



Reading the Text and the Context: A Critical Reappraisal of Tennyson's *Ulysses*

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Introduction

Ulysses is a poem written by the eminent Victorian poet Alfred Lord Tennyson in 1833 and published in 1842. It was written following the death of his close friend Arthur Hallam who remained a great influence on the poem. The poem consists of seventy lines of blank verse in the form of a dramatic monologue. Tennyson's contemporaries and subsequent literary luminaries praised the poem very highly for its theme and subject matter. It is widely regarded as one of Tennyson's best compositions as T.S. Eliot termed it a "perfect" poem in the poetic oeuvre of Tennyson. Tennyson employed a wide range of subject matter as the source for his poetry, ranging from medieval legends to ancient mythology and from home settings to observations of nature. Tennyson, in the romantic tradition of the previous era, drew inspiration in the ancient worlds of Greece and Rome. Tennyson retells the events of Dante and Homer in poems like *The Lotos-Eaters* (1832) and *Ulysses*, which described the characters of Ulysses, Telemachus, and Penelope and their experiences in the ancient world. Tennyson harps on these mythic stories to give expression to his poetic imaginings suited to his times.

The poem *Ulysses* is based on the Greek mythological character Odysseus who longs for adventure in the last phase of his life. He wishes to leave his Kingdom of Ithaca to his son Telemachus and embark on an adventure that may reunite him with his comrade in the Trojan war, Achilles. As the poem is written after the death of his friend Arthur Hallam, It captures the mood and tone of the poet in mourning. Though many of his poems in this period are prone to falling into pessimism and the temptations of giving up, *Ulysses* strongly gives out the light of optimism and avows the virtue of struggling on with life. Sokhanvar (qtd. In Babamiri) believes that Tennyson's bent on this poem rests on the "need of going forward and braving the struggle of life" (814) after the death of his friend. The attitude to life revealed in the poem stands sharply contrasted with another poem with the Hellenic theme, *The Lotos Eaters*. In the poem, the mariners of Ulysses find no meaning in the perpetual cycle of toil in the view of death closing it all, "Death is the end of life; ah, why should life all labour be?" (Tennyson 119). The intoxicated mariners revel in the

idleness as a state of inactivity and dormancy grip them. But, *Ulysses*, being the later poem, clears the haze of stagnancy and espouses for a life of activity. The poem also posits a Tennysonian version of Victorian compromise, which stands right between Arnoldian high pessimism and Brownian high optimism.

The poem is a prototypical Victorian poem as it strikes the tone and temper of the Victorian age. It encapsulates the themes such as the pull between social consciousness and realism, the chasm between science and religion, and finally, an equipoise between faith and doubt. As Andrew Sanders writes, “It was an age of conflicting explanations and theories, of scientific and economic confidence and of social and spiritual pessimism, a sharpened awareness of the inevitability of progress and of deep disquiet as to the nature of the present” (405). But what really stands out in the poem is the Victorian zeal for enlarging the boundaries of knowledge

to the farthest limits of science and innovation, and along with it, the desire to explore new lands through voyages. The poem hints at another very important aspect of the Victorian age which is the expansion of the British empire through the annexation of new lands. As John Darwin notes, “no other power developed more varied and far-reaching imperial relationship than Victorian Britain” (614).

Discussion

Ulysses by Lord Alfred Tennyson is one of the major poems on which Tennyson's fame is contingent. It is a poetic flourish of the Victorian ideals in an impressive manner and in a memorable diction that is based on a careful study of Homer and Dante. It poignantly captures Tennyson's considered philosophy of life which is predicated on a defiant optimism in the face of perils. Ulysses, the Greek king, becomes the mouthpiece of the poet who exercises his poetic prowess to give voice to his sentiments. Tennyson takes the impetus from the heroes of Homer's *Odyssey* and Dante's *Inferno*. For Homer's Ulysses, it has been predicted that when he kills his wife's suitors, he will only have one more voyage. However, Dante describes the journey in such a way that Ulysses becomes restless in Ithaca and seeks out new areas to both explore and plunder the belongings. Ulysses, like Marlow's Faustus, is a tragic hero who is bored of an ordinary life and desires to sail too far in his quest for knowledge. Tennyson shows his admiration for these two narratives by giving Ulysses to deliver his final speech to his wife, Penelope and son, Telemachus after he returns to Ithaca and makes his final decision to resume his administrative duties before embarking on his final voyage.

The poem encapsulates the zeal of the aged Troy warrior, Ulysses who wants to renounce his royal responsibilities to set out on a journey to the unknown and unexplored. Ulysses finds no joy in living an idle life in his hilly kingdom of Ithaca in the company of his old wife and ruling over the uncivilized people. He considers the idea of ceasing his travels unwelcoming as he wants to “drink life to the lees” (Tennyson 171). Ulysses recounts the joys he has found in his life by being a sailor at sea and a warrior with his fellow soldiers on the battlefield of Troy. He feels that the travels and encounters have shaped him and made

him a great name of his time. But none of these encounters have quenched his urge to travel; rather, each meeting has piqued his interest in seeing more of the world. The thought of bidding farewell to a life of activity seems monotonous to him as he does not want to just idle away the rest of his life. Lives piled on lives do not seem sufficient to him for acquiring all the knowledge of the world, so he wants to go beyond the limits of human experience and follow knowledge like a sinking star. In order to fulfill his desire of traveling, he wishes to consign "the spectre and the isle" (Tennyson 172) to his son, Telemachus, who is intelligent and prudent enough to rule his kingdom. Finally, he addresses his fellow mariners, who are old but unrelenting, to join him on a last voyage to sail beyond the horizons. He says that though they are old, they can still achieve something noble and honorable before "the long day wanes" (Tennyson 173). It may be that they will be drowned in the sea, but there is also the possibility of reaching the heavenly abode where they will meet the great Achilles. Though their youth and energy have been withered, yet their indomitable spirits remain intact. With all the zest and the strength of will, Ulysses invokes his mariners to go out exploring new lands without yielding either to old age or a life of complacency.

Ulysses, the Greek king in the poem, is seized by an uncontrollable desire "to sail beyond the sunset, and the baths, Of all the western stars" (Tennyson 172). The figure of Ulysses becomes a prototype of a Victorian man who wishes to travel to the unexplored land and regions. The poet here uses the metaphor of travel in which voyages to places beyond the horizon are the ultimate goal. The speaker throughout the poem expresses his desire to continue his incessant search for new experiences till he breathes his last. Tennyson expresses the speaker's philosophy in a metaphor where an experience is compared to a gateway, and every experience allows a man to look ahead and find a new vista of thrills to be crossed. The more the wayfarer advances, the more he feels that ultimate destination – death is yet far off. Death is beyond all *savoir-faire*. It is the final unconquered land that defines the limits of self-assertion. The speaker contextualizes his indomitable desire to travel and explore by recounting the risky circumstances through which he had undertaken his travel through rain and storm as suggested by the image of Hyades, which is an image inspired by Virgil's *Aeneid*. This shows the valor innate in him, which has made him become the sign of his times

– "I am become a name" (Tennyson 171). The legendary aspect of the story of Ulysses is emphasized here as the poet uses myth to recreate a nation's past so that his poetry becomes a regenerative force. Here the speaker of the poem becomes the spokesperson of his own status as a mythical figure, and Tennyson uses dramatic monologue in which the speaking is self-reflexive and addresses the readers.

In the figure of Ulysses, we have the eternal traveler, forever seeking new experience just like a Victorian Britisher whose final journey marks the dissolution of self. The adventurous spirit in Ulysses does not allow him "to pause, to make an end, To rust unburnis'd, not to shine in use!" (Tennyson 172). Here the speaker compares human life to a sword that should be regularly used and honed as opposed to remaining unused and rusted. Traveling for Ulysses becomes the only way of combatting death and living a life without being dormant. This unquenchable desire seizes the protagonist to "follow knowledge like a sinking star" (Tennyson 172). This poetic image of a bright, beautiful, and elusive star

tempts him to discover a new region which the human mind hitherto has no idea at all. This guiding principle of life is typically Tennysonian and basically Victorian in tone. Being the Tennysonian mouthpiece, Ulysses is reaching out for the unreachable to combat the limits of the self and reach an imaginative region. This desire of Ulysses reveals a social consciousness charged with the spirit of escapism as a Victorian trait. Ulysses seeks to escape from the tasks that are consigned upon him as the ruler. Rather he prefers to hand over the responsibilities of the crown to his son Telemachus and leave for a land beyond the human imagination. The adventurous spirit in him has also taken away the complacency of leading a common life. So he does not want to settle down by only shouldering the everyday responsibilities but wants “to seek a newer world” (Tennyson 172).

In the poem, the narrator’s journeys emblemize both a process of self-discovery and an appropriation of power. The vignettes of invasion of colonies in the nineteenth century can be found in the achievements of Ulysses as he has stamped his identity on all that has “seen and known... manners, climates, council and governments” (Tennyson 171). It ushers in a sense to show how Victorian imperialism worked. According to John Morrissey, imperialism can be defined, “as a system of power, political economic ascendancy and cultural subordination, envisioned from the center of expanding nation-states and differentially operationalized in colonized spaces throughout the world” (17). Though the seed of imperialism was sown in

England during the sixteenth century, it accelerated during the reign of Queen Victoria because the government intended to explore a large number of uncharted locations known as the "New World." This quest to explore unexplored zones was aided by technological advancements and scientific inventions. Furthermore, the advent of the "Second Industrial Revolution" between 1870 and 1914, and the rapid development in science and technology, resulted in the development of the railroad, iron ships, printing presses, and electrical power generation (Babamiri 9). These advancements enabled the Victorian men to materialize their whims and desire to explore the uncharted territories as typified in the figure of Ulysses. The ideology of expansion and of seeking new worlds was accompanied by the idea of administration. The typical notion of imperial conquest gives rise to the utilitarian idea of making the natives useful by refining and subduing it as Ulysses advises his son to “subdue them to the useful and the good” (Tennyson 172). In this context, the consignment handed over to Telemachus by Ulysses is important to be understood. Telemachus is trusted to carry out a political life where he can lead the "rugged people" (Tennyson 172) to the better version of themselves. It alludes to the Victorian white man's burden to civilize the world through the use of education and missionary zeal. It is in tune with Arnold’s dream of an ideal state in which intellectual revolution could bring together the best elements to rule the state.

In the last part of the poem, Ulysses directly addresses his fellow friends and mariners to get ready for an endless voyage with accustomed ease, energy, and skill to create furrow through the great waves of the ocean. He further tells his comrades that even if they are old, but still, they are honored as "some work of noble note may yet be done" (Tennyson 173). Thus, he urges his fellow travelers, "Tis not too late to seek a newer world" (Tennyson 173). This vivacity to sail to the uncharted land celebrates Victorian imperialism to the

fullest. But the spirit and zeal of Ulysses can also represent the poet's own quest to explore the region of the imagination.

Conclusion

Ulysses, like a typical Victorian citizen, is fired with energy to grasp the unattainable as he is extremely eager to reach the unknown and unexplored. The last line, "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" (Tennyson 174) echoes the indomitable Victorian zeal to dominate the world through imperialism. By viewing the poem from an imperialistic standpoint, one can understand the irrepressible desire of Ulysses to travel to the regions beyond the sunset only to fulfill the imperialist vision of Victorian England. Through the poem, Tennyson not only celebrates the zeal and spirit of the age but also seeks to present a philosophy of life by investing the character of Ulysses. Ulysses is typified as an epitome of a life in its eternal search for meaning through the metaphor of voyage. On the other hand, Ulysses also characterizes the Victorian man in his passion for knowledge, vigor for the exploration of new lands, and curiosity to know the mysteries of the universe. As the poem celebrates forward movement, Tennyson is caught between his struggle to understand death as the dissolution of self and the aggressive ideology of imperialism.

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