

Kenning

Definition of Kenning

A kenning, which is derived from Norse and Anglo-Saxon poetry, is a stylistic device defined as a two-word phrase that describes an object through metaphors. A Kenning poem is also defined as a [riddle](#) that consists of a few lines of kennings, which describe someone or something in confusing detail. It is also described as a “compressed [metaphor](#),” which means meanings illustrated in a few words. For example, a two-word phrase “whale-road” represents the sea.

Characteristics of Kenning

A literary piece may be considered as a kenning example if it possesses the following defining characteristics:

- It is used to describe an object in detail.

- The two parts of a compound word represent a relationship between subjects and objects, which creates associations in an abstract and concise way.

- It is also called a compressed metaphor.

Examples of Kenning in Literature

Example #1: *The Seafarer* (By Ezra Pound)

“May I for my own self song’s truth reckon,
Journey’s [jargon](#), how I in harsh days
Hardship endured oft.
Bitter **breast-cares** have I abided,
Known on my keel many a care’s hold,
And dire **sea-surge**, and there I oft spent.

That he on dry land loveliest liveth,
List how I, **care-wretched**, on **ice-cold** sea,
Deprived of my kinsmen;
Over the **whale's acre**, would wander wide
Eager and ready, the crying **lone-flyer**,
Whets for the **whale-path** the heart irresistibly."

The Seafarer is one of the best examples of kenning poems. Here, "whale-path," "whale-road," and "whale's acre" refer to the ocean. "Breast-hoard" refers to the heart.

Example #2: *Bone Dreams* (By Seamus Heaney)

"... and its yellowing, ribbed
impression in the grass —
—a small **ship-burial**.
As dead as stone,
flint-find, nugget
of chalk,
I touch it again,
I wind it in

the sling of mind
to pitch it at England
and follow its drop
to strange fields ...
Bone-house:
a skeleton
in the tongue's
old dungeons ..."

This poem is also a very good example of kenning. Here, the words which are used as metaphors are "ship-burial," "flint-find," and "bone-house." The two-word phrases give descriptions of objects in an alternative way. Though complex, kennings can make a poem more enjoyable.

“There is a singer everyone has heard,
Loud, a mid-summer and a **mid-wood** bird,
Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.
He says the early **petal-fall** is past
When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
On sunny days a moment overcast...”

In the given example, Frost has also employed kenning. For instance, “mid-wood” refers to a bird. And the second obvious kenning is “petal-fall,” which represents autumn or the fall season.

Example #4: *North* (By Seamus Heaney)

“I returned to a long strand
Were **ocean-deafened** voices
warning me, lifted again
in violence and [epiphany](#)...

was buoyant with hindsight—
it said Thor’s hammer swung
to geography and trade,
thick-witted couplings and revenges,
the hatreds and behind-backs
of the althing, lies and women,
exhaustions nominated peace...

It said, ‘Lie down
in the **word-hoard**, burrow
the coil and gleam
of your furrowed brain...”

Here again, Heaney has utilized kenning. The two word phrases include: “ocean-deafened,” which refers to inaudible and warning voices, and other metaphors such as “thick-witted” and “word-hoard,” for erudition and

Example #5: *The Dream of the Rodd* (By Caedmon and Cynewulf)

“Listen, I will tell the best of visions,
what came to me in the middle of the night,
when **voice-bearers** dwelled in rest.
It seemed to me that I saw a more wonderful tree...
That beacon was entirely ... likewise there were five
upon the **cross-beam**. All those fair through creation.
Wondrous was the **victory-tree**, and I stained with sins,
wounded with guilts...”

This is an example of kenning from an old Anglo-Saxon poem. Here, the phrases “voice-bearer,” “cross-beam,” and “victory-tree” serve as metaphors. These help in describing an object’s detail by employing compound words.

Function of Kenning

Kenning is used as a poetic device, and its function in poetry is to describe something in alternative ways, in order to provide a richer and different meaning. Kenning is related to dialects as well, wherein it works as a showcase example of regional or local [dialect](#). Also, metaphorical usage of kenning makes the poetic language more vibrant, and increases thought-provoking vocabulary. Hence, it tends to keep readers engaged.