

When to Use Old Language and Slang in Your Stories

I'm writing an alternate history/paranormal novel that takes place in a version of Victorian England (*Queen Victoria's Transmogrifier*, which I've written about [here](#)). I routinely give things a once-over to make sure my language is consistent with the era I'm depicting: no anachronisms, no modern slang, and appropriate use of mid-19th century phrasing when it adds flavor and makes sense to the reader.

Recently I was working on a short story that will be appearing in the forthcoming anthology, *Demon Lovers: Succubi*.¹ The story is related to characters and events in *Transmogrifier*, and in the course of this writing I found myself using some turns of phrase I had to double-check. When did they come in vogue? Would it be right to have people saying them in their time/place?

One case in point is the term "pish posh", a dismissive utterance somewhere between "don't be silly" and "oh, come on!". To my surprise, etymology for the term "pish" shows the word as an exclamation of contempt has been in use since the 1590s. Who knew? And yes, it was in vogue in the 19th century, as reflected in novels and some letters and journals of the period.

Anyway, this got me thinking about use of old expressions in writing, and so, here're some thoughts on the when/how/where/why of it.

When to Use Outdated Speech

Obviously, speaking in an "old fashioned" way can have (at least) one of two impacts. First, it can make someone sound old-fashioned - i.e., identified with an earlier era - if you have them do it when no one else talks that way. This is a tactic to use if you want to make your character sound dated. You don't have to think 19th century or earlier literature here for that to happen, either. The older man who answers the challenge, "Yo, why you up in my grill?" with "No sweat. It's groovy, man," sounds like an old hippy, or at least someone who came of age during the 1960s.

The other time and place to use period slang is when it is era-appropriate and everyone talks that way. In that situation, though, a writer has to deal with a different challenge: we generally want to convey the flavor and feel of the period, without having the language feel stilted. We want the story to flow in a way that is comfortable *and understandable* for a modern reader, but remind them in subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) ways, that they are a fly on the wall in a place and time that is not "here, now".

Certainly there is artistry to accomplishing this, and in the end you have to rely on your feeling for language (or develop a feeling for language) that lets you strike the right nuanced tone to carry these things off. But even if you're tone-deaf about vernacular and what slang comes from what period, there are still solutions to hand. Here are some resources I've found that can help you transport readers back in time without jarring the believability of your characters and setting.

Resources

If you're writing a period piece or want to talk old-fashioned on purpose, know your old-fashioned language. I think one of the best ways to do this is to read books from the era in question. I am lucky in that I grew up reading a lot of novels written in the 19th century and things even earlier, so the cadences and usage of that era are almost second nature to me. Often I will write something down and then go, "Wait, where'd that come from? I better look that up in case I'm making it up." Turns out I'm probably regurgitating something from Daniel Defoe (Robinson Crusoe) or Robert Louis Stevenson (Treasure Island), and so on. Good! The language my people are using, at least in the incidental expressions and phrasing, is hitting the right tone. You don't need this to be second nature in order to use the right phrasing, though. There are great resources online that I frequently turn to, and you might find them useful too. Here's a sampling:

The Online Etymology Dictionary

One of my favorite resources for the etymology of uncommon phrases is the most excellent Online Etymology Dictionary, which you can browse for endless hours (if you're of that bent) [right here](#). While good dictionaries have interesting etymology (word origin) notes, this online resource is more chatty and has some interesting backstories tucked in here and there about the phrases in question, going beyond the simple 'word root/first use' info in regular dictionaries. Great resource, highly recommended. In fact, let me give that a Lizard Lair [stomp of approval](#)!

[Online Etymology Dictionary](#)



Lizard Lair Stomp of Approval Rating: 5 Stomps=This Rocks!

The Word Detective

For an even more back-story filled and often humorous romp through the underbrush of language evolution, check out [The Word Detective](#). This bloggish reference site is the online version of a newspaper column produced for ages (well, online since 1995, anyway) by Evan Morris. Great stuff here, less dictionary-esque than the previous listing, and an eclectic grab-bag of vocabulary byways.

Evan Morris' work gets stomps of approval as well, but it's the same as the one above (5

Stomps=This Rocks!). In fact, all my recommendations here are 5-stomps worth of word fun. If it's just 4 stomps of "good stuff," it's not on this short list.

Speaking of vocabulary byways, I also recommend...

The Oxford English Dictionary Online

The O.E.D. is the sine qua non of dictionaries, and many obsessive wordsmiths would give their next smartphone for an unabridged version of this venerable reference work. Other dictionaries pale in comparison. Actual access to the grist of the OED online costs moolah, but you don't need to be a paying subscriber to get one of the next-best things: their [Access to English page](#). This content gives you various subsets of historical and word-evolution info. I find their "[Word Stories](#)" section to be one of the most consistently useful. I think they have a newsletter link somewhere there; I seem to get periodic (quarterly?) mailings from them, but right now cannot spot where I signed up for such a thing. Their Word of the Day is also entertaining, and you can sign up to get that emailed to you as well (right hand column on the home page). 5 Stomps for this one as well.

So there you go, hopefully a little helpful grist either for your writing mill, or for your language enjoyment neurons. Happy dated slang to us all. May we use it well!

Do you have suggestions for etymology and slang resources that help with language from other eras? Please share in the comments below!

1. *Demon Lovers: Succubi* is an anthology appearing December 2011 from my imprint, Storybones Publishing. More will be announced about that book shortly. You can find the book website at <http://www.demonlovers.info>.