

## Before You Read

### THE SEAFARER

#### Make the Connection

##### Has the Time of Heroes Passed?

In the PBS television series *The Power of Myth*, the television journalist Bill Moyers and the mythologist Joseph Campbell talk about heroes. At one point, Campbell says that as a child he had two heroes but now he has none. Here's a bit of the conversation that follows Campbell's comment:

**Moyers:** We seem to worship celebrities today, not heroes.

**Campbell:** Yes, and that's too bad. A questionnaire was once sent around to one of the high schools in Brooklyn which asked, "What would you like to be?" Two-thirds of the students responded, "A celebrity." They had no notion of having to give of themselves in order to achieve something.

Only a thousand years earlier, the poet who wrote "The Seafarer" addressed the same question: Has the time of heroes passed?

#### Quickwrite

Do you think we "worship celebrities today, not heroes"? And if we do, what effect does that have on what we value and whom we present to children as role models? Freewrite for a few moments to focus your thoughts on this question.



#### Elements of Literature

##### The Elegy

The dominant mood in Anglo-Saxon poetry is elegiac. As we have seen in *Beowulf*, this sense of sadness over the grimness and

transience of earthly life is found in the heroic epic. It is also found in several Old English fragments and poems in which a bard laments the passing of better days and greater glories.

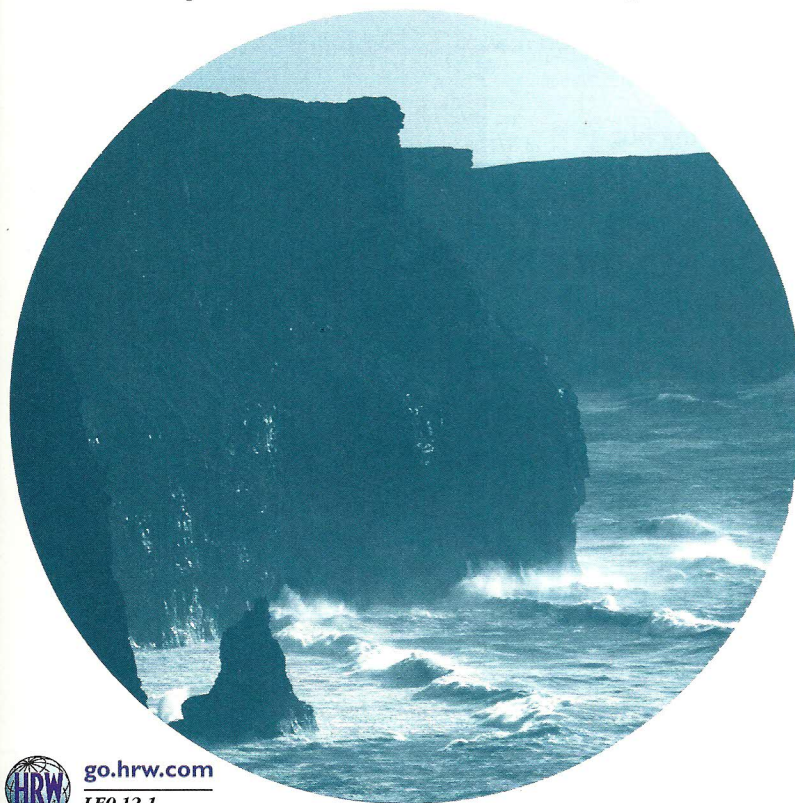
An **elegy** is a poem that mourns the death of a person or laments something lost.

*For more on the Elegy, see page 606 and the Handbook of Literary Terms.*

#### Background

"The Seafarer" is from the so-called Exeter Book, a manuscript of miscellaneous Anglo-Saxon poems dating from around A.D. 940, copied in A.D. 975, and now preserved at Exeter Cathedral in England. Though the manuscript survived the raids and fires of the centuries, the Exeter Book had not been well cared for. There are signs that its cover had been used as a chopping board; its pages had been marked by beer stains; and some had been partly burned. But today its "songs"—copied down by monks—are our chief source of Anglo-Saxon poetry.

The Anglo-Saxons were sea voyagers, and the northern seas were then, as now, especially cruel. The speaker in "The Seafarer" is an old sailor who drifted through many winters on ice-cold seas.



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