

Ulysses by Alfred Lord Tennyson

A Complete Literary Blog Analysis

Alfred Lord Tennyson · Published 1842 · Victorian Poetry

Introduction

Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Ulysses* (1842) is one of the most celebrated poems in the English literary canon. Written in the voice of the aging Greek hero Ulysses — the Roman name for Homer's Odysseus — the poem is a powerful dramatic monologue that captures the tension between rest and restlessness, between mortality and the unquenchable human desire to keep striving. Tennyson wrote it shortly after the death of his close friend Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833, and the poem pulses with grief transformed into defiance.

At its heart, *Ulysses* is a meditation on what it means to be alive in the face of old age and death. The aged king, now home in Ithaca after years of legendary adventure, finds domestic life unbearable. He longs to sail again, to seek, to strive — and he refuses to let the dimming of his physical powers silence the fire within.

AT A GLANCE

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| Poet | Alfred Lord Tennyson |
| Written | 1833 (published 1842) |
| Form | Dramatic Monologue |
| Speaker | Ulysses (Odysseus) |
| Meter | Blank Verse (Unrhymed Iambic Pentameter) |
| Lines | 70 |
| Inspired by | Homer's <i>Odyssey</i> & Dante's <i>Inferno</i> |
| Theme | Ambition, old age, courage, restlessness |

Background and Historical Context

Tennyson composed *Ulysses* in 1833, just weeks after learning of Arthur Hallam's sudden death. In his own words, the poem expressed his feeling that he must not simply give way to grief but press forward — 'the need of going forward and braving the struggle of life.' The poem was published nine years later in the 1842 collection *Poems*, which established Tennyson's reputation as the leading poet of his era.

Tennyson draws on two great literary predecessors. The primary source is Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Ulysses is the cunning hero who spends ten years trying to return home from Troy. But Tennyson's Ulysses owes an equally important debt to Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* (Canto XXVI), where Ulysses is a figure condemned for his insatiable curiosity — a man who convinces his aged companions to sail beyond the edge of the known world. Tennyson merges both portraits to create a figure who is simultaneously heroic and restless, noble and a little reckless.

Summary of the Poem

The poem unfolds in three broad movements, each shifting slightly in address and tone:

Lines 1–32 — The Complaint of Ithaca

Ulysses addresses himself, expressing frustration with his domestic role as king of Ithaca. He finds his people dull and unambitious, his wife old, and the routine of governance deeply unsatisfying. He reflects on a lifetime of heroic travel and declares that life is nothing if not lived to the full.

*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...*

(Lines 6–9)

Lines 33–43 — The Praise of Telemachus

Ulysses turns to speak of his son Telemachus, who will remain behind to govern Ithaca. The tone here is affectionate but revealing — Ulysses acknowledges Telemachus as well-suited to the 'slow prudence' of rule, a life of careful, civilising work. Implicitly, Ulysses distinguishes his own adventurous temperament from his son's more patient one.

Lines 44–70 — The Call to the Mariners

In the poem's most famous and stirring movement, Ulysses addresses his old companions and calls them to one final voyage. He acknowledges that they are all old and diminished, but insists this makes the journey more urgent, not less. The poem ends on its iconic, defiant note:

*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.*

(Lines 65–70)

Form, Structure, and Language

Dramatic Monologue

The poem is a dramatic monologue, a form Tennyson helped pioneer. In a dramatic monologue, a single speaker addresses a silent listener (or listeners), revealing character through speech. We hear only Ulysses' voice — and this makes us both sympathetic to and gently critical of him. A careful reader may notice that his glowing description of Telemachus barely conceals a mild condescension, and that his call to adventure may be a flight from responsibility as much as a noble quest.

Blank Verse

Tennyson writes in unrhymed iambic pentameter — the same metre used by Shakespeare in his plays. The absence of rhyme gives the poem a naturalistic, speech-like quality, while the steady iambic beat lends it dignity and weight. Tennyson varies the rhythm subtly to mirror emotion: slow, heavy lines convey weariness; shorter, clipped phrases convey impatience or urgency.

Imagery and Diction

The poem is rich in sea imagery — the ocean serves as the symbol of the unknown, of freedom, and of the boundary between life and death. The 'untravelling world' that 'gleams' through the arch of experience is one of Tennyson's most evocative images, suggesting that knowledge and adventure are always just beyond the horizon. Light and darkness are also used throughout: the 'gleam' of possibility contrasts with the 'dark broad seas' that await.

Major Themes

Restlessness and the Active Life

Ulysses embodies the Victorian ideal of ceaseless activity and self-improvement. He is constitutionally incapable of rest, and the poem frames this not as a flaw but as the very mark of a great spirit. Tennyson's Victorian readers would have recognised this as a valorisation of ambition, empire, and intellectual enquiry — the engines of their age.

Old Age, Mortality, and Defiance

The poem's emotional core is the confrontation with decline. Ulysses is old; his companions are old; their strength is diminished. Yet the poem insists that the heroic spirit need not diminish with the body. The final lines are among the most quoted in English poetry because they speak to anyone who has ever refused to surrender to circumstance.

Knowledge and Experience

Ulysses declares that his experiences — however painful — have made him what he is: 'I am a part of all that I have met.' Experience is not merely accumulated; it is absorbed into identity. This is a deeply Romantic idea, but Tennyson anchors it in classical heroism.

Duty vs. Desire

The poem quietly stages a tension between public duty (governing Ithaca, caring for his subjects) and personal desire (the open sea, the next horizon). Tennyson does not fully resolve this tension — Ulysses' decision to leave may be admirable or irresponsible, and the poem invites both readings.

Grief and Perseverance

Written in the shadow of Hallam's death, the poem is a personal document of mourning transformed into resolve. Tennyson uses the mythic framework of Ulysses to give shape to an intensely private emotion: the refusal to let grief become paralysis.

Critical Perspectives

Critics have long debated the true nature of Ulysses' heroism. W.W. Robson and E.J. Chell have argued that the poem contains an element of self-deception: Ulysses romanticises desertion, dressing up escapism in the language of heroism. His faint praise of Telemachus — 'He works his work, I mine' — can read as barely veiled dismissal.

On the other hand, T.S. Eliot and many Victorian readers took the poem at face value as a stirring endorsement of the examined, adventurous life. The closing lines were famously inscribed at the Scott Polar Research Institute and have been quoted at memorials for explorers and soldiers — suggesting that whatever Tennyson's ironic intent, the poem has historically

functioned as a genuine call to courage.

A middle reading — perhaps the most satisfying — is that the poem holds both impulses in tension. Tennyson grants Ulysses great eloquence but does not insist we endorse every choice he makes. This ambiguity is one of the marks of great dramatic monologue.

Why Ulysses Still Matters

Nearly two centuries after it was written, *Ulysses* continues to resonate because it addresses a universal human condition: the fear that our best years are behind us, and the question of how we face that fear. The poem does not offer false comfort — it acknowledges that Ulysses and his men are old, that their strength is 'made weak by time and fate.' But it insists that the will to 'strive, to seek, to find' is not extinguished by physical decline.

For students of English literature, the poem is also a masterclass in the dramatic monologue form — in how a single voice, carefully constructed, can simultaneously reveal and conceal character. For general readers, it is simply one of the great expressions of the human refusal to give up.

Conclusion

Ulysses is much more than a retelling of classical myth. It is a poem about grief, resilience, the passage of time, and the stubborn persistence of ambition. Tennyson takes a legendary hero at the end of his life and uses him to ask the question that haunts every reflective person: when the great adventures are over, what is left?

His answer — crystallised in those final, magnificent lines — is that what is left is the will itself. Not strength, not youth, not certainty of success, but the determination to keep moving toward the unknown. It is a deeply human answer, and one that has given comfort and courage to readers in every generation since 1842.
