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Beyond the Sunset: Maritime Imagery and the Victorian Urge to Strive in "Ulysses"

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Abstract
One of Tennyson's most iconic poems, "Ulysses" (1842), is considered to embody the work of the Victorian Era in their ceaseless endeavor, the need to continue exploring and the endurance of morals. While many think that "Ulysses" is simply about the praise of imperialism or is a warning about ruling without thinking, this view ignores the psychological detail contained in Tennyson's choice of sea metaphors. For example, the ocean represents something more than just geography. In the Victorian era, the world began to feel more insecure due to advancements in science, and people felt lost in this world. This existential fear along with Tennyson's own sorrow led to a change in his style and the inclusion of nautical metaphors. One can clearly see how Tennyson contrasts domestic stillness with active movement by looking at the stationary harbour, the wandering tides and the turbulent and ever deep sea and horizon. Through these motifs Tennyson draws out the divide of civility and the pursuit of knowledge.
I will analyze how the choice of land and sea boundaries and the heavy meter at the end of the poem demonstrate that one's morality can only be preserved through a maritime journey which is a collective attempt to brave the unknowns of life. For me, this journey is what life is really about. As we are presented with a final goal, what we actually do is decide to embark on a perpetual journey to sustain what it is to be a person, in order to avoid spiritual and mental atrophy.

Keywords: *Alfred Lord Tennyson, Ulysses, maritime imagery, Victorian progress, existential anxiety, dramatic monologue, literary analysis*

I. Introduction

Literary criticism has long been divided over the poem's ideological posture. Early and mid-twentieth-century commentators frequently read the monologue either as an inspiring testament to human resilience or as an ironic critique of a selfish ruler abandoning his civic duties for reckless adventure (Buckley"Ulysses" is an dramatic monologue, which was created in the early 1830s. The author, Alfred Lord Tennyson, wrote "Ulysses" to summarize the emotional and intellectual anxieties of Britain in the early to mid Victorian periods (Tennyson, 1987). A lot of changes happened in this period: an economy driven by industrialization grew rapidly; global trade started taking shape; and, Charles Lyell, for the first time in history, published a scientific paper in geology which showed that the Bible could no longer be taken literally. This in turn weakened people's belief that they were the most important creation of God. As outward progress became more obvious, an inner loss of faith became more apparent (Armstrong, 1993).

Tennyson created "Ulysses" in September of 1833, after his best friend, Hallam, suddenly passed away. Tennyson stated that the poem allowed him to speak his own personal thoughts about life continuing after his friend's death. This poem actually gained great recognition, as people began to use this poem as their own. "Ulysses" is now a symbol of the time, where a whole generation of people became lost in a world that was becoming secularized.

Later historicist studies further contextualized the speaker's restlessness within nineteenth-century maritime expansion and imperial ambition (Rowlinson, 1992). However, shifting the critical focus from the speaker's political ethics to the poem's sustained maritime imagery uncovers a deeper structural coherence. Throughout the monologue, Tennyson employs the sea as a psychological canvas upon which the exhausting Victorian compulsion to strive is tested against the inevitability of aging and death (Fulweiler, 1992). Rather than offering a simplistic triumphalist narrative, the poem's nautical topographies reveal that Victorian progress was often experienced as a grueling, defensive necessity against despair.

II. The Domestic Shore vs. the Ocean Horizon

The opening movement of "Ulysses" establishes a stark spatial and symbolic binary between the suffocating immobility of the land and the boundless potential of the sea. Rather than depicting Ithaca as a pastoral sanctuary or a rewarding seat of governance, Ulysses characterizes his island kingdom through images of heaviness, sterility, and enclosure. He laments his existence as an idle ruler stationed beside an unlit hearth amidst barren, rocky crags, bound to an aging spouse and tasked with administering imperfect laws to subjects who neither know nor understand him.

Tennyson's diction in these opening lines emphasizes weight, friction, and inertia. The hearth is cold and motionless; the terrain is jagged and unproductive. To remain anchored to the domestic shore is to submit to a slow, inglorious erosion of identity. Ulysses sharpens this critique through a striking metallurgical metaphor, equating prolonged domestic inactivity with a sword left to corrode in storage rather than gleaming through active use. For a Victorian audience navigating the newly codified routines of middle-class domesticity and bureaucratic governance, this tension carried immediate cultural resonance. While the orderly home offered insulation from public chaos, it also threatened to dull intellectual curiosity and reduce human existence to mere biological maintenance.

Against this static terrestrial confinement, Tennyson introduces the expansive, fluid geometry of the maritime horizon. Reflecting on his past expeditions, Ulysses compares accumulated experience to an archway through which an untamed, unvisited world glimmers—a world whose outer boundary retreats perpetually with every forward step. Unlike terrestrial borders, which can be mapped, fenced, and governed, the ocean horizon is defined by its refusal to be fixed. It recedes infinitely as the observer advances.

By linking maritime navigation to an unreachable horizon, Tennyson elevates a literal seafaring expedition into an epistemological and spiritual quest. The sea becomes the sole environment suited to a consciousness that rejects static boundaries on human understanding. Moreover, Ulysses expresses a desire to pursue knowledge as one follows a descending star past the farthest limits of human thought. The imagery of the sinking star—celestial, directional, yet steadily vanishing below the western waterline—underscores the paradox at the heart of the Victorian pursuit of truth: the closer one sails toward illumination, the further into darkness and uncertainty one must travel.

III. Telemachus and the Ethics of Civic Stability

Before turning toward the harbor, Tennyson complicates the binary between land and sea by introducing Ulysses' son, Telemachus. Often misread as a mere foil representing mediocrity, Telemachus embodies the necessary, methodical labor of Victorian social preservation. Ulysses acknowledges that his son possesses the patience, prudence, and civic devotion required to gradually civilize a rugged populace through mild governance and slow institutional reform.

In assigning the administration of Ithaca to Telemachus, Tennyson delineates two distinct modes of Victorian enterprise:

- **Terrestrial Stewardship:** Represented by Telemachus, this mode values incremental reform, social order, domestic duty, and institutional continuity. It is honorable and indispensable, yet bound to the immediate, practical demands of the polis.
- **Maritime Exploration:** Represented by Ulysses, this mode prioritizes existential inquiry, boundary-pushing discovery, and confrontation with the unknown. It cannot be contained within civic routines because its objective lies beyond established structures.

Through this division of labor, Tennyson avoids framing the sea voyage as a mere dereliction of duty. Instead, he suggests that a society requires both the stabilizing anchor of domestic governance and the outward thrust of visionary exploration. Nevertheless, Ulysses' emphatic conclusion—that his son performs his proper work while Ulysses must pursue his own—reaffirms that the aging king's identity cannot survive within terrestrial confines.

IV. The Sea as a Crucible of Struggle and Truth

Crucially, Tennyson resists the Romantic impulse to idealize the ocean as a site of sublime tranquility or spiritual regeneration. In "Ulysses," the maritime world is harsh, turbulent, and physically punishing. Recalling his past journeys, Ulysses emphasizes endurance over pleasure, noting that he has suffered deeply both alongside loyal companions and in solitude, on land as well as when storm-bearing constellations churned the darkened sea into violent swells.

The depiction of a dimmed, agitated sea stripped of pastoral beauty reflects the intellectual turbulence of the 1830s and 1840s. Just as sudden squalls obliterate familiar coastal landmarks, new scientific and industrial realities dissolved traditional theological and social bearings. The ocean offers neither passive comfort nor guaranteed salvation; instead, it enforces radical honesty through relentless physical and mental demand.

Despite—and precisely because of—its hostility, the sea remains the only arena in which Ulysses

experiences authentic vitality. As the monologue shifts spatially from the palace to the port, the atmosphere transforms. Down by the harbor, the ship's sails catch the wind, and dark, expansive waters surge around the hull. The port operates as a liminal threshold separating bureaucratic stagnation from existential freedom.

When Ulysses addresses his aging mariners—comrades who have labored, endured, and reasoned beside him through decades of alternating storms and clear skies—he invokes a solidarity forged entirely through shared struggle. At sea, artificial distinctions of royal rank and social hierarchy dissolve; survival depends solely upon collective discipline, technical skill, and unyielding willpower pitted against elemental forces. This egalitarian brotherhood of labor mirrors the Victorian gospel of work championed by contemporaries such as Thomas Carlyle, which held that purposeful exertion was the primary antidote to existential paralysis and moral despair.

V. The Agony of the Final Voyage

In the concluding movement of the poem, Tennyson synthesizes his maritime motifs into a stark meditation on aging, mortality, and perseverance. Night descends upon the coast, lights begin to twinkle from the rocky cliffs, the long day wanes, and the deep ocean murmurs around them with countless indistinct voices. These polyphonic sounds rising from the darkened water carry a dual resonance: they evoke both the Sirens' call to uncharted discovery and the ancestral voices of the dead summoning the aged mariners toward the grave.

Ulysses harbors no illusions about youthful invincibility. He candidly acknowledges that he and his crew no longer possess the physical vigor that once enabled them to move heaven and earth, noting that time and fate have weakened their bodies even as their resolve remains intact. He openly confronts the probability of shipwreck, conceding that the ocean's abyssal currents may well swallow them whole. At the same time, he entertains the fragile hope that they might reach the mythical Isles of the Blessed and reunite with their fallen comrade Achilles.

By suspending the narrative at the exact moment of departure, Tennyson deliberately refuses to resolve the voyage's outcome. The reader never learns whether the vessel founders in the Atlantic swells or reaches an imagined paradise. Meaning is located entirely in the act of embarkation rather than the certainty of arrival.

This thematic tension culminates in the poem's celebrated closing line, in which Ulysses declares their shared resolve to strive, seek, find, and never yield. When examined prosodically, the metrical structure of this final line undercuts any facile sense of triumphant ease. Following several lines of fluid iambic pentameter, the closing declaration relies on a sequence of stark, monosyllabic verbs punctuated by heavy pauses. Each stressed beat demands a deliberate, laboured vocal effort, mimicking the physical strain of aging oarsmen pulling against a heavy tide. Rather than ending in an effortless surge of victory, the poem's rhythm registers exhaustion, friction, and stubborn endurance. Tennyson reveals that the Victorian imperative to press forward was rarely a carefree celebration of power; more often, it functioned as an arduous, heroic defense against the terror of an unlived, meaningless existence.

VI. Conclusion

Through his intricate deployment of maritime imagery, Alfred Lord Tennyson captured the central psychological paradox of the Victorian age. By contrasting the sterile immobility of Ithaca with the perilous, ever-receding horizon of the open sea, "Ulysses" transforms a classical homecoming myth into an urgent modern allegory of existential perseverance. Rather than presenting the ocean as a romanticized realm of easy imperial triumph, Tennyson constructs a darkened, turbulent expanse that mirrors a century adrift between fading traditional certainties and an unpredictable industrial and scientific future (Armstrong, 1993; Fulweiler, 1992). Within this unstable topography, the port operates as a threshold of ethical choice, separating domestic stagnation from authentic, albeit exhausting, engagement with mortality and the unknown. By suspending the narrative at the exact moment of embarkation, Tennyson deliberately strips the voyage of any guaranteed arrival, locating human value solely in collective labor and stubborn endurance. Furthermore, the heavy, monosyllabic cadence of the poem's closing line registers physical strain rather than effortless victory, revealing that the nineteenth-century gospel of progress frequently functioned as an arduous defense against spiritual despair (Tucker, 1988). Ultimately, Tennyson suggests that human dignity does not depend upon conquering the horizon, mapping every shore, or securing a safe harbor. Instead, it resides in the clear-eyed courage to acknowledge one's physical frailty, leave the cold hearth behind, push beyond the fading sunset, and continue striving against the dark.

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