



Caesura in Beowulf: Examples

Lesson Transcript

You're in a great hall, just finishing a massive feast. Your entertainment steps up: a storyteller, about to regale you with tales of battle and victory recited from memory. This oral tradition is how 'Beowulf' and other tales were passed down, and it's made possible by devices like the caesura.

The Oral Tradition

If you've ever told a ghost story at summer camp or learned about American folk heroes like Johnny Appleseed, you've taken part in the oral tradition. Before writing was invented, the **oral tradition** was the only way stories, poems, and songs could be recorded. They had to be memorized and passed down, generation to generation. Many stories, *Beowulf* included, only survived to be written down by being repeated out loud many times. To help people memorize them, most of these stories include **mnemonic devices**, or literary elements that help the brain recall information more easily.

My Very Excellent Mother Just Served Us Nachos is a mnemonic to remember the planets, since each word starts with the same letter as a planet's name. Rhyme is another common mnemonic device, which is why you can probably quite easily remember this sentence:

Hickory dickory dock, the mouse ran up the clock.

In modern English, rhyme is the easiest way to lock something into your brain; but in Old English, rhyme doesn't really exist. The mnemonics of choice for the *Beowulf* poet and most other poets of the time were alliteration and caesura.

What a Caesura Looks Like

In many written forms of *Beowulf* in Old English, the **caesura** is a big blank space in the middle of a line. In the oral tradition, the caesura is a break in the line where the speaker pauses. Take a look at these few lines from Hrothgar's speech describing the lair of Grendel's mother. They're written in Old English and the two forward slashes mark the caesura.

þær mæg nihta gehwæm // niðwundor seon,

fyr on flode. // No þæs frod leofað

gumena bearna, // þæt þone grund wite;
 ðeah þe hæðstapa // hundum geswenced,
 heorot hornum trum, // holtwudu sece,

However, that's not really understandable, so let's take a look at the same lines in modern English.

At night there, something uncanny happens:
 the water burns. And the mere bottom
 has never been sounded by the sons of men.
 On its bank, the heather-stepper halts:
 the hart in flight from pursuing hounds

That's better. Notice that the caesura are all still in roughly the same place, but in most modern English translations, they're marked by punctuation or phrase shifts instead of space. The punctuation serves the same purpose, though; it marks a division in the line for the speaker to pause.

Caesura and Alliteration

Let's go back to the Old English for a second. Take another look at those five lines, especially at the bolded letters on either side of each caesura.

þær mæg **ni**hta gehwæm // **ni**ðwundor seon,
 fyr on flode. // No þæs **f**rod leofað
 gumena bearna, // þæt þone **g**rund wite;
 ðeah þe **h**æðstapa // **h**undum geswenced,
heorot hornum trum, // **h**oltwudu sece,

The bolded letters repeat on both sides of the caesura. This repetition of initial sounds in words is called **alliteration**. It's what gives tongue twisters like "She sells seashells by the seashore" their tongue-twisting ability, and in Old English poems like *Beowulf*, alliteration teams up with the caesura to make the lines more memorable for the speaker who has to memorize a 3,000-line poem.

Caesura and Translation

Modern English is a little wordier than Old English, so the caesura and alliterations don't always work out exactly when the poem is translated into a format we can read today. Some translations ditch the lines entirely and write *Beowulf* all in prose paragraphs. One more time, let's look at the translated lines from before with the alliteration in bold:

At **n**ight there, something **unc**anny happens:

the water **b**urns. And the mere **b**ottom

has never been **s**ounded by the **s**ons of men.

On its bank, the **h**eather-stepper **h**alts:

the **h**art in flight from pursuing **h**ounds

Everything looks close again, but still not quite the same. The caesura and alliterative words don't always fall in exactly the same spots as they do in the Old English version, but they don't have to. The purpose of the caesura and alliteration together in the original version of *Beowulf* is to make the poem easier to remember, but in translation, we have the poem written down -- if we want to know what the poem says on line 1370, we can just look. Alliteration and caesura make for nice poetic language today, but they're not as vital to our memories as they would have been if we still relied on the oral tradition.

Lesson Summary

Before writing was common, *Beowulf* and other epic poems were passed down through the **oral tradition**, where storytellers would memorize the poem and recite it to other people. The devices of **caesura** and **alliteration** helped those storytellers remember the lines, and while they're preserved in modern translations of the poem, they're not as necessary to us today as they were long ago.