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Works Cited

Nelles, William. "The Seafarer." *Masterplots II: Poetry, Revised Edition*, January 2002, pp. 1-3. EBSCOhost.

The Seafarer

Unknown

Quick Reference

First published: 960-980 c.e. in the Exeter Book; collected in *Seven Old English Poems*, 1966; lines 1-99a translated into English by Ezra Pound, in *Selected Poems*, 1957

Type of poem: Meditation

The Poem

The unique copy of "The Seafarer" is found in the Exeter Book, a manuscript anthology of Old English poetry assembled about 975 c.e., although many of the poems, including "The Seafarer," may have circulated in oral versions before being written down in the form in which they now exist. The poem's Christian message would seem to rule out any date earlier than the seventh century, when the Anglo-Saxons were converted; at the other extreme, it may have been composed, at least in the form in which it survives, around the time that the scribe copied it into the book in the second half of the tenth century. The 124-line poem is untitled in the manuscript, and its author is unknown. The best-known translation is that of Ezra Pound, whose rendering of the first ninety-nine lines has been widely admired on its own merits by readers with no knowledge of the original.

"The Seafarer," like most Old English poetry, is characterized by textual problems, abrupt transitions, and apparent inconsistencies in tone and structure that combine to render any modern interpretation tentative and subject to revision. Earlier scholars frequently read the poem as a dialogue between an experienced sailor and a young man who has not yet been to sea, dividing the text into alternating speeches (though with little agreement as to where these speeches begin and end). More recently, the critical consensus has come around to the view that the poem is a monologue by a single speaker, a religious man who has spent a life on the sea and is now meditating on his experience of life on Earth and contemplating the afterlife in Heaven.

The poem begins with the speaker's remembrance of the hardships of his past life on the sea, focusing especially on scenes of solitary voyages undertaken in harsh winter weather. He contrasts his lonely and difficult seafaring existence with that of the dwellers on land, who enjoy the comforts and pleasures of social life. At about line 33 of the poem, the seafarer resolves to return to the sea for another voyage, evidently to a distant land. He then shifts from personal experience to more general remarks in the third

person about how seafaring men are different from landsmen, drawn more strongly to wander than to share in an admitted prosperity and the beauty of the land, especially in spring and summer. The seafarer then briefly returns to his personal thoughts about the voyage he is planning.

At about the midpoint of the poem, he explicitly makes the point that life on the land is sterile, fleeting, and insubstantial. In the second half of the poem, he moves away from the autobiographical discussion of his experiences and concentrates on the revelation to which they have led him. He develops at length the argument that worldly goods and honors are transient and insubstantial and that wise people will therefore turn their minds entirely to the eternal life in the heavenly kingdom, considering not how to enjoy themselves on Earth but how to prepare themselves for Heaven, which offers the only true home for humankind.

Forms and Devices

Old English poetry is alliterative, relying on repetition of the initial sounds of stressed syllables rather than on rhymes at the ends of lines as its structural principle. The details of this alliterative practice can be quite complicated, but the most typical form is illustrated by lines 31-32 of "The Seafarer," which appear thus in the original Old English: "Nap niht-scaua, nor an sniwde,/ hrim hrusan band, hægl feoll on eor an" ("Nearest nightshade, snoweth from north,/ Frost froze the land, hail fell on earth then"). Each line is divided into two half lines (separated by editorially provided commas in these examples), and the alliterating letters for each line (n and h) must occur in both halves. Each half line usually has two stressed syllables, and while either or (more often) both may alliterate in the first half line (the "a" line), in the second half line (the "b" line), the first stressed syllable must alliterate and the second must not.

While there are many threads of imagery throughout the poem, including those of cold, barrenness, and the progression of the seasons, the central metaphor is surely that of the ship at sea, which was used throughout classical and medieval literature in a variety of permutations to symbolize human life. The specifically Christian version of the image used in this poem typically identifies the waves and salinity of the sea with the uncertainty and bitterness of postlapsarian life on Earth and the sailor as the Christian tossed about by its various storms and waves. Perhaps the best-known example of this symbolic system is Noah's ark, which was read as a parable of the power of the ship of the Church to save Christians from the floodwaters of sin. Depending upon the nuances of individual interpretation, the seafarer's ship can thus be seen as the Church or his religious faith, which protects him from drowning in the sea of a fallen and sinful world, or as the ship of his soul journeying over temptation (and potential shipwreck at the hands of Satan) toward a heavenly destination. In such readings, the chaos represented by the sea of sin is contrasted with the stability of Heaven.

Other readers have suggested that the sea may also reflect a Christian baptismal image whereby the water represents the possibility of rebirth into faith, thus explaining the seafarer's decision to return to the sea. The ship motif provides a number of possibilities for further elaboration; in "The Seafarer," for example, commentators find that the sea bird in flight represents the seafarer's soul in contemplation of God, that his night-watches represent his earlier spiritual darkness, and that the sea journey represents a religious pilgrimage. These various interpretations are not necessarily contradictory and may merely reflect the poet's sophisticated handling of a complex symbol by developing more than one significance for it.

Themes and Meanings

Early scholars of Anglo-Saxon literature believed that “The Seafarer” represented an early pagan poem that had been adapted for Christian audiences by the insertion of pious formulas throughout and a moral at the end; accordingly, these scholars expended considerable ingenuity in attempting to excise the Christian elements to discover the “real poem” hidden beneath these composite overlays. Pound’s famous translation, in line with this emphasis, systematically removes or downplays many explicitly Christian elements of the poem and stops before the overtly homiletic conclusion, which features some dozen direct references to God and the heavens in the last twenty-five lines.

Now, however, critics seem generally to agree that the two halves of the poem are unified by a movement from earthly chaos to heavenly order and that its coherent thematic thrust is the Christian message that the afterlife is more important than life on Earth. The poem is frequently discussed in conjunction with “The Wanderer,” another Exeter Book poem that shares many themes and motifs with “The Seafarer,” including the structure in which a specific treatment of biographical subject matter — the plight of a wanderer or seafarer — is followed by a more general homiletic section that draws a religious meaning from the earlier material.

The sailor, as a man required to travel over a hostile and dangerous environment, had always seemed to Christian poets to be a naturally apt image of the believer’s life on Earth, which should be viewed as a hazardous journey to the true homeland of Heaven rather than as a destination to be valued in itself. In this poem, the speaker seems to be a religious man (or reformed sinner) who has chosen the seafaring life as much for its efficacy as a means of spiritual discipline as for any commercial gain to be derived from it. The original opposition in the poem between landsmen and seafarers gives way to the insight that all men are, or ought to think of themselves as, seafarers, in the sense that they are all exiles from their true home in Heaven. As lines 31-32 (previously quoted) establish, the land can be just as cold and forbidding as the sea, and the virtuous, at least, should hope that they will be sojourning in this harsh world for only a brief time.

True Christian “seafarers” must psychologically distance themselves from secular life, as the seafarer of this poem has done both literally and figuratively. The poet appears to encapsulate his theme at the pivotal midpoint of the poem: “therefore the joys of the Lord seem warmer to me than this dead life, fleeting on land.” This recommended ascetic withdrawal from worldly interests should enable the Christian to properly reject the comforts of life on the land as transient and seek spiritual rather than physical comforts.

Essay by: William Nelles

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