

# Anachronism

## Anachronism Definition

Anachronism is derived from the Greek word *anachronous*, which means “against time.” Therefore, an anachronism is an error of chronology or timeline in a literary piece. In other words, anything that is out of time and out of place is an anachronism.

Anachronisms appear in literature, paintings, and other works, and it is fascinating to explore them. Generally, they are considered errors that occur due to lack of research. For example, if a painter paints a portrait of Aristotle, and shows him wearing a wrist watch, it would be an example of anachronism, as we are all aware that wristwatches did not exist during Aristotle’s time. Similarly, the presence of a wall clock in a stage [setting](#) that depicts the interior of a Roman fort is an anachronism.

## Examples of Anachronism in Literature

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### Example #1: *The Great Gatsby* (By F. Scott Fitzgerald)

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The most famous anachronism example comes from Act 2, Scene 1 of William Shakespeare’s play *Julius Caesar*:

Brutus: “Peace! Count the clock.”

Cassius: “The clock has stricken three.”

The time this play depicts is a point in history dating back to 44 A.D. Mechanical clocks referred to in the above-mentioned [dialogue](#) had not been invented at that time, but were present in Shakespeare’s time. Thus, the mention of a clock in this play is an anachronism.

The same play presents another example of anachronism in Act 1, Scene 2:

“... he plucked me open his doublet and offered them his throat to cut.”

Romans at the time of Julius Caesar did not wear a doublet, a close-fitted jacket. This was, however, a fashion among men at the time of Shakespeare, and therefore its use in the play is an anachronism.

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#### **Example #2: *Hamlet* (By William Shakespeare)**

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It is interesting to cite an instance of anachronism in Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. Hamlet, the [protagonist](#), is the Prince of Denmark. We are told in the play that he has been attending the University of Halle-Wittenberg.

It is a historical fact that the aforementioned institute was established in 1502 A.D. The time that was depicted in the play was that of the 7th or 13th century. Shakespeare did not bother much to set the mistake right, nor did people ever call into question the presence of the university mentioned above in the Hamlet [character](#)'s time.

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#### **Example #3: *Macbeth* (By William Shakespeare)**

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Yet another example of Shakespearean anachronism comes from Act 1, Scene 2 of his play *Macbeth*:

“Ross: That now  
Sweno, the Norways' king, craves composition:  
Nor would we deign him burial of his men  
Till he disbursed at Saint Colme's inch  
Ten thousand dollars to our general use.”

The use of the word “dollar” in the above excerpt is clearly an example of an anachronism, as the dollar was not the monetary unit during the time that the play is set. Shakespeare's lack of research caused him to mention an item out of its time.

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#### **Example #4: *Pharaoh* (By Boleslaw Prus)**

Another example of anachronism caused by a lack of research is in the novel *Pharaoh*, written by the Polish writer Boleslaw Prus. The setting of the novel is the regime of Ramses XII (1087–1085 B.C). The writer mentions in his novel a Prince Harim's canal in the time of Ramses XII, and claims that it was the size of the Suez Canal. Careful research reveals that the canal existed before the mentioned timeline of the [narrative](#), and it was much smaller than the Suez Canal.

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#### **Example #5: *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (By John Keats)**

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An example of anachronism can be traced in John Keats' poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn*:

“Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter: therefore, ye soft pipes play on.”

Notice the use of the century-old and formal term “ye,” rather than the informal and more appropriate to Keats' time, “you.” It is an anachronism, but its use here is intentional, as it is used to show the respect that the urn inspires in Keats; hence, produces an artistic effect.

#### **Function of Anachronism**

Generally, an anachronism is considered an unintentional error that is a result of a writer's carelessness, and his lack of research. At times, however, it is employed in order to produce a special artistic effect, in order to attract the attention of the readers by an appropriate use of anachronism.