

Allusions to Know for AP Literature and Composition

Classical and Mythological Allusions

Aeneas	• Son of Aphrodite (goddess of love) and Anchises, a member of Trojan royalty. Purported descendant of Romulus and Remus. • Led the Trojan survivors (of the Trojan War between Greeks and Trojans) to Italy, thus becoming the legendary founder of the Roman people.
Agamemnon	• Brother to Menelaus, (Helen of Troy's husband); father to Iphigenia, whom he sacrificed to Artemis. • Led the Greeks' attack on the Trojans to recover Helen. • His wife, Clytemnestra, plotted with her lover to murder Agamemnon when he returned from the Trojan War. • His daughter, Electra, then revenged his death by killing her mother, Clytemnestra. • The "Electra complex" derives from Electra's obsession with her father and killing of her mother.
Acheron	• One of the five rivers of the Greek underworld. • Known as the "river of sorrow and pain."
Achilles	• The most illustrious Greek warrior in the Greek-Trojan War. • His mother, an immortal sea nymph, holding him by the heel, dipped the infant Achilles into the River Styx to make him invulnerable to injury. • She later counseled him against going to the war because she knew he was fated to die. • He died by a wound to his heel, his only vulnerable body part, hence the term of one's "Achilles' heel" as one's ultimate weakness or vulnerability.
Adonis	• In Greek mythology, the mortal lover of goddess Aphrodite. • Etymology suggests he originated from a Phoenician Greek god of rebirth and vegetation. • Adored by women due to his beauty; representative of physically attractive males.
Ajax	• One of the bravest of the Greek warriors in Homer's <i>Iliad</i>, the story of the Greek and Trojan wars. • Considered dull-witted, thus he has become a prototype of the strong but dumb fighter.
Amazons	• Tribe of great women warriors in Greece, at one point led by Hippolyta.

Aphrodite (Greek); Venus (Roman)	• Goddess of love. • Considered the most beautiful of all goddesses.
Apollo	• Son of Zeus and Leto. • The sun god or god of light; god of prophecy, healing, music, and protector of the herds. • Twin to Artemis.
Ares (Greek); Mars (Roman)	• Ares was the Greek god of war and battle, while Mars was the Roman god of strategy and wisdom. • Represents destruction, violence, and brutality.
Artemis (Greek); Diana (Roman)	• Goddess of fertility, virginity, the hunt, childbirth, and the moon.
Athena (Greek); Pallas-Athena; Minerva (Roman)	• Goddess of war and wisdom. • Daughter of Zeus; sprang full-grown out of his head.
Aurora (Roman)	• Goddess of the dawn. • Represents daybreak.
Bacchus (Roman); Dionysus (Greek)	• God of wine, fertility, insanity, festivity, and theatre. • Associated with fertility rites, orgies, and, eventually, by the Middle Ages, associated with Satanic rituals and witchcraft.
Basilisk; Cockatrice	• Roman mythological creature considered the King of the Serpents. • Had a crest or comb on his head (like a rooster) and held himself upright. • Could kill merely by looking at the object it desired to kill.
Cassandra	• Daughter of Priam, the King of Troy. • Prophesied the Greek conquest, the destruction of Troy, and her own death. • Unwilling mistress of Agamemnon; both were killed by Clytemnestra. • Represents the idea of prophesying doom.
Cerberus	• In Greek mythology, a monstrous dog that guarded the entrance to Hades. Often depicted with multiple heads.
Ceres (Roman); Demeter (Greek)	• Goddess of fertility, sacred law, and the cycle of life and death; often associated with grain. • Mother of Persephone.
Charon	• The boatman who ferries the souls of the dead to the underworld. • The dead must arrive with coins to pay the ferry toll to cross the river(s), or they will be stuck between the two realms for eternity. • These coins should be placed under the tongue or on the eyes of the dead before burial to pay Charon for his services.

Circe	• In <i>The Odyssey</i>, enchantress and lover to Odysseus. • A “Siren” or seductress. • Known for ability to transform people into animals, e.g. pigs.
Cupid (Roman); Eros (Greek)	• Son to Aphrodite and Ares. • God of love, desire, and affection. • Portrayed as blind, as in, “love is blind”. • Married Psyche, a mortal who became “goddess of the soul.”
Daphne	• In Greek mythology, a nymph and a daughter of a river god Pheneus. • Cupid cursed Apollo to become obsessed with her. • To preserve her virginity and avoid Apollo’s unwanted advances, she begged her father to transform her into a laurel tree. • This tree became sacred to Apollo due to his obsession with Daphne; thus, evergreen laurel wreaths became common signs of reverence and honor.
Dido	• Queen of Carthage and lover to Aeneas (founder of Rome) in the <i>Aeneid</i>. • Their love ended tragically when he betrayed her with another woman. She killed herself and reunited with her previous husband in the underworld • Often associated with suicide by sword and burning pyres.
Elysium; The Elysian Fields	• Part of the underworld/Hades where the heroic and noble spend eternity.
Epicurus	• Greek philosopher who believed man should seek pleasure by attempting to achieve peace and tranquility of spirit through a simple life. • Some, however, corrupted his philosophy by reducing it to the concept of just living in the moment and/or seeking mere physical pleasure. • Adjective: Epicurean
Eros (Greek); Cupid (Roman)	• God of love.
The Fates	• Three weaving goddesses who assign individual destinies/fates to mortals at birth. • Originally called the “Morai” in ancient Greek. • Wielded immense power that not even Zeus could undo.
The Furies; The Erinyes; Eumenides; Semnai	• Three goddesses of vengeance and retribution: “anger,” “jealousy,” and “avenger.” • Punished men for crimes against natural order and/or defiance of public justice. • Related to the modern idea of conscience. • Helped with punishments in Hades.

Trojan Horse	• A large, hollow wooden horse that the Greek army left at the gates of Troy. Thinking it was a peace offering, the Trojans brought it into Troy, and the following night, Greek soldiers who had hidden inside the hollow horse sprung out to kill the Trojans. • Frequently alluded to in situations where a seemingly-benign facade tricks a foe into inviting danger into close range.
Hades (Greek); Pluto (Roman)	• God of the underworld. • Married to Persephone. • Also sometimes doubles as a name for the underworld.
Hecate (Greek)	• Goddess of the underworld, witchcraft, magic, and night; also associated with the moon, ghosts, and necromancy. • Advisor and companion to Persephone when she is in Hades. • Seems able to roam realms of life and death freely and is thus associated with boundaries and transitional places.
Hector	• Son of King Priam of Troy. • Great Trojan warrior, seen as virtuous and honorable. • Killed by Achilles; known for being denied a proper burial for twelve days.
Helen of Troy	• Considered the most beautiful mortal woman in the world with a “face that launched a thousand ships.” • Had many suitors; married King Menelaus of Sparta. • Kidnapped by Paris, the son of King Priam of Troy; the Greeks pursued them, thus starting the Trojan War.
Hymen (Greek)	• God of weddings, receptions, and marriage.
Iphigenia	• Daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. • Her father, Agamemnon, willingly sacrificed her to Artemis in return for passage overseas to fight against Troy in the Trojan War. • Artemis took pity on the girl and saved her, after which she became a priestess of Artemis.
Isis	• Egyptian goddess of the earth. • Married to Osiris, Egyptian god of death, afterlife, resurrection, life, etc. • Together, they represented life, death, and rebirth.
Juno (Roman); Hera (Greek)	• Chief goddess and wife of Zeus. • Goddess of childbirth and good counsel.
Jupiter (Roman); Zeus (Greek)	• King of the gods and husband of Hera. • God of the sky and thunder; often known for his proclivity for having affairs.

Lethe	• One of the five rivers of the Greek underworld. • Known as the “river of oblivion and forgetfulness,” from which the dead should drink in order to forget their previous earthly lives in preparation for possible reincarnation.
Mars (Roman); Ares (Greek)	• Ares was the Greek god of war and battle, while Mars was the Roman god of strategy and wisdom. • Represents destruction, violence, and brutality.
Medea	• Greek sorceress, priestess of Hecate, ex-princess of Colchis, and granddaughter of sun-god Helios. • Married the hero, Jason the Argonaut, and helped him retrieve the Golden Fleece. • He later betrayed her with another princess, Creusa of Corinth. • To get revenge on her husband, Medea kills her own two sons she shares with Jason, as well as his mistress and (indirectly) Creusa’s father.
Midas	• Mythical Greek king, offered any wish he wanted by the god Dionysus; Midas chose the ability to turn everything he touched to gold. • After the water he was trying to drink and the daughter he was trying to embrace turned to gold, Midas realized his (greedy) mistake and asked the gods to “rescind” the wish. • “The Midas touch” or “golden touch” comes from this myth and can refer to good fortune as well as avarice and greed.
Muses	• Greco-Roman goddesses of the arts. • Provided inspiration to all artists, musicians, poets, etc.
Narcissus	• Beautiful Greek youth, son of a river god and a nymph. • Fell in love with his own reflection upon seeing it in water. • Commits suicide out of anguish because he could not reach this beloved whom he worshiped—his own reflection. • Represents dangers of vanity and conceit.
Neptune (Roman); Poseidon (Greek)	• God of the seas. • Brother to Jupiter and Pluto.
Odysseus (Greek); Ulysses (Roman)	• Legendary king of Ithaca, Greece. • Hero of Homer’s <i>The Odyssey</i>; also appears in <i>The Iliad</i>. • Great warrior during the war against the Trojans. • Wandered into many adventures after the war trying to return home to faithful wife, Penelope, hence the use of the term “Odyssey” as an epic or long journey.
Olympus	• Mountain in Greece that is home to gods and goddesses.

Orpheus	• Greek god of music. • Made a deal with Hades to resurrect his lover, Eurydice, if he leaves the underworld without looking back to check she is following him. • He cannot resist looking back, and she remains trapped in the underworld.
Osiris	• Egyptian god of death, afterlife, resurrection, life, etc. • Married to Isis.
Pandora/ Pandora's Box	• Beautiful Greek woman of many charms or "gifts." • She was given a box filled with evil things and told never to open it, but she did open it, thus releasing all evils into the world; however, hope also dwelt in the box which she released. • She is analogous in biblical myth to Eve (who instigates knowledge of good and evil).
Paris	• Son of Priam, King of Troy. • Depending on the translation, either kidnaps or rescues Helen from her husband, Menelaus, thus starting the Greek and Trojan wars.
Persephone (Roman); Prosepine (Greek)	• Daughter of Zeus and Demeter; wife of Hades. • Queen/goddess of the underworld and goddess of fertility. • Dwells with Hades in the underworld during winter and on earth with her mother in the spring. • Represents the changing of seasons and the life (rebirth) and death that correspond.
Phoenix	• A large mythical bird representing death and rebirth; when it burned to death, a new bird rose out of the dead bird's ashes.
Pluto (Roman); Hades (Greek)	• God of the underworld. • Husband to Persephone; brother to Jupiter and Neptune.
Posiedon (Greek); Neptune (Roman)	• God of the seas. • Brother to Zeus and Hades.
Prometheus	• Titan trickster tasked by Zeus to create man from mud. • Came to love his creation, man, so he tricked Zeus and stole fire from the gods to give to humans. • For this, he was punished by being tied to a rock and having birds daily eat out his liver, which regrew each night, only to be eaten again.
Psyche	• Mortal who married Cupid and became Greek goddess of the soul. • Beauty was said to rival that of Aphrodite.

Satyrs	• Mythological creature: half goat/half man. • Forest dweller alongside nymphs, etc. • Associated with lustfulness. • Later associated with Satanic imagery.
Styx	• One of the five rivers of the Greek underworld. • Known as “the river of hatred and unbreakable oaths.”
Sisyphus	• The founder and king of Corinth who cheated death twice. • As punishment, he must roll a boulder up a hill, only for the boulder to roll down when it nears the top, repeating this cycle for eternity. • Tasks that are “Sisyphean” are usually as futile as they are laborious.
Tartarus	• Deepest part of the underworld, ruled by Hades. • The place of eternal punishment for Greeks who committed the worst of crimes on earth. • Part of the underworld that parallels with Christian concept of hell.
Tiresias	• Blind prophet of Thebes, known for his accurate and tragic prophecies, especially those surrounding Oedipus and the house of Cadmus.
Venus (Roman); Aphrodite (Greek)	• Goddess of love. • Considered to be the most beautiful of all goddesses.
Zeus (Greek); Jupiter (Roman)	• King of the gods; god of thunder and the sky. • Brother to Hades and Poseidon.

Biblical Allusions

Old Testament:	
Adam, Eve, the Serpent, and the Garden of Eden	• Adam and Eve were the first man and woman created by God and they lived in the idyllic, perfect place—the Garden of Eden. • They were to live there in harmony forever unless they broke the rule prohibiting them from eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. • A Serpent in the garden tempted Eve to eat the fruit; she then gave the fruit to Adam. This sinful act gets them exiled from Eden and ended their perfect existence, as now they had knowledge of evil. • Adam is punished with having to farm and Eve is forced to bear children, and both must face their own mortality as further retribution. • Meant to explain the hardships and mortality of humanity. • The Serpent starts as a representation of temptation of sin and takes on the connotation of evil and eventually becomes a symbol of the devil or Satan.

Cain and Abel	• Adam and Eve’s first two children, both sons. • Cain was jealous of Abel because God found favor with Abel’s sacrifice to Him but did not find favor with Cain’s sacrifice. • Out of jealousy, Cain killed Abel, committing the first murder. • When God comes looking for Abel, Cain professes ignorance and asks, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” God punishes Cain, makes his land infertile, and Cain becomes a wanderer. • The “mark of Cain” can be interpreted in two ways Biblically: either a mark that designates shame, or one that designates god’s protection. A third (unfortunate and racist) interpretation that popularized in Europe several centuries back is that the mark of Cain was a curse that turned some of humanity dark skinned, so that Cain’s descendants could be recognized on sight.
Noah, his ark, and the flood	• God warned Noah that he would destroy the Earth with a flood (rain for 40 days and 40 nights) to rid the world of evil people. • He instructed Noah to build a giant boat (an ark) that would keep Noah and his family, as well as two of every animal on earth (to repopulate), safely afloat until the flood receded. • When the rains ended Noah sent a dove out every day until it returned with an olive leaf—a sign that the waters had receded and Noah and his family could safely emerge. Hence the dove and olive leaf become symbols of hope. • Another common term, “antediluvian”—which means “before the flood”—also refers to this story. Something that is “antediluvian” is hyperbolically old.
Moses	• Pharaoh had ordered the death of all newborn Hebrew male infants, so Moses’ parents put him in a basket and sent him down the river hoping to spare his life. • Pharaoh’s daughter found and adopted him, then raised him at court. • Moses grows up, always feeling a kinship with the Hebrew slaves, leading him to eventually take action to protect his fellow Hebrews. • After Pharaoh learns of this betrayal, Moses must flee to Sinai, where he first encounters God in the form of a burning bush that tells Moses that God of the Israelites sees His people suffering and has come to help them through Moses and his brother Aaron. • The “burning bush” is, therefore, symbolic of a sign from God. • Moses and Aaron first try to reason with Pharaoh. When that doesn’t work, God sends plagues and pestilence to Egypt to force Pharaoh’s hand. When the first born of every Egyptian family dies in the night, Pharaoh finally relents. • As Moses and Aaron are leading the Hebrews out of Egypt (the Exodus), Pharaoh attempts to attack, but God allows Moses to part the Red Sea and the Israelites cross safely out of Egypt. Pharaoh’s army drowned as the waters closed behind God’s chosen people. • Also received the Ten Commandments from God and supposedly wrote the first five books of the Old Testament.

Sampson and Delilah	• Sampson was a powerful judge of Israel and strong man whose long hair (that had never once been cut) was the source of his power and strength. • Conspiring with Israel's enemies, the Philistines, the beautiful Delilah seduced Sampson and got him to reveal the secret of his power. • She then cut his hair, stripping him of his power, and the Philistines captured him.
David and Goliath	• David: youngest son of a prosperous farmer from Bethlehem. • Destined to be king of the Israelites. • Gained fame before his reign for beating Goliath, the giant who represented the Philistines, in one-on-one combat. • Thus a “David and Goliath” situation is one in which the underdog succeeds in defeating the enemy-giant.
Jezebel	• Phoenician princess who married Ahab. • Priestess of Baal (false god) who convinced Ahab to abandon the Hebrew God for worship of Baal. • For her praise of false prophets and pagan ideology, she was thrown from the window of her palace and stray dogs fed upon her flesh. • A “jezebel” became a prototype for a wicked woman and, in later literature, more specifically a prostitute.
Job	• Prosperous and morally upstanding Jew blessed with many children and wealth. • Satan challenged God, stating that Job was only a good man because God had blessed him. • God allows Satan to strip Job of all his prosperity—his job, his family, his wealth. • Job, however, never falters and believes in God's will and knowledge. • Job is, therefore, rewarded for his faith by having all that was taken from him restored. • “The patience of Job” became the prototype for patience and resilience in the midst of immense suffering.
Jonah	• Hebrew prophet whom God commanded to travel to a city and warn them of God's coming punishment if they don't cease the “great wickedness.” • Not wanting to deliver the bad news, Jonah tried in vain to hide from God. • God has sailors throw Jonah overboard into the sea, at which point he is swallowed by a “large fish” (or whale in the KJV Bible), where he stayed for three days until God commanded that the fish spew him out. • Jonah then did the task God had assigned him and the people he warned repented.

Daniel and the Lion's Den	• Hebrew boy captured by Babylonians. • Dream interpreter and visionary in Babylonian court; gained popularity. • When Persia conquered Babylon—which he had predicted—Daniel was given rule of the newly conquered lands. • This made other Persian leaders jealous, so they plotted against him, and accused him of praying to the God of the Hebrews. • They threw him into a den/pit of hungry lions, but an angel kept the lions' mouths closed to protect the devout Daniel. • Afterwards, those who conspired against him, along with their wives and children, were thrown to the lions and devoured.
Sodom and Gomorrah	• Two cities that God destroyed in Genesis for their wickedness, particularly related to lust, sexual abuse, etc. • God rained down sulfur and fire (or fire and brimstone) as punishment for the sinful inhabitants of the cities.
New Testament:	
Apocalypse and Armageddon	• Revelations, the last book of the New Testament, depicts the violent and tragic “end of the world,” (before God renews the earth as an Eden for his faithful) referred to as the apocalypse. • The “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” identified as conquest, war, famine, and death will arrive and wreak havoc on humanity through violence, disease, natural disasters, etc. as a sign of the impending final battle(s) between the followers of the Antichrist and God's Christian followers. • An Antichrist, a politician/military leader, will take control of the world, backed up by a religious leader, known as the “false prophet.” • This Antichrist and/or false prophet may also be referred to as “the beast” and their followers will be marked with the “sign of the beast” (sometimes considered the number 666). • In the end, the battle between God's forces and the Antichrist's demonic forces (referred to as Armageddon) will result in the destruction of the current heaven and earth and the creation of a new heaven and earth where God's people will live in peace and harmony.
Babylon and the Tower of Babel	• The origin myth for why people around the world speak multiple languages is centered on this city and its tower. • The people of Babylon built a tower that reached the heavens, which angered God. • To prevent these humans from attempting any such further feats, God decided to scatter humanity around the entire earth and confuse the language so different populations can't understand each other.

Gabriel	• An archangel with the power to communicate God's will to humans in the New Testament, the Hebrew Bible, and the Quran. • Known to converse with various prophets and other important Biblical figures. • He appears to announce the birth of John the Baptist to his father and the coming of Jesus to the virgin Mary.
Garden of Gethsemane	• The garden in Jerusalem in which Jesus suffered the “agony in the Garden” and was arrested the night before his crucifixion. • Often referenced as a place of great painful contemplation wherein one eventually gains a stronger perspective through their own mental anguish.
King Herod	• First Roman-appointed king of Judea. • Practiced Judaism, but not considered “Jewish” by the rest of Judea's citizenry, and therefore unpopular amongst his people. • Upon hearing from the Wise Men that the “king of the Jews” had been born in Bethlehem, he ordered for all boys aged two and under be killed to eliminate any competition to his position of power (known as the Massacre of the Innocents). • In medieval literature, Herod is depicted as cruel and tyrannical because of his efforts to kill infant Jesus. • The phrase “to out-Herod Herod” means to act in an extremely cruel and tyrannical manner.
Jesus Christ	• The central figure of Christianity, believed by most denominations to be the Son of (the Hebrew) God and the (mortal) Virgin Mary. • Born to (the Virgin) Mary and Joseph in a manger in Bethlehem. • Carpenter by trade (like his “father” Joseph); best known as a preacher, a philosopher, a healer, and a social reformer. • Believed to be the Messiah sent by God to save the people of the Jewish faith, as God's chosen people. • Jesus' crucifixion is considered a sacrifice to save God's chosen people; therefore, allusions to Jesus usually reference a character who makes personal sacrifices in order to “save” others, literally or metaphorically. • The Christ/savior figure is a prolific character type in most genres of literature.

Judas Iscariot	• One of the 12 disciples/apostles of Jesus. • Notorious for betraying Jesus which led to the crucifixion: • A group of priests were searching for Jesus to have him executed for claiming to be the Messiah. • Judas made a deal that he would lead the priests to Jesus and identify him by kissing him on the cheek, in exchange for 30 pieces of silver (“the kiss of Judas” being an ultimate betrayal). • Jesus is thus apprehended and later crucified. • Judas later repents for betraying Jesus and hangs himself in remorse. • Allusions often point out a “kiss of betrayal” for a small payout, making him a prototype for a character who “sells-out” or betrays loved ones for self gain.
Last Supper and the Holy Grail	• The final meal Jesus shared with his disciples in the Upper Room at Mt. Zion just outside Jerusalem before his crucifixion; instituted the ritual of the sacrament of Holy Communion. • The Holy Grail is the chalice from which Jesus and the apostles drank wine during the first Holy Communion at the Last Supper.
Lazarus	• Recipient of one of Jesus’ miracles. • Lazarus falls ill and dies. His sisters send word to Jesus in their grief. • Jesus visits the tomb of Lazarus and revives him from death, proving Jesus’ true level of power to his disciples. • Thus to “rise like Lazarus” means to be brought back from literal or metaphorical death.
Methuselah	• Biblical character considered to be the oldest living human being, who lived to be 969 years old according to the book of Genesis. • Any comparison to Methuselah indicates old age or longevity.
Pontius Pilate	• Roman official who governed Judea and presided over Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. • Though he first attempted to convince the crowd calling for execution that Jesus should be released, they would not relent, and he gave in to their demands. • Pilate, therefore, tries to deny any personal responsibility for Jesus’ death by washing his hands in front of the crowd to signal his innocence in the proceedings. • Allusions often reference Pilate’s refusal to accept responsibility and the proverbial “washing of hands” as a symbol of denying any responsibility, in general.

Prodigal Son	• The final of Jesus' three parables regarding redemption: • A father has two sons. The younger of the two asks for his inheritance early, and the father grants this request. • This younger son is “prodigal,” which means wastefully extravagant, and quickly squanders his fortune, forcing him to return home and beg for assistance from his father, planning to offer to work as an undeserving servant. • The father is so grateful for his errant son's return that he welcomes his son back whole heartedly without any hesitation or admonishment and even calls for a lavish celebration. • The return of the “prodigal son,” therefore, is representative of one who strays from his “family” and returns contrite and apologetic for his mistakes.
Satan	• After his baptism (New Testament), Jesus roamed the desert for 40 days to fast and pray. He encountered the Devil (Satan) and withstood Satan's temptation to sin. • In the Old Testament, the “Serpent” is a deceptive adversary who convinces people to stray from God. • In the New Testament, however, this character becomes malevolent and is often identified as Satan, a demonic figure whose intent is to destroy humanity. • In Christian tradition, this character was originally an angel, Lucifer, who rebelled against God and was ejected from Heaven. • He then evolves into the central villain of the Christian faith, with Hell as his domain.
St. Peter	• One of Jesus' twelve apostles. • Considered by Catholics to be the founder of the Church of Rome (the first bishop or “pope” and the longest reigning pope, supposedly). • Crucified in Rome by Nero. • Sainted by the Catholic Church. • Based on Jesus' supposed promise to give Peter the “keys of the kingdom,” common belief associates St. Peter as being the gatekeeper at the gates of heaven. • He has a book of accounts that detail which souls get into heaven and which ones do not.
The Trinity	• The center of Christian doctrine that cites the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as three entities together making up one “God-head.”
Zion	• Another name for Jerusalem and/or the Land of Israel. • A “city of refuge” and “city of holiness.”