

## Literary Analysis: Tennyson's "Ulysses"

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Alfred, Lord Tennyson, in his poem *Ulysses*, strikes universal themes about what it means to be human and fully engage life; to dream, to suffer anxiety and loss, but most of all, to strive ever onward and continue the journey, regardless.

In the particular passage from *Ulysses* I've chosen to explicate (lines 55-70) Tennyson has reached the "home stretch" of the poem, and begins to set the stage for the stirring emotional appeal that will follow by drawing the reader into an imaginary inner circle. One can envision a small band of brothers huddled about a flickering fire for warmth, listening in rapt attention as the poet intones:

The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep  
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,  
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world... (ll. 55-57)

The "deep" Tennyson refers to is the sea, a metaphor for the lives we lead; constantly in flux, sometimes treacherous, ultimately a mystery. Yet the poet is willing to accept life on life's terms, instructing us to "push off, and sitting well in order smite the sounding furrows" (l. 58) -- be brave, he says, be prepared, and fight back when confronted with untoward events. Then Tennyson reveals his "soul's mission," his reason for being:

For my purpose holds to sail beyond the sunset,  
and the baths of all the western stars, until I die. (ll. 59-61)

He seeks to transcend "the sunset" -- the ebbing of passionate youth, the confines of corporeal time, the boundaries of knowledge and reality itself. Then, Tennyson acknowledges the possibility that all of our courage and cleverness of mind still might not get us where we want to go -- "It may be that the gulfs will wash us down" (l. 62) -- yet nonetheless dreams of arriving there anyway: "it may be that we shall touch the Happy Isles, and see the great Achilles, whom we knew." (ll. 63-64) (The "Happy Isles" Tennyson refers to here are the Islands of the Blessed of Greek myth, lands of "paradise and perpetual summer.")

The next six lines are, to me, some of the best in all of English literature, because they speak so eloquently to the essence of human existence, that yawning space between heaven and earth where we find out how strong we are inside and thus who we really are. They begin with a sentence that seems like it was lifted straight from the Bible, "Though much is taken, much abides." (l. 65) Indeed, the sentiment closely resembles the basic tenants of Christian theology. The point is that though God, or life, may take from us many things that we hold dear -- those we love, our possessions, even our dignity at times -- we are remarkably resilient creatures, capable of withstanding almost unimaginable hardships and sorrow. Those who survived the concentration camps of World War II and somehow managed to live productive, enriching lives thereafter are an excellent example of this.

The next few lines speak to an ultimate acceptance, however reluctant, of the bruises inflicted and the losses sustained in our long journey through life:

...and though  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are -- (ll. 65-67)

The beauty and sublime humility of these words are a simple acknowledgment of the facts of life and, again, a kind of acquiescence, a taking into the self, of all the "thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to."

Tennyson, however, is not content to leave matters there. *Ulysses* concludes on a note of defiance; not toward life or God, but the practice of defeatism. There's a fundamental difference between acquiescence and retreat, and this is his chief point; to endure is no small achievement, perhaps the ultimate achievement. Though wisdom may dictate an acceptance of what life hands us, the human spirit at its best continues the timeless enterprise of defining and redefining the meaning and limitations of experience. Tennyson attempts to rouse the sleeping greatness within each of his readers when he addresses them as "one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will," (l. 68-69) and his final words are both an impassioned plea and a vigorous call to arms: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." (l. 70)

These lines from *Ulysses* are my favorite from the work of Tennyson. While still in the vein of manipulative, somewhat simplistic rhetoric, they possess a subtlety and poignance much of his

other material lacks (*Charge of the Light Brigade* comes to mind). It's easy to see why Bob Kennedy\* found this excerpt so richly meaningful and why he quoted it as often as he did. The words strike at the soul. That doesn't always happen with poetry, whoever the writer, but when it does, it's something special.

\* Though Senator Kennedy was less than a hero in my eyes, he had his charms. I thought you might enjoy another selection he frequently returned to in the years following his brother's death; it's from Aeschylus:

"In our sleep, pain, which cannot forget, falls  
drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair  
and against our will, comes wisdom through the awful  
grace of God."