

ANGLO-SAXON RIDDLES

Warriors didn't spend all their time battling. To help pass the long hours in the mead hall, the Anglo-Saxons invented complicated riddles, or verbal puzzles, to tell to one another. The riddles frequently personified an inanimate object or a concept, giving the listener subtle clues to its true identity. A riddle was, in essence, a poem. Anglo-Saxon poetry did not rhyme, but was strongly alliterative. Although much of their alliteration is lost in translation, here is an example of a strongly alliterative rhyme: "Five miles meandering with a mazy motion." Only a few Anglo-Saxon riddles have survived the years and come down to us. The following is one of these.



Bilbo Baggins and the creature Gollum engage in a battle of riddles. J.R.R. Tolkien, author of *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*, was heavily influenced by the Anglo-Saxon world when he created his own Middle-Earth world when he created his own Middle-Earth (Painting: *Riddles in the Dark*, Alan Lee)

*The creature ate its words— it seemed to me
strangely weird when I heard this wonder:
that it had devoured human speech.
A thief in the darkness gloriously mouthed
the source of knowledge— but the thief was not
the least bit wiser for the words in his mouth.*

Although the answer to this riddle probably didn't just leap to mind, it's still a good example of the wordplay typically used. It also shows the use of *caesura* ("cutting"), a line-break or pause in the middle of the line, where a pause might naturally occur.

The riddles below are not Anglo-Saxon but were created in imitation.

*When I am alive I do not speak.
Anyone who wants to takes me captive
and cuts off my head— they bite my bare body
I do no harm to anyone unless they cut me first.
Then I soon make them cry.*

Here's another.

*I am all on my own wounded by iron weapons
and scarred by swords— I often see battle.
I am tired of fighting— I do not expect to be allowed
to retire from warfare Before I am completely done for.
At the wall of the city, I am knocked about
And bitten again and again— Hard edged things
made by the blacksmith's hammer attack me.
Each time I wait for something worse.
I have never been able to find a doctor
who could make me better— or give me medicine.
Instead the sword gashes grow bigger day and night.*

CREATE YOUR OWN

Now *your* job is to create an Anglo-Saxon riddle. The subject of your riddle can be anything (you're not constrained to something from the Anglo-Saxon time period). Your poem must be five to eight lines and have these three elements.

- 1**
 - **ALLITERATION**
 - Make some of the words in your lines alliterate, but don't go too far (Peter Piper picked a pail of pickled...)
- 2**
 - **CAESURA**
 - Break your lines in the middle where a natural pause might occur
- 3**
 - **PERSONIFICATION**
 - For the subject of your poem, chose an inanimate object. Personify it by speaking for it.

When you have finished, share your riddle with your classmates and see if they can guess the subject.