**Analysis of Ulysses by Alfred Tennyson**

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.

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 his adventurous nature. 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 also has enjoyed battling at Troy with his fellow warriors.

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. Ulysses recognizes the enormous differences between him and is son but He still loves him because his abilities, different from Ulysses’; “He works his work, I mine.”

Ulysses looks at the port and the sea beyond, calling to him (“the thunder and the sunshine”, “free hearts”). Light fades, and the day wanes. Ulysses calls out that it is not too late to discover a “newer world”, beyond the sunset and to reach the Happy Isles and meet Achilles. Although, much vigor remains: they still have “heroic hearts” which are “strong in will” and want to explore and discover and never give up.

The poem might be based on the character Odysseus from Homer's Odyssey ("Ulysses", Latin form), where 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. Tennyson's character is similar but not the same as in Homer's Odyssey.

Tennyson's Ulysses is now old, having experienced all of the adventures of battle at Troy and on the seas. 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 adventure some 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".

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. 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” calling them are 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.

The allusion to Achilles in the Happy Isles (or the Blessed Isles) draws a contrast to Hades. 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 heroism for Ulysses.

For Ulysses, the crisis is due to old age: he knows death is unavoidable, but he also knows that death-in-life is intolerable for a person like him. It may be argued that Ulysses seeks to understand life beyond death, but consider that “it may be” that they reach the isles where Achilles resides. Ulysses may indeed want to find direct evidence of spiritual reality after death.

But the real, final point is: 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.