

# Movie Vocabulary/Idioms

## *Dead Man Walking*

(1995. Info at <http://us.imdb.com/Title?0112818>)

*Dead Man Walking* tries to open a window on the world of the death penalty, and does a pretty good job. We see representations of the emotions involved on the activist and victim sides, and get some insights into the political, legal, and enforcement mechanisms that result in execution.

**Warning! Warning! Accent Alert!** Southern accents run very thick in this story, set as it is in the “Deep South.” These range from various samples of black speech, to white trash diction, to a white southern lawyer. Oh, yeah; I suspect native southerners would say some of the accents are not authentic (e.g., Sean Penn). So for various reasons you’re going to experience various levels of difficulty understanding the English. If you don’t “get” something a character says, check and see if I covered it in the vocabulary/idiom listing.



The late Sister Helen

An odd little idiomatic joke. Sister Helen is late for her appointment, but the expression “the late so-and-so” is a *euphemistic* (“nice”) way of saying the person is dead.

smudged

Smeared. Note that in the postcard image to the right, in the handwritten phrase “Due / ½ cent”, the word “cent” is *smudged*.



Death Row

“Death Row” is a special section in a prison where prisoners sentenced to death are held.

to “get soft”

To lose muscular strength and tone because you don’t get enough exercise.

Sow on the farm

Sow (sounds like “how”): A female pig.

**Kumbaya**  
(alternately  
spelled  
“Kumbayah”)

A very popular children’s religious song, often sung at church camps and retreats. A “retreat” is where people go to take a week or two to explore and develop their spirituality.

**Chorus:**

Kumbaya, my Lord, Kumbaya  
Kumbaya, my Lord, Kumbaya  
Kumbaya, my Lord, Kumbaya  
Oh Lord, Kumbaya

**Verse:**

Someone’s **crying** Lord, Kumbaya  
Someone’s **crying** Lord, Kumbaya  
Someone’s **crying** Lord, Kumbaya  
Oh Lord, Kumbaya

**Repeat Chorus**

*Sing more Verses (alternated with Choruses) using “praying”, “dying”, etc.*

...your **habit**...

A nun’s *habit* is a traditional Catholic nun’s clothing. Note the three nuns (and a monsigneur) to the right.



Sister Helen worked closely with [Tim] Robbins on the script to be sure it was right, she explains. It took five drafts, but there is nothing in the film she is uncomfortable with. In the film, and in real life, for example, Sister Helen was confronted at Louisiana State Penitentiary by an elderly priest-chaplain who challenged her for not wearing a habit. In the first script the Sister Helen character went out to her car and got a habit out of the trunk.

"I told Tim, 'No way!'" exclaims Sister Helen. "We don't wear habits, and I had to explain to him the reasons for that." (The Sisters of St. Joseph, founded in France in 1650, were never intended to wear habits, but to blend in among the people they serve.)

**Source:** <http://www.americatholic.org/Messenger/Apr1996/feature1.asp>

morbid  
fascination

Morbid, *adj.*; relating to death. A morbid fascination is a strong curiosity about death or something relating to death (like a impending death). The idea is that the interest and curiosity is “unhealthy.”

...**bleeding  
heart**  
sympathy...

“Bleeding heart” is a negative expression to describe people who support the idea of government (tax-funded) help for poor and disadvantaged people. The expression is often used by “free market” or “conservative” persons who don’t want to be taxed for these kinds of purposes.

Jimmy Cagney



James Cagney (1899-1986) was a very successful Hollywood actor, famous for his portrayal of “good-hearted” gangsters.

con men

Confidence men. “Confidence” (as an adjective) describes a criminal behavior in which you fool people (often older people) into giving you money. Instead of threatening the victim with violence, you “take them into your confidence” (get them to trust you) in order to get their money from them by trickery.

...**flout**  
authority...

To *flout* authority is to willfully refuse to recognize the power or authority of a person or institution.

Woman on the  
**tier!**

A tier is a floor of an institutional building, like a prison.

Ain't you gonna  
ask me what I  
done?

Many examples of poor English:

- **Ain't** is an unofficial popular contraction of “am not”; “I’m not...” becomes “I ain’t...” Note that its use is often expanded to other conjugations of “to be”; e.g., “I ain’t”, “You ain’t”, “He ain’t”, “She ain’t”, “We ain’t”, “They ain’t”.
- “Gonna” is a common spelling for the slurred vocalization “going to” (“Ain’t you going to...?”).
- “...what I **done**?” Here, Matt is using the Past Participle of “to do” when he wants the Simple Past (“...what I **did**?”)

...loaded on  
downs, booze,  
and acid.

**Loaded:** Slang for “intoxicated”; drunk. This usually refers to alcohol; here it’s more.

**Downs:** “Downers”; pharmaceutical depressants, like tranquilizers, anti-depressants, or pain-killers.

**Booze:** Slang for hard liquor (strong alcoholic beverages).

**Acid:** Lysergic Acid Diethylamide; a powerful hallucinogenic drug.

**foster parents** People who take homeless children into their homes on a temporary basis; they “foster” (protect, care for) those children.

**killing spree** A “spree” is a short, exciting, physically involved activity. Another expression using “spree” is a “shopping spree”; a quick, unrestricted bout of intensive shopping.  
So, a “killing spree” would be a quick, unrestricted bout of intensive *killing*.

**a motion** Motion, *n.*; Generally, a statement to a court of law, to obtain legal attention from the government.

Motion: Requests made by one party to a lawsuit that a judge take specific action or make a decision.

Source: <http://www.sevarg.net/school/law/lawdef.htm>

**Appeal** An “appeal” to the legal system is a request that a higher court reconsider an undesirable judgment made by a lower court.

In this movie, Matt is trying to get a higher court to decide that the lower court that convicted/sentenced him was wrong.

Appeal: To take a case to a higher court for a rehearing.

Source: <http://www.sevarg.net/school/law/lawdef.htm>

**...kiss my ass...** Flattery, false praise, to get some kind of favor.

**...preach that  
hellfire and  
brimstone  
crap...**

“Hellfire and brimstone” is a phrase often used to refer to a Christian preaching style which threatens the listener with eternal torture in Hell should they fail to convert to Christianity before dying.

You don’t encounter this style of preaching very much anymore.

Image to right by cartoonist Charles Burns(!), from story entitled *Burn Again*.



**IRS** Internal Revenue Service; U.S. federal income tax collectors.



**Audited**



To be *audited* by the IRS is to be *randomly* (by chance) selected to have an IRS *auditor* come to your home or business and go over your last tax return to make sure it is accurate.

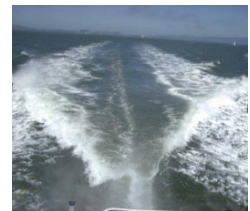
...let this one slide...

To “let something slide” is to decide not to worry about or fix a problem or oversight. Usually, you let *small* problems or oversights “slide”.

...in the wake of the murders...

A *wake* is what a boat leaves behind it when it moves through the water.

The *wake* of an event (like a murder) represents all the effects of that event on other people.



**Accomplice**

An accomplice is a person who helps another commit a crime.

...you **want out**?

To “want out” is to want to leave a formal or informal contract. When you ask someone if they “want out”, you are giving them an opportunity to gracefully say they no longer want to be responsible or involved. It lets them walk away from a situation while also allowing them to “save face.”

**get tough**

To “get tough” is to become more assertive and forceful, in order to deal with a difficult situation.

...on lenient parole boards...

Lenient, *adj.*: Not “tough”, offering little resistance to pressure; easy, soft, indulgent.

*Parole* is early release from prison. A *parole board* decides whether a prisoner deserves parole.

...come through...

To *come through* **for** someone is to fulfill a promise you make to that person; to do what you promise to do for them.

To *come through* **on** something is to fulfill a general promise to do something; to do what you say you will do.

...we're the pariahs

A *pariah* is a person held up as a symbol of evil. This word is often used to question the reality of whether that person is really evil, or just a handy symbol.

Main Entry: **pa·ri·ah**

Function: *noun*

Etymology: Tamil *paraiyan*, literally, drummer

**1** : a member of a low caste of southern India

**2** : OUTCAST 1

Source: <http://www.m-w.com/>

“HAVE MANY RABBIT”

A good example of back-country semiliteracy.

political appointees

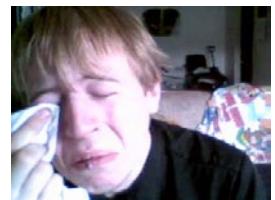
An *appointee* as a person who has been selected—not elected—to a job or office. An elected person (or board of people) has appointed (personally, officially selected) him or her for a job or office.

...be that as it may.

“Regardless of that...”, “Whatever you may think about that...”, “That matter, and the matter which concerns us here, are two separate issues...”

...blubber [her head off...]

To *blubber*, means to cry noisily, messily, pitifully, and uncontrollably.



*This Is the Day That the Lord Hath Made*

A classic, easy to sing, popular American church song.

***This Is the Day***

1967, Les Garrett

This is the day, this is the day, that the Lord hath made, that the Lord hath made.

We will rejoice, we will rejoice and be glad in it, and be glad in it.

This is the day that the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.

This is the day, this is the day that the Lord hath made.

Source: <http://faith.propadeutic.com/music.html>

...a regular **Ma Barker**



Ma Barker was Born on 1871. Her original name was Arizona, which then was nicknamed "Arrie". Later in her life she changed her name to Kate. She married George Barker. In her marriage she had four children: Herman, Lloyd, Arthur, and Fred who would later create the Barker gang.

She died in 1935 A.D. when she was accidentally shot down by the FBI.

Source: [http://www.efn.org/~yggir1/history/ma\\_barker.html](http://www.efn.org/~yggir1/history/ma_barker.html)

...you're being **suckered**

You're being fooled. A sucker is a gullible person, someone who can be easily tricked or fooled.

...**end-of-the-line** people...

The *end-of-the-line* refers to the end of a public transportation line; the bus (or subway, or streetcar) goes no further on that road or track.

...bringing home **strays**...

A *stray* is homeless domesticated animal, like a dog or cat.

...**drunk** as a couple of **coots**...



"**Drunk**" means under the influence of alcoholic drink.

"**Coots**" here is *arbitrary* (randomly chosen) and non-descriptive. There's another similar expression, "**crazy as a coot**". Coots are small *aquatic* (water-dwelling) birds. In reality, they have no mental problems or interest in alcoholic beverages ☺.

Why is you a nun?

Note the improper conjugation of "to be".

...a tax lawyer who never **tried** a **capital case** before...

To *try* a case is to argue a court case as lawyer.

A *capital case* is a case involving capital punishment (punishment by death).

...an amateur...

A person who does something as a hobby. For example, an amateur musician plays music at home for family and friends, but not as a regular job.

jury selection

*Jury selection* is the process by which jurors are chosen for a court trial. *Jurors* are the people in a jury.



The *jury* is the group of regular people from the community who sit through a court trial, see evidence, hear witnesses, and decide the guilt or innocence of the accused. If the accused is found guilty, they may also decide the *sentence* (punishment).

...lawyer raised one **objection**...

Lawyers can *object to* (disagree with) things said or done in a courtroom, and the judge can either *sustain the objection* (agree with the lawyer) or *overrule the objection* (disagree with the lawyer). The lawyer has to work in this way through the judge to shape and control argument and debate in the courtroom.

When a lawyer calls out an objection to the judge, he/she is *raising an objection*. In the State of Texas, the lawyer must **rise** to his or her feet when raising the objection.

...team of **crackerjack** lawyers...

Crackerjack: Expert; of the highest quality.

...**topnotch** investigators...

Same as "crackerjack"

...**ballistics** experts...

Ballistics is the special study of the physics of projectiles, especially **bullets**. Ballistics experts often testify in cases involving guns, to help the judge and jury interpret evidence involving the use of *firearms* (guns) in the *commission* (doing) of a crime.

...most **humane** of all...

Humane, *adj.*: Invoking the highest ideals of human culture; mercy, gentleness, kindness, intelligence, sensitivity, etc.

Armageddon

The Biblically *prophesied* (foretold, predicted) last great war which will signal the end of the world (Revelations 16:16).



...while this human being's organs **writhe**, twist, contort...

To writhe, v.: To twist and bend one's body under the influence of a tremendous physical feeling (usually pain) or emotions.

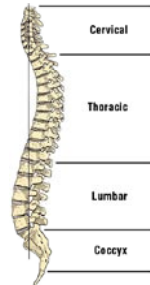
...justice is **long past due**...

"Justice should have been done a long time ago." In this context, the prosecutor is saying Matthew should have been executed a long time ago.

...steel your spine...

To steel, v.: To harden, to make still and inflexible, typically in preparation for a coming shock.

Sometimes the spine is used to refer to a person's strength of character; a firm, straight spine means a person has strength of spirit and character.



...that **scum** robbed me of my only son...



"Scum" is a common word for algae; the green microscopic plants that grow on the surface of a body of fresh water. To call someone "scum" is to say they don't even deserve the dignity of a more complex plant life.

clemency be denied

Clemency is *official* forgiveness. That clemency will be denied means that official forgiveness will be denied; there will be no mercy; the execution will *go forward* (it will happen; it will take place).

...called Goodwill™ ...

Chain of "thrift" stores around the United States. They operate on a non-profit basis to provide garments and household goods at low cost to low-income people.



...It **tears me up**...

Short for "tears me up inside"; causes me tremendous emotional pain.

...like a **shrine**

A shrine is a special place where you can worship, often a small place.

- You worship **in** (inside of) a *church*.
- You worship **at** (outside of) a *shrine*.



...in dire need of redemption

“in dire need”; to need desperately.

Redemption: To be redeemed, find the goodness within yourself, especially after you’ve failed to be good.

Sacraments of the Church

The sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church are:

1. Baptism (in water)
2. Eucharist (Holy Communion)
3. Reconciliation (conversion, confession, celebration)
4. Confirmation (public affirmation of your faith)
5. Marriage (Holy Matrimony)
6. Holy Orders (Ordination)
7. Anointing of the Sick (“Last Rites”)

Source: <http://www.americancatholic.org/Features/Sacraments/>

W. C. Fields

Born **William Claude Dunkerfield** (1880-1946). Legendary American vaudevillian (pre-movie era travelling entertainer), clown, and film comic and comedian. He had a famously irreverent style of humor.

He was also a very talented juggler. ☺



“lookin’ for a loophole”

A “loophole” is a “hole” in (convenient exception or alternate interpretation of) the law. If you can find a loophole, you can avoid being punished.

...this is so surreal...



*From the French, meaning “transcending (over) the real”. In common use, “surreal” is just a fancy*

*word for “weird”.*

Sliddell

Probably referring to Sliddell, Louisiana.

gone missing      Slang expression which means “a person is missing”.

Morgue

The morgue is a medical facility usually run by a city or county. It receives dead bodies not accounted for in *supervised* (watched) deaths; in hospitals, hospices, or at home with loved ones nearby.



It also receives the bodies of “wards of the state,” such as prison inmates.

...all that **lime** in it...

“Lime” is powdered limestone (mostly calcium carbonate,  $\text{CaCO}_3$ ). It can be used to *inhibit* (slow down) decay of a body by slowing bacterial growth.

...**come around** to our side...

“Come around” normally refers to regaining consciousness after losing consciousness from drugs, a blow to the head, or some other cause. When you “come around to someone’s side” of an argument, it refers to *switching your position* (changing your mind) about an important issue. Your former opponents with whom you now agree may call this “coming around” as a way of suggesting that, by switching to their way of thinking, you’ve “regained consciousness.”

aryan  
brotherhood,  
white  
supremecist



The *aryan brotherhood* is a racist organization of people of northern European *descent* (race). It is likely associated with **Aryan Nations**, a *white supremecist* organization, dedicated to the ideal that the white race is the master race, all other races of man being inferior/degenerate. One stated long-term goal of American white supremecist organizations is the *expulsion/extirpation* (killing) of all non-whites from North America (U.S. and Canada).

Source: <http://aryan-nations.org/>

...lie detector test...

A “lie detector” (or *polygraph*) is a system of sensors and gauges that monitor body responses to questions. The idea is that an expert can use this to tell if a person is telling the truth or not. The results of a lie detector test are never absolutely conclusive.

“I don’t know anything about lie detectors other than they scare the hell out of people.”

— U.S. President Richard M. Nixon



“...until death do us part.”



Phrase from “standard” marriage vows, in which the couple promises to stay married until one or both of them dies.

...my new **digs**.

“Digs”, in this context, means the place where you stay; your domicile, your home. It’s a sort of lighthearted slang. “Hey! Why don’t you come on over and check out my new digs?!”

...turn the other cheek...

Reference to a preaching by Jesus Christ, in the New Testament (Bible):

### *Luke 6*

<sup>29</sup>If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic.

Source: <http://bible.gospel.com.net/>

Jesus wasn’t no **rebel**...

Rebel, *n.*, pronounced “REH-buhl”: A person who rebels. Rebel, *v.*, pronounced “ree-BELL”: To oppose, to act in opposition to established power.

A **rash** judgment

A hasty judgment; an important decision made too quickly.

...play a **hymn** Hymn, *n.*: A sacred song, in the Christian tradition. Notably, this usually refers to a song which is *solemn* (serious), not “up-beat” and obviously joyfull.

Warden The person who manages a prison.

...look at **Romans...** Romans is a book in the Bible’s New Testament. This is a letter Paul the Apostle wrote to the Christian church that had just started in Rome. In *Dead Man Walking*, the priest is refering to a statement Paul made about how Christians should deal with *civil* (governmental) authority. Here’s the part of Romans chapter 13 which addresses this:

### ***Romans 13***

#### *Submission to the Authorities*

<sup>1</sup>Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. <sup>2</sup>Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. <sup>3</sup>For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. <sup>4</sup>For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup>Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. <sup>6</sup>This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. <sup>7</sup>Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

Source: <http://bible.gospel.com.net/>

No. **Let her be.** Leave her alone.

...**own up** to the part you played... To “own up” to something is to *admit* to something. The “part you play” is the thing you do in a situation.

...he’s so flip... He refuses to be serious. When you try to get him to be serious, he gives a *flippant* (joking) answer; he responds *flippantly*.