

What's in a Name? A Beginning Discussion

Names have an inherent fascination for most of us. We feel that our names are somehow part of us and at the same time a summation of us. In some societies a person's given name is so sacred that it is never spoken, and the person is given a second name for daily use. After important and beloved people die, their countrymen will often name schools, squares, streets, airports, et. al. after them in order to honor them. Nations have gone to war to uphold the honor of a country's name.

Why are we so fascinated by names? Perhaps it's because a name is a symbol which carries many connotations. A name is the object it names. Contrary to Shakespeare, a rose by any other name might smell as sweet, but it would not smell quite like a rose.

Let's consider first names first. Which names are popular in your age group? Compare these names with names of older people. What differences do you note? What names still seem fashionable or popular? Why do you think some names last through generations and some go out of fashion? What influences names we choose—celebrity names? sound? family traits or traditions? nationality or section of country? religion?

Can first names affect their owners? Are some names stereotypical of certain personality types?

The Naming Game. Discovering Answers

A name is one of the first things that we acquire upon birth. We carry it everywhere as our identity and are upset when it is mispronounced, misused, or replaced by a number. James Russell Lowell, a poet, wrote, "There is more force in names than most men dream of."

Lewis Carroll had this to say in *Through The Looking Glass*:

"My name is Alice..."

"It's a stupid name enough!" Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. "What does it mean?"

"Must a name mean something?" Alice asked doubtfully.

"Of course it must," Humpty Dumpty said with a short laugh. "My name means the shape I am—and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost."

He is wrong in one respect. The name, Alice, does mean something; it means truth.

But our egghead friend is correct when he eggs Alice on with "My name means the shape I am."

Our names do shape us. The pattern of naming in the English language began with single names, because when people lived together in small communities, the supply of names was large enough so that none had to be repeated in the same tribe or group. Most first names are quite old. Girls have been named Mary (star of the sea) and boys, John (gift of God), for millennia, and those remain, despite fads, the most popular first names in English-speaking countries.

As groups grew larger, single names began popping up more often, and a system of distinguishing among people with the same first name had to be invented. The villagers began to add a bit of description to the given names, and that's how surnames were born. The "sur" comes from Latin (super) and means above and beyond.

Some surnames began as coloring—Black, White, Reid (Red);

or size—Small, Little, Longfellow;

or geography—Churchill, Rivers, York;

or personal qualities or descriptions—Smart, Wise, Swift, Drinkwater, Armstrong, Truman, Whitehead

(Whitehead is my maiden name, by the way. You now know why.)

Other names are patronymics and matronymics, family names derived from parents or ancestors. Mc, Mac, O' or Fritz at the beginning of a name all mean "son of," and the endings son, sen, ov, or ovich also mean "son of."

What can you discover about your name?