

Tennyson's "Ulysses" – A Critical Appreciation / Reflection of Victorian Spirit

We still look to the earlier masters for supreme excellence in particular directions: to Wordsworth for sublime philosophy, to Coleridge for ethereal magic, to Byron for passion, to Shelley for lyric intensity, to Keats for richness. Tennyson does not excel each of these in his own special field, but he is often nearer to the particular man in his particular mastery than anyone else can be said to be, and he has in addition his own special field of supremacy. What this is cannot be easily defined; it consists, perhaps, in the beauty of the atmosphere which Tennyson contrives to cast around his work, molding it in the blue mystery of twilight, in the opaline haze of sunset: this atmosphere, suffused over his poetry with inestimable skill and with a tact rarely at fault, produces an almost unflinching illusion or mirage of loveliness.

Tennyson's "Ulysses" 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.

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 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. 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". 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" and to enter a mythical dimension "beyond the sunset, and the baths of all the western stars"; 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. Like the Lady of Shallot, who longs for the worldly experiences she has been denied, Ulysses hungers to explore the untraveled world.

By far the most popular reading of the poem matches the popular Victorian one, builds to the famous final line: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." According to this reading, "Ulysses" embodies the Victorian stiff-upper lip, the need to endure when things get difficult and unpleasant. However, according to Chiasson, the poem, which so many take to be an uplifting call to courageous perseverance, is in fact a form of intellectual satire, which "can be read as the dramatic presentation of a man who has faith neither in the gods nor consequently in the necessity of preserving order in his kingdom or in his own life", and thus, like Tithonus and the mariners in "The Lotus-Eaters" dramatizes an intellectual position that the poet wishes to explore but not accept. Nevertheless, Like Browning's "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's," "Ulysses" is a deathbed poem, which treats death as the last great adventure into the unknown — a reading that fits perfectly with Tennyson's statements about the occasion on which he wrote the poem as well as the other poems that explore the nature of death.