

Before You Read

THE SEAFARER

Make the Connection

Has the Time of Heroes Passed?

In the PBS television series *The Power of Myth*, the television journalist Bill Moyers and the mythologist Joseph Campbell talk about heroes. At one point, Campbell says that as a child he had two heroes but now he has none. Here's a bit of the conversation that follows Campbell's comment:

Moyers: We seem to worship celebrities today, not heroes.

Campbell: Yes, and that's too bad. A questionnaire was once sent around to one of the high schools in Brooklyn which asked, "What would you like to be?" Two-thirds of the students responded, "A celebrity." They had no notion of having to give of themselves in order to achieve something.

Only a thousand years earlier, the poet who wrote "The Seafarer" addressed the same question: Has the time of heroes passed? transience of earthly life is found in the heroic epic. It is also found in several Old English fragments and poems in which a bard laments the passing of better days and greater glories.

Quickwrite

Do you think we "worship celebrities today, not heroes"? And if we do, what effect does that have on what we value and whom we present to children as role models? Freewrite for a few moments to focus your thoughts on this question.



Elements of Literature

The Elegy

The dominant mood in Anglo-Saxon poetry is elegiac. As we have seen in *Beowulf*, this sense of sadness over the grimness and

An elegy is a poem that mourns the death of a person or laments something lost.

For more on the Elegy, see page 606 and the Handbook of Literary Terms.

Background

"The Seafarer" is from the so-called Exeter Book, a manuscript of miscellaneous Anglo-Saxon poems dating from around A.D. 940, copied in A.D. 975, and now preserved at Exeter Cathedral in England. Though the manuscript survived the raids and fires of the centuries, the Exeter Book had not been well cared for. There are signs that its cover had been used as a chopping board; its pages had been marked by beer stains; and some had been partly burned. But today its "songs"—copied down by monks—are our chief source of Anglo-Saxon poetry.

The Anglo-Saxons were sea voyagers, and the northern seas were then, as now, especially cruel. The speaker in "The Seafarer" is an old sailor who drifted through many winters on ice-cold seas.



The Seafarer

translated by Burton Raffel

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.
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.
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,

24. terns: seabirds related to gulls.

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
★ 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
In the hosts of Heaven.
80 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.

50. admonish: scold mildly.

61. ravenous: very hungry.

65. fervent: passionate.

75. rancor (ran'kər): ill will.

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 mould 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,
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.

91. **blanch:** turn pale.

114. **funeral pyre:** pile (usually of wood) on which a dead body is burned. See the burial of Beowulf, page 46.

The Original Language and the Translator's Task

Here are the opening lines of "The Seafarer" in Old English. Following these lines is a translation by Kevin Crossley-Holland. Burton Raffel, whose very different translation is used on page 56, describes the special demands of verse translation: "Verse translation is a minor art, but a unique one. . . . The translator's only hope is to re-create something roughly equivalent in the new language, something that is itself good poetry and that at the same time carries a reasonable measure of the force and flavor of the original. . . ."

MÆg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan,
siþas secgan, hu ic geswincdagum
earfoðhwile oft þrowade,
bitre breostceare gebiden hæbbe,
gecunnad in ceole cearselda fela. . . .

I can sing a true song of myself,
Tell of my travels, of many hard times
Toiling day after day; I can describe
How I have harbored bitter sorrow in
my heart
And often learned that ships are homes
of sadness.

—translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland

MAKING MEANINGS

First Thoughts

1. What is your first impression of the speaker in this poem? What is his life like? What does he believe in and hope for?

Shaping Interpretations

2. What passages in the poem explain why the seafarer seeks the rigors of the sea rather than the delights of the land? Does he find what he looked for at sea?
3. Lines 58–64 suggest that the poet is beginning to talk about the glories of adventuring at sea, but then he changes direction. What does he turn his attention to over the next sixteen lines?
4. In line 80, the speaker begins to talk about the present state of the world—what does he think of it? How do these thoughts contribute to the poem's **elegiac tone**?

5. The poem ends with a statement of the poet's beliefs. What are they?
6. This short lyric is full of striking **metaphors**—for example, "frozen chains" in line 10. Select three of these metaphors, and explain what is being compared in each one. What emotional effect does each metaphor create?
7. What do you think the seafarer is searching for?

Connecting with the Text

8. In line 88, the poem's speaker says, "All glory is tarnished." Do you think this idea also applies to today's heroes and to present-day life? Explain your response.

Extending the Text

9. Could the sentiments expressed in this poem be applied to the homeless today? Find passages in the poem to support your answer.