

Ulysses as a dramatic monologue

A dramatic monologue is a lyric poem in which a single imaginary speaker or a historical personage expresses his thoughts and feelings to an imaginary silent audience. In this kind of poem a single person, who is apparently not the poet, utters the entire poem in a specific situation at a critical moment. This person addresses and interacts with one or more other people, but we know of the presence of the audience and its reaction from the clues in the utterance of the speaker. Thus a dramatic monologue concentrates on the idiosyncrasies of the speaker. Now, since the dramatic monologue deals with the most momentous event in the life of the speaker, it plunges headlong into the crisis at the very outset. Thus a dramatic monologue has an abrupt and very arresting beginning, suggesting that the present situation is the continuation of something that has gone before. Though the ideal aim of the dramatic monologue is the faithful self-portrayal of the personality of the supposed speaker, in actual practice it is commonly used as a medium of reflection of the poet's own philosophy.

In the Victorian period, Robert Browning was well known for his dramatic monologues. His *My Last Duchess*, *Andrea del Sarto*, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, are some of the best known dramatic monologues. Tennyson too like Browning was good at composing dramatic monologues. His well known poem *Ulysses* is an excellent example of dramatic monologue in which he adopts a classical hero Ulysses as the main character for his work. Here he tries to focus on the adventurous as well as knowledge seeking spirit of Ulysses. But the philosophy of life suggested by Ulysses is actually Tennyson's own conviction.

In the poem *Ulysses*, Ulysses is supposed to be speaking and expressing his thoughts and feelings to the silent listeners. He is standing before the royal palace of Ithaca and speaks before the mariners, who had been his fellow sojourners during his long journey to Troy. The monologue begins with his cynical remarks towards life. Like a dramatic monologue, *Ulysses* has an abrupt and a very arresting beginning. It opens with a reference to the suggestion that Ulysses should spend his old age comfortably at home with his wife and govern his kingdom: "It little profits that an idle king/ By this still hearth, among these barren crags,/ Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole/ Unequal laws unto a savage race,/ That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me." Ulysses, the man of nimble wit, is not satisfied with his life among his subjects, who are unaware of his heroic mould. His aged wife (Penelope) too cannot understand his heroic soul. He calls his country "barren crags" and his wife "aged" and his people "a savage race". He is disgusted with the animal-like existence of his people and loathes to remain there. He instead longs for a life of adventure and new experiences. He reveals himself to be a hard, self-contained individual, scornful of his people and a stranger to softer affections. The next twenty seven lines serve the same purpose by telling us of his enthusiasm. But Ulysses's intention is not clear until he says- "I cannot rest from travel, I will drink/ Life to the lees."

Now, by the word 'travel' Ulysses means the journey which he made to rescue Helen from Paris and the perilous journey after the destruction of Troy. But he refuses to take rest and is determined to take a life of adventure to the very end. He compares life to a cup of wine. Just a man drinks till he has reached the sediment at the bottom, Ulysses intends to taste all aspects of life without leaving anything behind. Through these words, Ulysses' insatiable passion for knowledge is expressed. He is the man who can never take rest from the pursuit of knowledge. So he urges to his mariners: "To follow knowledge, like a sinking star/ Beyond the utmost bound of human thought."

Ulysses has become old but it is the knowledge and experience which he has gathered so long, which urges him on even in the old age to sail in quest of knowledge. He knows that a life spent in idleness is no life at all. Just a sword loses its polish and gets rusty when it is kept out of use for long time, in the same way vigour and energy gets dulled and blunted if they are not exercised. Ulysses is perfectly aware that

knowledge is vast and unlimited and our life on earth is too short to learn everything. Even a number of lives taken together would be too short for gaining all knowledge. So far he is concerned he has a single life to live. And even of this single life a greater part has already been spent. Only a few years of life are left to him. Hence he is determined to make the best of every moment of the remaining years of his life. To him an hour spent in some profitable work means an hour saved from the silence of death.

The monologue of Ulysses reaches to the point of climax, when he inspires his sailors and makes an appeal to them to welcome a life of exploration with great courage. He says- "Death closes all, but something ere the end/ Some work of noble note, may yet be done." Ulysses knows that he and his sailors, being old are nearer to death, but he has not given up hope and believes that old men can earn great glory and achieve great deeds. So, he inspires his sailors to achieve great deeds even in their old age before they finally die. The paths of knowledge may be full of dangers, but Ulysses is strongly determined. And finally he makes a noble resolution to carry on his quest. He is fired with the aspiration for the unattainable and the infinite. The fire in his mind has not been extinguished by the frost of old age. He is not even upset by the passing away of his youth and bodily strength. He knows that even old age cannot rob great men of their courage, bravery and other spiritual qualities. Therefore, he asks his sailors to show the same courage that they had in youth. He reminds them that all of them are brave and strong willed, and they know how to labour, how to struggle hard and how to pursue a great aim. There is no certainty as to what is in store for them, perhaps they may all drown in the seas. Perhaps they may be able to meet their departed leader Achilles in Elysium. But even then the wanderer's thirst is implicit in Ulysses's urge to his fellow marines.

Like Browning's *The Last Ride Together*, *Ulysses* too portrays the poet's outlook on life. At the same time, like a fine specimen of Dramatic monologue, the poem reveals the character of Ulysses vividly through his words addressed to the mariners as he exhorts them to prepare for a final, desperate voyage. This dramatic monologue also reveals the character of Telemachus, Ulysses' son. Ulysses speaks of his son in glowing terms. He is prudent and without blemish. He knows how to civilize the 'rugged people' by slow prudence. He is efficient and more fitted than his father to perform common duties. He has tenderness and is fond of worshipping his household gods. But we cannot ignore the underlying irony. Ulysses praises Telemachus for the very same qualities he himself despises in the first part of the poem. We also get a glimpse of the nature of his comrades. He is full of love and admiration for his old friends, who have shared joys and sorrows have shared joys sorrows with him readily.

Ulysses in Tennyson's poem also talks of the setting vividly. He gives a beautiful picture of darkness falling on the waters of the sea. The long day comes to a close and the moon climbs slowly. The sea is getting dark and it makes mournful sounds. It is against this melancholy twilight that Ulysses sets out his last, desperate voyage. So to conclude, *Ulysses* remains a fine specimen of dramatic monologue in which we feel that Ulysses succeeds in inspiring his fellow mariners (who are his silent listeners) "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."