

The Seafarer


Translated by Burton Raffel

Background

Each of the poems in this grouping is about exile—a prolonged stay away from home that is forced upon the exiled person. To the Anglo-Saxon people of Britain, *home* meant something different from what it means for people today. An Anglo-Saxon warrior viewed himself as the follower of a particular lord or king, not as a citizen of a nation. In exchange for a warrior's sworn loyalty, a lord dispensed goods—bread, fruit, riches won in raids—and guaranteed security in a dangerous world. Gathering in the mead-hall, a building dedicated to their feasts, a lord and his warriors would share food, drink, entertainment, and fellowship. Smoky, noisy, smelly, and crowded, the mead-hall was home.

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,
5 In a thousand ports, and in me. It tells
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,
10 With frozen chains, and hardship groaned
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
15 On an ice-cold sea, whirled in sorrow,
Alone in a world blown clear of love,
Hung with icicles. The hailstorms flew.

Reading Strategy
Connecting to Historical Context What Anglo-Saxon ideas of home and community explain why the speaker feels so strongly about his exile?

 **Reading Check**
What sufferings has the speaker endured at sea?

The only sound was the roaring sea,
 The freezing waves. The song of the swan
 20 Might serve for pleasure, the cry of the sea-fowl,
 The death-noise of birds instead of laughter,
 The mewling of gulls instead of mead.¹
 Storms beat on the rocky cliffs and were echoed
 By icy-feathered terns and the eagle's screams;
 25 No kinsman could offer comfort there,
 To a soul left drowning in desolation.
 And who could believe, knowing but
 The passion of cities, swelled proud with wine
 And no taste of misfortune, how often, how wearily,
 30 I put myself back on the paths of the sea.
 Night would blacken; it would snow from the north;
 Frost bound the earth and hail would fall,
 The coldest seeds. And how my heart
 Would begin to beat, knowing once more
 35 The salt waves tossing and the towering sea!
 The time for journeys would come and my soul
 Called me eagerly out, sent me over
 The horizon, seeking foreigners' homes.
 But there isn't a man on earth so proud,
 40 So born to greatness, so bold with his youth,
 Grown so brave, or so graced by God,
 That he feels no fear as the sails unfurl,
 Wondering what Fate has willed and will do.
 No harps ring in his heart, no rewards;
 45 No passion for women, no worldly pleasures,
 Nothing, only the ocean's heave;
 But longing wraps itself around him.
 Orchards blossom, the towns bloom,
 Fields grow lovely as the world springs fresh,
 50 And all these admonish that willing mind
 Leaping to journeys, always set
 In thoughts traveling on a quickening tide.
 So summer's sentinel, the cuckoo, sings
 In his murmuring voice, and our hearts mourn
 55 As he urges. Who could understand,
 In ignorant ease, what we others suffer
 As the paths of exile stretch endlessly on?
 And yet my heart wanders away,
 My soul roams with the sea, the whales'
 60 Home, wandering to the widest corners
 Of the world, returning ravenous with desire,
 Flying solitary, screaming, exciting me
 To the open ocean, breaking oaths

1. mead liquor made from fermented honey and water.

The British Tradition



Britain, Seafaring Nation

Britain is an island, surrounded by ocean, and its inhabitants have always had a complex relationship with the sea. Throughout British history, the ocean has been both an avenue to new lands and a mighty barrier to strangers, both a gateway to trade and conquest and a scene of terrifying isolation.

From its very beginning, the literature of Britain reflects this complicated connection. "The Seafarer," one of the earliest known British poems, explores the intense hold of the sea on the speaker's heart, an enduring theme. The theme of exile found in this ninth-century poem reappears, for instance, in the twentieth century in Joseph Conrad's sea tales. In the British literary tradition, the sea is a mighty force that tests the human spirit.

admonish (ad măn' ish) v.
 advise; caution

sentinel (sen' ti nel) n.
 person or animal that guards

Literary Analysis

Anglo-Saxon Lyrics

How does the alliteration of words beginning with *w*, *r*, and *s* affect the sound and meaning of lines 59–62?

On the curve of a wave.

Thus the joys of God

- 65 Are fervent with life, where life itself
Fades quickly into the earth. The wealth
Of the world neither reaches to Heaven nor remains.
No man has ever faced the dawn
Certain which of Fate's three threats
70 Would fall: illness, or age, or an enemy's
Sword, snatching the life from his soul.
The praise the living pour on the dead
Flowers from reputation: plant
An earthly life of profit reaped
75 Even from hatred and rancor, of bravery
Flung in the devil's face, and death
Can only bring you earthly praise
And a song to celebrate a place
With the angels, life eternally blessed
80 In the hosts of Heaven.

The days are gone

- When the kingdoms of earth flourished in glory;
Now there are no rulers, no emperors,
No givers of gold, as once there were,
When wonderful things were worked among them
85 And they lived in lordly magnificence.
Those powers have vanished, those pleasures are dead.
The weakest survives and the world continues,
Kept spinning by toil. All glory is tarnished.
The world's honor ages and shrinks,
90 Bent like the men who mold it. Their faces
Blanch as time advances, their beards
Wither and they mourn the memory of friends.
The sons of princes, sown in the dust.
The soul stripped of its flesh knows nothing
95 Of sweetness or sour, feels no pain,
Bends neither its hand nor its brain. A brother
Opens his palms and pours down gold
On his kinsman's grave, strewing his coffin
With treasures intended for Heaven, but nothing
100 Golden shakes the wrath of God
For a soul overflowing with sin, and nothing
Hidden on earth rises to Heaven.
We all fear God. He turns the earth,
He set it swinging firmly in space,
105 Gave life to the world and light to the sky.
Death leaps at the fools who forget their God.
He who lives humbly has angels from Heaven
To carry him courage and strength and belief.
A man must conquer pride, not kill it,

fervent (fɜr' vɛnt) *adj.*
having or showing great
warmth of feeling

rancor (ran' kər) *n.* ill will

Literary Analysis
Anglo-Saxon Lyrics
and the Elegy What
does the speaker mourn
in lines 81–90?

 **Reading Check**

Why does the seafarer
return to the sea time
and again?

110 Be firm with his fellows, chaste for himself,
Treat all the world as the world deserves,
With love or with hate but never with harm,
Though an enemy seek to scorch him in hell,
Or set the flames of a funeral pyre
115 Under his lord. Fate is stronger
And God mightier than any man's mind.
Our thoughts should turn to where our home is,
Consider the ways of coming there,
Then strive for sure permission for us
120 To rise to that eternal joy,
That life born in the love of God
And the hope of Heaven. Praise the Holy
Grace of Him who honored us,
Eternal, unchanging creator of earth. Amen.

Review and Assess

Thinking About the Selection

1. **Respond:** Do you agree that "Fate is stronger . . . than any man's mind"? Why or why not?
2. (a) **Recall:** Identify three images related to weather in the first stanza. (b) **Interpret:** What does each convey about the speaker's experiences at sea?
3. (a) **Recall:** What causes the speaker's heart to "begin to beat"? (b) **Generalize:** How can someone dislike something as much as the seafarer dislikes life at sea and yet be drawn to it?
4. (a) **Recall:** What is the seafarer's response to "harps," "rewards," "passion," and the other pleasures of life on the land? (b) **Interpret:** Judging from his response to these things, explain whether he is more attached to life on land than he is to life at sea.
5. (a) **Interpret:** What does the speaker mean when he says in lines 58–61 "And yet my heart wanders away, / My soul roams with the sea, . . . / . . . returning ravenous with desire. . . ."? (b) **Draw Conclusions:** Is the speaker fully at home on land, on the sea, or in neither place? Explain.
6. (a) **Interpret:** According to the last section of the poem, where is our home? (b) **Synthesize:** Explain the connection between the poem's concluding message and its depiction of the seafarer's wandering existence.
7. **Evaluate:** Can people find a way of life in which they are fully happy, or, like the seafarer, will they always have longings for "another place"? Explain.