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## IN SEARCH OF PSYCHIC REFLECTION OF A POET: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL STUDY OF "ULYSSES" BY ALFRED TENNYSON

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### ABSTRACT

"Ulysses", the oft-quoted poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson, is often considered as a representation of the Victorian spirit through the mythological character. The poem is generally thought as an expression of an individual self and his sense of superiority where the superiority of race and colonial enterprise has been propagated unreservedly. The piece is also read as a representation of the strength and vigour of an old man surpassing that of the youth by being an emblem of the quest for yet unattained knowledge. But a conscious study of the poem displays a totally ignored dimension of it and that is Ulysses's availing of unconscious psychological mechanisms to avoid the reality he faces after returning from the hazardous journey of ten years after a decade long Trojan War. His consideration about his family, evaluation of the people and the country and the demonstrated determination to explore the unexplored actually show a tendency that can be traced in the poet's life and his experiences. This paper is an attempt to make a psychoanalytical study of the poem "Ulysses" by Alfred Lord Tennyson to show how the poet has portrayed his mental working at that stage of his life through the story of Ulysses.

**Key word:** individual, superiority, psychoanalytical, tendency, explore

### Introduction

"Ulysses" is a poem by the Victorian poet Alfred Lord Tennyson whom W. Robson considers "the most un-strenuous, lonely and poignant of poets." The poem was written in 1833 and published in 1842. It was written after the death of his close friend Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833. They two had strong bond and intellectual exchanges regarding literature, philosophy and the political trends of the time. Tennyson had high hope of him and grew close family ties that resulted in his sister Emily's engagement with him. It was after Tennyson's father's death when he was staying in Somersby and trying to shoulder the responsibility of the family consisting of his mother and nine siblings of whom

three were mentally sick. While he was struggling with the family situations, the news of the friend's death arrived. The Victorian scholar Linda Hughes (1979) observes that the emotional state originating in the state of the domestic affairs and the loss of his closest friend informs the focus of the poem Ulysses. The way the mythical hero wants to defy the familial bondage might have influenced the poet to take it. He, however, said that it "gave my feeling about the need of going forward and braving the struggle of life".

Langbaum considers the poem which deals "with the evolution of a soul, with a man's quest for knowledge through self- realization" (57) The poem begins with Ulysses, the king of Ithaca who has

already returned home from the Trojan War after a long hazardous journey. He finds the country an unworthy, dull place inhabited by an aged wife at home and "a savage race" in the land. He sinks into frequent remembrance of his heroic past which aggravates his discontentment at home. He also finds his son Telemachus a blameless pious man who has grown to be a more fitting king dealing with the state affairs more efficiently. But he feels himself at discomfort to an extreme level and advances to ensure a more challenging life as he enjoyed earlier. Thus he makes frantic effort to instigate and inspire his fellow mariners to get prepared for further journey to the unknown. This spirit of Ulysses is eulogized as reflecting the unappeasable thirst for knowledge with youthful vigour of the Victorian England. This is, however, studied as an expression of pride like the Satan. This is also marked as his negligence to the responsibilities he is supposed to shoulder as a king. But it is hardly considered from the psychoanalytical point of view to excavate deep into his tendencies to shroud his deficiencies.

Ulysses on the surface is out and out a heroic person with unquenchable thirst for life with more and more engagement in newer activities with new and challenging dimension. His adventurous pursuit goes with any who wants to enjoy, consume, fight, emerge and achieve. His fighting spirit gets divulged in every expression in the poem Ulysses by Alfred Lord Tennyson. Again Ulysses is also often thought as a champion of colonial project who brave the way through sea to explore the unexplored and win them with displayed assertion of his greatness and dominance over others around wherever he can set foot. Thus the colonial legacy has been explicitly carried out by the character Ulysses. So the poem is considered as a piece braving life, highlighting the thirst for life, advancing the cause of the colonizers, upholding Victorian spirit. But the other aspects that can go the opposite direction, the other merits of the poem that can divulge deeper implications have hardly been discussed. If Ulysses is considered in terms of his responsibility towards his conjugal life, family, and country, he is a failure or an escapist. His attitude towards his country is again of a braggart having been the king without carrying out

responsibility to upgrade their positions. This focus can give a different light to make an important study. And psychoanalytical approach can quite fit into the study. Peter Barry (2002), "Psychoanalytic criticism is a form of literary criticism which uses some of the techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature." (96) It generally embarks on the psychoanalysis of the writer or any character of a literary piece. This type of study looks "to literature for material in which concepts of its own could be most vividly explained or displayed." (Stefan Polatinsky, Derek Hook. 2008. 259.) The major focus of this approach to literary interpretation is on the mind at different levels. Peter Barry (2002) comments that in psychoanalysis, the analysts,

"give central importance, in literary interpretation, to the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious mind. They associate the literary work's 'overt' content with the former, and the 'covert' content with the latter, privileging the latter as being what the work is 'really' about, and aiming to disentangle the two." (96)

In our psychic apparatus, three agents are seen active, according to Freud, id, ego, super ego. Often we feel frustrated out of anxiety and sense of guilt and our id or superego places demands to an extreme level. To protect ourselves from those mentally adverse conditions, we avail defense mechanisms, a type of psychic process, in order to protect ourselves. Defense mechanisms refer to psychological strategies that are put to use for protecting a person from anxiety that arises from socially or mentally unacceptable feelings or thoughts by ego unconsciously where "The ego is always the standard by which one measures the external world; one learns to understand it by a constant comparison with oneself." (Freud 266) Schacter (2011) opines that a defense mechanism is an unconscious psychological mechanism that reduces anxiety arising from unacceptable or potentially harmful stimuli. In his works, Sigmund Freud dispersedly marked several ego defenses. His daughter Anna Freud worked on that and developed the ideas by organizing them in a list. She listed ten

defense mechanisms from her father's works of her father: 1. Repression, 2. Regression, 3. Reaction formation, 4. Isolation, 5. Undoing, 6. Projection, 7. Introjection, 8. Turning against one's own person, 9. Reversal into the opposite and 10. Sublimation or displacement. Later on, the list has been elongated by many psychoanalysts. However, defense mechanisms are normal and natural outcome. Defense mechanisms are availed by ego as a means of protecting the self from the anxiety originating from the conflicting demands from id, the biological representation of the self and superego, the ethical component of our personality. Among the mechanisms, regression is often availed by human beings to resort to the past experiences. "This regression is a form of retreat, bringing back a time when the person feels safe and taken care of." (Traci (2018). "In a psychological context going back to early or past behavior is termed regression. Originally Sigmund Freud classified regression as a defense mechanism for coping with stress; where one reverts to earlier, more childlike patterns of behavior to cope." (Sisgold, 2014) Ulysses often resorts to this defense mechanism and feels at ease.

#### **A Psychoanalytical Study of "Ulysses"**

Pettigrew remarks that "Tennyson's character is as many-sided as Homer's 'man of many turns'" (31) which can give us a clue to this study. The poem "Ulysses" was written in a situation when Tennyson was distressed for many reasons at home and around affecting his mental, economic and emotional domains. All these issues must have created demoralizing impacts on his mind. Ulysses too finds his stay at home as a matter of idleness and the land 'barren crags'. He finds no attraction in family life or any charm in wife. He considers the people 'a savage race' who only 'hoard and sleep, and feed.' They can't realize his worth. This aversion to the family setting has emanated directly from Tennyson's own experiences of his family as he saw ups and downs after a sunny period in Cambridge. He just experienced a reversal. Bachelor observes, "An alcoholic rationalistic clergyman for a father, an emotional pietist for a mother, and a brood of brothers and sisters, some of home were precocious and some of whom were deranged, provided an environment for the young Tennyson which

acquainted him very early with the noblest human aspirations and the most distressing realities of human frailty." (80) The inner workings of the poet get exposed through the character of Ulysses which fits the cravings of the poet at that stage in the family setting.

To Ulysses, "How dull it is to pause, to make an end/To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use." (22-23) And he wants to pursue life and explore the world. He declares with determination, "I cannot rest from travel: I will drink/ Life to the lees." (6-7) He said so because he can't rest from travel. He has his set goals of life and that is to enjoy life to the fullest. So he goes more length and clarifies that he wants to travel because he wants to "drink life to the lees." These expressions also show how the character avails defense mechanism. These obviously fall under the defense mechanism named reaction formation which is "is marked by showiness and compulsiveness." (McLeod, Saul, 2017) Ulysses is interested in details of his past experiences. He narrates that he wants to travel because in the past he enjoyed greatly and suffered greatly alone or in company of the loved one in the tumultuous stormy sea or anywhere in the shore. In fact, he likes travels both for enjoyment and sufferings. The reason is further clarified that he is a name and fame monger. He boastfully says, "I am become a name" (12) wherever he has gone. He generally travels with a hungry heart to see and know more and more because he knows his life "little remains" (26) He experienced cities, men, their manner, climate, councils and government. He prides himself over the fact that he was "honour'd of them all" (15) whom he met on his way home. He even sets himself apart from his family domain and boastfully says, "I am a part of all that I have met." (18) The spirit and incidents highlighted in the poem can be seen as inspired by the singly most exciting expedition by the poet with his closest friend in his Cambridge days. The way Ulysses's journey way back home is presented and remembered in this poem matches the poet's adventurous journey to Spain through France to help establish democracy. The risks he took in the journey and the way he got enriched through it remind us of the hero of this poem. "Early in July 1830 Tennyson set out with Arthur Hallam on

the only real adventure of his life, an adventure which symbolizes his way of living both in his earlier and later years." (Lundquist, 6) The reason was that Tennyson wanted to be a part of the Spanish Revolution by being a secret agent with the hope of establishing a more democratic government by toppling the tyrant Ferdinand VII. Tennyson, Hallam and all the leading intellectuals of the time believed if a small guerrilla force could be reached in Spain, there was a possibility of arousing the people to revolt. However, the initial plan didn't work and so the active part of Tennyson and Hallam came after the blunders by the guerrilla leader Torrijos.

In early July, Tennyson and Hallam disappeared and none of the family members knew of they were. They left for Pyrenees to have contact with some Spaniards who agreed to work with Torrijos. Tennyson's responsibility was to carry some money and coded instructions to them. They had to take risks of detention when they crossed France and headed towards the mountains. The Spanish government had already several shooting with the guerrilla and they were well informed that efforts were being made to have contact and provide money to the insurgents from England through the supporters. So it was a hazardous journey with a type of idealistic dream of a democratic Spain. But the time they succeeded in contacting the insurgents, their enthusiasm waned away. The leaders had insurmountable disagreements among them. There was lack of coordination in the field. Ojeda, one of the northern leaders, expressed his position to Tennyson and he felt insulted as his message was disregarded. His role as a secret agent ended there. But the fascination lingered. They got back in September and had enthusiastically talked about the "wild and bustling time" there. After a few days, it was spread that Kemble, one English fighter for Torrijos was captured. Tennyson made frantic efforts to help him, but later on, it was found that it was just a rumor. However Torrijos along with fifty five members were shot later on.

Tennyson personally in that journey to Spain got much to learn and relish and later thrive on it in different ways. Hallam felt shocked by the consequence of the revolution and its utter failure, but Tennyson "seemed to thrive on the mission and

was not deeply despondent about the outcome." (Lundquist, 12) He rather absorbed much of the spirit and his health showed much improvement. "He came back talking of the beauty of Pyrenees." It is found that "much of his earlier and later life follows the pattern of his devotion to Torrijos and the mission of Ojeda." (Lundquist, 13)

That was a testing time for Tennyson who felt exhausted for the loss in business. Being estranged from Cambridge and burdened with a devastated family, he had a type of weariness. Langbaum finds "a certain life-weariness, a longing for rest through oblivion" (89) Ulysses call upon his fellow sailors to come out of the cocoon they are confined and inspires them saying that is it "not too late to seek a newer world." (57) He doesn't want to wait anymore. He wants to set himself to work, set sail and faces the sounding furrows. He explains further that his target is to sail beyond the sun set and beyond the setting of the western star before his death. He continues inspiring his fellow sailors saying further that they may face tumult in the sea or happy shores. May be, they will meet their great Achilles. Then Ulysses hopes even to go to the underworld to meet those who left the world. This also may supplement his wish to go beyond human knowledge. He understands that much has been lost and admits, "We are not now that strength which in old days" when they moved earth and heaven. Still he doesn't want to underestimate their position and takes with confidence saying, "we are, we are." So he accepts his fragility in that old age, confesses the loss and deficiencies, but that can't dissuade him from braving the way of life. He knows their heroic hearts are made weak by time and human fate of inevitable death. But his will power is strong enough to have a type of oath or resolution, "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." Though the declaration shows determination, it also shows the inner weakness and realization that days are tougher.

Rationalization is a defense mechanism which George (2007) defines as "creating false but plausible excuses to justify unacceptable behavior." Ulysses is always on the lookout for an escape from the house hold as he finds it intolerable. He eulogizes his son as blameless supposedly a praise to

fit his throne as a king. Telemachus's life is centered round the common duties. He is descent enough to show required tenderness and affection towards the country people. He is pious by nature and worship household gods regularly in his absence. Telemachus does his duties in his way that is quite different from his father's. He has grown independent and his attachment with his father seems little. Thus he rationalizes his desire to go out. "Regression, according to psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, is a defense mechanism leading to the temporary or long-term reversion of the ego to an earlier stage of development rather than handling unacceptable impulses in a more adaptive way." (Wikipedia) Ulysses always regresses to the past glories which is similar to that of Tennyson's life in Cambridge. The hero is an obsessed man with the world he left behind, the achievements he happened to have on his way home from Troy and all may simply seem a strategy on his part to sideline his discomfort in a changed time and situation. And he proves his worth by what he achieved and left behind in the unknown world, he considers himself a part of those explored parts of the world implying that he is not of Ithaca. Despite his disowning, he terms himself as a king, thus we find a man sticking to right like tortoise but escaping any probable responsibility in the guise of adventure and further exploration. Then he focuses on the tendency of the English of post Renaissance period, the frenzies of discovering world as if those were non-existent before! He feels himself "I am part of that I have met".

### Conclusion

The poem is the narration of a heroic person made weak by time and misfit by situations which make him resort to mechanisms to create a comfort zone for himself. Though he always shows his charged spirit, confident eloquence and zeal for knowledge, at the core he is a man shaken by his age and new development in the situations at home. Out of the unease, he makes frantic effort to resort to some alternatives by regressing to the past glories and recounting the achievements he had in the days left behind. Thus the hero at the core is a representative of true workings of the mind of the poet who wants to avail alternatives spaces. Thus the poem is an explicit display of the hero Ulysses's

availing of defense mechanism by ego to make him free from anxiety emanating from the demands of id and superego.

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