“Ulysses” Introduction

"Ulysses" was written in 1833 by Alfred Lord Tennyson, the future Poet Laureate of Great Britain. The poem takes the form of a dramatic monologue spoken by Ulysses, a character who also appears in Homer's Greek epic *The Odyssey* and Dante's Italian epic the *Inferno* (Ulysses is the Latinized name of Odysseus). In *The Odyssey*, Ulysses/Odysseus struggles to return home, but in Tennyson's "Ulysses," an aged Ulysses is frustrated with domestic life and yearns to set sail again and continue exploring the world. Dante seems to condemn Ulysses's recklessness as an explorer, but in Tennyson's poem, there is nobility and heroism in Ulysses' boundless curiosity and undaunted spirit.

“Ulysses” Summary

Ulysses expresses frustration at how dull and pointless his life now seems as king of Ithaca, trapped at home on the rocky island of Ithaca. His wife is old, and he must spend his time enforcing imperfect laws as he attempts to govern people he considers stupid and uncivilized. In Ulysses's eyes, all his people do is try to store up wealth, sleep, and eat. They have no conception of who Ulysses really is or what his life has been like. Ulysses still yearns to travel the world like he used to do. As long as he's alive, he doesn't want to stop doing the things that, in his eyes, make life worth living. He found joy, he claims, in every moment he spent traveling, even at the times when he was suffering. He found joy both when he was with his faithful crew members and when he was by himself; both when he was on land and when he was sailing the sea through rainstorms. He has become famous throughout the world as an explorer who was continually traveling and yearning to know more. Ulysses reflects that he has seen and learned a great deal about all the places where people live, about their lifestyles, cultures, and ways of governing themselves.

Everywhere he went, he was shown honor and respect. Ulysses also found joy fighting alongside his fellow soldiers, men he honored and respected, when he fought in battles far from home in the Trojan War. Ulysses feels that each person and place he has encountered has been changed by the encounter, as has he himself. But all these experiences have not satisfied his desire for travel; rather, each encounter has only whetted his appetite to see more of the world. No matter how much of the world he sees, there is always still more to see, and it is these unseen regions that he always tries to pursue. Ulysses exclaims that it is boring and unsatisfying to stay in one place and stop doing the activities that defined your life, comparing himself to a sword that has been allowed to rust uselessly away rather than being used gloriously in battle. Merely being alive doesn't mean you are truly living. Ulysses feels that multiple lifetimes would still have been too little time to do all he wishes to do, and he is almost at the end of the one lifetime he has. Still, every hour that he has left to live before he dies has the potential to bring new opportunities for action. It would be disgraceful, he feels, to sit tight at home and just try to eat and stay alive for a few more years, when, even as

an old man, his greatest desire is still to explore the world and keep learning more. He wants to go beyond the limits of what humans have seen and known, the way a shooting star seems to go beyond the horizon when it falls and disappears from sight.

Ulysses then starts to describe his son, Telemachus, who will inherit Ulysses's role as ruler of the island when Ulysses dies. Ulysses affirms that he loves his son, who is conscientious and thoughtful about how he will best carry out his responsibilities as ruler. With patience and judgement, Telemachus will work to civilize the fierce, wild people of Ithaca and make them more gentle, and gradually teach them to devote their lives to productive civic activities. Ulysses cannot find any faults in Telemachus; he devotes his life to the responsibilities of his role, he pays proper respect to his people and his parents, and after his father dies, he will continue offering appropriate sacrifices to the gods that Ulysses most honored. Telemachus is well suited for the role of ruler—just as Ulysses is well suited for a different role, the role of explorer.

Ulysses looks out towards the port, where the wind is blowing in the sails of his ship and where he can see

Ulysses looks out towards the port, where the wind is blowing in the sails of his ship and where he can see the wide, dark sea. He now addresses his former crew, the men who worked alongside him and explored the world and gained new knowledge with him. He reminds them that they always accepted joyfully whatever their travels would bring, whether trouble or good luck, and proudly faced every obstacle with resolution and bravery. Ulysses then acknowledges that both he and they have grown older, but insists that even as old men, they can still work do hard work and earn respect. Soon they will die and their chance to do great deeds will be over; but before they die, they can still accomplish something heroic, something fitting for men that once battled the gods. The people of Ithaca are beginning to light lamps in their homes; night is falling; the moon is rising in the sky; the waves of the sea are murmuring almost as if they are speaking to Ulysses. Ulysses urges his crew, as his friends, to join him on one last voyage—even now, they're not too old to explore some unknown region of the world. He invites them to board a ship, push away from shore, and man the oars so they can beat the waves; because Ulysses still has the goal of sailing past the horizon, as

far as he can go, before he ultimately dies. He acknowledges that the waves may sink their ship; but they may also find their way to the place where the souls of the blessed go after death. There, they might even see their old companion, the accomplished warrior Achilles. Many of their heroic qualities have been diminished by old age, but they haven't been lost completely. They don't have the same strength or physical prowess they possessed as younger men fighting epic, world-changing battles; but inside, Ulysses declares, they are ultimately the same men they always were. Their minds and hearts are still brave and composed in the face of danger and obstacles. Their bodies have been weakened by old age, something all human beings are destined to face, but their spirits are as strong as ever. They remain determined to work hard, to pursue their goals and accomplish them, and to never give up.

“Ulysses” Themes

Mortality and Aging

From the poem’s beginning, Ulysses unhappily confronts his old age and impending death. He responds not by settling down to rest, but by striving to relive his adventurous younger days. While he admits by the poem's end that age has weakened him, he resolves to use whatever is left of his youthful heroism as he sets out on one last journey. For Ulysses, the honorable response to time and mortality is not to calmly *accept* old age and death, but rather to *resist* them—to wring every last drop of knowledge and adventure out of life, even if doing so may result in dying sooner.

Ulysses begins by reflecting discontentedly on the fact that he is now an old man, stuck ruling at home rather than traveling the world. Ulysses finds no joy in being king. It “little profits” him. Rather than finding meaning in serving his people, he merely feels “idle.” He is also less than happy, it seems, to be growing old. He speaks of his wife dismissively as “aged,” and if he dislikes her

growing older, he probably dislikes growing older himself. Finally, he is discontented because he "cannot rest from travel." Rather than embracing his duties as king—essentially, putting away his youthful ambitions—he wishes he was still exploring the world as he did when he was a young man. For Ulysses, settling down isn't restful and restorative but rather stifling, an unwelcome reminder of his impending mortality.

Common wisdom would suggest that the aging Ulysses take it easy in order to prolong his life, but this isn't what he wants. Ulysses declares that it is disgraceful to "store and hoard" himself, sitting safely in one place just to extend his life "[f]or some three suns." Such a dull life isn't worth living. Thus although Ulysses's spirit is "gray," or aged, he still wishes to travel and "follow knowledge" as much as ever.

At the poem's end, Ulysses calls on his former crewmates to join him on a final, dangerous voyage to see the "untravell'd world." He admits that they are older and weaker but insists that the only noble response to time and mortality is to defy them both. If he must die, he will die with as much of his youthful heroism as he can. Ulysses acknowledges, "you and I

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus/Ulysses struggles for years to return to Ithaca. In Tennyson's poem, however, Ulysses has discovered that home is not enough to make him happy. Paradoxically, his years spent traveling to return home did not make him love that home; it made him love travel and adventure. Ulysses urges his crewmates to join him a last, great voyage so he can reclaim what he considers his true identity: an explorer who is continually striving for more, especially to *learn* more. In this way, Ulysses recognizes that the quest for knowledge is never complete. In spite of this—or perhaps because of this—it is the quest for new experiences and new knowledge that, for Ulysses, defines a meaningful life.

When the poem begins, Ulysses is agitated and discontent in Ithaca. He is restless for adventure. Ulysses feels "idle," even though he rules as king, because this role keeps him trapped by a "still hearth." He feels he "cannot rest from travel" and is also frustrated that his people do not "know" him. This frustration suggests that, in Ulysses's mind, his true

identity is an explorer rather than king of Ithaca. Indeed, when he says he has become famous—"I am become a name"—for "roaming," he suggests that his entire sense of self does not come from his life on Ithaca but rather from his travels. Merely being alive—simply "breath[ing]"—is not enough to make his life meaningful, if he has "pause[d]" and "ma[de] an end" in one place.

For Ulysses, the yearning for adventure and exploration can never really be sated, because there are seemingly endless things to discover; he realizes that his knowledge of the world—all human knowledge, really—touches on just a small piece of all that there is to know. His years spent trying return home only increased his appetite to travel more, because each experience he has had reminded him that there are still "untravell'd world[s]" to explore. And in particular, Ulysses hopes to *learn* more from his explorations. His desire is to "follow knowledge like a sinking star / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought." The point of going where no one else has gone is to understand things no one else has understood.

Ulysses urges his crewmates to join him in one final voyage to unknown lands, reclaiming their identity as explorers who never stop searching. His quest for knowledge can never be completed, but that, he argues, is part of what makes it worth pursuing. Ulysses wants to do some "work of noble note," and, for him, that means finding some "newer world." This newer world may even include "the Happy Isles," where the souls of the blessed dead reside. Here he could truly gain knowledge beyond what (living) humans know. Ulysses intends to keep searching for newer worlds "until [he] die[s]." The fact that Ulysses will never complete his quest for knowledge also means he will never again pause and "make an end." He will always be on a journey, and that, for him, is what defines a meaningful life.

At the poem's end, Ulysses articulates what he sees as his true identity: a man determined always "To strive, to seek, to find." Only when you have a goal that can never be fully accomplished can you spend the rest of your life striving for it. Seeking new worlds and new knowledge is that kind of goal, one that allows Ulysses to be the kind of man he wishes to be.

Ulysses describes his son, Telemachus, as a cautious and conservative man. Ulysses seems to scorn his son for lacking the daring, curiosity, and imagination that Ulysses has himself. However, Telemachus's prudence might seem more admirable when contrasted with Ulysses's irresponsibility and recklessness. Although a king, Ulysses shows little respect for his people and is willing to abandon his responsibilities as ruler to go on a voyage with his former crewmates. And even for those beloved crewmates, Ulysses does not express much concern; he admits that the journey might kill them. But because he would rather die adventuring abroad than quietly at home, he is willing to put them all at risk. Thus even while the poem portrays Ulysses as a heroic figure, it also reminds the reader of the recklessness and selfishness that can go along with his brand of heroism.

At the start of the poem, Ulysses shows little respect for the people of Ithaca. He describes them in terms that would describe a herd of grazing animals: they are "savage[s]" who do nothing but "hoard, and sleep, and feed." Ulysses does not see it as important or ennobling to serve as their king—it "little profits" him. Similarly, when Ulysses introduces his son, Telemachus, he shows little respect for Telemachus's character. Telemachus takes his duties to the people seriously; he is determined to "fulfill this labour" of ruling, however long and "slow" the process might be. In this, he shows "prudence" and reliability in "common duties," rather than imagination and boldness. Yet Ulysses does not respect Telemachus very highly for his prudent devotion to duty. His terms of praise are faint: Telemachus is "blameless" rather than praiseworthy; rather than succeed, he will "not ... fail." Ulysses does not see Telemachus as carrying on his own legacy but as taking a different path: "He works his work, I mine."

Heroism and Overcoming Limitations

Ulysses shows frustration with the limitations imposed on him by his role as a ruler and by old age. He misses the glory days of his youth when he fought heroically in battles and traveled the world. He urges his former crewmates to set out on a voyage with him to overcome the limitations imposed by time and age and reclaim some of their youthful heroism. But throughout the poem, it becomes clear that their heroism actually *emerges from* these limitations. What makes Ulysses and his men admirable is the fact that they are older and weaker than they used to be and yet are still willing to undertake tasks as difficult and dangerous as the ones they faced in their prime. It is because they see their own limitations and persist in spite of them that they emerge as heroic figures at the poem's end.