

Q2. Character of Ulysses

This poem is the incarnation of restlessness and insatiable activity. Tennyson, with his fine artistic instinct, saw that the idea of Ulysses at rest was an incongruous thought, and has chosen rather to picture him journeying ever onwards toward infinity or death—

“It may be that the gulfs will wash us down—

.....

And see the great Achilles, whom we knew”

Sick of Ithaca, Argus, Telemachus, and of Penelope too, the old much-enduring Mariner King Ulysses, is again panting for untried dangers and undiscovered lands. And with breathless interest, and a feeling approaching the sublime, we watch the grey-headed monarch stepping, with his few followers, into the dark, which is to be their home till death, and stretching away toward eternity. Every heart and imagination cry out after him—‘Go, and return no more.’

In this poem we find the restlessness, the deep and intense longing for travelling to see the unseen and the tread the untrodden, of

Ulysses. This dramatic monologue embodies the venturous life of Ulysses who was a legendary Greek warrior and who fought at the battle of Troy. The journey and his arrival home are the theme of the poet Homer's epic *Odysses*. The poet compares the past life of the king with all its excitement with his present life as King of Ithaca. Though he is old, he fervently desires to travel again & leave the charge of his kingdom to his son Telemachus, who is efficient to govern the kingdom, but who is acutely lacking in his father's keen thirst for more and more knowledge and greater and greater experience. 'Tennyson's Ulysses is a man who cannot retire. For him old age is not a time for rest and reflection. Ulysses feels he must go or and face more challenges and seek more knowledge.' [SENGUPTA].

The poem opens with a chafing, a clipped impatience : "It little profits that an idle king, /.../.../... and know not me." The contempt is pervasive and energizing, with the 'barren crags' leading from the 'idle king' and leading into the 'aged wife' : the marriage match does harsh justice. Ulysses shows that he gets exceedingly and intolerably bored, vexed and dissatisfied with his life as the King of Ithaca. He does not elicit any joy from the administering of justice to the people of his kingdom called 'Savage' by him. The people do not lead a varied, and colourful life. They know only how to eat, sleep and hoard up money and food. The words 'mete' and 'dole' are—words important words—important in the sense because they show contempt. Besides, 'still heart' and 'barren crages' suggest emptiness and farness.

Now Ulysses remembers his life before settling into kingship. His past life before his setting into kingship was an adventurous one. He both enjoyed himself and suffered on shore and at sea in the middle of the storm. He had journey far and wide, met a lot of people belonging to different countries, seen many cities. The stoniness mentioned is at once followed by a different kind of affirmation: "I cannot rest from travel I will drink .../.../... Vext dim sea" : Ulysses most intensely wishes to keep on experiencing that life of activity and adventure and restlessness. It is to be noted here most characteristic of Tennyson is a certain life-weariness, a longing for

rest through oblivion. The same weariness and longing for rest is the emotional basis of Tennyson's finest dramatic monologue *Ulysses*; though here the emotion is couched in the contrasting language of adventure giving an added complexity of meaning to the poem. However, the stoniness has amplitude, the affirmation, but a plumped amplitude. Ulysses is the man of action, becomes a 'hungry heart' roaming aimlessly to 'lands beyond the sunset', in the vain hope of being 'washed down by the gulf to the Happy Isles'. The poem's last sentence has its urgency. It is a beautiful stroke that proffers 'in old days' for what Tennyson elsewhere speaks of as 'our younger days': And rippling underneath that final line, striving to utter itself but batted down by will, is another line, almost identical and yet utterly different: 'To strive, to seek, to yield and not to find.' 'Ulysses is old; he stands upon the shores of life. The poem conveys a dragging sense of inertia, of ennui, played against the vocabulary of adventure and enterprise'. Goldwin Smith sensed that Ulysses 'intends to roam, but stands for ever a listless and melancholy figure on the shore.' For, though, the poem describes the passing of time, it does so with an oily stagnancy of shimmer: 'The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks: ...to seek a new world.' The rhythm and diction (long slow) are narcotically oppressive. Enterprise draws, but experience drugs. 'Yet all experience is an arch ...when I move.' Ulysses yearns to believe that his life is not just a past, that it still has a future. Yet that this is a yearning, and not a confident assurance, comes out in a ubiquitous feature of the poem's language: its reluctance in a poem of such an adventurous setting forth, so marred as to be morbid—to use the future tenses. This tissue of the poem is remarkable—unobtrusive but potent. For this poem which seizes the chance of a future, rises only at two points into future tenses, neither simple futures. At first in 'I will drink/Life to the lees'—'will', not 'shall': a determination. Near the end, with the future tense all governed by and attenuated by the word 'may'—'It may be that...whom we knew.'

When the poem opens, we find that Ulysses hurls his sneering contempt at the savage race. The greatest crime of his people is that they 'know not me'. This seems hardly surprising when he had been

absent for so long but it means that they don't give him the adulation that he feels he deserves. They are of such small account that their praise, even if they gave it, would not be worth much. Such is his pride and lack of humility. Then we discern a change of tone, from scion he moves to restlessness, mixed with nostalgic yearning. This failure to live where he is, to long for something 'other' or 'new' is at the root of Ulysses' sin. He says 'I will drink life to the less', but in fact he never does; he never lives in the present; in desire he is always somewhere other than where he is, as we see in the repeated 'over the horizon' image. He recalls the times 'he enjoyed greatly and suffer'd greatly', but the adverb placed after the verb makes this sound like mere rhetoric. All that emerges from his recollections is his lack of concern for the fates of those that had loved him; (We remember that as a result of his 'spirit of adventure' they had all perished.) His pride in that 'he had become a name!' There is a provincial pride too in that he had not been least of all the great men he had met, and he had been 'honoured' of them all : Although he says, 'I am a part of all that I have met, this recalling of always roaming with a hungry heart is nothing but a record of perpetual discontent. He can never be at peace with himself. There is a world of realization in the word yet : after all the great things he had done—no man less—and having his greatness recognized by the right types, too, yet, 'Yet all experience...where thro'...when I move.'

This is Ulysses, like Faustus, 'swollen with self conceit, but desiring to stretch even further than 'doth the mind of man'. These lines also contain the clue to Ulysses' tragedy. There is a yearning sadness in the word 'gleams' ('arch' suggests the rainbow's end). The sounds of 'untravel world', and the varid activity of the lips and tongue in these lines, causes the reader to pause longingly on this unattainable desire, with sad repetition of for 'ever and for ever'. But