

# [Transience and eternity in the elegy theology religion essay](https://assignbuster.com/transience-and-eternity-in-the-elegy-theology-religion-essay/)

Old English poetry can be divided into two main types: heroic poetry and Christian poetry. Christianity, as the most widely spread religion, is present in most literary works, including some of the heroic poems, although heroic poetry is considered separate from Christian poetry. There are many analogies to Christian themes in the poetry of the Old English period, since religion played a major part in people’s lives at the time.

‘ The Seafarer’ is an Old English poem which was recorded in the Exeter book, or Codex Exoniensis, a collection of Old English poetry, including ‘ The Wanderer’ and ‘ The Descent into Hell’, which dates back to the tenth century. It is a poem which describes the lonely, full of hardship and suffering life of the seaman. It can be logically divided into two parts. The first is a typical elegy – the speaker remembers his dismal life at sea, which he has chosen to the disturbing life on land. He knows he is alone, and he constantly has this internal conflict about choosing the sea to the land. The second part is more moralistic, or didactic. The speaker talks about the transience of wealth and fame on Earth, and how nobody will manage to outwit death and God, no matter how glorious a life they have led. Eventually all people will die, life will end for everyone at a certain point, and no amount of money will help them avoid their fate.

In the beginning of the poem the seafarer makes a song about his travels and experiences at sea. He begins grimly with a description of the ‘ troublesome times’ and lonely life while he’s sailing. This is a life which common people in the city know nothing about. They are safe on the land while the seaman risks his life at sea. The weather is cold and stormy, the ‘ terrible tossing of waves’ rock the ship, the seaman will soon freeze. He has to endure the fierce storms, the snow and the hail. The beginning of the poem is not only a description of a fierce weather. It is a description of the inner state of mind of the seaman – the inner struggles and conflicts he has. He is not homesick, but he realizes he is alone in the sea. His troubles are represented as being caused by the sea, but in reality the sea only represents what is already inside him, in his soul. The seafarer feels ‘ grim sorrow at heart’. He is unable to feel any pleasure from the surroundings; he does not enjoy it because of the darkness in his soul and heart. There are moments in which he holds life at sea in contempt.

Yet there is something which draws him back to the sea. He can choose the safe life on land, at home, where there are his fellow men, possibly his family, and where food and warmth are ensured. However, he feels this constant urge to travel, to go back to the sea. The sea is mysterious – it is wide and infinite; it holds many secrets; it offers a different lifestyle – it draws one away from everything familiar and safe, and throws them into a new, different world – the world of danger, uncertainty, constant change; a world with no boundaries or limits. This is what the seafarer seeks, this is why he constantly returns to the dangerous travels – he needs the challenge of the hard life at sea; he needs the struggles – either physical or emotional. His journey in the sea is not only a journey on the physical level. It represents the journey which his soul takes on the path to God. He has to go through hardship and struggles; he has to fight with the difficulties which God sends him; he has to welcome the challenges of the sea as challenges which God sends to test his soul. He is sailing in the sea which suggests that he is going forward. His soul is, symbolically, about to walk the path which leads to God, passing through severe trials. His kinsmen, who live on land, stay where they are, they haven’t moved from their place not only physically, but figuratively as well – their souls have not taken the path to God, but they simply enjoy the transient goods in life while they have them. They live a stable, secure life with no dangers or trials. They strive for the goods and the glory which earthly life offers, and never think of their spirituality and morality. They don’t realize that everything on Earth is fleeting and that life as they know it – wealthy, glorious and bountiful – will only last until their death and not in the afterlife when their souls will meet God.

This is a light transition to the second part of the poem which is a moral criticism of the people, especially the rich, who rely on their wealth and glory only. They may lead a sinful life, they may oppress the weaker or the poor people, but their deeds are the only thing which will accompany them in the afterlife, not gold or money, not friends and kinsmen. There is a similar concept in the English morality play ‘ Everyman’, in which wealth and fellow men abandon Everyman on his journey to death, and only good deeds stay with him until the end. There is the Christian influence, which is present in almost every piece of work in the medieval literature. According to the Christian religion God is the only truly eternal and lasting thing in the Universe. The speaker strongly criticizes the sinful life of common men – instead of living a good, honorable and humble life, they only rely on wealth and bounty, and they think these earthly goods will help them or benefit them in some way in the afterlife. They never challenge their souls, and they never even pray to God. The speaker tries to imply that the rich need to change their lifestyle but he realizes that they will not, because they do not understand how their sins and idleness will only harm them later. They don’t realize that wealth is transient and they will not be able to take it with them after death. God will not take in mind how powerful a man was on Earth or how much money did he possess, but will only consider his good and brave deeds and his sins. Life in Heaven is eternal and Heaven is a sort of reward for leading a faithful, honorable life. The seafarer claims that ‘ earthly happiness will not endure’. He mentions that ‘ age comes upon him’ eventually, which suggests that glorious life is only there for some time and then one gradually loses everything they possess, including their vitality, and outer things like their friends and kinsmen. The way one spends their life on Earth determines where they will spend their afterlife. The speaker urges people to think carefully what afterlife they would like to have and then decide what the right path to there is. He tries to explain to them that they will all be equal after death, no matter how wealthy some were and how poor the others were on Earth. Moreover, they all are equal even now in God’s eyes. It does not make a difference to God whether one is rich or poor; whether one is famous or not. What will differentiate them after death is how they led their life, what they did and what their deeds led to. This is the point at which some will be sent to Heaven and others will be sent to Hell. Afterlife will be eternal, that is why people have to think now how they want to spend it. The seaman has given up on all earthly goods and bounty because he has realized that they are not important, they will be lost in time and in the end nothing will remain, only memories of the glorious days and consequences from the deeds, good or bad.

‘ The Seafarer’ is not only a poem about life and death. It concerns transience in life and eternity as a concept mainly in the afterlife. It suggests that life on its own has no other meaning but to praise God and to prove that one is noble enough to go to Heaven. Moreover, life is a test for the soul whether it has to be sent to Heaven or to Hell. Life after death is what really matters, because it will be for eternity, in contrast to life on Earth which lasts only a few decades. The concept of eternity is important for the moral to reach the common people. If the common man does not fear God, or does not at least consider what will happen to him after his death, he will not try to live a better, noble life, but he will only keep in mind his earthly matters, and this will lead him to impious, even ignoble deeds. Thus ‘ The Seafarer’ can be considered a moral poem which teaches man how to live and how to save his soul, so that he deserves afterlife in Heaven.