

kennings

A **kenning** is a literary device in which a poetic phrase substitutes for a noun. In the best kennings, one element of the phrase will create a striking, unexpected comparison. Often used in Anglo-Saxon poetry and especially in *Beowulf*, a kenning provides powerful imagery that would help the audience focus on the words of the scop or poet telling the story. A kenning also allows the scop some variety, so words don't become overused. Finally, Anglo-Saxon poetry depended heavily on alliteration, and some kennings provided additional alliteration. Here are examples:

sky-candle (the sun)
swan-road (the sea)
stout-hearted (brave)

battle sweat (blood)
light-of-battle (sword)
helmet bearers (warriors)

giver of gold (king)
earth-hall (burial mound, barrow)
dwelling place (home)

When we translate these kennings from Anglo-Saxon, they lose some of their poetic quality. Listed below are some modern kennings. Can you find examples of striking imagery, alliteration, consonance, rhyme, and assonance among them? Can you identify the concept each kenning represents?

- | | |
|----------------|-----------------|
| 1. gas guzzler | 6. eye candy |
| 2. headhunter | 7. cancer stick |
| 3. web surver | 8. boob tube |
| 4. rug rat | 9. couch potato |
| 5. land line | 10. tramp stamp |

Can you create at least 5 kennings of your own? Be sure to include poetic qualities.



Replica helmet from Sutton Hoo:
<http://commons.wikimedia.org>

Hrodulf the Red-Nosed Reindeer (Modern English translation)

Here begins the deeds of Rudolph, Tundra-Wanderer

Lo, Hrodulf the red-nosed reindeer --
 That beast didn't have unshiny nostrils!
 The goodly nose-cartilage glittered and glowed.
 The hoof-bearers taunted him with proud words;
 The comrades wouldn't allow wretched Hrodulf
 To join the reindeer games.
 Then, on Christmas Eve bound in storms
 Santa Claus remembering that, spoke formally to him:
 "Dear night-sighted friend, nose-bright one!
 You, Hrodulf, shall lead my adorned rapid-wagon!"
 Then the sky-flyers praised their lead-deer --
 There was gladness and music; one of the horned ones sang
 "Lo, Hrodulf the red-nosed reindeer,
 Your fame spreads broadly, you are renowned!"

Copyright © 1996 Philip Chapman-Bell; All Rights Reserved.

QUESTIONS

Find three kennings in the poem and explain what each kenning means:

- | KENNING | MEANING |
|-----------|---------|
| 1.) _____ | |
| 2.) _____ | |
| 3.) _____ | |

Find two lines that use alliteration:

- 1.) _____
- 2.) _____

Using at least three kennings, you can use those shared during class, re-create your own verse. You can transform current jingles, theme songs, etc into your modernized Anglo-Saxon verse. Write your final verse below, and underline your kennings. **Remember: Kennings combine two words to create an evocative and imaginative alternative word. Your kenning should be thought-provoking, but it may also be funny.**

