

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019

www.ijellh.com

Livine Ancy. A

Research Scholar,

Stella Maris College, Madras University,

Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

livine2212@gmail.com

Tennyson's "Ulysses" as a Dramatic Monologue

Abstract: Alfred Lord Tennyson, a well- renowned writer of the nineteenth century, uses classical myths as the foundation to build a concrete work of art that mirrors the sentiments of his age and his personal experiences. His much referred and well-acknowledged "Ulysses", a dedication to Arthur Hallam, is one of the examples that bring out his approach to literature, politics and humanities. Hence, this paper attempts to analyze Tennyson's "Ulysses" as a dramatic monologue. It studies the features of dramatic monologue and how the poet places and subverts the role of classical mythologies in this sub-genre. The study does not only focus on the genre rather extends its argument to the socio-political prejudices and people's behaviors, specifically the quest for knowledge and also, self-centeredness in the modern age. It also refers to the postulations of Tennyson's contemporaries and critics; thereby, proving it to be a dramatic monologue.

Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Ulysses", published in 1842 is the first true dramatic monologue. Critics consider "Ulysses" as Tennyson's personal allegory. Tennyson composed the poem after the death of his friend Arthur Hallam. Tennyson's poems like "Ulysses", "Tithonus" are grouped as poems with mythical protagonist or heroes. Tennyson drew his heroes from classical and medieval myths. Tennyson used the myth "Ulysses" to express his

morbidity caused by his friend's death. Eliot, in his essay on Dante (1929), praised the last three lines of "Ulysses" and called them the true specimen of Tennyson's virgilianism.

The chief source of "Ulysses" is "Inferno" from Dante's "Divine Comedy". Eliot says that, "for a static poem, and a moving poem, on the same subject, you have to compare 'Ulysses' with the condensed and intensely exciting narrative of that hero in xxvi the canto of Dante's 'Inferno'. Dante is teaching story, Tennyson is only stating his elegiac mood." (7)

Tennyson's "Ulysses" presents an aged king, who has undertaken many adventures, who doesn't want to while away time by ruling the 'savage' race. He leaves the task of civilizing people to his son to 'sail beyond the sunset' with his old comrades. This essay focuses on Tennyson's poem as a dramatic monologue.

According to critics, Dramatic monologue is a poetic genre presenting an imaginary utterance of a single speaker, who is someone other than the poet. According to Sessions, the 'perfect dramatic monologue' is a poem which has the "definitive characteristics of speaker, audience, dramatic action and interplay between speaker and audience and action which takes place in the present" (19). The aim of dramatic monologue is to study a character without other dramatic devices like incident and dialogues. Dramatic monologue is addressed to a passive listener whose reaction is revealed through the speaker's speech.

According to M.H. Abrams, dramatic monologue has the following features:

1. A single person, who is not the poet utters the speech that makes up the whole of the poem in specific situation at a critical moment.
2. The speaker addresses and interacts with one or more people but we know of the auditor's presence and what they say or do only from the clues in the discourse speech given by the persona.
3. The poet's choice of words in the poem enhances the interest of the reader and the speaker's temperament and character.

In accordance with the first feature of dramatic monologue, in the poem “Ulysses”, the monologue is given by Ulysses, the hero of the poem. In his speech Ulysses recalls his past not with nostalgia and self-pity but with pride, specifically how he was one among the great heroes. He also expresses his endless thirst for knowledge through voyage which can only be quenched by death. In “Ulysses”, the dramatic speech is rhetorical and lyrical. His speech reveals the struggle between the need of self-expression and his duty. By recalling his past, Ulysses tries to evade his unhappy present. He speaks against the foundations of life such as home, marriage and social obligations. Tennyson speaks through the persona Ulysses and expresses the doubts, disability and chaos of his age.

The poem also agrees with the second feature of dramatic monologue. The poem is set in a conversational tone but only one speaker is identified. Ulysses addresses his speech to passive listeners. He addresses his audience directly in line 49: “You and I are Old”. Also, the audience is clearly identified in the last section of the poem- the ancient mariners, who accompanied him during his past adventurous voyages. He invites them again to undertake an adventurous journey, an endless voyage towards knowledge which ends only with death. Through his interaction with his comrades, the readers are informed about the age and hobby of his wife and son, Telemachus’ ability to civilize the ‘savage race’, which his adventure-loving father considers as a burden. The ancient mariners, whom he invites to take an adventurous journey with him may refer to his companions in Cambridge. His speech not only reveals Ulysses’ courage and will-power but also his comrades’ courage and their thirst for knowledge similar to Ulysses.

The poem subverts from the third feature of dramatic monologue. The speech of the speaker degrades his temperament and character instead of enhancing it. In the beginning of the poem, Tennyson gives a powerful portrayal of Ulysses’ heroic qualities and highlights his temperament and character. Ulysses is roused for knowledge in his old

age. He is a great traveler who has a deep thirst for knowledge, but his love for travelling turns into selfishness-the poem subverts at this point. He leaves the job of ‘civilizing people’ to his own son, whom he feminizes by giving him the job which he considers as feminine because according to Ulysses ‘civilizing people’ is no job of real men. Therefore, he brings down the status of his own son to achieve his aim and to state his heroic qualities. Moreover, he also deserts his wife Penelope who waited for a long time. He does not do any good to her, instead he mentions her as an “aged wife” which means useless. Ulysses’ longing for an adventurous journey and his urgency to move out of his kingdom shed light on his fear of facing the reality which probably refers to his duty. Thus, in this case, dramatic monologue does not enhance the speaker’s character but it degrades his status from a courageous and strong traveler to an extremely selfish man who expects sacrifices from his son and wife in order to succeed in his ambition and reveals that as a person, he has failed to fulfill his social duties.

According to Langbaum, dramatic monologue “elicits the reader’s sympathy because the poet’s experience is dramatized as an event rather than formulated as an idea with which the readers may agree or disagree” (19). Tennyson has dramatized his personal life in the poem. In his biography, it is said that the poem “Ulysses” is connected with the death of his close friend Arthur Hallam. Tennyson has also commented on his poem “Ulysses”:

“There is more about myself in “Ulysses” which was written under the loss and all that had gone by, but that still life must be fought out to the end. It was more wril the feeling of his loss upon me than many poems in ‘In Memoriam’” (40)

According to Sinefield, “The poets turned increasingly to the opportunities for oblique self-expression that the dramatic monologue offered in order to escape the burdens placed on them.” (64). Tennyson, through the poem “Ulysses” has tried to evade the burden of time by

looking back from painful present to the past. Tennyson used classical myths to bring glories of the past to the modern readers.

Bibliography

Abrams, M.H. A Glossary Of Literary Terms. India: Cengage Learning, 2016.

Henderson, Philip. Tennyson: Poet and Prophet. Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. London, 1978.

Revathi, M. Sources and Reference Book. Chennai: Andril Press, 2007.

Singh, Rajni. Tennyson and T.S Eliot: A Comparative Study. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2005.

