

What are kennings?

Bed of fish, smooth path of ships, island-ring, realm of lobsters, slopes of the sea-king, whale-house, land of the ocean-noise, blood of the earth, frothing beer of the coastline...

This is just a small clutch of examples from a vast hoard of phrases Viking and Anglo-Saxon poets used to refer to the sea. They are known as kennings and are often based on metaphor. The word 'kenning' comes from the Old Norse verb *að kenna*, which means 'to describe' or 'to understand'. When we think about the nature of poetry, part of its purpose is to explore new ways of describing and understanding the world around us. This is exactly what kennings do: they force us to look at things differently, to question the habitual way we think.

Kennings are a means of referring to people or objects without naming them directly. They are little riddles in a very compact form – the audience may often have to work hard to find the solution, particularly if they are unfamiliar with the conventions of kennings. In this sense, kennings may seem an exclusive, even secretive way of talking about things. They can also be surreal, creative and rather unexpected.

The kennings listed above all describe the sea in terms of something else: *bed, path, land, blood, beer, house* and so on. We call this part of the kenning the 'base word'. The other part of the kenning – *of fish, of ships, island-, of lobsters* etc – is known as the 'determinant' and it provides us with a clue to help us find or determine the answer to the kenning. In the kenning *whale-house*, we have to solve the riddle of what the *house* really is. A house is a space inhabited by people. Most whales don't live in houses – they live in the sea. Therefore 'sea' is what this house really means. If we modified the kenning to *moon-house* it would be the sky. Similarly *bat-house* would be a cave, and *soup-house* would be a bowl.

The basic structure of skaldic (Viking) kennings

	Base Word	Determinant	Referent
<i>fire of the sea</i>	fire	sea	GOLD
<i>battle-moon</i>	moon	battle	SHIELD
<i>praise-smith</i>	smith	praise	POET

referent – the object/person the kenning refers to. The referent is not named directly; we infer it by solving the kenning 'riddle'.

base word – this stands in for the referent. It is sometimes (but not always) a metaphor. E.g., in 'battle-moon', moon is used as a metaphor for shield.

determinant – relates to the sphere of the referent, helping us understand the base word in terms of the referent. E.g. moon could be a metaphor for a number of things. In 'battle-moon' it must represent a shield because it belongs to the sphere of battle. If we replaced battle with eyelash, 'eyelash-moon' would be the eye.