Analysis Tennyson’s  Ulysses  –   lines 1-18

Like the romantic poets who preceded him, Tennyson found much inspiration in the ancient worlds of Greece and Rome. In poems such as  “Ulysses,” Tennyson retells the story of  Homer, which described the characters of Ulysses and Telemachus and their adventures in the ancient world. "Ulysses" is the Roman name for the Greek hero Odysseus, the mythical king of Ithaca  He spent ten years fighting in the war, and then spent another ten years trying to get home. Ulysses is considered a  hero because he passed  a lot of tests. He provides the reader an example of intelligence, smartness, courage, strength.

The poem takes place in several places in Ithaca; it starts by the hearth in Ulysses' palace or castle, then points to port.

“Ulysses” is written as a dramatic monologue: the entire poem is spoken by a single character, whose identity is revealed by his own words. The lines are in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, which serves to impart a fluid and natural quality to Ulysses’s speech. Many of the lines are enjambed, which means that a thought does not end with the line-break;  the sentences often end in the middle, rather than the end, of the lines. The use of enjambment is appropriate in a poem about pushing forward “beyond the utmost bound of human thought.” Finally, the poem is divided into four paragraph-like sections, each of which comprises a distinct thematic unit of the poem.

Tennyson reworks the figure of Ulysses by drawing on the ancient hero of Homer’s [*Odyssey*](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/odyssey/)  and the medieval hero of Dante’s *Inferno*. The details of this sea voyage are described by Dante in Canto XXVI of the *Inferno*:  Dante’s Ulysses is a tragic figure who dies while sailing too far in an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Tennyson combines these two accounts by having Ulysses make his speech shortly after returning to Ithaca and resuming his administrative responsibilities, and shortly before embarking on his final voyage.

However, this poem also concerns the poet’s own personal journey, for it was composed in the first few weeks after Tennyson learned of the death of his dear college friend Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833 and the poem is also an elegy for a deeply cherished friend. Ulysses is also a model of individual self-assertion and the Romantic rebellion against bourgeois conformity. Tennyson  spoke to his Victorian contemporaries about  issues of urgent social and political concern. Thus for Tennyson’s immediate audience, the figure of Ulysses held not only mythological meaning, but stood as an important contemporary cultural icon as well.

 Analysis lines 1-18

Ulysses has done a lot of traveling; it took him ten years to get home from Troy, which means he's had an entire decade to visit a whole lot of places. Apparently, those ten years weren't enough because all he talks about is leaving home again. It's not entirely clear whether Ulysses wants to visit any specific place or if he just wants to travel for its own sake.

**Line 5**: Ulysses refers to his subjects as a "savage race," who do nothing but eat and sleep, which makes them more like brutes or "savages," than civilized people.

**Line 6**: Ulysses explains that he can't stop traveling because he wants to get the most out of life.

**Lines 10-11**:Sailors used the stars to guide them. Ulysses has done a lot of sailing, so it's no surprise that stars come up several times in the poem. Ulysses describes how the "rainy Hyades," a group of stars in the constellation Taurus,   caused storms at sea. Of course, the stars didn't literally "vex" the sea; Ulysses gives a human attribute to a non-human object, which is called **personification**.

**Lines 12-15**: Ulysses tells us that he's visited a lot of different places with different governments, people, foods, and the like. He portrays himself as some kind of predatory animal, "roaming with a hungry heart." Because he doesn't say "I was like a lion" or "I roamed just as a lion might," this is a **metaphor**.

**Lines 16-17**: Ulysses describes how he enjoyed fighting on the "plains" of Troy, an ancient city located in what is now Northwestern Turkey. Ulysses refers to his enjoyment of battle as a kind of consumption, a "drinking" of "delight."  Enjoying the delight of battle is compared to the drinking of some kind of beverage, which means this is a **metaphor**