

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

What is the meaning of 'chickens have come home to roost'?

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What is the meaning of 'chickens have come home to roost'?

(Mythreye, Mysore)

When used as a noun, the word 'roost' refers to the place where birds rest. It could be anything – the branch of a tree, a henhouse, etc. When a bird roosts somewhere, it rests there. This rather old saying, 'chickens have come home to roost', is normally used to mean that the bad things that someone has done in the past have come back to bite or haunt the individual. In other words, you are telling someone that he has to face the consequences of the deeds done in the past – though he may have committed them a long time ago.

*Ganesh is going out of his way to hurt people's feelings. He doesn't realise that the chickens will come home to roost someday.

*The Minister was sent to prison 30 years after committing the crime. The chickens finally came home to roost, I guess.

The original form of this 700 year-old expression was 'curses are like chickens; they always come home to roost'. The bad deeds that one may commit in one's lifetime are being compared with chickens. Hens and chickens in farms usually potter around all day looking for food. When the sun is about to set, they return to the safety of their henhouse to rest/roost. Geoffrey Chaucer is believed to have used this expression in his *Canterbury Tales*.

What is the difference between 'step sister' and 'half sister'?

(Sam Maria, Bangalore)

When Cinderella's father married the second time, he married a woman who was already the mother of two children. These girls, who were to harrass Cinderella later on, were her step-sisters. The term suggests that the heroine and the two girls didn't have a parent in common. The biological father and mother in both cases were different. In the past, kings used to marry several women and have children with each one of them. In such cases, the children were half brothers and half sisters. All of them had a parent in common – they had a common father.

What is the meaning of 'quid pro quo'?

(P.N. Krishnamoorthy, Madurai)

This Latin expression literally means 'something for something'. In **English**, it is mostly used to mean to give something to someone in return or exchange for something else. Other frequently used expressions that have a similar meaning are, 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours', 'tit for tat', etc.

*The Government denied that there was any quid pro quo involved in their decision.

'Quid' rhymes with 'mid' and 'kid' and the 'o' in 'pro' and 'quo' sounds like the 'o' in 'go' and 'so'.

What is the difference between 'New York minute' and 'Facebook minute'?

(G. Shalini, Udaipur)

A 'New York minute' is a very short period of time; it is actually less than a minute. The relatively new expression 'Facebook minute' means the exact opposite. It is used to refer to a relatively lengthy period of time. Very often people say they will check their messages on Facebook and get back to you in a minute. Once they log in, they forget about their promise, and stay online for a long period of time.

*Vivek gave me a New York minute to answer the question.

*Sandhya got back to him in a Facebook minute. By then, all tickets had been sold out.

"User: The word computer professionals use when they mean 'idiot.'" – Dave Barry

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