

# "ulysses" by alfred lord tennyson



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Alfred Tennyson learnt about the sudden death of his dear friend Henry Hallam, in October 1833. Hallam's death disturbed Tennyson, and he decided to write " Ulysses" in his memory. The poem is a tribute to his lifelong friend.

In Homer's Odysseys poem Odysseys travels from the Trojan War for a period of ten years to his home, but once he got home he had to embark on another journey, never made. These contrasts with Tennyson's poem where Ulysses chooses to continue sailing instead of returning home. Dante's Inferno criticized Tennyson's work since Ulysses adventurous habits did not please him.

Tennyson has managed to bring out both Homer's and Dante's ideas in this poem. The persona in Tennyson's poem is Ulysses, who complains of his imprisonment in the island. He wants to have more than the island has to offer. The death of Hallam caused Tennyson a lot of distress, even after mourning the death of his friend the peace that he desired to get does not show up. He wants to get more of it than he already has by exposing himself to more challenges. Tennyson uses Ulysses to show the zeal that he had to continue living despite the loss of Hallam. There are several themes brought out in this poem. The author has used symbols, imagery and similes to bring out these themes. Ulysses goes through dissatisfaction; he was not comfortable with staying indoors with nothing constructive to do. He wanted to see and have more than that on the island. Lines 1-3 shows Ulysses' discontent with the island; he refers to it as " barren", meaning it has no life. He also mentions idleness and his aged wife. In the lines 22-23 he talks of an item made of steel that has not been used, and may son rust and lose its

luster. He brought out the unused energy in him that he needs to get rid of by engaging in some useful activities. In the lines 24-25 he shows his lack of content and insists that even if he was out of the Ithaca, he would still yearn for more as long as he has breath.

Perseverance was another theme in the poem. Ulysses never gives up; when he sets himself to do something, he has to do it. In the lines 6-7 he says that he cannot rest, he will keep moving on despite his challenges. He will keep drinking until there's nothing more to drink. In the lines 58-61 he sacrifices every decent thing he has on the island for his dream of sailing far and wide.

Ulysses' high ambitions in life are as a result of his death approaching. He wants to leave a legacy after his death. In the lines 19-21 he moves in order to lengthen the distance between him and his death. In the lines 22-24 he talks of one being figuratively dead if they have breath and they cannot do something to make themselves shine. In the lines 59-60 he wants to keep sailing until he dies; he will either die when he gets to the climax of his voyage or die before getting there. In the lines 62-64 he appreciates the fact that he will have to die and go to the heavens where happiness is abundant. Tennyson brings out the theme of mortality remarkably well.

Old age has caused Ulysses to smell his death and that is why he wants to enjoy himself before he finally passes away. In the line 3 he mentions his aged wife, who he considered as boring company; yet we expect them to be around the same age, but he makes his wife look older than him. In the lines 49-50 Ulysses knows that the elderly should be accorded respect and that elderly have things to attend to,, but he choses traveling over the other

activities. In the lines 55-56 he is in the twilight of his life because both darkness and light can be seen. This is similar to old age since one is neither dead nor a youth. In the lines 65-67 the change of might is associated with old age, where one's strength is no longer the same as it was in his youthful days.

Exploration is another theme in this poem. Even after traveling for a long time, Ulysses wants to travel further and make new discoveries. In the lines 12-14 he likens himself to a predator that is always in the move in search of something new. In the lines 19-21 he wants to travel to the lands, where no one else has been before. In the lines 24-25 he says that one lifetime is not enough for him to travel to the places he wants to go to before his death. Lines' 26-29 express the following idea: keep exploring if you have breath.

The setting of the poem is symbolic. It starts in the palace and then changes to the port. This shows that the pleasures in the palace were not enough to make the king happy and he had to look for that happiness somewhere else.

The title of the poem is relevant as Ulysses was a mythical Greek king, who fought in the Trojan War and conquered all his enemies despite the challenges. Tennyson's poem brings out Ulysses as a man, who is ready to fight in order to attain his goals.

Tennyson's tribulations have been illustrated in this poem. We should not let shortcomings deter us from achieving our goals. On the contrary, we need to be focused and only stop when there is nothing else that can be done. This poem is an encouragement to the readers to pursue their goals in life fearlessly.