ULYSSES

It little profits that an idle king,

By this still hearth, among these barren crags,

Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole

Unequal laws unto a savage race,

That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

The poem begins by telling us that a king gains nothing from just sitting around by the fire with his wife and making laws for people who don't even know him.

The speaker at first seems at to be some kind of observer or impersonal figure who knows a lot about how to be a king, but in line 3 we learn that the king himself, Ulysses, is speaking.

The phrase "it little profits" is another way of saying, "it is useless" or "it isn't beneficial."

"Mete" means "to allot" or "measure out." Here it refers to the king's allotment of rewards and punishments to his subjects.

"Unequal" doesn't mean that the rewards and punishments are unjust or unfair, but rather variable.

"Match'd" doesn't refer to a tennis match or other sporting event; it means something like "paired" or "partnered with."

Ulysses' subjects are presented to us as a large group of drones who do nothing but eat and sleep.

Lines 6-11

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink

Life to the lees: all times I have enjoyed

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:

After his moralistic opening, Ulysses tells us more about why sitting around doling out rewards and punishments bores him.

We learn that he is a restless spirit who doesn't want to take a break from roaming the ocean in search of adventure. He will not let life pass him by.

The word "lees" originally referred to the sediment accumulated at the bottom of a bottle of wine; to "drink life to the lees" means to drink to the very last drop. Nowadays we might say something like "live life to the fullest."

Ulysses tells us that he has had a lot of good times and a lot of bad times, sometimes with his best friends, and sometimes alone, both on dry land and while sailing through potentially destructive storms.

"Scudding drifts" are pounding showers of rain that one might encounter at sea during a storm or while crab fishing off the coast of Alaska.

The "Hyades" are a group of stars in the constellation Taurus often associated with rain; their rising in the sky generally coincides with the rainy season. Here they are presented as agitators of the ocean.

Line 11-23

…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 honoured 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;

Ulysses elaborates on the good times and bad times – well, mostly the good times – he's enjoyed during his travels.

The phrase "I am become a name" means something like "become a household name." Ulysses has become famous because he's traveled to so many places.

Ulysses tells us that he's visited a variety of different places, with different manners, weather, governments, etc. He portrays himself as a Renaissance traveler of sorts with an insatiable desire ("hungry heart") to see as many places as he can, try as many foods as he can, etc.

The phrase "myself not least, but honoured of them all" is a little tricky. It means something like "I wasn't treated like the least little thing but was honored by everybody I met."

Ulysses also describes the time he spent "on the ringing plains of windy Troy," the famous city where the Trojan War took place: you know, that famous war dramatized in the Brad Pitt movie Troy? The "plains" are "ringing" because of the armor clashing together in battle.

"I am a part of all that I have met" is a strange phrase. Usually we say something like "all the places I have seen are now a part of me." The phrase suggests that Ulysses left parts of himself everywhere he went; this sounds like another way of saying "I don't belong here in Ithaca."

Lines 19-24

Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough

Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades

For ever and for ever when I move.

How dull it is to pause, to make an end,

To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!

As though to breathe were life!

Ulysses further justifies his desire to keep traveling and living a life of adventure.

He compares his life or experiences to an arch and describes the "untravelled world" as a place that "gleams" at him through that arch. All he has to do is walk through the arch…

The first two lines of the passage are very tricky, and we're not entirely sure what they mean. One way to read "Untravelled world" is as a reference to death; it is always looking at him through the "arch" of his experiences, but somehow seems to recede ("margin fades") as he keeps moving.

You could also think of the "Untravelled world" as an arch. As Ulysses moves, his experiences make an arch covering the arch of the "Untravelled world." The more he travels, the more the margins or edges of that world recede or are covered up.

Ulysses reiterates how boring it is just sitting around when he could be out exploring the world. It's a lot like that feeling you get when you're just getting into the rhythm of things and have to

stop.

He likens himself to some kind of metallic instrument that is still perfectly useful and shiny but just rusts if nobody uses it, like that ancient bicycle in your garage. If Ulysses weren't a soldier, he might say he's just collecting dust.

For Ulysses, life is about more than just "breathing" and going through the motions; it's about adventure.

Line 25-32

…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 grey spirit yearning in desire

To follow knowledge like a sinking star,

Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

Ulysses continues to a radiate a desire for adventure, claiming that even multiple lifetimes wouldn't be enough for him to do all the things he wants.

At this point, though, he's an old man – a "grey spirit" – near the end of his life, and he wants to make the most of what's left. It's a waste of time for him to hang out in Ithaca for three years when his desire for adventure is still so alive.

The phrase "but every hour is saved / From that eternal silence, something more, / A bringer of new things" is strange. It means something like "each additional hour that I live, or each hour that I am saved from death, brings me new experiences."

"Three suns" doesn't mean three days, but rather three years. Ulysses has apparently been wasting his time for quite a while.

The phrase "follow knowledge like a sinking star" is ambiguous. On the one hand, Ulysses wants to chase after knowledge and try to catch it as it sinks like a star. On the other hand, Ulysses himself could be the "sinking star." That makes sense too; he is a great personality who is

moving closer to death (though, in our opinion, he's also kind of a rock star).

Lines 33-38

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.

Ulysses introduces us to his son and heir, Telemachus, who seems like the right guy to take over the job of King of Ithaca. He's smart, and he knows how to make his people do things without being too harsh about it.

A "Sceptre" is a ceremonial staff that symbolizes authority. Ulysses means something like "I leave him in charge."

When compared with Ulysses, Telemachus seems a lot less restless. He has "slow prudence," meaning he's patient and willing to make the best decision for the people of Ithaca without being too hasty.

The people of Ithaca are "rugged," which means that they're a little uncivilized and uncultured. They're like country-bumpkins with a little bit of an attitude. That's why they need to be reigned in ("subdued," made "mild") and put to good use.

"Soft degrees" implies that Telemachus will civilize the citizens of Ithaca in stages and in a nice way; it's kingship as constructive criticism.

Lines 39-43

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.

Ulysses tells us more about Telemachus' qualifications; he's a straight shooter all the way, a nice guy.

"Decent not to fail" means that Telemachus is smart enough not to fail at doing nice things for people and paying the proper respects to the gods.

"Meet" means "appropriate" or "suitable."

We're not sure whether "when I am gone" means that Ulysses is planning on going back to sea for some more adventures, or if he's thinking about his own death.

Lines 44-50

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;

Ulysses shifts our attention from his son to the port of Ithaca, where he tells us a ship is preparing to set sail. Looks like he's planning on skipping town after all, and with his old friends as well.

"Gloom" is usually a noun but here it's a verb that means "appearing dark" or "scowling."

"Thunder and sunshine" is used here to mean something like "good times and bad times." They have gladly ("with a frolic welcome") gone through thick and thin for Ulysses.

The phrase "opposed / Free hearts, free foreheads" is a little tricky. Ulysses means that his sailors "opposed" whatever came in their way – "thunder," for example – and they did it as free men and with a lot of confidence ("free foreheads").

While at first it seems as though Ulysses has just been musing to himself, it turns out he's speaking to someone. We don't know whom he's talking to, but the other person is an old man.

Speaking of old age, Ulysses suggests that even though old people are respected, they also have responsibilities.

…Come, my friends,

'Tis 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.

It turns out that Ulysses is addressing his friends, at least during this part of the poem. He tells them what he's been telling us all along: it's never too late to go in search of new lands.

Here a "furrow" refers to the track or mark made in the water by the ship. He tells his sailors to "smite" or strike it, most likely with oars.

"Purpose" can mean two different things; it can mean either "destiny," as in "sailing is my purpose in life," or it can mean "intention," as in "I intend to sail as far as I can."

The "baths / Of all the western stars" isn't a place where the stars go to bathe themselves. It refers to the outer ocean or river that the Greeks believed surrounded the (flat) earth; they thought the stars descended into it.

To sail beyond the "baths" means Ulysses wants to sail really, really far away – beyond the horizon of the known universe – until he dies.

The "happy isles" refers to the Islands of the Blessed, a place where big-time Greek heroes like Achilles enjoyed perpetual summer after they died. We might say Heaven.

Ulysses realizes that he and his companions might die, but he's OK with that. If they die, they might even get to go to the "Happy Isles" and visit their old pal Achilles.

Lines 65-70

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and though

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.

Ulysses yet again tells us that even though he and his sailors are old and don't have a lot of gas left in the tank, there's enough left to go a little farther.

"Abides" is a word that means "remains."

These guys are a team with one heartbeat. They're old and broken, but they still have the will to seek out and face challenges without giving up. They can't bench-press 200 pounds anymore, but that won't stop them from trying anyway.

The phrase "strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not yield" means something like "we're strong because of our will to strive" or "our will to strive is strong."