Ulysses

POEM TEXT

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.
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 loved me, and alone, on shore, and when
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vext 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 honour'd of them all;
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
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!
As tho' to breathe were life! Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains: but every hour is saved
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
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-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, 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
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,
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
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
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
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'
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.

SUMMARY

Ulysses expresses frustration at how dull and pointless his life now seems as king of Ithaca, trapped at home on the rocky island of Ithaca. His wife is old, and he must spend his time enforcing imperfect laws as he attempts to govern people he considers stupid and uncivilized. In Ulysses's eyes, all his people do is try to store up wealth, sleep, and eat. They have no conception of who Ulysses really is or what his life has been like. Ulysses still yearns to travel the world like he used to do. As long as he's alive, he doesn't want to stop doing the things

that, in his eyes, make life worth living. He found joy, he claims, in every moment he spent traveling, even at the times when he was suffering. He found joy both when he was with his faithful crew members and when he was by himself; both when he was on land and when he was sailing the sea through rainstorms. He has become famous throughout the world as an explorer who was continually traveling and yearning to know more. Ulysses reflects that he has seen and learned a great deal about all the places where people live, about their lifestyles, cultures, and ways of governing themselves. Everywhere he went, he was shown honor and respect. Ulysses also found joy fighting alongside his fellow soldiers, men he honored and respected, when he fought in battles far from home in the Trojan War. Ulysses feels that each person and place he has encountered has been changed by the encounter, as has he himself. But all these experiences have not satisfied his desire for travel; rather, each encounter has only whetted his appetite to see more of the world. No matter how much of the world he sees, there is always still more to see, and it is these unseen regions that he always tries to pursue. Ulysses exclaims that it is boring and unsatisfying to stay in one place and stop doing the activities that defined your life, comparing himself to a sword that has been allowed to rust uselessly away rather than being used gloriously in battle. Merely being alive doesn't mean you are truly living. Ulysses feels that multiple lifetimes would still have been too little time to do all he wishes to do, and he is almost at the end of the one lifetime he has. Still, every hour that he has left to live before he dies has the potential to bring new opportunities for action. It would be disgraceful, he feels, to sit tight at home and just try to eat and stay alive for a few more years, when, even as an old man, his greatest desire is still to explore the world and keep learning more. He wants to go beyond the limits of what humans have seen and known, the way a shooting star seems to go beyond the horizon when it falls and disappears from sight.

Ulysses then starts to describe his son, Telemachus, who will inherit Ulysses's role as ruler of the island when Ulysses dies. Ulysses affirms that he loves his son, who is conscientious and thoughtful about how he will best carry out his responsibilities as ruler. With patience and judgement, Telemachus will work to civilize the fierce, wild people of Ithaca and make them more gentle, and gradually teach them to devote their lives to productive civic activities. Ulysses cannot find any faults in Telemachus; he devotes his life to the responsibilities of his role, he pays proper respect to his people and his parents, and after his father dies, he will continue offering appropriate sacrifices to the gods that Ulysses most honored. Telemachus is well suited for the role of ruler—just as Ulysses is well suited for a different role, the role of explorer.

Ulysses looks out towards the port, where the wind is blowing in the sails of his ship and where he can see the wide, dark sea. He now addresses his former crew, the men who worked alongside him and explored the world and gained new knowledge with him. He reminds them that they always accepted joyfully whatever their travels would bring, whether trouble or good luck, and proudly faced every obstacle with resolution and bravery. Ulysses then acknowledges that both he and they have grown older, but insists that even as old men, they can still work do hard work and earn respect. Soon they will die and their chance to do great deeds will be over; but before they die, they can still accomplish something heroic, something fitting for men that once battled the gods. The people of Ithaca are beginning to light lamps in their homes; night is falling; the moon is rising in the sky; the waves of the sea are murmuring almost as if they are speaking to Ulysses. Ulysses urges his crew, as his friends, to join him on one last voyage—even now, they're not too old to explore some unknown region of the world. He invites them to board a ship, push away from shore, and man the oars so they can beat the waves; because Ulysses still has the goal of sailing past the horizon, as far as he can go, before he ultimately dies. He acknowledges that the waves may sink their ship; but they may also find their way to the place where the souls of the blessed go after death. There, they might even see their old companion, the accomplished warrior Achilles. Many of their heroic qualities have been diminished by old age, but they haven't been lost completely. They don't have the same strength or physical prowess they possessed as younger men fighting epic, world-changing battles; but inside, Ulysses declares, they are ultimately the same men they always were. Their minds and hearts are still brave and composed in the face of danger and obstacles. Their bodies have been weakened by old age, something all human beings are destined to face, but their spirits are as strong as ever. They remain determined to work hard, to pursue their goals and accomplish them, and to never give up.

THEMES

MORTALITY AND AGING

From the poem's beginning, Ulysses unhappily confronts his old age and impending death. He responds not by settling down to rest, but by striving to relive his adventurous younger days. While he admits by the poem's end that age has weakened him, he resolves to use whatever is left of his youthful heroism as he sets out on one last journey. For Ulysses, the honorable response to time and mortality is not to calmly *accept* old age and death, but rather to *resist* them—to wring every last drop of knowledge and adventure out of life, even if doing so may result in dying sooner.

Ulysses begins by reflecting discontentedly on the fact that he is now an old man, stuck ruling at home rather than traveling the world. Ulysses finds no joy in being king. It "little profits"

him. Rather than finding meaning in serving his people, he merely feels "idle." He is also less than happy, it seems, to be growing old. He speaks of his wife dismissively as "aged," and if he dislikes her growing older, he probably dislikes growing older himself. Finally, he is discontented because he "cannot rest from travel." Rather than embracing his duties as king—essentially, putting away his youthful ambitions—he wishes he was still exploring the world as he did when he was a young man. For Ulysses, settling down isn't restful and restorative but rather stifling, an unwelcome reminder of his impending mortality.

Common wisdom would suggest that the aging Ulysses take it easy in order to prolong his life, but this isn't what he wants. Ulysses declares that it is disgraceful to "store and hoard" himself, sitting safely in one place just to extend his life "[f]or some three suns." Such a dull life isn't worth living. Thus although Ulysses's spirit is "gray," or aged, he still wishes to travel and "follow knowledge" as much as ever.

At the poem's end, Ulysses calls on his former crewmates to join him on a final, dangerous voyage to see the "untravell'd world." He admits that they are older and weaker but insists that the only noble response to time and mortality is to defy them both. If he must die, he will die with as much of his youthful heroism as he can. Ulysses acknowledges, "you and I are old," but insists that age does not mean the end of heroism: "Old age hath yet his honor." Honor doesn't come from accepting a new way of life in old age, he argues; it comes from doing all you can to recapture your youth. These men "strove with Gods" when they were young, and Ulysses now wants to find "[s]ome work of noble note" that is similarly heroic.

Likewise, although he acknowledges that "much is taken" from their abilities, Ulysses emphasizes more that "much abides." He and his crew members have lost some of their strength, but their character is still the same: "that which we are, we are." And that character is defined by their determination to "strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." Ulysses is determined to remain the heroic figure that he was as a young man, even if, on this voyage, the gulfs may "wash them down." Still, Ulysses implies, it is better to die trying to reclaim one's youthful bravery, than to accept old age and live an idle, sheltered life. He refuses to yield, not just to enemies on the battlefield, but to time and age itself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 6-7
- Lines 22-26
- Lines 26-28
- Lines 28-32
- Lines 49-53
- Lines 54-56
- Lines 56-57
- Lines 58-59
- Lines 59-61
- Lines 62-64
- Lines 65-70

ADVENTURE AND KNOWLEDGE

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus/Ulysses struggles for years to return to Ithaca. In Tennyson's poem, however, Ulysses has discovered that home is not enough to make him happy. Paradoxically, his years spent traveling to return home did not make him love that home; it made him love travel and adventure. Ulysses urges his crewmates to join him a last, great voyage so he can reclaim what he considers his true identity: an explorer who is continually striving for more, especially to *learn* more. In this way, Ulysses recognizes that the quest for knowledge is never complete. In spite of this—or perhaps because of this—it is the quest for new experiences and new knowledge that, for Ulysses, defines a meaningful life.

When the poem begins, Ulysses is agitated and discontent in Ithaca. He is restless for adventure. Ulysses feels "idle," even though he rules as king, because this role keeps him trapped by a "still hearth." He feels he "cannot rest from travel" and is also frustrated that his people do not "know" him. This frustration suggests that, in Ulysses's mind, his true identity is an explorer rather than king of Ithaca. Indeed, when he says he has become famous—"I am become a name"—for "roaming," he suggests that his entire sense of self does not come from his life on Ithaca but rather from his travels. Merely being alive—simply "breath[ing]"—is not enough to make his life meaningful, if he has "pause[d]" and "ma[de] an end" in one place.

For Ulysses, the yearning for adventure and exploration can never really be sated, because there are seemingly endless things to discover; he realizes that his knowledge of the world—all human knowledge, really—touches on just a small piece of all that there is to know. His years spent trying return home only increased his appetite to travel more, because each experience he has had reminded him that there are still "untravell'd world[s]" to explore. And in particular, Ulysses hopes to *learn* more from his explorations. His desire is to "follow knowledge like a sinking star / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought." The point of going where no one else has gone is to understand things no one else has understood.

Ulysses urges his crewmates to join him in one final voyage to unknown lands, reclaiming their identity as explorers who never stop searching. His quest for knowledge can never be completed, but that, he argues, is part of what makes it worth pursuing. Ulysses wants to do some "work of noble note," and, for him, that means finding some "newer world." This newer world may even include "the Happy Isles," where the souls of

the blessed dead reside. Here he could truly gain knowledge beyond what (living) humans know. Ulysses intends to keep searching for newer worlds "until [he] die[s]." The fact that Ulysses will never complete his quest for knowledge also means he will never again pause and "make an end." He will always be on a journey, and that, for him, is what defines a meaningful life.

At the poem's end, Ulysses articulates what he sees as his true identity: a man determined always "To strive, to seek, to find." Only when you have a goal that can never be fully accomplished can you spend the rest of your life striving for it. Seeking new worlds and new knowledge is that kind of goal, one that allows Ulysses to be the kind of man he wishes to be.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 6-7
- Lines 7-11
- Lines 11-15
- Lines 16-18
- Lines 19-21
- Lines 22-24
- Lines 24-29
- Lines 30-32
- Lines 44-49
- Lines 51-53
- Lines 56-64
- Lines 65-67
- Lines 68-70

CAUTION VS. RECKLESSNESS

Ulysses describes his son, Telemachus, as a cautious and conservative man. Ulysses seems to scorn his son for lacking the daring, curiosity, and imagination that Ulysses has himself. However, Telemachus's prudence might seem more admirable when contrasted with Ulysses's irresponsibility and recklessness. Although a king, Ulysses shows little respect for his people and is willing to abandon his responsibilities as ruler to go on a voyage with his former crewmates. And even for those beloved crewmates, Ulysses does not express much concern; he admits that the journey might kill them. But because he would rather die adventuring abroad than quietly at home, he is willing to put them all at risk. Thus even while the poem portrays Ulysses as a heroic figure, it also reminds the reader of the recklessness and selfishness that can go along with his brand of heroism.

At the start of the poem, Ulysses shows little respect for the people of Ithaca. He describes them in terms that would describe a herd of grazing animals: they are "savage[s]" who do nothing but "hoard, and sleep, and feed." Ulysses does not see it as important or ennobling to serve as their king—it "little profits" him. Similarly, when Ulysses introduces his son, Telemachus, he shows little respect for Telemachus's character. Telemachus takes his duties to the people seriously; he is determined to "fulfill this labour" of ruling, however long and "slow" the process might be. In this, he shows "prudence" and reliability in "common duties," rather than imagination and boldness. Yet Ulysses does not respect Telemachus very highly for his prudent devotion to duty. His terms of praise are faint: Telemachus is "blameless" rather than praiseworthy; rather than succeed, he will "not … fail." Ulysses does not see Telemachus as carrying on his own legacy but as taking a different path: "He works his work, I mine."

Ulysses shows more daring and imagination than Telemachus, but these qualities also lead Ulysses to act recklessly and irresponsibly as a ruler. Ulysses relates how he has traveled the world "hungry" to see and know things and found "delight" in battle. He still wishes to explore the "untravell'd world" where no one else has gone. When Ulysses asks his former crewmates to join him on another voyage, though, he shows that he is willing to abandon his responsibilities as ruler of Ithaca to fulfill his own personal goals.

Ulysses is also reckless and irresponsible towards his crewmates. He is willing to expose them to the risks of danger and death—risks that became real in Tennyson's source texts, Homer's *The Odyssey* and Dante's *Inferno*. In the poem, Ulysses tells his crewmates that "the gulfs [may] wash us down," meaning it's possible that this journey may kill them all. The risk of death seems all the greater if readers know other stories of Ulysses. In *The Odyssey*, several of Odysseus's crewmates do indeed die because of Odysseus's ambition and pride. In the *Inferno*, Ulysses also urges his crewmates to join him on a voyage into unknown seas, and the sea does swallow the ship and drown them all. These source texts suggest to the reader that in this poem, too, Ulysses's dreams of travel and glory could cause the deaths of his men. He is not just brave and daring, then: he can also be selfish and reckless with others' lives.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 6-7
- Lines 11-17
- Lines 19-21
- Lines 22-23
- Line 24
- Lines 33-43
- Lines 45-48
- Lines 52-53
- Lines 56-64

HEROISM AND OVERCOMING LIMITATIONS

Ulysses shows frustration with the limitations imposed on him by his role as a ruler and by old age. He misses the glory days of his youth when he fought heroically in battles and traveled the world. He urges his former crewmates to set out on a voyage with him to overcome the limitations imposed by time and age and reclaim some of their youthful heroism. But throughout the poem, it becomes clear that their heroism actually *emerges from* these limitations. What makes Ulysses and his men admirable is the fact that they are older and weaker than they used to be and yet are still willing to undertake tasks as difficult and dangerous as the ones they faced in their prime. It is because they see their own limitations and persist in spite of them that they emerge as heroic figures at the poem's end.

Ulysses is impatient with the constraints of life on Ithaca. Ulysses finds no joy in living among people who do nothing but "hoard, and sleep, and feed." Being king of such a people offers no mental stimulation—certainly no opportunity for heroic deeds. Worse, his role as king keeps him in one place so that he almost falls into the same trap as his people, tempted to do nothing but "store and hoard [himself]." Ulysses then reflects on his younger days and how he "enjoy'd / Greatly" his early days spent traveling and found "delight" in the heroic deeds of battle. If he can escape Ithaca and go on one more voyage, it will be like reliving the glorious heroism of his youth.

As such, Ulysses invites his former crewmates to go on a last voyage with him. He acknowledges that they are older and weaker, but believes that they can still accomplish heroic tasks. In fact, their courage and bravery are due, at least in part, to being are older and weaker, as they continue to strive in spite of these limitations. Even as he wishes they could return to their younger, heroic days, Ulysses acknowledges they cannot: "you and I are old," he admits, and are "made weak by time and fate." But these very limitations make possible a new kind of heroism. They do not have that strength that they had in "old days" but they have another kind of strength: the weakness of their bodies reveals that they are "strong in will," because they refuse to let their limitations stop them. In spite of age and weakness, they will continue "To strive, to seek, to find." It is when you have limits that might tempt you to yield and give up the fight that it becomes most heroic, as Ulysses says, "not to yield."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 12-17
- Lines 22-28
- Lines 49-53
- Lines 56-61
- Lines 65-70

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

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.

The poem's opening lines vividly introduce the speaker—Ulysses, the king of Ithaca—and establish that he isn't too happy with his situation. These lines also make it clear that the poem is a dramatic monologue, a speech uttered by a particular character in a particular context, similar to a monologue delivered by a character in a play. Ulysses's name isn't actually mentioned in the poem. Instead, the poem's title indicates who the poem is about: Ulysses, the protagonist (with his Greek name of Odysseus) of Homer's ancient Greek epic *The Odyssey*. *The Odyssey* is one of the most well known works of world literature, and so Tennyson would have expected his readers to be familiar with Ulysses/Odysseus and his story.

In Homer's tale, Odysseus spends 10 years fighting in the Trojan War and 10 years in adventures at sea struggling to return to his island home of Ithaca, and to his wife, Penelope, and his son, Telemachus. Odysseus's driving motivation throughout *The Odyssey* is to get home, so readers might be surprised by the opening lines of Tennyson's poem—which describe how unhappy Ulysses is with life on Ithaca. Ithaca is not a beloved homeland, it is merely "barren crags"; Penelope is not the woman he fought for years to return to, she is simply "an aged wife." The strong contrast Tennyson draws between the reader's prior idea of Ulysses and this new image presented in the poem is one of his strategies for engaging the reader's curiosity and interest: if Ulysses spent years traveling the world attempting to reach home, why has his home left him so unhappy?

The opening lines start to present an answer to that question. Ulysses seems to be unhappy with the idea of growing old. He does not directly call himself old—almost as if he cannot stand to admit it—but he calls his wife "aged," and if he is "Match'd" with her, then he must be aged as well. He also complains that he is "idle" and that he is stuck by a "still" hearth. He is frustrated because he does not feel he is doing satisfying work and because he is trapped in one place.

This dissatisfaction comes partly because Ulysses feels little connection to the people he rules. He describes them in terms that are often applied to animals or beasts. They are "savages" who do nothing but sleep and eat and "hoard" goods, like animals storing up food for hibernation. Worst of all, they "know not" Ulysses. That is, they do not understand the kind of man he is. He has traveled the world, while they have only ever seen the "barren crags" of Ithaca. He is also dissatisfied

because, while his people are content to live and die on this island, Ulysses cannot stand being "still."

The diction of the opening lines creates an audible sense of Ulysses's frustration. There are many harsh and cacophonous consonants that could be voiced almost as one were spitting them out—the /t/ sound in "little profits," "Match'd," "mete," and "not," the /p/ in "profits" and "sleep," the /k/ in "king," and, to a certain extent," the /d/ sound at the end of "hoard" and "feed."

These opening lines suggest that, deep down, Ulysses does not feel his true identity consists in being king of Ithaca. Ulysses does not say "sit idly by this still hearth"; he says "an idle king, / By this still hearth," almost as if the king were a person other than himself. He distances himself from the role. But when he speaks of how little his people understand him, he uses an emphatic first-person pronoun: "and know not *me*." His true identity lies in this side of him that his people (and perhaps even his wife) do not see or understand—the part of him that cannot stand being "still."

The poem's meter serves to emphasize Ulysses' strong emotions. The poem is written in unrhymed iambic pentameter (blank verse). This is the meter used by probably the most famous epic poem in English, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, so it is a fitting meter for a poem about the hero of one of the greatest epic poems in Greek. There are frequent irregularities in the meter, however, that serve to enhance the meaning of particular lines. For instance, line 2 could be scanned:

> By this still hearth, among these barren crags,

There is an irregular stress on "still," creating a spondee. The spondee slows readers down, forcing them to linger longer on the phrase "by this still hearth," almost reproducing the feeling of being still. There is another spondee at the end of line 5:

> That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

The wholly regular meter in the first three feet creates an impression of a regular, repetitive pattern, just as the people of Ithaca fall into a repetitive pattern of doing nothing but hoarding and sleeping and eating. The spondee, coming at the end of the first sentence in the poem, breaks the pattern, just as Ulysses wishes to break the pattern of daily life on Ithaca. It also gives strong emphasis to the idea that Ulysses feels misunderstood by his people, as if he cannot be his true self among them. Ending the line and the sentence on the word "me" indicates that an important theme of the poem will be Ulysses's exploration of his true nature and his true identity.

LINES 6-11

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 loved me, and alone, on shore, and when
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vext the dim sea:

As the poem continues, the reader better understands why Ulysses is so discontent with life on Ithaca. He is frustrated at being trapped by a "still hearth" because, he declares, "I cannot rest from travel." This, again, may come as a surprise to the reader familiar with Homer's story. Odysseus spent 10 years traveling to return to his family, but now, it seems, his heart is with his memories of traveling rather than his family. He declares that, in spite of having "suffer'd greatly" on his travels, he also "enjoy'd / Greatly" the entire experience at "[a]ll times." Whether on land or at sea, whether with his crewmates or on his own, he found joy in his wanderings.

Now that he has reached what was apparently the goal of his wanderings (that is, to return home), he finds he wants to travel again. He does not find great meaning or satisfaction in his life on Ithaca as king—as he said in line 1, it "little profits" him—but he believes he can find meaning in his life again if he sets back out to sea. He says, "I will drink / Life to the lees," meaning that he will seek out every bit of excitement and significance that life has to offer. The fact that he says this just after he declares "I cannot rest from travel" suggests that a meaningful life can *only* be found in travel.

The structure of the lines reinforces the emotions they describe. Lines 1, 2, 4, and 5 above were end-stopped lines, reinforcing Ulysses's sense that his life has come to a halt. In this section, each of lines 6-10 are enjambed, creating a sense of more continuous motion, just as Ulysses describes how he would like to be in motion once more. At the same time, the lines also use caesuras to create meaningful pauses to emphasize key words and ideas. There is a pause, for instance, after "travel," the word that first explains where Ulysses's desire lies. There is also a caesura after each use of the word "greatly" in line 8:

> Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those

These pauses, along with the repetition of the word and the irregular stress on the line's first syllable, give significant weight to the idea of "greatness"--not only the idea that Ulysses found a great deal of pleasure even in great suffering, but that Ulysses is a man used to doing things on a grand scale. He is used to a life filled with dangerous and heroic deeds, actions beyond what other men could do. Compared with this past history, his sedentary life on Ithaca seems even more frustrating and meaningless.

The mention of travels "both with those / That loved me, and alone" suggests an emotional connection between Ulysses and his sailors that seems even stronger than the emotional connection he now has with his wife and, the reader will learn, with his son. This connection to his crewmates will be

confirmed later on in the poem.

LINES 11-17

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 honour'd of them all;
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.

Ulysses continues to reflect on his past life as a traveler and adventurer. As a result of his extensive wanderings, he declares, "I am become a name." This phrase seems like a response to the ending of line 5: "and know not me." The fact that the Ithacans do not recognize Ulysses for who he is reflects their ignorance, for the rest of the world *does* recognize Ulysses. He has become famous, a household name, in places around the world. The sonorous sounds and regular meter of this phrase might reflect how pleasing and how right Ulysses finds the idea of his fame. The phrase follows a perfect iambic pattern:

> I am become a name;

The repetition (consonance) of euphonious consonants like /m/ and /n/ also creates internal slant rhyme and result in a pleasing, powerful sound. The stress on "am" and "name" emphasizes the importance of identity to Ulysses. It is important that other people recognize him for the great, powerful man he is.

The /m/ and /n/ sounds are then repeated in the following lines—"roaming," "seen," "known," etc.—linking the idea of Ulysses's fame to his travels and his curiosity. He won fame for how widely he traveled and how much he learned, seeing and observing so many different human cities and cultures. The lines "cities of men / And manners, climates, councils, governments" echoes part of the opening of Homer's *Odyssey*: "Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds" (Book I, trans. Robert Fagles). The reader will likely recognize this allusion because Homer's text is so famous, and so the truth of Ulysses's statement is reinforced. He *has* "become a name" and grown famous over time.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the hunger in Ulysses's heart was primarily to reach home, but by following the phrase "hungry heart" with the phrase "Much have I seen and known," Ulysses now implies that his appetite was for seeing and learning new things. Unlike his people, who "feed" merely on food, Ulysses hungers for knowledge.

Besides travel, Ulysses reveals that he also found joy in glory and in war. He uses a form of understatement (specifically litotes) when he says that he was "not least" among the men he met. Far from being merely "not the worst," Ulysses was often recognized in Homer's *Odyssey* as one of the greatest and cleverest of the Greek leaders. Calling himself "not least" sounds like a kind of modesty, but he clearly delighted in being "honor'd" by all the people he met. He also delighted in the experience of battle during the Trojan War. The term "drunk" in "drunk delight" ties back to his determination to "drink / Life to the lees." These two linked metaphors imply that, for Ulysses, part of what it means to live life to the fullest is to do dangerous and heroic deeds, like fighting in war. The plains of Troy were filled with the noise of deadly weapons clashing. But the fact that Ulysses uses the word "ringing" to describe that noise suggests that he found the sound almost like bells or music.

Ulysses yearns to do these kinds of heroic deeds again. Significantly, these deeds were done a long way from home. There is an irregular stress on the first syllable of line 17, emphasizing the word "Far." If Ulysses wants to recover the heroism of his youth, he will likely need to travel far from home again to do so.

LINES 18-24

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
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!
As tho' to breathe were life!

After describing his past travels and adventures, Ulysses concludes, "I am a part of all that I have met." He has left his mark on the people he encountered, and they have left their mark on him. To some people, this might mean that a life has been well lived, that you can simply rest and enjoy the time that remains. The fact that this line is perfectly iambic ("I am a part of all ...") and also end-stopped might seem similarly to suggest that Ulysses's life has come to a good conclusion.

The next lines, however, contradict this idea. Ulysses is far from considering his life to be over. He immediately declares:

> Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
> Gleams that untravell'd world ...

His past experiences are, metaphorically, an "arch" or gateway through which he glimpses all the experiences he has not yet had—the world he has still not traveled. Everything he has done so far has made him more, not less, eager to keep going.

These lines are also enjambed. The phrase does not stop at the end of the line but keeps going, just as Ulysses wishes to keep going. There is also an irregular stress on the first syllable of line 20, "Gleams," emphasizing just how attractive the "untravell'd world" remains for Ulysses. In his mind, it shines like treasure.

In connection with the word "margin," "Gleams" also suggests

the light of the setting sun. The sun sets at the horizon, which is the margin, or edge, of the visible world. It is the horizon that Ulysses wants to reach. Of course, this is impossible, since no matter how far you travel or "move," a farther horizon will "forever" be out ahead of you, always out of reach. Nevertheless, this farther horizon is what attracts Ulysses. For him, impossible deeds are the most heroic to attempt.

The word "move" seems to remind Ulysses that his current life is motionless, and he exclaims in frustration, "How dull it is to pause, to make an end." The caesura in the middle of the line and its being end-stopped reproduce the feeling of pausing for the reader. He goes on:

> To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!
> As tho' to breathe were life!

Here, Ulysses uses the metaphor of a weapon to represent a human life. Humans should treat their lifetimes just as they treat their weapons. A life of idleness is as useless and ugly as a weapon left to rust. What makes a weapon, or a life, "shine" with beauty is being used in action. That is why merely "breath[ing]," or merely having life in your body, does not count as really living life; a meaningful life is active. The metaphor of the weapon suggests in particular that a meaningful life is spent doing dangerous, daring things. As in line 16 ("And drunk delight of battle with my peers"), Ulysses links war and battle with living life to the fullest. Paradoxically, for Ulysses it is only those activities that may bring about death that make you truly alive. The threat of death implicit in this metaphor will be significant at the poem's end, as Ulysses urges his crewmates to join him on a final daring voyage.

LINES 24-28

> *Life piled on life*
> *Were all too little, and of one to me*
> *Little remains: but every hour is saved*
> *From that eternal silence, something more,*
> *A bringer of new things;*

After insisting that the only meaningful life is one spent in action, Ulysses reflects on the state of his own life. Even many lifetimes—"Life piled on life"—would not be enough for him to accomplish all the great deeds he hopes to accomplish. The repetition (technically, diacope) of "life" in "Life piled on life" replicates the sense of the line, piling on the word "life" by having it appear twice in one short phrase. The repetition of the word "little" then adds poignancy to Ulysses's sense of just how short a time remains to him. The fact that only a "little remains" of his one lifetime is even more painful if even many lifetimes would still be "too little" for all that he would like to do.

But Ulysses insists also that every hour he has left to live is a "bringer of new things"—an opportunity to see or do at least one more thing before he dies. He calls death "that eternal silence." The silence of death contrasts with the "ringing" plains of Troy where he fought furiously in battle, and parallels the "still hearth" where he idly passes his days now. Death, then, is the absence of action.

If Ulysses's life on Ithaca is motionless and quiet, it is not much better than death. And so Ulysses hopes to escape this sedentary life and accomplish at least one more great deed before he dies. He does not specify what, he simply says, "something more." "More" could simply mean "in addition to what he has already done," but Ulysses is also the kind of man who always wishes to do *more* than what others have done, to test the limits of human achievement. He is an ambitious explorer who wants to see, not just where other people have gone, but the "untravell'd world" where no one has gone before. Similarly, "new things" could refer to things outside Ulysses's usual daily life, things he has not yet done, or it could refer to things that *no* human has yet done. The line

> A bringer of new things;

could be scanned as having an irregular stress on "new" so that "new things" forms a spondee. This stress places further emphasis on "new," indicating both Ulysses's determination to escape from his habitual lifestyle and his ambition in testing human limits.

LINES 28-32

> *and vile it were*
> *For some three suns to store and hoard myself,*
> *And this gray spirit yearning in desire*
> *To follow knowledge like a sinking star,*
> *Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.*

Ulysses has just reflected that he only has a short time left to live. Still, he insists that the best way to spend what remains of his life is *not* simply to try to prolong it. He could keep himself alive for a short stretch of time, "some three suns," or years, if he were willing to hunker down and do nothing but "store and hoard" his life the way the people of Ithaca "hoard" goods in line 5. But this would be a "vile," disgraceful way to live, Ulysses insists. To hoard something implies greedily keeping it, holding it back, rather than using it and putting it to some useful purpose. For Ulysses, life is only worthwhile when it "shine[s] in use," as he says in line 23. And so he will freely expend his energy and spend what remains of his life in action—even if that action might shorten his life.

Ulysses affirms that his greatest desire is to continue traveling and learning as he did in his younger days. He had "seen and known much" in his earlier travels and now he still wishes to "follow knowledge like a sinking star." This simile indicates Ulysses's ambition, but possibly also his recklessness. When stars fall, or sink, they appear to fall into the horizon. The horizon, as he indicates in line 20, is precisely where Ulysses

would like to go. But the term "sinking" is ominous for a man wanting to set out on a sea voyage. If Ulysses is too ambitious, it may be his ship that sinks, prematurely ending his life. (This ominous note will return later on in the poem.) Still, Ulysses wishes to make the journey.

One reason that Ulysses is careless about preserving his life may be that he no longer identifies himself with the biological life of his body. Ulysses refers to himself as "this gray spirit." It is the body (specifically the hair) that goes gray with age. But Ulysses, employing the device of synecdoche, calls himself a "spirit." He ultimately identifies with the immaterial, transcendent part of himself, his soul, which is ageless, rather than with his graying, aging body. And in line 32, he indicates that he wishes to explore, not just the physical places where no human has been, but the *ideas* that no other human has contemplated: "knowledge ... Beyond the utmost bound of human thought." His ambition is to go farther than other human minds have gone. As Ulysses will indicate later in the poem, when the body's strength fails, a new kind of heroism must be found in the mind and heart.

"Beyond the utmost bound of human thought" is the end of the sentence and the end of the first section of the poem, and its regular meter and repeated sounds create a sense of confidence conclusion. "Beyond" and "bound" alliterate with the initial /b/ sound and share consonance with the closing /nd/ sound; they also create a subtle internal slant rhyme. There is then more consonance in the repeated /n/ at the end of "human." These repeated sounds tie the entire line together, creating a sense of finality. The percussive repeated /t/ in "utmost" and then in the final word, "thought," has a determined, emphatic sound, conveying the firmness and confidence Ulysses feels in uttering this final line. He will not be deterred.

LINES 33-38

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle,—
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.

Ulysses now turns from describing his memories and desires to describing his son Telemachus. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Telemachus grows up hearing about his father's greatness and is eager to measure up to Ulysses as he becomes a man. In Tennyson's poem, it is not clear how far he has succeeded. It is possible to read this section as a straightforward affirmation of Ulysses's love and respect for Telemachus. But it is also possible to find a degree of tension in their relationship caused by their different personalities and values.

Ulysses, conscious of his old age, begins by noting that Telemachus will rule Ithaca when he is dead. He clearly indicates affection for his son, saying he is "well-loved" (although the passive voice here distances Ulysses slightly from the act of loving his son). He then characterizes Telemachus's personality. Telemachus is a man of slow, thoughtful, deliberative judgment, characterized by "discern[ment]" and "prudence." A prudent person is someone who thinks through a situation carefully before acting, weighing each factor before making a decision about what to do, who is cautious rather than reckless. These are admirable qualities, and Ulysses does have admiration for them. He expresses no hesitation about leaving Telemachus in charge of Ithaca when he is gone.

However, Telemachus's qualities do not seem to be those that define the greatest, most heroic kind of man in Ulysses's eyes. Ulysses favors daring and boldness, pushing limits, where Telemachus seems more inclined to caution and dutifulness, respecting limits. Telemachus does not scorn the uncivilized people of Ithaca as Ulysses does; he patiently dedicates his time to working to educate them and teach them to perform "useful and ... good" works. If he is working to make the people "mild" and gentle, he is likely a mild man himself, not someone who would find delight in battle as Ulysses does. Even the sounds of this section are mild. There are euphonious /o/ and /u/ sounds in "slow prudence," "thro'," "Subdue," "useful," and "good," and soft /l/ and /f/ sounds in "Well-loved," "fulfil," "labour," "slow," "mild," "soft," and "useful." These gentle sounds reinforce the reader's sense that Telemachus is meeker, less heroic, than his father.

LINES 39-43

Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

This section continues to suggest that there is some distance in Ulysses's relationship to Telemachus, in particular because they are such different kinds of men.

Ulysses goes on to say that Telemachus is "[m]ost blameless." This is certainly a positive quality, in keeping with the positive qualities of discernment and prudence already noted. But it may be significant that Ulysses says that Telemachus is blameless rather than pointing out reasons why he should be *praised*. In line 15, Ulysses proudly remembers being "honour'd," admired and praised, by all the people he met on his travels. Telemachus, it seems, is not the kind of outstanding individual who does great deeds that win glory. He simply avoids doing anything that would be shameful. When Ulysses later says Telemachus is "decent not to fail" in his offices, the phrase could again be read in two ways. In itself, it is a positive trait. But it also falls short of achieving outstanding success and glory in some arena. Ulysses certainly expresses admiration for his son, but the admirable qualities he describes are quite

different from the heroic greatness he aspires to himself.

"Most blameless" and "decent not to fail" are both forms of understatement, expressing something less strongly than you would expect. One would expect a father to praise and show pride in his son, but Ulysses offers Telemachus only a limited form of praise. Sometimes understatement is used humorously to give extra emphasis to a quality, but here, it is used to call attention to the qualities Telemachus lacks, as well as to the qualities he does possess. Telemachus is an upright man, but not a very imaginative or daring one.

The following lines reinforce this impression. Telemachus is very good at fulfilling the tasks of his role, the "common duties" of a ruler. His dedication to "duties" and "offices" shows that he follows the rules and set guidelines for behavior. Rather than pushing the boundaries of human achievement as Ulysses wishes to do, Telemachus does what others expect him to do.

These differences in personality may be why the two men do not seem to share a close relationship. Ulysses concludes the section saying, "He works his work, I mine." Even though Telemachus will inherit Ulysses's official role as ruler of the island, Ulysses does not really see them as sharing the same role. Ulysses shows respect for Telemachus, but also sees him as a very different man with a different mission in life. Telemachus is dedicated to his duties to the people, but Ulysses does not take such duties to be his true purpose. As the next section will describe, his heart lies in exploring. The caesura in the middle of the phrase, by creating a gap in the sound, reinforces the sense of emotional gap or distance between the two men.

LINES 44-49

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:
There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads

As if the line "He works his work, I mine" has reminded Ulysses of what his true work is, Ulysses now turns his attention to the harbor and the ship. His reflections on the meaninglessness of his life in Ithaca, his joy in remembering his past days of battle and exploration, and his conviction that Telemachus is better suited to the duties of ruling than he is all seem to move Ulysses to a decision: he will set sail on one last voyage.

Ulysses looks around towards the port, the ship, and the sea:

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:
There gloom the dark, broad seas

These lines have several metrical irregularities: the stress on "There" at the start of each line and on "broad." In place of iambs these stresses create spondees, which give greater emphasis to each thing Ulysses notes. He is not merely observing but *insisting* that these things are there, as if they are invitations that he cannot ignore.

Ulysses now directly addresses his mariners, the men who have sailed and perhaps fought in war alongside him in the past. Just as he referred to himself in line 30 with the synecdoche of "spirit," he addresses these men as "Souls." This form of address is emphasized by the irregular stress on "Souls" at the beginning of the line. The most important qualities of these men are the qualities of the soul, of their minds and hearts. When Ulysses describes their past history together, he begins with purely physical activity,"toil'd," but ends with mental activity, "thought." These men had such strength of mind that they were equally happy to welcome both "[t]he thunder" and "the sunshine." Obstacles and danger could not frighten them or turn them aside from their goal.

Ulysses concludes by focusing again on qualities of the mind. The sailors faced challenges with

Free hearts, free foreheads

The adjective "free" has connotations of nobility (like an aristocrat who is free-born, as opposed to someone who is an indentured servant or slave). It also suggests that Ulysses's men followed him out of their own free choice, not because they were commanded to. It was their love—of adventure, of Ulysses himself—and their daring that led them to follow him into danger. Ulysses gives strong emphasis to these qualities by stressing each syllable in the phrase, creating more spondees.

LINES 49-53

you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.

Ulysses now acknowledges, in the most explicit way so far, that he has grown old. Nevertheless, he still insists that he and his men are still capable, in a way, of something like the heroism they showed when they were young.

There is a strong caesura in the middle of line 49 ("Free heats ... old"), separating two starkly different ideas. Ulysses has been recounting the brave way that his men faced obstacles in the past with willing hearts and minds, "Free hearts, free foreheads"—and then with the dash, he pauses at length before considering what he and his men are like now. He acknowledges to them, "you and I are old." Placing "old" at the end of the line, and making the line end-stopped, gives strong emphasis to the word "old." This emphasis firmly reminds Ulysses that he and his men are *not* the same as they were in the past. But Ulysses goes on immediately to say:

> Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;

"Honour" and "toil" are both variations on words that he has already used in the poem. As a younger man, Ulysses was "honour'd" by people around the world (line 15); as younger men, his mariners "toil'd" with him (line 46). Saying, then, that they can still have "honour" and "toil" reinforces Ulysses's claim that there is continuity between their younger selves and their older selves. They are still capable of some kind of heroism. He then elaborates on this idea.

Line 50 begins with a spondee, "Old age," whose irregular double stress further emphasizes the fact that the men have indeed grown older. Line 51, too, begins with a spondee: "Death closes all." The irregular stress on "Death" emphasizes still further and more grimly the truth that Ulysses and his men have grown old and will soon die. But as in line 49, there is a strong caesura in the middle of line 51 as Ulysses introduces another starkly contrasting idea: "but something ere the end." The caesura marks a pause while Ulysses lets the grim truth of mortality sink in. But he is also so determined to reclaim some of his heroic youth that he does not even wait for another line to remind his men, again, that they can do some honorable deed.

Ulysses does not specify what this deed might be. As in line 27, when he simply yearned for "something more," he leaves it open-ended. But he knows that it can be "noble"—a word with aristocratic connotations that resonates with "honour" and "free"—in a way that is suitable for men who "strove with Gods" when they were younger.

Specifically, Ulysses says this noble work will be "Not unbecoming." This phrase is another example of litotes, a form of understatement, similar to the understatement of line 15, "Myself not least." The expression sounds modest, an acknowledgement that their powers are weaker. But litotes is often used ironically, and so here, it may actually be used to insist that the men *are* still capable of heroism in spite of their weakened powers.

The line endings reinforce this optimistic note. There is a repeated /d/ sound (consonance) at the end of lines 49, 51, and 53 ("old," "end," "Gods")—along with a word starting with "d" at the end of line 52 in the word "done." This repeated sound links the concepts "old," "end," "done," and "Gods." It suggests that even men who are aged—even men who are near death—can still achieve something that makes them comparable with the gods.

LINES 54-59

> *The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:*
> *The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep*
> *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;*

Ulysses now observes how night is falling around the island. Evening is often used as a metaphor for old age, the twilight of life. As if thinking along these lines, Ulysses insists that, despite their age, it is still not too late for him and his men to make one last voyage.

Lines 54-55 have very irregular meters:

> The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
> Moans round with many voices

These spondees ("day wanes," "moon climbs," "moans round") slow the lines down considerably, so that the reader experiences something like the greater slowness that old age brings. The adjectives "long" and "slow" also subtly suggest old age. But the image of the sea having "voices" reinforces the suggestion from lines 44-45 ("There lies the port ... My mariners,") that the sea is calling to Ulysses and inviting him to sail.

Ulysses seems invigorated by the sea's invitation. After these slow-moving lines with their irregular extra stresses, lines 57-59 resume a regular iambic pentameter. They move much more quickly as if with more energy, just as Ulysses is urging his men to spend their remaining energy pushing off from shore and "smit[ing]," or beating, the waves with their oars. Describing the waves as "sounding furrows" connects them to the "ringing plains" of Troy, where Ulysses felt so full of action and alive. If he can just convince his men to come aboard the ship and allow him to take one last voyage, perhaps he can feel alive again in the same way. In inviting his friends to seek "a newer world" with him, he asks them to help him reach the goal he expressed in lines 20 and 32, to reach an "untravell'd world" and learn things "Beyond the utmost bound of human thought." It is "not too late," he insists, to reach that goal.

Even amidst this excitement, however, there are some ominous notes. The image of the voices in the sea could also suggest the idea of many people drowning and crying out from the water—and indeed, many of Ulysses's crew members did drown in Homer's version of the story.

Even more ominous is the allusion to Dante's version of Ulysses's story. In Canto XXVI of Dante's *Inferno*, Ulysses also acknowledges, "I and my shipmates had grown old and slow," but he still urges his men to go on a last voyage with him to "the world where no one lives" (trans. Robert Hollander). This line parallels Ulysses's urging his men that "'Tis not too late to seek a newer world." But in Dante's version of the story, Ulysses's voyage does end with the entire crew drowning. This ominous note is picked up again in the next several lines of the poem.

LINES 59-64

> *for my purpose holds*
> *To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths*

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.

In these lines, Ulysses most fully expresses his desire to travel to the farthest possible reaches of the world. He also most fully expresses the possible dangers and rewards involved, revealing his ambition and his recklessness.

After urging his friends to "seek a newer world" with him, Ulysses explains what it is he has in mind. In lines 20-21, he had yearned to see the "untravell'd world" whose "margin," the horizon, receded even as he tried to reach it. Now he is determined to reach the horizon and go *beyond* it. He will sail "beyond the sunset" and even beyond "the baths / Of all the western stars." To a sailor, the setting sun and falling stars appear to sink into the ocean at the horizon. If Ulysses can find the place where the stars sink into their ocean "baths," he will have achieved his goal of following knowledge "like a sinking star" (line 31).

But if this voyage could fulfill all of Ulysses's dreams, it could also bring great danger. Ulysses says he wishes to continue traveling "until [he] die[s]." It could be the voyage itself that kills him. He now acknowledges, "It may be that the gulfs will wash us down." Once again, the parallel to Dante reminds the reader how real that danger is, because this is exactly how Ulysses and his men died in the *Inferno* (Canto XXVI, trans. Robert Hollander):

> there came
> a whirlwind that struck the ship head-on.
> Three times it turned her and all the waters
> with her. At the fourth our stern reared up,
> the prow went down ...
> until the sea closed over us.

In Dante's *Inferno*, Ulysses and his men die when the gulfs wash them down. This allusion suggests that Ulysses and his men may well die if they set sail after the poem's conclusion. But Tennyson's Ulysses is willing to accept the possibility that all of his crewmates will die so long as he achieves his goal. He says specifically "*my* purpose"—it is for *his* dream that he asks his friends to be willing to sacrifice their lives. Here the reader sees an element of selfishness and recklessness in Ulysses's character alongside his nobility and heroism.

Ulysses seeks to entice his crewmates onto this dangerous journey with promises of heroism. They may die, but they may also "touch the Happy Isles," reaching the place where the blessed souls rest after death, and "see the great Achilles." Achilles was the greatest of the Greek warriors and died fighting alongside Ulysses in the Trojan War. Ulysses may possibly be imagining that they could sail to the Happy Isles as living men (in Homer's *Odyssey*, they do sail to the Underworld and Odysseus speaks to the soul of Achilles). Reaching this realm would certainly be a heroic feat of exploration, as very few living humans ever reach the land of the dead.

Ulysses may also be imagining that, if they did die at sea, their heroic boldness would earn their souls a place in the Happy Isles alongside great heroes like Achilles. When he follows Achilles's name with the phrase "whom we knew," Ulysses seems to wish to put himself and his men as peers alongside Achilles and to claim a similar greatness. Ulysses uses the same phrase "It may be" first to introduce the possibility of dying and then to introduce the possibility of entering the most honored realm after death. It is as if he is trying to distract his crewmates from the fact that they may die, or to convince them that dying would be worth it, if they could die with so much honor.

LINES 65-67

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;

Ulysses concludes by returning to the idea that, even as old men, he and his crewmates are still capable of a kind of greatness. They may have lost some of their physical prowess, but this only further highlights the greatness of their spirit and their character.

Just as Ulysses immediately followed the line "you and I are old" with the insistence that "Old age hath yet his honour," he admits that "much is taken," only to insist immediately that "much abides." Time and age have taken away many of their abilities, especially their physical abilities. Still, they have not lost all of their heroic qualities. By repeating the same word "much" in both phrases (another example of diacope), Ulysses actually implies that their losses are balanced by what they retain. For every ability lost, there is an ability they still possess.

Ulysses uses the same structure—loss, retention—in lines 66 and 67, when he admits they have lost their strength, but not their character. The "strength" that once "[m]oved earth and heaven" seems to be the physical courage and skill required to fight on the "plains" of Troy (earth) and to "[strive] with Gods" on their voyage home (heaven). But in saying "that which we are, we are," Ulysses seems to refer to a quality that transcends the physical. Time has made them physically "weak," but this special quality cannot be affected by time. Ulysses does not say, "That which we were in the past, we still are today." The phrase is entirely in the present tense: "that which we *are*, we *are*." The present tense reinforces the idea that this quality is permanent and timeless. The next lines will define more fully what that quality is.

The meter slows down considerably in these lines. Line 65 could be scanned as a line of regular iambic pentameter, but it has two caesuras that reduce its speed. Lines 66 and 67 could be scanned this way:

We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;

The lines have a high number of spondees; almost every beat is stressed. These frequent stresses give strong emphasis to the words, reminding the reader that they have come almost to the finale and the climax of the poem. Ulysses is stating here his most important ideas, summing up what he sees as his identity. But the frequent stresses also create a sense of slowness—like the slowness of old age. The slow pace at which Ulysses speaks his heroic words reminds the reader of what Ulysses has lost, as well as what he retains.

LINES 68-70

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.

When Ulysses says "that which we are, we are" in line 67, "that" seems to refer to a spiritual quality. The men have lost one kind of strength, but they still have another. They are "strong in will." Ulysses concludes his speech by explaining what that means. They are still determined "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." They may not be able to overcome every obstacle as they used to do, but they will still face obstacles with the same determination and bravery they always have. They may not have the same success, but they will never stop trying for it. They will never simply *give up*.

It is significant that the last word of the line is "yield." The line is a series of verbs in the infinitive. With the repeated verb forms—and the fact that this is the last line of the poem—there is a sense of progression, that the line is building towards a climax. "To find," for example, is a natural development from "to seek." The progression implies that the verbs will speak to greater and greater success as they go on. On this pattern, the last phrase might be something like, "to win the fight" or "to conquer still"—verbs of heroic achievement. But instead, the speaker reverses the pattern and gives a verb that speaks to failure: "yield."

Of course, the verb is in the negative. The point is that they will *not* yield. But merely using the verb cannot help calling the idea of failure into the reader's mind. It reminds the reader that there was the *possibility* of yielding. For men aged and weakened like Ulysses and his crew, a reader could easily imagine that they might be tempted to yield in the face of certain dangers, or even to yield to their own mortality, and accept a humbler, more sedentary life. The fact that these men face such strong temptation to stop striving, to stop pursuing heroic achievement, and that they persist in spite of those temptations, makes their perseverance all the more heroic.

Ending the poem on the phrase "and not to yield" raises the possibility of giving up even as it denies that possibility. It suggests that Ulysses is now heroic, not in spite of his limitations, but because of them. His heroism lies in continuing to test human limits even as his own abilities have become so much more limited.

The meter of these last three lines contributes to the optimistic sense at the poem's end. Lines 66-67 radically altered the poem's meter, stressing almost every syllable and greatly slowing the poem down. In the final three lines, the meter becomes regular iambic pentameter again, and so reads much more quickly and energetically. It is as if the poem was losing strength as it neared its conclusion but then regained strength and energy at the very end—just as Ulysses has felt his strength failing as he has aged but hopes to make one last great show of heroism before he dies.

These lines also feature alliteration and consonance. The /h/ sound in "heroic hearts" and the /s/ in "strong," "strive," and "seek" create a unified sound and link together key ideas that start with the same letter. Word endings repeat as well: the /t/ in "hearts" and "fate," the /l/ in "will" and "yield," and the /d/ in "find" and "yield." Repeating these strong consonants creates a sense of harmony and confidence in these final lines of the poem.

SYMBOLS

STARS

In the poem's only simile, Ulysses explains that he wishes to "follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought." The sinking star could serve as a symbol for Ulysses himself, reflecting both his weaknesses and his strengths. A sinking star refers to a shooting star that appears to fall or sink into the horizon when it crosses the sky. The specific term "sinking" suggests a process of decline, just as Ulysses himself is growing old and declining from his former strength. But Ulysses insists that even as an old man, a "gray spirit," he still wishes to sail "beyond ... the baths / Of all the western stars." In other words, he wishes to sail past the horizon where the stars appear to fall, to explore the "untravell'd world." The lands he wishes to explore are lands that no other human has ever reached—they are only reached by the stars. The image of the sinking star, then, is an appropriate symbol for Ulysses as an ambitious explorer.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 31-32:** "To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought."
- **Lines 60-61:** "To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths / Of all the western stars,"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

Tennyson's "Ulysses" is about a character who features prominently in two other great works of Western European literature: Homer's Greek epic *The Odyssey* and Dante's *Inferno*, the first part of Dante's Italian epic the Divine Comedy. Tennyson adds layers of meaning to his poem by alluding to what the reader may already know and expect about the character of Ulysses. Sometimes the poem reinforces the reader's existing impression of Ulysses, sometimes it goes against it.

Tennyson's Ulysses has certain key features in common with Homer's Ulysses (called "Odysseus" in the Greek poem). Both are clever, adventurous men who are defined by their travels around the world. At the opening of Homer's *Odyssey*, the narrator says, "Many cities of men [Odysseus] saw and learned their minds" (Book I, trans. Robert Fagles). Tennyson seems to allude to this line when he has his Ulysses say, "Much have I seen and known; cities of men / And manners, climates, councils, governments."

But the two stories differ about what Ulysses/Odysseus most desires. In Homer's story, Odysseus has been gone from home for 20 years, fighting in the Trojan War and then getting lost at sea, and his greatest desire is to return home to Ithaca, to his wife and his son. At one point, the goddess Calypso holds Odysseus captive on her island and offers to make Odysseus immortal and allow him to stay with her as her lover, saying that Odysseus's wife cannot be nearly as beautiful as she is. Odysseus replies, "All that you say is true … Look at my wise Penelope. She falls far short of you, / your beauty, stature. She is mortal after all / and you, you never age or die ... / Nevertheless I long—I pine, all my days— / to travel home and see the dawn of my return." Odysseus shows affection and loyalty to his wife; he doesn't seem bothered by the fact that she will have aged. He rejects Calypso's offer because his greatest desire is to return home.

In Tennyson's poem, by contrast, Ulysses dismisses Penelope as "an aged wife" and Ithaca as "barren crags." Far from desiring to be home, he declares, "I cannot rest from travel." He even misses the days of the Trojan War, when he "drunk delight of battle." Readers most familiar with Homer's version of Ulysses will be surprised at these changes in Tennyson's version.

Readers might be less surprised, however, if they are most familiar with the version of Ulysses in Dante's *Inferno*. In this poem, Dante and his guide Virgil travel through the nine circles of Hell. In Canto XXVI, they come to the Eighth Circle, where fraud is punished, and find Ulysses. Ulysses's soul has been condemned for the fraud that he perpetrated during the Trojan War. But Ulysses may also have been condemned for wishing to have knowledge beyond what is appropriate for human beings.

In explaining how he died, Dante's Ulysses says, "not tenderness for a son, nor filial duty / toward my agèd father, nor the love I owed / Penelope that would have made her glad, / could overcome the fervor that was mine / to gain experience of the world / and learn about man's vices, and his worth" (trans. Robert Hollander). These lines reflect the sentiments of Tennyson's Ulysses, who wishes "[t]o follow knowledge like a sinking star."

In Dante's story, as in Tennyson's, Ulysses then urges his former crewmates to join him on another voyage, telling them, "do not deny yourselves the chance to know — / following the sun — the world where no one lives … you were not made to live like brutes or beasts, / but to pursue virtue and knowledge." Tennyson's Ulysses also rejects the beast-like lifestyle of the Ithacans who do nothing but "hoard, and sleep, and feed." He urges his crewmates in similar terms to accompany him to "untravell'd world," sailing "beyond the sunset," in his quest for knowledge.

But just as Tennyson's Ulysses wishes to follow knowledge "[b]eyond the utmost bound of human thought," Dante's Ulysses also trespasses past the pillars of Hercules, a landmark at the Strait of Gibraltar which was understood in antiquity to "mark[] off the limits, / warning all men to go no farther." Both men want to test the limits of human possibility. In Dante's version, this leads to disaster: after sailing past the pillars, Ulysses and his men encounter a storm, and the sea sucks their ship down. In Tennyson's version, the reader does not see the outcome of Ulysses's voyage, but Ulysses does say, "It may be that the gulfs will wash us down."

For a reader familiar with Dante's story, this line is an ominous foreshadowing of the death that Ulysses and his men may very well encounter on this voyage. The reader may also wonder if Ulysses will end up condemned, as in Dante, for his recklessness, or whether he will be honored in "the Happy Isles" (a realm like heaven in Greek mythology) for his courage and daring.

These allusions add layers of meaning and interest as readers question Ulysses's values: is it better to cherish home and family, or to seek glory and adventure abroad? Is it admirable or pridefully ambitious to test human limits? Is it reckless or heroic to risk your life and others' in a quest to test those limits? The different stories of Ulysses suggest different answers, and so Tennyson's allusions force readers to struggle with these questions for themselves.

The entire poem constitutes an extended allusion to other works of literature, in that the character of the speaker is drawn from those other works. We have highlighted those portions of the poem discussed here, which provide particularly important parallels to the source texts.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "barren crags"
- **Line 3:** "aged wife"
- **Line 6:** "I cannot rest from travel:"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Much have I seen and known; cities of men / And manners, climates, councils, governments,"
- **Lines 16-17:** "And drunk delight of battle with my peers, / Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy."
- **Lines 19-21:** "Yet all experience is an arch wherethro' / Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades / For ever and forever when I move."
- **Lines 30-32:** "And this gray spirit yearning in desire / To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought."
- **Lines 56-61:** "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 / Of all the western stars, until I die."
- **Line 62:** "It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:"

METAPHOR

An important function of metaphor in this poem is to link key ideas together when they are described with related metaphors. These linked metaphors make important aspects of Ulysses's character—his love of adventure, his recklessness—more vivid.

Near the beginning of the poem, Ulysses declares, "I will drink / Life to the lees." In this expression, one's life is represented metaphorically as a cup of wine; those who live life to the fullest drain the cup to the last drop. Using a metaphor involving wine and drinking deeply may suggest an image of banqueting or feasting, in which the speaker is celebrating among family or friends. This suggestion is reinforced later in the poem when Ulysses uses a similar metaphor. He says that in the Trojan War, he "dr[a]nk delight of battle with [his] peers." Here, it is not life in general but life on the battlefield that is represented as a cup of wine, suggesting that to *really* live life to the fullest, you must spend your life in action.

This message is also conveyed by Ulysses's metaphor for a wasted life: "rust[ing] unburnished," not "shin[ing] in use." A wasted life is like a rusted, unused weapon. So, a life well lived is like a cup of wine fully drunk, and like a weapon used heroically in battle. Fighting alongside your friends is like drinking deeply with them at a banquet.

Together, these different metaphors suggest that Ulysses craves a life of action alongside like-minded friends, men who share his love of adventure. This is just what Ulysses does crave, as he reveals at the poem's end when he addresses his former crewmates with respect and love and invites them to come on a last voyage with him. The metaphors help the reader understand why this voyage is so important to Ulysses. But the image of deep drinking could convey the idea of drunkenness, suggesting that Ulysses could act thoughtlessly or recklessly under the influence of heroic aspirations. This recklessness, too, is part of Ulysses's character in the poem.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "I will drink / Life to the lees"
- **Line 12:** "hungry heart"
- **Line 16:** "drunk delight of battle"
- **Line 17:** "ringing plains of windy Troy"
- **Line 18:** "I am a part of all that I have met"
- **Line 23:** "To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!"
- **Lines 66-67:** "We are not now that strength which in old days / Moved earth and heaven"

SYNECDOCHE

Synecdoche appears a few times in the poem. In perhaps the most obvious moment, Ulysses refers to "the sceptre" to indicate kingship itself; that is, by saying he leaves "the sceptre" to Telemachus, Ulysses is saying that he will give control of Ithaca to his son.

The other moments of synecdoche could perhaps also be metonymy, depending on whether or not you consider the soul/spirit to be an actual part of a human being. In either case, though Ulysses's use of the device implicitly conveys his values—the way he chooses to refer to himself and others reveals what he believes is most important about them.

In line 30, Ulysses refers to "this gray spirit yearning in desire / To follow knowledge like a sinking star." He uses "spirit" as a synecdoche for his whole self. This usage is significant because it tells the reader that it is his un-aging spirit, not his aging body, that Ulysses truly identifies with. Although his physical self is gray with age, his spiritual self—his character, his heart, his mind—is ageless and still yearns for travel and adventure just as much as when he was young. Because it is this desire that truly defines his character, Ulysses refers to himself by the term "spirit."

In a similar way, Ulysses addresses his mariners in line 46 with the synecdoche of "Souls." He implies that they, too, should identify with their spiritual selves, the part of them that still yearns for adventure and that faces danger bravely. He concludes by saying that "that which [they] are" is "One equal temper of heroic hearts." Here, "hearts" also functions as a synecdoche for the whole person, and again calls attention to qualities of character rather than to physical traits—qualities of courage, determination, and perseverance. For Ulysses, those are the most important qualities in determining what kind of person you are, and so he uses synecdoche to emphasize them.

Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:

- **Lines 30-32:** "And this gray spirit yearning in desire / To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought."
- **Line 34:** "the sceptre"
- **Lines 45-46:** "My mariners, / Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—"
- **Line 68:** "One equal temper of heroic hearts,"

UNDERSTATEMENT

The speaker uses understatement in the poem in two ways. He uses a form of understatement called litotes to refer in a (seemingly) modest way to his own greatness. He also uses understatement to call attention to some of Telemachus's flaws even while praising his virtues.

In line 15, as he describes his past travels to many "cities of men," Ulysses explains that he was "[Him]self not least." Taken straightforwardly, "not least" implies that he was only a little better than the worst man in the group. But this is really a form of litotes, which should be taken ironically to mean that Ulysses was actually seen as one of the best men in the group. The fact that he was "honour'd of them all," as the next part of the line says, confirms that this is the correct reading. Ulysses was highly regarded in all the cities he visited, and saying he was merely "not least" is just a show of modesty (knowing Ulysses' pride, perhaps not a very convincing show).

Similarly, when Ulysses claims that he and his mariners can still accomplish some "work of noble note ... Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods," the straightforward reading would be that they can only achieve some small part of what they were capable of when they were young. Their deeds now would not be a total disgrace to the men they once were—but they would not be anything great, either. Ulysses's later words, however, claiming he intends to find "a newer world ... beyond the sunset," shows that he *does* still intend to accomplish great things. The phrase "not unbecoming" was another ironic litotes.

When describing Telemachus, however, Ulysses uses understatements that function in a different way. He expresses sentiments less strongly than the reader would expect, calling the reader's attention as much to what he does not say as to what he does. He says that Telemachus is "[m]ost blameless" and "decent not to fail." Given the love one would expect Ulysses to have for his son, the reader would expect Ulysses to praise Telemachus highly. He does praise Telemachus, but his terms of praise are phrased as negatives: Telemachus cannot be blamed, he does not fail in his duties.

This phrasing highlights the fact that Ulysses does *not* make the corresponding positive claims. He does not say that Telemachus should be greatly praised, or that Telemachus achieves great success. The reader is led to wonder whether Telemachus is not capable or talented enough to earn those claims. Using forms of understatement, then, emphasizes what Telemachus lacks, just as much as the good qualities he does have.

Where Understatement appears in the poem:

- **Line 15:** "Myself not least"
- **Line 39:** "Most blameless is he"
- **Line 40:** "decent not to fail "
- **Line 53:** "Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods. "

ASSONANCE

The speaker uses assonance frequently throughout the poem to enhance the sentiments of his words. This is clear from the poem's very first line, with the repetition of the short /i/ sound in "little," "profits," "king," "this," and "still." This shared sound sonically connects being "king" to a sense of useless stillness, quickly establishing how Ulysses feels about his current position.

Assonance accomplishes the same thing via the many similar /a/ sounds in lines 2-4 (/ay/, /ah/), establishing Ulysses's contempt for both his environment and the people he rules over (and, given the /a/ sound used in the word "Match'd," which refers to Ulysses, the assonance here might even betray his apparent contempt for himself in this position):

> ... barren crags,
> Match'd with an aged wife ...
> ... savage race,

Another striking moment of assonance comes in the final stanza, in lines 49-53. These lines share many repeated /oh/, /aw/, and /uh/ sounds (all of which also sound rather similar to one another as well). This serves to underscore Ulysses's argument, sonically connecting Ulysses's "old" men to men who "strove" with gods and can still accomplish works of "noble note."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 2:** "i," "i," "a," "a"
- **Line 3:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 4:** "a," "a"
- **Line 49:** "o"
- **Line 50:** "O," "o"
- **Line 51:** "o," "o"
- **Line 52:** "o," "o," "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 53:** "o," "u," "o," "o," "o"

CLIMAX (FIGURE OF SPEECH)

The speaker uses climax in the poem to signal which ideas are most important as he tries to define what makes life meaningful. Most of the climaxes come in the form of a series of

verbs, but some are a series of phrases or clauses.

The first climax is used to define what is *not* a good life. In line 5, Ulysses is scornful of the people of Ithaca because they "hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me." The first three verbs in the series are verbs one might use to describe the activities of animals—purely biological, physical functions. But the last verb in the series has to do with empathy and understanding. The most frustrating thing about the Ithacans is not that their lives are dull like animals' lives, but that they cannot truly sympathize with Ulysses. What is most important to Ulysses in other people is that they can understand his desires and share his values. This fact helps explain why Ulysses ultimately decides to leave his wife and son behind on Ithaca and set sail with his mariners. They share his values, his love of adventure and the active life.

Ulysses communicates his love of adventure through the climax in lines 22-23. Again he defines what makes a meaningless or "dull" life:

> How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
> To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!

These phrases come in ascending order of importance, in that they get closer and closer to defining precisely what Ulysses values in life. For him, the reason you should not "pause" or, worse, "come to an "end," is that a good life is an active one—one that you "use" doing great deeds as a warrior uses a shining weapon in battle.

As Ulysses ages, he cannot achieve great deeds of bodily strength, but he can still have great *mental* strength. He can still strive for new kinds of knowledge. And so, he addresses his mariners in line 46 as "Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me." He concludes the series of verbs with "thought," because for the aged Ulysses, the most valuable qualities are the enduring qualities of mind.

Will power could be thought of as another quality of mind. It is the inner determination not to get discouraged, not to give up. Ulysses uses climax in the poem's memorable last line to suggest that this quality of will power is the most important one of all. He asserts that he and his men are " strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

"Not to yield" is the climax of the line and the poem because it captures the challenge Ulysses now faces and the way he thinks that challenge should be met. He has grown old. He does not have the same physical strength to overcome challenges, and so he could easily be tempted not to expose himself to challenges at all—to stop even trying. The temptation to give up is now the greatest challenge of all. So *not* yielding to that temptation is now the greatest kind of heroism. The device of climax helps communicate that fact to the reader.

Where Climax (Figure of Speech) appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me. "
- **Lines 22-23:** "How dull it is to pause, to make an end, / To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use! "
- **Lines 45-46:** "My mariners, / Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me— "
- **Line 70:** "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

DIACOPE

The speaker uses diacope to great effect throughout. In some instances, diacope sets up some reversals in the direction of his thoughts. In lines 7-8, for example, Ulysses uses "greatly" to describe both how he suffered on his travels and how he enjoyed them. The repeated word tells the reader that Ulysses must truly have found great pleasure and meaning in those experiences, if his joy was as profound as his suffering.

In line 21, Ulysses describes how the margin or horizon of the world fades "For ever and forever when I move." "Forever" implies a permanent state, one that will always keep going. Repeating the word "forever" enhances the reader's sense of an activity that is forever repeating. Similarly, when Ulysses wants to describe in line 24 what it would be like to live many lifetimes, he says, "Life piled on life." He brings the word "life" together multiple times to describe bringing multiple lifetimes together. And in line 67, when he wants to communicate how he and his men have maintained the same, strong character even as they have grown old, Ulysses says, "[T]hat which we are, we are." The phrase "we are" stays the same during the phrase, just as the men themselves have stayed the same over time (note that this is *technically* epizeuxis, but we're discussing it here because the exact poetic clarification is less important than the intended effect).

Ulysses also uses diacope to express thoughts that oppose each other. For example, in line 49, when he says to his mariners, "[Y]ou and I are old," he seems to be focusing on how they have become weakened, on what they *cannot* do. But in the next line, he repeats "old" while expressing a quite different idea: "Old age hath yet his honour and his toil." Now he emphasizes what they *can* do. Repeating the same word stresses that Ulysses acknowledges their new limitations but truly believes that they can still be heroic even with those limitations

Ulysses expresses a similar idea when he says, "Tho' much is taken, much abides." The first "much" emphasizes what they have lost; the second "much" emphasizes what they still have. Repeating the same word suggests that what they still have is equal to what they have lost. However much time has changed them, there is still a great deal that it *hasn't* changed. This enduring heroism is one of the key themes of the poem, and diacope helps reinforce the reader's sense of it.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Greatly," "greatly"
- **Line 21:** "For ever," "forever"
- **Line 24:** "life," "Life," "life"
- **Line 25:** "little"
- **Line 26:** "Little"
- **Line 49:** "old"
- **Line 50:** "Old"
- **Line 65:** "much," "much"
- **Line 67:** "we are," "we are"

ENJAMBMENT

The speaker strategically uses enjambment (and its opposite, the end-stopped line) to communicate his mood and help the reader experience the speaker's own feelings through the poem's sound.

A key theme from the poem's beginning is old age. Ulysses acknowledges that he is growing older, but he also fiercely wishes to resist the limitations old age can bring. Four of the poem's first five lines are end-stopped. They bring the reader to a halt as they end. In these lines, Ulysses is expressing his frustration with growing older and living a sedentary lifestyle. Forcing the reader to pause at the end of the line helps create for the reader a similar sense of slowness and coming to a halt.

But then, in line 6, Ulysses begins talking about the joy he found in travel and how he still wants to travel the world. During this section, many more of the lines are enjambed. For example:

> 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 ...

The sense does not stop at the end of the line but keeps moving, just as Ulysses wishes to keep moving. Again, the experience of reading the line helps create for the reader the experience that the lines describe.

In the last six lines of the poem, Ulysses strikes a balance between acknowledging their old age and insisting that they can still be heroic in spite of it. The lines, similarly, are balanced between end-stopped and enjambed lines:

> Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
> 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.

In the last line, Ulysses does ultimately emphasize their heroism more than their age. The second-to-last line, then, is enjambed rather than end-stopped in order to lead into that last line with a sense of strength, speed, and motion. Overall, the speaker strategically uses and avoids enjambment to match the sound and speed of the line to the ideas he is describing.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "dole"
- **Line 4:** "Unequal"
- **Line 6:** "drink"
- **Line 7:** "Life," "enjoy'd"
- **Line 8:** "Greatly," "those"
- **Line 9:** "That," "when"
- **Line 10:** "Thro'," "Hyades"
- **Line 11:** "Vext"
- **Line 12:** "heart"
- **Line 13:** "Much," "men"
- **Line 14:** "And"
- **Line 19:** "wherethro'"
- **Line 20:** "Gleams," "fades "
- **Line 21:** "For"
- **Line 24:** "life"
- **Line 25:** "Were," "me"
- **Line 26:** "Little," "saved"
- **Line 27:** "From"
- **Line 28:** "were"
- **Line 29:** "For"
- **Line 30:** "desire"
- **Line 31:** "To"
- **Line 35:** "fulfil"
- **Line 36:** "This," "mild"
- **Line 37:** "A," "degrees"
- **Line 38:** "Subdue"
- **Line 39:** "sphere "
- **Line 40:** "Of," "fail "
- **Line 41:** "In," "pay "
- **Line 42:** "Meet"
- **Line 47:** "took"
- **Line 48:** "The," "opposed "
- **Line 49:** "Free"
- **Line 55:** "deep "
- **Line 56:** "Moans"
- **Line 58:** "smite"
- **Line 59:** "The," "holds"
- **Line 60:** "To," "baths"
- **Line 61:** "Of"
- **Line 65:** "tho'"
- **Line 66:** "We," "days "
- **Line 67:** "Moved"
- **Line 69:** "will "
- **Line 70:** "To"

SIMILE

There is only one simile in the poem and only one time when Ulysses explicitly compares himself to something else, so what

he chooses to compare himself to must be significant. The simile comes at the end of the first section as Ulysses is explaining what is really his greatest desire:

> And this gray spirit yearning in desire
> To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
> Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

Ulysses wishes to be "like a sinking star" in his pursuit of knowledge. One reason he might compare himself to a sinking star is that stars fall in the place where he most wishes to go. In lines 20-21, he longs for the "untravell'd world whose margin fades / For ever and forever when I move." Ulysses is continually trying to move towards the margin or horizon of the world, but the margin fades or recedes as fast as he can pursue it. There will always be a horizon out in front of you, no matter how far you travel—no one can ever actually reach it, and that is why it is an "untravell'd world." Stars, however, when they shoot across the sky, appear to touch the horizon when they fall. If Ulysses could be like a "sinking star," he could reach the horizon where no one else has traveled, and so find knowledge "[b]eyond the utmost bound of human thought."

The horizon turns out to be both a physical and a mental boundary, representing the limits of where humans can go and what humans can know. The simile represents Ulysses's desire to cross both of those boundaries. In this sense, it speaks to Ulysses's boldness. But the term "sinking" also foreshadows the possible disaster that could result from that boldness. Instead of bringing him past the horizon, his explorations could lead him to sink into the sea. In Dante's *Inferno*, Ulysses sails past the rocks that "mark[] off the limits, / warning all men to go no farther," and this transgression of boundaries appears to be what sinks his ship and leads to his death. The simile of the sinking star represents both Ulysses's heroic ambition and his self-destructive daring.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 30-32:** "And this gray spirit yearning in desire / To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought. "

CONSONANCE

The speaker uses consonance throughout the poem to link together key ideas and to create a unified, harmonious sound that enhances the sense of confidence and finality in his words.

As Ulysses describes his earlier days of travel, for instance, he declares boldly:

> I am become a name

The repeated /m/ creates a unified sound through the whole phrase that make it sound confident and conclusive—a fitting sound for Ulysses's confident declaration, in the last phrase of a line, that he has become famous throughout the world. The /m/ sound and the related /n/ sound then repeat throughout the following lines:

> 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 honour'd of them all;

The repeated sounds tie together the idea of Ulysses's fame with the details of his extensive traveling and knowledge. This reinforces the reader's understanding that Ulysses is famous *because* he was a great traveler.

Consonance creates a similar sense of confidence and finality in the last line of the section when Ulysses declares his determination to pursue knowledge

> Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

There is consonance here with the /b/ at the start of "Beyond" and "bound", as well as in the /nd/ sound that ends both words. There is also a repeated /t/ in "utmost" and "thought." These repeated sounds convey the speaker's control over his speech and create a sense of harmony in his words. In this way, consonance helps this important line sound more conclusive and convincing.

Consonance also helps link together important ideas in the third section, where the sounds of line endings repeat. The /d/ sound, for instance, repeats in lines 48-53, in the words "opposed," "old," "end," "done," and "Gods." The repeated /d/ sound links together the idea of age ("old," "end") both with their heroic youth ("opposed") and the heroism they still possess ("done," "Gods"). In this way, it helps reinforce Ulysses's message that he and his crew are still capable of heroic deeds of the kind they accomplished in their youth, even though they have aged.

There are many instances of consonance in the poem. We have mapped a few to give the reader a sense of how it works, but there are many more examples.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "m," "m," "n," "m"
- **Line 12:** "m"
- **Line 13:** "M," "n," "n," "n," "m," "n"
- **Line 14:** "m," "nn," "m," "n," "nm," "n"
- **Line 15:** "M," "n," "n," "m"
- **Line 32:** "B," "n," "d," "t," "t," "b," "nd," "t"
- **Line 48:** "d"
- **Line 49:** "d"

- **Line 51:** “d”
- **Line 52:** “d”
- **Line 53:** “d”

ALLITERATION

The speaker uses alliteration to link together key ideas and give additional emphasis to certain phrases. The final lines, for example, contain several instances of alliteration:

> 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.

The /w/ sound is repeated in "weak" and "will," the /s/ sound is repeated in "strong," "strive," and "seek," and the /h/ sound is repeated in "heroic hearts." Linking these words through their sound leads the reader to associate their sense more strongly as well. The men's *heroism* is not in their bodies but in their *hearts* . The reason they will always *strive* and *seek* is that, although their bodies are *weak*, their *wills* are *strong*.

The repeated sounds also tend to give greater emphasis to a phrase. There are a number of two-word alliterated phrases like "heroic hearts": "hungry heart" (line 12), "drunk delight" (line 16), "sinking star" (line 31), and "noble note" (line 52), to name a few. These phrases communicate key ideas about Ulysses's aspirations and desires. The alliteration tends to make the phrase stand out from the rest of the line, highlighting its importance for the reader.

There are many examples of alliteration in the poem; we have highlighted a few of them as discussed here.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** “h,” “h”
- **Line 16:** “d,” “d”
- **Line 31:** “s,” “s”
- **Line 32:** “B,” “b”
- **Line 52:** “n,” “n”
- **Line 68:** “h,” “h”
- **Line 69:** “w,” “t,” “s,” “t,” “w”
- **Line 70:** “T,” “s,” “t,” “t,” “s,” “t”

VOCABULARY

Crags (Line 2) - Steep, rugged rocks.

Mete (Line 3) - To deal out.

Dole (Line 3) - To give out, distribute.

Lees (Line 7) - The sediment left at the bottom of a vessel of wine or some other liquid. To "drink to the lees" means to drink to the very last drop.

Scudding (Line 10) - Moving swiftly along the water.

Drifts (Line 10) - A rain shower driven by the wind.

Hyades (Line 10) - A cluster of stars located in the head of the constellation Taurus. In Greek mythology, the Hyades were a group of nymphs who wept when their brother Hyas died and were transformed into a group of stars that became associated with rain.

Vext (Line 11) - Troubled or disturbed.

Margin (Line 20) - An edge or boundary; the outermost part of something.

Unburnish’d (Line 23) - Not polished.

Vile (Line 28) - Disgraceful.

Suns (Line 29) - Years.

Sceptre (Line 34) - An ornamental rod used to signify kingship or rule.

Discerning (Line 35) - Working thoughtfully.

Prudence (Line 36) - Wise, sensible judgment.

Meet (Line 42) - Appropriate.

Wrought (Line 46) - Worked.

Frolic (Line 47) - Joyful.

Unbecoming (Line 53) - Not appropriate for.

Wanes (Line 55) - Grows dark.

Smite (Line 58) - Strike.

Sounding (Line 59) - Reverberating with sound.

Furrows (Line 59) - The tracks left by a ship over the sea.

Gulfs (Line 62) - Deep parts of the ocean.

Happy Isles (Line 63) - In Greek mythology, the place where the souls of blessed mortals go after death (like the Christian notion of Heaven). Blessed mortals would include great warriors like Achilles.

Achilles (Line 64) - The greatest warrior on the Greek side when the Greeks, including Ulysses, fought the Trojans during the Trojan War.

Abides (Line 65) - Remains.

Temper (Line 68) - Character, especially a character that is balanced and composed.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Ulysses" does not have regular stanzas. Instead it is divided into three sections of different lengths:

Section 1: Lines 1-32

Section 2: Lines 33-43
Section 3: Lines 44-70

Each different section has a different focus and addresses a different audience, and each helps to develop Ulysses's character in a different way.

Section 1 focuses on Ulysses's present and past, and seems to be addressed to Ulysses himself. He begins by expressing discontent with his present situation as ruler of Ithaca. The reader then learns why Ulysses is so discontent when Ulysses shares memories from his past: it is because Ulysses enjoyed fighting in battles and traveling the world as a younger man that he is so frustrated at his current situation.

In Section 2, Ulysses introduces his son, Telemachus. (Telemachus may or may not be present as the actual audience for this section.) In this section, Ulysses's character is further illuminated through contrast with Telemachus. Telemachus responds to his future role as king by submitting himself to his public duties. That is *not* how Ulysses chooses to respond to his role as king.

Section 3 turns to focus on Ulysses's future, and it is addressed to his former crewmates. Ulysses responds to his present frustrations by planning a voyage that will help him relive his past glories. The reader can understand why Ulysses chooses this path in Section 3 because of what he or she has learned about Ulysses from the previous sections.

METER

The poem is written in iambic pentameter. This means there are five iambs—poetic feet with an unstressed-**stressed** syllable pattern—per line.This is the meter used by John Milton in what is perhaps the most famous epic poem in English, *Paradise Lost*, so it is an appropriate meter to use for a poem about the hero of one of the Greek epic poems. The poem frequently deviates from the meter, however, and especially makes use of spondees (a foot with two stresses in a row, **stressed**-**stressed**) to add emphasis or to slow the poem down. Line 5, for instance, could be scanned this way:

> That **hoard**, | and **sleep**, | and **feed**, | and **know** | **not** me.

The three stressed syllables in "know not me" create climactic emphasis at the end of the line, reinforcing for the reader how alienated Ulysses feels from his people. Line 43 similarly ends with a spondee in "**I mine**" that indicates to the reader how Ulysses feels alienated from his son.

The meter also breaks to create a sense of slowness that replicates Ulysses's sense of old age. Line 66, for instance, describes how Ulysses has grown weaker with age, and almost every syllable could be read as stressed:

> We **are** | **not now** | that **strength** | which **in** | **old days**

The spondees ("not now," "old days") slow the line down just as age has slowed Ulysses down, sapping the strength he had "in old days." But then, the meter becomes regular iambic pentameter again so that the last line scans perfectly regularly:

> To **strive**, | to **seek**, | to **find**, | and **not** | to **yield**.

The regular meter, not slowed down with additional stresses, reads with more speed and energy, reflecting the kind of determination that Ulysses is describing in this line. Generally, the poem uses the meter—the regular pattern and deviations from the pattern—to reflect the mood and sentiments of the speaker.

RHYME SCHEME

There is no regular rhyme scheme in the poem, which is written in blank verse. There is, however, some internal rhyme, including slant rhyme, that serves to link key words and ideas together throughout the poem. For instance, in line 1, in line 5, the /ee/ sound creates a slant rhyme in "sleep" and "feed." In line 11, the /m/ sound at the end of "am," "become," and "name" creates an extended slant line through the phrase "I am become a name." By linking the sounds of words together, these partial rhymes also help link their sense. For instance, the slant rhyme with "am" and "name" helps reinforce the idea that Ulysses finds his identity in the heroic deeds that made him famous.

Internal rhyme also creates a more musical, harmonious sound. In the last line, assonance creates slant rhymes in the four verbs. The long /i/ sound repeats in "strive" and "find," and the /ee/ sound repeats in "seek" and "yield." The patterned sound of these internal rhymes add to the sense of confidence and finality in the line.

SPEAKER

The speaker in this poem is Ulysses (a.k.a. Odysseus), the hero of Homer's Greek epic *The Odyssey*. The poem is spoken in the first-person point of view as a dramatic monologue—a poem that purports to be spoken by a specific character in specific circumstances, much like a character giving a monologue in a play. The poem proceeds first by revealing Ulysses's present circumstances, then reflecting on his past, then expressing his hopes for his future. Ultimately, he reveals that his greatest desire is to continue traveling and learning as an adventurer and explorer.

Ulysses is speaking in the poem as an old man, some years after he has returned to Ithaca from his wanderings at sea following the Trojan War. At the beginning of the poem, Ulysses expresses his frustration with his quiet, sedentary life on Ithaca. He then finds pleasure in remembering the glory days of his

youth, when he learned about many different lands and was honored around the world as a brave warrior and explorer. After reflecting on these memories, Ulysses acknowledges that he still wants to explore and learn.

The question is what to *do* with that desire. Ulysses then looks at his son Telemachus, who handles the duties of a ruler so responsibly. He acknowledges Telemachus's strengths, but ultimately decides that he must pursue a different path.

He ends the poem by deciding to pursue his desire for travel and to set sail again for unknown lands. In this final section, especially lines 65-70, he reveals what he considers to be the most important or fundamental traits that make him who he is: courage, persistence, and determination.

SETTING

The setting of the poem most generally is Ithaca, the small Greek island where Ulysses is king. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus expresses great fondness for Ithaca, telling those he meets on his travels, "Mine is a rugged land but good for raising sons— / and I myself, I know no sweeter sight on earth than a man's own native country" (Book IX, trans. Robert Fagles). But Ulysses shows contempt for Ithaca at the start of Tennyson's poem, calling it a place of "barren crags." Later in the poem, the reader learns that Ulysses is situated specifically near the shore of the island. The port and the ships docked there are within his view. Evening falls and the moon rises while Ulysses narrates the last section of the poem.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The title of "Ulysses" comes from a character who first appears in the epics of the ancient Greek poet Homer, *The Iliad* and especially *The Odyssey*, in which he is the main protagonist. Ulysses appears in works by several other authors, including Euripides, Horace, William Shakespeare, and Alexander Pope. But the most important source for the character in Tennyson's poem is the *Inferno*, the first part of the *Divine Comedy*, an epic poem by the medieval Italian poet Dante.

Dante presents Ulysses in quite a different way than does Homer. While Homer's Ulysses (a.k.a. Odysseus) yearns for home, Dante's Ulysses (Ulisse) longs to travel. And while Homer's character is the protagonist and hero of the poem, Dante's character is condemned to hell for fraud and evil counsel. These two versions of Ulysses—admirable and condemnable—are reflected in the two main ways that critics have interpreted the poem since Tennyson composed it. Some critics read the poem "affirmatively": they see Ulysses as he sees himself, as heroic in his perseverance. Other critics read the poem "ironically": they see Ulysses as a flawed hero in spite of his noble-sounding words because of his rejection of political responsibility and his scorn for his family and his people.

Tennyson's poem was one of the earliest modern adaptations of the character of Ulysses. Since then, numerous other authors have adapted the character or the story of *The Odyssey* in poems, novels, and films. An interesting example to compare to "Ulysses" is "Ithaka" (1911) by the Greek poet C.P. Cavafy. One of the most important adaptations is James Joyce's *Ulysses*, an epic modernist novel that follows the Odyssean "wanderings" of a man named Leopold Bloom across the city of Dublin over the space of a single day.

"Ulysses" is also an important poem in English literary history because of its form. Written in 1833 and published in 1842, the poem has been identified by some scholars as the first true dramatic monologue. A dramatic monologue is a poem that purports to be spoken by a specific character (who is *not* the poet) in a specific place and circumstances, similar to a monologue delivered by a character in a play. The 1842 volume in which it was published contained several other dramatic monologues, and Tennyson used the form in his later poetry as well. Other major Victorian poets, including Matthew Arnold, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, and Algernon Charles Swinburne, used the dramatic monologue form. Especially well known for his dramatic monologues is Robert Browning. Some of his most famous include "My Last Duchess" and "Caliban Upon Setebos."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Alfred Lord Tennyson composed "Ulysses" in 1833 and published it in a volume of poetry in 1842. "Ulysses" was a significant poem in the context of Tennyson's own life. His closest friend, Arthur Hallam, died in 1833. Tennyson said of the poem, "'Ulysses' was written soon after Arthur Hallam's death, and gave my feeling about the need of going forward, and braving the struggle of life."

At the time of Hallam's death, Tennyson was, like Ulysses, confined to domestic life. His father had recently died, and he had to return home and help care for his mother and ten siblings. His frustrations may have been reflected in Ulysses's own frustrations with home life. Tennyson had also enjoyed traveling Europe with Hallam in his younger days, just as Ulysses enjoyed traveling the world with his men, whom he addresses warmly in the poem as "friends." While writing the poem, Tennyson may have yearned, just as Ulysses does, to relive his younger days of travel and companionship with his lost friend Hallam.

Since its publication, many readers have found the poem inspirational when facing "the struggle of life," especially its final lines. Schools have taken the lines as a motto. The last three lines were inscribed on the cross commemorating the explorer Robert Falcon Scott and his team, who died while returning

from the South Pole in 1912. “Ulysses” was a favorite poem of John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy, and Senator Edward Kennedy quoted the poem’s final lines in 1980 in a speech withdrawing from the race for Democratic presidential nominee. The final lines were inscribed on the walls of the Olympic Village when London hosted the Olympic Games in 2012, and Prime Minister David Cameron also quoted them in his welcoming speech for the Olympics.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Homer's Odyssey — An English translation from a website specializing in ancient Greek and Roman literature. (http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0136:book=1:card=1)
- Dante's Inferno — An English translation (alongside the original Italian) of Canto 26 of Dante's Inferno, in which Dante and Virgil meet Ulysses. (http://www.worldofdante.org/comedy/dante/inferno.xml/1.26)
- Tennyson's Biography — A detailed introductory biography of the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alfred-Lord-Tennyson)
- Helen Mirren Reads "Ulysses" — Acclaimed actress Helen Mirren reads the last portion of "Ulysses" on the Late Show. (https://youtu.be/aJb_zJbJ7FI)
- "Ulysses" in Skyfall — The last lines of "Ulysses" are featured in a dramatic scene in the 2012 James Bond film Skyfall (https://youtu.be/VlBF1kNeNnU)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ALFRED LORD TENNYSON POEMS

- Crossing the Bar
- Tears, Idle Tears
- The Brook
- The Charge of the Light Brigade

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