

The Wanderer

“The Wanderer” is an Old English poem found only in The Exeter Book. It is untitled, and its author is unknown. The date of composition is also unknown. On the left is the original Old English text. On the right is a modern translation. Trans. by Sean Miller.

4a	Oft him anhaga are gebideð, metudes miltse, þeah þe he modcearig geond lagulade longe sceolde hieran mid hondum hrimcealde sæ wadan wræclastas. Wyrð bið ful aræd!	Often the solitary one finds grace for himself the mercy of the Lord, Although he, sorry-hearted, must for a long time move by hand [<i>in context</i> = row] along the waterways, (along) the ice-cold sea, tread the paths of exile. Events always go as they must!
8a	Swa cwæð eardstapa, earfeþa gemyndig, wraþra wælsleahta, winemæga hryre: Oft ic sceolde ana uhtna gehwylce mine ceare cwipan. Nis nu cwicra nan þe ic him modsefan minne durre sweotule asecan. Ic to soþe wat	So spoke the wanderer, mindful of hardships, of fierce slaughters and the downfall of kinsmen: Often (or always) I had alone to speak of my trouble each morning before dawn. There is none now living to whom I dare clearly speak of my innermost thoughts. I know it truly,
12a	þæt biþ in eorle indryhten þeaw, þæt he his ferðlocan fæste binde, healde his hordcofan,	that it is in men a noble custom, that one should keep secure his spirit-chest (mind), guard his treasure-chamber (thoughts),

	hycge swa he wille. Ne mæg werig mod wyrde wiðstandan, 16a ne se hreo hyge helpe gefremman. Forðon domgeorne dreorigne oft in hyra breostcofan bindað fæste; swa ic modsefan minne sceolde, 20a oft earmcearig, eðle bidæled, freomægum feor feterum sælan, siþþan geara iu goldwine minne hrusan heolstre biwrah, ond ic hean þonan 24a wod wintercearig ofer waþema gebind, sohte seledreorig sinces bryttan, hwær ic feor oþþe neah findan meahte þone þe in meoduhealle mine wisse, 28a oþþe mec freondleasne frefran wolde, wenian mid wynnum. Wat se þe cunnað hu sliþen bið sorg to geferan þam þe him lyt hafað leofra geholena: 32a warað hine wræclast, nales wunden gold, ferðloca freorig,	think as he wishes. The weary spirit cannot withstand fate (the turn of events), nor does a rough or sorrowful mind do any good (perform anything helpful). Thus those eager for glory often keep secure dreary thoughts in their breast; So I, often wretched and sorrowful, bereft of my homeland, far from noble kinsmen, have had to bind in fetters my inmost thoughts, Since long years ago I hid my lord in the darkness of the earth, and I, wretched, from there travelled most sorrowfully over the frozen waves, sought, sad at the lack of a hall, a giver of treasure, where I, far or near, might find one in the meadhall who knew my people, or wished to console the friendless one, me, entertain (me) with delights. He who has tried it knows how cruel is sorrow as a companion to the one who has few beloved friends: the path of exile (wræclast) holds him, not at all twisted gold, a frozen spirit,
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	nalæs foldan blæd. Gemon he selessecgas ond sincþege, hu hine on geoguðe his goldwine	not the bounty of the earth. He remembers hall-warriors and the giving of treasure How in youth his lord (gold-friend) accustomed him
36a	wenede to wiste. Wyn eal gedreas!	to the feasting. All the joy has died!
	Forþon wat se þe sceal his winedryhtnes leofes larcwidum longe forþolian: ðonne sorg ond slæð somod ætgædre	And so he knows it, he who must forgo for a long time the counsels of his beloved lord: Then sorrow and sleep both together
40a	earmne anhogan oft gebindað. þinceð him on mode þæt he his mondryhten clyppe ond cysse, ond on cneo lecge honda ond heafod, swa he hwilum ær	often tie up the wretched solitary one. He thinks in his mind that he embraces and kisses his lord, and on his (the lord's) knees lays his hands and his head, Just as, at times (hwilum), before,
44a	in geardagum giefstolas breac. Ðonne onwæcneð eft wineleas guma, gesihð him biforan fealwe wegas, baþian brimfuglas, brædan feþra,	in days gone by, he enjoyed the gift-seat (throne). Then the friendless man wakes up again, He sees before him fallow waves Sea birds bathe, preening their feathers,
48a	hreasan hrim ond snaw hagle gemenged. Ponne beoð þy hefigran heortan benne, sare æfter swæsne. Sorg bið geniwad þonne maga gemynd mod geondhweorfeð;	Frost and snow fall, mixed with hail. Then are the heavier the wounds of the heart, grievous (sare) with longing for (æfter) the lord. Sorrow is renewed when the mind (mod) surveys the memory of kinsmen;

52a	<p>greteð gliwstafum, georne geondsceawað secga geseldan; swimmað oft on weg fleotendra ferð no þær fela bringeð cuðra cwidegidda. Cearo bið geniwad</p>	<p>He greets them joyfully, eagerly scans the companions of men; they always swim away. The spirits of seafarers never bring back there much in the way of known speech. Care is renewed</p>
56a	<p>þam þe sendan sceal swiþe geneahhe ofer waþema gebind werigne sefan.</p> <p>Forþon ic geþencan ne mæg geond þas woruld for hwan modsefa min ne gesweorce</p>	<p>for the one who must send very often over the binding of the waves a weary heart.</p> <p>Indeed I cannot think why my spirit does not darken when I ponder on the whole</p>
60a	<p>þonne ic eorla lif eal geondþence, hu hi færlice flet ofgeafon, modge maguþegnas. Swa þes middangeard ealra dogra gehwam dreoseð ond fealleð;</p>	<p>life of men throughout the world, How they suddenly left the floor (hall), the proud thanes. So this middle-earth, a bit each day, droops and decays -</p>
64a	<p>forþon ne mæg weorþan wis wer, ær he age wintra dæl in woruldrice. Wita sceal geþyldig, ne sceal no to hatheort ne to hrædwyrde, ne to wac wiga ne to wanhydig,</p>	<p>Therefore man (wer) cannot call himself wise, before he has a share of years in the world. A wise man must be patient, He must never be too impulsive nor too hasty of speech, nor too weak a warrior nor too reckless,</p>
68a	<p>ne to forht ne to fægen, ne to feohgifre ne næfre gielpes to georn, ær he geara cunne. Beorn sceal gebidan, þonne he beot spricedð,</p>	<p>nor too fearful, nor too cheerful, nor too greedy for goods, nor ever too eager for boasts, before he sees clearly. A man must wait when he speaks oaths,</p>

	<p>oþþæt collenferð cunne gearwe</p>	<p>until the proud-hearted one sees clearly</p>
72a	<p>hwider hreþra gehygd hweorfan wille. Ongietan sceal gleaw hæle hu gæstlic bið, þonne ealre þisse worulde wela weste stondeð, swa nu missenlice geond þisne middangeard</p>	<p>whither the intent of his heart will turn. A wise hero must realize how terrible it will be, when all the wealth of this world lies waste, as now in various places throughout this middle-earth</p>
76a	<p>winde biwaune weallas stondaþ, hrime bihrorene, hryðge þa ederas. Woriað þa winsalo, waldend licgað dreame bidrorene, duguþ eal gecrong,</p>	<p>walls stand, blown by the wind, covered with frost, storm-swept the buildings. The halls decay, their lords lie deprived of joy, the whole troop has fallen, the proud ones, by the wall.</p>
80a	<p>wlonc bi wealle. Sume wig fornom, ferede in forðwege, sumne fugel oþbær ofer heanne holm, sumne se hara wulf deaðe gedælde, sumne dreorigheor</p>	<p>War took off some, carried them on their way, one, the bird took off across the deep sea, one, the gray wolf shared one with death, one, the dreary-faced</p>
84a	<p>in eorðscrafe eorl gehydde. Ypde swa þisne eardgeard ælda scyppend oþþæt burgwara breahtma lease eald enta geweorc idlu stodon.</p>	<p>man buried in a grave. And so He destroyed this city, He, the Creator of Men, until deprived of the noise of the citizens, the ancient work of giants stood empty.</p>
88a	<p>Se þonne þisne wealsteal wise gepohte ond þis deorce lif deope geondþenceð,</p>	<p>He who thought wisely on this foundation, and pondered deeply on this dark life,</p>

	frod in ferðe, feor oft gemon wælsleahta worn, ond þas word acwið:	wise in spirit, remembered often from afar many conflicts, and spoke these words:
92a	Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago? [#] Hwær cwom mabþumgyfa? Hwær cwom symbla gesetu? Hwær sindon seledreamas? Eala beorht bune! Eala byrnwiga! Eala þeodnes þrym! Hu seo þrag gewat, 96a genap under nihthelm, swa heo no wære. Stondeð nu on laste leofre duguþe weal wundrum heah, wyrmlicum fah. Eorlas fornoman asca þryþe, 100a wæpen wælgifru, wyrð seo mære, ond þas stanhleoþu stormas cnyssað, hrið hreosende hrusan bindeð, wintres woma, þonne won cymeð, 104a nipeð nihtscua, norþan onsendeð hreo hæglfare hæleþum on andan. Eall is earfoðlic eorþan rice, onwendeð wyrda gesceaft weoruld under heofonum. 108a Her bið feoh læne,	Where is the horse gone? Where the rider? Where the giver of treasure? Where are the seats at the feast? Where are the revels in the hall? Alas for the bright cup! Alas for the mailed warrior! Alas for the splendour of the prince! How that time has passed away, dark under the cover of night, as if it had never been! Now there stands in the trace of the beloved troop a wall, wondrously high, wound round with serpents. The warriors taken off by the glory of spears, the weapons greedy for slaughter, the famous fate (turn of events), and storms beat these rocky cliffs, falling frost feters the earth, the harbinger of winter; Then dark comes, nightshadows deepen, from the north there comes a rough hailstorm in malice against men. All is troublesome in this earthly kingdom, the turn of events changes the world under the heavens. Here money is fleeting,

her bið freond læne,
her bið mon læne,
her bið mæg læne,
eal þis eorþan gesteal
idel weorþeð!

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

112a 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,
eorl mid elne gefremman.
Wel bið þam þe him are seceð,
frofre to Fæder on heofonum,
þær us eal seo fæstnung stondeð.

here friend is fleeting,
here man is fleeting,
here kinsman is fleeting,
all the foundation of this world
turns to waste!

So spake the wise man in his mind,
where he sat apart in counsel.

Good is he who keeps his faith,
And a warrior must never speak
his grief of his breast too quickly,
unless he already knows the remedy -
a hero must act with courage.
It is better for the one that seeks mercy,
consolation from the father in the heavens,
where, for us, all permanence rests.

Notes

line 92a: In J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, in chapter six of *The Two Towers*, Aragorn sings a song of Rohan (itself a version of Anglo-Saxon England), beginning "Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing?". The song clearly comes from this section of *The Wanderer*. (A more strictly literal translation of "mago" would be "youth", hence "Where is the horse gone? Where the young man?" -- but since the horse and the youth appear in the same half-line, Tolkien's rendering "rider" is very hard to resist.)