

## Riddles

The Anglo-Saxons lived in early medieval England; their language was called Old English. They loved reading and writing in Old English, and also in another language, Latin. They also liked to tease one another by writing lots of riddles, and by making people guess the solutions of those riddles.

**Question:** Do you know any modern riddles? Do you like making people guess the solution of your riddles?

**Question:** What's the difference between the person who asks the riddle and the person who has to guess the solution?

**Question:** What's the point of a riddle? How do riddles work?

**Question:** What do riddles have in common with poetry?

Here's another modern riddle:

A door,           but not a door.  
In homes,       but not for humans.  
I have no hole for a key, nor a handle,  
Those who flash through me having no fingers.  
I am way out   and way in  
For the night-watchers, the long-whiskered

Source: Ursula Fanthorpe, from K. Crossley-Holland, ed., *The New Exeter Book of Riddles* (London, 1999)

**Question:** What's the solution? Do you like this riddle? What do you like about this riddle?

**Activity:** Write a riddle yourself! Try these simple steps:

- Pick an object that you know well and that other people know well
- Try to describe it but without mentioning its name
- You could describe what it does, or what it might like or hate, or what it might say if it could talk
- You could describe what it's made from
- Try out your riddle on somebody else: can they guess the solution?

## Anglo-Saxon Riddles

Anglo-Saxon riddles work the same way as some of the modern riddles: things are described in ways that make it difficult to guess what they are. You get objects speaking that normally don't speak. Small things are made to sound big, the big things are made to sound small. Things that are normally just lifeless objects and don't move or have feelings suddenly do move in the riddles, and have feelings. Here some examples which Anglo-Saxon authors wrote, first three riddles in Old English and then some in Latin:

Exeter Book Riddle 55:

The air carries little creatures  
Over mountain slopes. They are very black,  
Swarthy, pale-coated, rich in song,  
They travel in flocks, call out loudly,  
Walk over the wooded coastland,  
Sometimes the buildings of people.  
They name themselves.

Ʒeos lyft byreð lytle wihte  
ofer beorghleoþa þa sind blace swiþe,  
swearte, salopade. Sanges rope  
heapum ferað, hlude cirmað;  
tredað bearonæssas hwilum burgsalo  
niþþa bearna. Nemnað hy sylfe.

Exeter Book Riddle 49:

I saw four marvellous creatures  
Travelling together; their tracks were black  
Very dark traces.  
It was swift on its journey,  
Bolder than birds; it flew into the air,  
Plunged under the wave.  
The working warrior  
Bustled busily, the one who teaches  
All four their paths across precious gold.

Ic seah wrætlice wuhte feower  
samed sibian; swearte wæran lastas,  
swaþu swiþe blacu. Swift wæs on fore  
fuglum framra; fleag on lyfte  
deaf under yþe. Dreag unstill  
winnende wiga, se him wægas tæcneþ  
ofer fæted gold feower eallum.

Exeter Book Riddle 3:

I am a loner, wounded with iron,  
Battered by a blade, covered with battle-deeds,  
Tired out by swords. Often I see war,  
A dangerous fight; I expect no comfort,  
That help should come to me in the conflict of war,  
Before I am entirely destroyed among men;

But the thing that the hammer produced hacks at me,  
The hard-edged, highly sharo handwork of smiths,  
Bites me in townships; I must await  
A crueller clash. I could never find  
Any kind of doctors in the dwelling place,  
Of those who might heal wounds with herbs,  
But the scars of edges increase on me  
Through deadly blows day and night.

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  
ær ic mid ældum eal forwurðe;  
ac mec hnossiað homera lafe,  
heardecg heoroscearp hondweorc smiþa,  
bitað in burgum; ic a bidan sceal  
laþran gemotes. Næfre læcecynn  
on folcstede findan meahte  
þara þe mid wirtum wunde gehælde,  
ac me ecga dolg eacen weorðað  
þurh deaðslege dagum ond nihtum.

Tatwine Riddle 29:

I am used to satisfying everyone with sumptuous food;  
Therefore a blessed age decided that my four-footed self  
Be made lavish, while I am abundantly adorned with pretty coverings.  
Robbers are accustomed to plunder me eagerly,  
And when what covers me is snatched away, my naked form remains.

Multiferis omnes dapibus saturare solesco  
Quadripedem hinc felix ditem me sanxerat aetas  
Esse tamen pulchris fatim dum vestibus orner.  
Certatim me praedones spoliare solescunt,  
Raptis nudata exuviis mox membra relinquunt

Tatwine Riddle 18:

Nature, overseeing the whole of the law, has positioned  
The pair of us born together from a single mother,  
Divided by the narrow space of a small hill,  
So that I have never seen him, nor he me;  
But he sees nothing without me, nor do I see without him.

Discernens totum iuris natura locavit  
Nos partier geminos una de matre creatos;  
Divisi haut magno parvi discrimine collis,  
Ut numquam vidi illum, nec me viderat ipse;  
Sed cernit sine me nihil, illo nec sine cerno.

Tatwine Riddle 6:

Alas, I am completely cheated by an enemy of the purpose I was born to;  
Since once I used to dart swiftly through the lofty air,  
But now, thrice bound, I render tribute on the ground.  
I am compelled to furrow level fields on flat surfaces;  
The cause of the labour is love: that then always drives me  
to pour out floods of tears into dry furrows.

Nativa penitus ratione heu fraudor ab hoste  
Nam superas quondam pernix auras penetrabam,  
Vincta tribus nunc in terris persolvo tributum.  
Planos compellor sulcare per aequora campos;  
Causa laboris amor; is tum fontes lacrimarum  
Semper compellit me aridis infundere sulcis

Tatwine Riddle 5:

A fierce ravager has robbed me of what I once wore,  
And also taken away the spirit of the breath of life;  
But an artisan made me a level plain in turn.  
Soon a cultivator irrigates fruitful furrows with what flows;  
My meadows yield a varied crop of balsam,  
Through which I shall offer nourishment for the healthy and a cure for the injured.

Efferus exuviis populator me spoliavit;  
Vitalis pariter flatus spiramina dempsit;  
In planum me iterum campum sed verterat auctor.  
Frugiferos cultor sulcus mox irrigat undis;  
Omnigenam nardi messem mea prata rependunt,  
Qua sanis victum et levis prestabo medelam.