

Archaism

Definition of Archaism

Archaism is the derivative of the Greek word *archaikós*, which means “beginning,” or “ancient.” It is a [figure of speech](#) in which a used phrase or word is considered very old fashioned and outdated. It can be a word, a phrase, a group of letters, spelling, or [syntax](#).

Archaism is the use of writing or speech that is now rarely used; the use of older versions of language and art. Such as in these lines, “To **thine** own self be true” (*Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare). Sentences that may be considered examples of archaism will most probably contain words like “thine” and “thou.”

Evolution of Archaism

Archaism is also known as “archaic [diction](#).” Languages evolve over the years. The English language written and spoken by Shakespeare was very different from English used today. The use of archaic language is found in the literary works of ancient medieval ages, as well as in the Victorian and Edwardian, 19th and 20th centuries.

Examples of Archaism in Literature

Archaism examples are found in the masterpieces of Shakespeare, S. T. Coleridge, Hemingway, and Keats.

Example #1: *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (By S. T. Coleridge)

“It is an ancient Mariner,
And he **stoppeth** one of three.

‘By **thy** long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now **wherefore** stopp’st **thou** me?’

He holds him with his skinny hand,
‘There was a ship,’ **quoth** he.
‘Hold off! **unhand** me, grey-beard loon!’
Eftsoons his hand dropt he
‘I fear **thy** skinny hand! ...’

I fear **thee** and thy glittering eye,
And thy skinny hand, so brown.’ —
Fear not, fear not, **thou** Wedding-Guest!
This body **dropt** not down ...”

In the following extract, archaic words are used extensively. These words are shown in bold.

Example #2: *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (By Ernest Hemingway)

“‘Where the hell are you going?’ Agustín asked the grave little man as he came up...

‘Thy duty,’ said Agustín mockingly. ‘I besmirch the milk of **thy** duty.’ Then turning to the woman, ‘Where the **un-nameable** is this **vileness** that I am to guard?’

‘In the cave,’ Pilar said. ‘In two sacks. And I am tired of **thy** obscenity.’

‘I obscenity in the milk of thy tiredness,’ Agustín said.

‘Then go and **befoul thyself**,’ Pilar said to him without heat.

‘Thy mother,’ Agustín replied.”

Hemingway has filled this paragraph with archaism. For instance, the words “un-namable” and “vileness” are old fashioned and out of use. He has, however, used them purposefully to create special mysterious effect.

Example #3: *Ode to Autumn* (By John Keats)

“Who **hath** not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind; ...

Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while **thy** hook
And sometimes like a gleaner **thou dost** keep
Steady **thy** laden head across a brook; ...
Thou **watchest** the last oozyings, hours by hours.”

John Keats has used archaism frequently in his poems. This example is also based on old fashioned words. Like, “hath” is an older version of “has,” “thou” has replaced “you,” and “watchest” is used as the past participle of “watch.”

Example #4: *Hamlet* (By William Shakespeare)

“Perhaps he loves you now,
And now no soil nor **cautel doth** besmirch
The virtue of his will

There; my blessing with **thee**!
And these few precepts in thy memory
Look thou [character](#). Give **thy** thoughts no tongue ...

I find **thee** apt;
And **duller shouldst thou** be than the fat weed
That rots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,
Wouldst **thou** not stir in this ...”

Shakespeare is famous for using archaic words to make his work more rhythmic, realistic, and to draw the attention of readers. Here, the words marked in bold are considered archaic.

Function of Archaism

Archaism is frequently used in poetry, [prose](#), science, law, geography, ritual, and technology speech and writing. It may have been used

superior, but maybe mythical, ancient golden age. Also, it can be used for creating [humor](#) and [irony](#). However, the most effective use of archaism is in poetry. The sound patterns of archaic words are helpful when it comes to [assonance](#), [alliteration](#), and [rhyme](#) scheme.