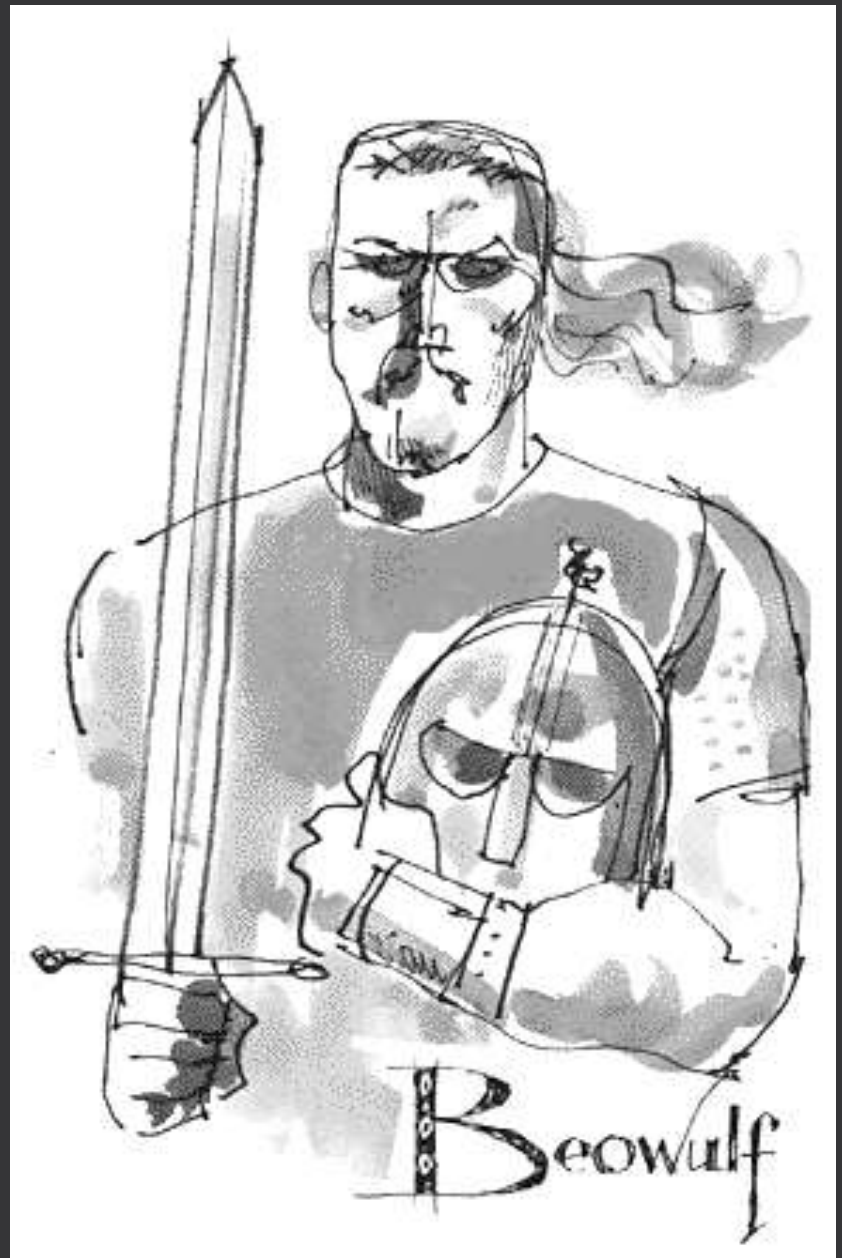


# *Beowulf*

An Anglo-Saxon Epic



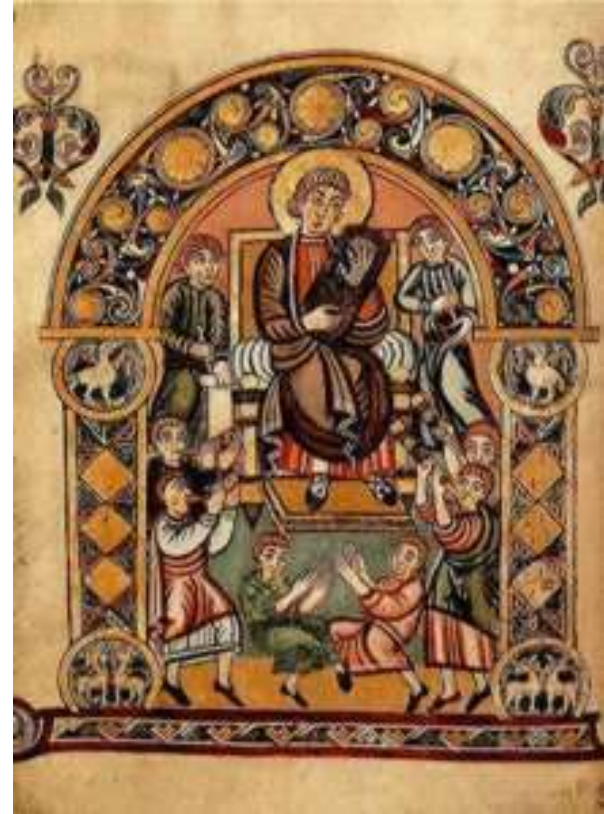
# Directions

- Read through the following information about *Beowulf*.
- **Items written in bold should be written down in your notes.**
- Answer the questions on the “Checking In” slides in your notes, and bring the completed questions to class. You should write down the full questions and answers so you can later use the information to study.



# Origins of *Beowulf*

- Transmitted or performed by a Scop (shōpe) from memory
- Finally written **between 700 A.D. and 800 A.D.**
- “The *Beowulf*-Poet”
  - (his identity is unknown) Was an English monk (and therefore, Christian) who probably lived in one of the Anglo-Saxon settlements in Western England
- This fact creates a **tension between pagan characters and Christian poet.**



# What is *Beowulf*?

- Beowulf is an **epic** poem.
  - A long narrative poem that relates the great deeds of a larger-than-life hero who embodies the values of a particular society
- It is about a transitional point in history (though it is mostly mythological and fictional).



BEOWULF



# What is *Beowulf*?

- It is poetic, creative, imaginative, and is one of the earliest works of art in the English language (Old English)
  - Click the following link to hear audio of an Old English recitation of *Beowulf*:  
<http://faculty.virginia.edu/OldEnglish/Beowulf.Readings/Prologue.html>
- It was NOT written in Latin. It was **written in the vernacular (Old English)** and about people who were England's founders (or conquerors) in the middle of the first millennium.



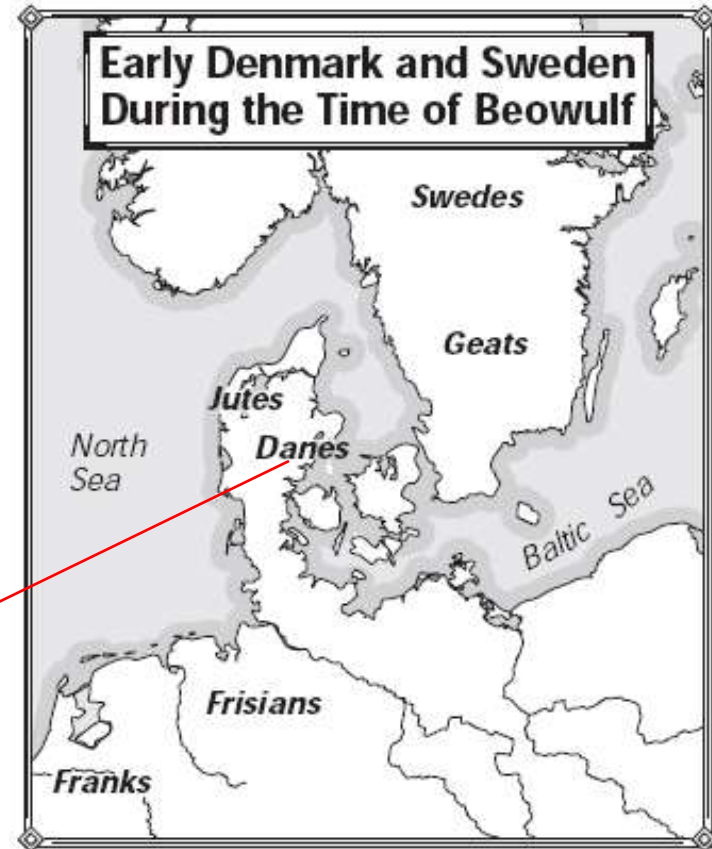
# *Beowulf* Plot Background

- Even though the poet himself was English and Christian, the poem is about neither Englishmen nor (full-fledged) Christians.
- It is the story of several Scandinavian peoples (tribes, really), mainly the **Geats** and the **Danes**, but also the **Swedes**.



# *Beowulf* Geography (700-800)

- Beowulf is a Geat.
- Beowulf goes to help Hrothgar and the Danes defeat Grendel.







# *Beowulf* Characters

- Beowulf (Geat)
- Hrothgar (Dane)
- Unferth (Dane)
- Wiglaf (Geat)
- Grendel
- Grendel's mother
- The dragon



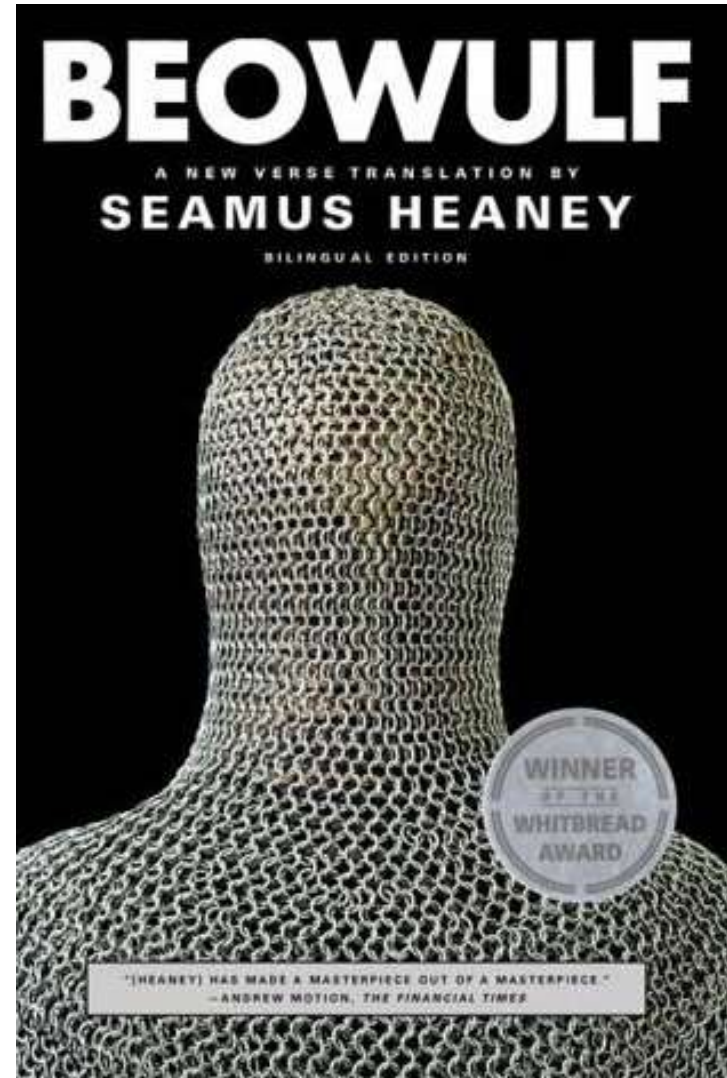
# Put Another Way

Many people divide the poem into thirds; it is about Beowulf's three epic battles with evil creatures:

1. Grendel
2. Grendel's Mother
3. The Dragon

However, as Seamus Heaney (the editor of the classroom edition of *Beowulf*) points out, it is also really about three tribes:

1. The Geats
2. The Danes
3. The Swedes



# Checking-In Questions

4. What three creatures does Beowulf battle?
5. What three tribes are present in the epic?





# When? No, *Really*. When?

- A fictional work
- However, it is an imaginative work about people who occupied the Baltic region sometime in **the fifth century A.D.**
- Some events in the poem did take place:
  - The raid against the Franks by Hygelac, Beowulf's lord, took place in the sixth century A.D.
- Beowulf and the other characters who populate the poem seem to be obsessed themselves with the human relationship to time (or “when”).
- It is a poem that reminisces about a previous, “dead” world.



# In Perspective...

- 2700-2400 BC Gilgamesh lived
- 1300 BC Gilgamesh formed/written down
- 500 AD Beowulf takes place
- 800 AD Beowulf written down

\*all dates are approximate

**For your notes...**

**How much time passes between the formation of Gilgamesh and Beowulf?**

# The Setting of *Beowulf*

- The action in the poem takes place in Geatland (southern Sweden) and Denmark.
- Also consider more specific settings:
  - The sea, the meadhall, the swamp, the cliff, the battlefield
  - In the modern world, it is Denmark and Sweden and the islands in the Baltic between the two countries.
- But it is also about the poet who wrote the poem; we can say this because so many Christian features exist in the work. So, it is also about Anglo-Saxon England, but only indirectly. None of the action takes place in England.



# Allegory in *Beowulf*

- An allegory is a story in which the characters, settings, and events stand for abstract or moral concepts.
- It would be better to say that there are allegorical features in *Beowulf* than to call it an allegory. As you read, think about each of the following characters and the moral concepts they represent:
  - Grendel
  - Grendel's mother
  - Dragon



# The Scary, Horror Movie Quality

Heaney puts it nicely in his introduction when he says that *Beowulf* takes place in a “once-upon-a-time world” and that it taps into “**three archetypal sites of fear**”:

1. The barricaded Meadhall at night (Grendel)
2. The infested underwater current (Grendel’s mother)
3. Reptile-haunted rocks of a wilderness (dragon)





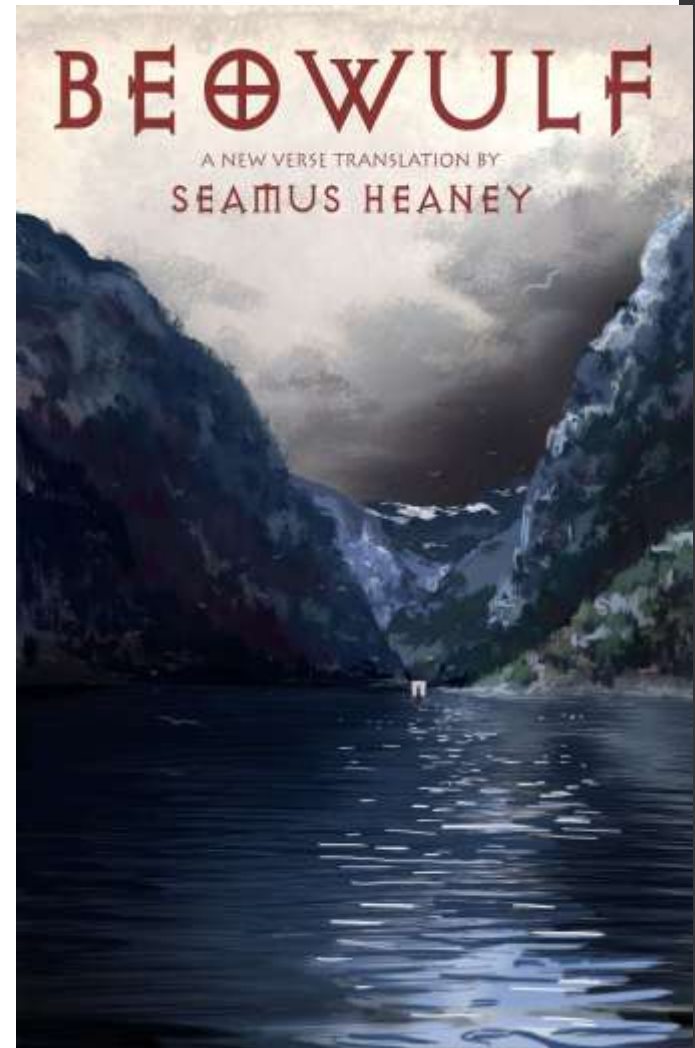
# Checking-In Questions

6. What are the three archetypal sites of fear present in *Beowulf*?
7. If *Beowulf* has elements of allegory, then for each archetypal site of fear you listed in the previous answer, what would each represent for you?



# Why Another Epic?

- It is the first epic written in English.
- It gives us insight into the origins of the British people, the culture who, through seafaring conquest, founded the modern world.
- It gives us insight into the origins of our language.
- It gives us insight into all people everywhere and throughout time. Its themes transcend English literature and matter to all people.
- It is scary and gets readers to think about our own worst fears.



# Epic Machinery

# Elements of the Epic

- Poem **begins with a statement of the theme** ("Arms and the man I sing")
- **Invocation to the muse** or other deity ("Sing, goddess, of the wrath of Achilles")
- Story begins *in medias res* (in the middle of things)
- **Catalogs** (of participants on each side, ships, sacrifices)
- **Histories and descriptions of significant items** (who made a sword or shield, how it was decorated)





- **Epic simile** (a long simile where the image becomes an object of art in its own right as well as serving to clarify the subject).
- Frequent use of **epithets** ("Aeneas the true"; "rosy-fingered Dawn"; "tall-masted ship")
- Use of **patronymics** (calling son by father's name): "Anchises' son"
- **Long, formal speeches** by important characters
- Journey to the **underworld**
- Previous episodes in the story are later recounted



# Anglo-Saxon Culture

Mortality

Heroic Code

Feasting Culture

Role of Women

Pagan and Christian Influences

# View on Mortality

- Average lifespan = 30 years old (including infant mortality)
- threat of invasion, disease epidemics, and famine
  - nations organized around loyalty to lord who offers protection, greater nations invade smaller ones, a lord's death means defenselessness for the nation, vengeance is sought, the cycle continues
- **fame/reputation/glory important**
  - **mortality imminent**
  - **work to achieve immortality through legend (hence importance of scop)**
  - **charity and good doing was therefore very public (humility not important)**

# Heroic Code

- loyalty, hospitality, strength, courage, honor, generosity
- **for warriors, glory is attained through noble deeds** and sacrifices to lord (against Christianity)
- **a good king** does not seek personal glory but rather **protection of kin and praises warriors**
- **comitatus: loyalty between king and warriors**
- warlords gave gifts of weaponry to warriors who would use it to protect him
- creates not only gratitude but also dependency
- acceptance of gifts accompanied by formal speeches
- community had to be first for safety
- general view that life outside the community was pointless
- **wergild: man-price**
  - murderer must pay family of victim
    - deterred revenge
    - sign of respect
  - varies according to person's rank

# Feasting Culture: Meadhall

- **symbolic refuge for king and warriors, symbol of power of kingdom**
  - hubs of value system of community, honor, and loyalty
  - center of warmth and comfort in contrast to the cold and discomfort/instability of outside
  - places of shelter and camaraderie rather than danger and warfare
  - stood at center of village homes, open inside to accommodate social events and public forums
  - ideally place for treaty-making, alliances, matchmaking, etc. but because of drinking in reality a place of feuds oftentimes



# Feasting Culture: the Feast

- **feast: event that emphasized shared values and community**
  - during times of peace
  - plenty of libations
  - also to celebrate marriages and commemorate funerals
  - Time for speeches

# Feasting Culture: the Scop

- **narrator of events, poets, bards**
  - **important for cultural history and legends** (reflective of emphasis on reputation)
  - emphasized war heroes and cultural values, idolized builders and protectors
  - demonized betrayers and destroyers

# Feasting Culture: Orations

- **formal speeches: oaths and boasts (often accompanied by drinking) and gift-giving**
  - important because of reputation; rarely did people make oaths/boasts they didn't plan on keeping

# Role of Women

- heroism really for men
- women associated with sexuality
- political/influential women shed sexuality = cannot be both = link to femininity must be obliterated in order to be seen as heroic
- occasional arranged marriages to achieve peace between clans, but women could refuse
- women could own land
- daily tasks: raising children, educating children, crafts, keeping the household

# Pagan and Christian Influences

- **wyrd = fate** - both pagan and Christian
- Christian poet reminiscing about pagan people
- Paganism: polytheistic, spirits, no hope for after life =  
glory in this life = fame only defense against death, fame  
is all-important because it alone transcends death
- **Conflict**
  - **vengeance vs. forgiveness**
  - **glory on earth vs. afterlife**
  - **boast v. humility**



# Anglo-Saxon Poetry

Alliteration

Kennings

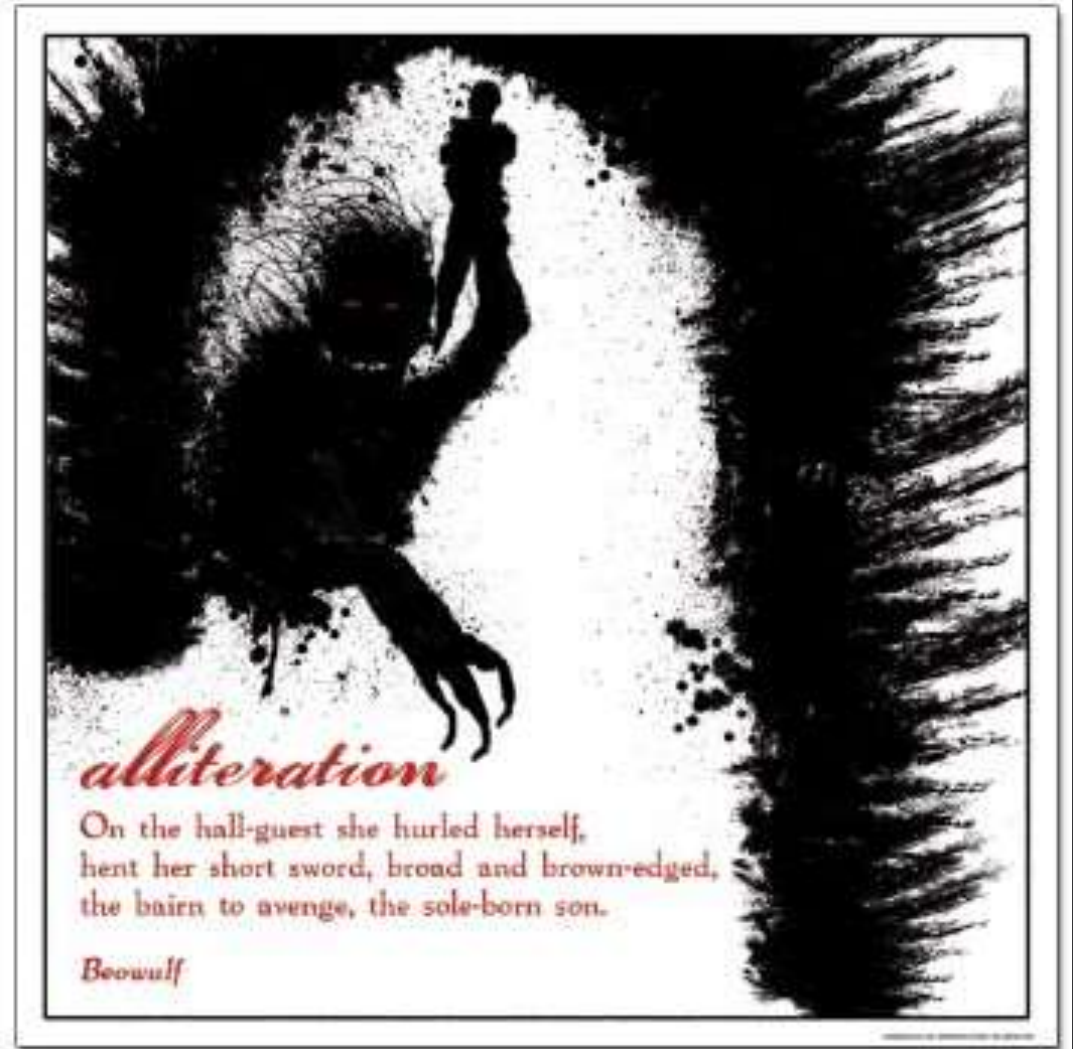
Caesura

# The Basic Rules

- **Alliteration** is the central organizing poetic device in Anglo-Saxon poetry.
- The basic formal unit in Anglo-Saxon poetry is the single line, not a stanza or a couple of lines (couplets, quatrains, etc.)
- Alliteration is what helped the poet form individual lines of poetry.

# Alliteration

- **Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds in words that are close to one another**
- In more general terms, it is the use of words with similar sounding beginnings
  - Ex) Great, big gobs of greasy, grimy, gopher guts.
- Alliteration linked the two halves of a line of poetry. The line was divided by a caesura, which is . . .



# Caesura

- **A pause or break within a line of poetry, usually dictated by the natural rhythm of language**
- In Anglo-Saxon poetry, the **caesura** is medial; that is, it occurs in the middle of the line.
- Words in one half of the line were stressed one way, while words in the second half could be stressed another.
- The stresses, the alliteration, and the caesura are tied together in a rather complex way...

- The best way to understand Anglo-Saxon poetry is to see an example:
- Alliteration of /sc/ sounds; further alliteration in /th/ sound
- “Oft Scyld Scefing    sceaƷena Ʒreatum”
- Stresses in first half    Stresses in second half

## Caesura

- This is the fourth line of Beowulf.



# kennings

- Simple definition: A kenning is a compound word.
- More precise definition:
- A **kenning** is a **specialized metaphor made of compound words**. It is unique to the Old Germanic languages, and is especially prominent in Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon literature.

# kennings

*Helmbarend*—“helmet bearer” = warrior

*Beodoleoma*—“battle light” = flashing sword

Swansroad—“swan road” = sea

In this way, a kenning is a compact metaphor that **functions as a name or epithet**; it is also a riddle in miniature. This will be important later.

# kennings

- Later, kennings grew more elaborate, and compound adjectives joined the compound nouns.
- Examples:
  - foamy-throated ship
  - foamy-throated sea-stallion
  - foamy-throated stallion of the whale-road
- The word “kennings” comes from the use of the Old Norse verb *kenna* ‘to know or recognize’.

# Why did poets use kennings?

1. Scops created new words to facilitate the alliterative structure of the poem.
2. Because scops memorized the poetry and repeated it orally, kennings made passages memorable.
3. Audiences liked the “elaborate” coining of the phrases and their inherent riddle quality.

Heaney’s translation maintains the kenning’s importance within the poem. Look for them!

# Checking-In Questions

8. Define and give an example of each of the following terms:
  - A. Alliteration
  - B. Caesura
  - C. Kenning



# Tone

*Beowulf* is somber because:

1. The poet is reminiscing about “**the good old days**” and the last vestiges of a warrior code.
2. The poem itself is about **loss—loss** of innocence, loss of life, loss of one’s lords, friends, etc. It is about loss through death.
3. The peoples in the poem lived in constant **fear** of the elements and their human predators.

# The Use of Digressions

- The term “**digression**” has a rather negative connotation, but as Heaney argues, when the *Beowulf* poet gets off topic, it is almost always for a very good reason.
- Ultimately, the poem is very complex, and certainly not rambling. The digressions almost always shed light on the characters, their actions, and the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian worlds.

# The Major Digressions

- Apart from minor moves in and out of the central story line, there are two major digressions. Each is an example of a story-within-a-story (in this case, a song within a song):
  1. 883-914: Siegemund's victory over a dragon
  2. 1070-1158: "The Finnsburg Episode"
- There are other digressions, too. They often occur before intense action within the epic.

# Minor Literary/Poetic Devices

**Synecdoche: a part used for the whole**

Keel used for ship

Iron used for sword

**Variation:** the use of parallel and appositive expressions which gives the verse a highly structured and musical quality

**Irony:** achieved through indirection, sometimes understatement

litotes = a classical rhetorical term which means “ironic understatement.

# Review of Important Terms

Alliteration (the most important term)

Caesura

Kenning

**Tone**

**Digression**

**Synecdoche**

**Irony**

9. **Checking-In: Define and give an example of each of these devices.**

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