

ULYSSES

- ALFRED LORD TENNYSON

*"The purpose of life is to live it,
to taste experience to the utmost,
to reach out eagerly and without fear for
newer and richer experience."*

- Eleanor Roosevelt

"Ulysses" was published in 1842 in the collection of poetry that secured Tennyson's literary fame. This poem has been written as a dramatic monologue: the entire poem is spoken by a single character, called Ulysses. Ulysses complains that he is "idle" as a king, being at home with his elderly wife, stuck passing enlightened laws for a "savage race". He does not want to cease his travels. He has made the most of his life, having suffered and experienced pleasure both with others and alone and both at sea and on the shore. He has seen the world and has been honored everywhere. He also has enjoyed battling at Troy with his fellow warriors. He says,

"I am a part of all that I have met,"

Yet all experience is an arch where thro'

his experience is an archway to new experiences, with the horizon always beyond reach. According to him, simply breathing is not life. Multiple lives would be too little to get the most out of existence. Here the poet brings his son to the readers. In the absence of his father, his son Telemachus, would succeed him as king, seems content to stay put and simply rule the people. Ulysses loves him and knows that he would use his prudence to govern wisely, turning the "rugged" people "mild," and he is "blameless" and "decent" in his "common duties." He honors the family's Gods. Yet, Telemachus does not have his father's energy. It is pictured emphatically in the following lines as,

"He works his work, I mine."

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:

Ulysses looks at the port and the sea beyond, calling to him. He recalls "the thunder and the sunshine" of his mariners' exciting travels together. He understands that he and they are old now. Yet, they still can do something noble as they are men who once fought with gods. Light fades, and the day wanes. Ulysses calls out that it is not too late to discover a "newer world." They can leave this shore and sail beyond the sunset. Perhaps they even would reach the Happy Isles and meet Achilles. Although they are weak in age, they still have "heroic hearts" which are "strong in will" and want to persevere, explore and discover and never give up. Indeed, we miss the most exciting aspects of life if we do not venture out, at least a little bit, into the unknown.

"One needs to emphasize that Ulysses's goal is not *death*,

but is *in death*: that is,

Ulysses seeks not death, but life in death.”

- Charles Mitchell(a critic of Tennyson)