

The seafarer: how to
preserve the initial
sense while
translating



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Beginning at the time of early settlements in the 5th century and spanning until 1150 A. D., the English language and that spoken and written by the Anglo-Saxons during this time is referred to as Old English or simply, Anglo-Saxon. The influence of Christianity on Anglo-Saxon writing was established early on, as the first complete composition was a code of laws written by the first English Christian king (Simpson 6). Naturally, with literacy of this time being mainly restricted to servants of the church, the popularity of religion in Old English works continued (Simpson 7). Along with elegiac tendencies, a blend between Christian and heroic ideals, exile or separation from one's "lord and kinship," the powerful return of spring, and especially the quest towards enlightenment and reaching one's true home of heaven are traditional themes present in Old English poetry.

Although Anglo-Saxon speech is also referred to as Old English, it is very much unlike the English language spoken today. Without translations, Old English, which more closely relates to Icelandic or German especially in terms of grammar, is difficult to decipher; Old English authors would often make up words as well. Translated poems under the same title, maintain the same content, story line, major themes, etc., but in some ways can vary from one translation to the next. While one translated edition, may appear to put emphasis on a certain motif, a translation of the same text by a different specialist may emphasize something else entirely.

Of the surviving Old English works, most poetry comes from just four manuscripts (Norton 8). Among these four manuscripts, The Seafarer, whose author remains unknown, now has many different editions of translation existing today. The 124-line poem is told from the point of view of a lonely

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seafarer. The speaker describes a life of hardship as he travels the ocean alone, left to endure danger and difficulties, never to return to a homeland. The journey of the seafarer is meant as an extended metaphor for the challenges in the life of a committed Christian trying to reach heaven.

Like most translations of Old English literature, *The Seafarer* slightly varies in word choice and syntax among editions. Although each variation of *The Seafarer* maintains a religious theme of traditional Anglo-Saxon beliefs and stresses the work that must be put into reaching heaven, an anonymously translated edition found on Anglo-Saxon.net, an individual translation by Burton Raffel, and the Kluge edition, published by Project Gutenberg, place a different emphasis on the commitment in the journey to reach heaven.

First, the anonymous edition of *The Seafarer* found on Anglo-Saxon.net strongly stresses the importance of and the acknowledgement of God's power and will through a positive and sincere outlook and tone. The difference in word choice of this translation compared to the Raffel and Kluge editions of *The Seafarer* creates a personal feeling and hopeful tone in emphasizing the remarkable glory of God. Phrases in the Kluge edition of *The Seafarer* such as, "dear to his Lord" (41), and positive descriptions of the work of God, all slightly vary from the other two translations, but demonstrate differences in where the emphasis of the individual translation lies.

In accordance with the Kluge edition, line 42 of the anonymous translation of *The Seafarer* describes man as "so dear to his lord"—unlike the translation

of “ so graced by God,” found in the Raffel edition. Although the word choice does not drastically differ, in the wording of “ so dear to” and the claim of “ his” lord, instead of the less personal wording, “ so graced by” simply an indefinite God, the first translation begins to feel more personal and delicate—creating a bond between what the speaker believes is the relationship between man and God. While “ so graced by god” may be an equally as positive statement, the wording implies isolation and a lonely self. Simply claiming “ by God” also creates more distance between man and his creator than the anonymous translation, “ his lord.”

Along with the sincere and inspiring emotion of the beginning of line 42, the Anglo-Saxon. net translation goes on to further explain, in lines 42-43, “ so dear to his lord that he never in his seafaring has a worry.” The Kluge edition, although equally comforting and personal in claiming man as “ so dear to his lord” in line 42, stops there without further elaboration. The translation of lines 42-43 in the anonymous edition not only creates a closer bond in man’s personal connection with his lord, but also continues a more positive tone and hopeful outlook towards his spiritual journey and relationship with God in the reassuring conclusion that man will have no worry. The conclusion of lines 42-43 in the Raffel edition, “ so graced by God, that he feels no fear as the sails unfurl,” still depicts encouraging possibilities, but unlike the anonymous translation, which claims that men will not have anything to worry about at all, the Raffel translation can only promise that there will be no fear.

Next, opposing the more positive perspective and hopeful approach towards the challenging Christian commitment and the power of God, the edition of <https://assignbuster.com/the-seafarer-how-to-preserve-the-initial-sense-while-translating/>

The Seafarer translated by Burton Raffel, who is also known for his translation of Beowulf, reveals a more somber tone and reflects on the same journey of a spiritual disciple with a more dark and cautious outlook. The melancholy, sorrowful tone of the Kluge translation ensures the most heavily elegiac feel of the three different translations. For example, although the suffering in the life of a committed Christian is a main influence in all translations of The Seafarer, the harsher word choice and more discouraging statements apparent in Raffel's edition create a noticeable contrast to the more hopeful word choice and lighter suggestions of the other two translations.

First, although in all translations of The Seafarer line 56 describes the hardship of a man in exile, minor differences in word choice reveal a notably different tone and attitude in Raffel's translation and the other two editions. Compared to the lines of the anonymously translated version suggesting, "in worldly things what some endure then," and Kluge's edition also using "endure," in the equivalent context, Raffel's translation, "In ignorant ease, what we others suffer," draws attention as the most negative portrayal of the speaker. While the use of both "endure" and "suffer" may imply similar meanings, the more severe connotation and definition of "suffer" contributes to the bleakest tone. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "endure" as, "to deal with or accept (something unpleasant)," and "suffer" as "to submit or be forced to endure." Although the verbs and statements of the lines are similar, Raffel's translation emphasizes the most brutally elegiac tendencies of the different editions.

The negativity in tone and implication of unavoidable grief are confirmed in the difference of declarations in the editions. The somber tone of the elegy appears almost hopeless in the word choice of the Raffel edition, and the difference between the editions in terms of opinion/suggestions vs. statements produces an equally daunting impact. While lines 67-68 of the anonymous edition found on Anglo-Saxon. net translate, “ I do not believe that the riches of the world will stand forever,” the same lines of Raffel’s edition simply state, “ The wealth of the world neither reaches to Heaven nor remains.” Because the translation by Kluge ends at line 64, no equivalent translation of these lines is available. The anonymous translation offers the opinion “ I do not believe,” leaving room for hope or interpretation. Instead of suggesting the equivalent beliefs, lines 67-68 of Raffel’s edition more definitively state the limited status of world riches as an unquestionable fact—leaving no possibility for hope or improvement. Although there is no radical difference in wording between the editions, the harsh expressions of Raffel’s translation paired with the declarative cynical statements, rather than suggestions or opinions found in the other two editions, emphasize the gravity of the suffering that is ensured for those who do not practice spiritual discipline.

Lastly, the shortened edition provided by the Gutenberg project—the Kluge edition—was the most immediately unique translation of the three editions of The Seafarer. Although almost half the length of the complete version of poem, the Kluge translation offered just as valuable a comparison because of the instantly notable differences. The first obvious difference in this translation is the persistence of the alliteration. According to The Norton

Anthology of English Literature, alliteration along with synecdoche, metonymy, figurative language and irony, is a traditional feature of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Unlike the complete translations found on Anglo-Saxon. net and the Raffel edition, where only a few instances of alliteration can be found, the Kluge edition is unmistakable in its persistent use of alliteration. The recognizable alliterative verse as a main component throughout the Kluge edition shows most instances drawing attention back to the natural aspects of the Christian expedition toward enlightenment. “ Welling of waves” (6) “ sorrowful and sad on a sea ice-cold” (14), “ leaves the land and longs for the sea” (43), and “ That I test the terrors of tossing waves” (35), are a few of many examples of the emphasis on nature and impact of the natural world. Aside from creating a focus on nature, the abundant alliteration also brings a sense of simplicity to this edition. Paired with less elaborate, more straight-forward speech, the Kluge edition—while just as much focused on the power of God in man’s attempt to reach heaven—also emphasizes the simplicity of spiritual discipline. Because God is suggested as the only constant, unchanging entity of the world, the Kluge translation focuses on the necessary withdrawal from typical comforts of life in order to pursue the transient journey of a devoted Christian in nature.

Popular Anglo-Saxon themes and the traditional foundation of Christianity in Old English poetry are the basis of every translation of the Anglo-Saxon poem The Seafarer. Although the emphasis of each translation may vary, the story and beliefs of the seafarer remain constant, particularly the conviction that man must work towards enlightenment through sacrifice and commitment. The seafarer explains the wonder and power of God and the

possibilities the lord may bring, as optimistically stressed in the anonymous translation on Anglo-Saxon. net. As emphasized in the Raffel translation of *The Seafarer*, the speaker explains the inevitable hardship and suffering that one must endure during the journey towards enlightenment. Lastly, as is the focus in the Kluge edition of the Old English poem, the way to heaven is also that of spiritual discipline in a life of natural simplicity.

Works Cited

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