

# Kennings and Close Relatives



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Outline of a workshop conducted by Jane Monson on 7 April 2013 in the Department of Anglo-Saxon Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge as part of the cultural engagement project, Kennings in the Community

*'The kennings workshop was fun and intriguing, plus it has given me a great tool to use within other forms of creative writing. It was such an inspiring day I've even begun tagging household items with kennings, a habit which I hope to hit the streets with this summer!'*

**~ Jake Lowry, workshop participant**

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## **Introduction**

Give a brief introduction to Skaldic poetry and definition of the Kenning followed by introduction to the use of the Kenning in poetry and its relation to short forms in poetry, namely Haiku, the riddle and the six-word story.

## **A working definition of The Kenning:**

Kenning means to know, perceive or feel and is therefore considered to be *felt* knowing as well as *cognitive* knowing.

It is a description of one thing in terms of another and condones using more than one word when you could just use one. The kenning has been described as a metaphorical *circumlocution*, whereby you still get to the thing itself, the subject of object, but by not naming it directly, the writer opens up other ideas and ways of looking. The many other associations that come to mind when thinking around the thing give a richer meaning and experience of the subject. So if you were to think of a kenning for swan, for example, you might think of what the swan represents – royalty, calmness, aggression – and its contradictory qualities as both a beautiful and fierce creature.

In summary, the kenning is a metaphorical circumlocution describing a well known noun in a new way which gives information about its qualities and characteristics. The device displaces the familiar and invites deeper thinking about how to describe and encapsulate the ordinary in an extraordinary way. The simplest use of the kenning is the compound word or union of two clashing words to convey the subject or object in a surprising way. That said, however refreshing the kenning is, it is always rooted in what we know:

For example: compound word for person is ‘speech-bearer’.

The main focus of this workshop is to use the ethos of the kenning, if you like, to make our own poems and to appreciate the kenning as a form particular to its time, but relevant and adaptable to contemporary poetry. The kenning has as much in common with the Riddle and Haiku as it does the six-word story, prose poetry, aphorisms and flash fiction, for example. The Kenning can be seen as the short form, that goes the long way round to achieve concision and new perspectives.

Here refer to the following handout and discuss the kenning in relation to the various short forms included.



## **Kennings and Close Relatives Handout**

To discuss in relation to the following examples:

Are kennings very much of their time or can you see a place for them in contemporary culture and if so any particular culture? Refer to examples below of other short forms: Haiku, Japanese Verse, Six Word Story and Riddle. More generally open up discussion of examples of modern poets where kennings or similar metaphors can be found.

### **Kennings**

Ship: sea-steed. Sea: whale-road. Sword: wound-hoe. Wind: breaker of trees. Raven: swan of blood. Battle: spear-din. Wife: girl of houses. The Sun: sky-candle. Fire: bane of wood.

### **Six Word Stories**

For sale: baby shoes, never worn.

**Ernest Hemingway**

"The Earth? We ate it yesterday."

**Yann Martel**

Heaven falls. Details at eleven.

**Robert Jordan**

### **Japanese Verse: Riddle Stories**

In the whole village  
The Husband alone  
Does not know of it.

If it's well styled  
There are stories about her –  
The widow's hair.

The picture that  
The guide can't read –  
He doesn't show them that.

The ladder-seller  
Hears the cry 'Swords drawn!'  
And scrambles to the roof.

**Anglo-Saxon Riddles (extracts)**

While my ghost lives I go on feet...

\*

I'm the world's wonder, for I make women happy  
—A boon to the neighbourhood, a bane to no one,  
though I may perhaps prick the one who picks me.

\*

From hand to friend's hand about the hall I go,  
so much do lords and ladies love to kiss me.

\*

I saw a woman sit alone.

**What do these short glimpses reveal about the story behind them? What do you see when you read them and how can this relate to the kenning?**

**BREAK**

**Hopkins' Kennings**

The Windhover is a sonnet written in 1877, and published in 1918. Hopkins coined the terms inscape and instress, meaning the essence of a thing and deliverance of that essence. Discuss the pertinence of this term in relation to what the kenning tries to achieve. Note in Windhover, the collision of verbs, adjectives, nouns, and the way they are seamlessly brought together by rhymes and rhythms. Note the repetition of 'ing', also common in kennings. "Windhover" can be read as a kenning for the Common Kestrel, as the name refers to the bird's ability to hover in midair while hunting prey. The bird can also be viewed as a metaphor for Christ or of divine epiphany.

**The Windhover:**

*To Christ our Lord*

I CAUGHT this morning morning's minion, king- (loving and loyal servant)

dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in (French for dolphin)

his riding

Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding

High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing (part of nun's headdress that keeps hair back)

In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,

As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and

gliding

Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding

Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here

Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion

Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier! (Medieval image of Christ as a knight riding on a horse)

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion (ploughed soil)

Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,

Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

### **Exercise 1**

Focussing on the **alliteration and assonance** so prominent in this poem, rewrite the Windhover, in sonnet form, but using another bird of your choice, describing it as closely to Hopkins's style and weaving in kennings throughout the poem. Similarly, the title of the poem should capture the essence, or inscape of the bird itself.

Other examples of kennings and near-kennings in Hopkins, found in 'The Starlight Night' and 'The Loss of the Eurydice'.

Bone-house; Fire-folk; Wind-beat whitebeam; Flake-doves; Piece-bright paling; Water-in-a wallow; Starlight-wender

And more of the same from 'Duns Scotus's Oxford':

'Cuckoo-echoing, bell-swarmèd, lark-charmèd, rook-racked, river-rounded'

### **Exercise 2**

Using a series of kennings, or compounds as above to describe a favourite or significant place in your life.

### **FORM and STRUCTURE**

The kenning essentially has a three part structure: referent, base word and determinant.

The referent is the object itself, undisclosed, so the reader has to guess as the kenning operates as a riddle.

The base word is the metaphor or representative of that object. So if you choose bowl, you might choose shelter, or holder.

Determinant provides the clues and is usually a noun which directs the base word towards the referent, the object itself. For this you can choose words that describe your object in some way or choose other objects that are associated with the object. So, with bowl you might choose plate: walled-plate or sheltered-plate for example.

### **Exercise 3**

Structure: Referent – Base word – Determinant

1. Choose 2 referents: Object – something from the natural world and something from the domestic
2. Make a list of base words: metaphors for chosen objects or things that look like or represent each referent

Bowl

Bath

Pond

Scoop

Well

Bucket

Sink

Boat

Tree

Brush

Comb

Family

Flag-pole

Map

Flames

Road

Rivers

Hands

3. Determinant: clues – things associated with your objects in some way or that describe your objects

Bowl

Kitchen

Table

Meal

Rounded

Soup

Fruit

Begging

Collecting

Spoon

Tree

Branch  
Growth  
Death  
Cycle  
Season  
Fall  
Colour  
Green  
Nest  
Ring  
Pattern  
Bird  
Flight

Choose one determinant and one base word to create a kenning, first as a compound-word, then as a phrase. First stick to a domestic list, then natural, then mix them up. Stick to compound words first, then lengthen your kenning either by a series of compound word or phrases, by adding other adjectives, articles and/or past, present or future endings. Experiment until you're happy with the sound, meaning and look of the kenning. How obscure or clear you make your kenning is up to you and your use of the list.

Examples for TREE:

Nest-road  
The nested-road  
Season-brush  
Flame-pole  
Death-map  
Birth-map  
Season-road  
Pattern-road

And for BOWL:

Table-pond  
Table-scoop  
Begging-well  
Meal-boat  
Spoon-sink  
Soup-pond

Now mix and match the lists using the same formula, but creating clashes to reveal unexpected kennings. The intention of this part of the exercise is to reverse the process, so you're revealing the kenning afterwards and creating them based on your determinants and base words.

Examples mixing TREE and BOWL lists to create other kennings (in brackets):

Soup-flames (STEAM or HEAT)  
Flight-boat (HOT-AIR BALLOON)  
Bird-scoop (TRAP)  
Bird-scoop (NEST)  
Kitchen-family (CUTLERY-SET)  
Soup-road (RIVER)  
Collected-flames (SUN)

A longer and surreal example creating a kenning narrative:

The soup-flames remained captive in a bird-scoop until the kitchen-family released them into the soup-road where they sailed happily under the skies collected-flames. Waves from a flight-boat followed them home.

#### **Exercise 4 (20 mins)**

Battle exercise: describe a traditional Viking Battle on the left hand side of the page and an equivalent contemporary battle scene on the right hand side. The traditional version must use typical Nordic images and the contemporary version must replace images of sea, swords, shields, helmets etc with contemporary images and settings. For example, rush hour, shopping, train stations, internet....

Twenty minutes to write, then twenty mins for read-through and feedback.

Finish with general discussion about the pros and cons of using kennings in their poetry. Does the kenning always enhance the work or can it distract in any way?

**Kennings: Further Writing Exercises**

1. Choose a significant object from your life and write a kenning based on your choice from the point of view of the thing itself. As with the riddle, the object must not divulge its identity, but the reader must gain an understanding of how it perceives itself outside of our own traditional use of the object or perception of the thing.
2. Rewrite a poem (written by you or someone else), replacing selected nouns with kennings. Observe the way the indirect use of language, the rhythms of your new metaphors and shift in the poem's structure changes your approach to the content.
3. Use a series of kennings to write about someone familiar. Choose a base-word that captures who this person is to you – their role, the way he/she makes you feel and their typical mannerisms.
4. Pick a book from your shelves, open it at random, choose a paragraph or sentence and translate using the kenning as a way of bringing out the essence of what you think the paragraph is illustrating or trying to say.
5. Write a kenning poem inspired by another art form: painting, photography, film, dance or, sculpture. Incorporate the language and vocabulary, however technical, that is particular to the form.
6. Make a list of things that children have said to describe something when they don't know its name. These are very close to the kenning anyway. Try and think of how you saw things as a child and write a kenning based on a childhood memory.
7. Write a poem about the kenning. What does the kenning teach you about the world and language and how we connect the two?
8. Cuckoo-echoing, bell-swarmèd, lark-charmèd, rook-racked, river-rounded' (From Dun Scotus' Oxford, Gerard Manley Hopkins). Using the horizontal list as Hopkins has done, write a series of kennings to describe a place that has been or is significant in your life.



**Poems by Workshop Participants**

**The Memory Peddler**

Wingless swallows flock round the trinkets of the memory peddler, shower him with pocket moons  
and royal portraits before returning home.

*~ Patrick Widdess*

**Corpus Clock**

The visitors stand in a knotted queue watching blue stars flicker across a golden time shield. They  
raise one-eyed picture boxes in greeting to life's gold-winged slayer advancing ever closer.

*~ Patrick Widdess*

**January Sales**

The whirlwind of the sisters of Freya,  
Speed over the hanging fields of the warmth-makers,  
And the harlequin crops bow,  
Before the coming storm-harvest.  
The thunder of the merciless wind-reapers,  
Approach the sown furrows of cotton soldiers.  
See the chaff rendering on the threshing-floor,  
As the earth-mothers claim their scythe-spoils.

*~ Tony Harris*

**Morning at the Window by T.S. Eliot**

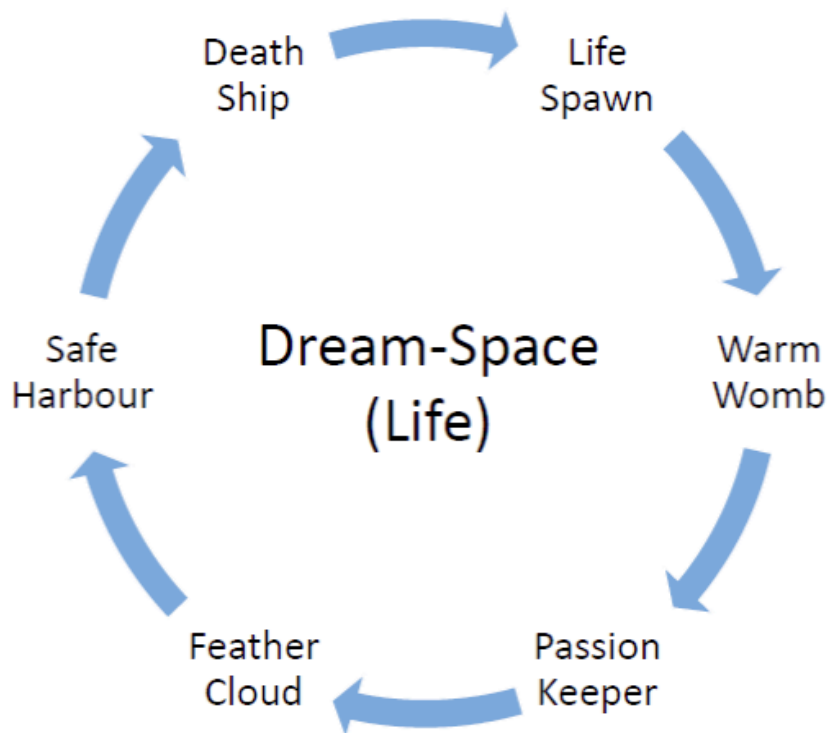
They are rattling breakfast plates in basement kitchens,  
And along the trampled edges of the street  
I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids  
Sprouting despondently at area gates.  
The brown waves of fog toss up to me  
Twisted faces from the bottom of the street,  
And tear from a passer-by with muddy skirts  
An aimless smile that hovers in the air  
And vanishes along the level of the roofs.

*~ Tony Harris*

### **Kenning Equivalent**

They are beating sun-birth food-shields in the realms of the under-hearths,  
Beside the sole-scuffed borders of the home-road  
In the eye of my mind comes the watery life-breath of the hearth-keepers  
Rising sadly from the home-walls of the earth-mother.  
The dark stealer of the light of minds sparks my catch  
Soul visions crumpled in the nether reaches of the home-road  
Ripped from the secret-traveller with the earth-stained homes of Freya's pedestals  
Flickering insight of the light of happiness soars in the wind of the life-domain  
And Loki's trick spans the heavens of the heart-dwelling.

*~ Tony Harris*



*~ Tony Harris*





