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Conflicting Sensibility in Alfred Tennyson's *Ulysses* and A.J.M. Smith's "Like an Old Proud King in a Parable"

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Abstract

The Victorian age is marked by a profound duality between the desire for intellectual expansion and the urge to withdraw from an increasingly materialistic society. This tension is vividly expressed in Ulysses by Alfred Tennyson. Similarly, Canadian literary consciousness reflects a divided sensibility, which Northrop Frye characterizes as "creative schizophrenia" (Frye 22). This duality is central to Like an Old Proud King in a Parable by A.J.M. Smith. Through a comparative analysis, this paper examines how both poets employ the Homeric figure of Ulysses as an intertext to explore internal conflict, while simultaneously reflecting broader cultural tensions within their respective literary traditions.

Keywords: Victorian sensibility, Canadian sensibility, conflicting sensibility, intertextuality, modernism, romanticism, *Ulysses*, *Like an Old Proud King in a Parable*, creative schizophrenia.

Introduction

Literary modernity often emerges from a tension between tradition and innovation, and this is particularly evident in the works of A.J.M. Smith, whose poetry is deeply rooted in earlier literary traditions. During his formative years in England (1918–1920), Smith encountered the works of T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and Alfred Tennyson, whose influence is unmistakable in Smith's later poetry. Smith's engagement with Tennyson is not merely imitative but intertextual, as he frequently reworks Tennysonian themes and imagery to suit his own modernist concerns.

One notable example is Smith's poem *"Far West,"* which echoes Tennyson's *"The Splendour Falls on Castle Walls."* Such allusions reveal Smith's tendency to use earlier texts as frameworks for new poetic explorations (Lakshmanan 34). This intertextual strategy is particularly evident in his use of the Ulysses figure, which serves as a symbolic vehicle for exploring conflicting sensibilities.

Tennyson's *Ulysses* is less indebted to Odyssey and more aligned with the portrayal of Ulysses in Inferno by Dante Alighieri. Unlike Homer's hero, who ultimately returns home and reclaims his domestic life, Tennyson's Ulysses is restless, dissatisfied, and eager to escape the constraints of ordinary existence.

The poem opens with a tone of disillusionment: "It little profits that an idle king…" (Tennyson). Here, Ulysses expresses contempt for his role as ruler and for the "savage race" he governs, revealing a profound alienation from both his responsibilities and his people. This dissatisfaction reflects a broader Victorian anxiety about stagnation and the loss of heroic purpose.

At the same time, Ulysses embodies the Victorian ideal of progress and exploration. His desire "to follow knowledge like a sinking star" (line 31) suggests an unending quest for intellectual and experiential expansion. However, this aspiration is complicated by an undercurrent of irony. Ulysses' rejection of domestic life can also be interpreted as an evasion of responsibility.

The poem's famous concluding line—"To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" (line 70)— encapsulates the essence of Victorian ambition. Yet, it also reveals the unresolved tension within the speaker. As critics have noted, Tennyson oscillates between celebrating progress and questioning its moral implications (Djwa 10). Thus, *Ulysses* becomes a site of conflicting sensibilities, where ambition and escapism coexist uneasily.

In contrast, Smith's *"Like an Old Proud King in a Parable"* presents a figure who renounces power not in pursuit of adventure but in search of artistic purity. The opening lines immediately establish a tone of bitterness and disillusionment: "A bitter king in anger to be gone…" (Smith). Unlike Tennyson's Ulysses, who is driven by a desire for exploration, Smith's king is motivated by a rejection of worldly excess. His act of casting away the "gilt crown" symbolizes a renunciation of Romantic extravagance in favor of Modernist austerity.

This tension between Romanticism and Modernism is central to Smith's poetic vision. As M. L. Rosenthal observes, Smith often strives for classical restraint while simultaneously expressing Romantic sensibilities (Rosenthal 12). This

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internal conflict is mirrored in the king's struggle to abandon his former identity.

The imagery of "northern stone" and "barren rock" reinforces the theme of austerity, suggesting a harsh, unyielding environment that contrasts sharply with the lush imagery of Romantic poetry. The king's prayer, "Let me…die / From this fat royal life…" (Smith) — reveals a desire for spiritual purification, akin to the transformation sought in Sailing to Byzantium by Yeats. In both cases, the speaker seeks to transcend the limitations of the physical world through artistic creation.

Despite their differences, both poems share a deep engagement with irony and self-reflexivity. In Tennyson's *Ulysses*, the speaker's heroic rhetoric is subtly undermined by his apparent irresponsibility. His desire to abandon his kingdom can be seen as both admirable and problematic, creating a tension that remains unresolved.

Similarly, Smith's king aspires to artistic greatness but is acutely aware of the difficulty of achieving it. The closing lines - "And I will sing to the barren rock / Your difficult lonely music…" (Smith) — suggest both determination and doubt. The phrase "difficult lonely music" encapsulates the challenges of artistic creation, particularly within a modernist framework that rejects traditional forms and conventions.

In both poems, the speaker's ambitions are tempered by a recognition of their limitations. This creates a tone of ironic self-awareness, which serves to highlight the complexity of their respective sensibilities. The use of the Ulysses figure as an intertext is significant in both poems. For Tennyson, Ulysses represents the Victorian ideal of relentless progress, while also embodying the anxieties associated with such ambition. For Smith, the figure is reinterpreted as a symbol of artistic struggle and self-denial.

This shift reflects broader changes in literary and cultural contexts. The Victorian emphasis on expansion and exploration gives way, in the modernist period, to a focus on introspection and fragmentation. Smith's adaptation of the Ulysses myth thus serves as both a continuation and a critique of Tennysonian themes.

As Frye's concept of "creative schizophrenia" suggests, Canadian literature often grapples with conflicting identities and influences (Frye 22). Smith's poem exemplifies this tension, as it navigates between Romanticism and Modernism, tradition and innovation.

The comparison between Tennyson's *Ulysses* and Smith's *"Like an Old Proud King in a Parable"* reveals a shared concern with conflicting sensibilities, albeit expressed in different cultural and historical contexts. Tennyson's poem reflects the Victorian struggle between progress and withdrawal, while Smith's work explores the modernist tension between artistic aspiration and self-denial. Both poets employ the figure of Ulysses as a means of articulating these conflicts, using intertextuality to enrich their exploration of the human condition. Ultimately, their works suggest that such conflicts are not easily resolved but are intrinsic to the creative process itself. As Lucan suggests, human beings endure life precisely because its contradictions remain unresolved (Lucan 89).

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