

Analysis

"Ulysses" was published in 1842 in the collection of poetry that secured Tennyson's literary fame. It had been written nine years earlier, when he was 24 years old, following the death of his closest friend, Arthur Henry Hallam. Tennyson commented that "it was more written with the feeling of [Hallam's] loss upon me than many poems in *In Memoriam*."

The poem is seventy lines of blank verse in the style of a dramatic monologue, with three audiences—Odysseus himself, the reader, and his mariners (although he may only be imagining what he might say to us and to his mariners). The poem garnered praise from Tennyson's contemporaries as well as successive literary figures including T.S. Eliot, who called it a "perfect" poem. It is generally considered one of his finest works and is a mainstay of Victorian poetry anthologies as well as selections of Tennyson's oeuvre.

The poem is based on the character Odysseus from Homer's *Odysey* ("Ulysses" is the Latin form of the name), but Tennyson also drew upon Dante's *Inferno*, Canto XXVI, in which Dante is led by the Roman epic poet Virgil to meet Ulysses and hear his tale. In Homer, Odysseus is told by the blind prophet Tiresias that he will return home to Ithaca but will then make one more journey to a land far away from home. In Dante, this part of the story is fleshed out. Ulysses gathers his men together to prepare for the journey and exhorts them not to waste their time left on earth. He dies on this journey, which is why he is in Dante's hell. Tennyson's character is somewhere in between these literary predecessors, as Ulysses knows he will set off on a last journey but has not done so yet. Critics also note the influence of Shakespeare, particularly his *Troilus and Cressida*, which also includes Ulysses.

Tennyson's Ulysses is now old, having experienced all of the adventures of battle at Troy and on the seas throughout his odyssey. Back home, he has had enough of his life as a ruler of men, keeping the peace at home; instead, he desires to embark upon his next journey. In the first part of the poem he speaks to himself, lamenting his uselessness as a ruler given the idleness of his people. They have no ambition; they "know not" the kind of adventuresome spirit that their king has. In contrast, he "will drink / Life to the lees," as is his wont.

Ulysses knows he is famous for his great deeds, but this is not what motivates him. His inquisitive spirit is always looking forward. He has seen much and has seen a great variety of cultures, but this is all in the past. Experiences have made him who he is, but what matters is passing through the "arch" to the "untravell'd world" and constantly moving toward the ever-escaping horizon. In addition to the arch, Ulysses uses another metaphor here, calling himself a sword that must "shine in use" rather than "rust unburnish'd." Yet, at home he feels bored and impotent, yearning to truly engage with what is left of his life. He is impatient for new experiences, lamenting every hour and every day that he does not seek "something more." His quest for adventure and fulfillment, like the goal of Goethe's Faust, is defined by the pursuit of new and unique knowledge "beyond the utmost bound of human thought."

In the second part of the poem, as though spoken to the reader (although this address may only be in his mind), Ulysses explains the difference between himself and his son Telemachus. Yes, his son will be a fair and "decent" ruler to his people, but the political life in this context is boring. Telemachus is rooted in regular political life, where one's aspiration is merely to lead a rough populace into accepting a somewhat better vision of morality and expedience. It is a duty

that a leader of uninspired and imprudent citizens may well fulfill with honor, like fulfilling one's regular duty to honor the "household gods." But to Ulysses this "slow" life is intolerable even if somebody has to do it. Thus Telemachus "works his work, I mine."

In the third part Ulysses seems to address his hearty mariners. The port, the boat, and the seas all beckon him. The mariners are his compatriots; they have been through thick and thin together. Unlike living under a king, on the seas they made their choices and took their risks with "free hearts, free foreheads." Those were the good old days, even fighting with gods, but there is no good reason to waste away in nostalgia. So long as they can do "something ere the end, / Some work of noble note," Ulysses wants to be doing it. Although the coming night in the poem reflects the waning years of their lives, it "is not too late to seek a newer world." The "many voices" of the ocean call out to them to come back—the voices of experiences past and of experiences yet to come. Their life is fulfilling when they are adventuring on the sea. No matter how much strength they have, while they have it they retain the strength of "will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

The allusion to Achilles in the Happy Isles (or the Blessed Isles) draws a contrast to Hades. Whereas in Dante, Ulysses has died, here he holds out hope that he will reach the heavenly isles where someone like vigorous Achilles deserves to spend eternity. In Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles is the featured warrior whose anger and valor generate the primary storyline. He is a hero who lived his life to the fullest in Troy, once he got back into the battle. But for much of the *Iliad*, Achilles sulked in his tent and left his sword and his skills "unburnish'd." Accordingly, Achilles is a good model of the heroic for Ulysses.

"Ulysses" has been called a "crisis lyric," which is a genre from the Romantic period that presents a crisis and an attempt to resolve that crisis (see William Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode"). For Ulysses, the crisis is due to old age: should he live out his days as king, fading away in dotage like [King Lear](#)? Or should he refuse to focus on death as an endpoint but, instead, constantly stay engaged in life as an adventurer? Will he live out the boring but honorable life of Telemachus at home as he ages, or the noble and risky life of surviving by his wits in uncertain waters, living by his strength of will even as his body weakens? He knows death is unavoidable, but he also knows that death-in-life—the impotency, the obsolescence—is intolerable for a person like him.

It may be a stretch to go a step farther and argue that Ulysses seeks to understand life beyond death, but consider that "it may be" that they reach the isles where Achilles resides. After all, Ulysses says that "my purpose holds / To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths / Of all the western stars, until I die." Critic Charles Mitchell notes, "one needs to emphasize that Ulysses's goal is not *death*, but is *in death*: that is, Ulysses seeks not death, but life in death." Other details in the poem support this view, such as the sea voyage, which is often a symbol for the voyage of death; his old age; his referring to himself and shipmates as spirits; and the "dark, broad, sea" which is unfathomable and carries mysterious voices. Certainly it is quite an adventure to reach the isles or Hades or somewhere that human beings normally do not reach while alive. Ulysses may indeed want to find direct evidence of spiritual reality after death. But this is not the point of the concluding lines. They are Ulysses' enduring challenge to himself, and ultimately Tennyson's challenge to us, to push ahead with vigor and strength of will no matter how old or weak our bodies are. To yield to age or weakness is to be less than fully

human. As honorable as it may be to live a peaceful life without risk, we miss the most exciting aspects of life if we do not venture out, at least a little bit, into the unknown.