UNIT 12: ALFRED LORD TENNYSON: "ULYSSES"

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12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, you will be able to

- describe the life and career of Alfred Tennyson
- discuss the poem "Ulysses" in terms of its different important aspects
- explain the underlying mythical pattern of the poem
- critically appreciate the significance of the poem "Ulysses" by Tennyson

12.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with the poem "Ulysses" written by the Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) who is generally hailed as the most representative poet of the Victorian period. Tennyson, as you will get to read, perfectly voiced relentless spirit of the age for gaining more and more knowledge of the unknown frontiers of the physical world of the time. While the other leading luminaries of Victorian poetry—Robert Browning (1812-

1887) and Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) remained preoccupied with their professed line of interests–Browning with dramatic monologue, and Arnold with moral deprivations often snubbed as 'philistinism', Tennyson focused on the different polarities of his time. Robert Browning has been much acclaimed for his innovative dramatic monologues like "My Last Duchess" and "The Last Ride Together" in which he tried to probe the inner minds of his characters, while at the same time advocating on their behalf. Matthew Arnold, who defined poetry as "criticism of life", embodied the role of a moral critic of the time. As exemplified in his poems like "The Scholar Gipsy" and "Dover Beach", Arnold felt disgust at the Victorian way of life particularly the corrupt and selfish pursuits of the age, and yearned for a peaceful, optimistic and spiritually tranquil society free from the 'philistines'. In contrast to these two great poets, Tennyson displayed a sweeping range of interests right from the imbroglio involving the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Human Species* (1859) resulting in the famous Victorian Compromise, the scientific innovations and inventions of the time, to the expansion of the British empire within the ambit of his poetic designs. By the time you finish reading this unit, you will be able to learn why he is often considered one of the most accomplished lyric poets in the history of English verse.

12.3 TENNYSON: THE POET

Alfred Tennyson remains the most representative poet of the Victorian era. Being the mouthpiece of the age, he expressed both the hopes and the doubts of his time. Like the great Romantics of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Tennyson too was a keen observer of nature. However, his specialty in this respect remains the fact that he was not biased in favour of only one particular dimension of nature; rather, he threw light on both the benevolent and malevolent aspects of it. Tennyson, to some extent, can be termed as a true descendent of Romantics like Shelly and Keats so far as the emotional thread of their poetic pieces is



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred,_Lord_Tennyson

concerned. His bosom friend and one of his earliest critics Arthur Henry Hallam first pointed out this aspect of Tennyson's poetry.

12.3.1 His Life

Alfred Tennyson, born on August 6, 1809 at Somersby Rectory in Lincolnshire, was the son of the rector of Somersby, Reverend George Clayton Tennyson. Tennyson had eleven siblings and his father was an alcoholic— factor that took a toll on their middle class existence in Tennyson's childhood. After his early education, mainly at home and at Louth Grammar School for a brief period, Tennyson went to Trinity College, Cambridge in 1827. He displayed his poetic competence at Trinity in 1829 by winning the Chancellor's Medal for his poem "Timbuctoo". In fact, admission into Trinity was sort of an escape for him from disturbed domestic environment marked by his father's bitter temperament resulting from his disinheritance. However, the chaotic atmosphere at home during his formative years had already left its mixed impetus on Tennyson's personality. The outcome of it was a dual personality displayed by the poet throughout his life—a personality prone to compromise that wavered between faith and doubt. However, his later life, particularly post the publication in 1842 of his *Poems*, a two-volume collection of poetry, was blissful.

In November 1850, Tennyson was appointed the Poet Laureate of England consequent to the death of William Wordsworth in April the same year and the refusal of the offer by Wordsworth and Coleridge's friend Samuel Rogers (1763-1855) on the ground of his senility. The year was also remarkable for the publication of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, an elegy triggered by the unfortunate and untimely death of Arthur Henry Hallam whom Tennyson had befriended at Trinity in 1828, and the beginning of his conjugal life with Emily Sellwood. The poet's personal fortunes saw a steep rise after 1850 and he was honoured with the title of Baron in 1884, which he had declined earlier on three occasions in 1865, 1874 and 1880. Tennyson suffered from serious illness in 1888 that posed a

threat to his life, which according to his doctor's version was as near death as a man could get.

He died at "Aldworth", his second country home, on 6th October 1892.

12.3.2 His Poetic Works [adapted from *Gale Encyclopaedia*]

In 1827, when Tennyson was almost eighteen years old, his first volume of poetry, *Poems by Two Brothers* was published. *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, published in 1830, was well received and marked the beginning of Tennyson's literary career. Another collection, *Poems* appeared in 1832. Many critics praised Tennyson's artistry but objected to what they considered an absence of intellectual substance. The latter volume was published following a request of Arthur Hallam, a brilliant Cambridge undergraduate who had become Tennyson's closest friend and who was an ardent admirer of his poetry. However, Hallam's premature death in 1833, which prompted the series of elegies later comprising "In Memoriam", contributed greatly to Tennyson's despair. For nearly a decade after Hallam's death, Tennyson published no further poetry.

As Tennyson was maturing, the political situation in England was also changing as Queen Victoria took the throne in 1837, beginning a long reign (which ended in 1901) and setting the tone for an important era in British history. During the Victorian age, the Industrial Revolution reached its peak, providing a boost to British colonial and military expansion during the 19th century. On the one hand, there was a vast increase in the factory system, industrialization, and urbanization, changing the fabric of British society. On the other hand, reform and social justice were also emphasised. In such an environment, yielding to a friend's insistence, Tennyson published his two-volume collection *Poems* in 1842.

Following an unsuccessful financial venture for some time, in 1845, Tennyson was granted a Government pension in recognition of both his poetic achievements and his apparent need. Contributing to his financial stability, the first edition of his narrative poem "The

Princess: A Medley", published in 1847, sold out within two months. Moreover, the timely success of "In Memoriam", published in 1850, ensured Tennyson's appointment as poet laureate, succeeding William Wordsworth. This assured Tennyson the opportunity to become the poetic voice of his generation, and in his ceremonial position he composed such poems as "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington" and "The Charge of the Light Brigade", each of which is a celebration of heroism and public duty. *Idylls of the King* (1859), considered by Tennyson's contemporaries to be his masterpiece, and *Enoch Arden* (1864), which sold more than forty thousand copies upon publication, increased both his popularity and his wealth and earned him the designation "the people's poet."

Although the dramatic works written later in his career like *Queen Mary* (1875) and *The Foresters* (1892) were largely unsuccessful, Tennyson completed several additional collections of poems in the last decade of his life, all of which were well received. They included: *Ballads and Other Poems* (1880), *Tiresias, and Other Poems* (1885), and *Demeter, and Other Poems* (1889). In 1883, he accepted a peerage, the first poet to be so honoured strictly based on literary achievement.



LET US KNOW

A quick look at the list of Tennyson's works

- *Poems by Two Brothers* (1827): It also contained poems written by his brothers Frederick and Charles.
- *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830)
- *Poems* (1832)
- *Poems* (1842), in two volumes. One of these volumes contained previously published poems in revised form and the other one presented fresh poems.
- *The Princess* (1847)
- *In Memoriam* (1850)
- *Maud and Other Poems* (1855)

- *Idylls of the King* (1859)
- *Enoch Arden* (1864). The publication of this volume brought to him the title "Poet of the People".
- *The Holy Grail and Other Poems* (1869)
- *Ballads, and Other Poems* (1880)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

Q 1: What was Arthur Henry Hallam's role in Tennyson's early career besides being a friend?

Q 2: Which aspects of the Victorian society did Tennyson express in his poetry?

Q 3: What were the factors that affected Tennyson's early life at home?

12.4 READING THE POEM

"Ulysses" was published in *Poems*, the two-volume collection of poetry in 1842 that marked the beginning of Tennyson's rapid stride towards great success and fame. "Ulysses", in the words of Andrew Sanders, "emphatically embraces the idea of progressive development" (426) which was one of the important agenda of Victorian policymaking. Written after Arthur Hallam's death in 1833, the poem was of much significance. Speaking of it, Tennyson himself had said: "There is more about myself in 'Ulysses', which was written under the sense of loss…" and that the poem provided him with the "feeling about the need of going forward, and braving the struggle of life…" (as qtd. in Hill, 82).

The poem is based on two mythical sources—Homer's the *Odyssey XI* and Dante's *Inferno* (Canto 26). However, Tennyson's "Ulysses" is not a mere reproduction from his mythical sources but a re-appropriation of these to give vent to a typical Victorian attitude to life and work.

12.4.1 The Text of the Poem

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.
I cannot rest from travel; I will drink
Life to the lees. All times I have enjoy’d
Greatly, have suffer’d greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when
Thro’ scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vext the dim sea. 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 honour’d 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;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro’
Gleams that untravell’d world whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish’d, not to shine in use.
As tho’ to breathe were life! 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 gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

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 thro’ soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
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.

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.
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. Come, my friends.
’T is 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.
Tho’ much is taken, much abides; and tho’
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.

(Source: *Tennyson’s Poetry*, edited by Robert W. Hill Jr.)

Ulysses, the speaker of the poem, dismisses the idea of leading a peaceful and idle life accompanied by his wife in his hilly kingdom of Ithaca. He is also not interested in ruling his subjects—a "savage race" in his view—who are ignorant of their king. He has been through many difficulties in life and have tremendously enjoyed and equally suffered while earning a reputation in the process. He has seen many a people in different countries and came to know their customs and manners. He acknowledges that wherever he has travelled to quench his thirst for knowledge, the people have honoured him. He has fought with valour along with his fellow warriors in the battle of Troy. He possesses much knowledge but the scope of knowledge knows no bound. One's experiences and knowledge appear just like an arch through which one can see the vast expanse of knowledge that remains unexplored.

Ulysses deems it foolish not to recognise the call of an active life preferring to lead a dull life of rest and comfort that resembles to him something made of iron that has lost the shine and rusted due to little use. According to him, lives piled on lives are inadequate to master knowledge of all the things available in the world. Since he has only one life at his disposal of which too only a few years are left, he cannot shy away from constant activity. He believes that an hour spent in meaningful and worthy pursuits of knowledge of new things equals to saving that time from death, which brings eternal silence to everyone. It will be mean on his part to waste another three years doing nothing and so he renews in old days his resolution to dedicate the rest of his life in the noble pursuit of knowledge.

Ulysses projects his son Telemachus as the future ruler. He possesses all the requisite qualities to govern the country during the absence of Ulysses. Telemachus is free from corruption and dutiful. He is expected to subdue the resilient people of his kingdom into efficient and law abiding citizens while at the same time he would offer prayers to the household gods when Ulysses is out on his mission.

In the last part of the poem, Ulysses addresses his mariners. He is well aware of his old age as well as that of the fellow-sailors.

However, it is his conviction that even old age has its honour to be won and work to be performed. Though death is inevitable, before it knocks them down, they can do some noble works that befit them who had fought with Gods in the Trojan War. As the daylight wanes and the moonrises, the roar of sea waves is heard. At such a juncture, Ulysses addresses his mariners to embark upon new voyages stressing that they are not too late to explore new things and newer opportunities. Ulysses is resolute to travel beyond the point in the horizon where the sun and all the western stars set. He wants to travel like that until his death. It may be that during the course of their journey they will get drowned in the sea or that they will be able to reach Elysium and meet the great hero Achilles whom they had known in Troy. Though they are now bereft of their youthful energy due to age, there remains with them the indomitable courage and the strong will "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield".

Ulysses postulates about the untraveled world, which holds a great store of knowledge unexplored. He is tempted to set out again and master this hidden knowledge. His urge to go for it is propelled by his realisation that he has already become old and he will not live long. He decides to put his son Telemachus at the helm of power to carry forward his legacy of kingship while he will be away. In the final section of the poem, he addresses his fellow mariners and gives them a wake-up call. He impresses upon them the fact that they have become senile but still possess the unconquerable will to achieve something great before they are silenced by death. He reiterates to them his resolution to sail beyond the utmost frontiers to attain his goal and ready to face his end if necessary.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Why is Ulysses not interested in ruling his subjects?

Q 5: How does Ulysses project his son Telemachus?

12.4.2 Major Themes

The Ulysses Myth:

"Ulysses" is a reworking of the traditional myth in the backdrop of Tennyson's sense of personal loss. The myth is Homeric, but Homer's Ulysses (called Odysseus) is a whimsical military general of the battle of Troy. He is also the adventurer who takes, after the ten-year war of Troy is over, another ten years to reach back his home. Towards the end of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus reaches his land Ithaca, killed many suitors of his wife Penelope and sits at the helm of power in his country. The only hint of a last adventure, which is the theme of the Tennyson's "Ulysses", can be traced in Book IX of Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus goes to the underworld, meets Tiresias, the blind prophet, who reveals to him that he would reach Ithaca and that his end will come from the sea. Dante, in Canto 26 of his *Inferno*, picks up this last sea voyage as his subject and not only extends the Homeric myth but also brings the story of Ulysses to an end. In the process, the character of Ulysses undergoes certain changes—from a clever general and avenger he has become a symbol of intelligence, hungry for more and more knowledge. Therefore, it is more on Dante's work than on the Homeric myth that Tennyson's poem "Ulysses" is based on. No doubt, the character of Ulysses is Homeric but the theme of the poem is modelled after Dante's extension of Homeric myth.

Social Consciousness:

Contemporary social consciousness is a major theme of "Ulysses". It has been represented through the character of Ulysses. Tennyson's hero is different from the Ulysses of any myth or legend. He is a purely intellectual character imbibed with the 19th century scientific zeal. He yearns for more and more knowledge and is ready even to meet his death to fulfil his avowed objective. He can hardly rest from travel and proposes to "drink/ Life to the lees". He has travelled to different lands with a hungry heart and acquired

knowledge of the places he has been to. Still, his thirst for knowledge remains insatiable and he wants to explore more and more in the unknown zones of knowledge. The imagination of the people of England during the reign of Queen Victoria was fired by the new discoveries and inventions of science. In these developments, they got the much-needed boost to discover new lands and thereby add to the expansion of the British Empire, which was perhaps sailing at its best pace at that point of time. Tennyson's Ulysses embodies in himself this quest of Victorians for knowledge.

Ulysses as an Egoist:

Another theme of the poem is the presence of an egoist in Ulysses. An accommodative outlook does not match his noble intentions and never-ending hunger for knowledge so far household relation is concerned. He is disrespectful of his wife and his subordinate citizens. The very first lines of the poem present him as an egoist who feels it unprofitable to remain "an idle king" who wastes his time by the side of the "still hearth" accompanied with "an aged wife". He even calls his people "a savage race" who only "hoard, and sleep". Such views and words to describe his wife and citizens sufficiently hint that he is biased against them and holds them in little respect. Ulysses even does not appreciate much his own son

Telemachus beyond his traditional and homely responsibilities.

Conflict between Science and Tradition:

The conflict or compromise between science and tradition remains a remarkable theme of the poem "Ulysses". The Victorian era was an age of the problem of choice between the traditional Christian way of life and the scientific discourse that was bolstered by new discoveries and inventions. Industrialisation and the advancement of science necessitated ever-going activity whereas the foundation of life of a large number of people in the society

remained their religious faith. Tennyson, being one of the greatest poets of the age attempted to strike a balance between these two opposite poles of his time. "Ulysses" reveals this effort of the poet through the characters of Ulysses and his son Telemachus. The poem remains a celebration of the energy and resolution of the period to run after the ever-increasing horizon of the world of knowledge. In a sense, Ulysses is the cross-continental hero of the Victorian England, an adventurer, an explorer of the unknown realms of knowledge and culture. Contrary to his father, Telemachus' life is a life of contentment and he is expected to play to perfection the conventional duties Ulysses is about to assign to him. Unlike his father, he does not feel the stir to go exploring new places and would prefer to "subdue" his subjects and worship the "household gods". However, in the fields of their individual preferences, both Ulysses and Telemachus are in mutual collaboration. They are helping one another in their respective spheres of activities, which is in a way indicative of the post-1859 Victorian Compromise between the subscribers of the conflicting ideologies of the time. Without Ulysses willing to bequeath his kingdom to his son Telemachus to rule when he is gone or Telemachus' supposed acceptance to perform the responsibilities of the king assigned to him by his father, they would not have been able to do what Ulysses puts as "He works his work, I mine". Thus, the compromising or collaborating relationship between the scientific and the traditional domains of activity can be termed as another theme of the poem.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

Q 6: What are the mythical bases of Tennyson's "Ulysses"?

Q 7: How has Ulysses become a name?

Q 8: Why does Ulysses want to undertake a new voyage?

Q 9: How does the poem Ulysses display the Victorian conflict between science and tradition?

12.4.3 Tennyson's Poetic Style

"Ulysses", according to David Daiches, is "one of Tennyson's most controlled and perfectly wrought dramatic monologues …" (998). This opinion by Daiches is quite apt considering the fact that the poet presents Ulysses at a very crucial moment of his life. He has come back after a long period of absence spent in pursuit of hazardous adventures on sea and plays with the opposite ideas of whether to idle away the rest of his life at home or embark upon yet another journey. In deciding what he intends to do, his inner mind is revealed to the readers.

Tennyson beautifully delineates through the inner play of conflicting emotions the entire personality of his hero. To heighten the effect of the dramatic monologue the poet gives the poem an abrupt beginning that captures our attention—"It little profits that an idle king, / By this still hearth …" After such a dramatic abruptness, the poet takes his protagonist to the middle of the crisis where he has to decide again about his future course of action. The epic background is one of the subtle techniques of the poem that has sustained the readers' admiration for it even today. Using mythical allusions to the character of Ulysses, Tennyson contextualises the ceaseless zeal and hunger of his contemporary Victorians for more and more knowledge of the unknown that would in turn add to the glory of their nation. It is Tennyson's sheer craftsmanship that blends so well the legendary elements from Homer and Dante with the Victorian thirst for ever-expanding knowledge.

Another technical aspect of the poem is the autobiographical element in it. "Ulysses" is actually an outlet of the poet's feelings regarding the need to face life and continue one's march ahead, undaunted by personal tragedies besetting life, towards fulfilment of men's set objectives. Tennyson himself has acknowledged this autobiographical aspect of the poem while speaking of *In Memoriam* to James Knowles, the architect of Tennyson's second country home "Aldworth", in this manner: "There is more about myself in 'Ulysses', which was written under the sense of loss and that all had gone by,

but that still life must be fought out to the end" (as qtd. in Hill 82). Ulysses, the persona of the poem, reflects the spirit and personality of the poet himself. By infusing personal touches to the near objective speaker of the poem, Tennyson perhaps wanted to instil in the minds of his contemporaries the need for a sincere pursuance of the national interests of his times.

The poem "Ulysses" is written in blank verse and there is a pictorial quality in its language. In the poem, Tennyson uses the words in a very evocative way. As evident in "By this still hearth, among these barren crags", or "There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail; / There gloom the dark, broad seas", or even the lines "The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks; / The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep/ Moans round with many voices", the poem is a good example of how language can conjure up images that are like the real ones witnessed by the eyes. Such pictorial use of language appears intentional on the part of Tennyson with a view to appealing more and more to his contemporary citizens of England.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

Q 10: Comment on Tennyson's poetic style as reflected in the poem "Ulysses"?

12.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF TENNYSON AS A VICTORIAN POET

While discussing the critical reception of Tennyson as a Victorian poet, one should be reminded of W.J. Long's comment on Tennyson as: "For nearly half a century Tennyson was not only a man and a poet; he was a voice, the voice of a whole people, expressing in exquisite melody their doubts and their faith, their grief and triumphs. In the wonderful variety of his verse he suggests all the qualities of England's greatest poets" (586). This comment is quite befitting to the merits that Tennyson had as a poet.

There is hardly any doubt that Tennyson has been the best among the Victorian poets in terms of addressing the different moods and issues

of his time. However, his reputation has not always enjoyed an easy ride. His critics dismissed his early poems. However, from the 1840s, he gradually established himself as a major voice of the Victorian poetry and after the publication of *In Memoriam*, his reputation became firmly cemented. The Poet Laureateship conferred upon him testifies to his status as a poet during his lifetime. However, in the early years of the 20th century, he received a mixed reception at the hands of the modernists. In their rejection of the entire Victorian ideology, the early modernists dismissed Tennyson too in that; he had betrayed a typical Victorian attitude through most of his poetic career. The damage to his reputation in the early 20th century was caused particularly by the didactic tone of his later poems for which he came to be looked at as a moral teacher besides being a great poet by his contemporaries.

It is not always so bleak for Tennyson so far the reaction of the 20th century critics is concerned. Some critics have praised him highly taking cognizance of his contribution towards art and craft he had practised with so much of mastery particularly from the 1830s. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, by situating Tennyson in the context of his time and subject matters, lauds him that "it was the peculiar genius of Tennyson to light on the tired, moderate, unconscious ideologies of his time and class" (613). Appreciating his lyric as "gorgeous", Sedgwick further opines that Tennyson had applied his lyric genius "with a regal impartiality that makes him seem like a Christmas present to the 20th century student of ideology" (613). Such accolades from Sedgwick highlight the importance of Tennyson for both the Victorian period and the 20th century.

Tennyson has been able to find appreciation even in the hands of T.S. Eliot. Being one of the greatest of the high modernist writers and a significant critic, Eliot's appreciation speaks volumes about Tennyson's position as a master poet of the Victorian era. Comparing between Tennyson's long poems and that of his contemporaries, Eliot writes, "Tennyson's long poems are not the long poems in quite the same sense as those of his contemporaries" (623). Pointing to his *Maud* and *In Memoriam*, Eliot also praises Tennyson's lyrical capacity as "*Maud* and *In Memoriam* are each a series of poems, given form by the greatest lyrical

resourcefulness that a poet has ever shown" (623). Such appreciation by modern critics proves Tennyson's importance as a Victorian poet who still continues to delight his readers. Though at times scoffed at for expressing the Victorian morality, one cannot deny Tennyson the status of a great poet of his times, which is again seconded by Eliot in the following way:

Tennyson is a great poet, for reasons that are perfectly clear. He has three qualities, which are seldom found together except in the greatest poets: abundance, variety, and complete competence. We therefore cannot appreciate his work unless we read a good deal of it. We may not admire his aims: but whatever he sets out to do, he succeeds in doing, with a mastery, which gives us the sense of confidence that is one of the major pleasures of poetry. His variety of metrical accomplishment is astonishing. (621)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:

Q 11: How was Tennyson received as a poet in the 19th century?

Q 12: What type of critical reception did Tennyson enjoy in the 20th century?



12.6 LET US SUM UP

Alfred Tennyson is one of the greatest poets of the Victorian period. Coming from a family of humble origins Tennyson had to face domestic troubles in his childhood. However, he comes over those early unpleasant patches of life after taking admission in Trinity College, and thereafter, he made his mark as a poet. He was way ahead of his contemporary poets like Robert Browning and Matthew Arnold in theme, technique and vision. Tennyson's "Ulysses" remains a representative poem of the Victorian spirit and social consciousness for a ceaseless campaign for more and more knowledge and might. Taking his cues from Homer and Dante's treatment of the story of Ulysses, Tennyson re-appropriates it to suit the Victorian socio-cultural ideal. Written on the wake of a great personal loss, which Tennyson frankly confesses, the poem also offers him a way to express

his resolution to carry forward his journey as a poet. The poem "Ulysses" begins with a dramatic abruptness that captures the readers' attention. Ulysses has returned home after a prolonged, tumultuous military engagement and equally eventful voyage. He expresses his unhappiness at the prospect of leading an idle life ruling over his people, which does not charm him at all. He recounts the wide range of experiences gathered during his adventurous journey and tells about his earning a name for himself.

You have read that critics have not always been unanimous in their support for Tennyson. In his initial career, he had to face adverse criticism. However, after the 1840s and 1850s, he was able to silence his critics through the merits of his poetic pieces. In the early years of the 20th century, he was criticised again for being a votary of Victorian orthodoxy. However, his reputation was redeemed after some of the greatest critics like Eliot offered a fair assessment of his poetic oeuvre.



12.7 FURTHER READING

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12.8 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: Arthur Henry Hallam was an early critic of Tennyson.

Ans to Q No 2: Tennyson expressed both hopes and doubts of the Victorian age.

Ans to Q No 3: A large family of twelve children and an alcoholic father were the factors that affected Tennyson's early life.

Ans to Q No 4: He is not interested in ruling his subjects who in his view are a "savage race" and who are ignorant of their king.

Ans to Q No 5: Ulysses projects his son Telemachus as the future ruler… …he possesses all the requisite qualities to govern the country during the absence of his father Ulysses… … Telemachus is free from corruption and is dutiful… …he would subdue the resilient people of his kingdom into efficient and law abiding citizens… …at the same time, he would offer prayers to the household gods when Ulysses is out on his mission.

Ans to Q No 6: Homer's Odysseus and Dante's Ulysses are the mythical bases for Tennyson's "Ulysses".

Ans to Q No 7: Ulysses has travelled to many countries where he has met many people and learnt their cultures and habits. As an outcome of his encounter with these different people across countries, he has been able to become a name among them.

Ans to Q No 8: Ulysses wants to undertake a new voyage in order to know the previously unexplored world of knowledge.

Ans to Q No 9: The Victorian era was an age of the problem of choice between the traditional Christian way of life and the scientific discourse… …Industrialisation and the advancement of science necessitated ever-going activity whereas the foundation of life of a large number of people remained their religious faith…. …Tennyson, attempted to strike a balance between these two opposite poles of his time.

Ans to Q No 10: This poem is one of Tennyson's most controlled and perfectly wrought dramatic monologues… …with a dramatic

abruptness, the poet takes his protagonist to the middle of the crisis where he has to decide again about his future course of action… …using mythical allusions to the character of Ulysses, Tennyson contextualises the ceaseless zeal and hunger of his contemporary Victorians for more and more knowledge… …"Ulysses" is actually an outlet of the poet's feelings regarding the need to face life and continue one's march ahead… …the poem is written in blank verse and there is a pictorial quality in its language

Ans to Q No 11: His critics dismissed his early poems… …from the 1840s, he gradually established himself as a major voice of the Victorian poetry… …he also became the Poet Laureate which testifies to his status as a poet during his lifetime… …W J Long comments: "For nearly half a century Tennyson was not only a man and a poet; he was a voice, the voice of a whole people, expressing in exquisite melody their doubts and their faith, their grief and triumphs.

Ans to Q No 12: In the 20th century, critics have praised Tennyson highly taking cognizance of his contribution towards art and craft he had practised… …Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick lauded him that "it was the peculiar genius of Tennyson to light on the tired, moderate, unconscious ideologies of his time and class."… …another poet T.S. Eliot speaks volumes about Tennyson's position as a master poet of the Victorian era.



12.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss "Ulysses' as a typical Victorian poem with particular emphasis on the dichotomy between science and tradition.

Q 2: Can you state that Tennyson's "Ulysses" is an expression of his personality or of an ideology? Give reasons in support of your argument.

Q 3: It will not be an exaggeration to say that in "Ulysses" Tennyson celebrates the energy and resolution of the Victorian age. Discuss.

Q 4: Critically appreciate "Ulysses" as a poem on the basis of its various thematic elements.

Q 5: Discuss Tennyson's "Ulysses" in the context of its underlying mythical structure.

Q 6: Comment on Tennyson's poetic style and technique as found in the poem Ulysses.

Q 7: In what ways, does a poem like "Ulysses" reflect on the Victorian compromise between scientiûc progress and religious faith? Discuss.

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