

and the devil take the hindmost

And the Devil Take the Hindmost: Origins, Meaning, and Modern Usage

and the devil take the hindmost is a phrase that carries a vivid imagery and a sharp message, often used to describe situations where individuals act selfishly, prioritizing their own interests while disregarding those left behind. This expression has a rich history and finds relevance not only in literature and everyday speech but also in fields like finance, social commentary, and psychology. Understanding its origin, meaning, and how it's applied today offers fascinating insights into human behavior and societal attitudes.

The Origins of "And the Devil Take the Hindmost"

The phrase "and the devil take the hindmost" is believed to have originated in the 16th or 17th century, rooted in English folklore and common sayings. The term "hindmost" refers to the last or slowest in a group, especially when moving in a line or a race. The expression essentially means that those who lag behind or fail to keep up will be left to their fate, often with a grim consequence implied by "the devil."

Historical Context and Early Usage

In earlier times, travel was perilous, and groups moving together often had to maintain a certain pace to avoid dangers like bandits, wild animals, or harsh weather. The slowest or weakest members faced the greatest risk, sometimes abandoned for the group's survival. The phrase captures this ruthless pragmatism.

The earliest recorded usage of the phrase can be traced back to John Lyly's play **Gallathea** (1588), where a similar sentiment appears. Over time, it evolved into the proverb we recognize today, symbolizing a take-no-prisoners attitude.

Meaning and Interpretation

At its core, "and the devil take the hindmost" is a commentary on selfishness and survival instincts. It implies that in competitive or challenging circumstances, individuals or groups focus on their own success or safety, leaving those who fall behind to face the consequences alone.

Literal vs. Figurative Meaning

Literally, it might evoke an image of a chase where the devil is poised to capture the slowest runner. Figuratively, it's often used to criticize or describe ruthless behavior in

various contexts:

- **Economic competition:** In markets or industries where only the strongest survive.
- **Social dynamics:** Situations where people prioritize self-interest, ignoring community or collective well-being.
- **Personal relationships:** When someone abandons friends or family during tough times.

Psychological Perspective

From a psychological standpoint, this phrase highlights aspects of human nature related to self-preservation and sometimes moral ambiguity. It reflects how stress and competition can bring out both survival instincts and ethical dilemmas about helping others versus focusing on oneself.

Usage in Literature and Popular Culture

"And the devil take the hindmost" has been used by numerous writers and thinkers to convey a sense of urgency, danger, or moral challenge. Its vividness makes it appealing in storytelling and rhetoric.

Literary References

Many classic authors have woven this phrase into their works to underscore themes of competition and sacrifice. For example, Charles Dickens and other Victorian writers occasionally employed it to critique social inequalities and the harsh realities of industrial-era capitalism.

Modern Media and Music

The phrase continues to appear in movies, television scripts, and song lyrics, often highlighting cutthroat scenarios or moments where characters must choose between solidarity and self-interest. It resonates with audiences because it encapsulates a universal tension: the struggle between looking out for others and ensuring one's own survival.

And the Devil Take the Hindmost in Economics and Finance

One of the most intriguing applications of the phrase is in the realm of finance, especially in describing market behaviors and investor attitudes.

Financial Markets and Investor Psychology

In highly volatile or speculative markets, "and the devil take the hindmost" aptly describes the mentality where investors scramble for profits, often ignoring the risks faced by those who cannot keep up. It reflects the ruthless nature of some financial environments where only the fastest or most aggressive players succeed, while others may suffer losses or be "left behind."

The Phrase as a Metaphor for Market Dynamics

The phrase is sometimes used to critique "winner-takes-all" markets or economic systems where competition is fierce, and social safety nets are minimal. It emphasizes the harshness of a system that rewards success and disregards those who falter, highlighting debates around economic inequality and corporate responsibility.

Applying the Concept in Everyday Life

Recognizing the meaning behind "and the devil take the hindmost" can offer valuable lessons in empathy, cooperation, and strategic thinking.

Balancing Self-Interest and Community

While the phrase describes a selfish approach, it can also serve as a cautionary tale. In personal and professional contexts, adopting a mindset that only values personal gain at the expense of others can damage relationships and long-term success.

Tips for Avoiding the "Hindmost" Scenario

If you want to avoid being the "hindmost" in any situation, consider the following strategies:

- **Stay proactive:** Keep up with changes and be adaptable.
- **Build alliances:** Collaborate with others to share knowledge and resources.
- **Focus on continuous learning:** Develop skills to remain competitive.
- **Maintain ethical standards:** Avoid ruthless behaviors that harm your reputation.

The Phrase's Enduring Relevance

Even in today's interconnected world, where cooperation often drives success, the sentiment behind "and the devil take the hindmost" reminds us of the ever-present tension between competition and compassion. Whether in corporate environments, social settings, or personal challenges, the phrase captures a fundamental aspect of human interaction — the choice between looking out for oneself or helping those who might be struggling.

By understanding this balance, we can better navigate complex situations with a sense of awareness and humanity.

Exploring the phrase "and the devil take the hindmost" opens up a window into history, human nature, and the dynamics of competition. Its vivid expression continues to resonate because it encapsulates a raw truth about survival and morality — a truth that remains as relevant today as it was centuries ago.

Frequently Asked Questions

What does the phrase 'and the devil take the hindmost' mean?

The phrase means that those who lag behind or fail to keep up will suffer the consequences or be left to deal with problems on their own.

Where does the phrase 'and the devil take the hindmost' originate from?

The phrase originates from old English proverbs and was popularized in the 17th century, often used to imply that those who are slow or less capable will be abandoned.

How is 'and the devil take the hindmost' used in modern language?

It is used to express a cutthroat attitude where people prioritize their own success and leave behind those who can't keep up, often in competitive or ruthless contexts.

Are there any literary works titled 'And the Devil Take the Hindmost'?

Yes, there are books and plays with this title, often exploring themes of competition, greed, and survival, such as the novel by Martin Clark.

Can 'and the devil take the hindmost' be applied in business or finance contexts?

Yes, the phrase is sometimes used in business or finance to describe situations where companies or individuals focus on their own gain without regard for those who fall behind or fail.

Is 'and the devil take the hindmost' considered a positive or negative phrase?

It is generally considered negative because it implies a lack of compassion and a ruthless attitude towards those who are less successful or slower.

Additional Resources

****And the Devil Take the Hindmost: Exploring the Origins, Meaning, and Cultural Impact of a Timeless Phrase****

and the devil take the hindmost is a phrase that has permeated English language and culture for centuries, evoking vivid imagery and moral implications. Often used to describe a ruthless attitude where those who lag behind or fail to keep pace are left to suffer the consequences, this idiom has transcended its literal roots to become a metaphor for cutthroat competition and survival of the fittest mentalities. This article delves into the phrase's historical background, its varied interpretations, and how it continues to resonate in contemporary discourse.

Historical Origins and Etymology

The phrase "and the devil take the hindmost" first appeared in English literature in the early 17th century. Its origins are believed to be tied to the literal danger faced by individuals who lagged behind during group movements or escapes, where the "hindmost" — the last in line — would be vulnerable to capture or harm. The "devil" in this context symbolizes an inevitable, often harsh penalty for those who fail to keep up.

The earliest known printed use of the phrase was by Thomas Nashe in his work **Christ's Teares Over Jerusalem** (1593), where he wrote, "The devil take the hindmost," highlighting the brutal nature of survival and competition. Over time, the phrase was adopted in various literary and colloquial contexts to signify a no-nonsense approach wherein individuals who do not succeed are left to face the consequences alone.

Literal and Figurative Meanings

At its core, the phrase conveys a stark reality: in certain situations, there is no room for empathy or second chances, and those who are slow or weak are sacrificed for the benefit

of the majority. Literally, it paints a grim picture of a chase or escape where the last person is forsaken. Figuratively, it applies to economic, social, or competitive scenarios where the focus is on advancement without regard for those who fall behind.

The idiom encapsulates themes of Darwinian survival, ruthless competition, and sometimes a cynical acceptance of harsh realities. It is often used to criticize cutthroat behaviors, whether in business, politics, or social environments, where collaboration is overshadowed by the desire for individual success.

Cultural Significance and Usage

The phrase "and the devil take the hindmost" has found its way into numerous cultural expressions, from novels and plays to songs and movies, each time reinforcing its message of uncompromising competition.

Literary and Artistic References

Throughout history, writers have harnessed the phrase to underscore themes of greed, ambition, and sacrifice. For example, in Charles Dickens' works, the brutal realities of Victorian society echo the sentiment behind the phrase, illustrating how those unable to keep pace were often left destitute.

In the 20th century, the phrase was famously used as the title of a novel by Edward Chancellor, **And the Devil Take the Hindmost: A History of Financial Speculation** (1999). This book investigates the speculative bubbles and financial manias throughout history, framing them as ruthless competitions where the less savvy investors inevitably lose out — a perfect embodiment of the idiom's meaning.

Modern-Day Applications

Today, the phrase is often invoked in discussions about economic policies, workplace environments, and social dynamics. In the context of capitalism, "and the devil take the hindmost" can be seen as a critique of laissez-faire approaches where market forces are left unchecked, leading to winners and losers without safety nets.

In sports and business, the expression sometimes justifies aggressive tactics and prioritization of efficiency over fairness. However, it also serves as a cautionary reminder about the ethical implications of such attitudes.

Analyzing the Implications: Pros and Cons

The use of "and the devil take the hindmost" as a guiding philosophy or descriptive metaphor carries both potential advantages and ethical concerns.

Advantages

- **Promotes Competitiveness:** Encourages individuals and organizations to strive for excellence and maintain high performance standards.
- **Efficiency in Decision-Making:** In high-stakes environments, prioritizing the best performers can lead to quicker, more decisive outcomes.
- **Reflects Certain Realities:** Accurately portrays situations where resources are limited and not everyone can be accommodated equally.

Disadvantages

- **Encourages Ruthlessness:** May foster environments where empathy and cooperation are undervalued, potentially leading to toxic cultures.
- **Social Inequality:** Risks exacerbating disparities by neglecting those who need support the most.
- **Long-Term Consequences:** Overemphasis on immediate competitiveness can undermine sustainability and morale.

Comparative Insights: Similar Idioms and Concepts

The sentiment behind "and the devil take the hindmost" finds parallels in other idioms and philosophical ideas across cultures. For example, the phrase "every man for himself" shares a similar emphasis on individual survival at the expense of others. Similarly, the concept of "survival of the fittest," rooted in evolutionary theory, echoes the naturalistic underpinning of the phrase.

In contrast, idioms like "a rising tide lifts all boats" promote collective progress and support, highlighting the ideological divide between competitive individualism and cooperative altruism.

Use in Business and Economics

In business, the phrase often surfaces in discussions about market competition and

consumer behavior. For instance, in highly competitive industries such as technology or finance, companies may adopt a "devil take the hindmost" stance to push innovation and market dominance, sometimes at the expense of smaller players or ethical considerations.

Economists study these dynamics to understand how unregulated markets can lead to winners and losers, highlighting the need for policies that balance competitiveness with fairness.

The Phrase in Contemporary Media and Popular Culture

"And the devil take the hindmost" continues to inspire creators in music, film, and television. Its dramatic imagery lends itself well to narratives involving betrayal, ambition, and survival.

For example, in crime dramas or thrillers, the phrase might be used to underscore the cutthroat nature of the characters' world. In music, lyrics invoking the phrase often explore themes of loss and ruthless ambition.

This continued relevance illustrates the phrase's versatility and the universal nature of its underlying message.

The enduring power of "and the devil take the hindmost" lies in its stark encapsulation of human competition and the ethical dilemmas it entails. While it can serve as a blunt descriptor of reality, it also challenges societies and individuals to reflect on how far they are willing to go in prioritizing success over solidarity. As a linguistic and cultural artifact, the phrase remains a potent reminder of the fine line between ambition and callousness.

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Another popular way to use **demon** **devil** is to use them as adjectives. For example, you can say "He is a **demon** **devil**." or "She is a **demon** **devil**." This is a common way to describe someone who is very evil or wicked.

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