

## TENNYSON'S ULYSSES ANALYSIS

In the present text I am going to analyse Tennyson's "Ulysses" based on title's expectations, structure, content, connotation and overall effect. This is not supposed to give a definite answer as it depends on a personal interpretation.

Just by reading the title, an intelligent reader should expect the poem to be about the mythological character of the Odyssey: Ulysses, king of Ithaca.

Tennyson is not the first one to talk about this particular character. First there was Homer, who, indeed, wrote the Odyssey: an epic poem about Odysseus (Ulysses Greek name) ten years long journey home after the Trojan war. Then, there was Dante who made Ulysses the protagonist of the Inferno canto 26.

These three characters are all different but still have something in common: love of adventure. In fact, even though Dante and Homer's Ulysses is young and strong while Tennyson's is older and weaker, there is something that connects them. In the Odyssey, he comes home safe and sound, but then, in the Inferno, we know he died because of his insatiable thirst of knowledge. Tennyson's Ulysses stands in the middle: he is at home but does not fit there, he wants to go away, to be free.

From a first reading, the poem is noticed to be arranged into five stanzas, all presenting different lengths. The poem is composed by blank verse, which means it should have iambic pentameter as its base metre. Although Tennyson made the reading more interesting by changing the stresses, mixing up the beat and combining with punctuation.

Also, this first reading confirm the fact that the protagonist is Ulysses and the central theme is a search for adventure, experience and meaning.

Right from the first lines the reader gets to meet Ulysses' character, as he is the speaking voice. He is the idle king of an unwanted kingdom. It is clear to the intelligent reader he does not fit there with that "*savage race*". He clearly says they live just to feed and sleep, distancing him from that kind of people. He does not want to be like them and he will never be: he refuse to settle.

*"I cannot rest from travel"*: from this arise his refuse to accept the setting of old age. At first he sounds like the idle king but as soon as the reading proceeds it is clear that he is desperate: he wants to live his life to the fullest but he is stuck on that island being the king he is not.

He starts to remember his past life and his adventures: these become the way for him to know himself, to change, to improve. On the contrary, Ithaca is still the same: nothing has changed. He can not be the king of such a stationary place.

He is in urge to get back outside and live. This urge is mostly underlined by the use of enjambement, which make the reading faster, almost not allowing the reader to pause and breathe: it could be the same for Ulysses, not breathing while still there. *"How dull it is to*

*pause, to make an end, To rust unburnished, not to shine in use*"; he craves travel and knowledge while he feels dull just waiting there.

Then, after knowing his feeling towards his past life, the reader meets Telemachus, Ulysses's son, introduced by the adjective "my". He comes to life through his father's words; he describes him as the perfect king for Ithaca.

Slow prudence, mild, good, blameless, duties, tenderness: these are the words used to characterize Telemachus. He is the typical Victorian positive character, devoted to the useful: profit, money, administrating.

It soon comes to mind how different son and father are. On the contrary of Telemachus, Ulysses wants to go over the boundaries, he is passionate, full of doubts: the romantic figure.

Because of this difference, Ulysses knows his son is the perfect candidate to be his successor: Telemachus is ready to own the crown, like Ulysses never will.

After introducing his son, Ulysses speaks to his mariners. His affection to them is showed by the adjective "my": he has lived with them, loved, travelled.

The atmosphere created in this stanza is quite battling: he is trying to convince his sail crew that old age is no excuse to sit and do nothing, that life can still be lived.

As they sail away he reminds them of their past glory, underlining the fact that past defines who you are. He knows he does not have much to live any more but he is not afraid: now he is starting a new journey which will take him to an honourable and heroic death, as he has always dreamed for. He is aware they are not as strong as in the past but he knows that it does not matter if they are brave in the heart and in the mind.

Coming to the end, the last line summarizes all the poem: "*To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield*" becoming a motto: even though time wears us down as we age, even though we may find ourselves depressed and weakened by circumstances, there is always something to strive for.

Ulysses figure becomes a role model: he is reflective, contemplative and hopeful.

Thanks to him the reader understands that to live a meaningful life he has to overcome his fears, abandon his domestic situation and try not to be held down by situations that do not fit him.