

Alliteration and Kennings

Poetic Devices

Anglo-Saxon Poetry

And the Geats'

Lord and leader, angry, lowered
His sword and roared out a battle cry,
A call so loud and clear that it reached through
The hoary^o rock, hung in the dragon's
Ear. The beast rose, angry,
Knowing a man had come—and then nothing
But war could have followed. Its breath came first,
A steaming cloud pouring from the stone,
Then the earth itself shook. Beowulf
Swung his shield into place, held it
In front of him, facing the entrance. The dragon
Coiled and uncoiled, its heart urging it
Into battle.

from *Beowulf*, translated by Burton Raffel

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^ohoary: ancient.

Two Poetic Devices

The following poetic devices are essential features of Anglo-Saxon poetry:

- alliteration
- kennings



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What Is Alliteration?

Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds in words that are close to one another. Alliteration may occur

- at the beginnings of words, as in “**b**right **b**lue” or “**k**ind **c**omment”
- within words, as in “j**a**cket p**o**cket”

Alliterative Anglo-Saxons

Instead of rhymes, Anglo-Saxon oral poets used alliteration along with carefully placed pauses to add music and rhythm to their poems.

- Lines of Anglo-Saxon verse often are divided into two halves separated by a rhythmic pause, or **caesura**.
 - Some lines have three alliterative words—two words in the first half before the caesura and one word in the second half.
 - Other lines have only two alliterative words—one in each half.

What Is a Kenning?

A kenning is a metaphorical phrase or compound word used to name a person, place, thing, or event indirectly.

- Kennings such as *whale-road* and *battle-dew* fill Anglo-Saxon poetry.
- Combining existing words from the relatively small Anglo-Saxon vocabulary helped poets to create alliteration.
- Kennings were memorable, ready-made phrases that bards could reuse and pass on to others.

Kennings Then and Now

Anglo-Saxon Kennings

- mead-hall
- ring-giver
- heaven's high arch
- shapes of darkness
- shepherd of evil

Modern-Day Kennings

- gas guzzler
- queen bee
- headhunter
- king of the hill
- snake in the grass

The Use of Alliteration and Kennings

Anglo-Saxon literature was part of an **oral tradition**. Poems, songs, and stories were passed from one generation to another orally.

- Anglo-Saxon poets and storytellers used alliteration and kennings because these devices
 - aided memory
 - created sound effects
 - pleased the audience

What Have You Learned?

Identify each of the following lines as a use of alliteration or kenning.

- | | |
|---|--------------|
| 1. That DJ is king of the airwaves. | Kenning |
| 2. The large sign loomed above the lonely highway. | Alliteration |
| 3. All of the washing machines were taken, so we had to wait. | Alliteration |
| 4. My brother calls his '78 sedan a land yacht. | Kenning |

The End