

Ozymandias

Percy Bysshe Shelley

“I met a traveler from an antique land,
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

VOCABULARY

Antique - ancient

Trunkless - without a trunk (in this case, legs without a torso or body)

Visage - face

Sneer - a smug, superior expression that demonstrates cruelty

Sculptor - a person who makes sculptures for a living

Pedestal - a column that a statue sits on

Ye - an old fashioned word for ‘the’

Colossal - huge, immense, like a colossus - a huge statue that is larger than life

Wreck - a damaged or destroyed structure, often used to describe ships at sea

Boundless - without end

Lone - alone, isolated, without companionship

STORY/SUMMARY

I met a traveler from an ancient land who told me a story. He said “Two huge legs of stone without a body stand in the desert... Near them, a shattered face is lying half-sunken into the sand, it has a frown and a wrinkled lip that sneers as if it is giving cold commands or orders. This expression shows that the sculptor who carved the piece knew the subject well: he knew his harsh emotions and cold personality and captured his likeness in the sculpture. These impressions still survive on the face of the sculpture, even though the man himself is long dead his personality is stamped onto these lifeless fragments, including his hand that mocked its people, and the heart that fed them. There is also a pedestal, on which these words are written: “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings, you mighty and great men must look upon my kingdom and feel terror!” But there is no kingdom to be seen, nothing else remains of king Ozymandias and his kingdom except these few broken pieces of his sculpture. Around the decaying and broken colossus, the lonely and flat sands of the desert stretch far away.”

SPEAKER/VOICE

There is a distorted sense of speaker in this poem as if it is presenting layers or echoes from the past. We start with a **first-person narrator**, unnamed and not well described. He tells us that he met a traveling man who told him the story of King Ozymandias, and soon through the use of **speech marks** the **narrative shifts into the third person**, as told by the traveler. There is also a third voice present in the poem: that of Ozymandias himself, as his own words are written on the pedestal: ‘My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; / Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’. There is therefore a **layering of three voices** inherent within the poem.

LANGUAGE

Oxymoron - 'colossal Wreck' - the **adjective** 'colossal' means 'like a colossus, a larger than life statue'; colossi were always meant to be tall and majestic structures that commanded awe from the people who looked upon them. The fact that this one is broken with the pieces turned on their sides and 'half sunk(en)' into the sand undermines its once impressive power.

Extended metaphor - the fallen statue of Ozymandias that is sinking back into the desert stands as an extended metaphor for the way in which political and personal power fades into history over time - the desert itself erodes the physical structures of Ozymandias' reign in the same way in which time erodes his memory. The 'lone and level sands' use an **alliterative visual image** to describe the vastness of the desert and demonstrate that his kingdom has long eroded back into the sand: 'Nothing beside (the statue) remains'. The **fricative 'l' sounds** emphasize the flat, long stretches of desert that surround the broken statue.

Symbolism - the poem contains many examples of symbolism, one of the most prominent being the **visual image of the** 'shattered visage', the broken face of Ozymandias. The **adjective** 'shattered' here refers to the face of the sculpture, but it also symbolically extends to represent the idea of the king himself - his reputation, fame, glory, and power are all lying equally in tatters as the memory of him fades into nothingness.

The semantic field of destruction - there is a continual sense of destruction in the poem through words that evoke erosion and degradation: 'half sunk', 'shattered visage', 'decay'. This has the effect of suggesting the slow process of decay which eventually destroys all-powerful entities, interestingly this destruction occurs not because of other people but instead because of the continual progress of time and natural forces.

STRUCTURE/FORM

Sonnet - The poem **takes the form of a sonnet**, a short lyric poem of 14 lines that expresses a single concept or idea, usually with a significant shift in tone or perspective towards the end. In this case, the **volta** (shift in tone) occurs with the **short sentence** 'Nothing beside remains.' which abruptly disrupts the flow of the poem, bringing it back into **present tense** as we consider the contrasts between Ozymandias at his height of power and the way in which he now lies fallen and almost forgotten in the sands of time.

Frame narrative - the story within the poem is essentially a 'story within a story', or a frame narrative. The speaker is telling us that meets a traveler, and this traveler tells the true story of the poem. This has the effect of the narrative being couched in layers of mystery and suspense, as we go back almost in a way that evokes Chinese whispers through several versions of the tale. We could even perhaps say that it imitates the **Chinese box narrative structure** that Shelley's wife, Mary, used when writing her famous novel 'Frankenstein'. This structure allows different levels of a story to be revealed as we go deeper into the narrative, ultimately ending up with a core central moment that's similar to a climax before zooming back out again through the levels of focus. Delving back through these layers of story, we eventually encounter the voice of Ozymandias himself. As the poem enters this **climactic moment** the **narrative shifts from prose to monologue - using speech marks** in the center of the poem reveal Ozymandias' own voice: 'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; / Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'. This **statement** from the King himself uses a **vainglorious tone** to assert dominance over the reader of his inscription, and across time the readers of the poem too. His 'works' are something that he was clearly proud of as he must have requested the message to have been written alongside the sculpture. It firstly displays a **pompous and assertive character**, where he clearly thinks highly of himself as he gives himself the title 'King of Kings', suggesting that he is not only a superior ruler but a ruler that even triumphs over all other kings. Furthermore, the **imperative verbs** provide further evidence of his 'cold command', as even in this 'lifeless' statue he cannot help but send orders to the people that read the pedestal, though he may not even know them or command them personally. Overall, Ozymandias is presented as having a narcissistic and arrogant nature; he enjoys power and fame above all else.

Caesura - “Who said—“ - several points in the poem use **caesurae** (punctuation that creates a dramatic pause in the center of a line). These heighten the intensity of the poem and often also indicate time or perspective shifts - here the dash indicates the shift from the speaker’s voice into the traveler’s voice.

CONTEXT

Ozymandias was written in 1817, and published in 1818, as the result of a competition that Percy Shelley had with his friend Horace Smith. Smith wrote his own sonnet of the same name:

Ozymandias

IN Egypt's sandy silence, all alone,
Stands a gigantic Leg, which far off throws
The only shadow that the Desart knows:—
"I am great OZYMANDIAS," saith the stone,
"The King of Kings; this mighty City shows
"The wonders of my hand."— The City's gone,—
Nought but the Leg remaining to disclose
The site of this forgotten Babylon.
We wonder,—and some Hunter may express
Wonder like ours, when thro' the wilderness
Where London stood, holding the Wolf in chace,
He meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess
What powerful but unrecorded race
Once dwelt in that annihilated place.

We can see that Smith’s poem explores similar concepts to Shelley’s - the idea that the kingdom over which Ozymandias reigns has long gone and been forgotten. Yet it ends on a slightly different note - considering history and anthropology, it examines the way in which London itself may one day fall and returns to the earth, thinking about the future when someone discovers fragments from our time now and tries to understand how our own lives had been. Shelley ends on a more

powerfully political note - concluding that even the most mighty men fall and fade in the end.

The name 'Ozymandias' is an Ancient Greek name for **King Rameses II**, also called Rameses the Great. The poem takes inspiration from a statue of Rameses II that can be found in the British museum - it is called 'Younger Memnon' and it bears an inscription: "King of Kings am I, Ozymandias. If anyone would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass one of my works."

The title 'King of Kings' seems very arrogant from a modern Western perspective because it sounds like the title claims to be the ruler of all rulers on Earth. However, this is **actually a common title given to Persian Kings of the Middle East**. It means something equivalent to 'Emperor'. In Judaism, the title is also used to refer to God, and in the Bible, it is used to refer to Jesus. Therefore, Shelley's contemporary readers may have understood the term in more of a Biblical than a historical context, and therefore been inclined to see it as blasphemous and overconfident.

Shelley's personal interests and beliefs are present in the poem. As a **Romantic poet**, his works dealt often with the theme of nature, seeing nature as a powerful spiritual force that was far superior to individual humans. In this sense, we can interpret the way in which the sands consume Ozymandias' empire to be an affirmation of the idea that nature always prevails in the end, and that human endeavor, no matter how great, is always transient and ephemeral. Shelley was also known for his **radical political views**, and he lived in a time when the British government feared radicalism or individuals who expressed political opinions that were different from the norm - they were afraid that there may be a revolution, as there had been in many European countries in the previous few decades - such as the French Revolution which took place in 1789 and resulted in an overthrown government and an abolition of the monarchy.

ATTITUDES

Greatness can be achieved through cruelty - the poem does explore the Machiavellian idea that it is possible to rule effectively through methods of fear. We can imagine that Ozymandias is not a king or a well-loved leader, but he is clearly a great and successful one. However, the last few fragments that remain of him are his cruel expression and arrogant words, implying through **symbolism** that if a

powerful person behaves selfishly or meanly, these are the last things that he will be remembered by, rather than his greatness - Ozymandias lies in pieces and he is no longer great, but he is still immeasurably cruel.

Tyrannical power fades over time - Ozymandias is depicted as a tyrant - a cruel dictator who loves power more than he loves his people, and who enjoys ruling through fear and oppression. He is obsessed with his own greatness and commands other mighty people to 'despair' when they view the greatness of his statue and the opulence of his kingdom. **Ironically**, all that remains of Ozymandias and his empire is a few broken fragments of the once spectacular effigy; himself and his kingdom are long gone. The effect is to suggest that **hubris (excessive pride) will always undo a person in the end** and they will leave no lasting positive or constructive impact on this earth.

Great empires will always fall - In reference to its exploration of history and time, Shelley concludes that all political structures are ultimately transient; they fade over time rather than remaining forever. Some critics have suggested that this is in contrast to the lasting power of art, which remains the same even hundreds or thousands of years after it is produced - through the Ancient Greek and Roman empires are gone, for instance, their art and culture still has a huge impact on us in the present day.

Humans are weaker than nature and time - the poem is inspired by a fragment of a statue in the British Museum of a long lost King who ruled over an Ancient Egyptian kingdom, which was once the pinnacle of human civilization though it has now faded in power. This makes a comment on the passage of time and the transience of human endeavor - over time, our life's works and efforts will fade into the past. The poem may also be reflecting Shelley's own anxieties about posterity - he wants his name to live on after death, but also is concerned that one day everything he worked so hard to create will crumble into dust and be forgotten, like Ozymandias and his 'works'.

THEMES

- Power
- Tyranny
- History
- Time
- Nature
- Death
- Anthropology
- Archaeology
- Leadership

POSSIBLE ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Examine the ways in which political power is presented in 'Ozymandias' and at least one other poem from the collection.
2. Compare the ways in which poets present attitudes to death in 'Ozymandias' and at least one other poem from the collection.
3. Discuss the presentation of leadership in 'Ozymandias' and at least one other poem from the collection.