

ANGLO-SAXON RIDDLES

Riddles have been discovered in the oldest examples of written Anglo-Saxon, the predominant language in England from around 450 A.D. until 1066, the date of the Battle of Hastings, when William the Conqueror brought Norman French as the language. Scholars have translated ninety-five Anglo-Saxon riddles from the Exeter Book, a collection of stories and poems copied by English monks in 1070.

These non-rhyming poetic riddles present a picture of everyday life in England over a thousand years ago. In them, the speaker of the riddle is a personified object that gives descriptive clues about his identity: a warrior's wounded and scarred battle shield, an anchor gripping rocks at the bottom of the sea, a plow burrowing into green grass and turning up black earth, an iceberg formed like a frozen bone, and a weather vane shaped like a rooster that endures wind, rain, sleet, and snow.

A riddle is basically an analogy; that is, it is an unusual comparison between two dissimilar objects. For example, a pen leaves an inky trail just like a jet plane leaves a jet stream. Sometimes an object will be personified; that is, it will be compared to a person. For example, a writer's pen moves rhythmically in line like a dancer.

The riddle on this page has four quatrains (a quatrain is a stanza with four lines), and an aabb rhyme scheme. The speaker in each quatrain is a different personification or analogy to the same object.

I tip my cap and bow down low
For those who tell me what they know
Black, blue, red, and green
My marks imprint the sights they've seen

Across white space from left to right,
Some fuel injections are heavy; others, light.
Red, green, black, and blue,
My vapor trail records both old and new.

Flowing, jerky, large or small,
My rhythmic movements interpret all.
Blue, red, green, or black,
I dance in line on front and back.

Although I'm just a simple tool
Of brilliant minds and sometimes fools,
Green, black, blue, and red,
My tracks record what teacher said.

Now follow these steps and use an object to create a riddle that will puzzle the reader.

1. Select an object used by modern Americans: lipstick, a lawn mower, a spatula, an ice cube, etc.
2. By using analogy or personification, think of ways to compare your object to an unusual object or person that is similar in some way.
3. Using the first person pronouns *I*, *me*, and *my*, write a four-line poem that describes the object's actions and appearance.
4. Work on the rhythm and rhyme scheme, but remember that riddles do not always rhyme.

In your journal!

Riddle 3*

3

Ic eom anhaga iserne wund,
 bille gebennad, beadoweorca sæd,
 ecgum werig. Oft ic wig seo,
 frecne feohtan. Frofre ne wene,
 þæt me geoc cyme guðgewinnes, 5
 ær ic mid ældum eal forwurðe,
 ac mec hnossiað homera lafe,
 heardecg heoroscearp, hondweorc smiþa,
 bitað in burgum; ic abidan sceal
 lapran gemotes. Næfre læcecynn 10
 on folcstede findan meahte,
 þara þe mid wyrstum wunde gehælde,
 ac me ecga dolg eacen weorðað
 þurh deaðslege dagum ond nihtum.

I am the lone wood in the warp of battle,
 Wounded by iron, broken by blade,
 Weary of war. Often I see
 Battle-rush, rage, fierce fight flaring--
 I hold no hope for help to come 5
 Before I fall finally with warriors
 Or feel the flame. The hard hammer-leavings
 Strike me; the bright-edged, battle-sharp
 Handiwork of smiths bites in battle.
 Always I must await the harder encounter 10
 For I could never find in the world any
 Of the race of healers who heal hard wounds
 With roots and herbs. So I suffer
 Sword-slash and death-wound day and night.

solut

Riddle 21

21

Agob is min noma eft onhwyrfed;
 ic eom wrætlic wiht on gewin sceapen.
 þonne ic onbuge, ond me of bosme fareð
 ætren onga, ic beom eallgearo
 þæt ic me þæt feorhbealo feor aswape. 5
 Sippan me se waldend, se me þæt wite gescop,
 leoþo forlæteð, ic beo lengre þonne ær,
 oppæt ic spæte, spilde geblonden,
 ealfelo attor þæt ic ær geap.
 Ne togonged þæs gumena hwylcum, 10
 ænigum eape þæt ic þær ymb sprice,
 gif hine hrined þæt me of hrife fleogeð,
 þæt þone mandrinc mægne geceapap,
 fullwered fæste feore sine.
 Nelle ic unbunden ænigum hyran 15
 nympe searosæled. Saga hwæt ic hatte.

Wob is my name twisted about--
 I'm a strange creature shaped for battle.
 When I bend and the battle-sting snakes
 Through my belly, I am primed to drive off
 The death-stroke. When my lord and tormentor
 Releases my limbs, I am long again,
 As laced with slaughter, I spit out
 The death-blend I swallowed before.
 What whistles from my belly does not easily pass
 And the man who seizes this sudden cup
 Pays with his life for the long, last drink.
 Unwound I will not obey any man;
 Bound tight, I serve. Say what I am.

solut