



## A Comparative Study of T.S. Eliot's Journey of the Magi and Alfred Tennyson's Ulysses

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### Introduction

In this research paper, I would like to compare and find out the contrasts between the two poems T.S. Eliot's **Journey of the Magi** and Alfred Tennyson's **Ulysses**. These two poems describe the chivalry and victory of the heroes in the unusual journey. One journey is religious and another is ambitious. Thus Eliot's *Journey of the Magi* and Tennyson's *Ulysses* enlighten the readers on various issues. Effort, difficulties, tolerance, self-confidence, adventure, courage and victory are some of the important matters these poems discuss. The journey is undertaken by the wise men in both the poems. It shows that the more new places one sees the more knowledge and new experiences one gets.

*Journey of the Magi* is based on the theme of the Bible. It is full of religious notions and spiritual themes. The visit of the Three Wise Men from East to Palestine at the time of Christ's birth has been described in a very realistic way. The wise men started their journey in the extreme cold of the winter season. They want to reach the place of Christ's birth to offer presents to the infant Jesus. In *Ulysses* the king Ulysses is a wise man who has the thirst for knowledge and that he wants to make many adventures. He has made many adventures and wants to continue. He says that he can not rest in his country. The people of Ithaca are like savages having no interest either in adventures or in developing their knowledge. Ulysses feels that he should not waste time. Although he is old he has the great strength of mind and will power to take new journey. He does not care about the season. His aim is to know something unknown. In the *Journey of the Magi*, the wise men too want to see whom the world has not seen.

### Poetic Form

Tennyson's *Ulysses* is the poem is of seventy lines of blank verse. It is a dramatic monologue. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi* is a forty three line poem and presented as dramatic monologue. It is one of five poems that Eliot contributed for a series of 38 pamphlets by several authors collectively titled Ariel poems. Thus there are similarities as well as differences between these two poems.

**BACKGROUND TO THE POEMS- Journey of the Magi and Ulysses**

T.S. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi* and Tennyson's *Ulysses* are the poems of dramatic monologue. T.S. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi* focuses upon the famous biblical story of the three kings from the East. They are travelling to Bethlehem to pay homage to the baby Jesus. He imagines one of the kings as narrator giving an account of the journey. In Tennyson's *Ulysses* the king himself is travelling with his well wishers. In Eliot's poem the wise men carry with them the gifts for Infant Jesus whereas in *Ulysses* the journey is taken to satisfy the king's personal longing in acquiring the new experience or new knowledge. Both the poets want something new to happen and they want to gain progress. The Magi tries to get blessings from God- Infant Jesus. Simultaneously, Ulysses wants to achieve fame and that to get blessings of the entire world as well as the future generation. The Magi are three in number but Ulysses has not given the exact number of the friends who accompany him. The Magi's age is not known but must be old. They must be senior people. In *Ulysses*, the king who wants to undergo voyages is an aged man and his friends too must be in his age.

*The journey of the Magi* is associated with celebration, wonder, gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The poem goes around the Christian tradition. The Poem *Ulysses* does not shed any light on any religion. It speaks of the religion of humanity. Ulysses emphasises human values. His principle seems to be 'nothing is impossible in life'. The Magi (known as the three kings) also seems to have the same principle. They see the star and walk forward. Although they come across hurdles and troubles they have not returned; they walk forward and forward. The self confidence in them has guided them to reach the final place and see the Infant Jesus. They teach the readers of religious faith that the more one suffer for good cause the more blessings one receives from the divine power. At last the Magi has reached the exact place and found satisfaction. The wise men have not seen their God easily. They have undertaken an arduous journey. In the first twenty lines Eliot reveals how the three kings suffer in their journey. For any journey weather should be pleasant but the weather is harsh for the Magi. The following lines show it.

A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For the journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,

*Ulysses* is associated with historical information. The poem is spoken by a famous Greek hero. Therefore references to Greek mythology are identified. Ulysses refers several times to the Trojan War and mentions several mythological landmarks in order to convey how hungry he is for new adventures. Ulysses' references to Greek mythology remind us of his heroic past while also giving us a sense of the scope of his future ambitions. "Ulysses" is the Roman form of the Greek "Odysseus" In lines 16 – 17 Ulysses describes how he enjoyed fighting on the "plains" of Troy, an ancient city located in what is now known as Northwestern Turkey. In line 33 : Ulysses introduces us to his son, [Telémakhos](#), a figure who appears in Homer's [Odyssey](#), an epic

poem that describes Ulysses' (Odysseus') long journey home. He is not an atheist or irreligious. He does not want to be idle in just spending time in prayers. He takes effort and believethat God will help. .In line 53 Ulysses refers to himself and his fellow mariners as men that "stroved with Gods." During the Trojan War, the gods – Athena, Ares, Venus, etc. – frequently took part in battle.

In *Ulysses* in the first part, the king Ulysses gives an account of himself and his country people. He says that it is not his first journey. The following lines show that he has travelled to many places and gained happy as well as unhappy experiences.

*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,*

He has undertaken journey in order to achieve victory. He became victorious and victorious. But he is not satisfied with his enormous victory; he intends to see the heaven while living on earth. He is a real modern man according to my point of view. Ulysses teaches all the people of the world how to live. He gives the theory of life to be followed.He is a role model for those who love adventures and victories. He wants to go around the entire world. He says that there may be sufferings, hurdles, and troubles. Effort should be taken. But the voyage should be successful.His purpose is to attain the final goal of life which according to Ulysses is to see the unseen and to learn that is not learnt.Ulysses intends to travel all directions- east, west, north and south of the world. He aims to create history in the world. He wants people and the future generation should speak about his wisdom,energy, thirst for voyage and great qualities.

Although these qualities are not found in the three kings in the *Journey of the Magi* they too intend to see the creator who has come to the world as a child in human form. They have satisfied as they have seen the divine child whereas Ulysses has no satisfaction in whatever achievements he has undertaken and however he is successful. He wants to gain something more and more. After finishing an adventure, he wants to start another adventure. He says that he cannot rest.He always wishes to check whether he can begin any other new journey. He wishes to fight in the war too. He is not tired of journey or war.

Ulysses praises his son Telemachus will inherit the throne that Ulysses finds boredom. While Ulysses thinks that Telemachus will be a good king—"Most blameless is he,centred in the sphere / Of common duties" he seems to have lost any connection to his son—"He works his work, I mine" and the conventional methods of governing—"by slow prudence" and "through soft degrees". In the final section, Ulysses turns to his fellow mariners and says that they must be ready to face any kind of hardship. They may get victory are defeat. They must continue to go forward in the journey. The heroic mind is highlighted in the following lines.

*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. (56–64)*

The speaker's language is unadorned but forceful.

Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'  
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades  
Forever and forever when I move. (19–21)

**Theme-----**In the *Journey of the Magi*, it is not the heroic mind that is revealed but religious mind. Jesus also suffered and then takes rebirth on the third day. Therefore Eliot says that those who suffer in life should not lose hope. They will be given one day happy life. T.S.Eliot connects the theme of rebirth with Indian Philosophy. It should be noted that Hindus and Buddhists of India believe in rebirths.

T. S. **Eliot** in his poem from line twenty-one to thirty-one says that the three kings arrive at their destination. Through the images, we learn that Eliot describes the life of Christ and the significance of his sufferings. Further some of the images in this section, such as ‘the three trees on the low sky’ and the hands ‘dicing for pieces of silver’ express the christian religious history and Eliot’s religious ideas. He wants people to follow religion in the modern world.

The last twelve lines of *Journey of the Magi*, we learn that the kings were deeply affected and changed by their experience. The birth of Christ heralds the start of a new order and new truth, The birth of the [Christ](#) was the new blessings for the world. But Tennyson says through Ulysses that new order is in the hands of man .Men havebeen already got enough blessings by nature to create new things on earth. The speaker in Eliot’s poem recalls his journey in old age and narrates his experience. It is the recollection of the journey they have made in the past.But Ulysses although old is preparing himself for voyage. He is energetic and he has will-power. Magi in the *Journey of the Magi* does not seem to be ambitious and they intend to see God. They have got self satisfaction after seeing God the Infant Jesus.Since it is the first person narration the readers can learn that the poem comes out from the mouth of one of the three wise men. The narrator goes on to tell of the Magi's arrival in Bethlehem the place the Infant Jesus was born. The poet describes the place as "a temperate valley" in line. They still can't find any information about where they were supposed to go .Finally the wise (The three kings) arrive just in time.

The last part of the poem shows that the narration is the recollection--"all this was a long time ago, I remember" line 32, but Ulysses although made voyages and took part in wars for several years, he speaks about his another voyage which he is going to undertake. The narration of Ulysses is mixed with his past experiences. He is anxious on the near future voyage experience which he is about to start.

Ulysses seems to speak to himself in the first movement. The first part seems to be a soliloquy and reveals his bad impression on the people of Ithaca. He cannot say in front of the people that they are savage.He introduces his son, Telemachus and so he needs an audience who may be certain court people. He justifies that he is not irresponsible although he leaves his country. He describes the good qualities and talents of his son. He indirectly says that his son will be a better king to Ithaca than himself. Then he seems to be near the seashore where he addresses his mariners. He assures that his son will certainly change the unwise people as wise. He predicts

that there would be a change in the life of his country people. Ulysses words are more impressive.

T.S.Eliot's [narrator](#) in *Journey of the Magi* is a witness to historical change. The second stanza of the poem has metaphor images of Christ's later life from the passion to the crucifixion including the trees referring to calvary the dicing for his clothes, as well as images of the Old Testament, Passover, in the lintel, and Revelation in the white horse. In the *Journey of the Magi* camel helps the three wise men to travel where as in *Ulysses* it is the ship that helps Ulysses and the mariners. The wise men continue their journey on earth and mountain. Ulysses has travelled land and is going to sail on ocean.

**Similarities and differences---**The poem *Journey of the Magi* has many [symbolist](#) elements, For example, the narrator says that on the journey they saw "three trees against a low sky"; the single image of the three trees implies the historical future (the [crucifixion](#)) and the spiritual truth of the future (the skies lowered and heaven opened). Ulysses has just revealed his urging heart that wants more voyages and wars. He has his own way of worship.

*Some work of noble note, may yet be done,  
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods .*

The Trojan War wasn't a war between men and gods, but occasionally the gods would come down and fight with either the Greeks or the Trojans. He seems to say if men undertake any difficult works God will come in search of human beings and help them.

According to Ulysses men need not go in search of God. Ulysses prepares for the new journey but the narrator in the *Journey of the Magi* says that he has returned from journey long before and he is not beginning any new voyage. It is only a recollection of the king who has gone to Bethlehem long back to get blessings from the Christ Now he is in his old age whereas Ulysses has returned to his kingdom, Ithaca, having made a long journey. He took part in the [Trojan War](#). Ulysses expresses his lack of contentment, including his indifference toward the "savage race". The king of Ithaca says that the people just eat and sleep. Ulysses contrasts his present restlessness with his heroic past, and wants to be victorious even in future. "Life piled on life / Were all too little, and of one to me / Little remains" lines 24–26—and longs for new experience and wisdom.

*come, my friends, 'Tis not too late to seek answer 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, His longing to gain make new adventure is clearly given here.*

The character of Ulysses in [Greek, Odysseus](#) has been explored widely in literature. The adventures of Odysseus were first recorded in [Homer's Iliad](#) and [Odyssey](#) (c. 800–700 BC), and Tennyson draws on Homer's narrative in the poem. Most critics, however, find that Tennyson's Ulysses recalls [Dante's](#) Ulisse in his [Inferno](#) (c. 1320). 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.

For much of this poem's history, readers viewed Ulysses as resolute and heroic, admiring him for his determination "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" In the twentieth century, some new interpretations of "Ulysses" highlighted potential [ironies](#) in the poem. They argued, for example, that Ulysses wishes to selfishly abandon his kingdom and family, and they questioned more positive assessments of Ulysses' character by demonstrating how he resembles flawed protagonists in earlier literature. But what I say is that Ulysses is not irresponsible for leaving the kingdom of Ithaca. It is great to see a king like Ulysses in Ithaca where people remain as savages. Ulysses encourages many youngsters to make achievements in life.

Even Swamy Viveganada left the family and that he is even now guiding the thousands of people around the world. There may be some selfish people who leave family and kingdom but Ulysses speaks something new. As the Magi went to see Christ they got blessings from God. If they have not taken the journey, they would not have got such divine blessings. The scientists all work for the world cause may not be able to concentrate on the family matters. One can not say that they do not care the family. The soldier leaves the family to save his country. Ulysses is the one who encourages the readers to make achievements not to lead a lazy life which many youngsters prefer now. Therefore I say that Ulysses is not really selfish. It is the universal act. He undertakes the Journey as a challenge in life.

Alfred Tennyson was born August 6th, 1809, at Somersby, Lincolnshire, fourth of twelve children of George and Elizabeth (Fytche) Tennyson. The success of his 1842 *Poems* made Tennyson a popular poet, and in 1845 he received a Civil List (government) pension of £200 a year, which helped relieve his financial difficulties; the success of "The Princess" and *In Memoriam* and his appointment in 1850 as Poet Laureate finally established him as the most popular poet of the Victorian era. *Ulysses* garnered praise from Tennyson's contemporaries as well as successive literary figures including T. S. Eliot, who called it a "perfect" poem.

T.S. Eliot was a poet, verse dramatist and literary critic who grew up in America and studied at Harvard, the Sorbonne and Oxford. He settled in England in 1914 and worked initially in teaching and banking. Later, he became a significant figure in the publishing company Faber and Faber. His first collection of poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, in 1917 was an immediate success and established him as a leading figure in the modernist movement. In 1922 Eliot wrote *The Waste Land*, one of the most influential and important poems of the twentieth century. Eliot was a consistently dominant figure in Western culture. Eliot continued to write, and his major later poems include "Ash Wednesday" (1930) and "Four Quartets" (1943). During this period he also wrote *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), *After Strange Gods* (1934) and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1940). For his vast influence in poetry, criticism and drama, T.S. Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948.

## Conclusion

Tennyson reveals the restlessness and dissatisfaction of the ambitious hero in the poem *Ulysses* whereas through the *Journey of the Magi* T.S. Eliot reveals the peace of mind and the satisfaction of the wisemen. T. S. Eliot seems to have satisfied with his achievements in life.

Tennyson seems to have longed to make many more adventures in his life. Thus there are similarities and differences between the two heroic poems. T.S. Eliot stresses that religion is necessary in one's life to be satisfied. What we learned from this comparative study is that since Ulysses believes only human values, he remains unsatisfactory. It may be difficult for anyone who believes only human potentialities to gain peace of mind and satisfaction. Tennyson lays primary importance to work and believes that God will certainly help the one who uses the talents given by God.

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