

Tennyson, “Ulysses” (512-513) Dramatic Monologue

Form: dramatic monologue, a special subcategory of dramatic poetry with a single speaker character, and an assumed listener or listeners (not the reader, but other characters), whose real or imagined presence colours the content and tone of the utterance.

Meter: unrhymed iambic pentameter, known as “blank verse.” Famous literary works in this form are Shakespeare’s plays, and Milton’s epic poem *Paradise Lost*.

Mythical background: Ulysses (Roman name of the Greek Odysseus mythical king of Ithaca), is a great Greek hero of the Trojan War—celebrated in Homer’s *Odyssey* and included in the *Iliad*). Most English poetry refers to him by his Roman name. The episode in Tennyson’s poem is based not on Homer but on Dante *Inferno* xxvi. In it, the soul of Ulysses, now dwelling in the eighth circle of Hell, explains to Dante how, after the Trojan War and his many adventures at sea, returned to his kingdom of Ithaca. Despite reunion with his wife Penelope and his son Telemachus, he was restless for further adventure, and anxious to learn more about human folly and valour. Consequently, he persuaded his few remaining companions—all old men now—to set out to sea one final time in search of further adventure. In the process, they came upon the very mountain on which the original Garden of Eden stood, within the circle of Moon, but forbidden to Man since Original Sin. As they approached, a whirlwind came and sunk their vessel plunging all to death.

Context: Tennyson’s poem dramatises Ulysses’ state of mind at the point where, he persuades his remaining followers to join him in one last voyage to the end of the world.

Discussion questions:

1. In the first stanza (lines 1-5) Ulysses summarizes his dissatisfaction with his present life as just an “idle king.” He lists several reasons why his present life is disappointing. In your opinion, are all his reasons admirable?
2. Based on stanza 2 (lines 6-32) do you believe Ulysses is in denial regarding old age and impending death?
3. In stanza 3, how honest does Ulysses seem to be about his feelings for his son and his people?
4. Although Ulysses states his goal in going on another quest is to live fully until death comes, what alternate goal does he reveal in stanza 4?
5. Tennyson wrote this poem in 1833, when he was only 24, deeply mourning the death that year of his best friend Arthur Hallam, who had been a fellow university student. This period of complicated grief extended during the composition of “In Memoriam” which he worked on during the next 17 years. Can you see any parallel between the mythical situation expressed in the poem and Tennyson’s state of mind immediately following Hallam’s death? Nevertheless, by encoding his private grief in a mythical poem, how does Tennyson manage to raise his private feeling to a higher more universal level?