

The Wanderer Main Text

Writer: Anonymous | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

The Wanderer

by Anonymous

Translated by Roy M. Liuzza

Always the one alone longs for mercy,
the Maker's mildness, though, troubled in mind,
across the ocean-ways he has long been forced
to stir with his hands the frost-cold sea,
and walk in exile's paths. *Wyrd* is fully fixed.
Thus spoke the Wanderer, mindful of troubles,
of cruel slaughters and dear kinsmen's downfall:
"Often alone, in the first light of dawn,
I have sung my lament. There is none living
to whom I would dare to reveal clearly
my heart's thoughts. I know it is true
that it is a nobleman's lordly nature
to closely bind his spirit's coffer,
hold fast his treasure-hoard, whatever he may think.
The weary mind cannot withstand *wyrd*,
the troubled heart can offer no help,
and so those eager for fame often bind fast
in their breast-coffers a sorrowing soul,
just as I have had to take my own heart—
Often wretched, cut off from my own homeland,
far from dear kinsmen—and bind it in fetters,
ever since long ago I hid my gold-giving friend
in the darkness of earth, and went wretched,
winter-sad, over the ice-locked waves,
sought, hall-sick, a treasure-giver,
wherever I might find, far or near,
someone in a meadhall who might know my people,
or who would want to comfort me, friendless,
accustom me to joy. He who has come to know

how cruel a companion is sorrow
for one with few dear friends, will understand:
the path of exile claims him, not patterned gold,
a winter-bound spirit, not the wealth of earth.
He remembers hall-holders and treasure-caking,
how in his youth his gold-giving lord
accustomed him to the feast—that joy has all faded.
And so he who has long been forced to forego
his lord's beloved words of counsel will understand:
when sorrow and sleep both together
often bind up the wretched exile,
it seems in his mind that he clasps and kisses
his lord of men, and on his knee lays
hands and head, as he sometimes long ago
in earlier days enjoyed the gift-throne.
But when the friendless man awakens again
and sees before him the fallow waves,
seabirds bathing, spreading their feathers,
frost falling and snow, mingled with hail,
then the heart's wounds are that much heavier,
longing for his loved one. Sorrow is renewed
when the memory of kinsmen flies through the mind;
he greets them with great joy, greedily surveys
hall-companions—they always swim away;
the floating spirits bring too few
familiar voices. Cares are renewed
for one who must send, over and over,
a weary heart across the binding waves.
And so I cannot imagine for all this world
why my spirit should not grow dark
when I think through all this life of men,
how suddenly they gave up the hall-floor,
mighty young retainers. Thus this middle-earth
droops and decays every single day;
and so a man cannot become wise, before he has weathered
his share of winters in this world. A wise man must be patient,
neither too hot-hearted nor too hasty with words,

nor too weak in war nor too unwise in thoughts,
neither fretting nor fawning nor greedy for wealth,
never eager for boasting before he truly understands;
a man must wait, when he makes a boast,
until the brave spirit understands truly
where the thoughts of his heart will turn.

The wise man must realize how ghastly it will be
when all the wealth of this world stands waste,
as now here and there throughout this middle-earth
walls stand blasted by wind,
beaten by frost, the buildings crumbling.

The wine halls topple, their rulers lie
deprived of all joys; the proud old troops
all fell by the wall. War carried off some,
sent them on the way, one a bird carried off
over the high seas, one the gray wolf
shared with death—and one a sad-faced man
covered in an earthen grave. The Creator
of men thus destroyed this walled city,
until the old works of giants stood empty,
without the sounds of their former citizens.

He who deeply considers, with wise thoughts,
this foundation and this dark life,
old in spirit, often remembers
so many ancient slaughters, and says these words:

'Where has the horse gone? where is the rider? where is the giver of gold?

Where are the seats of the feast? where are the joys of the hall?

O the bright cup! O the brave warrior!

O the glory of princes! How the time passed away,
slipped into nightfall as if it had never been!

There still stands in the path of the dear warriors
a wall wondrously high, with serpentine stains.

A storm of spears took away the warriors,
bloodthirsty weapons, *wyrd* the mighty,
and storms batter these stone walls,
frost falling binds up the earth,
the howl of winter, when blackness comes,

night's shadow looms, sends down from the north
harsh hailstones in hatred of men.
All is toilsome in the earthly kingdom,
the working of *wyrd* changes the world under heaven.
Here wealth is fleeting, here friends are fleeting,
here man is fleeting, here woman is fleeting,
all the framework of this earth will stand empty.'

So said the wise one in his mind, sitting apart in meditation.

He is good who keeps his word, and the man who never too quickly
shows the anger in his breast, unless he already knows the remedy
a noble man can bravely bring about. It will be well for one who seeks mercy,
consolation from the Father in heaven, where for us all stability stands.

Copyright Credit: Roy Liuzza, "The Wanderer" from Old English Poetry: An Anthology. Copyright © 2014 by Roy Liuzza. Reprinted by permission of Broadview Press.