

### **Ulysses- critical analysis.**

Tennyson wrote Ulysses after his dear friend, Arthur Henry Hallam's death in September, 1833, but published it after revision in 1842. In his poem, Tennyson combined the portraits of Ulysses by both Homer and Dante. He re-works the figure of Ulysses by drawing on the ancient hero of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey ("Ulysses" is the Roman form of the Greek "Odysseus"), 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 loyal wife, Penelope. The details of this sea-voyage are described by Dante in Canto XXVI of the Inferno. Ulysses finds himself restless in Ithaca and driven by the longing he has to gain experience of the world. Dante's Ulysses is a tragic figure who dies while sailing too far in an insatiable thirst for knowledge.

Ulysses (Odysseus) acknowledges that he has become old, but he is dissatisfied with his monotonous life as a king. He declares that there is little point in his staying home 'by this little hearth', with his old wife: doling out punishments and rewards among the unnamed masses who constitute his subjects. He yearns for more experience and knowledge. Speaking to himself, he proclaims that he 'cannot rest from travel', but feels compelled to live life to the fullest. He uses a drinking metaphor, implying that if life can be seen as wine, he wants to swallow it to the last drops. Throughout his life, he has enjoyed and suffered greatly: both alone and with his faithful mariners. Unused life seems to him rusting like an unburnished, unpolished sword. His passion is to follow knowledge like a sinking star, beyond the bounds of human knowledge. He uses two images to describe his pursuit of experience and knowledge: that of a long corridor of arches, and that of the horizon. As he crosses the arches, he encounters a series of arches, representing the yet unachieved experience and knowledge. Again, one can never reach the horizon: as one approaches, it seems to recede further away. Knowledge is the same, it can be approached but never finally attained. Ulysses now speaks to an unidentified audience regarding his son, Telemachus, who will act as his successor, while the great hero resumes his travels. He says; "This is my son, mine own Telemachus, To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle" This means, Ulysses is handing the authority of kingship and his kingdom, over to his only son. He speaks highly, but somewhat contemptuously (as he regards administrative work boring and worthless) of his son's capabilities as a ruler: praising his dedication, prudence and devotion to the gods. Ulysses says that Telemachus will be an ideal son to his old mother, Penelope, and ruler: much more efficient than himself. Telemachus will do the work fit for him, that is, governing the island; while Ulysses will embark on his voyage of adventure and exploration: 'He works his work, I mine'. At last, Ulysses, the Greek hero from Ithaca, addresses his fellow mariners. He exhorts them, with whom he has travelled, worked, and weathered life's storms and sunshines over many years to go on a further voyage. He admits that in old age, they have no more the strength of youth: but they are still "strong in will". Old age has its own share of toil yet. They would go imbued with the same resolution to seek new realms of knowledge. Perhaps, he suggests that they will reach the 'Happy Isles', the place where, according to Greek mythology, the souls of heroes go after death: Ulysses hopes to meet the great Achilles there. Ulysses concludes that he and his mariners are sustained by their resolve to push onward relentlessly; 'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.'

As discussed at the beginning, Tennyson depended more on Dante than Homer for his sources of the poem. Canto 26 of Dante's *Inferno* shows Ulysses, with a band of trusted mariners, reached the farthest point in the West. But Ulysses persuaded his men to go beyond. Tennyson transfers this persuasion to Ulysses in Ithaca. Moreover, his Ulysses represents the Victorian zeal of empire-builders. A definite contrast is intended between the adventurous Ulysses and his conventional son, Telemachus. Also, as mentioned in the above paragraph, Ulysses harbours a loving, tolerant, but perhaps slightly contemptuous attitude towards his son.

Ulysses, like many of Tennyson's other poems, deals with the desire to push beyond the limits of one's existing knowledge and the mundane details of everyday life. Ulysses is the antithesis of his own mariners in *The Lotos-Eaters*, who proclaim 'we will no longer roam' and desire only to relax in the land of the Lotos Eaters. In contrast, Ulysses 'cannot rest from travel' and longs to explore the globe. Like the Lady of Shallot, who longs for the worldly experiences she has been denied, Ulysses hungers to explore the yet unexplored world.

The poem is a dramatic monologue, though not as perfect as those of Browning. It is Ulysses who speaks out at a crucial juncture of his life, and thus reveals his own character and philosophy of life. As a poem, expressing a particular philosophy of life, it contrasts with *The Lotos-Eaters*, which is a plea for idleness and inaction.

Thus, in *Ulysses*, Tennyson foregrounds the philosophy of the character created by him. The speaker is Ulysses himself, and by no means the poet. The poem does not possess the qualities of abrupt beginning, subtle psychological analysis possessed by Browning's dramatic monologues. There is, however, the suggestion of an audience twice: one when Ulysses speaks of his son in front of an unidentified audience, and at the end, when he exhorts his mariners. There is implied setting and action in 'There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail'. The setting is, further in the evening: 'There gloom the dark broad seas.'

The poem is written in blank verse. The style displays intense compression. Instead of the languorous ease of *The Lotos-Eaters*, there is the robust manliness of Ulysses and his mariners.

### **What is/are the Hyades?**

Hyades is a 'V' shaped cluster of over 100 stars at the head of the zodiac constellation, Taurus (the Bull), held by the ancients to indicate rainy weather. In other words, the Bull appears in the sky over the Aegean Sea, when the rainy season is there.