Reflections of Common Life

The Seafarer
The Wanderer
The Wife’s Lament

Poetry from the Exeter Book

Meet the Author

The Exeter Book  c. 950

DID YOU KNOW?
The Exeter Book . . .

- consists of 131 leaves of parchment, each slightly bigger than a standard sheet of paper.
- has knife cuts on some of its pages, which suggests that at one point it was used as a cutting board.
- inspired the building of a 19-foot-high stainless-steel statue imprinted with riddles in the city of Exeter.

Nothing is known about the authors of “The Seafarer,” “The Wanderer,” and “The Wife’s Lament.” All three poems survive in the Exeter Book, a manuscript of Anglo-Saxon poems produced by a single scribe around a.d. 950. In addition to these and other secular poems, the Exeter Book contains religious verse, nearly 100 riddles, and a heroic narrative. It is the largest collection of Old English poetry in existence.

Neglected Treasure  Originally, the Exeter Book belonged to Leofric (lā’ō-frīk), the first bishop of Exeter. He donated it to the Exeter Cathedral library sometime between 1050 and 1072. For several centuries the book was neglected and abused; few people were able to read the Old English language in which it was written and thus had little use for it. Some pages are badly stained or scorched. The original binding and an unknown number of pages are lost.

Rediscovery  With the rise of Anglo-Saxon studies in the 19th century, scholars began to take an interest in the Exeter Book. Benjamin Thorpe published the first complete translation in 1842. He assigned titles to “The Seafarer” and “The Wanderer,” as none of the poems in the manuscript had titles. A photographic facsimile was published in 1933; it became the basis for later scholarly editions. A CD version, with facsimile pages and audio readings, was released in 2006.

The original manuscript still resides at the library at Exeter Cathedral, where it is cherished as one of the few surviving collections of Anglo-Saxon poetry.
When are people most alone?

When people find themselves cut off from contact with others, the sense of isolation can be all consuming. It is not surprising that loneliness is a frequent topic in poetry written during the Anglo-Saxon era—an era during which disease, war, and other perils often wrenched people away from their loved ones. In many Anglo-Saxon poems, images of freezing seas and jagged cliffs mirror this sense of isolation and the challenge of living in a harsh, unpredictable world.

QUICKWRITE Imagine that you are making a five-minute silent film about isolation and loneliness. What would you show onscreen? Where would you set the film? Who would the main character be, and what would he or she be doing? List some visual images that come to mind.

Film Images
• single robed traveler, trudging across the Sahara Desert
• endless sand dunes

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
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,
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,
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
On an ice-cold sea, whirled in sorrow,
Alone in a world blown clear of love,
Hung with icicles. The hailstorms flew.
The only sound was the roaring sea,
The freezing waves. The song of the swan
Might serve for pleasure, the cry of the sea-fowl,
The death-noise of birds instead of laughter,
The mewing of gulls instead of mead.
Storms beat on the rocky cliffs and were echoed

BACKGROUND The poems in the Exeter Book reflect the hardship and uncertainty of life in Anglo-Saxon times. Men who made their living on the sea had to leave behind their families and sail long distances in primitive, poorly equipped boats. The women and children left behind endured months and even years without knowing whether their menfolk would return. In addition, frequent outbreaks of disease and war scattered communities and brought untimely death to many people.

Language Coach

Etymology A word’s etymology, or origin, can help you understand its connotations—the images or feelings connected with a word. Wretched, which comes from the Old English wrecca (“outcast or exile”), means “miserable.” Why is wretched a better word than miserable in lines 12–17?

22 mead (mēd): an alcoholic beverage drunk at Anglo-Saxon gatherings.
By icy-feathered terns and the eagle’s screams;
No kinsman could offer comfort there,
To a soul left drowning in desolation. A
And who could believe, knowing but
The passion of cities, swelled proud with wine
And no taste of misfortune, how often, how wearily,
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
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,
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,

A IMAGERY
In lines 12–26, what senses does the imagery appeal to? Describe the mood created by the imagery.

24 terns: sea birds similar to gulls.

< Analyze Visuals
Describe the mood of this photograph as well as those on pages 109 and 113. What features of each landscape determine its mood?
45 No passion for women, no worldly pleasures,
   Nothing, only the ocean’s heave;
Orchards blossom, the towns bloom,
Fleas grow lovely as the world springs fresh.
   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
   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’
   Home, wandering to the widest corners
   Of the world, returning ravenous with desire,
   Flying solitary, screaming, exciting me
   To the open ocean, breaking oaths
   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
   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
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
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
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,
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
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
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,
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,
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
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
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.

Translated by Burton Raffel

Literary Analysis

1. Paraphrase What views does the speaker express about earthly life and God in lines 64–124?

2. Compare How does the last half of the poem (from line 64 on) relate to the first half of the poem?
This lonely traveler longs for grace,
For the mercy of God; grief hangs on
His heart and follows the frost-cold foam
He cuts in the sea, sailing endlessly,
Aimlessly, in exile. Fate has opened
A single port: memory. He sees
His kinsmen slaughtered again, and cries:
“I’ve drunk too many lonely dawns,
Grey with mourning. Once there were men
To whom my heart could hurry, hot
With open longing. They’re long since dead.
My heart has closed on itself, quietly
Learning that silence is noble and sorrow
Nothing that speech can cure. Sadness
Has never driven sadness off;
Fate blows hardest on a bleeding heart.
So those who thirst for glory smother
Secret weakness and longing, neither
Weep nor sigh nor listen to the sickness
In their souls. So I, lost and homeless,
 Forced to flee the darkness that fell
On the earth and my lord.
Leaving everything,
Weary with winter I wandered out
On the frozen waves, hoping to find
A place, a people, a lord to replace
My lost ones. No one knew me, now,
No one offered comfort, allowed
Me feasting or joy. How cruel a journey
I’ve traveled, sharing my bread with sorrow
Alone, an exile in every land,
Could only be told by telling my footsteps.
For who can hear: “friendless and poor,”
And know what I’ve known since the long cheerful nights
When, young and yearning, with my lord I yet feasted
Most welcome of all. That warmth is dead.
He only knows who needs his lord
As I do, eager for long-missing aid;
He only knows who never sleeps
Without the deepest dreams of longing,
Sometimes it seems I see my lord,
Kiss and embrace him, bend my hands
And head to his knee, kneeling as though
He still sat enthroned, ruling his thanes.
And I open my eyes, embracing the air,
And see the brown sea-billows heave,
See the sea-birds bathe, spreading
Their white-feathered wings, watch the frost
And the hail and the snow. And heavy in heart
I long for my lord, alone and unloved.

Sometimes it seems I see my kin
And greet them gladly, give them welcome,
The best of friends. They fade away,
Swimming soundlessly out of sight,
Leaving nothing.

How loathsome become
The frozen waves to a weary heart.
In this brief world I cannot wonder
That my mind is set on melancholy,
Because I never forget the fate
Of men, robbed of their riches, suddenly
Looted by death—the doom of earth,
Sent to us all by every rising
Sun. Wisdom is slow, and comes
But late. He who has it is patient;
He cannot be hasty to hate or speak,

He must be bold and yet not blind,
Nor ever too craven, complacent, or covetous,
Nor ready to gloat before he wins glory.
The man’s a fool who flings his boasts
Hotly to the heavens, heeding his spleen
And not the better boldness of knowledge.
What knowing man knows not the ghostly,
Waste-like end of worldly wealth:
See, already the wreckage is there,
The wind-swept walls stand far and wide,
The storm-beaten blocks besmeared with frost,
The mead-halls crumbled, the monarchs thrown down
And stripped of their pleasures. The proudest of warriors
Now lie by the wall: some of them war
Destroyed; some the monstrous sea-bird
Bore over the ocean; to some the old wolf
Dealt out death; and for some dejected
Followers fashioned an earth-cave coffin.
Thus the Maker of men lays waste.
This earth, crushing our callow mirth.
And the work of old giants stands withered and still.”

He who these ruins rightly sees,
And deeply considers this dark twisted life,
Who sagely remembers the endless slaughters
Of a bloody past, is bound to proclaim:

“Where is the war-steed? Where is the warrior?
Where is his war-lord?
Where now the feasting-places? Where now the mead-hall
pleasures?
Alas, bright cup! Alas, brave knight!
Alas, you glorious princes! All gone,
Lost in the night, as you never had lived.

And all that survives you a serpentine wall,
Wondrously high, worked in strange ways.
Mighty spears have slain these men,
Greedy weapons have framed their fate.

These rocky slopes are beaten by storms,
This earth pinned down by driving snow,
By the horror of winter, smothering warmth
In the shadows of night. And the north angrily
Hurls its hailstorms at our helpless heads.
Everything earthly is evilly born,
Firmly clutched by a fickle Fate.

Fortune vanishes, friendship vanishes,
Man is fleeting, woman is fleeting,
And all this earth rolls into emptiness.”

So says the sage in his heart, sitting alone with His
thought.

It’s good to guard your faith, nor let your grief come forth
Until it cannot call for help, nor help but heed
The path you’ve placed before it. It’s good to find your grace
In God, the heavenly rock where rests our every hope.

Translated by Burton Raffel

Literary Analysis

1. Compare  How does the wanderer’s present life
    compare with his former life?

2. Summarize  What does a wise man understand,
    according to the wanderer?
I make this song about me full sadly my own wayfaring. I a woman tell what griefs I had since I grew up new or old never more than now.

5 Ever I know the dark of my exile.

First my lord went out away from his people over the wave-tumult. I grieved each dawn wondered where my lord my first on earth might be. Then I went forth a friendless exile to seek service in my sorrow’s need.

10 My man’s kinsmen began to plot by darkened thought to divide us two so we most widely in the world’s kingdom lived wretchedly and I suffered longing.

15 My lord commanded me to move my dwelling here. I had few loved ones in this land or faithful friends. For this my heart grieves: that I should find the man well matched to me hard of fortune mournful of mind hiding his mood thinking of murder.

Blithe was our bearing often we vowed that but death alone would part us two naught else. But this is turned round now . . . as if it never were

20 our friendship. I must far and near bear the anger of my beloved. The man sent me out to live in the woods
under an oak tree in this den in the earth. Ancient this earth hall. I am all longing.

30 The valleys are dark the hills high the yard overgrown bitter with briars a joyless dwelling. Full oft the lack of my lord seizes me cruelly here. Friends there are on earth living beloved lying in bed while I at dawn am walking alone under the oak tree through these earth halls. There I may sit the summerlong day there I can weep over my exile my many hardships. Hence I may not rest from this care of heart which belongs to me ever nor all this longing that has caught me in this life.

May that young man be sad-minded always hard his heart’s thought while he must wear a blithe bearing with care in the breast a crowd of sorrows. May on himself depend all his world’s joy. Be he outlawed far in a strange folk-land— that my beloved sits under a rocky cliff rimed with frost a lord dreary in spirit drenched with water in a ruined hall. My lord endures much care of mind. He remembers too often a happier dwelling. Woe be to them that for a loved one must wait in longing.

Translated by Ann Stanford

28–29 den…earth hall: In describing her living quarters, the speaker uses an expression something like the modern “hole in the ground.”

L IMAGERY
What does the speaker’s description of her surroundings express about her emotional state?

42 that young man: the speaker’s husband. In these final lines, the speaker seems to wish for her husband to lead the same sort of life that he has forced her to endure.

M IMAGERY
What sad images does the speaker imagine in lines 42–50?
Comprehension

1. **Recall** How does the speaker in “The Seafarer” feel about life at sea?
2. **Clarify** Why is the title character in “The Wanderer” in exile?
3. **Clarify** In “The Wife’s Lament,” what does the wife wish for her husband?

Literary Analysis

4. **Monitor Understanding** Review the charts you made as you read. What is the speaker remembering or pondering in each poem? What elements in each poem helped you reach these conclusions?
5. **Compare Texts** Compare these three poems, noting similarities you see in each of the following elements:
   - subject
   - mood
   - imagery
   - theme
6. **Synthesize Ideas** What ideas about Anglo-Saxon life and religious attitudes do you get from the poems?
7. **Evaluate Imagery** How does the imagery in these poems reflect the passage of time? Support your answer with details from the poems.
8. **Apply Themes** What advice might the speakers of “The Seafarer” and “The Wanderer” give the speaker of “The Wife’s Lament”? In what circumstances could modern people benefit from this advice?

Literary Criticism

9. **Critical Interpretations** There has been much debate over the number of speakers in “The Seafarer.” Some critics believe that a second person begins to speak at line 64, and others believe that there is only one speaker throughout the poem. Which interpretation do you believe is more accurate, and why?

When are people most ALONE?

A cold, stony landscape mirrors the harsh, unpredictable lives of the Anglo–Saxons. What other kinds of landscapes might evoke a feeling of isolation or loneliness?