**Alfred Tennyson "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 met,” he asserts. And it is only when he is traveling that the “margin” of the globe that he has not yet traversed shrink and fade, and cease to goad him.

Ulysses 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.

**Commentary**

In this poem, written in 1833 and revised for publication in 1842, Tennyson reworks the figure of Ulysses by drawing on the ancient hero of Homer’s Odyssey (“Ulysses” is the Roman form of the Greek “Odysseus”) and the medieval hero of Dante’s Inferno. Homer’s Ulysses, as described in Scroll XI of the Odyssey, learns from a prophecy that he will take a final sea voyage after killing the suitors of his wife Penelope. The details of this sea voyage are described by Dante in Canto XXVI of the Inferno: Ulysses finds himself restless in Ithaca and driven by “the longing I had to gain experience of the world.” Dante’s Ulysses is a tragic figure who dies while sailing too far in an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Tennyson combines these two accounts by having Ulysses make his speech shortly after returning to Ithaca and resuming his administrative responsibilities, and shortly before embarking on his final voyage.

However, this poem also concerns the poet’s own personal journey, for it was composed in the first few weeks after Tennyson learned of the death of his dear college friend Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833. Like In Memoriam, then, this poem is also an elegy for a deeply cherished friend. Ulysses, who symbolizes the grieving poet, proclaims his resolution to push onward in spite of the awareness that “death closes all” (line 51). As Tennyson himself stated, the poem expresses his own “need of going forward and braving the struggle of life” after the loss of his beloved Hallam.

The poem’s final line, “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield,” came to serve as a motto for the poet’s Victorian contemporaries: the poem’s hero longs to flee the tedium of daily life “among these barren crags” (line 2) and to enter a mythical dimension “beyond the sunset, and the baths of all the western stars” (lines 60–61); as such, he was a model of individual self-assertion and the Romantic rebellion against bourgeois conformity. Thus for Tennyson’s immediate audience, the figure of Ulysses held not only mythological meaning, but stood as an important contemporary cultural icon as well.

“Ulysses,” like many of Tennyson’s other poems, deals with the desire to reach beyond the limits of one’s field of vision and the mundane details of everyday life. Ulysses is the antithesis of the mariners in “The Lotos-Eaters,” who proclaim “we will no longer roam” and desire only to relax amidst the Lotos fields. In contrast, Ulysses “cannot rest from travel” and longs to roam the globe (line 6). Like the Lady of Shallot, who longs for the worldly experiences she has been denied, Ulysses hungers to explore the untraveled world.

As in all dramatic monologues, here the character of the speaker emerges almost unintentionally from his own words. Ulysses’ incompetence as a ruler is evidenced by his preference for potential quests rather than his present responsibilities. He devotes a full 26 lines to his own egotistical proclamation of his zeal for the wandering life, and another 26 lines to the exhortation of his mariners to roam the seas with him. However, he offers only 11 lines of lukewarm praise to his son concerning the governance of the kingdom in his absence, and a mere two words about his “aged wife” Penelope. Thus, the speaker’s own words betray his abdication of responsibility and his specificity of purpose.

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**Stanza 1**

Having returned to his kingdom Ithaca after an action-packed journey and eventful past, he finds little pleasure in a ‘still hearth’. The metaphor is employed to comment on his own condition. Like a fireplace, it no longer carries the flame in it, only the ashes of a once fiery lifestyle. The phrase "barren crags" points to the island of Ithaca in the kingdom of Ulysses: a limestone ridge seventeen miles long and four miles broad at its widest, singular for its ruggedness and barrenness, and considered unhealthy for cultivation. It serves to reflect on the crude state of affairs in the king’s life; and the sterility that prevails. Penelope was ‘fifty’ at the time, and did not match his passion for adventure and quest for exploration.

The term ‘mete and dole’ pertains to groceries, and is used here with derogatory connotations to relegate regal affairs to trivial domesticity and underline the insignificance of the same. To ‘mete and dole’ literally implied to weigh and measure out in small quantities. Here, it alludes to the weighing of decisions mentally. There were no uniform laws at the time to deal with people fairly. Mr. Wheeler points out "In early time, there were no laws of general application; each case was decided on its own merits' ......with advancing civilization people began to see the necessity for "equal laws", or rather hard and fast rules to which all must conform.....But as the lawyers say, hard cases make bad law." Tennyson sharply reprimands the Victorian complacency that “hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me. “ In such a stance, the people were equivalent to a ‘savage race’ because their existence was limited to their basic functions and instincts as they were satisfied with a moribund existence. They are intellectually stagnant.

**·Stanza 2**

On the other hand, Ulysses aspires to live life to the fullest, to the lees. Here, ’lees’ implies the residual part of the drink that lies at the bottom of the glass. Compare the lines, “I will drink/ Life to the lees” to "The wine of life is drawn and the mere lees is left this vault to brag of." ( Macbeth III, iii, 101 & 102) In his exploits with Cyclops, the Lotoseaters ,the Laestrygonion cannibals and the enchantress Circe, he was accompanied by the loyal cannibals ,though they kept decreasing gradually in numbers. Eventually, as he did make it to the island of Ogygia, and as he encountered Alcinous, he was all alone. His faithful company had perished at sea owing to Apollo’s rage. Ulysses states that he enjoyed indulging in exploits both alone and with company.

He has wandered through the ‘scudding drifts’ or broken clouds that are themselves wanderers. 'Hyades' refers to a cluster of seven stars that formed the head/ face of the constellation, namely Taurus. The cluster was named "Hades" ( Greek for "the rainers") as the image of the cluster of stars indicated ‘rain’. It juxtaposes the ideas of fertility in opposition to Ulysses' current predicament of a sterile existence. Stopford Brooke claims that Tennyson touches Nature in the prescribed poem with "extraordinary brevity and force."

Ulysses intends to carve a name for himself in the Book of History and renders himself immortal. In a similar poem by Tennyson, Dream of Fair Women, Cleopatra refers to herself as a "name forever". The phrase, ‘hungry heart’, implies that not only does the mind crave intellectual adventures, but emotional challenges as well. The phrase ‘hungry heart’ can also be traced to Matthew, V.6: “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." He is a part of all than he has met; his existence and identity is intertwined with his past experiences. He has remained an active participant rather than being a passive spectator of the same. He has encountered all sorts of people and situations. Though he did not rank below them, he made it a point to honor all of them. The phrase ‘Windy Troy’ is Homeric.

Each form of experience is like an archway; from each point one can discern the unexplored regions. The nearer one reaches the area, the farther do their borders recede. Ulysses employs an eloquent metaphor in the form of a sword where rusting commences soon after the action has died away or it has lost its utility value. In Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part II; Falstaff gives a diametrically opposite viewpoint: "It were better to be eaten to death with rust than to be scoured to nothing with perpetual motion."

Ulysses asserts that even if he was gifted with innumerable lives, it would be inadequate to quench his insatiable thirst for the new avenues of knowledge and experience. It would be his time rather than wait complacently for that ‘eternal silence’, namely death. His past experience is his current treasury of savings in terms of knowledge. He longs for three more years (three suns) of such escapades. He longs to immerse himself in knowledge like a sinking star.

**·  Stanza 3**

In the third stanza, he speaks of his son, Telemachus, patronizingly to whom he leaves “the scepter and the isle”. He is deemed capable of refining the ‘rugged’ people. He is devoted to the Gods and dedicated to duties. "He works his work, I mine.” Ulysses completely trusts his son (who is a little above twenty) and entrusts him with the responsibility of handling a kingdom. He respects his insightful tactics. The audience towards whom this speech is directed is not clear. Critics state that this passage is singular for meiosis (understatement). Mr.Brett asserts: "Telemachus is pictured as having all those virtues that his father lacked; he is great in all that is small, and probably small in all that is great."

**·  Stanza 4**

He addresses the mariners and motivates them to seek unexplored avenues. Time is not in their favor as they have grown old. Yet they may be capable of something noble and noteworthy. Though they are weak in bodily strength, they were strong in cerebral and intellectual ability. In addition, they were blessed with iron will. Here, Tennyson differs with regard to Homer’s Odyssey, as the followers were dead and Ulysses returned to Ithaca alone. He attempts at mythifying their journey with references to “Happy Isles” that signifies the Paradisal paradigm where the great Greek warrior Achilles reached after his death.

In an aphoristic statement, he inspires them, "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.” The final line has been chosen as the motto for the 2012 London Olympics to be engraved into the elongated entrance to the athletes' village. A certain judge remarked, "The aim was to find a line of poetry that somehow encapsulated the endeavor, the glory and the dance with failure that Olympic sport entails."

For those of you who are interested in the underlying meaning and motive for inspiration of this poem, this literary analysis for Alfred Tennyson's Ulysses, will hopefully help to break it down in a way that is

understandable and will contribute to the poem's value.

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**Ulysses Detailed Summary**

"Ulysses" speaks about Ulysses' intense dissatisfaction and boredom on his island home of Ithaca. The poem is a monologue spoken by him, where he not only expresses his discontent, but also describes his desire to keep sailing. He's getting older and doesn't have a lot of time left, so he wants to get busy living rather than busy dying. The poem concludes with his resolution to "strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

**Lines 1-5**

It little profits that an idle king,

By this still hearth, among these barren crags,

Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole

Unequal laws unto a savage race,

That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

The poem begins by telling us that a king gains nothing from just sitting around by the fire with his wife and making laws for people who don't even know him.

The speaker at first seems at to be some kind of observer or impersonal figure who knows a lot about how to be a king, but in line 3 we learn that the king himself, Ulysses, is speaking.

The phrase "it little profits" is another way of saying, "it is useless" or "it isn't beneficial."

"Mete" means "to allot" or "measure out." Here it refers to the king's allotment of rewards and punishments to his subjects.

"Unequal" doesn't mean that the rewards and punishments are unjust or unfair, but rather variable.

"Match'd" doesn't refer to a tennis match or other sporting event; it means something like "paired" or "partnered with."

Ulysses' subjects are presented to us as a large group of drones who do nothing but eat and sleep.

**Lines 6-11**

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink

Life to the lees: all times I have enjoyed

Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those

That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when

Through scudding drifts the rainy Hyades

Vexed the dim sea:

After his moralistic opening, Ulysses tells us more about why sitting around doling out rewards and punishments bores him.

We learn that he is a restless spirit who doesn't want to take a break from roaming the ocean in search of adventure. He will not let life pass him by.

The word "lees" originally referred to the sediment accumulated at the bottom of a bottle of wine; to "drink life to the lees" means to drink to the very last drop. Nowadays we might say something like "live life to the fullest."

Ulysses tells us that he has had a lot of good times and a lot of bad times, sometimes with his best friends, and sometimes alone, both on dry land and while sailing through potentially destructive storms.

"Scudding drifts" are pounding showers of rain that one might encounter at sea during a storm or while crab fishing off the coast of Alaska.

The "Hyades" are a group of stars in the constellation Taurus often associated with rain; their rising in the sky generally coincides with the rainy season. Here they are presented as agitators of the ocean.

**Lines 11-18**

…I am become a name;

For always roaming with a hungry heart

Much have I seen and known – cities of men

And manners, climates, councils, governments,

Myself not least, but honoured of them all –

And drunk delight of battle with my peers,

Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy,

I am a part of all that I have met;

Ulysses elaborates on the good times and bad times – well, mostly the good times – he's enjoyed during his travels.

The phrase "I am become a name" means something like "become a household name." Ulysses has become famous because he's traveled to so many places.

Ulysses tells us that he's visited a variety of different places, with different manners, weather, governments, etc. He portrays himself as a Renaissance traveler of sorts with an insatiable desire ("hungry heart") to see as many places as he can, try as many foods as he can, etc.

The phrase "myself not least, but honoured of them all" is a little tricky. It means something like "I wasn't treated like the least little thing but was honored by everybody I met."

Ulysses also describes the time he spent "on the ringing plains of windy Troy," the famous city where the Trojan War took place: you know, that famous war dramatized in the Brad Pitt movie Troy? The "plains" are "ringing" because of the armor clashing together in battle.

"I am a part of all that I have met" is a strange phrase. Usually we say something like "all the places I have seen are now a part of me." The phrase suggests that Ulysses left parts of himself everywhere he went; this sounds like another way of saying "I don't belong here in Ithaca."

**Lines 19-24**

Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough

Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades

For ever and for ever when I move.

How dull it is to pause, to make an end,

To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!

As though to breathe were life!

Ulysses further justifies his desire to keep traveling and living a life of adventure.

He compares his life or experiences to an arch and describes the "untravelled world" as a place that "gleams" at him through that arch. All he has to do is walk through the arch…

The first two lines of the passage are very tricky, and we're not entirely sure what they mean. One way to read "Untravelled world" is as a reference to death; it is always looking at him through the "arch" of his experiences, but somehow seems to recede ("margin fades") as he keeps moving.

You could also think of the "Untravelled world" as an arch. As Ulysses moves, his experiences make an arch covering the arch of the "Untravelled world." The more he travels, the more the margins or edges of that world recede or are covered up.

Ulysses reiterates how boring it is just sitting around when he could be out exploring the world. It's a lot like that feeling you get when you're just getting into the rhythm of things and have to stop.

He likens himself to some kind of metallic instrument that is still perfectly useful and shiny but just rusts if nobody uses it, like that ancient bicycle in your garage. If Ulysses weren't a soldier, he might say he's just collecting dust.

For Ulysses, life is about more than just "breathing" and going through the motions; it's about adventure.

**Lines 24-32**

…Life piled on life

Were all too little, and of one to me

Little remains: but every hour is saved

From that eternal silence, something more,

A bringer of new things; and vile it were

For some three suns to store and hoard myself,

And this grey spirit yearning in desire

To follow knowledge like a sinking star,

Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

Ulysses continues to a radiate a desire for adventure, claiming that even multiple lifetimes wouldn't be enough for him to do all the things he wants.

At this point, though, he's an old man – a "grey spirit" – near the end of his life, and he wants to make the most of what's left. It's a waste of time for him to hang out in Ithaca for three years when his desire for adventure is still so alive.

The phrase "but every hour is saved / From that eternal silence, something more, / A bringer of new things" is strange. It means something like "each additional hour that I live, or each hour that I am saved from death, brings me new experiences."

"Three suns" doesn't mean three days, but rather three years. Ulysses has apparently been wasting his time for quite a while.

The phrase "follow knowledge like a sinking star" is ambiguous. On the one hand, Ulysses wants to chase after knowledge and try to catch it as it sinks like a star. On the other hand, Ulysses himself could be the "sinking star." That makes sense too; he is a great personality who is moving closer to death (though, in our opinion, he's also kind of a rock star).

**Lines 33-38**

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,

To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle –

Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil

This labour, by slow prudence to make mild

A rugged people, and through soft degrees

Subdue them to the useful and the good.

Ulysses introduces us to his son and heir, Telemachus, who seems like the right guy to take over the job of King of Ithaca. He's smart, and he knows how to make his people do things without being too harsh about it.

A "Sceptre" is a ceremonial staff that symbolizes authority. Ulysses means something like "I leave him in charge."

When compared with Ulysses, Telemachus seems a lot less restless. He has "slow prudence," meaning he's patient and willing to make the best decision for the people of Ithaca without being too hasty.

The people of Ithaca are "rugged," which means that they're a little uncivilized and uncultured. They're like country-bumpkins with a little bit of an attitude. That's why they need to be reigned in ("subdued," made "mild") and put to good use.

"Soft degrees" implies that Telemachus will civilize the citizens of Ithaca in stages and in a nice way; it's kingship as constructive criticism.

**Lines 39-43**

Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere

Of common duties, decent not to fail

In offices of tenderness, and pay

Meet adoration to my household gods,

When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

Ulysses tells us more about Telemachus' qualifications; he's a straight shooter all the way, a nice guy.

"Decent not to fail" means that Telemachus is smart enough not to fail at doing nice things for people and paying the proper respects to the gods.

"Meet" means "appropriate" or "suitable."

We're not sure whether "when I am gone" means that Ulysses is planning on going back to sea for some more adventures, or if he's thinking about his own death.

**Lines 44-50**

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:

There gloom the dark broad seas. My mariners,

Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me –

That ever with a frolic welcome took

The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed

Free hearts, free foreheads – you and I are old;

Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;

Ulysses shifts our attention from his son to the port of Ithaca, where he tells us a ship is preparing to set sail. Looks like he's planning on skipping town after all, and with his old friends as well.

"Gloom" is usually a noun but here it's a verb that means "appearing dark" or "scowling."

"Thunder and sunshine" is used here to mean something like "good times and bad times." They have gladly ("with a frolic welcome") gone through thick and thin for Ulysses.

The phrase "opposed / Free hearts, free foreheads" is a little tricky. Ulysses means that his sailors "opposed" whatever came in their way – "thunder," for example – and they did it as free men and with a lot of confidence ("free foreheads").

While at first it seems as though Ulysses has just been musing to himself, it turns out he's speaking to someone. We don't know whom he's talking to, but the other person is an old man.

Speaking of old age, Ulysses suggests that even though old people are respected, they also have responsibilities

**Lines 51-56**

Death closes all: but something ere the end,

Some work of noble note, may yet be done,

Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.

The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:

The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep

Moans round with many voices.

Ulysses knows that death will end everything, but he still believes he can do great things, things worthy of men who fought against the will of the gods during the Trojan War.

The Trojan War wasn't a war between men and gods, but occasionally the gods would come down and fight with either the Greeks or the Trojans.

"Ere" is an old poetic word that means "before," as in "I will come ere nightfall."

Ulysses observes the sunset and the arrival of night, but it seems like he's thinking about his own death as well. What's with the moaning? It reminds us of ghosts or people mourning a death.

"Lights begin to twinkle from the rocks" is an elegant way of saying the stars are coming out.

**Lines 56-64**

…Come, my friends,

'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.

Push off, and sitting well in order smite

The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds

To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths

Of all the western stars, until I die.

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.

It turns out that Ulysses is addressing his friends, at least during this part of the poem. He tells them what he's been telling us all along: it's never too late to go in search of new lands.

Here a "furrow" refers to the track or mark made in the water by the ship. He tells his sailors to "smite" or strike it, most likely with oars.

"Purpose" can mean two different things; it can mean either "destiny," as in "sailing is my purpose in life," or it can mean "intention," as in "I intend to sail as far as I can."

The "baths / Of all the western stars" isn't a place where the stars go to bathe themselves. It refers to the outer ocean or river that the Greeks believed surrounded the (flat) earth; they thought the stars descended into it.

To sail beyond the "baths" means Ulysses wants to sail really, really far away – beyond the horizon of the known universe – until he dies.

The "happy isles" refers to the Islands of the Blessed, a place where big-time Greek heroes like Achilles enjoyed perpetual summer after they died. We might say Heaven.

Ulysses realizes that he and his companions might die, but he's OK with that. If they die, they might even get to go to the "Happy Isles" and visit their old pal Achilles.

**Lines 65-70**

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and though

We are not now that strength which in old days

Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;

One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Ulysses yet again tells us that even though he and his sailors are old and don't have a lot of gas left in the tank, there's enough left to go a little farther.

"Abides" is a word that means "remains."

These guys are a team with one heartbeat. They're old and broken, but they still have the will to seek out and face challenges without giving up. They can't bench-press 200 pounds anymore, but that won't stop them from trying anyway.

The phrase "strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not yield" means something like "we're strong because of our will to strive" or "our will to strive is strong."

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**Symbols**

1. Traveling and Sailing

Ulysses has done a lot of traveling; it took him ten years to get home from Troy, which means he's had an entire decade to visit a whole lot of places. Apparently, those ten years weren't enough because all he talks about is leaving home again. It's not entirely clear whether Ulysses wants to visit any specific place or if he just wants to travel for its own sake. Maybe he just likes the smell of the ocean air. Either way, he wants to get out of Dodge.

Line 6: Ulysses explains that he can't stop traveling because he wants to get the most out of life.

Lines 9-11: Ulysses describes storms at as resulting from the Hyades "vexing the sea." "Vex" means to upset, stir up, trouble; attributing human actions to a non-living thing (the Hyades) is called personification.

Lines 12-15: Ulysses tells us that he's visited a lot of different places with different governments, people, foods, and the like. He portrays himself as some kind of predatory animal, "roaming with a hungry heart." Because he doesn't say "I was like a lion" or "I roamed just as a lion might," this is a metaphor.

Lines 19-21: Ulysses compares life to an arch – that's a metaphor again – and explains that the "untravelled world" (death; places he hasn't experienced) gleams through it. The "untravelled world" is likened to some kind of planet or luminous world, which means this is also a metaphor.

Lines 44-45: Ulysses directs our attention to the "port," where the mariners are preparing the ship. The ship can't "puff" its own sail; the wind is probably doing it. Attributing human characteristics to non-living objects is personification.

Line 46: Ulysses refers to his "mariners" as "souls." The "soul" is part of the body; using a part (the soul) to stand in for the whole (the mariners) is called synecdoche.

Lines 56-7: Ulysses tells his companions that even though they're old, they still have time to visit places they haven't already seen. Ulysses probably doesn't have any specific place in mind so "a newer world" is standing in for a host of potential places he might visit; this is another example of synecdoche.

Lines 58-9: Ulysses exhorts his mariners to set sail; the phrase "smite / the sounding furrows" compares the act of rowing to hitting or striking something; hitting something that makes a sound is here a metaphor for rowing.

Lines 60-61: Ulysses says he intends to sail "beyond the sunset," which is another way of saying he intends to sail beyond the known universe. "Beyond the sunset" is a metaphor.

**2. Eating and Drinking**

As the king of Ithaca, Ulysses doesn't have a lot do besides eat and sleep and act as a judge every once and a while. In fact, he's not too happy about just sitting around eating and drinking all day. He's hungry, sure, but for something else. He sees the people who just sit around eating food and sleeping – his subjects – as more like animals than people. This is partly why Ulysses has lost his appetite for ease, tranquility, and regular food.

Line 5: Ulysses refers to his subjects as a "savage race," who do nothing but eat and sleep, which makes them more like brutes or "savages," than civilized people.

Lines 6-7: Ulysses says he will "drink / Life to the lees," an old version of "live life to the fullest." Living life is here compared to drinking a bottle of something; because "like" or "as" do not appear, it's a metaphor, not a simile.

Line 12: Ulysses explains that he's seen so many places because he's like a predatory animal with a "hungry heart." He tacitly compares himself to a lion or tiger, which makes this a metaphor.

Line 16: Ulysses refers to his enjoyment of battle as a kind of consumption, a "drinking" of "delight." Enjoying the delight of battle is compared to the drinking of some kind of beverage, which means this is a metaphor.

**3. Stars**

Before the compass was invented, sailors used the stars to guide them. Ulysses has done a lot of sailing, so it's no surprise that stars come up several times in the poem. The stars in this poem, however, are always doing more than looking pretty; they have the power to affect things on earth, and they're also handy as metaphors for Ulysses' experiences and desires.

Lines 10-11: Ulysses describes how the "rainy Hyades," a group of stars in the constellation Taurus, caused storms at sea. Of course, the stars didn't literally "vex" the sea; Ulysses gives a human attribute to a non-human object, which is called personification.

Line 20: Ulysses compares the "untravelled world" to a gleaming object. Though he doesn't call it a star, the fact that it's compared to some kind of celestial object "gleaming" out in space kind of makes one think of a star. Oh, and since the "untravelled world" isn't really a star, the gleaming object or planet is a metaphor for that world.

Line 29: Ulysses says it would be "vile" if he were to spend three years hoarding supplies and basically doing nothing. He says "three suns" (the sun is technically a star), by which he presumably means three complete revolutions of the earth around the sun.

Line 31: Ulysses here refers to a "sinking star," only it's not clear if that star is the knowledge he's seeking, or himself. Either way, he says "like a sinking star," which means this is a simile.

Line 54-5: Ulysses describes the onset of night and the appearance of the stars. Here, the description of night doubles as Ulysses' reflection on his own approaching "night," his own death. The end of a day is a metaphor for death in this passage.

Lines 60-1: Ulysses describes how the stars rest in a body of water that the Greeks believed surrounded the earth. He mentions the "baths" of the stars in order to convey how far beyond the known world he wants to travel.

**4. Animals**

There are a lot of sly references to animals in this poem, and we're not talking about Ulysses' poodle either. The residents of Ithaca are described as uncultivated people that just eat and sleep and need to be tamed like a bunch of wild animals. Ulysses doesn't want to end up like them, which he sees as a very real possibility if he stays in Ithaca. He wants to be a different kind of animal, a predatory one that wanders around, consuming different places as if they were exotic prey.

Line 5: Ulysses describes his subjects like animals; they don't eat, they "feed" like pigs out of a trough. Oh, and they "hoard" too, as if they were getting ready to hibernate. Some unspecified animal is here a metaphor for the citizens of Ithaca.

Line 12: Ulysses compares himself to a lion or tiger, "roaming" the seas with a "hungry heart." One of those animals, or a similar animal, is a metaphor for Ulysses.

Lines 28-9: Ulysses remarks that if he stays in Ithaca he'll end up just like his subjects, sitting around "storing and hoarding" things as if preparing for hibernation and an unproductive life. Again, some unspecified animal is here a metaphor for Ulysses.

Lines 37-8: Here again some kind of animal is a metaphor for the people of Ithaca. They are "rugged" – almost like a stallion that hasn't learned how to wear a saddle yet – and have to be "subdued." Some unspecified, savage animal is here a metaphor for the citizens of Ithaca.

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**Themes**

**1. Dissatisfaction**

Let's face it, Ulysses is really bored. He can't stand just sitting around the house with his wife all day, eating and sleeping and settling disputes every once in a while. It would be like if you spent the entire summer traveling around the world and then had to go to your corner office where all you had to do was count your money and live in luxury. Yeah sure, it'd be nice, but wouldn't you get a craving for adventure every once in a while? After visiting all kinds of strange places, Ulysses has to go back to Ithaca where, since he's the king, he doesn't really have to do a whole lot. He's still in good physical shape, and he can't stand it that he doesn't get to put that body to use.

**2. Perseverance**

Ulysses is an untamed spirit, and nothing is going to stop him; he's got a disease, and the only cure is to keep traveling, to keep moving on. It's not that his life in Ithaca isn't good; there's a voice inside his head that tells him his life is synonymous with perseverance, and that he should continue to see as many places as he can before he dies so he can get the most out of life. He's determined to persevere against the lures of domestic tranquility, even if it kills him

**3. Mortality**

The strong sense of urgency that Ulysses radiates stems largely from his own consciousness of death; it seems like every time he talks about going back to sea he mentions the fact that he might die soon, or die out there. Ulysses knows that death is stalking him, and he wants to try and cheat it for as long as he can. In other words, he wants to try to steal as many moments as he can before the curtain drops. And he thinks by traveling more he can somehow forestall death, can make the "eternal silence" wait just a bit longer for him.

**4. Old Age**

In a lot of ways, Ulysses resembles a retiree, someone who's had a long, eventful life and has been forced to hang it up just a bit too soon. Death isn't just stalking him because that's what death does; it's stalking him because he's old! Ulysses spent twenty years away from home, and even if he left home at the age of 25, that would still make him 45. That's like 70 if you're living in 1200 B.C.! And that's one of the reasons why he's in such a hurry to get out of Ithaca; he doesn't want to spend his few remaining years sitting around watching his son take over the family business. He'd rather say his goodbyes now and see what happens.

**5. Exploration**

Ulysses is like that guy you once knew who was totally happy taking whatever he could fit in his backpack and setting off for Europe, or Africa, or any other sprawling land mass. On one of those trips he got lost, was presumed dead, but later made it back home; now he's on his way out the door again because he's not done looking for new places. Ulysses knows he might die, but the search, the process of exploring, satisfies him in ways that nothing else can.

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