



American Expression E2118 Come to a pretty pass

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"Come to a pretty pass" is an idiom that conveys a situation that has deteriorated or reached a troubling state. It implies a turn of events or circumstances that are unfavorable, unexpected, or undesirable. The phrase suggests a sense of dismay, disappointment, or concern about the current state of affairs.

The origin of this expression dates back to the 16th century, where "pretty" didn't mean "attractive" as it commonly does today, but rather it meant "considerable" or "significant." So, when something has "come to a pretty pass," it has arrived at a considerable or significant point of difficulty or trouble.

When we say a situation has "come to a pretty pass," we're describing a scenario that has unfolded in a way that is concerning or alarming. It could refer to a series of events that have led to an unexpected outcome, such as a project failing despite initial optimism or a dispute escalating beyond resolution. It might also describe a gradual deterioration of circumstances, where problems accumulate over time until they reach a critical point.

This phrase is often used to express frustration, disappointment, or disbelief at the turn of events. It conveys a sense of incredulity that things have reached such a troubling state. For example, if a company experiences a significant financial loss due to poor management decisions, one might remark that the situation has "come to a pretty pass," indicating disappointment and concern about the company's future.

Furthermore, "come to a pretty pass" can also suggest a turning point or a moment of reckoning. It implies that the current situation demands attention and action to address the underlying issues or mitigate further consequences. In this sense, the phrase serves as a wake-up call, urging individuals or groups to confront reality and take necessary steps to resolve the problems at hand.

The use of "pretty" in this context adds a layer of irony to the expression. While "pretty" typically denotes something attractive or pleasing, in this phrase, it underscores the severity or significance of the situation. It's a reminder that even seemingly minor issues can escalate into major problems if left unattended.

In conclusion, "come to a pretty pass" encapsulates the notion of a situation reaching a troubling or undesirable state. It conveys a sense of dismay, disappointment, or concern about the current circumstances and implies a need for action or resolution. Whether describing unexpected setbacks, gradual deterioration, or moments of reckoning, this idiom serves as a poignant reminder of the complexities and challenges of life.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are some common situations in which one might use the expression "come to a pretty pass," and how does this phrase reflect the speaker's perception of the circumstances?
2. How does the use of irony in the phrase "come to a pretty pass" contribute to its impact and effectiveness in conveying disappointment or concern about a situation?
3. Can you share a personal experience or example from history or literature where a situation "came to a pretty pass," and what actions were taken to address or resolve the issues at hand?
4. In what ways do cultural and societal factors influence the interpretation and usage of idiomatic expressions like "come to a pretty pass," and how might these vary across different regions or communities?
5. How can individuals and organizations recognize the signs that a situation is "coming to a pretty pass," and what strategies can they employ to prevent or mitigate further escalation of problems?