**THE WANDERER**

An anonymous, untitled Old English (Anglo-Saxon) elegy of 115 alliterative lines preserved in The Exeter Book (10th century manuscript). Probably written in the late 9th-early 10th century, was identified as an individual poem in the 19th century. The speaker is either alternating between a world-wise man and an exile, who are in dialogue, or a soliloquizing solitary wanderer facing the hardships of exile after he lost his lord. He muses upon the hardships of human fate and puts his faith in God to endure.

J. R. R. Tolkien adopted the poem's “ubi sunt” passage (lines 92–96) for his “Lament for the Rohirrim” in *The Lord of the Rings*.

[The Wanderer | Old English Poetry Project | Rutgers University](https://oldenglishpoetry.camden.rutgers.edu/the-wanderer/)

**The Wanderer**

# An alliterative translation by Dr. Aaron K. Hostetter

“How often the lone-dweller anticipates
some sign, this Measurer’s mercy
— must always must—
mind-caring, along the ocean’s windings,
stirring rime-chill seas, hands as oars
many long whiles, treading the tracks of exile—
the way of the world an open book always.” (1–5)

So spoke the earth-stepper, a memorial of miseries
slaughter of the wrathful, crumbling of kinsmen:

“Often, every daybreak, alone I must
bewail my cares. There’s now no one living
to whom I dare mumble my mind’s understanding.
I know as truth that it’s seen suitable
for anyone to bind fast their spirit’s closet,
hold onto the hoards, think whatever — (8–14)

“Can a weary mind weather the shitstorm?
I think not.
Can a roiling heart set itself free?
I don’t think so.
So often those hustling for the win must
clamp down grim mindings in their coffer,
just as I ought fetter my inborn conceit,
often wounded, wanting where I know,
kindred pulled away, how many winters now?
I shrouded my giver in dark earth
and wended away worrisome,
weather-watching the wrapful waves,
hall-wretched, seeking a center,
far or near, where they might be found,
in some mead-hall, who knows of my kind,
willing to adopt a friendless me,
though they be joyful enough. (15–29a)

“The well-travelled know how slicing
sorrow can be by one’s side,
short a struggle-friend, however dear.
The ways of wandering wind him round
not even a wire of wound gold—
a frigid fastness, hardly any fruits of the fold.
This one lists the hall-lads swilling rings,
giver-drenched in youngsome days,
in both furnishing and feasting.
Joys all flown, vanished all away! (29b-36)

“Therefore one knows who long forgoes
the friendly words of their first,
when sleep and sorrow stand together
clutching at the crestfallen alone.
Somehow seems that somewhere inside
this one enwraps his lord and kisses his lord,
and laps both hands and head
on his knee, when, once upon a year
blurry in time now, one thrived by the throne —
too soon rousing, a friendless singular
seeing all around a fallowness of waves,
sea-birds bathing, fanning their feathers,
ice and snow hurtling, heaved up with hail. (37-48)

“So heavy and heavier the hurt in heart
harrowing for the lost. Sorrow made new
whenever recalling pervades the mind,
greeting kindred joyfully, drinking in the look of them
fellowable and fathoming—
                                              they always swim away.
Gulls ghost-call — I don’t know their tongue too well,
much of their comfort weird. Worrying made new
to that one who must send more and more, every day,
a bleary soul back across the binding of waves. (49-57)

“Therefore I cannot wonder across this world
why my mind does not muster in the murk
when I ponder pervading all the lives of humans,
how suddenly they abandon their halls,
proud princes and young. Right here in the middle
it fumbles and falls every day — (58-63)

“No one can be wise before earning their lot of winters
in this world. The wise one, they stay patient:
not too heart-heated, not so hasty to harp,
not too weak-armed, nor too wan-headed,
nor too fearful nor too fey nor too fee-felching,
and never tripping the tongue too much, before it trips them. (64-9)

“That one bides their moment to make brag,
until the inner fire seizes its moment clearly,
to where their secret self veers them.

Who’s wise must fore-ken how ghostly it has been
when the world and its things stand wasted —
like you find, here and there, in this middle space now —
there walls totter, wailed around by winds,
gnashed by frost, the buildings snow-lapt.
The winehalls molder, their wielder lies
washed clean of joys, his peerage all perished,
proud by the wall. War ravaged a bunch
ferried along the forth-way, others a raptor ravished
over lofty seas, this one the hoary wolf
broke in its banes, the last a brother
graveled in the ground, tears as war-mask. (70-84)

“That’s the way it goes—
the Shaper mills middle-earth to waste
until they stand empty, the giants’ work and ancient,
drained of the dreams and joys of its dwellers.” (85-7)

Then one wisely regards this wall-stead,
deliberates a darkened existence,
aged in spirit, often remembering from afar
many war-slaughterings, and speaks these words: (88-91)

“Where has the horse gone?
Where are my kindred?
Where is the giver of treasure?
Where are the benches to bear us?
Joys of the hall to bring us together?
No more, the bright goblet!
All gone, the mailed warrior!
Lost for good, the pride of princes!

“How the space of years has spread —
growing gloomy beneath the night-helm,
as if it never was! (92-6)

“Tracks of the beloved multitude, all that remains
walls wondrous tall, serpents seething—
thanes stolen, pillaged by ashen foes
gear glutting for slaughter — we know this world’s way,
and the storms still batter these stony cliffs.
The tumbling snows stumble up the earth,
the clash of winter, when darkness descends.
Night-shadows benighten, sent down from the north,
raw showers of ice, who doesn’t hate humanity? (97-105)

All shot through in misery in earthly realms,
fortune’s turn turns the world under sky.
Here the cash was a loan.
Your friends were a loan.
Anyone at all, a loan.
Your family only ever a loan—
And this whole foundation of the earth wastes away!” (106-10)

So says the wise one, you don’t hear him at all,
sitting apart reading their own runes. (111)
It’s better to clutch at your counsel,
you ought never manifest your miseries
not too quickly where they well,
unless the balm is clear beforehand,
keep whittling at your courage. (112-14a)

It will be well for those who seek the favor,
the comfort from our father in heaven,
where a battlement bulwarks us all. (114b-5)