

# *The Seafarer*

## by **Anonymous**

*Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan,  
siþas secgan, hu ic geswincdagum*

- You're probably thinking, those lines don't look like any kind of English I know. You're not wrong.
- They're written in something called Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, which is the language that the inhabitants of Britain spoke before the Norman invasion in 1066.
- English has evolved so much since then that the Old English in these lines is completely unrecognizable to most twenty-first-century readers without the aid of a translation.
- As it turns out, these lines are the first two lines of a ridiculously old and ridiculously awesome poem called "**The Seafarer.**"

# *The Seafarer*: Introduction

- “The Seafarer” was first discovered in the Exeter Book, a hand-copied manuscript containing the largest known collection of Old English poetry, which is kept at Exeter Cathedral, England.
- “The Seafarer” has its origins in the Old English period of English literature, 450-1100, a time when very few people knew how to read or write.
- Old English, the earliest ancestor of modern English, is the name given to the Germanic tongues brought to England by the invading tribes who crossed the English channel from Northern Europe.
- Old English resembles German and Scandinavian languages, and one cannot read it without at least one year of intense study.
- Even in its translated form, “The Seafarer” provides an accurate portrait of the sense of stoic endurance, suffering, loneliness, and spiritual yearning so characteristic of Old English poetry. (remember *Beowulf*)
- “The Seafarer” is divisible into two sections, the first elegiac and the second didactic.

# *The Seafarer*: Introduction

- “The Seafarer” can be read as two poems on separate subjects or as one poem moving between two subjects.
- Moreover, the poem can be read as a dramatic monologue, the thoughts of one person, or as a dialogue between two people.
- The first section is a painfully personal description of the suffering and mysterious attractions of life at sea.
- In the second section, the speaker makes an abrupt shift to moral speculation about the fleeting nature of fame, fortune, and life itself, ending with an explicitly Christian view of God as wrathful and powerful. In this section, the speaker urges the reader to forget earthly accomplishments and anticipate God’s judgment in the afterlife.

# *The Seafarer*: Introduction

- The poem addresses both pagan and Christian ideas about overcoming this sense of suffering and loneliness. For example, the speaker discusses being buried with treasure and winning glory in battle (pagan) and also fearing God's judgment in the afterlife (Christian).
- "The Seafarer" can be thought of as an allegory discussing life as a journey and the human condition as that of exile from God on the sea of life.
- For comparison, read Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Whatever themes one finds in the poem, "The Seafarer" is a powerful account of a sensitive poet's interaction with his environment.

# The Process of Translating the Poem

VanBenthuysen, “The Seafarer” – Lines 18a-33a

20 þær ic ne gehȳrde būtan hlimman sǣ  
īscaldne wǣg. Hwīlum ylfete<sup>19</sup> song  
dyde ic mē tō gomene, ganetes<sup>20</sup> hlēoþor  
ond huilpan<sup>21</sup> swēg fore hleahtor wera,  
mǣw<sup>22</sup> singende fore medodrince.  
Stormas þær stānclifu bēotan;<sup>23</sup> þær him stearn<sup>24</sup> oncwǣð  
25 īsigfeþera; ful oft þæt earn<sup>25</sup> bigeal,  
ūrigfeþra<sup>26</sup>; ne<sup>27</sup> ænig hlēomǣga  
fēasceaftig ferð frēfran<sup>28</sup> meahte.  
For þon him gelyfeð lyt, sē þe āh līfes wyn  
gebiden in burgum, bealosīþa hwōn,  
wlongc ond wīngāl, hū ic wērig oft  
30 in brimlāde bīdan sceolde.  
Nāp nihtscūa; norþan snīwde;<sup>29</sup>  
hrīm hrūsan bond; haegl fēol on eorþan,  
corna caldast.

# The Process of Translating the Poem

## TRANSLATION - WORD FOR WORD

20 There I not heard but roaring sea  
ice-cold wave. Sometimes of the wild swan song  
did I for myself for pastime, of gannet voice  
and of whaup sound instead of laughter of men,  
mew singing instead of mead-drink.  
Storms there stonecliffs beat; there tern answers them  
ice-feathered-one; fully often that eagle screamed,  
25 dewy-feathered-one; not any of protecting-kinsmen  
few-thing-having soul to console was able.  
Indeed then him believes little, he who has of life joy  
experienced in city, of harm-journeys a few,  
valiant and wine-lustful, how I weary often  
30 in sea-way to remain I was obliged.  
Darkened night-shadow; from north snowed;  
hoarfrost to earth bound; hail fell on earth,  
of grains coldest.

# The Process of Translating the Poem

## TRANSLATION – PROSE

There I heard nothing but the roaring sea,  
the ice-cold wave. Sometimes I had for myself  
a song of the wild swan for a pastime, the gannet's voice  
and the whaup's sound instead of men's laughter,  
mew singing instead of mead-drink.

There storms beat stonecliffs. There the tern,  
ice-feathered one, answers them. Very often the eagle,  
dewy-feathered one, screamed back; not any protecting-  
kinsmen was able to console the few-thing-having soul.

Indeed then he who has experienced the joy of life  
in the city, few harm-journeys, proud and full of wine,  
hardly believes another, how I often weary  
in the sea-way was obliged to remain.

Night-shadow darkened; it snowed from the north;  
hoarfrost bound to the ground; hail fell on earth,  
the coldest of grains.

# The Process of Translating the Poem

## TRANSLATION – POETRY

20 I heard nothing there /but heaving seas,  
ice-cold waves. /With wild swan's song  
I'd grind through the time, /with gannet's voice,  
with whaup's sounds, /instead of men's laughs  
with mew singing /instead of mead-drink.  
Storms against the cliff, /answered by the tern,  
25 the ice-feathered bird; /followed by the eagle,  
bird winged with dawn; /no one will console,  
no protecting kin, /a possessionless soul.  
He cannot believe /who can recall  
the city-joy, /not journeys hard,  
30 wine-drunk and proud, /how, weary, I often  
was obliged to stay /at sea alone.  
Night's shadow darkened; /it snowed from the north;  
ground eaten by frost; /earth pounded by hail,  
the coldest grain.



# *The Seafarer: A Quick Summary*

- The speaker of "The Seafarer" announces that he can make a true song about himself and the suffering he has endured while traveling over the ocean in the middle of winter.
- He remembers terrible cold and loneliness, and hearing the sounds of seabirds instead of the mead hall.
- This life of hardship is one about which the comfortable "city dwellers" know nothing. They'll never understand his suffering.
- The weather worsens as snow and hail fall. His spirit is troubled, urging him to endure the harsh conditions on the winter sea so that he can seek a faraway "foreign" homeland.
- Ah, the arrival of spring should help, right? Wrong. It only causes more wanderlust in the speaker.
- The cry of the cuckoo, a sign of warmer weather, tells him it's time for yet another journey.
- The Seafarer's spirit leaps out of his chest and soars all over the world, then returns to him unsatisfied. He breaks promises and returns to the sea.
- He knows the world's riches will not last, since everyone dies and you can't take your possessions with you.

# *The Seafarer: A Quick Summary*

- Because it's only through the praise of the living after one's death that a person can hope to live forever, people should fight hard against the devil so their bravery will be remembered after their death. That way, they can live forever with the angels.
- The days of earthly glory are over, the speaker tells us, because the wealthy and powerful civilizations have fallen, and the weak have inherited the earth. Glory and nobility have faded just like an aging person, whose body and senses fail.
- No matter how much we try to comfort the dead and ourselves with gold, it won't work because a sinful soul can't take his gold with him after death, nor can one buy God's forgiveness.
- The speaker tells us that it's important to fear God, who created the whole world, and before whom it stands still. Only a fool does not fear God: he will meet his death unprepared.
- In order to avoid this, a man has to live humbly, control his passions, keep his word, and be fair to both friends and enemies. A man should think about his earthly life, focus on the heavenly home that awaits him, and how to get there. In fact, the speaker suggests, we should all work hard to get to the eternal life, where joy awaits us.

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

1 This tale is true, and mine. It  
tells  
2 How the sea took me, swept  
me back  
3 And forth in sorrow and fear  
and pain,  
4 Showed me suffering in a  
hundred ships,  
5 In a thousand ports, and in  
me. It tells

Lines 1-5:

- The elegiac, personal tone is established from the beginning.
- The speaker pleads to his audience about his honesty and his personal self-revelation to come.
- He tells of the limitless suffering, sorrow, and pain and his long experience in various ships and ports.
- The speaker never explains exactly why he is driven to take to the ocean.

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

6 Of smashing surf when I  
sweated in the cold  
7 Of an anxious watch,  
perched in the bow  
8 As it dashed under cliffs.  
My feet were cast  
9 In icy bands, bound with  
frost,  
10 With frozen chains, and  
hardship groaned  
11 Around my heart. Hunger  
tore

Lines 6-11:

- Here, the speaker conveys intense, concrete images of cold, anxiety, stormy seas, and rugged shorelines.
- The comparisons relating to imprisonment are many, combining to drag the speaker into his prolonged state of anguish.
- The adverse conditions affect both his physical body (his feet) and his spiritual sense of worth (his heart).

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

12 At my sea-weary soul. No  
man sheltered

13 On the quiet fairness of  
earth can feel

14 How wretched I was, drifting  
through winter

15 On an ice-cold sea, whirled  
in sorrow,

16 Alone in a world blown clear  
of love,

Lines 12-16:

- The loneliness and isolation of the speaker's ocean wanderings are emphasized in these lines.
- The speaker highlights the opposition between the comfortable landlubber and the anguished, lonely, frozen mariner.
- Alone physically and without a sense of connection to the rest of the human race, the seafarer pushes on in his suffering.

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

- 17 Hung with icicles. The  
hailstorms flew.
- 18 The only sound was the roaring  
sea,
- 19 The freezing waves. The song of  
the swan

Lines 17-19:

- The speaker returns to depicting his adverse environment and the inclement weather conditions of hail, high waves, cold, and wind.

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

- 20 Might serve for pleasure, the  
cry of the sea-fowl,
21. The death-noise of birds instead  
of laughter,
- 22 The mewling of gulls instead of  
mead.
- 23 Storms beat on the rocky cliffs  
and were echoed
- 24 By icy-feathered terns and the  
eagle's screams;
- 25 No kinsman could offer  
comfort there,
- 26 To a soul left drowning in  
desolation.

Lines 20-26:

- The first of several catalogues, or lists of items using similar grammatical structures, appears in these lines; here the speaker invokes the names of four specific sea-birds that serve as his sole companions.
- The birds' lonely cries only emphasize the distance from land and from other people.
- The speaker says that the swan's song might serve for pleasure, but in his case it will not.
- The swans, gulls, terns, and eagles only increase the mariner's sense of abandonment and show the lack of warm, human compassion in his stormy ocean wandering.
- The speaker metaphorically drowns in his loneliness.

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

27 And who could believe, knowing  
but  
28 The passion of cities, swelled  
proud with wine  
29 And no taste of misfortune, how  
often, how wearily,  
30 I put myself back on the paths  
of the sea.

Lines 27-30:

- The speaker constructs another opposition, one between himself and the comfortable city dweller who puffs himself up with pride and drink.
- This city person cannot possibly know of the seafarer's suffering.
- The experience of the speaker cannot be translated for the sheltered urban inhabitant.
- The landlocked man cannot possibly understand the seafarer's motives.



# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

31 Night would blacken; it would  
snow from the north;  
32 Frost bound the earth and hail  
would fall,  
33 The coldest seeds. And how my  
heart  
34 Would begin to beat, knowing  
once more  
35 The salt waves tossing and the  
towering sea!  
36 The time for journeys would  
come and my soul  
37 Called me eagerly out, sent me  
over  
38 The horizon, seeking foreigners'  
homes.

Lines 31-38:

- The speaker again describes the changes in weather.
- As day turns to night, and snow and hail rain down from black skies, the speaker says that he is once again drawn to his inexplicable wandering.
- His restless spirit eagerly returns to the sea and foreign seaports.
- The phrase “seeking foreigners’ homes” is ironic, because, while he searches for the shelter of homes, the seafarer is isolated from the values represented by home: warmth, safety, compassion, friendship, and love

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

39 But there isn't a man on  
earth so proud,  
40 So born to greatness, so bold  
with his youth,  
41 Grown so brave, or so graced  
by God,  
42 That he feels no fear as the  
sails unfurl,  
43 Wondering what Fate has  
willed and will do.

Lines 39-43:

- These lines introduce a central theme of the poem.
- The speaker displays his second catalogue, a list of earthy human virtues: pride, greatness, boldness, youth, seriousness, and grace.
- The speaker emphasizes that even the person blessed with all these virtues feels fear at the onset of a journey on the sea wondering what fate may have in store for him.

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

- 44 No harps ring in his heart, no  
rewards,
- 45 No passion for women, no  
worldly pleasures,
- 46 Nothing, only the ocean's  
heave;

Lines 44-46:

- These lines continue the catalogue of worldly pleasures begun in line 39.
- The will never be comforted by harps, rewards, or the love of women; only the sea comforts him.

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

47 But longing wraps itself around him.  
48 Orchards blossom, the towns bloom,  
49 Fields grow lovely as the world  
springs fresh,  
50 And all these admonish that willing  
mind  
51 Leaping to journeys, always set  
52 In thoughts traveling on a quickening  
tide.  
53 So summer's sentinel, the cuckoo,  
sings  
54 In his murmuring voice, and our  
hearts mourn  
55 As he urges. Who could understand,  
56 In ignorant ease, what we others  
suffer  
57 As the paths of exile stretch endlessly  
on?

Lines 47-57:

- The speaker shifts away from deprivation and winter to fulfillment and summer.
- The imagery of orchards, flowers, and cities in bloom stands in stark contrast to that of icy winter winds and storms.
- The cuckoo, a bird of happiness and summer, contrasts with the earlier lists of winter ocean birds.
- Even these pleasantries cannot combat the speaker's wanderlust and desire to return to the sea.
- Again the speaker says those who dwell in ease cannot understand the reason why he and those like him are called to abandon city life and search the frozen, stormy seas.

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

58 And yet my heart wanders away,  
59 My soul roams with the sea, the  
    whales'  
60 Home, wandering to the widest  
    corners  
61 Of the world, returning ravenous  
    with desire,  
62 Flying solitary, screaming, exciting  
    me  
63 To the open ocean, breaking  
    oaths  
64 On the curve of a wave.

Lines 58-64:

- In this conclusion of the first major section, the seafarer says that his mind and heart constantly yearn for the sea.
- Notice the kenning, “whales’ home” for sea.
- The paradox of the seafarer’s excitement at beginning the journey shows his acceptance of suffering to come.
- Despite knowing of the isolation and deprivation, the speaker is driven to resume his life at sea.
- Breaking promises, the speaker expresses his thrill at returning to his wandering. (End of Part I)

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

Thus the joys of God

65 Are fervent with life, where life  
itself

66 Fades quickly into the earth.  
The wealth

67 Of the world neither reaches to  
Heaven nor remains.

68 No man has ever faced the  
dawn

Lines 65-68:

- The speaker announces the theme of the second section: that the joys of accepting God's will far exceed any form of wealth or earthly pleasure.
- Earthly wealth cannot reach heaven, nor can it transcend life.
- This section grows less personal and becomes mostly theological and didactic (educational) in nature.

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

- 69 Certain which of Fate's three threats
- 70 Would fall: illness, or age, or an enemy's
- 71 Sword, snatching the life from his soul.
- 72 The praise the living pour on the dead

Lines 69-72:

- Describing three ways of death, the speaker says that no man is certain how life will end. The violent nature of Anglo-Saxon society is described by the possibility of death by an enemy's sword.

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

73 Flowers from reputation: plant  
74 An earthly life of profit reaped  
75 Even from hatred and rancor, of  
bravery  
76 Flung in the devil's face, and  
death  
77 Can only bring you earthly praise  
78 And a song to celebrate a place  
79 With the angels, life eternally  
blessed  
80 In the hosts of Heaven.  
The days are gone  
81 When the kingdoms of earth  
flourished in glory;

Lines 73-81:

- The speaker writes that one wins a reputation through battle and bravery, that only earthly praise comes to warriors who take risks and perform great feats in battle. In this section, one imagines the creation of funeral fires, songs, and shrines in honor of the great warriors.



# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

82 Now there are no rulers, no  
emperors,  
83 No givers of gold, as once there  
were,  
84 When wonderful things were  
worked among them  
85 And they lived in lordly  
magnificence.  
86 Those powers have vanished,  
those pleasures are dead.  
87 The weakest survives and the  
world continues,  
88 Kept spinning by toil. All glory is  
tarnished.

Lines 82-88:

- The speaker says the days of glory and honor have passed.
- Another catalogue laments the lack of rulers, emperors, gold-givers, and lords.
- The power of the nobles and aristocrats has vanished; glory must be sought in other ways than through bravery in battle.

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

89 The world's honor ages and  
shrinks.  
90 Bent like the men who mould it.  
Their faces  
91 Blanch as time advances, their  
beards  
92 Wither and they mourn the  
memory of friends.  
93 The sons of princes, sown in the  
dust.  
94 The soul stripped of its flesh  
knows nothing  
95 Of sweetness or sour, feels no  
pain,

Lines 89-95:

- The theme of lost glory is continued.
- The speaker uses the simile of faded glory being like old men who remember their former youth.
- The old men turn white, their beards grow thin, and they mourn the memory of departed companions.
- The sons of nobles who formerly fought to win glory in battle are now dust on the ground.

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

96 Bends neither its hand nor its  
brain. A brother  
97 Opens his palms and pours  
down gold  
98 On his kinsman's grave,  
strewing his coffin  
99 With treasures intended for  
Heaven, but nothing  
100 Golden shakes the wrath of God  
101 For a soul overflowing with sin,  
and nothing

Lines 96-101:

- The speaker focuses on the spiritual aspect of life after death and how the soul knows no earthly comforts; the soul removed from the body feels nothing and cares nothing for fame.
- The metaphor of a brother placing gold coins on his kinsman's coffin shows the uselessness of wealth and reputation to the dead.
- The speaker writes that all earthly wealth and fame are meaningless in the next world.
- God's anger against a sinful person cannot be reduced at any price; thus, the speaker urges all to heed the warning not to get taken in by wealth and fame.

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

102 Hidden on earth rises to  
Heaven.  
103 We all fear God. He turns the  
earth,  
104 He set it swinging firmly in  
space,  
105 Gave life to the world and light  
to the sky.  
106 Death leaps at the fools who  
forget their God.  
107 He who lives humbly has angels  
from Heaven

Lines 102-107:

- The speaker shifts to the final, concluding section of the poem, the most religious part of “The Seafarer.”
- The speaker writes that all fear God because He created the earth and the heavens.
- God moves everything on earth and in the skies, according to the speaker.

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

108 To carry him courage and strength  
and belief.  
109 A man must conquer pride, not  
kill it,  
110 Be firm with his fellows, chaste  
for himself,  
111 Treat all the world as the world  
deserves,  
112 With love or with hate but never  
with harm,  
113 Though an enemy seek to scorch  
him in hell,  
114 Or set the flames of a funeral  
pyre  
115 Under his lord. Fate is stronger  
116 And God mightier than any man's  
mind.

Lines 108-116:

- The speaker presents his final catalogue, a list of lessons or commandments to be learned by the humble person who fears his judgment day.
- According to the seafarer, each wise person must be humble, strong, courageous, chaste, firm with his friends, and never resort to violence even if enemies seek to burn and destroy him.
- The man who thinks about God will be comforted by angels

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

117 Our thoughts should turn to  
      where our home is,  
118 Consider the ways of coming  
      there,  
119 Then strive for sure permission  
      for us  
120 To rise to that eternal joy,  
121 That life born in the love of God  
122 And the hope of Heaven.

Lines 117-122:

- The speaker admonishes that God and Fate are more powerful than any person's will.
- According to the seafarer, people should always consider God's purpose and think of their final resting place in heaven, their home.
- Here, the speaker talks of the joys, love, and hope that he feels await the faithful in heaven.

# *The Seafarer*: Detailed Summary

122 ... Praise the Holy  
123 Grace of Him who honored us,  
124 Eternal, unchanging creator of  
earth. Amen.

Lines 122-124:

- The poem ends in a prayer of praise to God, the eternal creator of earth and its life.
- The traditional ending “Amen” raises the question about how, if at all, the concluding section connects or fails to connect with the more passionate, emotional song of the forsaken seafarer adrift on the inhospitable waves in the first section.