
**reaper**

b. fig. *the (Great, Grim, Old) Reaper*: Death personified.

The expression arises from the iconographic portrayal of Death wielding a scythe: cf. *scythe* n. 2.

1839 Longfellow in *Baltimore Lit. Monument* May 17/1 O, not in cruelty, not in wrath, The reaper came that day. 1931 *N. & Q.* 5 Sept. 180/2 One is startled by the inroads which the great reaper has made in the ranks of the Knights since the 15th Edition. 1940 A. Upfield *Bushranger of Skies* xiv. 161 That he happened to be the seventh son of a seventh son..was said..to account for his escapes from The Reaper. 1976 *R. Lewis* *Witness my Death* v. 182 The old house had been silent, waiting with him for the Old Reaper to come again. 1977 *New Statesman* 2 Sept. 304/1 The Grim Reaper has been rather too vigorously at work among us... At least ten of the best have gone.

**scythe, n.**

(sæθ) Forms: o. 1 sigdi, siđe, 3-6 sype, 4-7 sith, 5 cithe, (sythy), 5-6 cythe, 6 symth, 6-7 symth, sieth, 7 siethe, seith, sight, syeth. 3-9 sythe; g. 5 seth, 7 saith; γ. 7 scith, scithe, 7- scythe. [OE. sige masc., earlier *siđi* (written sigdi in Epinal Gl.) = LG. seged, seid, sicht, ON. siga-r (mod.Icel. siga fem., Norw. sigd, sigde, sidde masc.):—OTeut. *segizjo-z*, f. root *seg-* to cut, whence the synonymous OS. segisna (MLG., MDu. seisen, Du. zeisen, zeis), OHG. segansa (MHG. segense, seinse, G. sense).

The etymologically correct spelling *sithe* was preferred by Johnson, but his authority has not prevailed against the currency of the spelling with *sc*, due to erroneous association with L. scindere to cut. Cf. scissors.]

2. transf. and fig., esp. as the attribute of Time or Death.

1387-8 *T. Usk* *Test. Love* I. Prol. 99 Sithen al the grettest clerkes..with their sharpe sythes of conning al mowen and mad therof grete rekes and noble. 1506 *Kal. Sheph.* (Sommer) 90 They fyght and cose on eche other wonder with the sythe of deuyls dredabyll. c1600 *Shakes*, *Sonn*. xii, And nothing gainst Times sieth can make defence Saue [...]. 1659 *T. Pecke* *Parnassi Puerp.* 112 Time devours Things; His Sithe our Legs will hit. a1711 *Ken* Hynmotheo Poet. Wks. 1721 III. 185 See how Death preys on humane Race; Out with his Scythe the Tyrant goes, Great Multitudes at once he mows. 1809 *Byron* *Bards & Rev.* 632 Whet not your scythe, suppressors of our vice! Reforming saints! 1854 *Brewster* *More Worlds* i. 16 The swarm of human life..has never been perceptibly reduced by the scythe of famine, of pestilence, or of war. 1883 *O. W. Holmes* *Loving-cup Song* 29 Old Time his rusty scythe may whet.