Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Literary Elements

Because few people of the time were literate (449 AD to 1066 AD) most stories were told orally through traveling storytellers called **scops**. The reciting of poems often occurred at ceremonial occasions, like those for military victories.

Early verse (another word for poetry) falls into two categories:
- heroic poetry, recounting the achievements of warriors—like *Beowulf*
- lyric poetry—expresses the thoughts and feelings of a single speaker, usually by recounting events in the speaker's life.
- elegiac poetry, lamenting the deaths of loved ones and the loss of the past (elegy is the name of the type of poem that mourns the loss of someone or something)
- The Exeter Book—a book probably compiled by monks during the reign of Alfred the Great between 871-899.

Marks of Anglo-Saxon oral tradition:
- Rhythm—most A-S poetry contained lines with regular rhythms, usually four strong beats (also called stresses) to a line. Read the following line aloud: "This tale is true, and mine. It tells…." Notice how one stresses the words "tale," "true," "mine," and "tells." These are the four strong beats.

- Caesura—a sound break in the middle of a poetic line—this was probably quite useful to the scops telling the poems. Often times, the caesura happens by way of a punctuation mark in the middle of a poetic line.

- Alliteration--the repetition of stressed sounds, particularly consonants from the beginning of words or syllables. Example: **S**he **s**ells **s**ea**s**hells by the **s**ea shore.

- Compounding—the combining of two words to make a new word. An example is *feorhseoc*, literally "life-sick" (*feorh* = life, *seoc* = sick), which can be translated as mortally wounded. A more common example can be found in the first line of Beowulf: *Gar-Dena*, literally "Spear-Danes" (*gar* = spear, *Dena* = Danes). Compounding may be done to meet the needs of the alliterative meter, or to make a new word.

- Variation—the restatement of a concept or term using different words.

  A simple form of variation can be seen in the formula used in line 429: "Beowulf spoke, the son of Edgetho". Here the second half of the line provides a second identifier for Beowulf.
  A more complex form of variation can be seen in the lines 1408 – 1411:
  > (The nobleman's son then passed
  > the steep rocky cliffs, the narrow path,
  > the narrow single-file path, an unknown way,
  > precipitous headland, the homes of many water-monsters.)

  Variation is not used as filler, but fulfills a few important functions. On a practical level, as we can not just stop and check a fact during an oral performance as we can while reading, variation reminds the audience of important facts. Because the poet constantly reminds us that Beowulf is Edgetho's son, we are much more likely to remember who Edgetho is when he is important to the poem. Variation also allows the poet to present an event, or image from multiple perspectives, each providing additional information.

- Kenning—a two-word **metaphorical** name for something.
  - whale's road = the sea
  - bone's house = the body
  - sky's candle = the sun

Working with Old English Poetry

As a way to begin your immersion into the world of Old English poetry, read the following excerpt from "The Seafarer" translated by Burton Raffel (the author is unknown). Then, answer the following questions regarding the poem and its employment of poetic devices.

The Seafarer
translated by Burton Raffel

1. Paraphrase these bolded lines:

This tale is true, and mine. It tells
How the sea took me, swept me back
And forth in sorrow and fear and pain,
Showed me suffering in a hundred ships,
In a thousand ports, and in me. It tells   5
Of smashing surf when I sweated in the cold
Of an anxious watch, perched in the bow
As it dashed under cliffs. **My feet were cast**
In icy bands, bound with frost,
With frozen chains, and hardship groaned 10
Around my heart. Hunger tore
At my sea-weary soul. *No man sheltered*
On the quiet fairness of earth can feel
How wretched I was, drifting through winter
On an ice-cold sea, whirled in sorrow,   15
Alone in a world blown clear of love,
Hung with icicles. The hailstorms flew.
The only sound was the roaring sea,
The freezing waves. The song of the swan
Might serve for pleasure, the cry of the sea-fowl, 20
The death-noise of birds instead of laughter,
The mewing of gulls instead of mead.
Storms beat on the rocky cliffs and were echoed
By ice-feathered terns and the eagles screams;
No kinsman could offer comfort there,   25
To a soul left drowning in desolation.

2. Paraphrase these bolded lines:

3. *Paraphrase these italicized lines:*

4. Paraphrase these bolded lines:

5. Paraphrase these italicized lines:

6. What is the physical condition of the narrator of the poem?   Provide evidence from the poem (along with line #'s in parenthetical citation) during the explanation of your answer.

7. What is the emotional condition of the narrator of the poem? Provide evidence from the poem (along with line #'s in parenthetical citation) during the explanation of your answer.

8. Mood is the feeling that a literary work conveys to readers. What is the mood of the poem? Provide at least three moments of evidence from the poem (along with line #'s in parenthetical citation) during the explanation of your answer.

For each of the literary elements below, (1.) copy down an example of the literary device from the poem, and then (2.) explain how your example fits the definition of this device. Use your own paper should you run out of room on this sheet.
   9. Rhythm (do not use line 1)
   10. Caesura
   11. Alliteration
   12. Variation
   13. Kenning