

Ambiguity in Tennyson's *Ulysses*
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In Pettigrew's Tennyson's "Ulysses": A Reconciliation of Opposites' considers a number of different critical positions of Tennyson's *Ulysses* and argues he is able to synthesise another uniquely identifiable interpretation of the poem.

Pettigrew starts by examining how various prominent critics from different eras view *Ulysses*. These are the Victorian Thomas Carlyle, T.S Eliot in 1929, E.J. Chiasson in a University of Toronto Quarterly article, and Professor Paul F Baum). Pettigrew divides these critics into three camps. The first represents what Pettigrew sees as the mainstream view as represented by Carlyle: that *Ulysses* depicts a "clarion call to action and expresses a heroic aspiration "to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield"" (Pettigrew, 1963, p. 28). The second camp is based on Chiasson's views, that Ulysses is a "hard, self-contained individual, contemptuous of his people" (p. 28), who essentially has no empathy or regard for his society. Pettigrew's description of the third camp, characterised by Baum's views, is that these critics are less interested in illuminating the meaning of the poem, or Tennyson's intent, than in scorning the faults they see in the poem's form and structure.

Pettigrew next clearly states his intent is to take a fourth view, but not necessarily a brand-new view. Instead, he seeks to steer a middle ground, and synthesise these disparate camps described into a single coordinated view, - the reconciliation of opposites in the paper's title. With some chutzpah, he suggests that the three parts of this synthesis "discordant and antithetical as they appear to be...point to the larger synthesis, the reconciliation of opposites, effected within the poem itself" (p. 29). Sadly, Pettigrew's synthesis of these parts is nothing like as successful as Tennyson's handling of ambiguity and complexity in the poem

that Pettigrew is discussing.

Pettigrew then goes on to present a number of arguments. First, he refutes the proposal of other critics (W.W. Robson and Prof Roppen) that *Ulysses* is Tennyson, and that Tennyson lacks dramatic power (p. 30). By comparing *Ulysses* to T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Pettigrew argues that *Ulysses* is a "highly complex individual" (p. 31) and that the ambiguities and incongruities in Tennyson's poem, are comparable to those used by Eliot, just as intentionally and which successfully portray the ubiquity, ambivalence and divided personality of the character depicted in each poem.

Pettigrew continues to consider the complexity of the character of Tennyson's *Ulysses* by exploring the links between Tennyson's poem and Ulisse in Dante's *Inferno* and Homer's original *Ulysses*. While Pettigrew asks interesting questions such as whether Tennyson's *Ulysses* is like Ulisse "one of the chief sinners, a master of guile whose cunning and rhetorical skills have doomed so many others besides himself" he fails disappointingly to convincingly answer these questions, saying "While no final answer to such questions is possible" (p. 31). Eventually, he concludes "the character Tennyson inherited was such as to make probable a complex rather than a simple figure". This is a rather unsatisfactorily generalised statement.

In considering Tennyson's own personal situation, Pettigrew provides more detailed and convincing evidence. Tennyson's strong tendency to mix self-withdrawal with a need for action were "never so sharply opposed, as they were at the time *Ulysses* was written" (pp. 32-33). He backs this argument up with a detailed analysis of other poems, written close in time to *Ulysses: The Two Voices*, *Hail Briton* and *The Lotos Eaters*. Pettigrew's insight seems perspicacious when he states: "deprived of Hallam's support, Tennyson finds an internal prop in these bad days in writing poetry, and an external prop in his sense of being at one with mankind" (p. 33). While re-emphasising *Ulysses*' synthesis of the "romantic, withdrawing,

passive” and the “outgoing, active” Tennyson then makes a tangential reference to Chiasson, whose camp Pettigrew proposed he would unify into his fourth view: “as Chiasson has suggested for different reasons, stands squarely in the main path of Tennyson’s development” (p. 34). Frustratingly, and consequently at detriment to his argument, Pettigrew never explains what these “different reasons” are.

As do many critics, Pettigrew sees *Ulysses* falling into four clearly defined parts, half of which depict an “essentially heroic Ulysses” and half which show “less attractive characteristics” (p. 37). In pp. 37-41, Pettigrew not only shows his great admiration of the poem, but examines these four parts in great detail, giving fair balance to the expression of Ulysses' world weariness, his desire for new knowledge, the temptation that extinction offers him, his disgust with his present position, wife and people, his pride in past achievements, his dereliction of present duty and the ambiguous and unpleasant relation with his son, and so on backing these opinions up with many examples of close reading and factual analysis of the structural form of the poem. This section, one must presume, is Pettigrew’s third camp mentioned in his opening paragraphs. But is this discussion really synthesising a new view? Competent and interesting it may be, but Pettigrew’s thoughts are really simply marshalling and revalidating early thoughts by critics he has already mentioned.

How close then does Pettigrew actually come to achieving his objective of synthesising a new view of *Ulysses*? (We should of course bear in mind that Pettigrew was writing in 1963 and that we have the benefit of a further half-century of criticism which may well colour our view). Pettigrew’s text is well written and contains a great deal of credible, plausible argument, backed up with a detailed close reading of the text. Where there are ambiguous or alternate interpretations of the text, Pettigrew says so. But he provides no pithy concluding paragraphs, nor explicitly convincing arguments that his analysis provides a new and novel view of *Ulysses*. Rather it provides a balanced and thoughtful synthesis of a variety of views

on the poem – without revealing a truly novel and uniquely innovative fourth view. Perhaps though, such a goal is unattainable. As Pettigrew says, Tennyson’s work is one of rich complexity of “structure, ambiguity in diction, syntax, and image, meaningful variations in the quality of the diction and rhythm and echoes of other works of literature” (p. 37). It is maybe therefore unsurprising that it supports a myriad of interlocking and conflicting interpretations.

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Written in 1833, Tennyson’s *Ulysses* predates the Victorian era by four years. Tennyson was therefore writing as an English subject in the reign of the largely unremembered William IV. Victoria, ten years younger than Tennyson, was a mere fourteen at the time. So, to suggest that *Ulysses* references aspects of Victorian thoughts of progress is perhaps premature. Nevertheless, much of the foundations of the social, economic, military and technological progress that blossomed so strongly in the Victorian era had already been laid, and if Tennyson was not yet thinking of himself explicitly as a Victorian, he was most certainly nurtured by a society that was soon to become Victorian.

As a passenger on the inaugural run of the Liverpool-Manchester railway line on 20 September 1830 instead of being inspired by the excitement and novelty of the experience “Tennyson could muster only one line - the “ringing grooves of change” in “Locksley Hall” (1842) - a line that notoriously misrepresented the actual mechanics of train travel by substituting grooves for rails” (Keirstead, 2019). Nevertheless, Tennyson did interest himself in scientific and social progress. Both he and Huxley were members of the Metaphysical Society and Huxley noted that Tennyson “was the only modern poet, ... since Lucretius ... who has taken the trouble to understand the work and tendency of the men of science” (Gould, 1992). Nevertheless, according to Gould, Tennyson found no solace in science for his grief at Hallam’s death:

“Tennyson lauds its [i.e., science’s] power to build a global network of railroads, feed nations, answer empirical riddles of the universe--but he knows that science cannot tell us why a man should die so young or how a grieving lover should resolve his suffering. ...We get this faith from ourselves, from what is highest within us” (Gould, 1992).

The sentiments expressed in Tennyson’s *Ulysses* show that Victorian progress in material things does not and cannot address the spiritual angst expressed by Ulysses. Mitchell sees that “The voyage for which Ulysses is preparing is the act of dying, and his goal is spiritual reality” (Mitchell, 1964, p. 87). This is a conflict for every man (and woman) – the conflict between their will and their death. However, for the individual this conflict remains unchanging the same, as expressed in *Ulysses* by: “Yet all experience is an arch where thro, / Gleams that untravell’d world” (Ricks, 2007, ll. 19-20).

In *Ulysses*, Tennyson constructs a poem whose form, content and thought are a sequence of oppositions: idleness at home, or far away adventure, weary resignation or heroic achievement, the decay of age or the ongoing strength of mind. The use of iambic pentameter gives a strong momentum, while the periodic inclusion of spondees (e.g., “The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep / Moans round with many voices” (Ricks, 2007, ll. 55-56)) or trochaic substitutions (e.g., “Much have I seen and known; cities of men / And manners, climates, councils, governments” (ll. 12-13)) slows and interrupts the rhythm, reinforcing the sense of reflection and indecision in the discourse. As Pettigrew notes, (Pettigrew, 1963, p. 42), Tennyson uses a shift from private soliloquy in the first two paragraphs, to public dramatic monologue, in the poem’s second half (from l. 44), again adding a sense of uncertainty. Tennyson continues the ambiguity by showing Ulysses as ignoble and indecisive in stanzas one and three and as equally noble and admirable orator. In stanzas two and four. Combined with the fact that Tennyson places Ulysses in mental prison

on Ithaca, trapped by his political and domestic situation, but also allows Ulysses the possibility of both mental and physical freedom (“To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths / Of all the western stars, until I die.” (ll. 60-61) by the end of the poem, Tennyson opens the possibility of many complex interpretations of Ulysses state of mind and intent.

The Industrial Revolution that started in the late eighteenth century achieved its peak in Victorian times, as exemplified by the work of Brunel and others. By the time *Ulysses* was published Isambard Kingdom Brunel (who was born just three years before Tennyson) had completed the Great Western Railway linking London to Bristol. Charles Darwin, born in the same year as Tennyson, was halfway through his five-year trip on the *Beagle* when Tennyson wrote *Ulysses* in 1833 and had formulated (though not published) his theory of the evolution of the species by 1838.

The Victorian Era was also a time of vast political reform and social change. 1838 saw the abolition of slavery, though with no compensation to the enslaved. By 1840 David Livingstone, born four years after Tennyson, was making the first of his four extended missions to Africa. In 1838 the Chartist People’s Charter called for equal representation, votes for men of 21 or older, and secret voting. Advances in education and medicine also greatly improved social conditions. The Vaccination act of 1853 required all children to be vaccinated against smallpox and antiseptics in surgery were introduced by Lister in 1863. Not all was tumultuous progress though - the decline of rural life, the growth of slums, and excessive factory hours, the millions of deaths in the Irish Potato famine, and the continued brutality of wars in the Crimea, India and Africa all undermined social and economic progress.

Much of Victorian effort was devoted to progressing the expansion of its colonial interests. Although Tennyson’s *Ulysses* predates these achievements of Victorian progress, it very much embodies its spirit. Superficially, Ulysses' desire to “sail beyond the sunset” (l.

60) indicates a restlessness reflective of many Victorians who sought to explore new lands and new thoughts and ideas.

On the surface, it might seem that *Ulysses* with its classical associations with Homer and Dante may have little to say about Victorian colonialism. Pettigrew however points out that Tennyson's *Ulysses* combines elements from both Homer and Dante. For example, although Homer's *Ulysses* yearns for home and Dante's *Ulisse* hates it; Tennyson's *Ulysses* synthesises a more complex and ambiguous position. Our first encounter with Tennyson's *Ulysses* (l. 1-5) reveals a deep dissatisfaction with home characterised by "a still hearth, among these barren crags" amongst "a savage race" that "know not me". He finds no solace in Penelope either, being "matched with an aged wife" (l. 3) in alignment with the Victorian notion of the subservience of a wife to the husband's achievements. (Tennyson's *Ulysses* sadly contains little suggestion of Victorian feminist progress). These elements are derived from the sarcastic, sinning *Ulisse* of Dante. *Ulysses*' deep dissatisfaction extends to his son, Telemachus too. Pettigrew recognises the critics' disparate views that "*Ulysses* wisely leaves work for which he is unsuited to a son whose merits he well recognises, while others stress *Ulysses*' dereliction of duty, and find contempt and scorn in his attitude to Telemachus" (p. 39). Once more Tennyson presents complexity rather than simplicity.

Rowlinson (1992, p. 267) similarly sees important colonialist parallels with *Ulysses*' relation to his subjects. As *Ulysses* hands over control to Telemachus "to make a mild / A rugged people and through soft degrees / Subdue them..." (ll. 36-38) *Ulysses* sets himself apart in terms of class and racially and culturally. Effectively he is the colonial administrator passing the people of Ithaca into the hands of his successor, Telemachus. Later in the same essay, Rowlinson wavers as to whether Ithaca is really *Ulysses*' home, or whether it is "already marginal, or savage?" (p. 268) and thus whether *Ulysses*' motivation is his dislike of the idleness he finds at home ("To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!" (l. 24)), or his desire

for conquest (“drunk delight of battle with my peers”, (l. 16) and desire for travel, new knowledge and experience (“To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.” (l. 31-32)). Later in life, Tennyson was a clear supporter of Victorian colonialism, as shown in his works, such as the epilogue to the *Idylls of the King*, entitled “To the Queen”, published in 1873, and in which, as Rowlinson points out, Tennyson rebukes the argument that Britain should give up its military presence in Canada because it is too costly” (Rowlinson, 1992, p. 268).

The problem with associating *Ulysses* with a Victorian thirst for colonialism and imperialism is that it precedes both of these developments. British Imperialism only came into being in the mid-19th century as took direct rule in India in 1858 and started making acquisitions in Africa and Asia. Rowlinson clearly articulates this paradox, saying “*Ulysses* is a text that dates from before... British imperialism, and yet seems peculiarly to speak to and about the twilight of that imperialism” (p. 270). Rowlinson provides a deeply unsatisfactory resolution to this paradox by suggesting that Tennyson’s poetry metonymically exchanges beginnings and endings – an explanation which seems just a rhetorical sleight of hand.

It seems more reasonable to take the view, as does Pettigrew, that Tennyson had no conscious thought of societal progress in writing *Ulysses*. Rather, Tennyson was finding expression for the complex thoughts that Hallam’s death had provoked in his mind. In concluding *Ulysses* with the lines: “Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield” (ll. 69-70) Pettigrew says Tennyson “reveals a great deal more than a man going forward and braving the struggle of life...death is associated not with Ithaca...but the world beyond it and with the voyage” (Pettigrew, 1963, p. 42). This is the core thinking behind the Victorian idea of progress. Although in 1833 Tennyson had little idea of the material assets that such progress would later bring in Victorian England, the

feelings and complexities he encapsulated in Ulysses' situation came to represent the driving force that compelled the progress of the Victorian era.

[2665 words]

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