

UNIT 6

The Wanderer

The Wanderer comes in the tradition of Anglo-Saxon literature known as the elegies, although it is sometimes referred to as 'wisdom literature'. These poems are characterized by their vivid recreations of the thoughts and feelings of individuals in states of mental and emotional distress. An important and recurring technique is the use of the first-person narrator, the personal voice. Some readers have felt that these poems provide us with an authentic insight into the minds of Anglo-Saxon people. While it is no doubt true that Anglo-Saxons did undergo profound emotional turmoil – the poems must reflect something about the inner life of individuals, otherwise they would mean nothing to a contemporary audience – the poems are not documentary but carefully constructed texts which have a larger purpose than the exploration of grief and emotional turmoil.

The speaker of *The Wanderer*, the personal voice, we are to imagine is a warrior whose lord has died or has been killed, and who has been left without a household to which he can belong. The speaker has become an exile or a solitary, who laments the death of his lord and who is seeking a new household of which he might become a part. Because of the nature of Anglo-Saxon heroic society which was based on the hall and close bonds of loyalty to one's lord or chieftain, the state of exile, that is, having no lord to whom one could give one's loyalty, in other words, have part in a society, was a state which, in the world of heroic literature, Anglo-Saxons seem to have feared most. One's identity in heroic society was so closely tied to one's lord, that the loss of one's lord and household would plunge the survivor into a state of grief or despair. Exile and the grief that this produces is one of the most frequently recurring themes in Anglo-Saxon literature. It is central to *Beowulf* and is in the background to a text such as *The Dream of the Rood*.

The Wanderer, however, is not simply and solely about the state of mind of an exile in heroic society. Up to line 57 the poem is a vivid and engaging recreation of the speaker's grief and anxieties, but from line 58 onwards the perspective of the text broadens to take in a range of themes which have their

origins in homiletic writing and wisdom literature. There is a dynamic to the text which is intriguing. One argument is that it is intended to show a movement or a psychological or spiritual process that takes the speaker – and by implication the audience – from grief and despair to consolation. In this argument the poet has taken a motif or a situation common to heroic writing – the warrior who is in a state of exile – and used this to build up a critique of heroic values and to generate from this a desire for Christian consolation. In other words, like the author of *The Dream of the Rood*, a Christian writer has taken over traditional material from secular heroic writing and developed a poem with a profound religious and spiritual meaning. The text implies that the wanderer's search for an earthly lord is futile and that the only possible consolation comes from the heavenly lord.

The Wanderer has continued to puzzle scholars of Anglo-Saxon literature. As you read it, consider whether you think there is an dynamic or process at work. How does the poet use heroic values and heroic ethics? Might *The Wanderer* be seen as a critique of heroic values? To what extent is there a tension between secular heroic values and Christian values in *The Wanderer*?

- 5 Oft him anhaga are gebideð,
 metudes miltse, beah þe he modcearig
 geond lagulade longe sceolde
 hrean mid hondum himcealde sæ,
 wadan wræclastas. Wyrð bið ful aræd!
- 10 Swa cwæð eardstapa, earfeþa gemyndig,
 wraþra wælslehta, winemæga hryre:
 "Oft ic sceolde ana uhtna gehwylce
 mine ceare cwippan. Nis nu cwicra nan
 þe ic him modesfan minne durre
 sweotule asecgan. Ic to soþe wat
 þæt biþ in eorle indryhten þeaw,
 þæt he his ferðlocan fæste binde,
 healde his hordcofan, hycge swa he wille.
- 15 Ne mæg werig mod wyrde wiðstondan,
 ne se hreo hyge helpe gefenman.
 Forðon domgeorne dreorigne oft
 in hyra breostcofan bindað fæste;
 swa ic modsefan minne sceolde,
 oft earmcearig, eðle biðæled,
 freomægum feor feterum sælan,
 sippan gearu iu goldwine minne
 hrusan heolstre biwrað, ond ic hean þonan
 wod wintercearig ofer wapema gebind,
 sohte seledreorig sinces bryttan,
 hwær ic feor oþþe neah findan meahhte
 þone þe in meoduhealle mine wisse,
 oþþe mec freondleasne frefran wolde,
- 25

Often the solitary one (*anhaga*) experiences mercy (*are*), the favour of the creator, even though, sad at heart, he must, through the sea-way, for a long time, stir with his hands the ice-cold sea, travel the paths of an exile (*wraclastas*). Fate (*wyrð*) is completely inescapable! [1-5]

Thus spoke the wanderer (*eardstapa*), his mind full of the memories of hardships, violent battles, the death of dear kinsmen: 'Always, each morning, I must utter my sorrow alone. There is now no one alive to whom I dare tell openly (the feelings of) my heart. I know as a truth that it is a noble characteristic in a warrior that he should bind his heart firmly, keep his feelings under control, no matter what he is thinking. The weary heart cannot withstand fate (*wyrð*) nor can the troubled mind offer any help. Therefore, those who are eager to attain glory (*domgeorne*) often bind firmly the sadness in their hearts; just as I, often wretched and sorrowful (*earncearig*), deprived on my homeland, far from my noble kinsmen, have had to bind my heart in fetters since, long ago, I covered my gold-friend [i.e., lord] with the darkness of the earth, and I then, sorrowful as winter, travelled from there over the frozen waves (*wapema gebind*), and, sad at the loss of a hall (*seledreorig*), I sought a giver of treasure, somewhere, far or near, where I might find one who in the mead-hall would know my family or would comfort me, the friendless one, and

30 wenian mid wynnun. Wat se þe cunnað
 Iu sliþen bið sorg to geferan
 þam þe him lyt hafað leofra geholena:
 warað hine wræclast, nales wunden gold,
 ferðloca freorig, nales foldan blæd.
 35 Gemon he se secegas ond sincþege,
 hu hine on geoguðe his goldwine
 wenede to wiste. Wyn eal gedreas!
 Forþon wat se þe sceal his winedryhtnes
 leofes larcwidum longe forþolian:
 40 ðonne sorg ond slæp somod ætgædre
 earme anhogan oft gebindað,
 þinceað him on mode þæt he his mondryhten
 clyppe ond cysse ond on cneo lece
 honda ond heafod, swa he hwilum ær
 in geardagum giefstolas breac.
 45 Ðonne onwæcneð eft wineleas guma,
 gesihð him biforan fealwe wegas,
 bapian brimfluglas, brædan feþra,
 hreosan him ond snaw hagle gemenged.
 þonne beoð þy hefigran heortan benne,
 50 sare æfter swæsne. Sorg bið geniwað.
 þonne maga gemynd mod geondhweorfeð,
 gretteð gliwstaful, geome geondsceawað
 secga geseldan; swimmað oft on weg.

entertain me joyfully. He is wise/understands (*wat*) he who
 experiences (*cunnað*) how cruel is sorrow as a companion for those
 who have no beloved close friends (*leofra geholena*): the path of
 exile preoccupies him, not at all the twisted gold; the frozen heart,
 not at all the joy of the earth. He remembers his companions in the
 hall and the receiving of treasure, and how in his youth his gold-
 friend [i.e., lord] entertained him at feasting. That joy has
 completely vanished! [6-36]

Therefore, he gains understanding, he who must for a long time
 do without the wise counsel of his beloved lord: when sorrow and
 sleep both together often overpower the wretched solitary one, it
 seems to him in his mind that he embraces and kisses his liege lord,
 and on his knee lays his hand and head as, in times long ago, in
 days gone by, he enjoyed all the gifts that his lord was able to give
 to him. Then the friendless man awakes; he sees before him the
 dark waves, the seabirds bathing, preening their feathers, frost and
 snow falling mixed with hail. [37-48]

Then the wounds of the heart are heavier, sorrow for the beloved
 one. His sorrow increases. Then the memories of his comrades
 overpower his heart; he greets them joyfully, eagerly looks upon
 these companions of men. But, they swim away again.

55 Fleotendra ferð no þær fela bringeð
 cuðra cwidegedda. Cearo bið geniwad
 þam þe sendan sceal swiþe geneahhe
 ofer wabema gebind werigne sefan.
 Forþon ic gepencan ne mæg geond þas woruld
 60 for hwan modsefa min ne gesweorce
 þonne ic eorla lif eal geondþence,
 hu hi færllice flet ofgeafon,
 modge maguþeagnas. Swa þes middangeard
 ealra dogra gehwam dreoseð ond fealleþ;
 65 forþon ne mæg weorþan wis wer, ær he age
 wintra dæl in woruldrice. Wita sceal gebyldig,
 ne sceal no to hatheort ne to hrædwyrde,
 ne to wac wiga ne to wanhydig,
 ne to forht ne to fægen ne to feohgife
 ne næfre gielpes to geom, ær he geare cunne.
 70 Beorn sceal gebidan, þonne he beot spriceð,
 oþþæt collenferð cunne gearwe
 hwider hreþra gehygd hweorfan wille.
 Ongietan sceal gleaw hæle hu gæstlic bið,
 þonne ealre þisse worulde wela weste stondeð,
 75 swa nu missenlice geond þisne middangeard
 winde biwaune weallas stonðað,
 hrime bilrorene, hryðge þa ederas.
 Worlað þa winsalo, waldend licgað
 dreame bidrorene, dugup eal gecrong,
 80 wlonc bi wealle. Sume wig fornorn,

This company of seamen never bring to him many words of
 comfort. Sorrow is renewed for one who must very frequently send
 his weary spirit over the frozen waves. [49-57]

Therefore, I cannot think why, throughout this world, my mind
 should not grow dark when I ponder thoroughly the life of
 warriors, how they, proud young retainers, have suddenly left the
 floor. So this world day by day declines and falls. Indeed, a man
 may not become wise before he has lived a number of years in the
 kingdom of the world. A wise man must be patient; he must not
 be too rash, nor too hasty of speech, nor too weak a warrior, nor
 too reckless, nor too afraid, nor too overly happy, nor too greedy,
 nor ever too eager to utter a boast, before he has gained
 understanding. A warrior must wait, when he speaks a boast,
 until, stout-hearted, he clearly understands where the thoughts of his
 heart will lead. A wise man must perceive how terrifying it will be
 when all the wealth of this world stands waste, as now, here and
 there, throughout this world walls stand blown upon by the wind,
 covered with frost, the buildings snow-swept. The halls decay, the
 rulers lie dead, deprived of joys; all of the troop of seasoned
 retainers (*dugud*) have perished, the proud ones (*wlonc*) beside the
 wall. Some of them battle (*wig*) took,

ferede in forðwege, sumne fugel oþbær
ofer heanne holm, sumne se hara wulf
deaðe gedælde, sumne dreorighleor
in eorðscrafe eorl gehyddde.

85 Yþde swa þisne eardgeard ælda scyppend
oþbæt burgwara breahtna lease
eald enta geworc idlu stodon.

Se þonne þisne wealsteal wise gepohte
ond þis deorce lif deope geondþenceð,
frod in ferðe, feor oft gemon
wælslehta worn, ond þas word acwið:
90 "Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago? Hwær cwom
mabpungfa?"

Hwær cwom symbla gesetu? Hwær sindon seledreamas?
Eala beorht bune! Eala byrnwiga!

95 Eala beodnes byrn! Hu seo þrag gewat,
genap under niðhelm, swa heo no wære.
Stondeð nu on laste leofre dugolpe
weal wundrum heah; wrymlicum fah.

Eorlas fornoman asca pryfe,
100 wæpen wælgifu, wryd seo mære,
ond þas stanhleoðu stormas cnyssað,
hrið hreosende hrusan bindeð,
wintres woma, þonne won cymeð,
nipeð nihtscua, norþan onsendeð
105 hreo hæglfare hælepum on andan."

Eall is earfoðlic eorþan rice,
onwendeð wyrda gesceaft weoruld under heofonum.
Her bið feoh læne, her bið freond læne,
her bið mon læne, her bið mæg læne,

bore them away; some of them the bird took over the high sea; some the grey wolf shared with Death; and some the sad-faced warrior buried in a grave. Thus, the Creator of men has destroyed this dwelling-place (*earðgeard*) until, deprived of the revelry of the citizens, the ancient work of giants stood empty. [58-87]

'He who has thought wisely about this foundation and considered deeply this dark life, wise in spirit often remembers from long ago the multitude of those who have been slaughtered in battle and speaks these words: "What has become of the horse (*mearg*)? What has become of the young man (*mago*)? What has become of the giver of treasure (*mabpungfa*)? What has become of the feasting hall (*symbla gesetu*)? Where are now the joys of the hall? Alas, the bright goblet! Alas the mail-coated warrior! Alas the glory of the prince! How the time has departed, vanished under the cover of night as it had never been. Now there stands in the track of the beloved troop of seasoned retainers (*ðigolpe*) a wondrously high wall decorated with interlace patterns (*wrymlicum*). The multitude of ash-spears has carried off the warriors, the greedy weapons, the notorious fate (*wryd*), and storms beat upon these cliffs, driving snow-storms (*hrið*) bind the earth, the tumult of winter. Then comes darkness; the shadow of night grows dark; it sends from the north a fierce hailstorm as if in anger to men." [88-105]

'All is fraught with hardship in the kingdom of the earth; the working of fate (*wyrda gesceaft*) changes the world under the heavens. Here money (*feoh*) is transitory, here friends are transitory, here man is transitory, here kinsmen are transitory;

110 eal þis eorþan gesteal idel weorþeð!"

Swa cwæð snottor on mode, geset him sundor æt rune.

Til biþ se þe his treowe gehealdeþ, ne sceal næfre his
torn to rycene

beorn of his breostum acyþan, nemþe he ær þa bote
cunne,

115 eorl mid elne gefremman. Wel bið þam þe him are seceð,
frofe to Fæder on heofonum, þær us eal seo fæstnung
stondeð.

all this foundation of the earth will become worthless!" [106-110]

Thus spoke the one wise in mind; he sat apart in meditation.
Good is he who maintains his faith (*treowe*); a warrior must never
too quickly reveal his grief unless he may know beforehand the
remedy for it and be strong enough to carry it out. Well it is for
the one who seeks after mercy (*are*) for himself, comfort from the
Father in heaven where all our hope for security (*fæstnung*) rests.
[111-115]

THE WANDERER

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Also: See also discussions of the elegies in the studies of Old English literature by Greenfield, Pearsall, and Wrenn, listed on the general bibliography.