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SETTING AND MODE IN *THE SEAFARER* AND *THE WANDERER*

Ever since *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* received their "titles" from Thorpe when he edited the Exeter Book in 1842,[1] the critical world has viewed these poems as companion pieces and has thought that what could be said of one could, with only minor reservations, be said of the other. One critic has even maintained that *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* share so strong a thematic bond that they are the work of the same poet,[2] although recently attempts have been made to dissociate one from the other.[3]

There are unmistakable similarities between the poems and the most important of these are the bleak winter landscapes which, as critics have long recognized, symbolize the psychological states of the two narrators.[4] However, what distinguishes the two poems is not so much the equation of setting and psychological or spiritual state, but rather a difference in structure that finally defines their poetic modes, those strategies and forms by which the poet presents his meaning. And an analysis of the use of the settings provides the details of this structural variation.

THE ALLEGORICAL MODE: *THE SEAFARER*

The representation of mind by object is fully illustrated in *The Seafarer*. Frost, snow, and cold are the objective symbols of the seafarer's *bitre breost-ceare* (4a).[5]

[1] *Codex Exoniensis: a Collection of Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. . ., ed. Benjamin Thorpe (London, 1842).

[2] G. V. Smithers, "The Meaning of *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*," *MÆ*, XXVI (1957), 152.

[3] See the recent edition of *The Wanderer* by T. P. Dunning and A. J. Bliss (London, 1969), p. 79, and James E. Cross, "On the Genre of *The Wanderer*," *Neophil.*, XLV (1961), 63–75.

[4] The precise way in which settings symbolize mind has been aptly described by E. G. Stanley, "Old English Poetic Diction and the Interpretation of *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Penitent's Prayer*," *Anglia*, LXXIII (1956), 427: "it is not the flower that gives the thought: with the OE poets it is the thought which gives the flower."

[5] That is, through juxtaposition the poet makes the winter landscape a symbol of the Seafarer's mind. Cf. the definition of the "objective correlative" by T. S. Eliot in "Hamlet and His Problems," *Selected Essays* (New York, 1950), pp. 124–125, and John Casey's caveat in *The Language of Criticism* (London, 1968), p. 93. Quotations from *The Seafarer* are taken from I. L. Gordon's edition (London, 1960).

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Here the narrator "iscealdne sæ/ winter wunade wræccan lastum" (14b–15b). The extent of his trials on the icy water is severe:

Calde geþrungen
wæron mine fet, forste gebunden
caldum clommun. (8b–10a)

And the narrator makes a point of sketching the bond between his physical situation and his spiritual condition. He has endured *bitre breostceare* and describes himself as *earmcearig* (14a).

The narrator's spirit may find its objective symbol in the winter seascape, but the image of the sea does not exist in complete isolation. In fact, the ship on which the seafarer suffers is not far from shore. He says:

þær mec oft bigeat
nearo nihtwaco æt nacan stefnan,
þonne he be clifum cnossað. (6b–8a)

The shore, in close proximity to the seafarer's vessel, is a second setting, contrasted with the sea. Imagining those on land as enjoying a life impossible for him, the seafarer expresses his envy of their tranquility: "þæt se mon ne wat/ þe him on foldan fægrost limpeð" (12b–13b). Once the land has been introduced as a setting opposed to the sea, the narrator continues with a series of comparisons which abundantly illustrate the different state of mind represented by the land. In one passage the contrast becomes explicit:

Hwilum ylfete song
dyde ic me to gomene, ganetes hleoþor
ond huilpan sweg fore hleahtor wera.
(19b–21b)

From the focus on the hardships of the sea as symbolic of the narrator's *breostceare*, the emphasis has now shifted subtly to a consistent alternating pattern of the sea as a symbol of the exile's present state of mind contrasted with the land as a symbol of his former joys and the present happiness o land-dwellers. Whereas he now has only the lone screams of the birds for companions, he once knew the joys of *hleomæga* (25b). And then once again he expresses his feelings:

him gelyfeð lyt, se þe ah lifes wyn
gebiden in burgum, bealosiþa hwon,
wlonc ond wingal, hu ic werig oft
in brimlade bidan sceolde.
(27a–30b)

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Now in line 31 an almost imperceptible shift occurs. What seems to be merely a continuation of the desolate winter seascape suddenly changes to encompass the land as well. Snow comes from the north, though now "hrim hrusan bond, hægl feol on eorþan" (32). The opposing psychological settings of sea and land as symbolic forces are here merged. No longer symbolizing the vanished joys of the narrator's human happiness, the land has become one with the bleakness of the sea. This land, which has been so close to the sea throughout the first section, now takes on the qualities of the sea itself.

Line 33b begins the second section of *The Seafarer:*

> For þon cnyssað nu
> heortan geþohtas þæt ic hean streamas,
> sealtyþa gelac sylf cunnige.
> (33b–35b)

From symbol of the despairing spirit, the narrator turns the sea into an inviting and desirable path of hope. In the words *For þon* [1] something has altered in the narrator's consciousness, and this alteration has produced a change in the psychological and symbolic meaning of the sea for the speaker. The exact manner in which the sea symbolizes the narrator's state of mind is soon demonstrated. No man, he says, can be so sure of this world that he have no care about his destiny, "þæt he a his sæfore sorge næbbe" (42). The fears and trepidations so minutely rendered in the first section have not disappeared from the narrator's memory, but they now seem to have a different point of reference, and the narrator is urged to continue his life on the sea, to make a journey.[2]

The sea now symbolizes the yearning of the seafarer. *Longung* (47a) is the Old English word, meaning both "longing" and "anxiety," thus aptly expressing the seafarer's ambiguous emotions. There is even further change in the spatial relationship between the two important symbols in the poem – land and sea. In the first section the ship tossed always close to the cliffs; the narrator wishes at this point to put as much distance as

[1] I am assuming that *For þon* can be translated *therefore*. However, W. F. Bolton suggests that in the first half of the poem it means *therefore*, and in the second *because:* "Connectives in *The Seafarer* and *The Dream of the Rood*," *MP*, LVII (1960), 260–262.

[2] Cf. John C. Pope, "Dramatic Voices in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*," in *Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr.*, eds. Robert P. Creed and J. B. Bessinger (New York, 1965), p. 125.

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he can between himself and the land so that he may set out on the *hean streamas*. The pattern of contrast between land and sea is not discontinued. In keeping with the radical shift in the meaning of the sea, there is a corresponding shift in the description of the land. Land, last pictured as frost-bound, becomes the place where "Bearwas blostmum nimað, byrig fægriað, / wongas wlitigað" (48a–49a). These blossoms only press him the more urgently to make his journey on the high seas.[1]

In section two land does not seem to be opposed to sea, for it is the sight of the reviving land that stirs the soul of the narrator into making his voyage. Again, to find the contrasting symbol to the sea one has to look for a change in symbolic reference. The land up to this point has been closely identified with the seafarer's existence: it is the land humanity inhabits. The journey the blossoming groves inspire is to another kind of land entirely; the seafarer desires to find "feor heonan / elþeodigra eard" (37b–38b). Thus this "land of strangers" becomes, by extension, symbolic also of the seafarer's longing, and provides the contrasting symbol to the sea-land of the earlier section. The seafarer's desire to leave the land, such as he has known it, and to seek another world receives full expression in his determination to face all possible dangers: nothing on *land* will entice him to remain.

In the first two sections of the poem the settings may be called psychological. But in line 64a, the so-called homiletic section begins with a decision that reinforces the seafarer's intentions:

> for þon me hatran sind
> Dryhtnes dreamas þonne þis deade lif
> læne on londe. (64b–66a).

For the last time in the next verse the narrator identifies himself: "Ic gelyfe no / þæt him eorðwelan ece stondað" (66b–67b). During the last part of the poem the personal narrator fades into an impersonal speaker who utters gnomic verses, though as the "I" he is still present at the beginning of the homiletic coda. Essentially the psychological pattern of settings is set by the conclusion of the first two sections. Two brief refer-

[1] N. F. Blake, "*The Seafarer*, Lines 48–49," *N & Q*, IX (1962), claims that the blossoming groves are symbols "of the resurrection of man at the Day of Judgment" (p. 163). In view of what the narrator later says about all things on *land*, this interpretation seems doubtful.

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ences to place in the homiletic section are only metaphoric extensions of the patterns established in the imagery of the first half. The first metaphor is the seafarer's characterization of all life on "land" as transitory and dead (65b–66a); the second is the identification which the impersonal narrator makes of the true Christian's "home" with heaven, the Augustinian *patria:*[1]

> Uton we hycgan hwær we ham agen,
> ond þonne geþencan hu we þider cumen;
> . . .
> hyht in heofonum. (117a–118b, 122a)

Even a cursory glance at this outline will reveal a certain pattern inherent in the structure itself. Only two elements form the pattern - land and sea. These stand apart, merge, or shift their focus and reference as the psychological development of the narrator progresses. Represented schematically, the pattern is as follows: land and sea seem to symbolize joy and sorrow in the seafarer's mind, but actually both symbolize aspects of the sadness of human existence. Therefore, the seafarer will seek another land by changing the direction he is now following on the sea. This change, both geographical and psychological, is prompted by the coming of spring on the land.

But something informs him that all life on earth is like death. The land the seafarer seeks on this new and outward ocean voyage is one that will not be subject to the mutability of the land and sea he has known. It may be a "land of strangers," but it clearly stands as a polar opposite to the land where all is *læne*. A final reduction of the pattern to its simplest terms would have the important contrast between two symbolic meanings for land – one a land of transience and the other, because it has *Dryhtnes dreamas*, a land of permanence. The sea, then, is associated with the land in two ways – as eventually identified with it in section one, and as the pathway to the new land in section two. When the personal voice of the narrator drifts away, the settings fade as well, though the image of land, which is repeated twice, underscores the double symbolism of land as both transience and stability.

However, the shift in the personal pronoun causes some hesitation in identifying *elþeodigra eard* with *ham*. *Elþeodigra eard* is the destination which

[1] See Smithers, p. 151.

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the "I" narrator is heading for; *ham* is the end all of us should desire to reach. But the merging of the "I", after his decision to make the sea journey, with the impersonal narrator of the gnomic verses does not represent a break in the poem. Rather the change in view is a modulation from the personal to the universal and ultimately to the eschatological. Even the narrator's words, "ond þonne geþencan hu we þider cumen" (118), seem to refer to the sea journey as the means of reaching the heavenly home, and we can make the identification of this *ham* with the promised land.[1]

The opening contrasts between land and sea present an ambivalent perspective on human existence. The poet manipulates this ambiguity in the symbols until he envisions the end of the seafarer's journey as the heavenly home where security lies. Ambiguous and shifting settings are necessary at the beginning to symbolize the narrator's mind when he is involved with the world, if the image of heavenly stability is to have a proper force.

For the narrator, the sea alone is redeemable because it can eventually be separate from the land, a passage for the *peregrinus* to the *elþeodigra eard*. The aptness of the sea as a psychological setting is undeniable. By identifying the sea metaphorically with life, the poet finds a setting which may be both identified with and contrasted to life on land, thus embodying the narrator's ambiguous view of human life in the landscape itself. The sea can also express the extension of life into the unknown reaches of time and space *feor heonan*, that is, death.[2] Assurance that another port awaits the seafarer, the genuine *peregrinus*, is, of course, the meaning of the poem.

The seafarer's realization of the world's transient nature is cumulative. From his point of view the opening sections are not meant to be read immediately as signals of a future allegory. The poem is a record of the states and movements of the speaker's mind as it comes to know mutability. But only through involvement in the world can he achieve this awakening into wisdom. When we view the contrasts in the first section as the start of the allegorical pattern, we are looking at the work like the poet; we are not immersed in the imagined experience with the narrator who must endure in order to know. The allegory is the poet's, not that of the *persona*

[1] See James E. Cross, rev. of *The Seafarer*, ed. I. L. Gordon (London, 1960), *JEGP*, LX (1961), 547.

[2] See O. S. Anderson (later Arngart), "*The Seafarer:* an Interpretation," *K. Humanistiska Vetenskapssamfundets i Lund, Årsberättelse*, I (1937), 1–50.

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he creates. And the agency for the revelation of that allegory is the pattern of settings that adumbrates the narrator's growing perceptiveness into the enigma of his own life.

THE THEMATIC MODE: *THE WANDERER*

The Wanderer is a poem which focuses almost entirely on the mind. Phrases and images related to the mind or the processes of the mind abound: *modcearig* (2b), *gemyndig* (6b), *modsefan minne* (10), *wat* (11b), *ferðlocan* (13a), *hordcofan* (14a), *hycge* (14b), *werig mod* (15a), *breostcofan* (18a), *gemon* (34a), *þinceð him on mode* (41a), *þonne maga gemynd mod geondhweorfeð* (51), *wise geþohte* (88b), *deope geondþenceð* (89b), *oft gemon* (90b).[1] This characterizing pattern of imagery and extensions from it define the basis of contrast between *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*.

Although the opening section in *The Seafarer* is presented as straightforward description, it is a part of a remembered experience in the mind of the exiled figure. The rest of *The Seafarer*, however, is written in the present tense as the different settings reflect the progress of that exile's mind. *The Wanderer* lacks such a simple pattern, for in this poem the "mind" roams through time and space with a freedom that makes accurate commentary on the poetic structure extremely difficult. Perhaps we can posit a narrational present tense in which the speaker describes his past exile of years ago on the sea.[2] During this part of his monologue he experiences three visions, the "memory" of the ring-giving ceremony at the hall, the "dream" of laying his head on his lord's knee, and the "hallucination" of seeing the spirits of his former companions swimming about him.[3] Between the "dream" and the "hallucination" he is suddenly and brutally re-awakened to the present description of his past exile on the *fealwe wægas* (46b). From this account of past trial and suffering, the narrator turns to contemplate the ruins which he surveys in the present, and from these

[1] James L. Rosier, "The Literal-Figurative Identity of *The Wanderer*," *PMLA*, LXXIX (1964), 366–369, calls attention to this pattern of imagery. Quotations from *The Wanderer* are taken from the edition by Dunning and Bliss.

[2] See Stanley B. Greenfield, "*The Wanderer:* a Reconsideration of Theme and Structure," *JEGP*, L (1951), 453.

[3] These terms are from *The Wanderer*, ed. R. F. Leslie (Manchester, 1966), p. 8.

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he proceeds, through the *ubi sunt* passage, to the final affirmation of his reliance on a Christian God.

The Wanderer does not have the ordered allegorical pattern of *The Seafarer*. Rather, this elegy depicts a "mirror of a mind in its several states and faculties, of memory and revery, of reason and imagination, of perception and conception." [1] A hierarchy of physical settings corresponds to the perplexity of psychological states. In the "real" world of the present only two settings may truly be said to exist – the winter sea and the ruins. The narrator's visions constitute a series of secondary settings, for within the visions themselves there are objective landscapes even though these must ultimately melt into thin air. The relationship, therefore, between mind and setting in this poem begins under conditions that were not present in *The Seafarer*. Despite the complexity of the critical problems, one point is clear enough: the two "real," i.e. present, settings frame the visionary projections. This fact will be seen to have considerable significance once the psychological structure of *The Wanderer* has been described.

What is remarkable in the wanderer's opening soliloquy is the absence of a prolonged and detailed description of landscape. Somehow, perhaps by reading back from *The Seafarer*, critics have assumed the predominance of a seascape that is only fleetingly present. In the opening section there is one reference to the *hrimcealde sæ* (4b). Twenty lines later the poet says that the exile left the hall and "wod wintercearig ofer waþema gebind" (24). The winter seascape appears once again in a particularly moving contrast with the preceding vision where the wanderer laid his head on the lord's knee:

ðonne onwæcneð eft   wineleas guma,
gesihð him biforan   fealwe wægas,
baþian brimfuglas   brædan feþra,
hreosan hrim ond snaw   hagle gemenged.
(45a–48b)

A detail from *The Seafarer* is repeated here – the replacement of the joys of men by the solitary birds as companions on the cold sea. The narrator's final word on his exile relates how he must send his weary spirit *ofer waþema gebind* (57a). This sporadic presentation of the winter seascape is entirely in keeping with the interior and associative psychological process with which it is connected.

[1] Rosier, p. 366.

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As expected, the conventional force of the sea imagery continues to equate "the ice-cold sea and the ice-cold heart," [1] but the structural pattern cannot be taken so much for granted. For intervening between these glimpses of the sea and the way that the sea symbolizes the wanderer's state of mind are the three visions. And it is the import which these visions have for the wanderer in terms of his growth in wisdom that profoundly affects the relationship of mind and setting in the latter part of the poem. After the wanderer has referred for the last time to the *waþema gebind*, his perspective gradually broadens in such a way as to imply that he acquires a universal understanding quite different from the narrow and personal point of view of the first section. We must assume a passage of time between the recounted experiences of exile and the present continuation of the narration as the wanderer contemplates the ruins. His fruitless searchings for a new lord are long past, and the visions have taught him that his own exile and his own loss were but types of the whole pattern of loss and mutability in the world. Whereas in the visions, and the seascapes which interpenetrate the visions, the wanderer pictures himself in the center of the frame – receiving the rings, laying his head on the lord's knee, greeting the spirits of his dead companions – he now enlarges his focus to universalize his personal loss. He no longer views the hostile seascape as connected only to his own state of mind, nor does he see the pattern of loss as relevant only to his particular existence. His mind seizes on the life of all noble warriors (1. 60) and this image enables him to generalize his reflection to the *topos* of the Sixth Age of the World, where all is decay and destruction as the world awaits the Second Coming:[2] swa þes middangeard / ealra dogra gehwam dreoseð ond fealleþ (62b–63b).

At this point there is a certain similarity between *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. Both speakers come midway to a realization of mutability. Each narrator undergoes a development into wisdom. The significant difference is that the seafarer at once sets out on his journey to find the heavenly land; the wanderer continues on earth waiting for the time when he will receive God's mercy. In *The Wanderer* the movement from the narrator's attainment of wisdom is not toward a specific place, but

[1] Susie I. Tucker, "Return to *The Wanderer*," *EIC*, VIII (1958), 233.

[2] See James E. Cross, "Aspects of Microcosm and Macrocosm in Old English Poetry," in *Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur*, ed. Stanley B. Greenfield (Eugene, Ore., 1963), pp. 1–22.

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only toward a greater recognition of the meaning of mutability until he reaches an eschatological vision at the end of the poem. Heaven is *ham* in *The Seafarer;* it is only a place where *fæstnung* is in *The Wanderer*, and the difference in specificity helps explain why *The Seafarer* is an allegory and *The Wanderer* is not.

The ruins which appear in lines 75–87 are the second "real" setting. They symbolize both the wanderer's state of mind and the man himself, yet they do so in a manner which calls attention to the variance between the two "real" settings and the psychological milestones which these settings mark off. For the ruins in this section are a cumulative symbolic setting. They embody all that was inherent in the visions and the symbol of the seascape. The ruins pre-empt the symbolic force of all the other settings. The bleakness of heart and sea in the personal section of the poem evolves here into the recognition that all life is transitory *sub specie aeternitatis*.[1] Not only men but the works that men build as monuments to live after them are subject to the same destructive force. In a single image the poet links the wanderer to man in general and to man's achievements – *hrime bihrorene* (77a). None can escape the frost that covers all in the transient world. The ruins stand as visible projections of the growing awareness and despair that have been carefully delineated in the wanderer's mind.

The second presentation of the ruins as a setting demonstrates even more forcefully how the ice-cold seascape becomes fused with the ruins as a symbol of the narrator's expanded comprehension of mutability. But intervening between these first and second examples is the famous *ubi sunt* passage. When the wanderer first viewed the ruins he moved from personal sadness to a perception of universal destruction; in this second rendering of the "weal wundrum heah wyrmlicum fah" (98), he intensifies the previous emotion until his vision becomes apocalyptic:

eorlas fornoman   asca þryþe,
wæpen wælgifru,   wyrd seo mære –
ond þas stanhleoþu   stormas cnyssað;
hrið hreosende   hrusan bindeð;
wintres woma   (þonne won cymeð,
nipeð, nihtscua)   norþan onsendeð
hreo hæglfare   hæleþum on andan.
(99a–105b)

[1] See Thomas C. Rumble, "From *Eardstapa* to *Snottor on Mode:* the Structural Principle of *The Wanderer*," *MLQ*, XIX (1958), 228.

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What the wanderer has done is to go one better on his own previous perceptions by depicting the terrors of the winter storm and the absolute futility of the world with such intensity that he rises to an emotional plateau. From this point his knowledge that "eal þis eorþan gesteal idel weorþeð" (110) leads him immediately to a statement of faith, "Til biþ se þe his treowe gehealdeþ" (112a), and motivates his admonition that "Wel bið þam þe him are seceð, / frofre to Fæder on heofonum, þær us eal seo fæstnung stondeð" (114b–115b). Viewed thus, the second presentation of the ruins symbolizes the need in the wanderer's mind for faith in a Christian God. These second ruins, like the first, are psychological symbols; they symbolize that last stage in the inner development of the narrator from which he can see the "fastness" of a faith beyond. The poem becomes a record of the process whereby the achievement of this faith is re-enacted in the complex psychological movement of the speaker's own mind.

Unlike *The Seafarer*, however, the structural pattern in the settings constitutes, in itself, the mode of *The Wanderer* and cannot be extrapolated to some other plane where one can construct an allegory. In *The Wanderer* the allegorical process – the relation of the literal facts of a narrative to an outer body of ideas – is both absent and unnecessary. The psychological pattern of settings moves directly and continuously to the thematic conclusions. Nothing inherent in the structure of *The Wanderer* requires an allegorical reading, for the pattern that does exist makes itself immediately applicable to thematic interpretation.[1] Christian didacticism stands by itself and is illustrated plainly by the several contrasts between the mutable and heavenly worlds.

The imagery of the poem also relates the psychological settings in still another way to the one central theme. Take, for example, the *fæstnung* of heavenly stability, a word which "in Old English has many references – anything that holds fast: stability: fortification: ratification: covenant." [2] The "fastness" of heaven is one and real, and against this unity is the seeming "fastness" of the world. Everywhere images of fastness and binding occur, though, of course, in this context they are within the confines of the mutable world. The wanderer must bind fast his thoughts in his heart (11, 13, 18), and clasp his spirit in fetters (21). The waves themselves are *waþema gebind* (24b, 57a). The storm, terror of winter, *hrusan bindeð* (102b).

[1] Cf. Cross, "On the Genre of *The Wanderer*," 72.

[2] Tucker, p. 237.

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Even the compounds for heart and breast noted earlier, *ferðloca, hordcofa, breostcofa*, suggest things which are bound fast. The imagery reinforces the use of settings as symbols of states of mind. Bound hearts and spirits are identified metaphorically with the "bound" waves of the winter seascape much as nature was bound to man through Adam's fall. And all is bound, both mind and its symbol, sea, to transience and the vicissitudes of mutability through the storm which "binds" the earth at the poem's end. If we take the meaning "fortification" for *fæstnung*, we realize that the ruins too are a symbol of man's attempt to erect a "fastness" on earth. Mind, man, building, and earth are thus bound together in the inevitability of destruction, and the poet makes the contrast explicit when he points from this pattern of binding on earth to the heaven "þær us eal seo fæstnung stondeð."

This imagery bolsters the thematic pattern established in the settings. Together the two patterns serve a function analogous to the elaborate allegorical structure of settings traced in *The Seafarer*. *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* both contain elements which place the transience of the world in opposition to the stability of heaven, but the poetic mode produced by the patterns in *The Wanderer* is thematic rather than allegorical. The recollective manner of the narrator's presentation of his past in *The Wanderer*, as opposed to the active involvement in present circumstances in *The Seafarer*, only heightens this conclusion drawn from the structural analysis. *Metudes miltse* (2a) and the *fæstnung* of heaven frame the wanderer's monologue at the beginning and end. So all the images, settings, and symbols refer directly to the Christian ideas that surround them. *The Seafarer*, which has no such frame, is free to construct its own patterns from the encounters of the narrator's mind with the settings, and to use these patterns as a metaphorical system that may bear an allegorical reading.

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