

Ulysses

Alfred Tennyson, 1st Baron (1809–92)

IT little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me. 5
I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: all times I have enjoy'd
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
That lov'd me, and alone; on shore, and when
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades 1
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Vex'd the dim sea. I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known: cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honor'd of them all; 1
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And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades 2
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For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!
As tho' to breathe were life. Life pil'd on life
Were all too little, and of one to me 2
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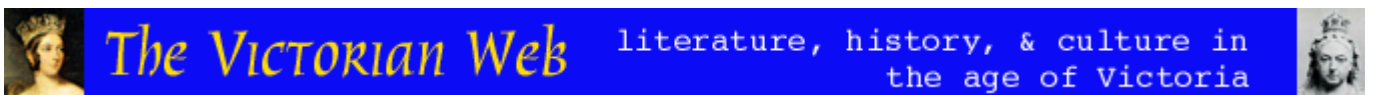
Little remains: but every hour is sav'd
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this gray spirit yearning in desire 3
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To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.
This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle—
Well-lov'd of me, discerning to fulfil 3

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This labor, by slow prudence to make mild A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees Subdue them to the useful and the good. Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere Of common duties, decent not to fail	4 0
In offices of tenderness, and pay Meet adoration to my household gods, When I am gone. He works his work, I mine. There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail: There gloom the dark broad seas. My mariners,	4 5
Souls' that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me— That ever with a frolic welcome took The thunder and the sunshine, and oppos'd Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old; Old age hath yet his honor and his toil;	5 0
Death closes all; but something ere the end, Some work of noble note, may yet be done, Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods. The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks: The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep	5 5
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends, 'T is not too late to seek a newer world. Push off, and sitting well in order smite The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths	6 0
Of all the western stars, until I die. It may be that the gulfs will wash us down: It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles, And see the great Achilles, whom we knew. Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'	6 5
We are not now that strength which in old days Mov'd earth and heaven, that which we are, we are: One equal temper of heroic hearts, Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.	7 0

Alfred Tennyson's "Ulysses"

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Form: 70 lines in four blank verse paragraphs.

First published in *Poems* (1842), the poem was written in the first few weeks after Tennyson learned of his friend [Arthur Henry Hallam](#)'s death.

Victorians tended to read this poem pretty straightforwardly, as an avowal of faith in the necessity of striving ever onward. They were supported by Tennyson's own statement that this poem "gave my feeling about Hallam's death perhaps more simply than anything in *In Memoriam*," his great elegaic lament. But modern critics have found "Ulysses" anything but simple. Perhaps more than any other single poem, how you read it depends upon your theoretical assumptions about the nature of poetry. Here follow a few of the critical appraisals. Make up your own questions.

1. Even though Tennyson said "Ulysses" gave his feeling about Hallam's death and "the need for going forward, and braving the struggle of life," this account of the poem's meaning is inconsistent with the desolate melancholy music of the words themselves.
2. Tennyson is espousing a jovial [agnosticism](#) totally opposed to the faith endorsed in *In Memoriam*. Thus the poem is a dramatic representation of a man who has faith neither in the gods nor in the necessity of preserving order in his kingdom and his own life.

3. The whole thing is a *monologue interieur*, and there is no quest. It is merely the utterance of a super-annuated hero indulging himself in the fantasy that his beloved mariners are still alive. It is a kind of dream, a means of escape momentarily from the uncongenial environment of Ithaca.

4. The whole thing is a *monologue interieur* that takes place on Ulysses's death-bed. Thus he can greet his dead sailors, and thus he can look forward to exoloring the last great mysetry, death.

(These last three possibilities do not necessarily contradict the previous suggestions.)

5. The idea that here Tennyson unlocked his heart depends upon stock responses. If we simply read it as a dramatic poem, one comes to see its speaker as a highly complex individual.

6. Ulysses is heroic but bewildered, and the structural inconsistencies in the poem are evidence of the author's (or character's) muddled thinking.

7. Ulysses is an [Ancient Mariner](#) who has never learned his lesson.