

Listen!

By Dónal Thompson



"Listen!" is the first word of the the Old English poem 'Beowulf' which tells of the adventures of the eponymous hero and his three great battles against two monsters and a dragon. It has just been made into a dazzling three-dimensional computer generated movie by Hollywood.

Old English is very hard to understand. Look at this!

*Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum,
peodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.*

which means

*Listen! How great were the old kings of the
spear carrying Danes
and what honour they won in the days long
gone.*

Beowulf is famous for the quality of its poetry - for the beautiful sounds of the words and the imagination of its descriptions. Many words in Beowulf are"

kennings". Kennings combine two words to create an evocative alternative word. By linking words in this way, the poets were able to play with the rhythm, sounds and imagery of the poem. Beowulf contains over a thousand kennings! For example:-

banhus (bone-house) - the human body

beadoleoma (battle-light) - sword

wægflota (wave-floater) - ship

As you would expect with a poem about Danes, there are many kennings that describe the sea.

hronrad- whale road

fiscesethel - fish home

seolbæp - seal bath

Beowulf, the film, will make millions of dollars for Hollywood. It is reassuring that, in spite of technological advances, storytelling has not changed. In the old days, with an audience huddled in the dark around the camp fire, the tribal poet would begin his tales with the word 'Listen!'. Although, modern storytellers, have more ways to grab our attention as we sit huddled in the dark around a cinema screen. We are still called the audience - from the Latin *audientia*, from *audire* - Listen!