

"Ulysses" is based on the excerpt from Dante's 'Inferno'.

In Dante's day during the Middle Ages, ambition was bad. A person should be happy in his or her place.

According to Dante, Ulysses did not return home. He kept exploring with his crew after they left Circe. In Homer, Odysseus/Ulysses went to Hades after leaving Circe. Here he almost reaches Purgatory, then ends up in Hell.

He eventually crossed the barrier set up by Hercules as the limit of human explorations.

Ulysses and his men have launched into the Atlantic Ocean. They sail until they see a giant mountain. This mountain was Purgatory, where people could have their sins "purged" until they were good enough to enter heaven.

For the crime of exceeding human boundaries and trying to reach Purgatory by their own power rather than by God's grace, Ulysses & his companions are washed down in the ocean.

Tennyson may deal with the same events in almost the same words, but he has a very different outlook on Ulysses' ambition. The Victorian was a time when ambition and striving were good. Arthur Hallam, Tennyson's friend, had just died at sea. Tennyson must continue in his duty anyway. He also needed to find comfort in Hallam's death--he died as an active man engaged in meaningful activity.

The genre of the poem is dramatic monologue. It is an ancient genre that had recently been popularized again by Robert Browning.

Characteristics of a dramatic monologue:

somebody is speaking the whole poem is the character's speech

the character is in a dramatic setting; there is a particular audience, time, and place. the reader must determine from hints in the poem:

the identity of the speaker the identity of the audience & the relationship between them the setting & time the speaker's purpose.

In this poem the speaker is Ulysses.

There are three paragraphs in the poem. Ulysses is the speaker in all three sections, but the audience, purpose, and setting change each time, so his purpose changes as well.

In the first paragraph, he is alone. The "hearth" is the fireplace. It is "still," meaning that the fire is out. Since the fire was used to cook as well as for heat, the only time it was out was at night. He can't be talking to Penelope, for he calls her his "aged wife." He wouldn't call her the old lady to her face. He's not talking to a subject - he calls them a "savage race." He is talking to himself. His purpose is to determine what to do with the rest of his life.

The second paragraph is Ulysses' abdication speech. The audience is composed by the citizens of his kingdom. His purpose is to pass the scepter on to his son. Note the elevated style of his speech, fitting for a formal state occasion. His subjects are now "a rugged people" rather than a "savage race."

The third paragraph is Ulysses' speech to his sailors as they prepare to set sail. His purpose is to inspire them to great achievements.

The theme of the poem is the purpose of striving. Unlike the Lotos Eaters, Ulysses can't be satisfied to be *lentus in umbra*. He needs to do something, or he will lose his self-respect.

Paragraph 1

The purpose of this paragraph is to show Ulysses' motives. WHY would a king leave his kingdom, a husband his wife, a father his son, and strike out on his own? What would make a man like John Glenn retire from the Senate to re-enter space?

(1-5) The poem takes place at the end of Ulysses' life. He has become sedentary – not

accomplishing anything. Tired of the drudgery of governing.

He is talking to himself. Has decided to leave. King is lonely – no one knows him. The subjects are like animals - they "feed" rather than eat.

(2) "Still hearth." It's nighttime.

(12) "I am become a name" – Has 2 meanings -

he has become a legend

he's only a legend.

(18) "I am a part of all that I have met." He keeps some of those he met with him & leaves some of himself with them.

(20) "Margin" of the world is the horizon and it moves away from him. The "arch" is the place where he is at the moment. The important thing to him is where he is going, not where he is.

(23) "rust unburnished" - His armor is probably decorating the wall above the fireplace. Sword is on wall and rusting – like he is.

(29) "three suns" sometimes = three days, but = three years here. He could live for three more years if he really took care of himself, but is that really living? He doesn't want to doze under the lotos tree or molder in his bed like Tithonus.

Paragraph 2

This is the abdication speech. His tone & vocabulary change markedly. He came back because his son was not yet ready to assume command. Now he is, and his temperament is such that he can enjoy ruling.

(41) They each have their different tasks. Telemachus' is ruling, Odysseus' is exploring.

Paragraph 3

(43) Tennyson changes the story somewhat. According to Homer, Odysseus was the only survivor of his crew. But here we have his mariners still surviving. Why? Tennyson knew the story, so he didn't just slip up. The mariners were the ones who went through battle and on the ship with him. They are the ones who know him, so Tennyson changes the story so that some survived. Could Captain Kirk fly off without Spock, McCoy, and Scotty?

(55) "newer world." Dante mentions the "new land," but he wrote before Columbus. Tennyson, of course, knew about the "New World." The United States was a rising power by his time.

(58-59) The direction (toward the western stars) & the time of day when they leave (sunset) both symbolize the fact that "you and I are old." Ulysses and his crew are going on their last voyage.

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.

Tennyson uses the 2 possible outcomes Dante mentioned.

They may reach the Happy Isles - the pagan equivalent to heaven, or in this case Purgatory.

They may be washed down into the sea.

For Ulysses, the outcome is irrelevant. What is important is that he end his life as he lived it, heroically. He may die, but he'll do it with his boots on.