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Alfred Tennyson's Ulysses as a Victorian poem

Alfred Tennyson as the First Victorian Poet: An Academic Discussion through the Analysis of *Ulysses*

Introduction

The Victorian period in English literature, which coincides with the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901, represents one of the most dynamic and intellectually complex eras in British cultural history. The period was marked by dramatic changes in politics, society, science, and philosophy. Industrialization, imperial expansion, and new scientific discoveries challenged traditional beliefs and values. Within this context, poetry became an important medium through which writers explored questions of identity, morality, faith, and human purpose.

Among the leading figures of the period, Alfred, Lord Tennyson is often regarded as the first major poet of the Victorian age. His works capture the spirit of the era by addressing themes such as duty, perseverance, doubt, progress, and the search for meaning. Tennyson's poem *Ulysses* (published in 1842) provides a powerful example of these themes and illustrates many of the defining characteristics of Victorian poetry. Through the dramatic voice of the classical hero Ulysses, Tennyson explores the Victorian ideals of perseverance, ambition, and the continuous pursuit of knowledge.

This lecture examines Tennyson's position as a foundational Victorian poet and analyzes *Ulysses* as a representative poem that reflects the intellectual and moral concerns of the Victorian school of poetry.

Alfred Tennyson as the Representative Victorian Poet

Alfred, Lord Tennyson played a central role in shaping Victorian literary culture. In 1850 he was appointed Poet Laureate of Britain, a position that made him the official poetic voice of the nation. His poetry reflects both personal emotional depth and broader social concerns, which became characteristic of Victorian literature.

Tennyson's importance lies in his ability to bridge two literary traditions. On the one hand, he inherited the emotional intensity and love of nature from Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley. On the other hand, he introduced the intellectual seriousness and moral reflection that would define Victorian poetry. His works frequently address themes such as the conflict between faith and doubt, the responsibilities of leadership, and the role of individuals in a rapidly changing society.

Through his refined style, musical language, and philosophical depth, Tennyson established a poetic model that many later Victorian poets followed. His poetry reflects the Victorian fascination with classical mythology, historical reflection, and moral inquiry.

Background of the Poem *Ulysses*

The poem *Ulysses* is based on the legendary Greek hero Odysseus from classical mythology, known in Latin as Ulysses. The character originates from ancient epic poetry, particularly the *Odyssey* traditionally attributed to Homer. In Tennyson's interpretation, Ulysses is portrayed as an aging king who has returned home to Ithaca after many adventures but feels dissatisfied with the inactivity of domestic life.

Instead of accepting a peaceful retirement, Ulysses expresses a powerful desire to continue exploring the world and seeking new experiences. The poem is written in the form of a dramatic monologue, in which Ulysses speaks about his past adventures, his dissatisfaction with ordinary life, and his determination to continue striving despite his old age.

The poem was written shortly after the death of Tennyson's close friend Arthur Hallam, and many scholars interpret the poem as reflecting the poet's own struggle to overcome grief and continue pursuing intellectual and creative goals.\

Victorian Ideals in *Ulysses*

One of the central characteristics of Victorian poetry is the emphasis on perseverance and progress. The Victorian age was deeply influenced by the belief in human advancement through exploration, science, and knowledge. The character of Ulysses embodies this spirit of relentless striving.

Early in the poem, Ulysses expresses dissatisfaction with a passive life:

“I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees.”

This statement reflects a distinctly Victorian ideal: the belief that life should be lived actively and purposefully. The metaphor “drink life to the lees” suggests experiencing life fully and completely. Rather than accepting comfort and stability, Ulysses seeks continual challenge and discovery.

This theme parallels the broader Victorian fascination with exploration and imperial expansion. During the nineteenth century, Britain was expanding its global influence, and the idea of heroic exploration resonated strongly with Victorian readers.

The Spirit of Striving and Human Determination

Another defining feature of Victorian thought is the belief in human effort and determination. The poem emphasizes the idea that personal growth comes through struggle and perseverance.

Ulysses reflects on his past adventures and describes how experience has shaped his identity:

“I am a part of all that I have met.”

This line illustrates the Victorian belief that knowledge and identity are formed through experience. Ulysses views life as a continuous journey of learning and self-discovery. His character represents the Victorian admiration for individuals who actively seek knowledge and personal development.

Even in old age, Ulysses refuses to surrender to weakness or inactivity. He encourages his companions to embark on one final journey beyond the known world:

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

This famous line encapsulates the essence of the Victorian ethos. It expresses determination, resilience, and the refusal to surrender in the face of difficulty. The emphasis on striving and perseverance reflects the moral seriousness that characterized Victorian literature.

Leadership and Duty

Victorian poetry often explores themes of leadership and responsibility. In *Ulysses*, the hero contrasts his adventurous spirit with the stable rule of his son Telemachus, who governs the kingdom in his absence. Ulysses acknowledges that Telemachus is better suited to the responsibilities of governance and social order.

This contrast reflects a broader Victorian concern with the balance between individual ambition and social duty. While Ulysses embodies the restless spirit of exploration, Telemachus represents the stability and moral responsibility required for maintaining society.

Through this contrast, Tennyson highlights two complementary ideals: the need for visionary leadership and the importance of responsible governance.

Stylistic Characteristics of Victorian Poetry in *Ulysses*

The poem also demonstrates several stylistic features typical of Victorian poetry. First, it uses the dramatic monologue form, which allows readers to explore the psychology of the speaker. This technique became highly influential in Victorian literature and was later developed further by poets such as Robert Browning.

Second, the poem incorporates classical references and mythological themes. Victorian poets often turned to classical history and mythology as a way of exploring contemporary moral and philosophical questions.

Finally, Tennyson's language is highly musical and carefully structured. His use of blank verse creates a natural yet elevated tone that reflects the dignity and grandeur of the poem's subject.

