

Dramatic Interpretation

The Tale of Glam: An Original Poem

I dedicate my original poem to the people of medieval Iceland, who gathered around the fires at night to tell ghost stories and who firmly closed their sturdy doors against the coming of the dark.

The story for my original poem comes from *The Grettis Saga*, which contains a prose version of the conflict between the undead Glam and the hero Grettir the Strong. There are dramatic parallels between this story and the story of Beowulf and Grendel, so I chose to follow the literary example of *Beowulf* and write my poem in the style of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry, a style dating from 650 A.D. to 1000 A.D.

I had originally planned to write the poem and submit it to the Compositional Arts category. But as I went along, I realized the truth of the matter: Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry is really meant to be spoken aloud. Perhaps most poetry should be, but certainly this form. It rises out of the Old Germanic oral traditions, the stories and legends that were shared and chanted throughout whole communities. Sometimes the story-poems were even accompanied by music.

This poetic style is challenging to write in English, to say the least. Anglo-Saxon poetry, which hails from Old Germanic oral verse forms, does not observe the metrical beats of the poetry English speakers are familiar with. Instead of rhyming and/or beat conventions, Anglo-Saxon poetry depends on combining two half-lines to make a full line, with each half-line containing two stressed syllables along with a few more unstressed syllables. In addition, each beginning half-line alliterates with the next half-line like this: either the first or second stressed syllable of the first half-line alliterates with the first stressed syllable of the second half-line. In some of the surviving Anglo-Saxon heroic poems, including much of *Beowulf*, the alliteration scheme is even more demanding: it alliterates both the first and second stressed syllables of the first half-line with the first stressed syllable of the second. (No matter what, an alliteration must occur on the first stressed syllables of the second half-line.)

Here is an example from my poem. To clarify the alliteration and stressed syllables, I have bolded the stressed syllables and underlined the alliterated syllables for clarity. Note that the full syllable counts for each half-line are usually four syllables.

a **w**ailing **w**ind **w**ithered **w**armth
and **m**adly **m**oaned its **m**idwinter cry.

Here is an Anglo-Saxon example from lines 4-7 of *Beowulf*, a famous Anglo-Saxon heroic poem with close parallels to the prose story that I based my poem on.

Of **Scyld** **S**cefing **s**ceapena **p**reatum,

<u>mon</u> egum <u>mæg</u> þum,	<u>meo</u> dosetla ofteah,
egsode <u>eor</u> las.	Syððan <u>æ</u> rest wearð
<u>feas</u> ceaft <u>f</u> unden,	he þæs <u>f</u> rofre gebad,

I did not always follow this three-syllable alliterative pattern, since frankly it's difficult for a modern audience to listen to 3-4 alliterated syllables per line throughout an entire poem. Other surviving Anglo-Saxon heroic verses followed the two-syllable alliterative pattern as well. (I'm not the only poet to struggle over finding an alliteration and stress that will fit – some of the Anglo Saxon poets were really reaching too.¹) So in some sections of my poem, I chose to alliterate one or the other stressed syllable in the first half-line with the first stressed syllable in the second.

Death-walked the <u>w</u> ight	in <u>w</u> retched Shady-vale
cursing the <u>l</u> iving with	<u>l</u> onely death,
<u>g</u> reen-cloaked valleys	<u>g</u> rim and stained
with <u>s</u> hepherds' blood.	<u>S</u> hining sun over
Thorhall's good <u>l</u> and	<u>l</u> ost to the glooming
and <u>d</u> arkness <u>w</u> ild	<u>w</u> raith-rode ruin.

You can see a similar mixed alliterative scheme from *The Battle of Finnsburh*:

Ac her <u>f</u> orþ berað;	<u>f</u> ugelas singað,
<u>g</u> ylleð <u>g</u> ræghama,	<u>g</u> uðwudu hlynneð,
<u>s</u> cyld <u>s</u> cefte oncwýð.	Nu <u>s</u> cyneð þes mona
<u>w</u> aðol under <u>w</u> olcnum.	Nu arisað <u>w</u> eadæda
ðe ðisne <u>f</u> olces nið	<u>f</u> remman willað.

Alliteration, stress and the half-line structure is the heart of the Anglo-Saxon verse form, but there is a great deal more to it than that: scholars have written reams on the form's word choices, imagery, metrics, and rules.² Ironically, we only have a few of these poems to study since so few of them have survived the last 1000 years. Survivors include shorter poems like *The Wanderer*; *The Seafarer*; *Judith*; *The Whale*; *Dream of the Rood*; *Eadwacer*; *Deor*; and *The Wife's Lament*. *Beowulf*, and others such as the *Finnsburh* fragment, *The Battle of Maldon* and *Brunanburh* are classed as epics in poetic form.

A key feature of Anglo-Saxon poetry is combining simple words into imaginative compounds known as kennings. Period kennings include "swan-road" for ocean and "storm of swords" for battle. Examples from my poem include "serpent-son," a reference to the undead Glam as the devil's spawn, and "death-walked," referring to the original wight's murderous killing spree. (Yes, the tale has not one but *two* violent undead. The Anglo Saxon storytellers were nothing if not thorough.)

¹ Professor T.A. Shippey points out that the *Beowulf* poet(s) periodically refers to the exact same group of people as "East-Danes," "North-Danes," or "South-Danes," then throws in "Spear-Danes," "Ring-Danes" and "Bright-Danes" for good measure. The reason for the mixed-up sense of direction? Making the alliteration fit.

² Influential scholars include linguists Eduard Sievers and the esteemed J.R.R. Tolkien.

Surviving Anglo-Saxon poems covered a variety of themes ranging from sad stories like *The Wife's Lament* to religious poems like the beautiful *The Dream of the Rood*. Other Anglo-Saxon poems, most notably *Beowulf*, included the epic battles and monsters beloved to Germanic storytellers. Since *Beowulf* is deeply rooted in Scandinavian (Germanic) folktales, it's not surprising that it reflects that culture's love of all things emotional, heroic, colorful, and supernatural.³ Iceland in particular, which produced many heroic sagas between 1000 A.D. and 1400 A.D., was fond of its legendary monsters and ghosts.

Being fond of a good ghost story, I wove my poem around the story from *The Grettis Saga* with its imagery of the walking dead, the deadly *draugr*, which roamed the cold Icelandic wastes. Grettir is the worst of the Icelandic *draugr* type: a *draugr* so driven, strong and bold that they it leaves its burial howe far behind to ravage an entire region. These powerful *draugr* ripped great hall doors off their frames, danced on town roofs, and smashed beasts and humans to smithereens. The story of Grendel from *Beowulf* is this type of *draugr* as well.

I have also included Christian content in the poem. This may seem like an odd choice, but is perfect period: post-1000 A.D. Iceland converted to Christianity, and many of the anti-*draugr* measures had Christian elements. For example, in the story of Glam from the *Grettis Saga*, the men who found Glam's cursed corpse fetched a Christian priest to exorcise it, but Glam's body disappeared until the priest gave up and went away.⁴ Other Christian priests from Icelandic sagas handily defeated *draugrs* by scolding them. Apparently these *draugrs* maintained some sense of civic duty, and returned to their howes.

References

- Grettis Saga: The Story of Grettir the Strong*. (14th century). Author unknown. Translated from the Icelandic by Eirikr Magnusson and William Morris (1869). London: F.S. Ellis.
- Abrams, M.H., ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. (1979). Volume I. 4th ed. New York: Norton.
- Beowulf*. (1st century A.D.). Translated by David Wright. (1957). New York: Penguin Books.
- Savelli, Mary. (2000). "Old English Metrics." Retrieved December 2005 from <http://www.dnaco.net/~sirbill/OldEnglishMetrics.html>.

³ European legends of deadly revenants date from ancient Germanic folklore and literature. Like their ghostly namesake, the stories were resurrected in post-Icelandic Conversion sagas and heroic poems.

⁴ According to the story's author, Glam's non-Christian beliefs – and his general unpleasant personality – opened the door to the evil that caused him to rise as a *draugr*.