This tale is true, and mine. It tells
How the sea took me, swept me back
And forth in sorrow and fear and pain,
Showed me suffering in a hundred ships,
In a thousand ports, and in me. It tells
Of smashing surf when I sweated in the cold
Of an anxious watch, perched in the bow
As it dashed under cliffs. My feet were cast
In icy bands, bound with frost,
With frozen chains, and hardship groaned
Around my heart. Hunger tore
At my sea-weary soul. No man sheltered
On the quiet fairness of earth can feel
How wretched I was, drifting through winter
On an ice-cold sea, whirlèd in sorrow,
Alone in a world blown clear of love,
Hung with icicles. The hailstorms flew.
The only sound was the roaring sea,
The freezing waves. The song of the swan
Might serve for pleasure, the cry of the sea-fowl,
The death-noise of birds instead of laughter,
The mewing of gulls instead of mead.
Storms beat on the rocky cliffs and were echoed
By icy-feathered terns and the eagle’s screams;
No kinsman could offer comfort there,
To a soul left drowning in desolation.
And who could believe, knowing but
The passion of cities, swelled proud with wine
And no taste of misfortune, how often, how wearily,
I put myself back on the paths of the sea.
Night would blacken; it would snow from the north;
Frost bound the earth and hail would fall,
The coldest seeds. And how my heart
Would begin to beat, knowing once more
The salt waves tossing and the towering sea!
The time for journeys would come and my soul
Called me eagerly out, sent me over
The horizon, seeking foreigners’ homes.
But there isn’t a man on earth so proud,
So born to greatness, so bold with his youth,
Grown so brave, or so graced by God,
That he feels no fear as the sails unfurl,
Wondering what Fate has willed and will do.
No harps ring in his heart, no rewards,
No passion for women, no worldly pleasures,
Nothing, only the ocean’s heave;
But longing wraps itself around him.
Orchards blossom, the towns bloom,
Fields grow lovely as the world springs fresh,
And all these admonish that willing mind
Leaping to journeys, always set
In thoughts travelling on a quickening tide.
So summer’s sentinel, the cuckoo, sings
In his murmuring voice, and our hearts mourn
As he urges. Who could understand,
In ignorant ease, what we others suffer
As the paths of exile stretch endlessly on?
And yet my heart wanders away,
My soul roams with the sea, the whales’
Home, wandering to the widest corners
Of the world, returning ravenous with desire,
Flying solitary, screaming, exciting me
To the open ocean, breaking oaths
On the curve of a wave.

22 mead: an alcoholic beverage made from fermented honey, frequently drunk in Anglo-Saxon gatherings. In contrasting mead with “the mewing of gulls,” what is the speaker stressing?
24 terns: sea birds similar to gulls.
28 The “cities” of the seafarer’s day were far smaller than modern cities—more like villages and encampments.
50 admonish (əd-mən′ış) v.: criticize or caution.
53 sentinel (sän′tə-nəl): guard; watchman.
Thus the joys of God

Are fervent with life, where life itself
Fades quickly into the earth. The wealth
Of the world neither reaches to Heaven nor remains.
No man has ever faced the dawn
Certain which of Fate's three threats
Would fall: illness, or age, or an enemy's
Sword, snatching the life from his soul.
The praise the living pour on the dead
Flowers from reputation: plant
An earthly life of profit reaped
Even from hatred and rancor, of bravery
Flung in the devil's face, and death
Can only bring you earthly praise
And a song to celebrate a place
With the angels, life eternally blessed
In the hosts of Heaven.

The days are gone
When the kingdoms of earth flourished in glory;
Now there are no rulers, no emperors,
No givers of gold, as once there were,
When wonderful things were worked among them
And they lived in lordly magnificence.
Those powers have vanished, those pleasures are dead,
The weakest survives and the world continues,
Kept spinning by toil. All glory is tarnished,
The world's honor ages and shrinks,

Bent like the men who mold it. Their faces
Blanch as time advances, their beards
Wither and they mourn the memory of friends,
The sons of princes, sown in the dust.
The soul stripped of its flesh knows nothing
Of sweetness or sour, feels no pain,
Bends neither its hand nor its brain. A brother
Opens his palms and pours down gold
On his kinsman's grave, strewing his coffin
With treasures intended for Heaven, but nothing

Golden shakes the wrath of God
For a soul overflowing with sin, and nothing
Hidden on earth rises to Heaven.

We all fear God. He turns the earth,
He sets it swinging firmly in space,
Gave life to the world and light to the sky.
Death leaps at the fools who forget their God.
He who lives humbly has angels from Heaven.
To carry him courage and strength and belief.
A man must conquer pride, not kill it,
Be firm with his fellows, chaste for himself,
Treat all the world as the world deserves,
With love or with hate but never with harm,
Though an enemy seek to scorch him in hell,
Or set the flames of a funeral pyre
Under his lord. Fate is stronger
And God mightier than any man's mind.
Our thoughts should turn to where our home is,
Consider the ways of coming there,
Then strive for sure permission for us
To rise to that eternal joy,
That life born in the love of God
And the hope of Heaven. Praise the Holy
Grace of He who honored us,
Eternal, unchanging creator of earth. Amen.

Translated by Burton Raffel

Thinking Through the Literature

1. Comprehension Check What conflicting emotions does the seafarer feel when he sets off on a sea voyage?

2. What images remain with you after reading this poem? Describe the images, or draw a sketch of them.

3. Why do you think the seafarer chose a life at sea in spite of its hardships?

   THINK ABOUT
   • the feelings he expresses in lines 58–64
   • the problems recounted in lines 81–102
   • the view of fate expressed in the final lines

4. Why do you think the seafarer tells about his life and its hardships? Cite details from the poem to support your opinion.
This lonely traveler longs for grace,
For the mercy of God; grief hangs on
His heart and follows the frost-cold foam
He cuts in the sea, sailing endlessly,
Aimlessly, in exile. Fate has opened
A single port: memory. He sees
His kinsmen slaughtered again, and cries:
“I’ve drunk too many lonely dawns,
Grey with mourning. Once there were men
To whom my heart could hurry, hot
With open longing. They’re long since dead.
My heart has closed on itself, quietly
Learning that silence is noble and sorrow
Nothing that speech can cure. Sadness
Has never driven sadness off;
Fate blows hardest on a bleeding heart.
So those who thirst for glory smother
Secret weakness and longing, neither
Weep nor sigh nor listen to the sickness
In their souls. So I, lost and homeless,
Forced to flee the darkness that fell
On the earth and my lord.
Leaving everything,
Weary with winter I wandered out
On the frozen waves, hoping to find
A place, a people, a lord to replace
My lost ones. No one knew me, now,
No one offered comfort, allowed
Me feasting or joy. How cruel a journey
I've travelled, sharing my bread with sorrow

30 Alone, an exile in every land,
Could only be told by telling my footsteps.
For who can hear: "friendless and poor,"
And know what I've known since the long cheerful nights
When, young and yearning, with my lord I yet feasted
Most welcome of all. That warmth is dead.
He only knows who needs his lord
As I do, eager for long-missing aid;
He only knows who never sleeps
Without the deepest dreams of longing.

40 Sometimes it seems I see my lord,
Kiss and embrace him, bend my hands
And head to his knee, kneeling as though
He still sat enthroned, ruling his thanes.
And I open my eyes, embracing the air,
And see the brown sea-billows heave,
See the sea-birds bathe, spreading
Their white-feathered wings, watch the frost
And the hail and the snow. And heavy in heart
I long for my lord, alone and unloved.

45 Sometimes it seems I see my kin
And greet them gladly, give them welcome,
The best of friends. They fade away,
Swimming soundlessly out of sight,
Leaving nothing.

How loathsome become
The frozen waves to a weary heart.
In this brief world I cannot wonder
That my mind is set on melancholy,
Because I never forget the fate
Of men, robbed of their riches, suddenly

50 Looted by death—the doom of earth,
Sent to us all by every rising
Sun. Wisdom is slow, and comes
But late. He who has it is patient;
He cannot be hasty to hate or speak,
Nor must he be bold and yet not blind,
Nor ever too craven, complacent, or covetous,
Nor ready to gloat before he wins glory.
The man's a fool who flings his boasts
Hotly to the heavens, heeding his spleen
And not the better boldness of knowledge.
What knowing man knows not the ghostly,
Waste-like end of worldly wealth:
See, already the wreckage is there,
The wind-swept walls stand far and wide,
The storm-beaten blocks besmeared with frost,
The mead-halls crumbled, the monarchs thrown down
And stripped of their pleasures. The proudest of warriors
Now lie by the wall: some of them war
Destroyed; some the monstrous sea-bird
Bore over the ocean; to some the old wolf
Dealt out death; and for some dejected
Followers fashioned an earth-cave coffin.
Thus the Maker of men lays waste
This earth, crushing our callow mirth.
And the work of old giants stands withered and still.”

He who these ruins rightly sees,
And deeply considers this dark twisted life,
Who sagely remembers the endless slaughters
Of a bloody past, is bound to proclaim:
“Where is the war-steed? Where is the warrior? Where is
his war-lord?
Where now the feasting-places? Where now the mead-hall
pleasures?
Alas, bright cup! Alas, brave knight!
Alas, you glorious princes! All gone,
Lost in the night, as you never had lived.
And all that survives you a serpentine wall,
Wondrously high, worked in strange ways.
Mighty spears have slain these men,
Greedy weapons have framed their fate.
These rocky slopes are beaten by storms,
This earth pinned down by driving snow,
By the horror of winter, smothering warmth
In the shadows of night. And the north angrily

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66 craven (krá'ven): cowardly;
complacent (kám-plä'sant): self-
satisfied; covetous (kôv't-tas):
greedy.
69 spleen: bad temper. (The spleen
is a body organ that was formerly
thought to be the seat of strong
emotions.)
77–82 In what different ways have
the warriors met their fate?
84 callow mirth: childish joy.
95 serpentine: winding or
twisting, like a snake.
Hurls its hailstorms at our helpless heads.
Everything earthy is evilly born,
Firmly clutching by a fickle Fate.
Fortune vanishes, friendship vanishes,
Man is fleeting, woman is fleeting,
And all this earth rolls into emptiness."

So says the sage in his heart, sitting alone with
His thought.
It's good to guard your faith, nor let your grief come forth
Until it cannot call for help, nor help but heed
The path you've placed before it. It's good to find your
grace
In God, the heavenly rock where rests our every hope.

Translated by Burton Raffel

Thinking Through the Literature

1. Comprehension Check What happened to cause the poem's title character to become a wanderer?
2. What emotion does this poem chiefly evoke in you? Share your reaction with classmates.
3. How would you describe the wanderer's present life and his feelings about it?
   THINK ABOUT
   - the experiences he describes in lines 8–22
   - the life he led before he became a wanderer
   - his remarks in lines 90–108
4. Do you agree with the attitude toward grief expressed in lines 12–16? Why or why not?
I make this song  about me full sadly  
my own wayfaring.  I a woman tell  
what griefs I had  since I grew up  
new or old  never more than now.  
Ever I know  the dark of my exile.

First my lord went out  away from his people  
over the wave-tumult.  I grieved each dawn  
wondered where my lord  my first on earth might be.  
Then I went forth  a friendless exile  
to seek service  in my sorrow’s need.  
My man’s kinsmen  began to plot  
by darkened thought  to divide us two  
so we most widely  in the world’s kingdom  
lived wretchedly  and I suffered longing.

My lord commanded me  to move my dwelling here.  
I had few loved ones  in this land  
or faithful friends.  For this my heart grieves:  
that I should find the man  well matched to me  
hard of fortune  mournful of mind  
hiding his mood  thinking of murder.

GUIDE FOR READING
1 To show the rhythmic structure  
of Old English poetry, this  
translator has divided each line  
into two units with a break called  
a caesura (n-y-oh-ber). The caesura  
signal places where the scop, or  
poet-singer, probably paused for  
breath while reciting the poem.  
2 wayfaring: journeying.  
6 my lord: the speaker’s husband.  
7 wave-tumult: the sea. Why  
might the poet have used this  
kenning?

19 hard . . . mind: having a hard  
life and feeling sad.
Blithe was our bearing often we vowed
that but death alone would part us two
naught else. But this is turned round
now . . . as if it never were
our friendship. I must far and near
bear the anger of my beloved.
The man sent me out to live in the woods
under an oak tree in this den in the earth.
Ancient this earth hall. I am all longing.

The valleys are dark the hills high
the yard overgrown bitter with briars
a joyless dwelling. Full oft the lack of my lord
seizes me cruelly here. Friends there are on earth
living beloved lying in bed
while I at dawn am walking alone
under the oak tree through these earth halls.
There I may sit the summerlong day
there I can weep over my exile
my many hardships. Hence I may not rest
from this care of heart which belongs to me ever
nor all this longing that has caught me in this life.

May that young man be sad-minded always
hard his heart's thought while he must wear
a blithe bearing with care in the breast
a crowd of sorrows. May on himself depend
all his world's joy. Be he outlawed far
in a strange folk-land—that my beloved sits
under a rocky cliff rimed with frost
a lord dreary in spirit drenched with water
in a ruined hall. My lord endures
much care of mind. He remembers too often
a happier dwelling. Woe be to them
that for a loved one must wait in longing.

*Translated by Ann Stanford*
Connect to the Literature

1. **What Do You Think?**
   What is your reaction to the story told in "The Wife's Lament"?

   **Comprehension Check**
   • What happened after the wife's husband went to sea?
   • Why do the husband and the wife live apart?
   • What does the wife wish her husband to feel?

Think Critically

2. Evaluate the kind of life the wife has led. Support your evaluation with details from the poem.

3. How would you describe the wife's opinion of her husband's behavior?

   **THINK ABOUT**
   • the influence of her husband's kinsmen
   • the vow that the husband and the wife made to each other
   • the wife's thoughts in lines 42–50

4. In your opinion, how might the husband respond to his wife’s accusations?

5. **ACTIVE READING [INTERPRETING DETAILS]**
   Get together with a partner and discuss the cluster diagrams of descriptive details you created in your [READER'S NOTEBOOK]. What moods do the details help convey?

Extend Interpretations

6. **What If?** Suppose that the husband of the speaker in "The Wife's Lament" returned to her. Describe their reunion.

7. **Comparing Texts** Compare the plights of the three poems' title characters. Who do you think faces the most difficult hardships? What makes you think this way? Defend your opinion.

8. **Connect to Life** In the modern world, many refugees leave their countries to escape dangers, not knowing when or if they will ever return to the homelands and people they love. How do you think the loneliness and other hardships they face compare with those endured in Anglo-Saxon times? Cite evidence from the poems to support your opinion.

Literary Analysis

**KENNING** Anglo-Saxon poets made frequent use of kenning, descriptive terms and phrases substituted for simple nouns. In a translation of Old English poetry, a kenning may appear as a compound word, like *wave-turning*, used for the sea in "The Wife's Lament." A kenning may also appear as a group of two or more words, like *swan-road*, another common kenning for the sea. The name *Beowulf* itself can be interpreted as "beo-wolf," a kenning for a bear (because bears like honey and are often found around beehives).

**Cooperative Learning Activity**
Identify two more kennings in the poems and explain what they mean. Then copy the chart below and try creating your own kennings for the words in the first column. Discuss your ideas and complete the chart with a small group of classmates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Kenning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>city</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>journey</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ship</td>
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<tr>
<td>tree</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>war</td>
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**REVIEW [ALLITERATION]** Besides rhythm, the most important element of sound in Old English poetry is alliteration, the repetition of initial consonant sounds. Look for examples in all three poems.