**Ulysses**

**- Alfered Tennyson**

**Title:**

"Ulysses" is the Roman name for the Greek hero Odysseus, the mythical king of Ithaca who fought in the Trojan War alongside Achilles, Agamemnon, Menelaus, and others. He spent ten years fighting in the war, and then spent another ten years trying to get home! The Greek poet Homer wrote about [Odysseus](http://www.shmoop.com/character/literature/homer/the-odyssey/odysseus.html) and the Trojan War in the *Iliad*, while his other epic poem the [*Odyssey*](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/literature/homer/the-odyssey.html) is all about Odysseus's journey home.

In other versions of the story, Ulysses is in no rush to get home; in fact, he's willing to keep battling strange creatures and risk death in order to keep sailing. Both versions of the story of Ulysses are evoked in the poem; Ulysses is at home in Ithaca (Homer), but realizes he's bored and wants to keep exploring the world, even if it kills him (other versions). Getting home and resting up for a while is an important step, but so is getting back out there. Ulysses is like a football player who gets injured, goes to the locker room to get taped up, and opts go back in the game rather than spend the rest of it on the sidelines.

**Summary**

Ulysses (Odysseus) declares that there is little point in his staying home “by this still hearth” with his old wife, doling out rewards and punishments for the unnamed masses who live in his kingdom.

Still speaking to himself he proclaims that he “cannot rest from travel” but feels compelled to live to the fullest and swallow every last drop of life. He has enjoyed all his experiences as a sailor who travels the seas, and he considers himself a symbol for everyone who wanders and roams the earth. His travels have exposed him to many different types of people and ways of living. They have also exposed him to the “delight of battle” while fighting the Trojan War with his men. Ulysses declares that his travels and encounters have shaped who he is: “I am a part of all that I have met,” he asserts. And it is only when he is traveling that the “margin” of the globe that he has not yet traversed shrink and fade, and cease to goad him.

Ulysses declares that it is boring to stay in one place, and that to remain stationary is to rust rather than to shine; to stay in one place is to pretend that all there is to life is the simple act of breathing, whereas he knows that in fact life contains much novelty, and he longs to encounter this. His spirit yearns constantly for new experiences that will broaden his horizons; he wishes “to follow knowledge like a sinking star” and forever grow in wisdom and in learning.

Ulysses now speaks to an unidentified audience concerning his son Telemachus, who will act as his successor while the great hero resumes his travels: he says, “This is my son, mine own Telemachus, to whom I leave the scepter and the isle.” He speaks highly but also patronizingly of his son’s capabilities as a ruler, praising his prudence, dedication, and devotion to the gods. Telemachus will do his work of governing the island while Ulysses will do his work of traveling the seas: “He works his work, I mine.”

In the final stanza, Ulysses addresses the mariners with whom he has worked, traveled, and weathered life’s storms over many years. He declares that although he and they are old, they still have the potential to do something noble and honorable before “the long day wanes.” He encourages them to make use of their old age because “ ’tis not too late to seek a newer world.” He declares that his goal is to sail onward “beyond the sunset” until his death. Perhaps, he suggests, they may even reach the “Happy Isles,” or the paradise of perpetual summer described in Greek mythology where great heroes like the warrior Achilles were believed to have been taken after their deaths. Although Ulysses and his mariners are not as strong as they were in youth, they are “strong in will” and are sustained by their resolve to push onward relentlessly: “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

**Form**

This poem 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.

**Commentary**



 “Ulysses,” like many of Tennyson’s other poems, deals with the desire to reach beyond the limits of one’s field of vision and the mundane details of everyday life. Ulysses hungers to explore the untraveled world.

As in all dramatic monologues, here the character of the speaker emerges almost unintentionally from his own words. Ulysses’ incompetence as a ruler is evidenced by his preference for potential quests rather than his present responsibilities. He devotes a full 26 lines to his own egotistical proclamation of his zeal for the wandering life, and another 26 lines to the exhortation of his mariners to roam the seas with him. However, he offers only 11 lines of lukewarm praise to his son concerning the governance of the kingdom in his absence, and a mere two words about his “aged wife” Penelope. Thus, the speaker’s own words betray his abdication of responsibility and his specificity of purpose.