

Critical appreciation of *Ulysses*

Ulysses is a poem in blank verse by the Victorian poet Alfred Lord Tennyson. The poem was written in 1833 and published in 1842 in Tennyson's well-received second volume of poetry. In the poem, Ulysses describes to an unspecified audience, his discontent and restlessness upon returning to his kingdom, Ithaca, after his far-ranging travels. Facing old age, Ulysses yearns to explore again, despite his reunion with his wife Penelope and son Telemachus.

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*, 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 counselors, both for his pursuit of knowledge beyond human bounds and for his adventures in disregard of his family. However, Tennyson's readers have viewed Ulysses to be resolute and heroic, and have admired him for his determination "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield". The view that Tennyson intended an heroic character, is also 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.

As the poem begins, Ulysses has returned to his kingdom Ithaca, after fighting in the Trojan War. Confronted again by domestic life, Ulysses expresses his lack of contentment, including his indifference toward the "savage race" that he governs. Ulysses contrasts his restlessness and boredom with his heroic past. He contemplates his age and eventual death—"Life piled on life / Were all too little, and of one to me / Little remains"—and longs for further experience and knowledge. His son Telemachus will inherit the throne that Ulysses finds burdensome. While Ulysses thinks Telemachus will be an adequate king, he seems to have little empathy for his son as he says- "He works his work, I mine". In the final section, Ulysses turns his attention to his mariners and calls on them to join him on another quest. He does not make any guarantees about their fate, but tries to inspire them by conjuring their heroic past.

Ulysses is a typical Victorian poem as it shares some of the dominant features of Victorian poetry- such as social consciousness (realism) vs. escapism, idealism, conflict between science and religion, love of nature etc. The Victorian age was one of energy and resolution. The people were drunk with the desire to enlarge the boundaries of knowledge to the farthest limit through voyages and to extend the British Empire through annexation. The epoch-making discoveries of Charles Darwin and other scientists added to the people's curiosity about unexplored fields of knowledge. *Ulysses* is fraught much with social consciousness. The poem represents the energy and restless curiosity of the Victorians and their resolution to leave nothing unseen, unknown and unexplored. As Hales says that, *Ulysses* embodies, "the modern passion for knowledge, for the exploration of its limitless fields, for the annexation of new kingdoms of science and thought."

Again, as a representative Victorian poem by Tennyson, *Ulysses* is marked by the conflict between science and religion. The poem portrays this conflict by the contrast of the characters of Ulysses and his son Telemachus. Ulysses embodies the Victorian passion for the exploration of new kingdoms of science and Telemachus stands for the respect for traditional religion. When Ulysses will adventure for knowledge, his son will pay "meek adoration to my household works." Moreover Like a typical Victorian poem, Ulysses gives a beautiful and accurate description of nature. The lines: "The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks... many voices" present the brilliant picture of the evening landscape of Ithaca with lights twinkling from the houses on the rocks, the moon slowly rising in the eastern sky and the sea roaring in the distance.