

Alfred Lord Tennyson's Ulysses

IN THIS PRESENTATION

- A background information of Ulysses, a Greek mythical character.
- Origins of the poem Ulysses.
- An explanation of the poem Ulysses.
- A discussion of figurative language in the desired poem.

WHO IS ULYSSES (ODYSSEUS)?

- He is a Greek hero in Trojan War; a war which was mainly between the prince of Troy (Paris) and the king of Sparta (Menelaus).
- After the fall of Troy, he travels ten years to explore the world.
- When arrived to Ithaca, his kingdom, he yearns to explore the world again despite his reunion with his family.



ITHACA: ULYSSES' KINGDOM



ORIGINS OF THE POEM

The character of Ulysses has been explored widely in literature:

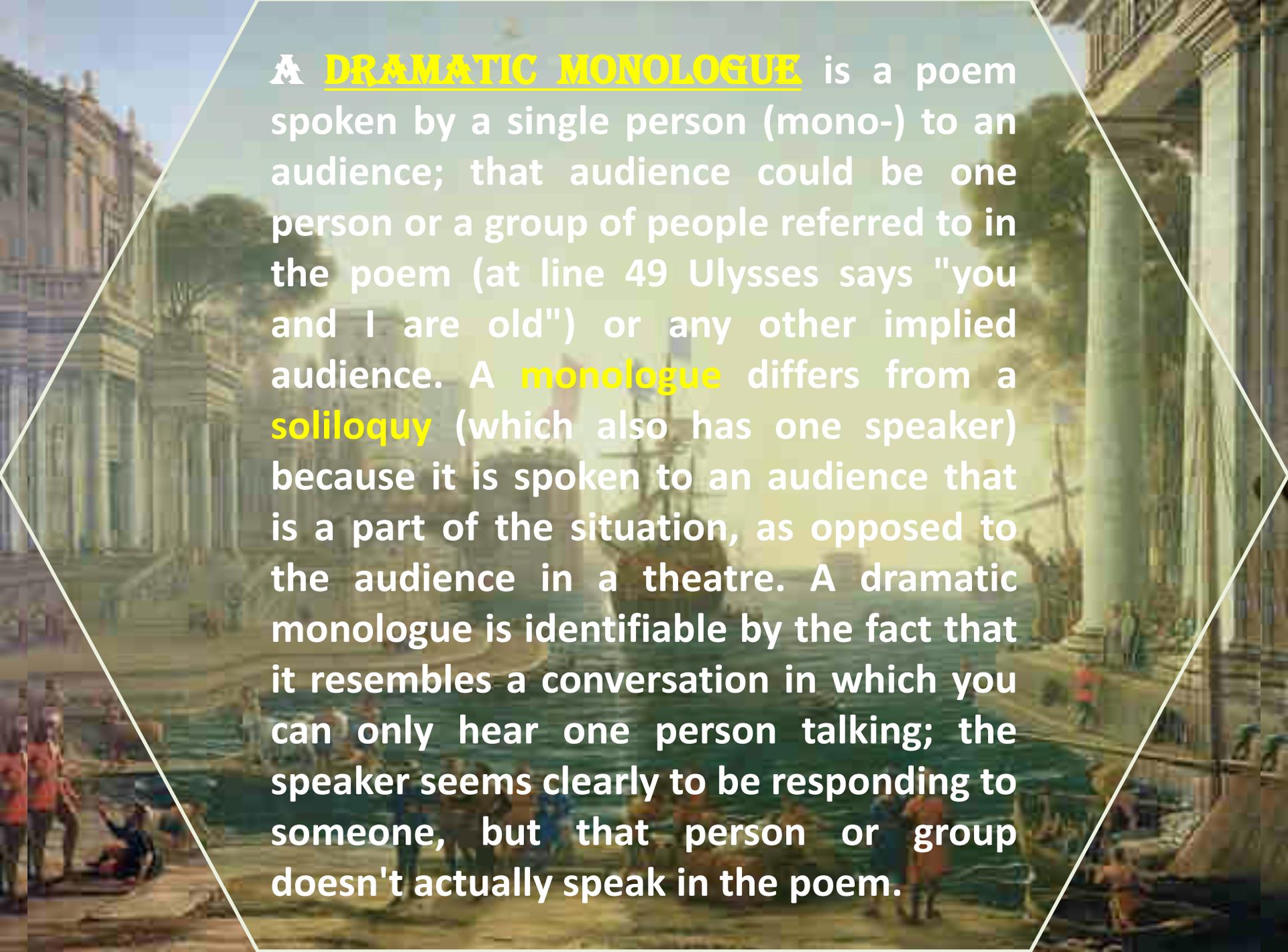
Greek: The adventures of Odysseus were first recorded in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Tennyson draws on Homer's narrative in the poem.

Italian: Tennyson's Ulysses recalls Dante's Ulisse in his *Inferno*. In Dante's re-telling, Ulisse is condemned to hell among the false counsellors, both for his pursuit of knowledge beyond human bounds and for his adventures in disregard of his family.

SPEAKER AND AUDIENCE

Ulysses, who's a semi-retired soldier and also a king, is the speaker of the poem that bears his name.

The poem is considered the first true **Dramatic Monologue** addressed to an unknown audience.

A historical painting of a harbor scene. In the center, a large, multi-masted sailing ship is docked at a pier. The harbor is filled with smaller boats and people. In the background, there are grand classical buildings with columns and arches. The scene is set in a bright, sunny day with a clear sky.

⚠ **DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE** is a poem spoken by a single person (mono-) to an audience; that audience could be one person or a group of people referred to in the poem (at line 49 Ulysses says "you and I are old") or any other implied audience. A **monologue** differs from a **soliloquy** (which also has one speaker) because it is spoken to an audience that is a part of the situation, as opposed to the audience in a theatre. A dramatic monologue is identifiable by the fact that it resembles a conversation in which you can only hear one person talking; the speaker seems clearly to be responding to someone, but that person or group doesn't actually speak in the poem.

WHEN WAS THE POEM WRITTEN?

It was written in 1833, and published in 1842.

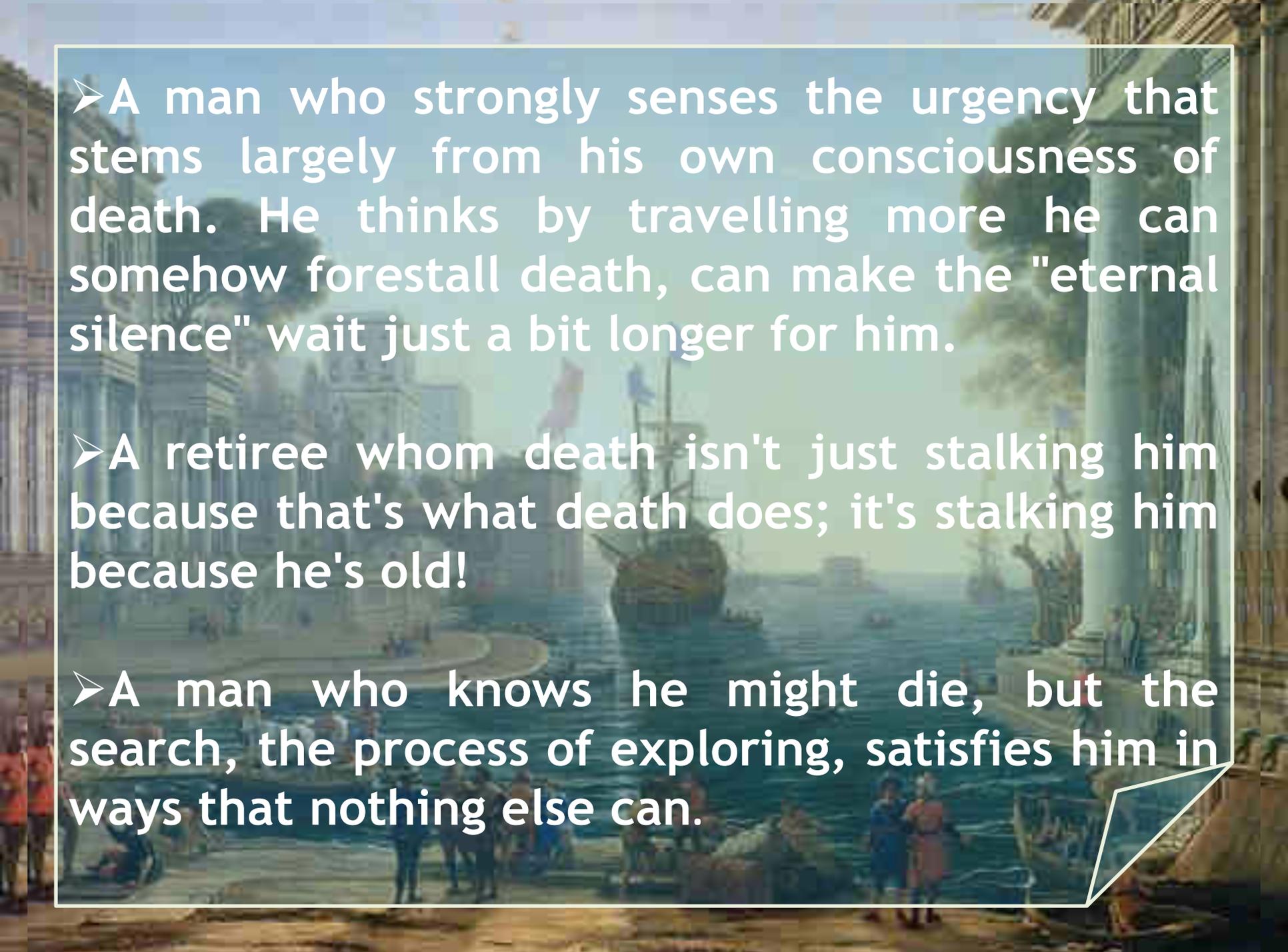
«*Ulysses* was written soon after Arthur Hallam's death, and gave my feeling about the need of going forward, and braving the struggle of life perhaps more simply than anything in *In Memoriam*» (Tennyson).

Based on a passage in Dante's *Inferno*, Hallam had drawn Tennyson to a study of Dante. Tennyson exalts his hero's eternally restless aspiration, whereas Dante condemned his curiosity and presumption. Both poets recalled *Odyssey*, where the ghost foretold Ulysses' fortune.

THE SUBJECTS OF THE POEM

➤ A bored dissatisfied king who can't stand just sitting around the house with his wife all day, eating, sleeping and settling disputes every once in a while. He's still in good physical shape, and he can't stand it that he doesn't get to put that body to use.

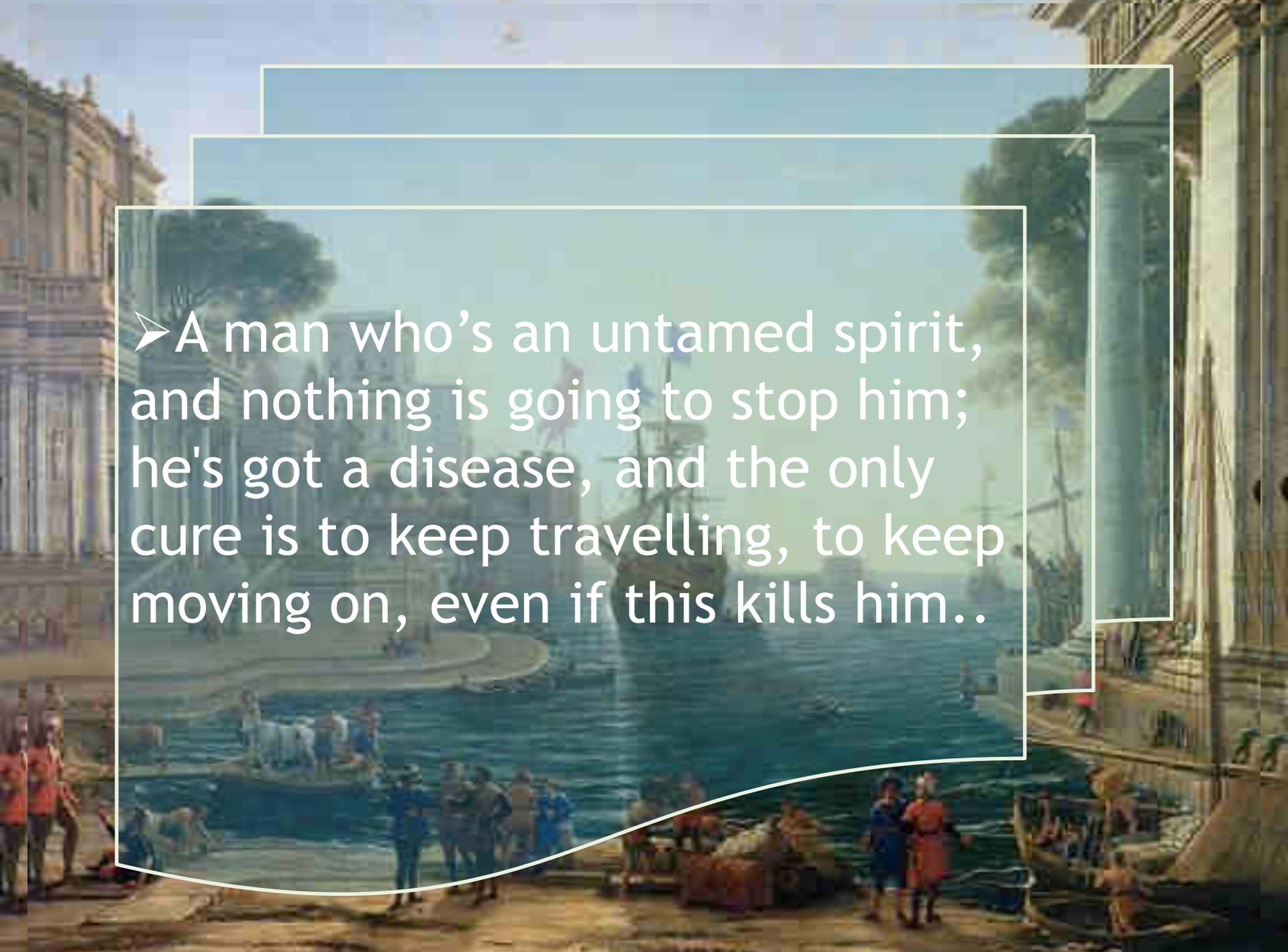
➤ A man who has travelled to many places, not any places, and fought many wars, not any kind of wars. And now he wants to revive his majestic past by travelling.

A historical painting of a harbor scene. In the center, a large, dark-hulled sailing ship with multiple masts and flags is docked at a quay. The water is a deep blue-green. In the foreground, a group of people in period clothing are gathered on the shore, some looking towards the ship. To the right, a large, classical-style building with columns is visible. The background shows more buildings and a hazy sky. The overall scene is busy and detailed, typical of 17th or 18th-century port scenes.

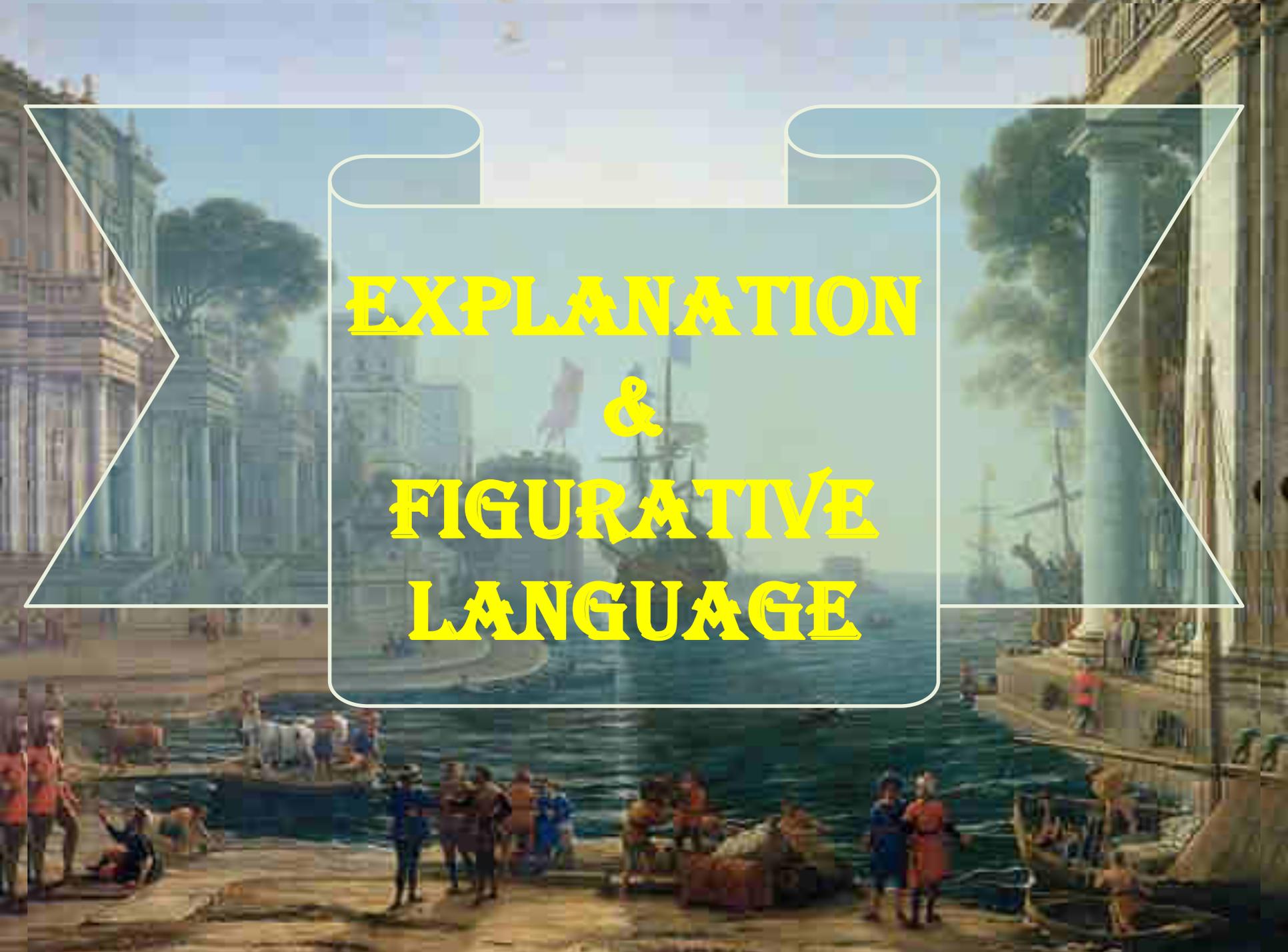
➤ A man who strongly senses the urgency that stems largely from his own consciousness of death. He thinks by travelling more he can somehow forestall death, can make the "eternal silence" wait just a bit longer for him.

➤ A retiree whom death isn't just stalking him because that's what death does; it's stalking him because he's old!

➤ A man who knows he might die, but the search, the process of exploring, satisfies him in ways that nothing else can.

A detailed historical painting of a harbor scene. In the foreground, a busy quay is filled with people in period clothing, some carrying goods. Several large sailing ships are docked at the pier, with their masts and rigging visible. The water is a deep blue, and the sky is a pale, hazy blue. In the background, grand classical buildings with columns line the waterfront. The overall atmosphere is one of a bustling, active port.

➤ A man who's an untamed spirit, and nothing is going to stop him; he's got a disease, and the only cure is to keep travelling, to keep moving on, even if this kills him..

The background is a detailed 17th-century painting of a harbor scene. In the center, a large, dark-hulled ship with multiple masts and a flag is docked at a quay. To the left, a classical building with columns and a pediment stands on a hillside. To the right, another classical building with a large column is visible. The foreground is filled with people, some on the quay, some on a small boat, and some near a horse-drawn cart. The overall scene is bustling and depicts a major port of the era.

**EXPLANATION
&
FIGURATIVE
LANGUAGE**

Lines 1-5

"it is useless"

"it isn't beneficial"

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

"to allot"

"measure out"

"paired"

"partnered with"

Metaphor

"doesn't mean that the rewards and punishments are unjust or unfair, but rather variable"

"his subjects are like animals; they don't eat, they "feed" like pigs. Oh, and they "hoard" too, as if they were getting ready to hibernate"

"he refers to his subjects as a "savage race" because they do nothing but eat and sleep, and this makes them more like savages than civilized people"

LINES 1-5

➤ *The poem begins by telling us that a king gains nothing from just sitting around by the fire with his wife and making laws for people who don't even know him.*

The speaker at first seems at to be some kind of observer or impersonal figure who knows a lot about how to be a king, but in line 3 we learn that the king himself, Ulysses, is speaking.

➤ *The phrase "it little profits" is another way of saying, "it is useless" or "it isn't beneficial."*

➤ *"Metē" means "to allot" or "measure out." Here it refers to the king's allotment of rewards and punishments to his subjects.*

➤ *"Unequal" doesn't mean that the rewards and punishments are unjust or unfair, but rather variable.*

➤ *"Match'd" doesn't refer to a tennis match or other sporting event; it means something like "paired" or "partnered with."*

Ulysses' subjects are presented to us as a large group of drones who do nothing but eat and sleep

Lines 6-11

“to drink to the very last drop”

“live life to the fullest”

Metaphor

“living life is like drinking a bottle of something”

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: all times I have enjoyed
Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when
Through scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vexed the dim sea:

Personification

“upset, stir up,
trouble”

“pounding showers
of rain”

“a group of stars which rise with
the sun in spring at the rainy
season”

LINES 6-11

- *After his moralistic opening, Ulysses tells us more about why sitting around doling out rewards and punishments bores him.*
- *We learn that he is a restless spirit who doesn't want to take a break from roaming the ocean in search of adventure. He will not let life pass him by.*
- *The word "lees" originally referred to the sediment accumulated at the bottom of a bottle of wine; to "drink life to the lees" means to drink to the very last drop. Nowadays we might say something like "live life to the fullest."*
- *Ulysses tells us that he has had a lot of good times and a lot of bad times, sometimes with his best friends, and sometimes alone, both on dry land and while sailing through potentially destructive storms.*
- *"Scudding drifts" are pounding showers of rain that one might encounter at sea during a storm.*
- *The "Hyades" are a group of stars associated with rain; their rising in the sky generally coincides with the rainy season. Here they are presented as agitators of the ocean.*

Lines 11-18

“become a household name”
“become famous because
he's travelled to so many
places”

Metaphor

“his enjoyment and
delight of battle is
like his enjoyment
and delight of
drinking some kind
of beverage”

...I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known – cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honoured of them all –
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy,
I am a part of all that I have met;

Metaphor

“I was like a lion”
“I roamed just as a
lion might”

“I wasn't treated like the
least little thing but was
honoured by everybody I
met”

The phrase suggests that Ulysses
left parts of himself everywhere
he went; this sounds like another
way of saying “I don't belong
here in Ithaca”

LINES 11-18

- *Ulysses elaborates on the good times and bad times he's enjoyed during his travels.*
- *The phrase "I am become a name" means something like "become a household name." Ulysses has become famous because he's travelled to so many places.*
- *Ulysses tells us that he's visited a variety of different places, with different manners, weather, governments, etc. He portrays himself as a traveller with an insatiable desire ("hungry heart") to see as many places as he can, try as many foods as he can, etc.*
- *The phrase "myself not least, but honoured of them all" means something like "I wasn't treated like the least little thing but was honored by everybody I met."*
- *Ulysses also describes the time he spent "on the ringing plains of windy Troy," the famous city where the Trojan War took place. The "plains" are "ringing" because of the armor clashing together in battle.*
- *"I am a part of all that I have met" is a strange phrase. Usually we say something like "all the places I have seen are now a part of me." The phrase suggests that Ulysses left parts of himself everywhere he went; this sounds like another way of saying "I don't belong here in Ithaca."*

Lines 19-24

Metaphor

“death is like a planet or gleaming world or object”

Metaphor

“life is like an arch”

Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!
As though to breathe were life!

“as a reference to death”

it is always looking at him through the "arch" of his experiences, but somehow seems to recede ("margin fades") as he keeps moving.

“as an arch”

As Ulysses moves, his experiences make an arch covering the arch of the "Untravelled world." The more he travels, the more the margins or edges of that world recede or are covered up.

LINES 19-24

- *Ulysses further justifies his desire to keep travelling and living a life of adventure.*
- *He compares his life or experiences to an arch and describes the "untravelled world" as a place that "gleams" at him through that arch. All he has to do is walk through the arch...*
- *The first two lines of the passage are very tricky.. One way to read "Untravelled world" is as a reference to death; it is always looking at him through the "arch" of his experiences, but somehow seems to recede ("margin fades") as he keeps moving.*
You could also think of the "Untravelled world" as an arch. As Ulysses moves, his experiences make an arch covering the arch of the "Untravelled world." The more he travels, the more the margins or edges of that world recede or are covered up.
- *Ulysses reiterates how boring it is just sitting around when he could be out exploring the world.*
- *He likens himself to some kind of metallic instrument that is still perfectly useful and shiny but just rusts if nobody uses it.*
For Ulysses, life is about more than just "breathing"; it's about adventure

“each additional hour that I live, or each hour that I am saved from death, brings me new experiences”

Lines 24-32

...Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains: but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this grey spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

“three years”

Metaphor

“he would be like an animal, if he stays in Ithaca”

“old man”

“near the end of his life”

“Ulysses himself could be the “sinking star.” He is a great personality who is moving closer to death”

“Ulysses wants to chase after knowledge and try to catch it as it sinks like a star”

Simile

“Ulysses is like the sinking star”

“the knowledge he is seeking is like the sinking star”

LINES 24-32

- *Ulysses continues to radiate a desire for adventure, claiming that even multiple lifetimes wouldn't be enough for him to do all the things he wants.*
- *At this point, though, he's an old man – a "grey spirit" – near the end of his life, and he wants to make the most of what's left. It's a waste of time for him to hang out in Ithaca for three years when his desire for adventure is still so alive.*
- *The phrase "but every hour is saved / From that eternal silence, something more, / A bringer of new things" is strange. It means something like "each additional hour that I live, or each hour that I am saved from death, brings me new experiences."*
- *"Three suns" doesn't mean three days, but rather three years. The phrase "follow knowledge like a sinking star" is ambiguous. On the one hand, Ulysses wants to chase after knowledge and try to catch it as it sinks like a star. On the other hand, Ulysses himself could be the "sinking star." That makes sense too; he is a great personality who is moving closer to death.*

Lines 33-38

“they're a little uncivilized and uncultured”

Metaphor

“citizens of Ithaca are almost *like* a stallion that hasn't learned how to wear a saddle yet and they need to be tamed”

“they need to be reigned in and put to good use”

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle –
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and through soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.

a ceremonial staff that symbolizes authority.

Ulysses means something like “I leave him in charge.”

“Ithaca”

“he's patient and willing to make the best decision for the people of Ithaca without being too hasty”

“he will civilize them in stages and in a nice way”

LINES 33-38

➤ *Ulysses introduces us to his son and heir, Telemachus, who seems like the right guy to take over the job of King of Ithaca. He's smart, and he knows how to make his people do things without being too harsh about it.*

➤ *A "Sceptre" is a ceremonial staff that symbolizes authority. Ulysses means something like "I leave him in charge."*

When compared with Ulysses, Telemachus seems a lot less restless. He has "slow prudence," meaning he's patient and willing to make the best decision for the people of Ithaca without being too hasty.

➤ *The people of Ithaca are "rugged," which means that they're a little uncivilized and uncultured. They're with a little bit of an attitude. That's why they need to be reigned in ("subdued," made "mild") and put to good use.*

"Soft degrees" implies that Telemachus will civilize the citizens of Ithaca in stages and in a nice way.

Lines 39-43

Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

"appropriate"
"suitable"

"Ulysses is planning on going
back to sea for some more
adventures"

"he's thinking about his
own death"

"smart enough not to fail at
doing nice things for people and
paying the proper respects to
the gods"

LINES 39-43

- *Ulysses tells us more about Telemachus' qualifications; he's a straight shooter all the way, a nice guy.*
- *"Decent not to fail" means that Telemachus is smart enough not to fail at doing nice things for people and paying the proper respects to the gods.*
- *"Meet" means "appropriate" or "suitable."*
- *We're not sure whether "when I am gone" means that Ulysses is planning on going back to sea for some more adventures, or if he's thinking about his own death.*

Lines 44-50

“appearing dark”

“scowling”

“ship”

Personification

“the ship can’t puff
its own sails”
Probably, “the wind
is doing it”

Synecdoche

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:

There gloom the dark broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me –
That ever with a frolic welcome took

“soul” is a part of
“mariners’ body”

The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads – you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;

“with a lot of confidence”

“good times and bad times”

LINES 44-50

- *Ulysses shifts our attention to the port of Ithaca, where he tells us a ship is preparing to set sail.*
- *"Gloom" is usually a noun but here it's a verb that means "appearing dark" or "scowling."*
- *"Thunder and sunshine" is used here to mean something like "good times and bad times." They have gladly ("with a frolic welcome") gone through thick and thin for Ulysses.*
- *The phrase "opposed / Free hearts, free foreheads" is a little tricky. Ulysses means that his sailors "opposed" whatever came in their way – "thunder," for example – and they did it as free men and with a lot of confidence ("free foreheads"). Speaking of old age, Ulysses suggests that even though old people are respected, they also have responsibilities.*

Lines 51-56

“before”

Metaphor

Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices.

“an elegant way of saying the
stars are coming out”

“the end of the
day is like the end
of his life”

LINES 51-56

➤ *Ulysses knows that death will end everything, but he still believes he can do great things, things worthy of men who fought against the will of the gods during the Trojan War.*

➤ *"Ere" is an old poetic word that means "before."*

➤ *Ulysses observes the sunset and the arrival of night, but it seems like he's thinking about his own death as well.*

It reminds us of ghosts or people mourning a death.

➤ *"Lights begin to twinkle from the rocks" is an elegant way of saying the stars are coming out.*

Lines 56-64

Synecdoche

“a newer world” is standing in for a host of potential places he might visit

“destiny”
as in “sailing is my purpose in life”

“strike it, most likely with oars”

“intention”
as in “I intend to sail as far as I can”

“refers to the track or mark made in the water by the ship”

...Come, my friends,
'Tis 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.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew

Metaphor

It is like hitting or striking something that makes a sound

Metaphor

It is like “beyond the known universe”

“the islands of the Blessed”

“It is a place where big-time Greek heroes enjoyed perpetual summer after they died”

“The ocean was imagined as a river encompassing the earth, and on the west plunging down a vast chasm where was the entrance of Hades”

“It is the place where the stars seem to plunge into the ocean”
“It is a body of water where the stars rest. Greeks believed it surrounded the earth”

LINES 56-64

- *Ulysses is addressing his friends. He tells them what he's been telling us all along: it's never too late to go in search of new lands.*
- *Here a "furrow" refers to the track or mark made in the water by the ship. He tells his sailors to "smite" or strike it, most likely with oars.*
- *"Purpose" can mean two different things; it can mean either "destiny," as in "sailing is my purpose in life," or it can mean "intention," as in "I intend to sail as far as I can."*
- *The "baths / Of all the western stars" refers to the place where the stars seem to plunge into the ocean which the Greeks believed it surrounded the earth.*
- *To sail beyond the "baths" means Ulysses wants to sail really, really far away – beyond the horizon of the known universe – until he dies. The "happy isles" refers to the Islands of the Blessed, a place where big-time Greek heroes like Achilles enjoyed perpetual summer after they died.*
- *Ulysses realizes that he and his companions might die, but he's OK with that. If they die, they might even get to go to the "Happy Isles" and visit their old pal Achilles.*

Lines 65-70

“remains”

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

“we're strong because of our
will to strive”

or

“our will to strive is strong”

LINES 65-70

➤ *Ulysses yet again tells us that even though he and his sailors are old and don't have a lot of gas left in the tank, there's enough left to go a little farther.*

➤ *"Abides" is a word that means "remains."*

➤ *These guys are a team with one heartbeat. They're old and broken, but they still have the will to seek out and face challenges without giving up.*

➤ *The phrase "strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not yield" means something like "we're strong because of our will to strive" or "our will to strive is strong."*

THEMES

- Fulfillment of life:

Ulysses is not satisfied with the kind of idle life he leads after his return from the Trojan wars. For him, life is not just the accumulation of years, "*Life piled on life.*" It is the accumulation of experiences and knowledge, which come through hard work. Life void of action and adventure leads to decay, while an active life makes one excel and shine: "*How dull it is to pause, to make an end,/To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!*" Ulysses is keen on living life to full.

- **Exploration and Colonization:** The poem is a piece of propaganda for imperialism, encouraging the British to go out and capture the world. Ulysses is a representative of the spirit of imperialism during the Victorian period. Ulysses' son, on the other hand, represents the other side of managing the vast empire, taming and subduing the savage nations under the British control. The poem glorifies the life battles and conquest; Ulysses persuades the mariners to continue the mission of conquering new territories to enlarge the empire and to fulfill Britain's obligation to rule and 'culture' the rest of the world.

- Elegy: The tone of the poem is elegiac. It is one of many poems that Tennyson wrote in response to the death of his close friend Arthur Hallam. The poem's reference to death as the end of a life full of adventures has a biographical relevance. The poem also laments the end of a lifestyle, the life of the restless warrior and adventurer.

THANKS FOR PATIENCE... 😊

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- **KÜBRA ERTAŞ**
- **ABDULLAH LEKESİZ**
- **BÜŞRA AKBAŞ**

Resources

- **About who Ulysses is:**

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odysseus>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odyssey>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trojan_War

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ithaca>

- **About Ulysses' Origins**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulysses_\(poem\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulysses_(poem))

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odyssey>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iliad>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Divine_Comedy#Inferno

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inferno_\(Dante\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inferno_(Dante))

- **About the Poem**

<http://www.shmoop.com/ulysses-tennyson/>

<http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/tennyson/section4.rhtml>

<http://www.ficml.org/jemimap/voy/colony/Ulysses.html>