

= Ulysses (poem) =

" Ulysses " is a poem in blank verse by the Victorian poet Alfred , Lord Tennyson (1809 ? 1892) , written in 1833 and published in 1842 in his well @-@ received second volume of poetry . An oft @-@ quoted poem , it is popularly used to illustrate the dramatic monologue form . Facing old age , mythical hero Ulysses describes his discontent and restlessness upon returning to his kingdom , Ithaca , after his far @-@ ranging travels . Despite his reunion with his wife Penelope and son Telemachus , Ulysses yearns to explore again .

The character of Ulysses (in Greek , Odysseus) has been explored widely in literature . The adventures of Odysseus were first recorded in Homer 's Iliad and Odyssey (c . 800 ? 700 BC) , and Tennyson draws on Homer 's narrative in the poem . Most critics , however , find that Tennyson 's Ulysses recalls Dante 's Ulysses in his Inferno (c . 1320) . In Dante 's re @-@ telling , Ulysses is condemned to hell among the false counsellors , both for his pursuit of knowledge beyond human bounds and for his adventures in disregard of his family .

For much of this poem 's history , readers viewed Ulysses as resolute and heroic , admiring him for his determination " To strive , to seek , to find , and not to yield " . The view that Tennyson intended a heroic character is supported by his statements about the poem , and by the events in his life ? the death of his closest friend ? that prompted him to write it . In the twentieth century , some new interpretations of " Ulysses " highlighted potential ironies in the poem . They argued , for example , that Ulysses wishes to selfishly abandon his kingdom and family , and they questioned more positive assessments of Ulysses ' character by demonstrating how he resembles flawed protagonists in earlier literature .

= = Synopsis and structure = =

As the poem begins , Ulysses has returned to his kingdom , Ithaca , having made a long journey home after fighting in the Trojan War . Confronted again by domestic life , Ulysses expresses his lack of contentment , including his indifference toward the " savage race " (line 4) whom he governs . Ulysses contrasts his present restlessness with his heroic past , and contemplates his old age and eventual death ? " Life piled on life / Were all too little , and of one to me / Little remains " (24 ? 26) ? and longs for further experience and knowledge . His son Telemachus will inherit the throne that Ulysses finds burdensome . While Ulysses thinks that Telemachus will be a good king ? " Most blameless is he , centred in the sphere / Of common duties " (39) ? he seems to have lost any connection to his son ? " He works his work , I mine " (43) ? and the conventional methods of governing ? " by slow prudence " and " through soft degrees " (36 , 37) . In the final section , Ulysses turns to his fellow mariners and calls on them to join him on another quest , making no guarantees as to their fate but attempting to conjure their heroic past :

= = = Prosody = = =

The speaker 's language is unadorned but forceful , and it expresses Ulysses ' conflicting moods as he searches for continuity between his past and future . There is often a marked contrast between the sentiment of Ulysses ' words and the sounds that express them . For example , the poem 's insistent iambic pentameter is often interrupted by spondees (metrical feet that consist of two long syllables) ; such laboured language slows the poem (and in other places may cast doubt upon the reliability of Ulysses ' utterances) :

Observing their burdensome prosodic effect , the poet Matthew Arnold remarked , " these three lines by themselves take up nearly as much time as a whole book of the Iliad . " Many of the poem 's clauses carry over into the following line ; these enjambments emphasize Ulysses ' restlessness and dissatisfaction .

= = = Form = = =

The poem 's seventy lines of blank verse are presented as a dramatic monologue . Scholars disagree on how Ulysses ' speech functions in this format ; it is not necessarily clear to whom Ulysses is speaking , if anyone , and from what location . Some see the verse turning from a soliloquy to a public address , as Ulysses seems to speak to himself in the first movement , then to turn to an audience as he introduces his son , and then to relocate to the seashore where he addresses his mariners . In this interpretation , the comparatively direct and honest language of the first movement is set against the more politically minded tone of the last two movements . For example , the second paragraph (33 ? 43) about Telemachus , in which Ulysses muses again about domestic life , is a " revised version [of lines 1 ? 5] for public consumption " : a " savage race " is revised to a " rugged people " .

The ironic interpretations of " Ulysses " may be the result of the modern tendency to consider the narrator of a dramatic monologue as necessarily " unreliable " . According to critic Dwight Culler , the poem has been a victim of revisionist readings in which the reader expects to reconstruct the truth from a misleading narrator 's accidental revelations . (Compare the more obvious use of this approach in Robert Browning 's " My Last Duchess " .) Culler himself views " Ulysses " as a dialectic in which the speaker weighs the virtues of a contemplative and an active approach to life ; Ulysses moves through four emotional stages that are self @-@ revelatory , not ironic : beginning with his rejection of the barren life to which he has returned in Ithaca , he then fondly recalls his heroic past , recognizes the validity of Telemachus ' method of governing , and with these thoughts plans another journey .

= = = Publication history = = =

Tennyson completed the poem on 20 October 1833 , but it was not published until 1842 , in his second collection of Poems . Unlike many of Tennyson 's other important poems , " Ulysses " was not revised after its publication .

Tennyson originally blocked out the poem in four paragraphs , broken before lines 6 , 33 and 44 . In this structure , the first and third paragraphs are thematically parallel , but may be read as interior and exterior monologues , respectively . However , the poem is often printed with the first paragraph break omitted .

= = Interpretations = =

= = = Autobiographical elements = = =

Tennyson penned " Ulysses " after the death of his close Cambridge friend , the poet Arthur Henry Hallam (1811 ? 1833) , with whom Tennyson had a strong emotional bond . The two friends had spent much time discussing poetry and philosophy , writing verse , and travelling in southern France , the Pyrenees , and Germany . Tennyson considered Hallam destined for greatness , perhaps as a statesman .

When Tennyson heard on 1 October 1833 of his friend 's death , he was living in Somersby , Lincolnshire , in cramped quarters with his mother and nine of his ten siblings . His father had died in 1831 , requiring Tennyson to return home and take responsibility for the family . Tennyson 's friends were becoming increasingly concerned about his mental and physical health during this time . The family had little income , and three of Tennyson 's brothers were mentally ill . Just as Tennyson 's outlook was improving ? he was adjusting to his new domestic duties , regaining contact with friends , and had published his 1832 book of poems ? the news of Hallam 's death arrived . Tennyson shared his grief with his sister , Emily , who had been engaged to Hallam .

According to Victorian scholar Linda Hughes , the emotional gulf between the state of his domestic affairs and the loss of his special friendship informs the reading of " Ulysses " ? particularly its treatment of domesticity . At one moment , Ulysses ' discontent seems to mirror that of Tennyson , who would have been frustrated with managing the house in such a state of grief . At the next ,

Ulysses is determined to transcend his age and his environment by travelling again . It may be that Ulysses ' determination to defy circumstance attracted Tennyson to the myth ; he said that the poem " gave my feeling about the need of going forward and braving the struggle of life " . On another occasion , the poet stated , " There is more about myself in Ulysses , which was written under the sense of loss and that all had gone by , but that still life must be fought out to the end . It was more written with the feeling of his loss upon me than many poems in In Memoriam . " Hallam 's death influenced much of Tennyson 's poetry , including perhaps his most highly regarded work , In Memoriam A.H.H. , begun in 1833 and completed seventeen years later .

Other critics find stylistic incongruities between the poem and its author that make " Ulysses " exceptional . W. W. Robson writes , " Tennyson , the responsible social being , the admirably serious and ' committed ' individual , is uttering strenuous sentiments in the accent of Tennyson the most un @-@ strenuous , lonely and poignant of poets . " He finds that Tennyson 's two widely noted personae , the " responsible social being " and the melancholic poet , meet uniquely in " Ulysses " , yet seem not to recognize each other within the text .

= = = Literary context = = =

Tennyson adopts aspects of the Ulysses character and narrative from many sources ; his treatment of Ulysses is the first modern account . The ancient Greek poet Homer introduced Ulysses (Odysseus in Greek) , and many later poets took up the character , including Euripides , Horace , Dante , William Shakespeare , and Alexander Pope . Homer 's Odyssey provides the poem 's narrative background : in its eleventh book the prophet Tiresias foretells that Ulysses will return to Ithaca after a difficult voyage , then begin a new , mysterious voyage , and later die a peaceful , " unwarlike " death that comes vaguely " from the sea " . At the conclusion of Tennyson 's poem , his Ulysses is contemplating undertaking this new voyage .

Tennyson 's character , however , is not the lover of public affairs seen in Homer 's poems . Rather , " Ulisse " from Dante 's Inferno is Tennyson 's main source for the character , which has an important effect on the poem 's interpretation . Ulisse recalls his voyage in the Inferno 's 26th canto , in which he is condemned to the Eighth Circle of false counsellors for misusing his gift of reason . Dante treats Ulisse , with his " zeal ? / T 'explore the world " , as an evil counsellor who lusts for adventure at the expense of his family and his duties in Ithaca . Tennyson projects this zeal into Ulysses ' unquenched desire for knowledge :

The poet 's intention to recall the Homeric character remains evident in certain passages . " I am become a name " (11) recalls an episode in the Odyssey in which Demodocus sings about Odysseus ' adventures in the king 's presence , acknowledging his fame . With phrases such as " There gloom the dark broad seas " (45) and " The deep / Moans round with many voices " (55 ? 56) , Tennyson seems to be consciously invoking Homer .

Critics have also noted the influence of Shakespeare in two passages . In the early movement , the savage race " That hoard , and sleep , and feed , and know not me " (5) echoes Hamlet 's soliloquy : " What is a man , / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed ? A beast , no more . " Tennyson 's " How dull it is to pause , to make an end , / To rust unburnish ? d , not to shine in use ! " (22 ? 23) recalls Shakespeare 's Ulysses in Troilus and Cressida (c . 1602) :

The last movement of " Ulysses " , which is among the most familiar passages in nineteenth @-@ century English @-@ language poetry , presents decisive evidence of the influence of Dante . Ulysses turns his attention from himself and his kingdom and speaks of ports , seas , and his mariners . The strains of discontent and weakness in old age remain throughout the poem , but Tennyson finally leaves Ulysses " To strive , to seek , to find , and not to yield " (70) , recalling the Dantesque damnable desire for knowledge beyond all bounds . The words of Dante 's character as he exhorts his men to the journey find parallel in those of Tennyson 's Ulysses , who calls his men to join him on one last voyage . Quoting Dante 's Ulisse :

However , critics note that in the Homeric narrative , Ulysses ' original mariners are dead . A significant irony therefore develops from Ulysses ' speech to his sailors ? " Come , my friends , / ' Tis not too late to seek a newer world " (56 ? 57) . Since Dante 's Ulisse has already undertaken this

voyage and recounts it in the Inferno , Ulysses ' entire monologue can be envisioned as his recollection while situated in Hell .

= = = From affirmation to irony = = =

The degree to which Tennyson identifies with Ulysses has provided one of the great debates among scholars of the poem . Critics who find that Tennyson identifies with the speaker read Ulysses ' speech " affirmatively " , or without irony . Many other interpretations of the poem have developed from the argument that Tennyson does not identify with Ulysses , and further criticism has suggested that the purported inconsistencies in Ulysses ' character are the fault of the poet himself .

Key to the affirmative reading of " Ulysses " is the biographical context of the poem . Such a reading takes into account Tennyson 's statements about writing the poem ? " the need of going forward " ? and considers that he would not undermine Ulysses ' determination with irony when he needed a similar stalwartness to face life after Hallam 's death . Ulysses is thus seen as an heroic character whose determination to seek " some work of noble note " (52) is courageous in the face of a " still hearth " (2) and old age . The passion and conviction of Tennyson 's language ? and even his own comments on the poem ? signify that the poet , as was typical in the Victorian age , admired courage and persistence . Read straightforwardly , " Ulysses " promotes the questing spirit of youth , even in old age , and a refusal to resign and face life passively .

Until the early twentieth century , readers reacted to " Ulysses " sympathetically . The meaning of the poem was increasingly debated as Tennyson 's stature rose . After Paull F. Baum criticized Ulysses ' inconsistencies and Tennyson 's conception of the poem in 1948 , the ironic interpretation became dominant . Baum finds in Ulysses echoes of Lord Byron 's flawed heroes , who similarly display conflicting emotions , self @-@ critical introspection , and a rejection of social responsibility . Even Ulysses ' resolute final utterance ? " To strive , to seek , to find , and not to yield " ? is undercut by irony , when Baum and later critics compare this line to Satan 's " courage never to submit or yield " in John Milton 's Paradise Lost (1667) .

Ulysses ' apparent disdain for those around him is another facet of the ironic perspective . He declares that he is " matched with an aged wife " (3) , indicates his weariness in governing a " savage race " (4) , and suggests his philosophical distance from his son Telemachus . A skeptical reading of the second paragraph finds it a condescending tribute to Telemachus and a rejection of his " slow prudence " (36) . However , the adjectives used to describe Telemachus ? " blameless " , " discerning " , and " decent " ? are words with positive connotations in other of Tennyson 's poetry and within the classical tradition , where " blameless " is an attribute of gods and heroes .

Critic E. J. Chiasson argued in 1954 that Ulysses is without faith in an afterlife , and that Tennyson uses a " method of indirection " to affirm the need for religious faith by showing how Ulysses ' lack of faith leads to his neglect of kingdom and family . Chiasson regards the poem as " intractable " in Tennyson 's canon , but finds that the poem 's meaning resolves itself when this indirection is understood : it illustrates Tennyson 's conviction that " disregarding religious sanctions and ' submitting all things to desire ' leads to either a sybaritic or a brutal repudiation of responsibility and ' life ' . "

Other ironic readings have found Ulysses longing for withdrawal , even death , in the form of his proposed quest . In noting the sense of passivity in the poem , critics highlight Tennyson 's tendency toward the melancholic . T. S. Eliot opines that " Tennyson could not tell a story at all " . He finds Dante 's treatment of Ulysses exciting , while Tennyson 's piece is " an elegiac mood " . " Ulysses " is found lacking in narrative action ; the hero 's goal is vague , and by the poem 's famous last line , it is not clear for what he is " striving " , or to what he refuses to yield . According to Victorian scholar Herbert Tucker , Tennyson 's characters " move " through time and space to be moved inwardly . To Ulysses , experience is " somewhere out there " ,

= = Legacy = =

== Contemporary appraisal and canonization ==

The contemporary reviews of " Ulysses " were positive and found no irony in the poem . Author John Sterling ? like Tennyson a member of the Cambridge Apostles ? wrote in the Quarterly Review in 1842 , " How superior is ' Ulysses ' ! There is in this work a delightful epic tone , and a clear impassioned wisdom quietly carving its sage words and graceful figures on pale but lasting marble . " Tennyson 's 1842 volume of poetry impressed Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle . Quoting three lines of " Ulysses " in an 1842 letter to Tennyson ?

? Carlyle remarked , " These lines do not make me weep , but there is in me what would fill whole Lachrymatories as I read . "

English theologian Richard Holt Hutton summarized the poem as Tennyson 's " friendly picture of the insatiable craving for new experience , enterprise , and adventure , when under the control of a luminous reason and a self @-@ controlled will . " The contemporary poet Matthew Arnold was early in observing the narrative irony of the poem : he found Ulysses ' speech " the least plain , the most un @-@ Homeric , which can possibly be conceived . Homer presents his thought to you just as it wells from the source of his mind : Mr. Tennyson carefully distils his thought before he will part with it . Hence comes ... a heightened and elaborate air . "

Despite the critical acclaim " Ulysses " received , its rise within the Tennyson canon took decades . Tennyson did not usually select it for publication in poetry anthologies ; in teaching anthologies , however , the poem was usually included ? and it remains a popular teaching poem today . Its current prominence in Tennyson 's oeuvre is the result of two trends , according to Tennyson scholar Matthew Rowlinson : the rise of formal English poetry studies in the late nineteenth century , and the Victorian effort to articulate a British culture that could be exported . He argues that " Ulysses " forms part of the prehistory of imperialism ? a term that only appeared in the language in 1851 . The protagonist sounds like a " colonial administrator " , and his reference to seeking a newer world (57) echoes the phrase " New World " , which became common during the Renaissance . While " Ulysses " cannot be read as overtly imperialistic , Tennyson 's later work as Poet Laureate sometimes argues for the value of Britain 's colonies , or was accused of jingoism . Rowlinson invokes the Marxist theorist Louis Althusser 's extension of the argument that ideology is ahistorical , finding that Tennyson 's poem " comes before an ideological construction for which it nonetheless makes people nostalgic " .

== Literary and cultural legacy ==

In a 1929 essay , T. S. Eliot called " Ulysses " a " perfect poem " . An analogue of Ulysses is found in Eliot 's " Gerontion " (1920) . Both poems are narrated by an aged man contemplating life 's end . An excerpt from " Gerontion " reads as an ironic comment on the introductory lines of " Ulysses " :

The Italian poet Giovanni Pascoli (1855 ? 1912) stated that his long lyric poem *L'ultimo viaggio* was an attempt to reconcile the portrayals of Ulysses in Dante and Tennyson with Tiresias 's prophecy that Ulysses would die " a mild death off the sea " . Pascoli 's Ulysses leaves Ithaca to retrace his epic voyage rather than begin another .

" Ulysses " remains much admired , even as the twentieth century brought new interpretations of the poem . Professor of literature Basil Willey commented in 1956 , " In ' Ulysses ' the sense that he must press on and not moulder in idleness is expressed objectively , through the classical story , and not subjectively as his own experience . [Tennyson] comes here as near perfection in the grand manner as he ever did ; the poem is flawless in tone from beginning to end ; spare , grave , free from excessive decoration , and full of firmly controlled feeling . " In the fifteenth edition of Bartlett 's Familiar Quotations (1980) , nine sections of " Ulysses " , comprising 36 of the poem 's 70 lines , are quoted , compared to only six in the ninth edition (1891) .

Many readers have accepted the acclaimed last lines of " Ulysses " as inspirational . The poem 's ending line has also been used as a motto by schools and other organisations . U.S. Senator Robert Francis Kennedy quoted the three last lines at the end of his speech " On the Mindless Menace of

Violence " in America a day after the assassination of Martin Luther King . The final line is inscribed on a cross at Observation Hill , Antarctica , to commemorate explorer Robert Falcon Scott and his party , who died on their return trek from the South Pole in 1912 :