

**The Seafarer**  
Dr. Johnathan A. Glenn (1936)

## The Seafarer

**Manuscript:** The Exeter Book (preserved in the library of Exeter Cathedral). **Editions:** Krapp, George Philip, and Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie, eds. *The Exeter Book*. ASPR 3. New York: Columbia UP, 1936; Gordon, I. L., ed. *The Seafarer*. 1960. New York: Appleton, 1966 (originally published in Methuen's Old English Library); Pope, John C., ed. *Seven Old English Poems*. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1981.

Hyperlinks to [annotations](#) are added in-line in the text, in bolded brackets. See also my notes on [The Seafarer](#).

### Text

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About myself I can utter a truth-song,  
tell journeys--how I in toil-days  
torment-time often endured,  
abode and still do [ **1** ] bitter breast-care,  
sought in my ship many a care-hall,**5**  
horrible waves' rolling, where narrow night-watch  
often has kept me at the ship's stem  
when it dashes by cliffs. Pinched by the cold  
were my feet, bound by frost's  
frozen fetters, where those cares sighed**10**  
hot about heart; hunger within tore  
the mind of the sea-weary one. [ ¶ ] That man knows not,  
to whom on earth fairest falls,  
how I, care-wretched, ice-cold sea  
dwelt on in winter along the exile-tracks,**15**  
bereaved both of friend and of kin, [ **2** ]  
behung with rime-crystals. [ **3** ] Hail showers flew.  
I heard nothing there but the sea's sounding,  
ice-cold wave. At times the swan's song  
served me for merriment, gannet's crying**20**  
and curlew's sound instead of men's laughter,  
mew's singing in place of mead-drink.  
Storms there beat stone-cliffs, where starn, [ **4** ] icy-feathered,

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answered and called to them; often the eagle screamed,  
dew-feathered fowl: no sheltering kinsman<sup>25</sup>  
brought consolation to a destitute life.  
Indeed, he little believes it, who owns life's joy--  
stayed in towns, had few baleful journeys--  
proud and wine-merry, how I, weary,  
often on sea-path had to abide. [ 5 ]<sup>30</sup>  
Night-shadow darkened; snow fell from the north;  
rime bound the soil; on earth hail fell,  
coldest of corns. [ 6 ] [ ¶ ] So, now, thoughts  
trouble my heart, that I the deep sea,  
play of salt-waves, should venture myself on.<sup>35</sup>  
Mind's desire urges, ever and again,  
my spirit to fare, that I, far hence,  
foreigners', pilgrims', homeland should seek.  
For there is none so proud in heart over earth,  
none so good of his [ 7 ] gifts nor in youth so keen,<sup>40</sup>  
in deeds so brave, to him lord so loyal,  
that ever no sorrow he has of seafaring,  
of what the Lord--God's will--brings him to.  
Nor is his thought on harp or on ring-taking,  
on woman's delight or on the world's hope,<sup>45</sup>  
nor on aught else save the tossing of waves:  
he ever has longing [ 8 ] who hastens on water.  
Groves blossom, make fair the dwellings,  
brighten the plains--the world hurries forward:  
all these urge him, doomed of mind, [ 9 ]<sup>50</sup>  
his spirit to sojourn on which he so minds,  
to depart far on flood-ways.  
So the cuckoo urges, mournful of voice [ 10 ];  
summer's ward sings, forebodes for me sorrow,  
bitter in breast-hoard. That one does not know,<sup>55</sup>  
man blessed with comfort, what some [ 11 ] endure  
who widest must lay the tracks of the exile.

Therefore, now, heart turns beyond its breast-chamber,  
my mind's thought with mere-flood,  
over the whale's home, wide in its turning,<sup>60</sup>

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over earth's regions-comes back to me  
eager and greedy. Yells the lone-flyer,  
whets on the whale-way spirit quite suddenly  
over the holm's [ 12 ] deep: hotter to me are  
delights of the Lord than this dead life,<sup>65</sup>  
loaned [ 13 ] on the land. I do not believe  
that this earth-weal still stands eternal.  
Always one of three things brings into doubt  
every affair before its due time:  
illness or old age or else edge-hate [ 14 ]<sup>70</sup>  
wrests life away, fey one fromward.  
Therefore, praise of the living, of those speaking after,  
is for each noble one best of words left behind--  
that he so work, before he must away,  
good actions on earth against malice of fiends,<sup>75</sup>  
brace deeds against devils,  
that children of men after may praise him,  
and his glory hereafter live among angels  
always for ever, eternal life's splendor,  
joy among noble ones. [ ¶ ] Days have departed,<sup>80</sup>  
all pride of earth's kingdom;  
now are no kings and no kaisers  
nor any gold-givers such as once were,  
when they most glorious deeds did among them  
and then most lordly lived out their doom. [ 15 ]<sup>85</sup>  
Wanes all this noble host; joys have departed;  
weaker remain and rule this world,  
live here afflicted. Glory is humbled,  
honor of earth grows old and withers,  
as does now every man over this Middle-Earth.<sup>90</sup>  
Old age fares over him; bright face grows pale;  
gray-haired, he grieves, knows former friends,  
sons of the athelings, given to earth.  
Nor may his flesh-home, then, when life is lost to him,  
sweet swallow nor sore feel,<sup>95</sup>  
hand stir nor mind think.  
Though golden he strews the graves of his brothers,  
buries by dead men manifold treasures,

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that deed will not go with him [ 16 ]:  
gold is no aid to a soul full of sins<sup>100</sup>  
in face of God's terror, his awful power,  
when he earlier hides it while he lives here.  
Much is the Measurer's power: therefore this earth turns.  
He established [ 17 ] alone sturdy foundations,  
surface of earth, height of the heavens.<sup>105</sup>  
Foolish he who fears not his Lord: death comes to him unexpected.  
Blessed he who lives humbly: favor to him comes from heaven.  
The Measurer establishes his mind, for he believes in His might.  
One must steer strong mind, hold it established,  
wise in its covenants, clean in its ways.<sup>110</sup>  
Here every man meetly must hold  
love with the loved one, with loathed one hate.  
Though he will not filled up with fire  
or burned up on funeral pyre  
friend he has made, Fate is aye stronger,<sup>115</sup>  
Masurer mightier, than any man's thought.  
Let us consider where our true home is;  
and then let us think how to come thither;  
and then also strive that we indeed come there,  
into the blessedness there everlasting,<sup>120</sup>  
where life is long in love of God,  
hope in the heavens. So, to the Holy One  
thanks that he honored us, master of Glory,  
God of Eternity, in all our time. AMEN.

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## Annotations

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[ 1 ] **abode and still do.** This is a compromise between metrical requirements and sense. The original *gebiden hæbbe* 'have experienced/abided' suggests, since it is in the perfect tense, continuing results.

[ 2 ] **of friend and kin.** OE *winemægum*: *wine* 'friend' + *mæg* 'kinsman'; the compound is usually interpreted 'dear kinsman' or some such.

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[ 3 ] rime-crystals. OE *hrimgicelum* appears only here; apparently synonymous with OE *is-gícel* (> NE *icicle*) (Gordon).

[ 4 ] starn. OE *stearn*, "etymologically a variant of modern 'tern', which is still known in Norfolk dialect as *starn*. . ." (Gordon).

[ 5 ] stayed, had to abide (lines 28 and 30). The OE sets up a contrasting parallel here, using essentially the same word--*gebiden* (28), *bidan* (30)--for both the town-dweller and the seafarer.

[ 6 ] coldest of corns. "Corn," of course, refers to grain, not to North American maize.

[ 7 ] good of his gifts. Gordon notes that *his gifena þæs god* "may mean either 'generous of gifts' or 'good in moral qualities'. . . ."

[ 8 ] longing. 'Anxiety' and 'yearning' (etc.) are both possible meanings of OE *langung*.

[ 9 ] doomed of mind. OE *fus* (here translated 'doomed') means both 'eager' and 'doomed,' that is, 'dying.'

[ 10 ] mournful of voice. The cuckoo's song as a *lament* occurs in OE only here and in the *Husband's Message* ("þæt þu lagu drefde, / sibban þu gehyrde on hliþes oran / galan geomorne geac on bearwe" [that you stir ocean after you have heard on hill's edge singing the mournful cuckoo in the grove], lines 21b-23); it also appears in Welsh elegy, but nowhere else in NW European literature (Gordon).

[ 11 ] some. Generic: denotes a class of people, defined in the following line (Gordon). One might translate, "what certain people endure." Note that the poem earlier asserts that sooner or later *all* must experience life as seafaring.

[ 12 ] holm's. OE *holm* 'ocean.'

[ 13 ] loaned. The OE *læne* means 'transitory, fleeting'; some of the qualities of NE *loaned* are certainly suggested. *Læne* is cognate with ON *lán*, from which NE *loan* is derived.

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[ 14 ] **illness . . . edge-hate.** See *Beowulf* 1735-39 and 1763-68, where Hroðgar speaks of these same evils. *Edge-hate*, a simple modernization of OE *ecghete*, means 'sword-enmity.'

[ 15 ] **doom.** OE *dom* 'glory, judgment, law, majesty.' As a suffix, *-dom* signifies state, condition, particular power, etc. *Dom* here means the destiny or fate, of the nobles of olden times.

[ 16 ] **that deed . . . him.** Ambiguous reference (not an uncommon occurrence in OE poetry). Probably the poet suggests both possibilities: (1) that the gold is useless to the dead one in his "travels" and (2) that the deed of giving the gold is worthless to the live one.

[ 17 ] **established, etc.** Note the verbal linkage here and in the following lines of God as Creator, God as Provider (here of man's mind), and Man as free moral agent (holding his own mind established).