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IN WHAT WAY THE VERY CONCEPT OF THE VIRTUES OF TENACITY AND OPTIMISM IN  
"ULYSSES" OF ALFRED LORD TENNYSON DOES CORROBORATE THIS NOTION BY ITSELF?

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ABSTRACT

It should be a matter of great honour and worthy too to incorporate the creative aspect of the poet laureate Alfred Lord Tennyson. The influence of John Keats and other Romantic poets published before and during his childhood is evident from the richness of his imagery and descriptive writing. It reflects the Victorian period of his maturity in his feeling for order and his tendency towards moralizing. The aim of this paper is to depict the notion of his virtuous concept relating to perseverance and optimism of human beings as well as of his own life. He was no doubt a man of optimist. Tennyson used a wide range of subject matter ranging from medieval legends to classical myths and from domestic situations to observations of nature. Like many writers who write a great deal over a long time, his poetry is occasionally uninspired, but his personality rings throughout all his works that reflect a grand and special variability in its quality. The fundamental aim of presenting this paper is to give a new ideas; i.e. new vistas of the psychological aspect of his writings and life too.

Key notes: perseverance and optimism, psychological aspect of his writings, observation of nature, psychological aspect and doctrine, romanticism.

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INTRODUCTION

Ulysses' was written in October 1833 after Tennyson learned about his friend Arthur Hallam's death. Ulysses, based on the Greek mythological character Odysseus, longs for adventure, is going to leave his Kingdom of Ithica to his son Telemachus and set out in an adventure which may reunite him with his comrade in the Trojan war, Achilles. The poem is in the form of blank verse, unrhymed iambic pentameter and is a dramatic monologue. In the first part of the poem, Ulysses is listing the problems that he has. Ulysses describes himself as an 'Idle king', which shows he is restless and although he governs, is not getting any satisfaction from it. This description is Ulysses' thought process, as he says how he is 'match'd with an aged wife', he most probably would not say this out loudly. Ulysses says how he 'mete and dole unequal laws unto a

savage race'. After the death of his friend Arthur Hallam, Tennyson struggled through a period of deep despair, which he eventually overcame to begin writing again.

During his time of mourning, Tennyson rarely wrote and, for many years, battled alcoholism. Many of his poems are about the temptation to give up and fall prey to pessimism, but they also extol the virtues of optimism and discuss the importance of struggling on with life. The need to persevere and continue is the central theme of *In Memoriam* and "Ulysses" (1833), both written after Hallam's death. Perhaps because of Tennyson's gloomy and tragic childhood, perseverance and optimism also appear in poetry written before Hallam's death, such as "The Lotos-Eaters" (1832, 1842). Poems such as "The Lady of Shalott" (1832, 1842) and "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (1854) also vary this theme: both poems glorify characters who embrace their destinies in life, even though those destinies end in tragic death. The Lady of Shalott leaves her seclusion to meet the outer world, determined to seek the love that is missing in her life. The cavalymen in "The Charge of the Light Brigade" keep charging through the valley toward the Russian cannons; they persevere even as they realize that they will likely die. Tennyson lived during a period of great scientific advancement, and he used his poetry to work out the conflict between religious faith and scientific discoveries.

Like the romantic poets who preceded him, Tennyson found much inspiration in the ancient worlds of Greece and Rome. In poems such as "The Lotos-Eaters" and "Ulysses," Tennyson retells the stories of Dante and Homer, which described the characters of Ulysses, Telemachus, and Penelope and their adventures in the ancient world. However, Tennyson slightly alters these mythic stories, shifting the time frame of some of the action and often adding more descriptive imagery to the plot. For instance, "Ulysses," a dramatic monologue spoken by Homer's hero, urges readers to carry on and persevere rather than to give up and retire. Elsewhere Tennyson channels the voice of Tithonus, a legendary prince from Troy, in the eponymous poem "Tithonus" (1833, 1859). He praises the ancient poet Virgil in his ode "To Virgil" (1882), commenting on Virgil's choice of subject matter and lauding his ability to chronicle human history in meter. Tennyson mined the ancient world to find stories that would simultaneously enthrall and inspire his readers. The poem expresses the insatiable thirst of the human soul for knowledge. It was the spirit of the Italian Renaissance that made modern Europe what it is today. He has also given us here a picture of that mind. He kept up his attitude of mind throughout life and repeated in poem after poem the idea of the eternal search after truth beyond the limits hitherto attained.

### Discussion

"Ulysses" was published in 1842 in the collection of poetry that secured Tennyson's literary fame. It had been written nine years earlier, when he was 24 years old, following the death of his closest friend, Arthur Henry Hallam. Tennyson commented that "it was more written with the feeling of [Hallam's] loss upon me than many poems in *In Memoriam*." 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 (although he may only be imagining what he might say to us and to his mariners). The poem garnered praise from Tennyson's contemporaries as well as successive literary figures including T.S. Eliot, who called it a "perfect" poem. It is generally considered one of his finest works and is a mainstay of Victorian poetry anthologies as well as selections of Tennyson's oeuvre. As source material for his poetry, Tennyson used a wide range of subject matter ranging from medieval legends to classical myths and from domestic situations to observations of nature.

The poem is based on the character Odysseus from Homer's "*Odyssey*" ("Ulysses" is the Latin form of the name), but Tennyson also drew upon Dante's *Inferno*, Canto XXVI, in which Dante is led by the Roman epic poet Virgil to meet Ulysses and hear his tale. In Homer, 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. In Dante, this part of the story is fleshed out. Ulysses gathers his men together to prepare for the journey and exhorts them not to waste their time left on earth. He dies on this journey, which is why he is in Dante's hell. Tennyson's character is somewhere in between these literary predecessors, as Ulysses knows he will set off on a last

journey but has not done so yet. Critics also note the influence of Shakespeare, particularly his *Troilus and Cressida*, which also includes Ulysses.

*Ulysses* is a poem written by the Victorian Poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson in the traditional blank verse in unrhymed iambic Pentameter, which serves to impart a fluid and natural quality to Ulysses' speech. It was written in 1833 and published in 1842. It is in the Dramatic Monologue form where the main principle controlling the poet's choice and formulation of what the lyric speaker says is to reveal to the reader, in a way that enhances its interest, the speaker's temperament and character.

The first stanza introduces us to the mindset of Ulysses. His idea of an ideal King is not of one who sits around the fire with his wife and making laws for people who don't even know him. He compares people to a sort of animal ("savage race"), who needs to be fed and taken care of. He feels uneasy as he knows he is meant for more meaningful things. Here, we get to question Ulysses selfishly claiming his family and kingdom as less important to him than his needs and wishes. This demonstrated how he resembles flawed protagonists in earlier literature.

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." His quest for adventure and fulfillment, like the goal of Goethe's *Faust*, is defined by the pursuit of new and unique knowledge "beyond the utmost bound of human thought." As Ulysses moves, his experiences make an arch covering the arch of the "Untravelled World". The more he travels, the more the margins or edges of that world recede or covered up. He is getting bored sitting on his own homeland and feels the urgency to leave yet again for another journey. He compares himself to a metal, that is still full of shine but if he is not active for a while he could rust, just like an unused metal would rust. He feels life is beyond just breathing and surviving. Ulysses feels this urgency to leave as he feels death is nearing him and hence refers to himself as a "sinking star" and "grey-spirited".

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. So long as they can do "something ere the end, / Some work of noble note," Ulysses wants to be doing it. 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" of the ocean call out to them to come back—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, while they have it they retain the strength of "will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." The use of Greek Mythology is persistently used in this poem as the poem is spoken by a famous Greek Hero. The day is ending and he watches the sunset. This sunset is symbolic of the nearing end of his life. He thus, calls on his men and asks them if they would join him in his last endeavor to a land beyond the "baths/ of all the western stars". This refers to the outer ocean or river that the Greeks believed surrounded

the (flat) earth, thinking the stars descended into these "baths". He wants to go to the "happy isles" which refers to the Islands of the Blessed, or heaven where their personal hero, Achilles resides. The allusion to Achilles in the Happy Isles (or the Blessed Isles) draws a contrast to Hades. Whereas in Dante, Ulysses has died, here he holds out hope that he will reach the heavenly isles where someone like vigorous Achilles deserves to spend eternity. 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 the heroic for Ulysses. Ulysses tells us about how he and his troop are not as young as they used to be with half the energy they used to have, there is still enough left to move them further.

Ulysses is almost like an antithesis, who eventually decides to move away from his kingdom and escape into more meaningful voyages. He devotes a full 26 lines to his own egotistical proclamation of his zeal for the wandering life and another 26 lines to the encouragement towards his mariners to roam the seas with him. On the other hand, there are only 11 lines devoted to his son and how he trusts his son with the kingdom Ulysses built with his own hands and another 2 words for his wife who lived for him her whole life, simply waiting for his return from these very voyages. He has lived most of life in travel, seeking knowledge and meeting new people.

### Conclusion

The philosophy of Ulysses in the poem is Tennyson's own philosophy. He followed the vision or gleam throughout life and that took him onwards. Ulysses is the modern passion for knowledge, for the exploration of its limitless field, for the annexation of the new kingdoms of science and thought. The human spirit is dauntless. It can never grow weary in its search for knowledge. There is in human spirit an insatiable curiosity, a strong urge to know more and more of the mysteries of the universe. If we lead a life of mental activity we are sure to prosper. A settled and lazy mind is bound to kill the soul. Ulysses is the expression of those eternal and everlasting elements in man's nature. Tennyson seeks to present 'a philosophy of life' in the person of Ulysses as the very personification of strong passion for knowledge. He hates to stay at home but loves to be adventurous. Though he is becoming old but he becomes young from his mental side. In spirit he is still young. "Ulysses" has been called a "crisis lyric," which is a genre from the Romantic period that presents a crisis and an attempt to resolve that crisis. Tennyson's challenge to us, to push ahead with vigor and strength of will no matter how old or weak our bodies are. To yield to age or weakness is to be less than fully human. 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. T. S. Eliot famously described Tennyson as "the saddest of all English poets", whose technical mastery of verse and language provided a "surface" to his poetry's "depths, to the abyss of sorrow".

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