

## Literary text • *The Seafarer*

*Anonymous*

*The Seafarer* is a 124-line poem whose themes, imagery and rhythms anticipate much of the great sea literature in English, from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* to the works of Joseph Conrad, Malcolm Lowry and William Golding. The *Seafarer* deals with the experience of the outsider and in many ways the poet's exiled state anticipates the modern notion of the artist's estrangement from society. In this sense *The Seafarer* achieves a remarkable degree of complexity. It begins with a lament at the suffering of a life at sea – compared with the comforts of land – until the speaker understands that this exile is what he wants, that he prefers to live a life of hardship on the waves rather than having the security of land. In the second part of the poem he explains his reasons for this choice, saying that all the things that civilisation provides in order to avoid facing mortality, all its riches and comforts, are nothing more than pointless vanity. In this regard the poet speaks of a 'life of death lent us on land', to which he prefers a life of perpetual motion, one that embraces the flux of existence and the transience of the moment, as represented by the sea.

In the first part of the poem the speaker, a sailor, tells of the hardships of a life at sea.

### BEFORE YOU READ

1 When you think of the sea, what emotions does the movement of the waves inspire in you? Choose from the following:

- |                                     |                                     |                                       |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> sadness    | <input type="checkbox"/> fear       | <input type="checkbox"/> paralysis    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> calm       | <input type="checkbox"/> loneliness | <input type="checkbox"/> nausea       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> violence   | <input type="checkbox"/> boredom    | <input type="checkbox"/> restlessness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> excitement | <input type="checkbox"/> vertigo    | <input type="checkbox"/> smallness    |

- 1 This tale is true, and mine. It tells  
How the sea took me, swept<sup>1</sup> me back  
And forth<sup>2</sup> in sorrow and fear and pain,  
Showed me suffering in a hundred ships,  
5 In a thousand ports, and in me. It tells  
Of smashing surf<sup>3</sup> when I sweated in the cold  
Of an anxious watch<sup>4</sup> perched<sup>5</sup> in the bow<sup>6</sup>  
As it dashed<sup>7</sup> under cliffs.<sup>8</sup> My feet were cast<sup>9</sup>  
In icy bands, bound with frost,  
10 With frozen chains, and hardship groaned<sup>10</sup>  
Around my heart. Hunger tore  
At<sup>11</sup> my sea-weary<sup>12</sup> soul. No man sheltered  
On the quiet fairness<sup>13</sup> of earth can feel  
15 How wretched<sup>14</sup> I was, drifting<sup>15</sup> through winter  
On an ice-cold sea whirled<sup>16</sup> in sorrow,  
Alone in a world blown clear<sup>17</sup> of love,  
Hung with icicles.<sup>18</sup> The hailstorms<sup>19</sup> flew,  
The only sound was the roaring sea,  
20 The freezing waves. The song of the swan

- 1 **swept**: carried.  
2 **forth**: forward.  
3 **smashing surf**: breaking waves.  
4 **watch**: observation duties.  
5 **perched**: poised, balanced.  
6 **bow**: the frontal part of a ship, shaped like a V.  
7 **dashed**: flew.  
8 **cliffs**: high rocks on the coast.  
9 **cast**: (here) locked.  
10 **groaned**: made a noise of lamentation.  
11 **tore at**: attacked.  
12 **sea-weary**: tired of the sea.  
13 **fairness**: beauty.  
14 **wretched**: miserable.  
15 **drifting**: being carried by water.  
16 **whirled**: rolling violently.  
17 **blown clear**: (here) emptied.  
18 **icicles**: frozen drops of water.  
19 **hailstorms**: tempests of ice.

Might serve for pleasure, the cry of the sea-fowl,<sup>20</sup>  
 The death noise of birds instead of laughter,  
 The mewling<sup>21</sup> of gulls<sup>22</sup> instead of mead.<sup>23</sup>  
 Storms beat on the rocky cliffs and were echoed  
 25 By icy-feathered terns<sup>24</sup> and the eagle's screams;  
 No kinsman could offer comfort there,  
 To a soul left drowning<sup>25</sup> in desolation.

20 **sea-fowl**: seabirds.

21 **mewling**: crying.

22 **gulls**: seagulls, birds.

23 **mead**: alcoholic drink made of honey, spices and water.

24 **terns**: long-winged aquatic birds.

25 **drowning**: dying in water.

### COMPREHENSION

1 What does the poem describe? Choose from the following:

- a  the pleasant sea journeys the speaker has made throughout the years
- b  the harsh and isolated life the speaker has led at sea
- c  the adventures of the speaker in exotic lands

2 The speaker mentions a series of hardships he had to endure. Put them in the order in which they appear in the text:

- a  He had no human company.
- b  He had to suffer tempests of ice.
- c  On his many voyages he was at the mercy of a cruel sea.
- d  He was beaten by waves hitting the ship.
- e  The sound of seabirds was intolerable.
- f  He had nothing to eat.
- g  His feet were frost-bitten.

### ANALYSIS

- 3 Find examples of alliteration.
- 4 As we have seen, another typical characteristic of Anglo-Saxon poetry is the use of caesura. Find examples in the text.

5 Reflect on the way the sea is portrayed. Fill in the text with the following words:

compassion • waves • reflected • sounds •  
 movement • hostile

The sea that is evoked in the first part of the poem is **a** ..... and violent one: it is 'ice-cold' and seems to be an inhuman, elemental world deprived of softness or **b** ....., a 'world blown clear of love'. The poem evokes this desolate atmosphere also through reference to **c** .....: the 'smashing surf' or the 'death noise of birds'. But in the poem the sea is not simply described. Its movement is **d** ..... in the poem's rhythm. The use of caesura gives us the impression that the lines of the poem are like **e** ..... that overlap. Just as one falls away, the next is already surging forward, driving the poem on in a perpetual **f** .....

6 How would you describe the mood of the speaker? Choose from the following and justify your choice with reference to the text:

nostalgic • embittered • proud • angry • sad •  
 content • defiant • regretful • agitated • sentimental

### DISCUSSION

- 7 In pairs, choose a piece of music that you think would make a suitable accompaniment to the mood of the poem.