UNIT 11: ALFRED TENNYSON: ULYSSES

UNIT STRUCTURE

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11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the life and works of Alfred Tennyson
- explain the text of the poem "Ulysses"
- analyse the style and language employed in the poem
- appreciate the message contained in the poem

11.2 INTRODUCTION

The present unit takes up the poem "Ulysses" by Alfred Tennyson which was published in 1842. In Homer, Ulysses, the Greek hero of the Trojan War, was the king of Ithaca. and longs to go voyaging again after returning from all his adventures to the island of Ithaca. His adventures during the return are described in Homer's journey. Tennyson makes Ulysses typical of some aspects of Victorian age -the energy and the restless curiosity of its explorers, missionaries, soldiers and empire-builders. The idea of the poem is taken from The Odysseys, but modified on the basis of a passage

from Dante's *Inferno* (Canto26), which represents the hero as pushing his single ship beyond the srait of Gilbraltar, which in ancient belief marked the end of the world. Tennyson himself stated that the poem, written shortly after the death of his friend Hallam, gave expression to his need of 'going forward and braving the struggle of life.'

11.3 ALFRED TENNYSON: THE POET

Let us explore the life and works of Alfred Tennyson before we read through the contents of the widely anthologised poem "Ulysses."

11.3.1 His Life

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was born on August 6 in the rectory of Somersby, Lincolnshire, in 1809. His early poems reflect the sweet influences of the natural surroundings of his early childhood. When he was seven years old, he went to his grandmother's house at Louth, in order to attend a famous grammar school at that place. But, his school life was not satisfactory, so Tennyson returned home and started writing many verses and his first efforts appeared in a little volume called *Poems by Two Brothers* in 1827. Then, he went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, in October 1827, where he got the opportunity to develop friendship with the young poet Arthur Henry Hallam. Two years after his entrance he gained the prize of the Chancellor's Medal for a poem called "Timbuctoo". Tennyson published his first signed work, called *Poems Chiefly Lyrical* (1830). In 1831, Tennyson had to leave the university without taking his degree, as their family was poor and immediately after, his father passed away.

In 1832, in his another remarkable work appeared as Poems containing his remarkable poems like “The Lotus Eaters”, “Palace of Art”, “A Dream of Fair Women”, “The Miller's daughter” a “The lady of Shalott” and so on. But, the critics of the Quarterly condemned him severely. In the year 1833, Tennyson’s intimate friend Arthur Henry Hallam died and that created so much void and sorrow to him that for

nearly ten years after Hallam's death, Tennyson published nothing. But he continued writing poetry and that resulted in his immortal work *In Memoriam* and his Idylls of the king.

In 1850, Tennyson was appointed poet laureate to succeed Wordsworth and the year in which he published his famous elegy, *In Memoriam*. And he, then married Emily Sellwood, whom he had loved for thirteen years, but his poverty prevented him from marrying. The last forty years of his life was spent like Wordsworth 'in the stillness of a great peace.' Tennyson was the greatest of the Victorian poets, and one of the greatest in the entire history of English poetry.

"One who reads this haunting poem of "Merlin and The Gleam" finds in it a suggestion of the spirit of the poet's whole life, --his devotion to the ideal as expressed in poetry, his early romantic impressions, his struggles, doubts, triumphs, and his thrilling message to his race. Throughout the entire Victorian period Tennyson stood at the summit of poetry in England," thus commented by William J. Long in English *Literature: Its History and its Significance*. To provide you a glimpse of the lines of "Merlin and the Gleam," it reads as given below":

"O young Mariner,
You from the haven
Under the sea-cliff,
You that are watching
The grey Magician
With eyes of wonder,
I am Merlin,
And I am dying,
I am Merlin
Who follow The Gleam."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Write a few lines on the early life of Alfred Tennyson.

Q2. When and for which work was Tennyson appointed the Poet Laureate

11.3.2 His Works

In 1874, Tennyson published his first long poem, “The Princess”, which deals frankly with a problem of the day, the Woman's question. This long poem of over three thousand lines of blank verse, is Tennyson's answer to the question of woman's rights and woman's sphere. But, *In Memorium*, written to mourn the death of a dear friend, Arthur Hallam, he tries to reconcile the conflicting claims of science and religion.On the one hand, he believed in scientific progress, and on the other, he loved undogmatic but stable religion.

In 1833, he was deeply shocked by the death of A.H. Hallam, a gifted young scholar and his closest friend. His sufferings and emotional disturbances urged him to compose *In Memorium* in 1850, which was the result of nearly twenty years' thought and craftsmanship. Arthur Compton Rickett, in his *A History of English Literature* had said, " As a work of art, indeed, it is worthy of the highest praise. Not only is it a metrical masterpiece, for the movement of the verse suits to perfection the brooding and contemplative manner; but it is rich to overflowing in rhythemic felicities, and many of its lines have passed into our language and become common property." Gradually the poem became an expression, first, of universal doubt, and then of universal faith, a faith which rests ultimately not on reason or philosophy, but on the soul's instinct for immortality."

On the other hand, speaking about William J Long said, "As science has already overturned many old conceptions of life and Tennyson as a representative poet of his age, gave this poem to the

world as his own answer to the doubts and questionings of men. This universal human interest, together with its exquisite form and melody, makes the poem, in popular favour at least, the supreme threnody, or elegiac poem of our literature; though Milton's *Lycidas* is, from the critical view point, undoubtedly a more artistic work."

Maud (1855) is a monodrama, telling the story of a lover who passes from morbidness to ecstasy, then to anger and murder, followed by insanity and recovery. This was Tennyson's favourite poem. As a love poem, Maud is a triumph, not merely for the satisfying beauty of its phrasing, but as a glorious expression of the sheer ecstasy and rapture of passion.

Following Maud, came the *Idylls of the King* (1859), where he treated of the Arthurian Legend, in four episodes -the Welsh story of Geraint and Enid, the tale of Merlin and Vivien, one of Lancelot's adventures, and the parting of Arthur and Gueneveve.

During his seventies, Tennyson turned to the domain of conventional poetic drama. Of his three best plays, Queen Mary (1875),Harold (1876), and Becket (1884). Since, he started drama very late, so his success as a dramatist was not very significant.

Again, in his later works, like Death of Eenone or Demeter, one can notice his decline of power due to advancing age. As a national poet, he was enormously popular, and his ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington (1852) and 'The Charge of the Light Brigade (1854) are most popular poems. On the other hand, his Idylls of the King, recounting tales of the early English king, Arthur, together with his Ulysses and The Lotus-Eaters, which deal with classical Greek themes, were very popular and appealed to Victorian taste.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3. Describe the poem Maud by Tennyson in a few words

Q4. Write a few lines on Tennyson's widely popular contributions as the National poet of England.

11.4 TEXT OF THE POEM

Ulysses

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Matched 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 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: 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 ;
Yet all experience is an ache wherethrough
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades
For ever and forever 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. 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 board 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 about, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and through 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 vessal puffs her sail.
There gloom the dark brod seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toiled, 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 are the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that stove with Gods
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks ;
The long day wanes ; the slow moon climbes : the deep
Moans round with many voices. 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.
Though 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.

11.4.1 Explanation of the Poem

Ulysses was the king of the island of Ithaca. Soon after the Trojan War, he sailed for his own Kingdom and met several adventures on his way back home. At last he reached Ithaca, where he ruled over his people for three years. Ulysses expresses the lofty ambition of man's eternal quest for knowledge. Tennyson himself said, "There is more about myself in Ulysses which was written under the sense of loss and all that had gone by."

After long absence from his kingdom Ulysses has returned home. He has been ruling over the people of his kingdom, Ithaca for quite some time. But he soon becomes tired of his life and embarked on a voyage. He already successfully has completed so many adventurous voyages and now he feels allured to undertake more voyage. So, he desires to set sail again to have fresh experience of life. Ulysses has travelled far and wide and he has a lot of experience of many adventurous voyages. But the more he has travelled and gathered experiences, the greater has become his hunger for

undertaking voyage to discover new regions and to have more knowledge and experience. He considers his present state of life as dull and useless, and wishes to set sail again to have fresh adventures and knowledge.

The area of knowledge is vast and varied. It is infinite, but human life is short. Ulysses has grown old and he has only a few more years to live. That is why, he would like to have more experiences and knowledge. He is so determined to sail for a voyage, and for this he wants to hand over the responsibility of his kingdom to his son Telemachus who is wise and kind hearted. Telemachus is a spirited youngman and Ulysses believes that Telemachus would be able to discharge his royal duties with satisfaction to all, and would also be dutiful to his mother. Keeping this in mind, Ulysses is now free to leave his kingdom.

For the purpose of undertaking the voyage, Ulysses requested his old mariners to accompany him. In quest of new regions and experiences Ulysses is firm in carrying out his voyage beyond the Western Horizon. He with his company would travel to have more and more experience till their last breath of life. Beyond the Western horizon Ulysses hopes to reach the land of Happy Isles where he hopes to meet Achilles, one of the great Greek heroes of the Trojan War. Ulysses is determined "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield till the end of his life." Thus, Ulysses wants to travel to have adventures and experience.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. Who was Ulysses?

Q6. What were the hopes of Ulysses and what did he look forward to in his long voyage?

11.5 POETIC STYLE

Tennyson was one of the most accomplished poetic artists, who combined the observations of a scientist with the sensibility of an artist. He tried to reconcile the conflicting claims of science and religion. As a poet, his mastery of metre and language, shows that he continued the tradition of Spenser and Keats in English poetry. Tennyson's blank verse is inexpressibly finer in quality than any attempted by the poets of the Romantic Revival.

Some of the unique characteristics of Tennyson' poetry are, – he is essentially the artist. He studied the art of poetry with a singleness of purpose. Of course, Swinburne also wrote poems with melody and perfect finish. And like all the great writers of his age, he is a teacher and a leader. In the preceding age, as the result of the turmoil produced by the French Revolution, lawlessness was more or less common in literature. But, Tennyson's theme is characteristic of his age, is the reign of order, of law in the physical world, producing evolution, and of law in the spiritual world, working out the perfect man.

Tennyson's command of language and sense of poetry have earned him a lasting place in the history of English poetry. As a poet, his mastery of metre and language, shows that he continues the tradition of Spenser and Keats in English poetry. These qualities find perfection in his shorter lyrics, where he deals with human emotions. Tennyson is hailed by critics as a philosopher-seer, a supreme interpreter of his age and a great voice of Victorian England. He is the finest expositor of the Victorian age and began his poetic career while still at Cambridge. Unlike Robert Browning, who is generally appreciated by more mature minds, Tennyson is for enjoyment and for inspiration, rather than for instruction. William J. Long, in *English Literature : Its History and Its Significance*, said, "The secret of Tennyson's poetry is to be eternally young, and like Adam in Paradise, to find every morning a new world, fresh, wonderful, inspiring, as if just from the hands of God."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q7. What are some of the unique characteristics of Tennyson?

Q8. "Tennyson is hailed by the critics as a philosopher poet" Explain.



11.6 LET US SUM UP

After having gone through the unit, the learner will be able to discuss the life and works of the poet Alfred Tennyson in details. The poem "Ulysses" which is one of the widely anthologised poems has been explained highlighting the main events in the poem. Also, the unit discusses the poetic techniques employed in the poem. The unit will stir your interest to further explore the poetical works of Alfred Tennyson.



11.7 FURTHER READING

1) Long. William J. *English Literature : Its History and Its Significance.*



11.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) was born on August 6 in the rectory of Somersby, Lincolnshire, in 1809. His early poems reflect the sweet influences of the natural surroundings of his early childhood. When he was seven years old, he went to his grandmother's house at Louth, in order to attend a famous grammar school at that place. But, his school life was not satisfactory, so Tennyson returned home and started writing many verses and his first efforts appeared in a little volume called *Poems by Two Brothers* in 1827.

Ans to Q2: In 1850, Tennyson was appointed Poet Laureate to succeed Wordsworth and the year in which he published his famous elegy, *In*

Memoriam.

Ans to Q3: *Maud* (1855) is a monodrama, telling the story of a lover who passes from morbidness to ecstasy, then to anger and murder, followed by insanity and recovery. This was Tennyson's favourite poem. As a love poem, Maud is a triumph, not merely for the satisfying beauty of its phrasing, but as a glorious expression of the sheer ecstasy and rapture of passion.

Ans to Q4: As a national poet, he was enormously popular, and his ode on the “Death of the Duke of Wellington” (1852) and “The Charge of the Light Brigade” (1854) are most popular poems. On the other hand, his *Idylls of the King*, recounting tales of the early English king, Arthur, together with his *Ulysses* and *The Lotus-Eaters*, which deal with classical Greek themes, were very popular and appealed to Victorian taste.

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Ans to Q6: Beyond the Western horizon Ulysses hopes to reach the land of Happy Isles where he hopes to meet Achilles, one of the great Greek heroes of the Trojan War. Ulysses is determined "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield till the end of his life." Thus, Ulysses wants to travel to have adventures and experience.

Ans to Q7: Some of the unique characteristics of Tennyson' poetry are,– he is essentially the artist. He studied the art of poetry with a singleness of purpose. Of course, Swinburne also wrote poems with melody and perfect finish. And like all the great writers of his age, he is a teacher and a leader. In the preceding age, as the result of the turmoil produced by the French Revolution, lawlessness was more or less common in literature. But, Tennyson's theme is characteristic of his age, is the reign of order, of law in the physical world, producing evolution, and of law in the spiritual world, working out the perfect man.

Ans to Q8: Tennyson is hailed by critics as a philosopher-seer, a supreme interpreter of his age and a great voice of Victorian England. He is the finest expositor of the Victorian age and began his poetic career while still at Cambridge. Unlike Robert Browning, who is generally appreciated by more mature minds, Tennyson is for enjoyment and for inspiration, rather than for instruction.



11.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Discuss the life and works of the poet Alfred Tennyson

Q2. Give a brief explanation of the poem "Ulysses"

Q3. Analyse the style and language employed by Alfred Tennyson in his poem "Ulysses".

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