

Boethian concepts in "the wanderer"



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* and the Old English poem "The Wanderer" are both testament to the enduring quality of literature. Writing in the sixth century A. D., Boethius discusses such varied topics as happiness, the existence of evil, and the path to God while locked in a cell with the goddess Philosophy. In contrast, "The Wanderer," an elegy originally written in Old English, is a poem told from the point of view of an exile mourning his despondent existence away from the community. Though it was written almost five centuries later, it reflects many of the philosophical tenets outlined in Boethius's account. It expresses life as a merely transient existence, arguing that happiness can only be found in God and that fate is an integral part of the human experience. Both texts agree on the transient nature of human existence. For example, to the narrator in "The Wanderer," wealth is but a temporary means of happiness that is ultimately transitory and will eventually be destroyed along with the rest of the world. This sentiment is evoked when he writes that "wealth is fleeting" (108), and in another line predicts that "all the wealth of this world stands waste" (74) until the universe will "stand empty" (109). This belief mirrors the teachings of Boethius's *Consolation* in many ways. First, both works hold that one shouldn't be attached to wealth because it serves no purpose in the end. Boethius's Fortune explains that she holds the power to "withdraw [her] gifts" (21) whenever she wants to and condemns humans for the desire to be "enhanced by external adornment" (29). Although the narrator of "The Wanderer" doesn't explicitly say that God eventually strips us from our material possessions, his belief in our ultimate destruction likens his "Father in heaven" (117) to the role of Fortune in the sense that what is provided to us can just as easily be taken away. Secondly, both suggest that the only

remedy for this desire is a spiritual relationship with God, one that will outlive the material world. The pursuit of happiness also assumes an ephemeral presence in both "The Wanderer" and *Consolation*. Both narrators find themselves in exile, only able to seek consolation through poetic expression that finds their surroundings meaningless and temporary. Philosophy outlines three pursuits that ultimately lead nowhere: wealth, respect, and fame. But all of these ventures cause nothing but detriment. Wealth brings worry (46), power brings disdain (48), and fame is nothing but false celebration (49). These vacuous enterprises render men into animals who fail to establish a spiritual connection in this transitory life. Although the narrator in "The Wanderer" doesn't seem to lament a moral forfeiture like Philosophy, his displeasure is simply because those things aren't eternal. Those "eager for fame often bind fast... a sorrowing soul" (17). His "memory of kinsmen" (51) brings temporary solace, but "they always swim away" (53), and in the end, "rulers lie deprived of all joys" (99) "as if it had never been" (96). The world of "The Wanderer" is only temporary and describes aspects of civilization as a whole being "wrecked" (85) by "The Creator" (84). In the last few lines, the only hope for redemption is for those who "seek mercy" (116) in God. Since the world is empty, the only path to true happiness is through virtue. Philosophy asserts that all earthly attempts toward happiness are simply inadequate since humans by nature exist outside of God. The realm of humans is grounded on possessions and material things, and the pursuits previously discussed. But the realm of God is "the true and perfect good" (55), and intersects with the worldly realm through the pursuit of intellect, spirituality, and virtue. As mentioned before, Boethius concludes that happiness is not found in material things. But since

power and wealth are the only standards we use to measure happiness, then the true measure lies outside of ourselves, in God. That realm is bridged by virtue. The character in " The Wanderer" outlines the makings of a wise man: