

Falling Behind



S**HIT.** It is probably the most popular word in the English language and responsible for some of our most expressive sentiments. We've a **shit-load** of expressions that capture perfectly the nature of the human condition. Add a simple exclamation point and what better way to register disgust, disappointment, or frustration? It can mean very little—nothing, or the least quality as “This ain't worth **shit.**” or represent the very best, as in top quality street drugs: “This is some **good shit!**”

It's everywhere. You'll find it in the most exotic places—in your pants, alongside a shave, shower, shine, and shampoo, **on a stick**, and **in a handbag** (all 20thC). Most people are **full of it**; those who aren't simply act **shitty**. We start the day telling others, “I feel like **shit,**” eliciting the remark, “You do seem flushed.” Dispassionate observers reinforce the sentiment, noting how **you look like shit** or **like ten pounds of shit in a five pound bag** (both 20thC). We pretend not to notice the resemblance.

Down and Dirty

We have **shit** for brains, and allow **shit-heads** with bogus credentials (BS—“**bullshit,**” MS—“more **shit,**” and PhD—“piled high and deep”) to run our institutions. Such is society's fate. Individually, some **shit in high cotton**, enjoying prosperity, living high off the hog, “high cotton” being equated with wealth. The rest of the population, however, is simply **shit out of luck.**

But we're anything but grateful for it. We're repelled by its presence. We approach it cautiously, deal with it reluctantly, and treat it like—well—**shit.** We **kick, beat, and stomp the shit** out of people. We trivialize it as **diddlyshit**, which explains why it has traditionally been **number two** (19thC). As the Penguin (Danny De Vito) in *Batman Returns* (1992) reminisced about his parents who threw him in the sewers as a child, “I was their number one son, and they treated me like **number two.**”

*When you speak of a movement, or sit on a seat,
Have a passage, or stool, or simple excrete;
Or say to the others, “I'm going out back,”
Then groan in pure joy in that smelly old shack.
You can go lay a cable, or do number two,
Or sit on the toidy and make a do-do,
But ladies and men who are socially fit,
Under no provocation will go take a shit!*
—“Ode to Those Four-Letter Words”



*Boys, I may not know much, but I do know the
difference between chicken shit and chicken salad.*
—Colonel Sanders