

Name: _____

Date: _____

Anglo-Saxon Riddles

The *Exeter Book* contains almost one hundred riddles, some witty, some picturesque, some crude, and some so obscure that the reader could never hope to guess their meanings. The following riddles are among those that are challenging but not incomprehensible to the modern day reader. Read the riddle assigned to your group and answer the questions that follow.

Riddle One:

My clothes are silent as I walk the earth
Or stir the waters. Sometimes that which
Makes me beautiful raises me high
Above men's heads, and powerful clouds
Hold me, carry me far and wide.
The loveliness spread on my back rustles
And sings, bright, clear songs,
And loud, whenever I leave lakes
And earth, floating in the air like a spirit.

Riddle Two:

A worm ate words. I thought that wonderfully
Strange—a miracle—when they told me a crawling
Had swallowed noble songs,
A night-time thief had stolen writing
So famous, so weighty. But the bug was foolish
Still, though its belly was full of thought.

Riddle Three:

I was a warrior's weapon, once.
Now striplings have woven silver wires,
And gold, around me. I've been kissed by soldiers,
And I've called a field of laughing comrades
To war and death. I've crossed borders
On galloping steeds, and crossed the shining
Water, riding a ship. I've been filled
To the depth of my heart by girls with glittering
Bracelets, and I've lain along the bare
Cold planks, headless, plucked and worn.
They've hung me high on a wall, bright
With jewels and beautiful, and left me to watch
Their warriors drinking. Mounted troops
Have carried me out and opened my breast
To the swelling wind of some soldier's lips.
My voice has invited princes to feasts
Of wine, and has sung in the night to save
What savage thieves have stolen, driving them
Off into the darkness. Ask my name.

Riddle Four:

Our world is lovely in different ways,
Hung with beauty and works of hands.
I saw a strange machine, made
For motion, slide against the sand,
Shrieking as it went. It walked swiftly
On its only foot, this odd-shaped monster,
Traveled in an open country without
Seeing, without arms, or hands.
With many ribs, and its mouth in its middle.
Its work is useful, and welcome, for it loads
Its belly with food, and brings abundance
To men, to poor and to rich, paying
Its tribute year after year. Solve
This riddle, if you can, and unravel its name.

Riddle Five:

A creature came through the waves, beautiful
And strange, calling to shore, its voice
Loud and deep; its laughter froze
Men's blood; its sides were like sword-blades.
It swam contemptuously along, slow and sluggish,
A bitter warrior and a thief, ripping
Ships apart, and plundering. Like a witch
It wove spells—and knew its own nature, shouting"
"My mother is the fairest virgin of a race
Of noble virgins: she is my daughter
Grown great. All men know her, and me,
And know, everywhere on earth, with what joy
We will come to join them, to live on land!"

Riddle Six:

This thing all things devours:
Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;
Gnaws iron, bites steel;
Grinds hard stones to meal;
Slays kings and ruins town,
And beats high a mountain down.

Riddle Seven:

I war with the wind, with waves I wrestle;
I must battle with both when the bottom I seek,
My strange habitation by surges o'er-roofed.
I am strong in the strife, while still I remain;
As soon as I stir, they are stronger than I.
They wrench and they wrest, till I run from my foes;
What was put in my keeping they carry away.
If my back be not broken, I baffle them still;
The rocks are my helpers, when hard I am pressed;
Grimly I grip them. Guess what I'm called.

Riddle Eight:

Wounded I am, and weary with fighting;
Gashed by the iron, gored by the point of it,
Sick of battle-work, battered and scarred.
Many a fearful fight have I seen, when
Hope there was none, or help in the thick of it,
Ere I was down and fordone in the fray.
Offspring of hammers, hardest of battle-blades,
Smithed in forges, fell on me savagely,
Doomed to bear the brunt and the shock of it,
Fierce encounter of clashing foes.
Doctor cannot heal my hurts with his simples,
Salves for my sores have sought in vain.
Blade-cut sorrows, deep in the side of me,
Daily and nightly redouble my wounds.

Riddle Twelve:

An eye in a blue face
Saw an eye in a green face.
"That eye is like to this eye"
Said the first eye,
"But in a low place,
Not in high place."

Riddle Nine:

I wear gray, woven over
With bright and gleaming gems. I bring
The stupid to folly's paths, fool
The ignorant with sin, urge all useless
Roads and ruin the rest. I can't
Explain their madness, for I push them to error
And pick their brains, yet they praise me more
For each seduction. Their dullness will be sorrow,
When they lead their souls on high, unless
They learn to walk wisely, and without my help.

Riddle Ten:

I cannot be seen, cannot be felt,
Cannot be heard, cannot be smelt.
I lie behind stars and under hills,
And empty holes I do fill.
I always come first and always follow after,
I end life, kill laughter.

Riddle Eleven:

Voiceless I cry,
Wingless I flutter,
Toothless I bite,
And mouthless I mutter.