“The Wife's Lament”

(from the Exeter Book)

Translated by: Ann Stanford

I make this song about me full sadly

my own wayfaring. I a woman tell

what griefs I had since I grew up

new or old never more than now.

Ever I know the dark of my exile. 5

First my lord went out away from his people

over the wave-tumult. I grieved each dawn

wondered where my lord my first on earth might be.

Then I went forth a friendless exile

to seek service in my sorrow’s need. 10

My man’s kinsmen began to plot

by darkened thought to divide us two

so we most widely in the world’s kingdom

lived wretchedly and I suffered longing.

My lord commanded me to move my dwelling here. 15

I had few loved ones in this land

or faithful friends. For this my heart grieves:

that I should find the man well matched to me

hard of fortune mournful of mind

hiding his mood thinking of murder. 20

Blithe was our bearing often we vowed

that but death alone would part us two

naught else. But this is turned round

now . . . as if it never were

our friendship. I must far and near 25

bear the anger of my beloved.

The man sent me out to live in the woods

under an oak tree in this den in the earth.

Ancient this earth hall. I am all longing.

The valleys are dark the hills high 30

the yard overgrown bitter with briars

a joyless dwelling. Full oft the lack of my lord

seizes me cruelly here. Friends there are on earth

living beloved lying in bed

while I at dawn am walking alone 35

under the oak tree through these earth halls.

There I may sit the summerlong day

there I can weep over my exile

my many hardships. Hence I may not rest

from this care of heart which belongs to me ever 40

nor all this longing that has caught me in this life.

May that young man be sad-minded always

hard his heart’s thought while he must wear

a blithe bearing with care in the breast

a crowd of sorrows. May on himself depend 45

all his world’s joy. Be he outlawed far

in a strange folk-land— that my beloved sits

under a rocky cliff rimed with frost

a lord dreary in spirit drenched with water

in a ruined hall. My lord endures 50

much care of mind. He remembers too often

a happier dwelling. Woe be to them

that for a loved one must wait in longing.

**“The Wife’s Lament”**

**Directions: Using the poem and your notes, complete the questions below using complete sentences. Be sure to include line numbers and direct quotes when necessary.**

1. Define “lament”.

2. In line 6, the speaker refers to her “lord”. Who is she speaking of? What has he done?

3. The speaker has been exiled from her husband’s family. Why might they have done that to

her?

4. How does the speaker feel about being separated from her husband? How do you know?

5. Look at lines 27-28: “I was commanded to dwell in a wood grove under an oak tree in this

earth grave.” What is the speaker describing? Where is she?

6. Which lines represent a flashback? What is the speaker describing in these lines?

7. Beginning on line 29, the speaker describes her surroundings. Review this section and give

special attention to her word choice. What can be gleaned from this passage in regard to the

speaker’s emotional state?

8. How is the wife feeling about her husband toward the end of the poem? How do you know?