

ENGH-H-CC-T-10

SEM-IV

ULYSSES

Alfred Tennyson And A Summary of Ulysses:

Ulysses is a blank verse dramatic monologue written when Tennyson was a young man of 24 years, in 1833, the year his best friend Arthur Hallam died whilst touring in Europe.

The poem was inspired by his friend's passing, as Tennyson acknowledged:

'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.'

Ulysses is the latinised version of the Greek mythological hero Odysseus, king of Ithaca, first recorded in Homer's classic poems the Iliad and its sequel the Odyssey, which tells of Odysseus's ten year journey home following the Trojan War.

Tennyson loved the Greek myths. Several poems of his are directly inspired by them, so his choice of Ulysses (Odysseus) is understandable. He also knew of Dante's Inferno canto 26 where Ulysses is found in hell, for his many sins. Virgil the Roman poet also used Ulysses in his epic poem the Aeneid.

So it is that Virgil, Dante and Tennyson chose the original Homeric Odysseus and in each case recast the character for their particular work. James Joyce the Irish novelist also got in on the act with his novel Ulysses published in 1922.

Tennyson's Ulysses finds himself idle and restless at home after years of exploration and adventure. He tells himself :

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

To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!

Three Stages in Ulysses

1. The poem begins with Ulysses admitting that his life is a monotony despite him being king. All he does is waste his time with a people who don't know him. His wife is old, he doesn't even mention her name. (lines 1 - 5)

Ulysses looks back to better days when he truly lived and travelled the world. He yearns for more adventure and 'to follow knowledge' (lines 6 - 32)

Ulysses rejects the status quo.

2. He knows his son Telemachus will take over the kingdom and run it well when Ulysses has gone. (lines 33 - 43).

Abdicates responsibility.

3. Ulysses addresses his mariners and prepares them for the journey of all journeys, 'beyond the sunset', to seek and find and not to yield. (lines 44 - 70).

Prepares for the final journey.

The poem was written in 1833 and published in Poems in 1842. Some publications have the poem split into four stanzas but in the original book (and Tennyson's personal notebook) the poem is one long stanza, with indentations at lines 33 and 44.

What Is The Main Idea or Theme of Ulysses?

The main idea or theme of Ulysses is that of conquering or overcoming a situation that threatens to bring a person down. The poem builds up to those final few lines which are defiant, hopeful, pro-life and inspirational

What Is The Tone Of Ulysses?

The tone of Ulysses is reflective, contemplative and hopeful. The speaker has come to the conclusion that, to live a meaningful life, he has to move on from his domestic situation.

Whilst the poem is a kind of dramatic monologue, it is more of a soliloquy - an address to oneself but in the presence of others.

Full Analysis of Ulysses Line By Line

Ulysses is a dramatic monologue, the speaker, Ulysses himself, reflecting on his current domestic situation, looking back to when his life was exciting and adrenaline filled, looking forward to more of the same now that his son Telemachus can rule the kingdom of Ithaca.

Lines 1 - 5

The opening two lines and a half suggest that the speaker is observing an idle king and it's only when the rest of line three is read that the first person is revealed. This is Ulysses himself, bemoaning the fact that he's stuck at home.

Just look at the language...little profit, idle, still, barren, agèd. Words that imply emptiness and stagnation. (note the accent on the è in agèd making this a two syllable word which fits into the pentameter)

That phrase mete and dole means to weigh and measure but he's having to do it to a savage race unequally, suggesting that he thinks the people uncouth and he feels himself far apart from those he rules.

So by the end of line 5 he's already in a difficult position.

These lines have caused controversy over the years because, for some, they lack proper grammar, specifically a comma which should come after the word that in the first line.

Without the comma the third line's I mete and dole seems out of place. But, if the first line is read slowly with one ear on the metrical beat this appositional opening makes sense.

Lines 6 - 17

The confession is out. The speaker, Ulysses, is restless because he has wanderlust. It's in his being to travel. He wants to drink life to the lees (make the most of it) and begins to look back at those times when he was doing just that.

Note the contrasts set up as this section of the poem progresses: enjoyment/suffering, in loving company/alone, on land/at sea.

Ulysses the hero, warrior and adventurer is slowly deteriorating at home. Discontentment rules. Something has to change.

The syntax here is complex - the way clauses and grammar are put together - the eleven lines being one complete sentence.

Tennyson's use of colons and semi-colons together with enjambment challenge the reader to make meaningful pauses. This is especially true for lines 6 - 10 where most pauses are mid-line, which helps break up the steady iambic beat.

Hyades is a group of stars in the constellation Taurus, believed to foretell the coming of rain.

In line 11 note the use of the word Vext (sometimes written vexed) which means agitated or angered or annoyed.

He states that he has become a name, that is, Ulysses is known by many abroad (in contrast to his name at home where the people know not me, a sad truth).

As the poem moves on the reader becomes increasingly aware of this divide between what Ulysses was to what he has become. His former life was a heady mix of travel, meetings with important men in far off places and battle. The alpha male's dream existence.

Lines 18 - 21

The next four lines sum up Ulysses's existential dilemma in a somewhat abstract image.

His past experiences are an integral part of who he is. To elaborate this idea Tennyson introduces a metaphorical arch through which the future untravelled world appears, to be experienced only when he is moving.

So it is forward motion in life that is crucial for Ulysses.

Lines 22 - 23

In contrast these two lines sum up what it feels like to be stuck at home, a passive, resigned figure.

This could be a sword that rusts, or a shield. Ulysses oxidised. On the scrapheap, a piece of junk.

Lines 24 - 32

More reasons to move on! Breathing might be a sign of life but not for Ulysses. How many breaths make a life? Time waits for no man...every hour is precious. Every hour could bring forward new things from out of that eternal silence (death).

Ulysses pictures himself in the same vile (horrible) position for three years or three days (three suns) when inside he craves travel and knowledge, right round the earth and beyond all human thought.

The reader can now get a good grasp of what is going on inside Ulysses's heart and mind. Here is a desperate man yearning for his former life, keen to move on.

Line By Line Analysis of Ulysses

Lines 33 - 43

Ulysses introduces his son Telemachus in an act of abdication. He outlines the qualities that will make his son a successful leader, through slow prudence and soft degrees to transform a rugged people (no longer a savage race) into useful citizens.

That last line contains the essential difference between the two:

He works his work, I mine.

Telemachus knows nothing of adventure and battle but will duly rule the kingdom because he is dutiful and ready to take over the household gods.

Ulysses Line by Line Analysis

Lines 44 - 61

Ulysses addresses the mariners that have been with him throughout. The sea is calling, a ship awaits.

They may be old, death may be around the corner but before they succumb there will be one last voyage beyond the sunset and no return. It is crystal clear that Ulysses intends to go out with a bang and not a whimper.

He is saying with some conviction that old age is no excuse to sit and do nothing; life can still be lived, useful work can be done.

Lines 62 - 70

They might sink, drown, end up on the Happy Isles (Islands of the Blessed in Greek mythology, Elysium, abode of the gods for heroes and patriots, located beyond the western horizon) where they'll meet Achilles (greatest of Greek warriors, killer of Hector at Troy and lead figure in Homer's Iliad).

We are what we are Ulysses says, that is, older now but still full of yearning for new things. He will never give in.

So even though time wears us down as we age, even though we may find ourselves depressed and weakened by circumstance, there is always something to strive for.

Tennyson's friend Arthur Hallam died young. It was this tragic event that brought the poet initial grief and sadness and caused him to question his own existence and purpose.

Ulysses was written to exorcise demons and transform an individual. Change for the better is always possible...out of the darkness and into new light.