Kennings

A kenning is a literary device in which a poetic phrase substitutes for a noun. In the best kennings, one element of the phrase will create a striking, unexpected comparison. Often used in Anglo-Saxon poetry and especially in Beowulf, a kenning provides powerful imagery that would help the audience focus on the words of the scop or poet telling the story. A kenning also allows the scop some variety, so words don’t become overused. Finally, Anglo-Saxon poetry depended heavily on alliteration, and some kennings provided additional alliteration. Here are examples:

- sky-candle (the sun)
- swan-road (the sea)
- stout-hearted (brave)
- battle sweat (blood)
- light-of-battle (sword)
- helmet bearers (warriors)
- giver of gold (king)
- earth-hall (burial mound, barrow)
- dwelling place (home)

When we translate these kennings from Anglo-Saxon, they lose some of their poetic quality. Listed below are some modern kennings. Can you find examples of striking imagery, alliteration, consonance, rhyme, and assonance among them? Can you identify the concept each kenning represents?

1. gas guzzler
2. headhunter
3. web surver
4. rug rat
5. land line
6. eye candy
7. cancer stick
8. boob tube
9. couch potato
10. tramp stamp

Can you create at least 5 kennings of your own? Be sure to include poetic qualities.

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1. gas guzzler – a vehicle that has poor gas mileage, alliteration, striking imagery
2. headhunter – a person who finds executive positions for job seekers, consonance (“h”), striking imagery
3. web surfer – a person who spends time online, striking imagery
4. rug rat – a mischievous child, alliteration, striking imagery
5. land line – a traditional telephone, alliteration
6. eye candy – a person or thing with visual appeal, striking imagery
7. cancer stick – a cigarette, striking imagery
8. boob tube – television, rhyme, striking imagery
9. couch potato – a person who gets little exercise, assonance and striking imagery
10. tramp stamp – a tattoo on the lower back, rhyme, striking imagery