

## BEOWULF AS EARLY EXAMPLE OF ALLITERATION IN LINGUISTICS

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**Introduction:** Alliteration is considered to be one of the most important stylistic devices not only on English language but also in linguistics. Alliteration refers to constant repetition of similar initial consonant sounds one another not only in sentences but also in phrase. The first appearance of alliteration could be seen in Old English epic poem which is called “Beowulf”. According to the vast majority of linguistics, Beowulf is foundation of alliteration. This article investigates the epic poem “Beowulf” and highlights the key examples of alliteration in “Beowulf”.

According to the online dictionary “Oxford languages”, the word “alliteration” originally came from Latin language which can be divided into two parts “ad”, “littera” (letter of the alphabet). Alliteration is a rhetorical device that repeats the same consonant sound, not the actual letters at the start of a series of words. Cuddon (1991) stated that alliteration is a figure of speech in which consonants, especially at the beginning of words, or stressed syllables, are repeated. According to Billy Coins(2021) alliteration is one of the most consistently used poetic devices in history, with instances dating back to the birth of the English language. Historically, the birth of English language dated back to the mid fifth century when Germanic tribes which were called Anglo, Saxons and Jutes invaded British Isles. Admittedly, they brought their language culture and lifestyle, moreover the language they spoke was called Old English which it is known as English language now. Eventually, Anglo-Saxons created their own oral literature even though the written literature had not been created yet. Old English literature, often called as Anglo-Saxon literature, had the most prominent oral literature examples, including “Beowulf”. Beowulf is epic poem of Old English which consists of two parts and more than three thousand lines. Before it was recorded in writing, the poem was performed and passed on through oral tradition. Oral poetry has its own set of strange conventions and particularities, many of which are designed to help the scop

(Anglo-Saxon bard/poet) or storyteller both remember and recite the poem. Alliteration is particularly common. In addition to this, the poem *Beowulf* (and Anglo-Saxon poetry in general) makes common use of irony, in which the expectations do not match a given situation, or caesura, a poetic technique in which the speaker pauses in the middle of a line. Caesuras are commonly marked by colons, dashes, or commas in the middle of a line.

From prospective of linguistics, alliteration is one of the most important literary devices mainly used in poetry for a number of purposes<sup>1</sup>. In Old English poetry, alliteration was a continual and essential part of the metrical scheme and it was often until the late Middle Ages. However, alliterative verse becomes increasingly rare after the end of the 15th century and alliteration- like assonance, consonance, and onomatopoeia- tends more to be reserved for the achievement of the special effect (Cuddon, 1991).

Alliteration occurs in nearly every line throughout the poem. In *Beowulf*, to describe how The King Hrothgar live in castle, following lines are given;

*So Hrothgar's men lived happy in his hall  
Till the monster stirred, that demon, that fiend...*

In two lines, it can be seen that the letter “h” is repeated in the words “Hrothgar, happy, his, hall” as alliteration in the first line. Moreover, in the second line, the letter “t” is repeated in key succession in the second line. If it is paid attention thoroughly, in the first line, king’s name started with “H” and it continued with three words which are started with “h” as well.

Here are several examples of alliteration from *Beowulf*. In thirtieth line it is told when Grendel come to destroy Herot.

*Then, when darkness and dropped, Grendel  
Went up to Herot, wondering what the warriors  
Would do in that hall when their drinking was done....<sup>2</sup>*

In this example, the wide usage of alliteration can be highlighted. Not only one letter, but also two letters are repeated in a sentences. The letter “w” is used more when it is compared to the letter “d”. The succession of “went, wondering, what, warriors” especially can create poetic rhyme. Another examples can be as follows;

“to feast his fill of the flesh of men” (the alliterative use of the letter ‘f’)  
“gulped the blood and gobbled the flesh” (the alliterative use of the letter ‘g’)

<sup>1</sup>Nizomova, Z. (2021). ALLITERATION AS A SPECIAL STYLISTIC TECHNIQUE. *Mental Enlightenment Scientific-Methodological Journal*, 2021(5), 244-253.

<sup>2</sup> Bloom, H. (2007) *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Beowulf*, Updated Edition.

“for fear of a feud were forced to disown him”

“Bound to the bank then the broad-bosomed vessel”

And here are a few examples of the use of alliteration along with the caesura, or break:

“He found them sprawled in sleep (caesura) suspecting nothing” (the alliterative use of the letter ‘s’ both before the break and then repeated after)

“And the heathen’s only hope (caesura) Hell always in their hearts” (the alliterative use of the letter ‘h’ before and after the break)

After investigating several articles, it can be found that the reasons why Beowulf was passed mouth to mouth with alliteration might grab listener’s attention as far as it was told orally. The use of alliteration in Beowulf is to help to grab listener’s attention, and it holded them captive in the language. The repeating sounds resonate, and with each line they were transported into the action of the piece. The bard understood the necessity for entertaining the audience, and to make it exciting he would exaggerate and emphasize the repetitive sounds to engage and delight, to frighten and entertain. Audiences loved the tales the bard brought to them; they begged for more<sup>1</sup>. Secondly, Alliteration helped make lines in the poem sing for the listener and be more easily remembered for the bard. The rhythm helped both the teller and the listener follow the story line, and it enhanced the process of retelling the tale. These lines demonstrate how the rhyme scheme made for an exciting and entertaining retelling:

‘Cunningly creeping, a spectral stalker

Hot-hearted Beowulf was bent upon battle

He had often haunted Hrothgar’s house

How gluttoned with gore he would guzzle his fill’

In modern poetry, alliteration is used for several reasons such as grabbing attention, making easy to learn so on and so forth. The main reason to use alliteration in poetry is that it sounds pleasing. It’s a means to get the attention of readers or listeners. It’s also a clear way to signify that the alliterative words are linked together thematically, and it puts a spotlight on the subject contained therein. The second use of alliteration in poetry is to build mood. While a wide array of words could theoretically be used to describe any subject, certain letter sounds have specific connotations, and the act of repetition enhances that effect. Think of the “s” sounds in “silt,” “seas” and “silver.” It almost makes words sound whispered, and it can evoke an air of mystery, solemnness or intimacy, depending on the context. In fact, there’s a word for the repetition of this class of letter sound—it’s called sibilance, and it also applies to the consonants starting “ship,” “zip,” “chasm,” “genre” and “jealous.” The opposite can

<sup>1</sup> Cuddon, J.A. (1991) A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, USA: Basil Blackwell Inc.

be said of hard consonant sounds like the “ck” in “cat” or the “g” in “good” or “plosives” like “b” and “p.” They can be awakening, uplifting or violent. The third reason to use alliteration is hinted at by its alternate names—initial rhyme or head rhyme. As with perfect rhyme, alliteration lends verse some melody and rhythm and imparts a sense of how it should sound read out loud<sup>1</sup>.

In conclusion, the effect of alliteration is to add artistic style to a poem or other literary form. Old English epic poem Beowulf has a great number of examples of alliteration. The main objectives of using alliteration in Beowulf is to grab listener’s attention and make the poem easy to memorize and entertain with poetic rhyme.

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