

## **The Evolution of Ulysses' Power Shift from Dominance to Disintegration in Tennyson's Poems "Ulysses" and "The Lotos Eaters"**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the evolving nature of leadership as demonstrated in Alfred Lord Tennyson's poems "Ulysses" and "The Lotos Eaters." This research centres on the character of Ulysses and examines the convoluted progression of his authority, which oscillates between realms of dominion and disintegration. This study conducts a thorough analysis of the poetic texts to explore the many aspects of Ulysses' leadership journey. It aims to uncover the multifaceted connection between the yearning for power and the temptation to let go of control. The investigation begins with an exploration of Ulysses' authoritative persona in "Ulysses," where he articulates a fervent longing for new challenges and conquests. The study then delves into the contrasting portrayal in "The Lotos Eaters," where Ulysses grapples with the temptation to embrace a passive existence, symbolized by the Lotos-eating culture. The study uses literary analysis and associated theoretical frameworks to explore the psychological and philosophical aspects of Ulysses' changing leadership. The research also contextualises Tennyson's

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work within its wider cultural and historical framework, providing insights into the poet's analysis of leadership, escapism, and the human condition. The study adds to a more sophisticated understanding of the complexity inherent in Ulysses' authority transition through a blend of textual investigation and contextual interpretation.

**Keywords:** Ambition and Restlessness, Inactivity, Ulysses, Renaissance Spirit, The Lotus Eaters, Victorian Spirit

### **Introduction**

Alfred Lord Tennyson, a prominent poet of the Victorian era, gained recognition as the poet laureate and is renowned for his influential and immensely popular poetry in the 19th century. "Ulysses" and "The Lotos-Eaters," two of his well-known pieces, are integral components of his extensive oeuvre. "Ulysses" and "The Lotos Eaters" chronicle the hero Ulysses' voyage of transformation as he wrestles with the changing definition of power, control, and the search for a purpose in life. Tennyson explores the depths of Ulysses' character in these pieces, showing how his understanding of authority changes from a posture of firm control to a progressive disintegration of conventional ideas of power.

In "Ulysses," Tennyson conjures a picture of a seasoned and agitated hero who, after returning from his epic adventures, is unhappy with the routine duties of governing Ithaca. Ulysses displays a yearning for new experiences and a life free from the traditional constraints of royalty. His courage, wits and stability enable him to endure all his difficulties (Snodgrass, 50). This poem demonstrates Ulysses' transition from the hierarchical authority he formerly held to a more individualistic quest of self-realization, capturing his need for adventure and a sense of purpose. In contrast,

"The Lotos Eaters" delves into the repercussions of yielding to the captivating appeal of a serene and idyllic living. Ulysses and his crew stumble upon the Lotus-eaters, a tribe that consumes the Lotus plant and becomes indifferent and disconnected from the actualities of the universe. This tale emphasises Ulysses' encounter with a different viewpoint on power, characterised by a relinquishment of authority and a submission to the delights of a peaceful and carefree existence.

Through a comparative analysis of these two poems, the intricate development of Ulysses' relationship with authority can be discerned. Tennyson skillfully constructs a narrative that contrasts the mariners of "Ulysses," who boldly seek dominance, and the sailors of "The Lotos Eaters," who contemplate dissolution and surrender. This dichotomy highlights the influence of the Renaissance spirit on the mariners in "Ulysses" and the Victorian spirit on the sailors in "The Lotos Eaters."

### **Research Methodology**

The research paper employs a qualitative approach to meticulously analyse Tennyson's two mythological poems "Ulysses" and "The Lotos Eaters," with a particular emphasis on the complexity of Ulysses' leadership trajectory from control to dissolution. Researchers collect primary data from these two poems, using textual extracts and applicable quotes. They also use secondary sources, such as literary criticisms and historical studies, to enhance and support the main data. In addition, they arrange and classify the obtained data based on themes of power, domination, and disintegration, as well as identify patterns and trends in Ulysses' character progression across the two selected poems.

### **The Transformation of Ulysses' Authority from Control to Dissolution**

Lord Alfred Tennyson revitalised the archetypal character of Ulysses, who is the protagonist in Homer's

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*Odyssey* and the mediaeval hero in Dante's *Inferno*, through his two poetic works "Ulysses" and "The Lotos Eaters." These two poems portray the consequences of the monumental Trojan War and Ulysses' authoritative control over his sailors. Ulysses exerts his inner spirit - characterised by a sense of adventure, curiosity, and restlessness - onto his sailors, and the sailors in the poem "Ulysses" obediently follow his orders. However, the sailors in "The Lotos Eaters" advocate for the essentiality of repose and reflection for all restless and anguished spirits, in opposition to the dominance of Ulysses.

In "Ulysses," the restlessness and yearning for adventure of Ulysses reflect the Renaissance spirit. Langbaum views the poem to be concerned "with the evolution of a soul, with a man's quest for knowledge through self-realization" (57). Ulysses' ambition to sail beyond the familiar realm and to "strive, seek, find, and not yield" (Line 70) reflects the Renaissance spirit of exploration and inquiry. Similarly, Dr. Faustus, the central figure of a renaissance play *Dr. Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe, is motivated by an insatiable desire for knowledge and power. Faustus is unsatisfied with traditional education and pursues supernatural knowledge, striking a deal with the devil to attain his goals. Faustus' ambition exceeds humanity's constraints and rises to higher accomplishments and heights, similar to Ulysses' desire to "drink life to the lees" (Lines 6-7) and experience all the world has to offer. This reflects the Renaissance focus on knowledge, a celebration of human potential, and the concept of enjoying a diverse variety of experiences. Ulysses demonstrates an interest in gaining information and expertise in the lines:

Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough  
Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades  
Forever and forever when I move

(Lines 19-21)

The idea that people can control their own destiny and the value of individualism were championed during the Renaissance. In *The Alchemist*, Santiago exemplifies these ideals as he sets out on a spiritually enlightening and self-discovering journey that transcends the material world. In the same way, Ulysses conveys a strong sense of independence and a resolve to follow his own path in the poem: "I am become a name; / For always roaming with a hungry heart / Much have I seen and known" (Lines 11-13). Ulysses' discontent with leading his kingdom and his rejection of a quiet, sedentary life in Ithaca are examples of his rejection of the status quo. This distaste for conformity and quest for personal fulfilment are in compliance with the Renaissance spirit, which frequently questioned accepted wisdom and promoted the investigation of unfamiliar ideas and experiences. Sailing west for one final voyage "stress[es] Ulysses' capacity for enthusiasm, but it also reinforces the impression of a restless wanderer and strongly implies that the enthusiasm is rather for self-gratification than for pursuing knowledge" (Pettigrew, 27-30).

The mariners in "Ulysses" comply with Ulysses' authority due to their embodiment of the Renaissance spirit. Tennyson depicted Ulysses' command over his sailors as he has similar traits with Renaissance colonialists, such as self-awareness, pride, wisdom, intelligence, and notably, a tendency towards tyranny. Ulysses is not only aware of his global reputation for his bravery in the Trojan War, but also has a deep understanding of how to control his sailors by the gradual application of oppressive behaviour. The sailors answer his summons for a fresh voyage. Ulysses orders his sailors to depart the ship and to assume a suitable seating position. He coerces the sailors to carry out his own agenda by navigating

beyond the point where the sun sets. He commands the  
mariners-

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.

(Lines 56-61)

However, the dominant and commanding demeanour of Ulysses diminishes in "The Lotos Eaters" due to the transformation of the sailors from a Renaissance influence in "Ulysses" to a Victorian influence in "The Lotos Eaters." Individuals throughout the Victorian era experienced fatigue from their ceaseless pursuit of time and yearned for a life characterised by established structure, stability, and tranquilly. In "The Lotos Eaters," the sailors come across the land of the Lotos-eaters, where the residents live in a state of dreamy and idyllic existence and after consuming Lotos fruits, the sailors are captivated by the serene and tranquil ambiance of the island. They still have a long way to go before they can return home, but they want to travel and struggle no more. Instead, they desire to live permanently in a state of relaxation, calm, and harmony on this island. "They wanted only to dwell in the Lotos Land, and let the memory of all that had been fade from their minds. Odysseus had to drug them on shipboard and chain them there. They wept, so great was their desire to stay, tasting forever the honey –sweet flowers" (Hamilton, 258). The mariners have "Convinced that they would become involved in struggles with evil if they should depart and seek to re-enter their familiar world, the sailors reject this course of action because it would give them no pleasure" (MacLaren, 259-267). Therefore, they show their repugnance towards the arduous life that Ulysses opted for. This exemplifies the Victorian

preoccupation with exotic and ethereal environments as a means of seeking escape from reality.

The Choric song, the representation of the mariners' long wanted desire of freedom from Ulysses' authority, has the expression of joy of freedom and revolt against Ulysses' command. At the same time, they prefer to stay rest of the life in this Lotos land and reject the idea of adventurous spirit. They choose the idea of inaction against Ulysses. They announce:

Surely, surely, slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore  
Than labour in the deep mid-ocean, wind and wave and oar;  
O, rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more.  
(Line 171-173)

During the Victorian era, people question traditional values and explore new ideas. One of the primary factors contributing to Ulysses' losing his authority is the lack of activity in the Lotos land, which allows the mariners an opportunity to think of their own heart and the sailors address the issues of responsibility, exploration, and the meaning of life. The exhaustion from the Trojan War and the hardships endured during the arduous ten-year journey prevent the mariners from attending to the desires of their own souls. They understand that the authority of Ulysses brings nothing but nothingness. They think, "Death is the end of life; ah, why / Should life all labour be?" (Lines 86-87). All efforts are futile to them and engaging in an unending battle against malevolence guarantees no happiness. Why should they subject themselves to the toil and anguish that Ulysses endures, when all other elements of nature experience tranquilly? All of these inquiries demonstrate their refusal to accept Ulysses' authority.

Ulysses might be seen as a figure of authority in the context of colonialism, symbolising the colonising power. In this comparison, mariners represent the colonised people. They may be subject to Ulysses' power, facing hardship and suffering as a result

of his power. Their revolt against Ulysses may be likened to colonial-era resistance movements or revolutions. The rise of nationalist ideals and the impact of the Enlightenment fostered the yearning for self-determination and independence throughout the Victorian period. The quest for freedom of the mariners parallels the ambitions of the colonised people for autonomy and independence. The loss of power of Ulysses over the other sailors in "The Lotos Eaters" may be regarded as a metaphor for colonial decline or weakness. The increased independence of the mariners may represent the weakening grasp of the colonial power, providing for a moment of relief or autonomy for the colonised people. The mariners declare:

All things are taken from us, and become  
Portions and parcels of the dreadful past.  
Let us alone. What pleasure can we have  
To war with evil? Is there any peace  
In ever climbing up the climbing wave?  
All things have rest, and ripen toward the grave  
In silence; ripen, fall and cease:  
Give us long rest or death, dark death, or dreamful ease.  
(Lines 91-98)

The sailors have realised that following Ulysses' instruction is pointless when they observe natural phenomena and movement. The bud's petals do not reveal their own. They need an outside force, such as the wind, to motivate them to move and change into fruits. Bud accepts no accountability; the fruit varies as a result of the constant breeze. The wind, moisture, and sun help to ripen it. At one point, the ripe fruit falls quite softly. The natural objects remain inactive. It stays in the fixed place for the whole of its existence. The sailors thus understand that they need to continue living on this Lotos country. Consequently, they want to remain inactive like nature against the command of Ulysses.



The mariners' rejection of their duties and defiance towards Ulysses' authority might be seen as an expression of their mind to stay in the blissful realm of the Lotos, where they can avoid the difficulties and burdens of their former existence. Fulweiler (1965) has made an argument highlighting that the act of sailing back to Ithaca, with the aspiration of eventually reuniting with one's home and family, entails labour and suffering (31). The Lotos land, on the other hand, symbolises a condition of serene detachment where individuals are exempt from all responsibilities. The correlation established between the Lotos land and Ithaca, the domicile of Ulysses, implies that the sailors' hesitance encompasses not only a renunciation of their previous lifestyle but also a rejection of the religious convictions and traditions linked to Ithaca. It represents a defiance of the existing hierarchy and a longing for liberation from society and ethical responsibilities. In "The Lotos-Eaters," Tennyson delves into the topics of escapism, the irresistible appeal of a carefree living, and the conflict between the want for a simple, enjoyable life and the obligations and difficulties that come with being human.

### **Conclusion**

The character of Ulysses in Tennyson's "Ulysses" embodies the Renaissance ethos by virtue of his insatiable curiosity, desire for adventure, commitment to individualism, and repudiation of complacency. The poem embodies the Renaissance ideal of the individual's limitless capacity and the quest for an existence brimming with discovery and self-actualization. Conversely, "The Lotos Eaters" aptly encapsulates the ideals of the Victorian era through its exploration of escapism, industrialization, nostalgia, the scrutiny of conventional values, and the clash between individual aspirations and societal demands. Tennyson's investigation of these themes aligns with the more extensive intellectual and cultural movements of the Victorian period. In conclusion, it can be asserted

that the mariners depicted in "The Lotos Eaters" and "Ulysses" exhibit distinct demeanours and perspectives. The sailors in "The Lotos Eaters" exhibit defiance against Ulysses' authority, whereas the mariners in "Ulysses" demonstrate obedience to their commander, Ulysses.

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