I don't know why," expands the theme from one man to all human beings in a world wasted by war and time. He derives such cold comfort as he can from asking the old question, "Where are they now, who were once so glad in the mead-hall?"

The Wanderer is preserved only in the Exeter Book, a manuscript dating to about 975 (although the poem may be much earlier), which contains the largest surviving collection of Anglo-Saxon poetry.

The Wanderer [1]

"Often the lone-dweller[2] longs for relief,
the Almighty's mercy, though melancholy,
his hands turning time and again
the ocean's currents, the ice-cold seas,
following paths of exile. Fate is firmly set."
So spoke the Wanderer,[3] weary of hardships,
cruel combats, the death of kinsmen.
"Often alone, always at daybreak
I must lament my cares; not one remains alive
to whom I could utter the thoughts in my heart,
tell him my sorrows. In truth, I know that
for any eorl[4] an excellent virtue
is to lock tight the treasure chest
within one's heart, howsoever he may think.
A downcast heart won't defy destiny,
nor the sad spirit give sustenance.
And therefore those who thirst for fame
often bind fast their breast chamber.
"So I must hold in the thoughts of my heart—
though often wretched, bereft of my homeland,
far from kinfolk— bind them with fetters,
since in days long past with darkness of earth
I covered my gold-friend,[5] and I fared from there
over the waves' bed, winter-weary,
longing for a hall and a lord of rings,
where near or far I might find one
in the mead-hall remembering me and my kin,
or else show favor to a friendless man,
requite me with comfort. One acquainted with pain
understands how cruel a traveling companion
sorrow is for someone with few friends at his side.
Exile attends him, not twisted gold rings,
Heart-freezing frost, not fruits of the earth.
He recalls tablemates and treasure distributed,

1. The translation by Alfred David is based on *Eight Old English Poems*, 3rd ed., edited by John C. Pope, revised by R. D. Fulk. The translation is also indebted to comments by Professor Fulk.
2. Old English *an-haga* = one + hedge, enclosure—i.e., one who dwells alone in some sort of confinement.
3. Old English *eard-stapa* = earth + treader. The modern title—there is no title in the manuscript—derives from this compound noun.
4. *Eorl* = warrior. Only later did the Old English word come to designate a member of the British nobility.
5. Old English *gold-wine* = gold-friend, one of the many formulas applied to the lord, here in his role as dispenser of treasure to his retainers.

how from the first his friend and lord
helped him to the feast. That happy time is no more.
"This, indeed, anyone forced to forgo for long
the beloved counsel of his lord knows well.
Often when sorrow and sleep together
bind the poor lone-dweller in their embrace,
he dreams he clasps and that he kisses
his liege-lord again, lays head and hands
on the lord's knees as he did long ago,
enjoyed the gift-giving in days gone by.
Then the warrior, friendless, awakens again,
sees before him the fallow waves,
seabirds on the water spreading their wings,
snow and hail falling and sleet as well.
Then the heart's wounds grow heavier,
sadness for dear ones. Sorrow returns.
Then through his mind pass memories of kinsmen—
joyfully he greets them, eagerly gazes—
his fellow warriors, the floating spirits,
fade on their way. They fail to bring
much familiar talk —trouble is renewed—
for any man who must often send
his weary spirit over the waves' bed.
"Therefore I don't know why my woeful heart
should not wax dark in this wide world
when I look back on the life of eorls,
how quickly they quit the mead-hall's floor,
brave young men. So this middle-earth
from day to day dwindles and fails;
therefore no one is wise without his share of winters
in the world's kingdom. A wise man must be patient,
not too hot of heart nor hasty of speech,
not reluctant to fight nor too reckless,
not too timid nor too glad, not too greedy,
and never eager to commit until he can be sure.
A man should hold back his boast until
that time has come when he truly knows
to direct his heart on the right path.
"A wise man must know the misery of that time
when the world's wealth shall all stand waste,
just as in our own day all over middle-earth
walls are standing wind-swept and wasted,
downed by frost, and dwellings covered with snow.
The mead-hall crumbles, its master lies dead,
bereft of pleasures, all the warrior-band[6] perished,
boldly by the wall. Battle took some,
bore them away; a bird carried one
above the high waves; the gray wolf took another,
divided him with death; dreary-spirited

6. Old English *duguth* = generally something that affords benefit or advantage, but here it specifically applies to a band of warriors.

an eorl buried another in an earthen pit.
"Mankind's Creator laid waste this middle-earth
till the clamor of city-dwellers ceased to be heard
and ancient works of giants stood empty.
He who wisely contemplates this wall-stead,
and considers deeply the darkness of this life,
mature in years, remembers many
bloody battlegrounds and so begins:
'Where did the steed go? Where the young warrior? Where the treasure-giver?
Where the seats of fellowship? Where the hall's festivity?
Alas bright beaker! Alas burnished warrior!
Alas pride of princes! How the time has passed,
gone under night-helm as if it never was!
A towering wall, traced with serpent shapes,[7]
endures instead of the dear warrior-band.
Strength of ash-spears destroyed warriors,
slaughter-greedy weapons, overwhelming fate,
and storms beat against these stone-faced cliffs,
snow descending seals up the ground,
drumming of winter when darkness falls,
night shadows darken, from the north send down
fierce hail-showers in hatred of men.
All is wretchedness in the realm of earth;
fate's work lays low the world under heaven.
Here wealth is fleeting, here friend is fleeting,
here family is fleeting, here humankind is fleeting.
All this resting-place Earth shall become empty.'"
So said the wise man as he sat in meditation.
A good man holds his words back, tells his woes not too soon,
baring his inner heart before knowing the best way,
an eorl who acts with courage. All shall be well for him who seeks grace,
help from our Father in heaven where a fortress stands for us all.

7. The reference is to a kind of serpentine ornamentation; examples from Roman times survive in Britain.

WULF AND EADWACER

The first three lines of this lyric poem consist of three grammatically coherent sentences, and yet they paint no coherent narrative situation. The reader is obliged to infer that situation from the juxtaposition of sentences: thus the gap of narrative sense between the first and second sentences begs the reader to supply a narrative. But what is that narrative? One might infer that the speaker's people and the male to whom the speaker refers are mutually hostile, and that if "he" comes to