



Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892)



- Alfred Tennyson was born August 6th, 1809, in Lincolnshire, the fourth of twelve children.
- The death of his friend Arthur Hallam in 1833 (he was only 22) shocked Tennyson profoundly, and his grief led to most of his best poetry, including *In Memoriam*, "The Passing of Arthur", "Ulysses," and "Tithonus."
- In 1850 he was appointed as Poet Laureate
- His short poems include short lyrics, such as "Break, Break, Break", "The Charge of the Light Brigade", "Tears, Idle Tears" and "Crossing the Bar".
- Among his good long poems are "The Lotus-Eaters," "The Lady of Shalott," and "Idylls of the King."

Ulysses

(1842)

It little profits that an idle king, *It little profits: It is useless*
By this still hearth, among these barren crags, *hearth: the area of floor around a fireplace*
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole *matched: paired with – mete and dole: to give*
Unequal laws unto a savage race, *unequal: just, treating all people equally*
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink *drink to the lees: drink to last drop*
Life to the lees: All times I have enjoy'd *(live life to the fullest)*
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone, on shore, and when
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades *thro': through – scudding drifts: heavy rain*
Vext the dim sea: I am become a name; *Haydes: a group of stars associated with rain*
always roaming with a hungry heart *vext: vexed, annoyed, made angry*
Much have I seen and known; cities of men *I am become a name: I have become famous*
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all; **15**
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 wherthro'
Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades **20**
For ever and forever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use! *Burnish: polish*
As tho' to breathe were life! Life piled on life *tho': though*
Were all too little, and of one to me **25**
Little remains: but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were *vile: unpleasant*
For some three suns to store and hoard myself, *Three suns: three years*
And this gray spirit yearning in desire *gray spirit: old man*
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 – *sceptre: stick carried by kings or queens*
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil **35**
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild *prudence: cautiousness*
A rugged people, and through soft degrees *rugged: uncivilized*
Subdue them to the useful and the good.

*Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail* 40
In offices of tenderness,

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, *gloom (used as a verb): appearing dark*
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought **with me** –*

*That ever with a frolic welcome took *frolic: cheerful*
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed *good times and bad times**

*Free hearts, free foreheads – you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;* 50

*Death closes all: but something ere the end, *ere: before*
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:*

The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep 55

*Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite *smite: strike (with oars)*
The sounding furrows¹; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths² 60*

*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,³
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.*

1- a "furrow" here is the track or mark made in water by the oars.

2- The baths: the ocean where the Greeks believed the stars descended

3- Happy Isles: Heaven of Greek heroes

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho' abides: continues to exist
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved 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. 70 yield: surrender

- **Stanza form:** The poem is divided into three stanzas, or groups of lines, coinciding with the division of thought.
- **First stanza (lines 1-32):** Ulysses is speaking to himself expressing his dissatisfaction with his idle life and his longing for his former life of adventure.
- **Second Stanza (lines 33-43):** Ulysses speaks to an unidentified listener about his son.
- **Third Stanza (lines 44-70):** Ulysses is speaking to his old crew about the need to go again to the sea.

- Elegy: The tone of the poem is elegiac. It is one of many poems that Tennyson wrote in response to the death of his close friend Arthur Hallam. The poem's reference to death as the end of a life full of adventures has a biographical relevance. The poem also laments the end of a lifestyle, the life of the restless warrior and adventurer.

THEMES

- Fulfillment of life:

Ulysses is not satisfied with the kind of idle life he leads after his return from the Trojan wars. For him, life is not just the accumulation of years, "*Life piled on life.*" It is the accumulation of experiences and knowledge, which come through hard work. Life void of action and adventure leads to decay, while an active life makes one excel and shine: "*How dull it is to pause, to make an end,/To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!*" Ulysses is keen on living life to full.

FORM

- **Blank Verse:** The poem is written in blank verse or unrhymed iambic pentameter.
- **Dramatic Monologue:** The dramatic monologue is a poetic form in which the speaker of the poem is a character, distinct from the poet, addresses a silent listener, revealing his or her character, in a certain situation.

The Victorian period is the high point of this form. It is commonly used by Tennyson, Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold, and others.

Ulysses is spoken by Ulysses, addressing an unidentified listener or his fellow mariners, expressing his discontent with living without adventures.

- **Exploration and Colonization:** The poem is a piece of propaganda for imperialism, encouraging the British to go out and capture the world. Ulysses is a representative of the spirit of imperialism during the Victorian period. Ulysses' son, on the other hand, represents the other side of managing the vast empire, taming and subduing the savage nations under the British control. The poem glorifies the life battles and conquest; Ulysses persuades the mariners to continue the mission of conquering new territories to enlarge the empire and to fulfill Britain's obligation to rule and 'culture' the rest of the world.