

## Ulysses

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.  
I cannot rest from travel: I will drink  
Life to the lees: All times I have enjoy'd  
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those  
That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when  
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades  
Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;  
For always roaming with a hungry heart  
Much have I seen and known; cities of men  
And manners, climates, councils, governments,  
Myself not least, but honor'd of them all;  
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,  
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.  
I am a part of all that I have met;  
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'  
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades  
For ever and for ever when I move.  
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,  
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!  
As tho' to breathe were life. Life piled on life  
Were all too little, and of one to me  
Little remains: But every hour is saved  
From that eternal silence, something more,  
A bringer of new things; and vile it were  
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,  
And this gray spirit yearning in desire  
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,  
Beyond the utmost bounds of human thought.

This is my son, mine own Telemachos,  
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle-  
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfill  
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild  
A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees  
Subdue them to the useful and the good.  
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere  
Of common duties, decent not to fail  
In offices of tenderness, and pay  
Meet adoration to my household gods,

When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.  
There lies the port, the vessel puffs her sail:  
There gloom the dark broad seas. My mariners,  
Souls that have tol'd and wrought, and thought with me-  
That ever with a frolic welcome took  
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed  
Free hearts, free foreheads - you and I are old;  
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;  
Death closes all: but something ere the end,  
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,  
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.  
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:  
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep  
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,  
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.  
Push off, and sitting well in order smite  
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds  
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars, until I die.  
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:  
It may be that we shall touch the Happy Isles,  
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.  
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved heaven and earth; 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.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

## Tennyson's Poems Summary and Analysis of "Ulysses"

[Ulysses](#) complains that he is “idle” as a king, home with his elderly wife, stuck passing enlightened laws for a “savage race” that sleeps and eats but does not know him. He does not want to cease his travels; he has made the most of his life, having suffered and experienced pleasure both with others and alone and both at sea and on the shore. He is a famous name; he has seen the world and has been honored everywhere. He also has enjoyed battling at Troy with his fellow warriors.

He is “a part of all that I have met,” but this is not the end, for his experience is an archway to new experiences, with the horizon always beyond reach. It is boring to stop and wither away and be useless in his old age; simply breathing is not life. Multiple lives would be too little to get the most out of existence, and little of his one life remains, but at least he is alive and

there is time for “something more.” It would be a shame to do nothing for even three days; he does not want to store himself away. His “gray spirit” yearns to attain knowledge and follow it “like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.”

In contrast, his son Telemachus, who will succeed him as king, seems content to stay put and simply rule the people. Ulysses loves him and knows that he will use his prudence to govern wisely, turning the “rugged” people “mild,” and he is “blameless” and “decent” in his “common duties.” He honors the family’s gods. Yet, Telemachus does not have his father’s energy; “He works his work, I mine.”

Ulysses looks at the port and the sea beyond, calling to him. He recalls “the thunder and the sunshine” of his mariners’ exciting travels together, their “free hearts” and free minds, and understands that he and they are old now. Yet, they still can do something noble and suited to their greatness, especially as they are men who once fought with gods.

Light fades, and the day wanes. Ulysses calls out that it is not too late to discover a “newer world.” They can leave this shore and sail beyond the sunset, exploring until he dies. Perhaps they even will reach the Happy Isles and meet Achilles. Although they are weak in age, much vigor remains; they still have “heroic hearts” which are “strong in will” and want to persevere, to explore and discover and never give up.

## Analysis

"Ulysses" was published in 1842 in the collection of poetry that secured Tennyson’s literary fame. It had been written nine years earlier, when he was 24 years old, following the death of his closest friend, Arthur Henry Hallam. Tennyson commented that "it was more written with the feeling of [Hallam's] loss upon me than many poems in *In Memoriam*."

The poem is seventy lines of blank verse in the style of a dramatic monologue, with three audiences—Odysseus himself, the reader, and his mariners (although he may only be imagining what he might say to us and to his mariners). The poem garnered praise from Tennyson's contemporaries as well as successive literary figures including T.S. Eliot, who called it a "perfect" poem. It is generally considered one of his finest works and is a mainstay of Victorian poetry anthologies as well as selections of Tennyson's oeuvre.

The poem is based on the character Odysseus from Homer's *Odyssey* ("Ulysses" is the Latin form of the name), but Tennyson also drew upon Dante's *Inferno*, Canto XXVI, in which Dante is led by the Roman epic poet Virgil to meet Ulysses and hear his tale. In Homer, Odysseus is told by the blind prophet Tiresias that he will return home to Ithaca but will then make one more journey to a land far away from home. In Dante, this part of the story is fleshed out. Ulysses gathers his men together to prepare for the journey and exhorts them not to waste their time left on earth. He dies on this journey, which is why he is in Dante’s hell. Tennyson's character is somewhere in between these literary predecessors, as Ulysses knows he will set off on a last journey but has not done so yet. Critics also note the influence of Shakespeare, particularly his *Troilus and Cressida*, which also includes Ulysses. Tennyson's Ulysses is now old, having experienced all of the adventures of battle at Troy and on the seas throughout his odyssey. Back home, he has had enough of his life as a ruler of men, keeping the peace at home; instead, he desires to embark upon his next journey. In the first part of the poem he speaks to himself, lamenting his uselessness as a ruler given the idleness of his people. They have no ambition; they “know not” the kind of adventuresome spirit that their king has. In contrast, he “will drink / Life to the lees,” as is his wont.

Ulysses knows he is famous for his great deeds, but this is not what motivates him. His inquisitive spirit is always looking forward. He has seen much and has seen a great variety of cultures, but this is all in the past. Experiences have made him who he is, but what matters is passing through the “arch” to the “untravell’d world” and constantly moving toward the ever-escaping horizon. In addition to the arch, Ulysses uses another metaphor here, calling himself a sword that must “shine in use” rather than “rust unburnish’d.” Yet, at home he feels bored and impotent, yearning to truly engage with what is left of his life. He is impatient for new experiences, lamenting every hour and every day that he does not seek “something more.” His quest for adventure and fulfillment, like the goal of Goethe's Faust, is defined by the pursuit of new and unique knowledge “beyond the utmost bound of human thought.”

In the second part of the poem, as though spoken to the reader (although this address may only be in his mind), Ulysses explains the difference between himself and his son Telemachus. Yes, his son will be a fair and “decent” ruler to his people, but the political life in this context is boring. Telemachus is rooted in regular political life, where one’s aspiration is merely to lead a rough populace into accepting a somewhat better vision of morality and expedience. It is a duty that a leader of uninspired and imprudent citizens may well fulfill with honor, like fulfilling one’s regular duty to honor the “household gods.” But to Ulysses this “slow” life is intolerable even if somebody has to do it. Thus Telemachus “works his work, I mine.”

In the third part Ulysses seems to address his hearty mariners. The port, the boat, and the seas all beckon him. The mariners are his compatriots; they have been through thick and thin together. Unlike living under a king, on the seas they made their choices and took their risks with “free hearts, free foreheads.” Those were the good old days, even fighting with gods, but there is no good reason to waste away in nostalgia. So long as they can do “something ere the end, / Some work of noble note,” Ulysses wants to be doing it. Although the coming night in the poem reflects the waning years of their lives, it “is not too late to seek a newer world.” The “many voices” of the ocean call out to them to come back—the voices of experiences past and of experiences yet to come. Their life is fulfilling when they are adventuring on the sea. No matter how much strength they have, while they have it they retain the strength of “will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

The allusion to Achilles in the Happy Isles (or the Blessed Isles) draws a contrast to Hades. Whereas in Dante, Ulysses has died, here he holds out hope that he will reach the heavenly isles where someone like vigorous Achilles deserves to spend eternity. In Homer’s *Iliad*, Achilles is the featured warrior whose anger and valor generate the primary storyline. He is a hero who lived his life to the fullest in Troy, once he got back into the battle. But for much of the *Iliad*, Achilles sulked in his tent and left his sword and his skills “unburnish’d.”

Accordingly, Achilles is a good model of the heroic for Ulysses.

“Ulysses” has been called a “crisis lyric,” which is a genre from the Romantic period that presents a crisis and an attempt to resolve that crisis (see William Wordsworth's “Intimations Ode”). For Ulysses, the crisis is due to old age: should he live out his days as king, fading away in dotage like [King Lear](#)? Or should he refuse to focus on death as an endpoint but, instead, constantly stay engaged in life as an adventurer? Will he live out the boring but honorable life of Telemachus at home as he ages, or the noble and risky life of surviving by his wits in uncertain waters, living by his strength of will even as his body weakens? He knows death is unavoidable, but he also knows that death-in-life—the impotency, the obsolescence—is intolerable for a person like him.

It may be a stretch to go a step farther and argue that Ulysses seeks to understand life beyond death, but consider that “it may be” that they reach the isles where Achilles resides. After all, Ulysses says that “my purpose holds / To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths / Of all the western stars, until I die.” Critic Charles Mitchell notes, “one needs to emphasize that Ulysses’s goal is not *death*, but is *in death*: that is, Ulysses seeks not death, but life in death.” Other details in the poem support this view, such as the sea voyage, which is often a symbol for the voyage of death; his old age; his referring to himself and shipmates as spirits; and the “dark, broad, sea” which is unfathomable and carries mysterious voices. Certainly it is quite an adventure to reach the isles or Hades or somewhere that human beings normally do not reach while alive. Ulysses may indeed want to find direct evidence of spiritual reality after death.

But this is not the point of the concluding lines. They are Ulysses' enduring challenge to himself, and ultimately Tennyson's challenge to us, to push ahead with vigor and strength of will no matter how old or weak our bodies are. To yield to age or weakness is to be less than fully human. As honorable as it may be to live a peaceful life without risk, we miss the most exciting aspects of life if we do not venture out, at least a little bit, into the unknown.