

Spiritual Uncertainty in “The Seafarer”

In the Seafarer, we see a narrator who is a wanderer, separated from his commatatus, and how he views his life. We notice that there seem to be two voices from the narrator speaking in the poem. The first is one of melancholy and isolation; the narrator has been cut off from the commatatus and has been forced to navigate the icy cold waters of the lonely ocean, and he believes that no one on the land can understand his situation. The idea of God doesn't appear here. The second voice contrastingly expresses a belief in God and explains that life on sea is much better than that on land. The narrator tells us that “far warmer to me are the Lord's kindness than this life of death lent us on land.” Life at sea, although lonely, is better than life on land because the sea's expanse helps the narrator to forget about time and worries, and because he can forget the passage of time, one does not have to recognize the decay and the decline of time that pervades the land. The two viewpoints are most likely present because they represent the narrator's spiritual uncertainty; the narrator does not know whether or not his separation from the commatatus will destroy his chance for “immortality.”

The fact that the narrator is isolated from the commatatus and the rest of the land causes the narrator a degree of “spiritual” stress. Since there was no afterlife for the Anglo-Saxons before the arrival of Christianity, what one did with one's life was very important, and fame was of even greater importance. Fame was one form of immortality because a person could be remembered long after he was gone in the songs of scops and the thoughts of one's kinsmen if one was well-known. A person who was alone could not earn fame simply because there were no people to know him. The second form of immortality is having children, and of course, being alone prevents this from occurring.

The narrator also experiences gloom and physical discomfort as a result of his separation from everything he has known. He has moved from the close gatherings of the mead-hall to the open expanses of the ocean, and as he sits “day-long / At oar’s end clenched against clinging sorrow,” he sees nothing but water and the occasional bird as he searches for new land, the “cliffs we beat along.” He is uncertain of his future because everything he knows is gone, and he does not know where he will end up, if he ends up in another land at all. Therefore, the present and the past are the only things he can think of, and days of having “No friend or brother by to speak with the despairing mind” forces him to dwell on his situation. The extent of his isolation is shown by his “seldom amusement” being “The swan’s blare,” “for men’s laughter there was curlew-call, there were the cries of gannets, for mead-drinking the music of the gull.” His companions have been replaced by the birds of the sea, the warmth of mead-halls replaced by the icy-cold winds of the sea. He is on “the wanderer’s beat, / cut off from kind.” The fact that his only companions are birds greater exemplifies his isolation--unlike mead-hall companions whom he could be in close contact and carry on a merry conversation with, birds are far away in the frigid sky, answering his silence with screams “from throats frost-feathered.” The narrator also experiences great physical discomfort. Within his commatatus, the narrator had shelter, food, warmth, and protection. On a boat in the sea, he had little shelter, little food, and no warmth or protection. He tells us in the second stanza that “Cold then nailed my feet, frost shrank on its chill clamps, cares sighed hot about heart, hunger fed on a mere-wearied mind.” He traveled over “ice-cold seas,” having “wasted whole winters,” and here, we notice the use of “winters” instead of “summers” or “years” to give us the connotation of gloom and coldness the narrator experiences. The only sound he heard as the “Hail flew in showers” was “the slam of waves along an icy sea.”

Nowhere in the first seven stanzas is God mentioned; quite the opposite is mentioned. The narrator firmly believes that the “Blithe heart cannot know, / through its happiness, what hardships they suffer / who drive the foam-furrow furthest from land,” and that “This he little believes whose life has run / sweet in the burgs, no banished man, / but well-seen at wine-round, my weariness of mind.” It can be inferred,

that since he believes that no one living a better life than himself could possibly understand his situation, the narrator must believe that God cannot help him. However, we later find the narrator in his second voice, showing us that he recognizes God as a source of kindness, in other parts of the poem. God is shown to be an important power in a person's life; "For no man above mould is so mood-proud, / so thoroughly equipped, so quick to do, / so strong in his youth, or with so staunch a lord / that before seafaring he does not fear a little whither the Lord shall lead him in the end." Regardless of the kind of person one is, the narrator tells us here that God still is a powerful shaper of one's fate. No matter how many riches a man buries his brother with, "gold-hoarded when he here lived / cannot allay the anger of God / towards a soul sin-freighted." God's mercy is like Fate in that nothing can control it or control who receives it. Though God's kindness seems fleeting and short-lived, we see that the narrator believes that God's kindness is "far warmer. . . than this life of death lent us on land." Not only does the narrator acknowledge God's presence, but he also tells us that a life at sea, although harsh and lonely, is in a way better than life on land.

In almost all of Anglo-Saxon poetry, there is a heavy emphasis on a certain theme, that of decay and the decline of time. Anglo-Saxons believed basically two things about time. The first was that the days of old were much better than the present. The second was that no matter how kind, courageous, strong, or wise a person was, or whatever a person did, that person would still grow old and die. The narrator realizes these two things, and knows that his life will bear out to the same conclusion regardless if he was wandering over the sea or back in his commatus. We see that the narrator realizes this because he states, "I do not believe / earthly estate is everlasting." There are three things that "all ways threaten a man's peace / and one before the end shall overthrow his mind," he states. "Either illness or age or the edge of vengeance / shall draw out the breath from the doom-shadowed." The next to last stanza, which is about one-sixth the length of the poem, is devoted to giving several samples of the decline of man, earth, and time.

Days are soon over, / on earth imperium with the earl's hand fails; / kings are not now, kaisers are not, / there are no gold-givers like the gone masters / who between them framed the first deeds in the world, / in their lives lordly, in the lays renowned. / That chivalry is changed, cheer is gone away, / it is a weaker kind who wields earth now, / sweats for its bread. Brave men are fewer, / all excellence on earth grows old and sere / as now does every man over the world; / age fares against him, his face bleaches / and his thatch thins: had a throng of friends / of noble houses, knows now they all / are given to the ground. That grieves his white head. / Once life is going, this gristle slackens; / nothing can pain or please flesh then, / he cannot stir a finger, fix his thinking.

This is a very pessimistic attitude on life to have; this attitude obviously forbids the narrator from finding happiness in life. As a result, the “thriving of the treeland, the town’s briskness, / a lightness over the leas, life gathering,” causes him more grief because he knows that all of it will end someday. Anything that reminds him of the goodness of life causes him grief, primarily because he is unable to experience these pleasures and secondly, because he knows that it will all end. The cuckoo, which is said to be “a scout of summer,” is mentioned in two stanzas as a singer “of new griefs / that shall make breast-hoard bitter,” and whose “dirge drags out my heart, / whets will to the whale’s beat.” We see again with the cuckoo the use of summer and winter to describe the narrator’s feelings; because the cuckoo is associated with summer, a time of life and festivity, the bird’s call brings sadness to the narrator.

The numbing effect of the sea is the primary reason why the narrator believes that life at sea is much better than life on land--he is able to forget his grief. When not thinking of what he has lost, such as his commatatus and his homeland, the sea causes time to become nonexistent and causes him to be unable to think of anything else except the sea. The pleasures of life are forgotten at sea; “His heart is not in harping nor in the having of rings, / has no delight in women, nor the world’s gladnesses / nor can think of any thing outside the thrash of waves, / sea-struck, is distracted, stillness lost.” He is able to forget his grief by losing himself in the sea; his “Spirit breaks from the body’s chest / to the sea’s acres; over earth’s breadth / and whale’s range roams the mind now.”

In this poem, the narrator describes the harsh, unfriendly life he led as a result of being away from the land and his commatatus through two different viewpoints. First, the narrator describes his terrible existence and how he misses his former life with his commatatus, and second, the narrator tells us that he

would rather live that terrible existence and receive the Lord's kindness than to return to "a life of death."

We can possibly conclude that this dichotomy is a result of the narrator's spiritual uncertainty. The Anglo-Saxons had a hard time reconciling the differences between fate and Christianity since God's mercy was supposed to change fate, but few people ever witnessed this occurring. We know that the narrator believes in God, but because he has had to live in a harsh environment removed from everything he has cared about without any change, he is uncertain of the future. He does not know if being away from his commatatus will deny him the chance to gain "immortality" through fame or if God will grant him everlasting life regardless of his situation.