

# Improper Malapropisms

by [Steve Jamnik](#) (September 2022)



*Ramsgate Sands (Life at the Seaside)*, William Powell Frith, 1851-54

One of the first holidays I can remember was a short stay in Ramsgate with my Auntie Joan. Ramsgate did not have anything fancy like Margate's Dreamland, so there was not much excitement to be had traipsing around the town.

One late afternoon our small group was wandering morosely along the promenade when we came upon a deserted Crazy Golf attraction.

"Ooooooh, can we?" I bleated.

We walked over. The lady in the booth eyed us suspiciously.

"What do you want?" she hissed.

"Can we come in and play the crazy golf?" Auntie Joan asked politely.

"We close at six," barked the woman.

Auntie Joan consulted her watch.

"But it's only quarter past five."

"Yes," the lady in the booth replied, "but if I let you in, it will have to be under false pretences."

We looked at each other uneasily. We didn't like the idea of false, and pretences were definitely to be avoided, so we slunk guiltily away, ashamed of having put the booth lady in such a difficult position.

A few years after that I started secondary school. For the first time in my life I had English language and English literature. I was terrible at both. English literature consisted of dreadful books that didn't have pictures, such as *Jane Eyre* and *The Autobiography of a Super Tramp*; and convoluted texts such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Macbeth*, sprinkled with *alarums* and *exeunts*. I could never make head nor tail of any of it. I preferred Enid Blyton and *The Magic Faraway Tree*. Could it be that I was, shall we say ... a late developer?

We were set extremely difficult questions in comprehension.

'How would you describe the character of Mr Rochester?  
(Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*.)'

My answer: 'Mr Rochester is a very seduced man.'

When my exercise book was returned the following week, the teacher had underlined *seduced* in red ink, and had written in the margin: 'Wrong word. See me.' So at the end of the lesson, while the rest of the class were filing out, I went up to the teacher's desk as requested to see what was wrong with the word.

"*Seduced* means to run off with another man's wife," the

teacher explained, a little nervously. "I think you may have meant *subdued*."

Well, maybe I did and maybe I didn't. To give subdued credit to my English teacher, at least he didn't say that *seduced* meant to run off with another woman's husband. That would have cast my assessment of the character of Mr Rochester in quite a different light. Nevertheless, duly chastised for a wrong thing, I slunk guiltily away, ashamed of having put my English teacher in such a difficult position. I was well into my twenties before I realised that being seduced wasn't altogether a wrong thing.

When I finally left full time education, having encountered words such as *contingent* and *medulla oblongata*, I entered the world of work, and at last had *disposable income*. As a special treat for my mother's birthday that year, I splashed out on some quite expensive seats for a performance of *Sleeping Beauty* at the Royal Ballet.

The seats were in the Amphitheatre Stalls, and mother and I dolled ourselves up emphatically for the occasion, me wearing my latest brushed denim loon pants, and my mother wearing her off white mid-length coney fur coat, with a little dab of *Californian Poppy* behind each ear. We must have looked a bit common, because the usherette looked us up and down with no small degree of disdain, before deigning to show us to our quite expensive seats.

I hadn't really considered how we might have appeared to the jaded eye of an usherette. As far as I was concerned, we were just a young man accompanying his mother out for a bit of culture up the West End; but when I think about it now, the coney coat, and my buttock-hugging loon pants, we were as likely to have been a slapper from Brewer Street showing off her latest Toy Boy.

The usherette led us silently down the steep amphitheatre, and

when we reached seats 93 and 94, we found them already occupied by a smartly dressed couple.

The usherette asked to see our tickets again. They were printed with 93 and 94 all right. She studied us critically.

"Hmm," she said, lips tightly pursed. "There seems to have been some duplicity."

She enunciated her esses with maximum sibilance, so that her speech sounded like glass bottles being smashed against a brick wall. I felt my face flush with embarrassment. It was very humiliating. I wondered whether mum and I should put our tails between our legs (she was wearing a coney fur coat after all) and simply slink guiltily away, ashamed of having put the usherette in such a difficult position; but further negotiations ensued, and after a few minutes the smartly dressed couple got up and mother and I sat down. However, it wasn't much fun after that. I was on the edge of my seat for the entire performance, expecting at any moment the cruel hand of the manager on my shoulder to eject the duplicitous. The experience instilled in me a lifelong aversion to the ballet in general, and *Sleeping Beauty* in particular.

When I recounted the incident to my Uncle Walt, and how uncomfortable it had made us feel, he told me that he, too, was unable to tolerate the ballet, or indeed any live concert, on account of the fact that it set off his *tittinus*. I hadn't the slightest idea what he was talking about, but it sounded rather risqué. One more reason to avoid the ballet.

Walt's mother, my maternal Grandmother, whom I always called Nana, had her own unique way with words. She never used one word where forty-seven would do, and she was totally incapable of using reported speech, so everything she said was excruciatingly verbatim, larded with: *and-she-turned-round-and-said* and: *and-I-turned-round-and-said*. One afternoon I popped in to see her. She greeted me with clenched jaw, very

unusual for her.

“What’s up, Nana?”

“It’s the council. They’ve asked me if I want to dumb down, but I don’t want to.”

“Dumb down?”

“They want me to transfer myself to a one bedroom flat. I don’t want that.”

She lived alone in a two-bedroom house.

“I think you mean downsize.”

“Well, that’s the way I say it myself,” she insisted. “They’ve got a nerve. I’m going to write off and give them a piece of my mind. The council throw money around. It’s not me who should dumb down. They should.”

I imagined the correspondence.

*Nana to Housing Department:* ‘Dear Sirs, About your letter. I suggest that you dumb down. Yours sincerely, etc.’

*Housing Department to Nana:* ‘Dear Nana, Thank you for your recent correspondence. In response to your request: WE WANT YOU TO GET OUT OF THE HOUSE YOU DAFT OLD BIDDY. Yours faithfully, etc.’

Perhaps I come across as being too crucial. After all, not everyone can be a Robespierre with a vast constabulary.

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Behavioural Psychologist for two years, then moved into television post-production. He is now retired.

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