

# **Summary and Analysis of Tennyson's Poem, "Ulysses" .**

# Introduction

- Ulysses complains that he is “idle” as a king, home with his elderly wife, stuck passing enlightened laws for a “savage race” that sleeps and eats but does not know him. He does not want to cease his travels; he has made the most of his life, having suffered and experienced pleasure both with others and alone and both at sea and on the shore.
- He is a famous name; he has seen the world and has been honored everywhere. He also has enjoyed battling at Troy with his fellow warriors.

- He is “a part of all that I have met,” but this is not the end, for his experience is an archway to new experiences, with the horizon always beyond reach.
- It is boring to stop and wither away and be useless in his old age; simply breathing is not life. Multiple lives would be too little to get the most out of existence, and little of his one life remains, but at least he is alive and there is time for “something more.”
- It would be a shame to do nothing for even three days; he does not want to store himself away. His “gray spirit” yearns to attain knowledge and follow it “like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.”

- In contrast, his son Telemachus, who will succeed him as king, seems content to stay put and simply rule the people. Ulysses loves him and knows that he will use his prudence to govern wisely, turning the “rugged” people “mild,” and he is “blameless” and “decent” in his “common duties.” He honors the family’s gods. Yet, Telemachus does not have his father’s energy; “He works his work, I mine.”

- Ulysses looks at the port and the sea beyond, calling to him. He recalls “the thunder and the sunshine” of his mariners’ exciting travels together, their “free hearts” and free minds, and understands that he and they are old now.
- Yet, they still can do something noble and suited to their greatness, especially as they are men who once fought with gods. Light fades, and the day wanes.
- Ulysses calls out that it is not too late to discover a “newer world.” They can leave this shore and sail beyond the sunset, exploring until he dies. Perhaps they even will reach the Happy Isles and meet Achilles.
- Although they are weak in age, much vigor remains; they still have “heroic hearts” which are “strong in will” and want to persevere, to explore and discover and never give up.

# Analysis

- "Ulysses" was published in 1842 in the collection of poetry that secured Tennyson's literary fame.
- 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.
- 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.

- 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, 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.”

- "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. 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.

**Thank You**