

“Ulysses”

## Summary

Ulysses (Odysseus) declares that there is little point in his staying home “by this still hearth” with his old wife, doling out rewards and punishments for the unnamed masses who live in his kingdom.

Still speaking to himself he proclaims that he “cannot rest from travel” but feels compelled to live to the fullest and swallow every last drop of life. He has enjoyed all his experiences as a sailor who travels the seas, and he considers himself a symbol for everyone who wanders and roams the earth. His travels have exposed him to many different types of people and ways of living. They have also exposed him to the “delight of battle” while fighting the Trojan War with his men. Ulysses declares that his travels and encounters have shaped who he is: “I am a part of all that I have mUlysses declares that it is boring to stay in one place, and that to remain stationary is to rust rather than to shine; to stay in one place is to pretend that all there is to life is the simple act of breathing, whereas he knows that in fact life contains much novelty, and he longs to encounter this. His spirit yearns constantly for new experiences that will broaden his horizons; he wishes “to follow knowledge like a sinking star” and forever grow in wisdom and in learning.

Ulysses now speaks to an unidentified audience concerning his son Telemachus, who will act as his successor while the great hero resumes his travels: he says, “This is my son, mine own Telemachus, to whom I leave the scepter and the isle.” He speaks highly but also patronizingly of his son’s capabilities as a ruler, praising his prudence, dedication, and devotion to the gods. Telemachus will do his work of governing the island while Ulysses will do his work of traveling the seas: “He works his work, I mine.”

In the final stanza, Ulysses addresses the mariners with whom he has worked, traveled, and weathered life’s storms over many years. He declares that although he and they are old, they still have the potential to do something noble and honorable before “the long day wanes.” He encourages them to make use of their old age because “ ’tis not too late to seek a newer world.” He declares that his goal is to sail onward “beyond the sunset” until his death. Perhaps, he suggests, they may even reach the “Happy Isles,” or the paradise of perpetual summer described in Greek mythology where great heroes like the warrior Achilles were believed to have been taken after their deaths. Although Ulysses and his mariners are not as strong as they were in youth, they are “strong in will” and are sustained by their resolve to push onward relentlessly: “To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

## Form

This poem is written as a dramatic monologue: the entire poem is spoken by a single character, whose identity is revealed by his own words. The lines are in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, which serves to impart a fluid and natural quality to Ulysses’s speech. Many of the lines are enjambed, which means that a thought does not end with the line-break; the sentences

often end in the middle, rather than the end, of the lines. The use of enjambment is appropriate in a poem about pushing forward “beyond the utmost bound of human thought.” Finally, the poem is divided into four paragraph-like sections, each of which comprises a distinct thematic unit of the poem.

## Themes

### The Reconciliation of Religion and Science

Tennyson lived during a period of great scientific advancement, and he used his poetry to work out the conflict between religious faith and scientific discoveries. Notable scientific findings and theories of the Victorian period include stratigraphy, the geological study of rock layers used to date the earth, in 1811; the first sighting of an asteroid in 1801 and galaxies in the 1840s; and Darwin’s theory of evolution and natural selection in 1859. In the second half of the century, scientists, such as Fülöp Semmelweis, Joseph Lister, and Louis Pasteur, began the experiments and work that would eventually lead to germ theory and our modern understanding of microorganisms and diseases. These discoveries challenged traditional religious understandings of nature and natural history.

For most of his career, Tennyson was deeply interested in and troubled by these discoveries. His poem “Locksley Hall” (1842) expresses his ambivalence about technology and scientific progress. There the **speaker** feels tempted to abandon modern civilization and return to a savage life in the jungle. In the end, he chooses to live a civilized, modern life and enthusiastically endorses technology. *In Memoriam* connects the despair Tennyson felt over the loss of his friend Arthur Hallam and the despair he felt when contemplating a godless world. In the end, the poem affirms both religious faith and faith in human progress. Nevertheless, Tennyson continued to struggle with the reconciliation of science and religion, as illustrated by some of his later work. For example, “Locksley Hall Sixty Years After” (1886) takes as its protagonist the speaker from the original “Locksley Hall,” but now he is an old man, who looks back on his youthful optimism and faith in progress with scorn and skepticism.

### The Virtues of Perseverance and Optimism

After the death of his friend Arthur Hallam, Tennyson struggled through a period of deep despair, which he eventually overcame to begin writing again. During his time of mourning, Tennyson rarely wrote and, for many years, battled alcoholism. Many of his poems are about the temptation to give up and fall prey to pessimism, but they also extol the virtues of optimism and discuss the importance of struggling on with life. The need to persevere and continue is the central theme of *In Memoriam* and “Ulysses” (1833), both written after Hallam’s death. Perhaps because of Tennyson’s gloomy and tragic childhood, perseverance and optimism also appear in poetry written before Hallam’s death, such as “The Lotos-Eaters” (1832, 1842). Poems such as “The Lady of Shalott” (1832, 1842) and “The Charge of the Light Brigade” (1854) also vary this theme: both poems glorify characters who embrace their destinies in life, even though those destinies end in tragic death. The Lady of Shalott leaves her seclusion to meet the outer world, determined to seek the love that is missing in her life. The cavalymen in “The Charge of the

Light Brigade” keep charging through the valley toward the Russian cannons; they persevere even as they realize that they will likely die.

## **The Glory of England**

Tennyson used his poetry to express his love for England. Although he expressed worry and concern about the corruption that so dominated the nineteenth century, he also wrote many poems that glorify nineteenth-century England. “The Charge of the Light Brigade” praises the fortitude and courage of English soldiers during a battle of the Crimean War in which roughly 200 men were killed. As poet laureate, Tennyson was required to write poems for specific state occasions and to dedicate verse to Queen Victoria and her husband, Prince Albert. Nevertheless, Tennyson praised England even when not specifically required to do so. In the *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson glorified England by encouraging a collective English cultural identity: all of England could take pride in Camelot, particularly the chivalrous and capable knights who lived there. Indeed, the modern conception of Camelot as the source of loyalty, chivalry, and romance comes, in part, from Tennyson’s descriptions of it in the *Idylls of the King* and “The Lady of Shalott.”

## **Symbols**

### **King Arthur and Camelot**

To Tennyson, King Arthur symbolizes the ideal man, and Arthurian England was England in its best and purest form. Some of Tennyson’s earliest poems, such as “The Lady of Shalott,” were set in King Arthur’s time. Indeed, Tennyson rhymes *Camelot*, the name of King Arthur’s estate, with *Shalott* in eighteen of the poem’s twenty stanzas, thereby emphasizing the importance of the mythical place. Furthermore, our contemporary conception of Camelot as harmonious and magnificent comes from Tennyson’s poem. *Idylls of the King*, about King Arthur’s rise and fall, was one of the major projects of Tennyson’s late career. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert envisioned themselves as latter-day descendents of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, and their praise helped popularize the long poem. But King Arthur also had a more personal representation to Tennyson: the mythic king represents a version of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam, whose death at twenty-two profoundly affected Tennyson. Hallam’s death destroyed his potential and promise, which allowed Tennyson to idealize Hallam. This idealization allows Tennyson to imagine what might have been in the best possible light, much as he does when describing King Arthur and his court.

### **The Imprisoned Woman**

The imprisoned woman appears throughout Tennyson’s work. In “Mariana,” a woman abandoned by her lover lives alone in her house in the middle of desolate country; her isolation imprisons her, as does the way she waits for her lover to return. Her waiting limits her ability and desire to do anything else. “The Lady of Shalott” is likewise about a woman imprisoned, this

time in a tower. Should she leave her prison, a curse would fall upon her. Tennyson, like many other Victorian poets, used female characters to symbolize the artistic and sensitive aspects of the human condition. Imprisoned women, such as these Tennyson characters, act as **symbols** for the isolation experienced by the artist and other sensitive, deep-feeling people. Although society might force creative, sensitive types to become outcasts, in Tennyson's poems, the women themselves create their own isolation and imprisonment. These women seem unable or unwilling to deal with the outside world.

How did Tennyson respond to the scientific advances of his day?

Tennyson lived through many important discoveries and developments in the fields of biology, astronomy, and geology. In 1830-33, Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* extended the history of the earth back millions of years and reduced the stature of the human race in time. Astronomers presented a map of the sky overwhelming in its vastness. Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) and Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) made humans just another species within the animal kingdom. The new discoveries implied a view of humanity that much distressed many Victorians, including Tennyson. In *Maud*, for example, he describes the stars as "cold fires, yet with power to burn and brand / His nothingness into man"; unlike the Romantics, he possessed a painful awareness of the brutality and indifference of "Nature red in tooth and claw." Although Tennyson associated evolution with progress, he also worried that the notion seemed to contradict the biblical story of creation and long-held assumptions about man's place in the world. Nonetheless, in "In Memoriam," he insists that we must keep our faith despite the latest discoveries of science: he writes, "Strong Son of God, immortal Love / Whom we, that have not seen they face, / By faith, and faith alone, embrace / Believing where we cannot prove." At the end of the poem, he concludes that God's eternal plan includes purposive biological development; thus he reassures his Victorian readers that the new science does not mean the end of the old faith. Tennyson thus provided the Victorians with a way of reconciling the new discoveries of science with their personal and religious convictions about man's place and purpose.

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