

# Alliteration, Kenning, and Caesura

In *Beowulf*

# Use of Sound Devices

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- The Anglo-Saxon **oral tradition** is evident in *Beowulf*.
- Like other oral art, it was handed down, with changes and embellishments, from one story teller to another.
- To aide the retelling of the story, several poetic devices are incorporated into this epic poem.

# Alliteration

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- **Alliteration** is the repetition of initial consonant sounds in words close to one another in lines of poetry.
  - Instead of rhyme unifying a poem, the Anglo-Saxon poet used **alliteration** to connect the narrative structure of the epic.

- **Examples:**

“ . . . A powerful monster, living **down**  
In the **darkness, growled in pain, impatient**  
As **day after day** the music rang  
Loud in the hall . . . ”

“So **Hrothgar’s men lived happy in his hall”**

# Caesura

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- Often the verse line is divided into two halves separated by a rhythmical pause, or **caesura**.
  - In one half, two words would commonly **alliterate**; in the other half, one word **alliterates** with the two from the other half.
- **Example:**

“Then, when darkness had dropped, Grendel  
Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors\_(caesura  
after Herot)  
Would do in that hall when their drinking was done.”

# Kenning

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- The **kenning** is a specialized metaphor made of compound words.
  - They are still used today (*gas guzzler* and *headhunter*).
- The earliest and simplest kennings are compound words formed from two common nouns:
  - “sky-candle” for sun
  - “whale-road” for sea.
- Later, **kennings** became much more elaborate.
  - A ship became a “foamy-throated ship,” then a “foamy-throated sea-stallion,” and finally a “foamy-throated sea-stallion of the whale-road.”
- Once a kenning was formed, it was used over and over by the oral poets.

# Kennings continued...

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## ■ Examples:

“So mankind’s enemy continued his crimes”  
(*Grendel*)

“So the living sorrow of Healfdane’s son  
simmered” (Hrothgar)

“In his far-off home Beowulf, Higlac’s  
Follower and the strongest of the Geats”  
(*Beowulf*)