Pandora’s Box

Modern English contains many words and phrases whose origins go back to ancient Greece. One of these phrases is a Pandora’s Box, which has come to mean “something that produces unexpected problems or difficulties.” Take, for example, the nineteenth-century French scientist Marie Curie. She was a pioneer in the study of uranium, and it could be said that she opened a Pandora’s Box with her research. Her work led to the splitting of the uranium atom and the development of the atomic bomb. This gave the human race, for the first time in history, the power to annihilate itself. The expression a Pandora’s Box comes from a Greek myth that explains how evil and suffering came into existence in a world that was originally devoid of them.

The story starts with Prometheus, whom the ancient Greeks looked upon as a benefactor of the human race. They believed that he stole fire from Zeus, the king of the gods, and gave it to human beings. To get revenge, the wrathful Zeus punished Prometheus by chaining him to a rock where eagles came and devoured his liver. Each night it grew back, and each day it was devoured afresh. Zeus was not satisfied with this, however; he also wanted to punish the people who had received the precious gift of fire, so he came up with a devious plan.

Zeus ordered his son Hephaestus, the best craftsman of the gods, to create the first woman. Her name, Pandora, means “all the gifts” because each of the gods bestowed a special gift upon her. Aphrodite gave her beauty. Hermes gave her the ability to be crafty. Zeus gave her a box, which he admonished her never to open. But he also gave her the gift of curiosity. He knew that she would not heed his warning.

Zeus then sent Pandora to live on Earth as a mortal. She married and lived happily, untroubled except for one thing. She could not stop glancing at the box that Zeus had given her. That kept her musing about what it contained. She was often tempted to lift the lid and peep inside. Then she would remember Zeus’s warning and restrain herself. However, her curiosity, far from subsiding, increased with every passing day.
Finally, Pandora could stand it no longer. She acted swiftly, so as to give herself no time to think. She picked up the box and opened it. Immediately, all the evils that now exist in the world flew out of Pandora’s Box. Greed and envy, hatred and fear, disease and despair; all appeared on Earth for the first time. They began to plague humankind. Pandora was aghast at what she had done. She quickly slammed the lid shut. Too late! She had been Zeus’s unwitting helper as he carried out his plan of revenge and proved his power once again.

Answer each of the following questions in the form of a sentence. If a question does not contain a vocabulary word from the lesson’s word list, use one in your answer. Use each word only once.

1. What did Prometheus bestow on humankind?

2. What is the meaning of subsiding as it is used in the passage?

3. Did Pandora know what she was doing when she helped Zeus carry out his plan?

4. Why would it be incorrect to call Pandora a benefactor of humankind?

5. What is the meaning of devious as it is used in the passage?

6. What warning did Zeus give Pandora when he presented her with the box?

7. Did Hephaestus obey Zeus’s order?
8. How did Zeus’s gift of curiosity affect Pandora?

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9. What is the meaning of **plague** as it is used in the passage?

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10. Did Zeus show any pity for Prometheus?

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11. In what way did Marie Curie take a lead in the world of science?

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12. What is the meaning of **mortal** as it is used in the passage?

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13. According to the myth, who suffered because of Zeus’s **wrath**?

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14. Why can we say that Marie Curie opened a Pandora’s Box?

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15. How do you think Madame Curie would have felt if she had known that her research would lead to the atom bomb?

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The word **benefactor** is formed from two Latin roots, *bene*, which means “good” or “well,” and *facere*, which means “to do; to make.” The Latin word *malus* means “bad” or “evil.” Using your knowledge of Latin roots, can you figure out the meaning of the word **malefactor**?

The Latin word for “death” is *mortalis*; from it comes our word **mortal**. The antonym of *mortal*, both as an adjective and a noun, is **immortal**. As an adjective, it means “living forever” (According to Greek mythology, the gods and goddesses who lived on Mount Olympus were *immortal*), and “having lasting fame” (No writer can compare to the *immortal* William Shakespeare). As a noun, **immortal** means “a mythical being who will never die” (Athena and the other *immortals* of Mount Olympus were sometimes rivals), and “a person having lasting fame” (Jane Austen is one of the *immortals* of English literature).

**Plague** is now the general term for any widespread and deadly disease; it once referred to a specific disease called “the Plague,” also known as “the Black Death,” which swept through Europe and parts of Asia in the fourteenth century, killing up to three quarters of the population. A red cross on a door was a sign that someone inside the house had the disease. Spread by fleas that had bitten infected rats, it attacked many parts of the body, especially the lungs, and was almost always fatal. It has reappeared at various times over recorded history; the last great outbreak of the disease was in England in 1665.