

Darkness, Depression, and Descent in
Anglo-Saxon England

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Darkness, Depression, and Descent in Anglo-Saxon England

Edited by Ruth Wehlau

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Preface

MANY PEOPLE HAVE SUPPORTED me in the editing of this book, but special thanks are due to: Simon Forde, who first solicited a manuscript on medieval darkness; Shelley King who encouraged me throughout the entire process; and Garrett Wall, my very patient assistant, whose judicious good sense in editing and research was a great help. I would also like to thank my husband, John Corbett, whose love sustained me in this work as it does in life: “Pócan dó.”

Introduction: Darkness in the Universe, Darkness in the Mind in Anglo-Saxon Literature

Ruth Wehlau and Fabienne L. Michelet

THE RECURRENT USE OF light and dark imagery is a contrast that runs deep in Old English literature, deriving from a structure of opposition in which a broad array of images and motifs of the fallen world—night, shadow, chaos, descent, damnation as well as nightmare, loss, sadness, and depression—are opposed to that which emanates from God—day, light, order, salvation, and joy. Darkness in this sense is more than absence of light; it is a way of structuring one's experience and of understanding the world, a fundamental image that extends into various aspects of culture, from the macrocosm—darkness in the universe—to the microcosm—darkness in the mind. The Anglo-Saxon notion of the dark not only underlies learned and intellectual constructs of the world. It also conveys an intimation of the world as lived experience; it is a sensibility, an opposite to the contained and controlled, and a metaphor for what is not known and is itself unknowable. Although such foundational metaphors are found throughout language, their power is amplified in Old English verse where poetic features originating in oral tradition—a reliance on visceral imagery, repetition, and an avoidance of abstract and analytical terms—allow for phenomenological analysis¹. The chapters in this collection follow this phenomenological turn, attending to darkness in multiple aspects, from cosmic chaos to representations of hell, from nighttime fears to the dread of unknowing, from loss of wisdom to sinfulness, deep sadness, and grief—that is, troubled mental states that vernacular authors often represent with images of shadows and darkness and that are now routinely called depression.² In so doing, the papers speak to three lively critical trends in Old English studies: cultural geography and spatial representations, depictions of the mind and its operations, and studies of emotions.

In considering darkness and descent essential to cultural and mental constructs of space, the contributions gathered here build on the work

of Nicole Guenther Discenza, Nicholas Howe, and Jennifer Neville.³ In a cosmic sense, darkness foregrounds motifs such as chaos, the abyss of hell, hostile environments, and exile. The realm that exists outside the order of the world comprises Hell and Chaos, both literally and symbolically dark. Chaos is “darkness palpable,”⁴ primal anti-structure or disorder, both a substance and a place, although a place of unknown length and breadth, thus simultaneously a place and no place. Outside the realm of order, Chaos is in some ways liminal, located between life and death (Jones, 33–34), but also close at hand, associated with the descent of night. Where Chaos is an unstructured, unlimited, and extensive nothingness, Hell in Anglo-Saxon literature is narrow and measurable, an anti-hall that exists in opposition to the heavenly hall; in *Christ and Satan*, Hell is a place where punishment consists of measurement. But, like Chaos, it can be close at hand: Grendel, a fiend from Hell, lives on the margins of the Danish territory.⁵

By its very location—underneath—Hell evokes the motif of descent, a fundamental trope that recurs in Christian-influenced literature and that partakes both of the phenomenology of downward movement and of Christian associations with the concepts of descent and fall, including the fall of Satan and the rebel angels, and the fatal succumbing to temptation of Adam and Eve. But it also calls to mind Christ’s descent into Hell, the Harrowing, which includes both conquest and triumphant return. As Christ’s triumph indicates, all darkness is ultimately within God’s control; even descent into the grave is understood to include a final return to existence in another form after death.⁶

If Hell is literally a place of entrapment, it is also a state of mind experienced by Satan. In like manner, macrocosmic darkness is co-extensive with microscopic darkness, the darkness of the mind. This association is hinted at in the Old English dialogue, *Solomon and Saturn II*, where Solomon’s question concerning shadows is followed by a question about joy and sorrow:

Ac forhwon ne mot seo sunne side gesceafte
scire geondscinan? Forhwam besceaded heo
muntas ond moras ond monige ec
weste stowa? ...

(162–165a)

Ac forhwam beoð ða gesidas somod ætgædre,
wop ond hleahtor? Full oft hie weorðgeornra
sælda toslitað.

(170–172a)

(But why can't the sun shine brightly across the ample creation?
Why does it shade mountains and moors and many other deserted
places as well? ...

But why are the companions, weeping and laughter, both together?
Very often they destroy the happiness of the well-intentioned.)⁷

With their exploration of shadows and darkness in the mental world, the present essays are indebted to recent studies on the conceptions of the mind and mental activities in vernacular literature, such as those by Leslie Lockett or Antonina Harbus.⁸ Especially relevant is Britt Mize's claim that a preoccupation with mental states is integral to the aesthetics of Old English verse.⁹ In poetic terms, language can be used performatively to combat the forces of darkness, be they terrors of the night, the dread of unknowing, or a darkened internal world of sinfulness and despair. The vernacular psalm *The Order of the World* best expresses the opposition to darkness as articulated within Old English poetry. The function of this poem, which is sometimes called *The Wonders of Creation*, is evident in the two different titles given by its editors: "wonders" evokes the mystery of divine power, while "order" indicates the boundary-making actions of God in constructing the cosmos.¹⁰ As the poem moves from instructions to a young poet to a sample praise poem based on Psalm 19 and including a lengthy paean to the sun, it represents the power of the poet in conversation with God to construct and create, to bring light, in imitation of God's own power. Yet even here the boundaries of what can be known are fixed. The wise man must seek out mysteries, and fix them within his mind, but he cannot expand his own mind beyond the limits given to humankind; there is always a realm beyond the power of speech and knowledge.

The contributions in this collection also address the darkened mind and gloomy thoughts that we would now call depression, as for instance the experience of listlessness and profound sadness described in *Beowulf*, in Hrethel's lament death over the death of his son (2435–2471). In Anglo-Saxon culture, this experience is also that of the exile, separated from his or her community and enclosed within his or her own mind, as in *The Wife's Lament*. In the world constructed by this poem, thoughts roam repeatedly over the same territory seeking relief and finding none. Although depression as a form of mental illness is a modern notion, there is no doubt that the medieval world understood something of

this condition in the concepts of *tristitia* and of *acedia*. Recent work on medieval emotions by Barbara Rosenwein, Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy, and Alice Jorgensen sheds helpful light on how to approach the conventional expressions of emotions that we find in our texts, specifically here sadness and grief.¹¹

During the Carolingian period, medieval understandings of the emotions laid the foundation for moral teaching, and emotions were transformed into vices and virtues.¹² Recalling this background helps us go beyond our modern understanding of emotions as intimate experiences in order to consider them historical and cultural phenomena that grounded one's relationship to the world and to God. Medieval treatises on the vices and virtues classified sadness as a vice and they distinguished between a good and a bad sadness. Ælfric for instance says that the fifth vice, *tristitia*: "... Is þisre worulde unrotnyss, þonne se mann geunrotsað ealles to swiðe for his æhta lyre, þe he lufode to swiðe, and cit þonne wið God and his synna geeacnað. Twa unrotnysa synd: an is þeos yfele, oðer is halwende, þæt man for his synnum geunrotsige." (... [That] is sadness of this world, when a man is made utterly too sad because of the loss of his possessions, which he loved too much, and complains against God and increases his sins. There are two sadnesses: one is this evil one, the other is healing in that one is made sad because of one's sins.)¹³ The good sadness leads to God; the evil sadness diverts from God.¹⁴ This distinction is clearly present in the opening lines of *The Gifts of Men*, a catalogue poem that enumerates the various abilities granted to human beings: one is rich, one is strong, one is eloquent, etc. The poet points out that no one is so unhappy, so poor, so faint-hearted, or so slow-minded, to whom God has not given some gift, "þy læs ormod sy ealra þinga, / þara þe he geworhte in woruldlice, / geofona gehwylcre" (*The Gifts of Men* 14–16a, "lest he be despairing of everything that he has done in this worldly life, of each gift").¹⁵ And God never decrees that anyone should be so miserable. This passage thus distinguishes between the harshness of life which, despite misfortune, poverty, or personal mental failings, does not exclude a comforting trust in divine providence on the one hand, and despair, which annihilates confidence both in one's achievements and in God's grace on the other.

Several contributions to this volume explore different modalities through which vernacular authors summoned up the mood of regret and sadness so frequent in Old English literature. Reflecting on how medieval authors conveyed emotional and mental states points not only to the social and spiritual significance of emotions—as they were often

public and demonstrative, and thus part of the social fabric—but also to the use of concrete imagery to communicate abstract thought. In the world of Old English verse, poets rarely resorted to psychological terms to express emotions but rather made them manifest through actions or settings.¹⁶ Darkness, wintry weather, loneliness, and an indifferent natural world represent a character's troubled psyche. Discussions of gloomy landscapes figure prominently in the pages that follow. The darkness and discomforts of hell; the bleakness and loneliness of *The Wife's Lament's* settings; the unknowable and threatening nature of the monsters' shadowy dwellings in *Beowulf*; the grave, a dim house which none but worms will visit; all convey emotional states, such as sadness or dread at the limits of human knowledge.

Sometimes, an entire emotional journey is mapped unto these bleak settings, as in *The Wanderer* for instance. The poem's arc moves from an account of personal suffering to an exhortation to trust in God's mercy. It starts with "sadness of this world," caused by loss of worldly joys; it then proceeds to a "healing sadness" that increases wisdom; and it ends with sadness's corresponding virtue: spiritual happiness. The first part of the poem conveys the Wanderer's sadness with an elaborate contrast between the ice-cold sea and the speaker's moving recollections of happiness in the hall with his lord and companions. In the second part however, departed kinsmen and the dreary setting, now made up of frost-covered ruins, are evoked with contemplative detachment. The concluding lines of the poem invite the audience to turn their gaze towards heaven and to have faith in divine grace: "Wel bið þam þe him are seceð, / frofre to fæder on heofonum, þær us eal seo fæstnung stondeð" (*The Wanderer* 114b–115, "It is well for the one who seeks mercy for himself, consolation from the Father in heaven, where for us all stability stands"). Evocations of physical and mental darkness punctuate this spiritual progression: the darkness of the earth where the speaker buries his lord, his surprise at the fact that his mind does not darken at the thought dead kinsmen, the hostile darkness and night shadows of "þis deorce life" (this dark life, *The Wanderer* 89a) which the audience is invited to ponder. With its recognition that our true home is in heaven, the end of the poem traces a path to spiritual happiness, the virtue which, in Ælfric's words, teaches us that "gif we forleosað þas lænan weoruldþing, þonne sceole we witan þæt ure wunung nis na her, ac is on heofenum, gif we hopiað to Gode" (if we lose these transitory worldly possessions, then we must know that our dwelling is not here but in heaven, if we hope in God).¹⁸ The tradition of vices and virtues

invites a nuanced understanding of sadness and its representations. When it darkens the fool's mind, it leads to despair and ruin. But when it is a source of enlightenment—as we hope this volume is—it may lead to wisdom and happiness.

Opposed to that which is safe and enclosed, the boundaries of darkness itself are vague, yet the notions associated with the concept of the dark are susceptible to analysis. The articles in this collection adopt a variety of approaches to the subject, examining words, mental constructions, emotions, and narratives associated with the dark. Filip Missuno and Amy W. Clark address themselves to the terms for darkness, blackness, shade, and shadow in Old English. Missuno demonstrates how poetic collocation and alliteration played a role in the choice of terms used to describe shadows, concluding that a fascination with shadows may have been a uniquely Anglo-Saxon preoccupation. Clark examines the relationship between two common Old English terms for the color black, *sweart* and *blæc*, and the different connotations of each; where *blæc* is the dominant term, *sweart*'s association with sin and damnation means that it is usually restricted to religious poetry and prose. Gwendolyn Knight's paper concerns the concept of nightmare as found within Anglo-Saxon texts, examining the terms *mare* and *nihtgenga* as means of revealing attitudes toward the night and its terrors, and in particular the dread caused by darkness impeding human perception.

Matthew Scribner and Rafał Boryśławski's articles address epistemological limitations—the experience of a lack of knowledge or intelligibility. Scribner looks at the difficulty of interpreting signs in *Beowulf*, arguing that Beowulf himself, although somewhat limited, is still more capable of reading and interpreting the signifiers within the poem than are other characters. Boryśławski employs both modern medical theory on depression and Neoplatonic philosophy to analyze how Old English wisdom poetry confronts us with a mysterious world. He shows how the sadness that stems from this depressing encounter with our cognitive shortcomings may be beneficial and ultimately lead to wisdom and a better understanding of God.

Sadness, depression, and loss of wisdom are often depicted as darkness of the mind. Both James H. Morey and Ruth Wehlau discuss the image of dark thoughts in Old English poetry. Morey argues that dark thoughts are a fourth “fate of men,” that is, a form of mental death.

He makes of Heremod a figure of despair who suffers from *sorhwylmas* (surging sorrows) that darken his mind, exclude him from society, and eventually cause his “mental death.” Wehlau looks at Beowulf’s dark thoughts when faced with the dragon’s attack, arguing that they indicate a serious clouding of the mind which leaves Beowulf susceptible to despair first, and then to an overconfident belief that he will be able to defeat the dragon alone. Daniel Anlezark shows how Guthlac’s mind is darkened by similar temptations of extreme sadness first,¹⁹ and then overconfidence during his confrontations with the demons when he arrives in his fenland retreat, and how the saint subsequently grows in mental stability.

Medieval emotions were socially significant, and sadness and despair often signal exclusion. Satan and Grendel, both famous outcasts who figure prominently in this volume, are repeatedly associated with deathly shadows and the darkness of primeval chaos. These associations underscore their sad mental states and attest to their exclusion from human society and their enmity with God, for both are forever *fah wið God* (in a state of feud with God, *Christ and Satan* 96b and *Beowulf* 811b). The sadness voiced by the speaker of *The Wife’s Lament* and by Satan in *Christ and Satan* also indicates the loss of their social position: alienated from their community, they are reduced to existence in dark underworlds, as seen in Francisco Rozano-Garcia’s contribution. Matthew Roby’s article on the Donestre, a tribe of monstrous polyglots who befriend foreigners, eat them, and then cry over their heads, ponders over the significance of their tears and suggests that they may also be a symptom of the Donestre’s separation from Christianity.

Several contributors deal specifically with descent, which is a motif often, although not always, associated with grief or depression. Anlezark’s paper traces Guthlac’s descent into the mouth of hell. Carl Kears’s paper examines the various portrayals of the fall of Lucifer within the poems of Junius 11, noting the representation of the fall in terms of darkness, shadow, and anti-creation. Haruko Momma discusses Anglo-Saxon representations of descent into the grave, with special attention to the trope of worms eating the bodies in the *Soul* and *Body* poems.

As various as these papers are, they all position themselves around the Anglo-Saxon understanding or experience of loss and lack, of failure, grief, and confusion, in short, of encounters with physical and mental darkness. We hope this collection will shed light on what is a deep structural element in the corpus of Old English literature.

NOTES

¹ On metaphors based on lived experience, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), and also Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor in Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). On the features of oral poetry, see Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Routledge, 1982), pp. 42–43. On the relevance of “figurative thought” to the nature of Old English poetry, see Stanley: “The Anglo-Saxons have no difficulty expressing abstract thought in their language; they do so often enough in prose. But in verse they achieve their effects by concrete imagery”; E. G. Stanley, “Old English Poetic Diction and the Interpretation of *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer* and *The Penitent’s Prayer*,” *Anglia* 73 (1955): 413–466 (444).

² Previous studies of darkness include Jean Ritzke-Rutherford, *Light and Darkness in Anglo-Saxon Thought and Writing* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1979). *Beowulf* offers particularly fruitful ground for such studies; Herbert G. Wright’s early article, “Good and Evil; Light and Darkness; Joy and Sorrow in *Beowulf*,” demonstrates a parallel between the light / darkness contrast and the binary of good and evil in the poem. (*Review of English Studies* vol. 8, no. 29 (1957): 1–11).

³ Nicole Guenther Disenza, *Inhabited Spaces: Anglo-Saxon Constructions of Place* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017); Nicolas Howe, *Writing the Map of Anglo-Saxon England: Essays in Cultural Geography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Fabienne L. Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest: Imaginary Geography and Sense of Space in Old English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Jennifer Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 27 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁴ Christopher A. Jones, “Early Medieval *Chaos*,” in *Verbal Encounters*, ed. Antonina Harbus and Russell Poole (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp. 15–38 (p. 31).

⁵ Several studies of *Beowulf* have connected the monsters to notions of chaos, including Tolkien’s famous “The Monsters and the Critics,” in *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays* (London and Boston, MA: Allen and Unwin, 1983); and James W. Earl, “Transformation of Chaos: Immanence and Transcendence in *Beowulf* and Other Old English Poetry,” *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 10, no. 3 (1987): 164–185. Michael Lapidge looks at the attack of Grendel in order to identify terror as that which is nightmarish and unknowable in the poem. “*Beowulf* and the Psychology of Terror,” in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period: Studies in Honor of Jess B. Bessinger, Jr.*, ed. Helen Damico and John Leyerle, *Studies in Medieval Culture* 32 (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993), pp. 373–402. Joyce M. Hill, “Figures of Evil in Old English Poetry,” *Leeds Studies*

in *English* 8 (1975): 5–19, reflects on the term *deapscua* (“shade of death”) to describe Grendel. A study of a more general Anglo-Saxon understanding of chaos is found in Jones’s “Early Medieval *Chaos*.”

⁶ Studies of the Fall and of Hell in Old English poetry are found chiefly in criticism of the poems *Genesis B* and *Christ and Satan*, and are too numerous to mention here, but useful discussions of these subjects are also found in Antoinette diPaolo Healey, ed., *The Old English Vision of St. Paul* (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1978), and Peter Dendle, *Satan Unbound: The Devil in Old English Narrative Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). On Christ’s descent into Hell, see George Hardin Brown, “The Descent-Ascent Motif in Christ II of Cynewulf,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 73 (1974): 1–12; and Jackson J. Campbell, “To Hell and Back: Latin Tradition and Other Literary Use of the ‘Descensus ad Inferos’ in Old English,” *Viator; Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 13 (1982): 107–158. For the notion of Hell as an anti-hall, see Kathryn Hume, “The Concept of the Hall in Old English Poetry,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 3 (1974): 63–74; and Alvin Lee, *The Guest-Hall of Eden* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972).

⁷ Daniel Anlezark, ed. and trans., *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), pp. 86–87. The translation is Anlezark’s.

⁸ See in particular Leslie Lockett, *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies in the Vernacular and Latin Traditions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011) and Antonina Harbus, *Cognitive Approaches to Old English Poetry*, *Anglo-Saxon Studies* 18 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012).

⁹ Britt Mize, *Traditional Subjectivities: The Old English Poetics of Mentality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

¹⁰ For studies of this poem, see Neil D. Isaacs, *Structural Principles in Old English Poetry* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1968), pp. 71–82; Ruth Wehlau, “Rumination and Re-Creation: Poetic Instruction in The Order of the World,” *Florilegium* 12 (1994): 65–77; and Robert DiNapoli, “The Heart of the Visionary Experience: The Order of the World and its Place in the Old English Canon,” *English Studies* 79 (1998): 97–108.

¹¹ Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy, *Sensible Moyen Age: Une histoire des émotions dans l’Occident médiéval* (Paris: Seuil, 2015); Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Alice Jorgensen, Frances McCormack, and Jonathan Wilcox, eds., *Anglo-Saxon Emotions: Reading the Heart in Old English Language, Literature and Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

¹² On this point, see Boquet and Nagy, *Sensible Moyen Age*, pp. 95–97 and Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling*, pp. 67–71.

¹³ Ælfric, “De Octo Vitiis et de Duodecim Abusivis Gradus,” in *Two Ælfric Texts: The Twelve Abuses and the Vices and Virtues*, ed. and trans. Mary Clayton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013), p. 146.

¹⁴ This distinction can be traced back to Paul, II Cor. 7:10: "For the sorrow that is according to God worketh penance, steadfast unto salvation: but the sorrow of the world worketh death."

¹⁵ *The Exeter Book*, ed. G. P. Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936; repr. 1966), pp. 137–140.

¹⁶ On this point, see Hugh Magennis, "Monig oft Gesæt: Some Images of Sitting in Old English Poetry," *Neophilologus* 70 (1986): 442–452; and Mize, *Traditional Subjectivities*, pp. 7–8.

¹⁷ *The Exeter Book*, pp. 134–137.

¹⁸ Ælfric, "De Octo Vitiis et de Duodecim Abusivis Gradus," p. 150.

¹⁹ As Anlezark points out in his contribution to this volume, this form of despair is related to *acedia*, a sin that represented a particular danger for monks.

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Part 1

Darkness

Chapter 1

Sweart as Sin: Color Connotation and Morality in Anglo-Saxon England

Amy W. Clark

THE RAVEN IN OLD English literature is a creature in need of what we might, today, diplomatically call “rebranding.” Sent by Noah over the waves of the Flood, the raven did not return; for this, as Adrian recounts to Ritheus, he became “swa sweart þe ær wæs hwit” (as black as he had been white before).¹ Warriors at the *Battle of Brunanburh* leave the “hræw bryttian / saluwigpadan, þone sweartan hræfn” (“dark-coated, black raven to break up the dead,” 60b–61b), while the Soul of *Soul and Body I* tells her body “ne eart ðu þon leofra nænigum lifigendra ... þonne se swearta hrefen” (“you are no dearer than the black raven to anyone alive,” 52a–54b).² Not, it would seem, the bird to invite to one’s next dinner party. Yet in this decidedly negative context, *Beowulf*’s sunrise raven cuts a surprising figure: “hrefn blaca, heofones wynne, / bliðheort bodode” (“a black raven, blithe-hearted, announced heaven’s joy,” 1802a–1803a).³ Following on the heels of a hero’s victory, and signaling the moment of Beowulf’s triumphant return to his people, this raven is different—and not just because he is good, but because, unlike all but two other attestations in the extant Old English corpus, he is *blac*.

In this chapter, I address the connotative differences represented, in part, by the *blac* raven and his *sweart* counterparts through a quantitative exploration of these two color terms within the Old English corpus. From William Mead’s declaration in 1899 that “blackness and darkness meant to the primitive German mind something fearful and terrible” to Filip Missuno’s more recent assertion that “shadow words” connote “extreme otherness and disquieting monstrosity,” the link between dark colors and negative cultural associations in Anglo-Saxon England has been widely acknowledged.⁴ Yet in spite of (or perhaps due to) the seemingly

self-evident nature of this connotative link, which continues into Middle and Modern English, *blæc* and *sweart* have rarely been studied together, or in a larger context that might offer more precise insight into how and why these negative associations arise. I aim to address that contextual gap, tracking color-referent collocation within the Dictionary of Old English Corpus (henceforth the DOEC) in order to better understand the semantic role of *blæc* and *sweart* in Old English texts, both generally and in relationship to one another. My results suggest that while *blæc* is frequently listed as the “standard” or dominant term for Modern English “black” within the corpus, and has a more neutral valence overall, its easy confusion with *blac* (bleached; bright, shining) makes it less popular in contexts where denotative ambiguity would be problematic. Conversely, *sweart* has such a strong association with sin and damnation in poetry and religious prose that it appears to have had limited applicability outside these genres; only when *blæc* cannot provide an appropriate level of denotative clarity is *sweart* called upon to take its place. When taken together, the variation in the use of each term across genres—*sweart*’s omission from charter boundary clauses, and *blæc*’s relative infrequency in poetry and religious prose, for example—become evidence of a kind of dual lexical ecology, in which the two color terms have come to occupy distinct connotative and generic niches within the Old English language.

To discuss this ecology in full, however, we must begin with the data that displays it. In the case of *sweart*, 61 percent of attestations (shown in Table 1.1) display an association with sin or religious damnation; an additional 8 percent (included as part of Table 1.2) occur in negative but not explicitly sinful contexts. In tracking these associations, I have taken both grammar and narrative into account. Most frequently, *sweart* agrees grammatically with a sinful/negative referent; *deofol*, *hellegrund*, *gest*, and *lig*, for example, are among the most common nouns described by *sweart*’s adjectival forms in the DOEC, usually as part of the landscape of hell. In other cases, however, a color term’s negative implications only arise within a larger narrative context. The phrase “black as a raven,” for example, connotes little beyond hue to the modern reader—and ravens are, at a denotative level, black. Yet when this phrase appears in the DOEC, a closer examination of context reveals a devil in disguise: “[H]im cumað togeanes his sawle twegen englas, oðer bið Godes encgel, se bið swa hwit swa snaw, oðer bið deofles encgel, se bið swa sweart swa hræfen oððe silharewa” (Two angels shall come to him together with his soul; the one shall be God’s angel, and is as white as snow, while the other is the Devil’s angel, and is

Table 1.1. *Sweart*: Negative Moral Valence

	<i>Poetry</i>	<i>Prose (R)</i>	<i>Prose (S)</i>	<i>Glosses</i>	<i>Charters</i>	<i>Totals</i>
Devils	2	29		2		33
Hell	7	16		1		24
Atmospheric	10	7		3		20
Fire	13	6				19
Night	6	10				16
Internal State	5	9		1		15
Spirits	5	8				13
Water	5	5				10
Death	1	4		1		6
Sin	2	3		1		6
Animal	2	3		1		6
Prison/Chains	1	4				5
Soul	1	3				4
Raven	2	2				4
Tortures	2	2				4
Crowd		1		2		3
Books/Letters		3				3
Men		3				3
Earth	1	1				2
Journey	2					2
Trees		1		1		2
Eclipse	1	1				2
“Place”		1				1
Cloth		1				1
Heathens				1		1
Vision				1		1
Feathers		1				1
Totals	67	122		15		207/338

Table 1.2. *Sweart*: Neutral Moral Valence

	<i>Poetry</i>	<i>Prose (R)</i>	<i>Prose (S)</i>	<i>Glosses</i>	<i>Charters</i>	<i>Totals</i>
Gloss		1		25		26
Flesh/Rot		1	12	2		15
Herb/ remedy			12	1		13
Human	3 (riddle)	3	6		1	13
Raven	3	6				9
Night	1	1	1	4		7
Animal	1 (riddle)	1	3	1		6
Weather	2 (riddle)	1	3			6
Bile			1	4		5
Spot				4		4
Vision	1	1		2		4
Tracks	3 (riddle)					3
Eclipse		1	2			3
Fire	2					2
Name			1		1	2
Prison				2		2
Riddle (?)	2 (riddle)					2
Signal		2				2
Weapons	2					2
Wool			1			1
Earth		1				1
Internal State		1				1
Tree				1		1
Disease			1			1
Totals	20 (+/-4)	20 (+/-8)	44 (+/-9)	46 (+/-6)	2	132/338

Table 1.3. Blac/Blæc

	<i>Poetry</i>	<i>Prose(R)</i>	<i>Prose(S)</i>	<i>Glosses</i>	<i>Charters</i>	<i>Totals</i>
Landmark/Pl. Nm.					109	109
Bodily Char.	7	18	2	7		34
Illness/injury			29	2		31
Simple gloss				26		26
Animal	3	4	12	2	1	22
Devils	4	8				12
Plant/Herb		1	6	4		11
Ink		3		7		10
Personal Nm.		5			5	10
Fire	7	1				8
Cloth/ing	2	1	1		2	6
Light	3	1		2		6
Remedy			5			5
Army/Group	3		1			4
Soil/Rock	1	2	1			4
Moon/Sun	1	2		1		4
Raven	1	1		1		3
Writing	2					2
Gold		1		1		2
Lightning	2					2
Soul		2				2
Wool			2			2
Clouds	1					1
Cross	1					1
Emotion	1					1
Parchment	1					1
Snow				1		1
Water	1					1
Tar				1		1
Bile				1		1
Weapon		1				1
Riddle (?)	1					1
Totals:	41	51	59	55	117	325

as black as a raven or an African).⁵ When this wider net of collocational and narrative associations is taken into account, a clear cultural relationship between *sweart* and damnation begins to emerge from the corpus. Yet it is a relationship limited by genre and form: *sweart* primarily collocates with these negative/sinful referents in verse, homiletic prose, and glosses of Christian Latin texts, while the remaining 31 percent of attestations for this term are more neutral or ambiguous, and occur most frequently in the leechbooks, charters, and law codes.

In contrast to *sweart*, *blac/blac* is relatively evenly dispersed across genres within the DOEC. It is also more connotatively neutral, with only 9.8 percent of attestations having a textual association with sin or damnation (usually in the context of hellfire). Yet part of that neutrality arises not from the need for a positive term for darkness, but from *blac*'s orthographical interchangeability with *blac* (bleached; bright, shining) within the corpus. As the two lexemes are essentially homonyms due to the variability of scribal spelling, I have incorporated them into the same database and simply attempted to note, where possible, when context demands a pale or a dark hue denotation.⁶

While cultural color associations for *blac* and *sweart* are demonstrably present within the Old English corpus, they do not result in the uniform treatment of these lexemes across the genres of poetry, prose, charters, and glosses assigned by the DOEC. Instead, the formal and contextual environment of the text appears to affect the collocational grouping of color terms. These generic divergences have influenced my study in two ways. First, they have led me to split the DOEC "prose" category into two distinct sections during the process of analysis: religious and homiletic prose, labeled R-prose; and secular prose, including lapidaries and medical texts, labeled S-prose.⁷ Second, they have proven amenable to contextualization within the theoretical framework of discourse analysis. In *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, M. A. K. Halliday describes variation in collocational distribution as a feature of register:

[C]ollolocations are often fairly specifically associated with one or another particular register, or functional variety of [a] language. This is true, of course, of individual lexical items, many of which we regard as "technical" because they appear exclusively, or almost exclusively, in one kind of text. But it is also noteworthy that perfectly ordinary lexical items often appear in different collocations according to the text variety. For example, *hunting*, in a story of the English aristocracy, will call up *quarry* and *bounds*; ...

in an anthropological text, words like *gathering*, *agricultural*, and *pastoral*; as well as, in other contexts, *bargain*, *souvenir*, *fortune* and suchlike.⁸

In Halliday's grammatical model, collocation is part of a group of discursive tools, inherent to spoken and written language, which produce and maintain lexical cohesion. Register, in turn, exists on what Halliday calls a "cline of instantiation," which refers to the process by which a system of grammar is used to produce concrete examples of spoken and written language, or "text."⁹ The system is the "ideal" or abstract concept of the language; the text is the concrete manifestation.

Register falls somewhere in-between the abstract and the concrete. It conveys semantic meaning through text, but also adheres to and is identified by a set of abstract semiotic signifiers that produce a kind of "text type." These signifiers may include specialized vocabulary, preferred syntactic sequences or conventions, and situational cues such as body language or publication format. The semantic "sub-systems" marked by different registers often serve to streamline communication within specialized language communities. Britt Mize, drawing upon the work of Halliday and others to explore formal traditions in Old English poetry, illustrates this function of register using the example of modern legal texts:

For uninitiated audiences, this register's conventional forms of expression may defeat diligent attempts at full comprehension, but for those with appropriate experience—including the development of not just linguistic but situational (i.e. legal) knowledge—those same structures amount to highly efficient packages of communication, a significant part of which takes place above and around denotative meaning and can only work by assuming a shared frame of reference.¹⁰

Register thus narrows the semantic potential of language, alerting readers and speakers to access the specialized "lexical storehouse which [the addresser] and the addressee possess in common" during a particular communicative act.¹¹ What this means, of course, is that the "clustering" behavior evidenced respectively by *sweart* and *blæc* in different genres is not only typical but *informative*—and that an attestation of *sweart* in the *Lacnunga* must be read quite differently than an attestation of the same term in, say, *Genesis A*.

Anglo-Saxonists will recognize in this model the concept of the "word-hoard," the store of formulaic and stylized language associated with

the production of Old English poetry. Here, too, the poet draws upon a shared pool of linguistic possibilities with the expectation that the audience, recognizing lexical and supralexical common codes, will interpret aspects of the communicative act in a particular way, and thus properly receive his or her intended message. For Mize, poetic formulae function as one indicator of register; they signal to the audience the type of interpretative process that must be adopted for “right reading,” and thus the larger literary mode in which they are meant to operate.¹² Yet because formulaic language is not unique to the Old English poetic corpus, even when imbued with special semantic weight in that context, the communicative capacity of a poetic formula is intimately tied to its presentation within the poetic register:

The structures of association [that formulas] establish are cognitive and cultural categories according to which the poem’s meaning is organized through the connection of the given episode, motif, phrase, or poetically marked word to larger bodies of implication, which a reader or hearer who is also proficient in the special idiom perceives quasi-instinctively.¹³

In other words, poetic *formulae*, like legal idioms, function by connecting their audience to a wider nexus of associative cultural meaning; they are designed to demand a common code of poet and reader, addresser and addressee. The contextual cues required to infer connotative meaning are crucial to the production of Old English poetry: “It turns out that the ‘value-added,’ greater-than-literal signifying power that ... endows traditional poetic units with communicative nuance and efficiency is not only plausible, but certain, indeed normal.”¹⁴ Mize’s definition of poetic formulae as “structures of association” that organize meaning through “the connection of the given episode, motif, phrase, or poetically marked word to larger bodies of implication,” can also be applied to color terms. The connotative content of color terminology similarly requires a common code of both addresser and addressee; it draws upon a wider nexus of associative cultural contexts; and it is both flexible in that, like a poetic formula, a color term can be applied to referents in unique and unexpected ways, and traditional, in that this innovation is evident only within the context of typical use. In this way, Mize’s definition allows for Old English color terms to be understood as a kind of formulaic system of meaning.

Anita Riedinger’s examination of the formulaic sequence “*x* under (the heavens)” further illustrates the significance of reading color words and their referents as supralexical or formulaic units of meaning.¹⁵

Riedinger observes that linguistic variability in Old English poetry is such that any number of combinations may arise within the formulaic *system* “*x* under *x*,” yet “*x* under (the heavens)” occurs with such frequency that it comes to resemble a set formula in spite of an inherent lexical variability. That is, “*x* under (the heavens)” is recognizable as a separate, coherent pattern within the larger system of “*x* under *x*.” In the same way, *sweart* + (damned/damning referent) is recognizable within the larger system of color + (referent). For Riedinger, “the repetition of one general concept + one system + one function = one formula.” If Riedinger singles out “*x* under (the heavens)” as a significant formulaic pattern for appearing “more than 100 times,” within the Old English corpus, then surely *sweart*’s collocation with devils and hell across multiple genres is no less noteworthy:¹⁶

Weorpeð bega cyme,
 hwitra ond sweartra, swa him is ham sceapen
 ungelice, englum ond deoflum.¹⁷
 (*Christ*, 896b–8a)

(Both shall come, the white and the black, as home is
 shaped differently for them, angels and devils.)

Ða æt nextan comon cwelmbære deoflu. swutellice
 gesewene, on sweartum hiwe, into ðam cilde.¹⁸
 (Ælfric, *CH Second Series*, Hom. 21)

(Then at last came a death-bearing devil, plainly visible
 in dark appearance, into the child.)

Ða him andsweradan atole gastas,
 swarte and synfulle, susle [begnornende]:
 “þu us gelærdæst ðurh lyge ðinne
 þæt we helende heran ne scealdon.”¹⁹
 (*Christ and Satan*, 51a–54b)

(Then the foul fiends, black and sinful, chained in
 torment, answered him: “You through your lies taught
 us that we should not listen to the Savior.”)

Hit gelimpeð, þanne þæs synfullan mannes saul gæð
 of his lichaman, ðonne bið heo seofon siðum sweartre
 ðonne se hræfen.²⁰

(anonymous homily)