Activities on Tennyson’s Ulysses

1) - the narrator is the famous Ulysses of the Greek mythology; it is not reported who is speaking to, probably his words are addressed to the whole humanity.

- he is old, indeed there are many references to death, but it’s not given the precise age.

- reading the first lines, Ulysses seems to be at home, in Ithaca (“By this still hearth, among these barren crags, / Match'd with an aged wife”)

2) Life on Ithaca (lines 2-5): it is uncivilised and… Negative adjectives such as idol, aged convey Ulysses’s total dissatisfaction with life on Ithaca

His past life: he has experienced a lot, both negative and positive situations. He has seen and know a lot during his journeys. Quotes like “All times I have enjoy'd / Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those / That loved me (...) For always roaming with a hungry heart (...) Much have I seen and known;” convey such message.

View of present and future (19-32): it looks like he wants to reject his current tedious life in Ithaca to start travelling again. He is hungry of knowledge, he is even ready to suffer to experience new things. “Death closes all: but something ere the end / Some work of noble note, may yet be done” recall his desire of escape his life.

Attitude to Telemachus (33-44): he is attached to his son and has esteem for him. He describes his sons as a wise and capable man, and he would run Ithaca as Ulysses leaves. Adjectives as “mine own (Telemachus)” shows affection, while “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” convey a sense of commitment.

Address to his mariners (45-70): his mariners were more like mates, he doesn’t consider himself superior than them. They shared the same experiences, even when regarded sufferance. “My mariners / Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me”

3a) The idea of the powerful and young Ulysses conveyed by epic poet Homer, as well as Dante, is totally changed: Tennyson writes about an old man who is sitting near a fireplace at home, remembering his past experiences and regretting them. Even if old, he is ready to leave, to follow his desire of knowledge and to escape the tedious life of Ithaca. Ulysses is the opposite of his son Telemachus: while his son is apparently wise and responsible, capable of ruling, he wants just to travel, he doesn’t feel like belonging to a single place. The awareness of how his body lost strength because of his age doesn’t stop him: maybe the message conveyed is that will is stronger than anything.

3b) The narrator, Ulysses, highlights the different personality of Telemachus, praising his attitude; the poet is apparently neutral, but I think he secretly sides with Ulysses, admiring his courage and will of experiencing something new even at his old age.

4) Ulysses doesn’t feel at ease when at home in Ithaca, he feels bored and trapped in a life which doesn’t belong to him; he wants to leave and travel again. I think the sense of loss he perceives could recall the poet’s sense of loss for the death of his dearest friend A. Hallam.

5) The poet’s lexical choices enhance a sense of sadness and regret, as well as the desire of knowledge and new experiences. The poem has not a regular patter, it’s like Ulysses is simply speaking to a friends, confessing his feelings and deepest desires. The poem has anyway a musical sound, recalling almost a fable.