



achieve
CAREERS

ULYSSES

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

THINKING POINTS

What do you imagine doing once you are retired one day?

Are old people still capable of learning new things, in your opinion?

Have you ever been on a journey to a place away from home that you would like to revisit?

What does 'adventure' mean to you?

Have you ever heard of something being described as an 'odyssey'?



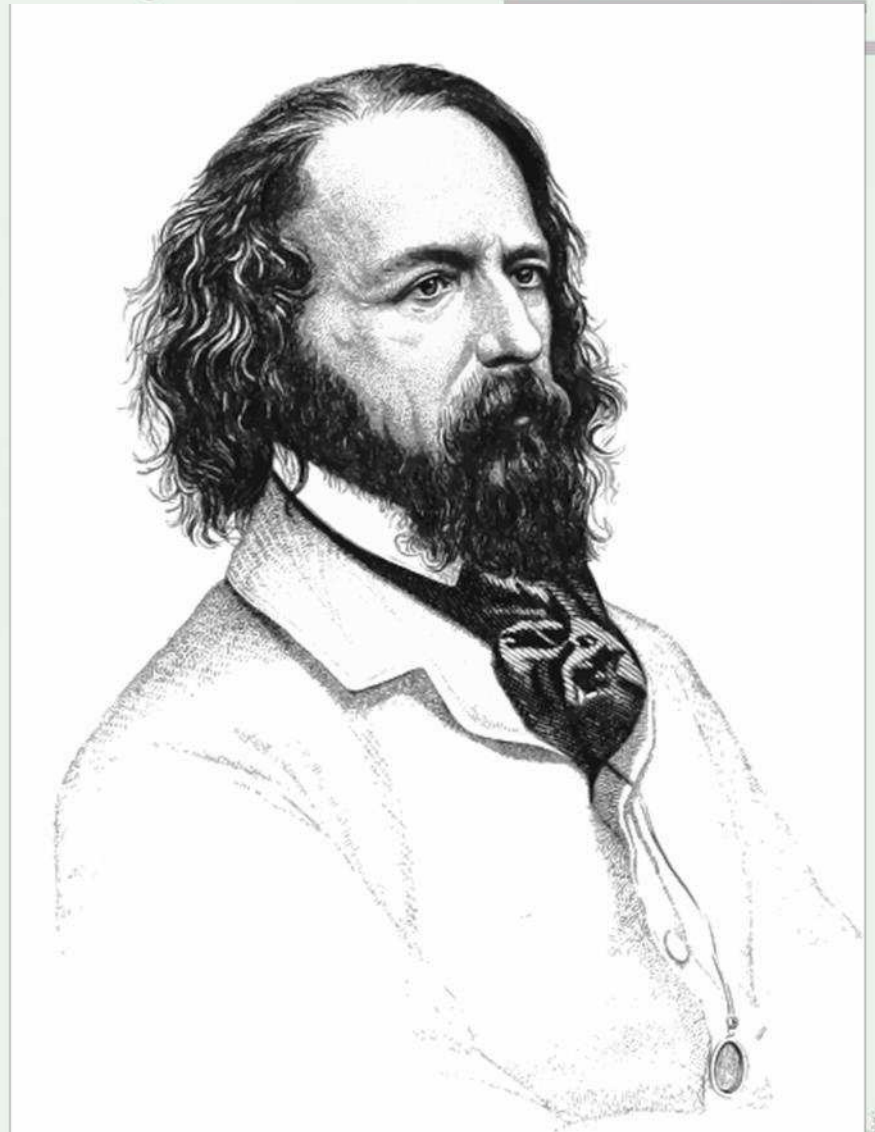
THE POET: ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON (1809–1892)

Born in England as one of 12 children, Alfred Tennyson began writing poetry when he was eight. His work was first published in 1827, but he was only recognised as a 'real' poet in the 1840s.

When Tennyson's father died in 1831, the family became even poorer and Tennyson did not complete his degree. Instead, he had to become a minister in the Church, as his father had been. He was determined to keep writing poetry.

The death of his close friend, Arthur Hallam, had a profound impact on Tennyson. He wrote 'In Memorium' while he was grieving and it became a poem in which Queen Victoria found much consolation.

Tennyson was Queen Victoria's poet laureate from 1850 until he died in 1892.



ULYSSES/ODYSSEUS

Tennyson uses the Roman name 'Ulysses'. Ulysses' Greek name was 'Odysseus'.

The Greeks viewed Odysseus as brave and heroic while the Romans saw him as cunning and manipulative.

As you read the poem, consider whether this knowledge adds any ambiguity to your interpretation of the speaker's character.



Odysseus = Ulysses
↓ + ↓ —
Greek name Roman name

Lines 1 - 32	Ulysses expressed his discontent at where he is and reflects on the life he used to live. He is frustrated with his current situation. He is unfulfilled.
Lines 33 - 43	Ulysses reflects on his son, Telemachus, how proud he is of his son, and also on how different they are.
Lines 44 - 70	Ulysses thinks about the future, and tries to convince his crewmates to join him on a new adventure (here you will see the dramatic monologue form most clearly). He must leave to live as he wants to.

THE POEM – ULYSSES STARTS WITH A COMPLAINT

The poem, a dramatic monologue, starts when Ulysses has returned home to Ithaca after ten years of adventuring following the defeat of Troy. His kingdom is now at peace and Ulysses does not have much to do. He is addressing his mariners with whom he shared many challenging experiences.

Words such as 'idle', 'still', 'barren', 'aged', 'unequal' and 'savage', and their negative connotations, portray Ulysses' dissatisfied state of mind.

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.

Ulysses complains that there is nothing to be gained from sitting around being 'idle'.

measure out and distribute

Ulysses feels misunderstood by his people; he does not feel that they appreciate all that he has achieved.

Considering that Ulysses' wife, Penelope, embodied the ideal of marital fidelity during his long absence – rejecting numerous suitors and patiently waiting for his return – Ulysses' dismissive reference to her as an 'aged wife' could lead the reader to question his sense of loyalty.



Lines 1 - 5

- The speaker is observing an idle king (line 1)
- It's only when the rest of line three is read that the first person is revealed: "I mete and dole" – this is Ulysses himself, bemoaning the fact that he's stuck at home.
- . . . *little profit, idle, still, barren, aged* (lines 2-3) – emptiness and stagnation.
- *mete and dole* (line 3) – to weigh and measure but he's having to do it to a *savage race* (line 4) unequally, suggesting that he thinks the people uncouth and he feels himself far apart from those he rules (line 5)
- [Tone – boastful and arrogant]

ULYSSES DESCRIBES HIS LOVE FOR EXPLORING

The main reason for Ulysses' discontent: he is restless; he has wanderlust.

to the very bottom of the barrel where the sediment of wine is

troubled

Some critics have pointed out that the sounds here become onomatopoeic. Can you hear the swords clashing on the battlefield?

A cluster of stars that were believed to indicate rainy weather

This poem uses a very specific metre— iambic pentameter.

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.

He has enjoyed adventures alone and with his men. He has suffered through terrible storms and battles but emerged triumphant and respected by everyone he met on his travels.

In what tone does Ulysses recount his adventures?
Is he nostalgic or proud or is it something less complimentary?

Lines 6 - 17

- **Ulysses is restless** (line 6) because he has wanderlust. It's in his being to travel.
 - He wants to *drink life to the lees* (lines 6-7) – make the most of it and begins to look back at those times when he was doing just that.
- **Contrasts: enjoyment/suffering, in loving company/alone, on land/at sea.**
- Ulysses the hero, warrior and adventurer is slowly deteriorating at home. Discontentment rules. Something has to change.
- The syntax here is complex—the way clauses and grammar are put together—the eleven lines being one complete sentence.
 - **Colons and semi-colons together with enjambment challenge the reader to make meaningful pauses – helps break up the steady beat.**

Lines 6 - 17

- Hyades is a group of stars believed to foretell the coming of rain.
- *Vext* (line 11) which means agitated or angered or annoyed.
- He states that he has become a name, (line 11), Ulysses is known by many abroad.
- His former life was a mix of travel, meetings with important men in far off places and battle (lines 13-17).

ULYSSES DESCRIBES HOW HE CANNOT JUST WAIT IN ONE PLACE WHILE HE AGES

Consider how Ulysses says that his experiences have shaped him.

unpolished

Identify the metaphor here. To what is Ulysses comparing himself and his life?

What is this a euphemism for?

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

Can you visualise this metaphor of an arch and shifting horizons?

Does the image below contribute to your understanding?



Lines 18 - 21

- The next four lines sum up Ulysses's existential dilemma.
 - His past experiences are an integral part of who he is (line 18)

So it is forward motion in life that is crucial for Ulysses (line 21)

Lines 22 - 32

- In contrast lines 22-23 sum up what it feels like to be stuck at home, a passive, resigned figure.
- This could be a sword that rusts, or a shield. Ulysses oxidised. On the scrapheap, a piece of junk – rotting away [Tone – despondent and hopeless]
- Time waits for no man . . . every hour is precious. Every hour could bring forward new things from out of that eternal silence (line 27 – death).
- Ulysses pictures himself in the same vile (horrible) position for three years or three days (three suns) when inside he craves travel and knowledge, right round the earth and beyond all human thought.
- Inside Ulysses's heart and mind – a desperate man yearning for his former life, keen to move on.

ULYSSES DISCUSSES HIS ABDICATION

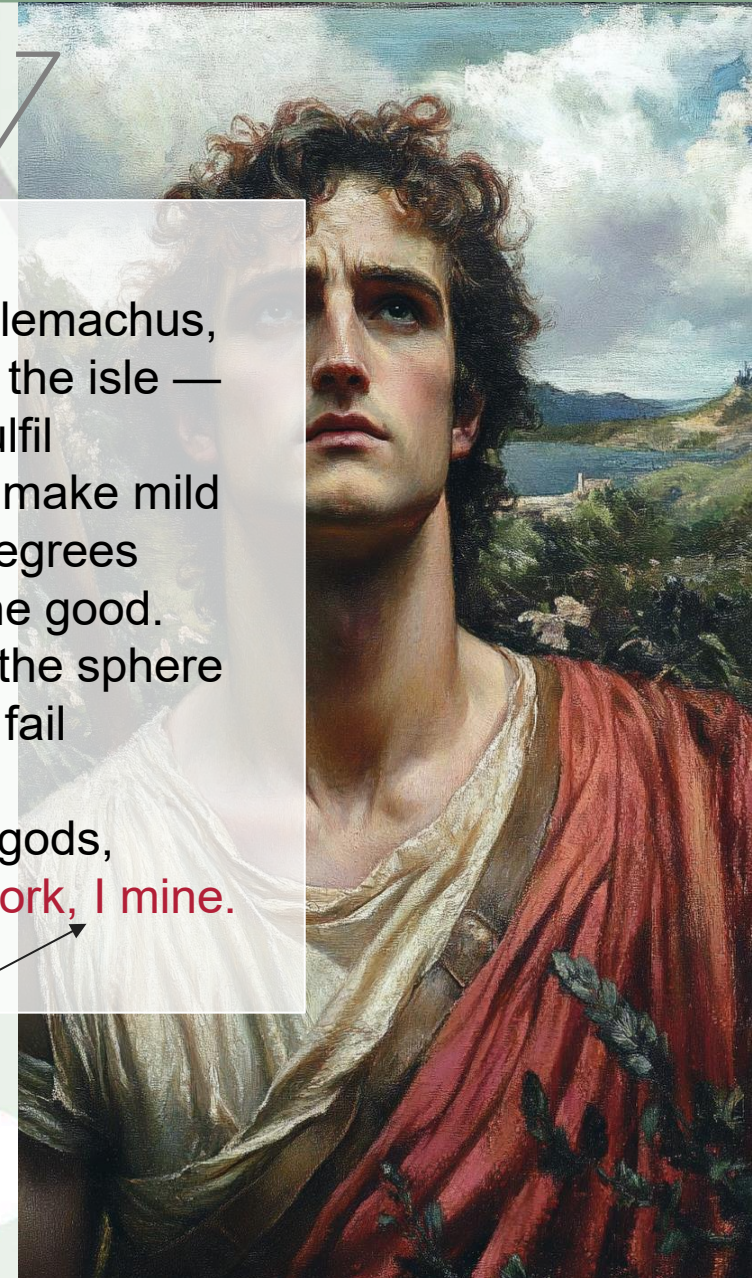
Consider how Ulysses describes his son. Reword Telemachus's character traits in your own words. Do you think Ulysses respects Telemachus? What evidence can you find to support this in this stanza?

Consider how the need to 'subdue them' links back to the description of the people of Ithaca as 'savage'.

decorated staff or rod – the symbol of kingship

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.**

In what tone do you think Ulysses says this?



Lines 33 – 43

- Ulysses introduces his son **Telemachus** as he **abdicates – gives up throne** (line 34)
- He outlines **the qualities that will make his son a successful leader**, through *slow prudence* and *soft degrees* to transform a *rugged people* (no longer a *savage race*) into useful citizens. **[Tone – proud but also acceptance]**
- That last line contains the essential difference between the two:
 - ***He works his work, I mine. (line 43)***
 - Telemachus knows nothing of adventure and battle but will duly rule the kingdom because he is dutiful and ready to take over the *household gods*.

ULYSSES MOTIVATES HIS SAILORS

Where is Ulysses standing when he says this?

Metonymy

Personification

the dips between the high waves

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,
'Tis 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.

The seas are mysterious and unfathomable

The assonance adds to the sense of strength here.

Here he addresses his sailors directly.

strike with a strong blow; consider the other meaning of 'being smitten' – do both meanings work?

Lines 44 - 61

- Ulysses addresses the mariners (line 45) that have been with him throughout. The sea is calling, and a ship awaits. [Tone – sentimental]
- They may be old (line 49), death may be around the corner but before they succumb there will be one last voyage *beyond the sunset* (line 60) and not return (line 61)
- He is saying with some conviction that old age is no excuse to sit and do nothing; life can still be lived, useful work can be done.

ULYSSES REFLECTS ON THEIR PURPOSE

*Achilles died
after being
wounded in the
Trojan War*

*Heaven – the isles
of the blessed*

To be
able to
achieve
even
that
which is
usually
thought
to be
unattain-
able.

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.



*Ulysses does not want to
conform; he wants to keep
challenging himself while
he embarks on new
adventures.*



Reference to the poem in 'Skyfall' (0.00-2.02)

Reference to the poem in 'Frasier'

*Despite their
age, they still
have strength in
purpose*

Lines 62 - 70

- They might sink, drown, end up on the Happy Isles (line 63) (Islands of the Blessed in Greek mythology, Elysium – “heaven”) where they'll meet Achilles (greatest of Greek warriors).
- Even though time wears us down as we age, even though we may find ourselves depressed and weakened by circumstance, there is always something to strive for (line 70)
- [Tone – defiance, not accepting an end/death]
- Change for the better is always possible . . . out of the darkness and into a new light.

THEMES

The difficulty and necessity of overcoming obstacles

The power of perseverance

Attitudes to aging

The value of knowledge and experience

What other themes can you think of?

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