“Ulysses”

Complete Text

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.

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink

Life to the lees: All times I have enjoy’d

Greatly, have suffer’d greatly, both with those

That loved me, and alone, on shore, and when

Thro’ scudding drifts the rainy Hyades

Vext 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 wherethro’

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 unburnish’d, 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 thro’ 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,

’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.

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.

Summary

Ulysses (Odysseus) declares that there is little point in his staying home “by this still hearth” with his old wife, doling out rewards and punishments for the unnamed masses who live in his kingdom.

Still speaking to himself he proclaims that he “cannot rest from travel” but feels compelled to live to the fullest and swallow every last drop of life. He has enjoyed all his experiences as a sailor who travels the seas, and he considers himself a symbol for everyone who wanders and roams the earth. His travels have exposed him to many different types of people and ways of living. They have also exposed him to the “delight of battle” while fighting the Trojan War with his men. Ulysses declares that his travels and encounters have shaped who he is: “I am a part of all that I have met,” he asserts. And it is only when he is traveling that the “margin” of the globe that he has not yet traversed shrink and fade, and cease to goad him.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

Ulysses declares that it is boring to stay in one place, and that to remain stationary is to rust rather than to shine; to stay in one place is to pretend that all there is to life is the simple act of breathing, whereas he knows that in fact life contains much novelty, and he longs to encounter this. His spirit yearns constantly for new experiences that will broaden his horizons; he wishes “to follow knowledge like a sinking star” and forever grow in wisdom and in learning.

Ulysses now speaks to an unidentified audience concerning his son Telemachus, who will act as his successor while the great hero resumes his travels: he says, “This is my son, mine own Telemachus, to whom I leave the scepter and the isle.” He speaks highly but also patronizingly of his son’s capabilities as a ruler, praising his prudence, dedication, and devotion to the gods. Telemachus will do his work of governing the island while Ulysses will do his work of traveling the seas: “He works his work, I mine.”

In the final stanza, Ulysses addresses the mariners with whom he has worked, traveled, and weathered life’s storms over many years. He declares that although he and they are old, they still have the potential to do something noble and honorable before “the long day wanes.” He encourages them to make use of their old age because “ ’tis not too late to seek a newer world.” He declares that his goal is to sail onward “beyond the sunset” until his death. Perhaps, he suggests, they may even reach the “Happy Isles,” or the paradise of perpetual summer described in Greek mythology where great heroes like the warrior Achilles were believed to have been taken after their deaths. Although Ulysses and his mariners are not as strong as they were in youth, they are “strong in will” and are sustained by their resolve to push onward relentlessly: “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

Form

This poem is written as a dramatic monologue: the entire poem is spoken by a single character, whose identity is revealed by his own words. The lines are in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, which serves to impart a fluid and natural quality to Ulysses’s speech. Many of the lines are enjambed, which means that a thought does not end with the line-break; the sentences often end in the middle, rather than the end, of the lines. The use of enjambment is appropriate in a poem about pushing forward “beyond the utmost bound of human thought.” Finally, the poem is divided into four paragraph-like sections, each of which comprises a distinct thematic unit of the poem.

Commentary

In this poem, written in 1833 and revised for publication in 1842, Tennyson reworks the figure of Ulysses by drawing on the ancient hero of Homer’s Odyssey (“Ulysses” is the Roman form of the Greek “Odysseus”) and the medieval hero of Dante’s Inferno. Homer’s Ulysses, as described in Scroll XI of the Odyssey, learns from a prophecy that he will take a final sea voyage after killing the suitors of his wife Penelope. The details of this sea voyage are described by Dante in Canto XXVI of the Inferno: Ulysses finds himself restless in Ithaca and driven by “the longing I had to gain experience of the world.” Dante’s Ulysses is a tragic figure who dies while sailing too far in an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Tennyson combines these two accounts by having Ulysses make his speech shortly after returning to Ithaca and resuming his administrative responsibilities, and shortly before embarking on his final voyage.

However, this poem also concerns the poet’s own personal journey, for it was composed in the first few weeks after Tennyson learned of the death of his dear college friend Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833. Like In Memoriam, then, this poem is also an elegy for a deeply cherished friend. Ulysses, who symbolizes the grieving poet, proclaims his resolution to push onward in spite of the awareness that “death closes all” (line 51). As Tennyson himself stated, the poem expresses his own “need of going forward and braving the struggle of life” after the loss of his beloved Hallam.

The poem’s final line, “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield,” came to serve as a motto for the poet’s Victorian contemporaries: the poem’s hero longs to flee the tedium of daily life “among these barren crags” (line 2) and to enter a mythical dimension “beyond the sunset, and the baths of all the western stars” (lines 60–61); as such, he was a model of individual self-assertion and the Romantic rebellion against bourgeois conformity. Thus for Tennyson’s immediate audience, the figure of Ulysses held not only mythological meaning, but stood as an important contemporary cultural icon as well.

“Ulysses,” like many of Tennyson’s other poems, deals with the desire to reach beyond the limits of one’s field of vision and the mundane details of everyday life. Ulysses is the antithesis of the mariners in “The Lotos-Eaters,” who proclaim “we will no longer roam” and desire only to relax amidst the Lotos fields. In contrast, Ulysses “cannot rest from travel” and longs to roam the globe (line 6). Like the Lady of Shallot, who longs for the worldly experiences she has been denied, Ulysses hungers to explore the untraveled world.

As in all dramatic monologues, here the character of the speaker emerges almost unintentionally from his own words. Ulysses’ incompetence as a ruler is evidenced by his preference for potential quests rather than his present responsibilities. He devotes a full 26 lines to his own egotistical proclamation of his zeal for the wandering life, and another 26 lines to the exhortation of his mariners to roam the seas with him. However, he offers only 11 lines of lukewarm praise to his son concerning the governance of the kingdom in his absence, and a mere two words about his “aged wife” Penelope. Thus, the speaker’s own words betray his abdication of responsibility and his specificity of purpose.