

26 nov 2020 - Ulysses

Ulysses becomes the expression of the dynamic man of Tennyson's time, who believes he has the right and the duty to exploit all the possibilities of human intelligence.

From this point of view, he is contrasted to his own son Telemachus, who represents the balancing force of stability and conservation. Paradoxically Ulysses, who is the father, is more active of Telemachus who is the son and much younger.

Ulysses represents an active, adventurous life, rich in imagination and enthusiasm, though sometimes it seems like a sort of escape.

Telemachus represents a more sedentary life, full of responsibilities and social duties, though sometimes lacking in enthusiasm, with a more materialistic view.

The relationship between father and son is anyway healthy and strong, and based on mutual respect.

We can also say that Ulysses is the poet's alter ego, because he gives expression to his torturing doubts about men's destiny and men's end role, and about life after death.

In general Ulysses became a metaphor for human existence, in which even the most optimistic vision of life - the one which interprets life as material and intellectual progress - is never separated from the melancholic awareness of the destiny of decline and death, reserved to us all.

The persona who is speaking is the king Ulysses, who is addressing his speech to his companions. Their presence is essential but passive, they are never interlocutors.

The character of Ulysses is rich and poignantly human; he is aware he has lived the best part of his life; he knows he has lost the integrity of his body and his energies, and he knows that death will soon put an end to everything. This gives a note of melancholy to the poem, and throws an ambiguous light on its immediate optimism.

The main sources of the monologue are Homer's *Odyssey* and Dante's *Inferno*;

- Homer represents the perfect hero in the odyssey, who conquers troy, roams the whole world, came back to Ithaca and defeats all his enemies;
- Ulysses by Dante represents the tragic hero, who is punished for trying to learn too much, and goes beyond the limits of human knowledge; actually Dante puts Ulysses in hell for the sin of **fraud**, because of the deceit with the Trojan horse; moreover his passion for

exploration has overcome his affection for his family. He is a multifarious character.

Ulysses by Tennyson represents the old hero who still wishes to travel and to learn, with a free heart and a free mind.

The first five lines are devoted to the description of Ulysses' situation on Ithaca. He reveals dissatisfaction and contempt for his present life, which is boring and meaningless; he expresses a deep nostalgia, a deep craving for his past adventures; there he is bored to death.

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Matched with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: All times I have enjoy'd
Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone, on shore, and when
Through scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vexed the dim sea: I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known, - cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all -
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch where-through
Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades
For ever and forever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!
As tho' to breathe were life! Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains: but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,

And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle,—
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and through soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. **He works his work, I mine.**
There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:
There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'T is not too late to seek a newer world'.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;

One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

This last line was the motto of the Olympic game in London 2012.