

Ozymandias

by 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 upon 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.*

Detailed Analysis of the Poem:

This sonnet composed in 1817 is probably Shelley's most famous and most anthologized poem—which is somewhat strange, considering that it is in many ways an atypical poem for Shelley, and that it touches little upon the most important themes in his oeuvre at large (beauty, expression, love, imagination). Still, “Ozymandias” is a masterful sonnet. Essentially it is devoted to a single metaphor: the shattered, ruined statue in the desert wasteland, with its arrogant, passionate face and monomaniacal inscription (“Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”).

The once-great king's proud boast has been ironically disproved; Ozymandias's works have crumbled and disappeared, his civilization is gone, all has been turned to dust by the impersonal, indiscriminate, destructive power of history. The ruined statue is now merely a monument to one man's hubris, and a powerful statement about the insignificance of human beings to the passage of time. Ozymandias is first and foremost a metaphor for the ephemeral nature of political power, and in that sense the poem is Shelley's most outstanding political sonnet, trading the specific rage of a poem like “England in 1819” for the crushing impersonal metaphor of the statue. But Ozymandias symbolizes not only political power—the statue can be a metaphor for the pride and hubris of all of humanity, in any of its manifestations. It is significant that all that remains of Ozymandias is a work of art and a group of words; as Shakespeare does in the sonnets, Shelley demonstrates that art and language long outlast the other legacies of power.

It is Shelley's brilliant poetic rendering of the story, and not the subject of the story itself, which makes the poem so memorable. Framing the sonnet as a story told to the speaker by “a traveller from an antique land” enables Shelley to add another level of obscurity to Ozymandias's position with regard to the reader—rather

than seeing the statue with our own eyes, so to speak, we hear about it from someone who heard about it from someone who has seen it.

Shelley's description of the statue works to reconstruct, gradually, the figure of the "king of kings": first we see merely the "shattered visage," then the face itself, with its "frown / And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command"; then we are introduced to the figure of the sculptor, and are able to imagine the living man sculpting the living king, whose face wore the expression of the passions now inferable; then we are introduced to the king's people in the line, "the hand that mocked them and the heart that fed." The kingdom is now imaginatively complete, and we are introduced to the extraordinary, prideful boast of the king: "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" With that, the poet demolishes our imaginary picture of the king, and interposes centuries of ruin between it and us: "'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."

Characters

1. **Narrator:** The poet, Shelley. He assumes the role of auditor to the tale of the traveler (line 1) and tells the reader what the traveler said.

2. **Traveler:** A person from an ancient land who tells his tale to the narrator.

3. **Ozymandias: Egyptian Pharaoh who is the subject of the traveler's tale. Ozymandias (also spelled Osymandias) is another name for one of Egypt's most famous rulers, Ramses II (or Ramses the Great). He was born in 1314 BC and ruled Egypt for 66 years as the third king of the Nineteenth Dynasty.** His exact age at death is uncertain, but it was between 90 and 99. Ramses was a warrior king and a builder of temples, statues and other monuments. He was pharaoh at the time Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, as recounted in the second book of the Bible, *Exodus* (derived from the Greek word for *departure*).

In Cecil B. de Mille's melodramatic film *The Ten Commandments*, the late Yul Brynner portrays Ramses, and Charlton Heston plays Moses.

4. **Sculptor:** The craftsman who sculpted the statue of Ramses.

VOCABULARY

1....**antique: Ancient.**

2....**desert: Sahara.**

3....**visage: Face.**

4....**well . . . read: The sculptor skillfully interpreted the king's feelings.**

5....**survive: The Pharaoh's passions (as indicated by the sneer and the frown) survive in the sculpted image.**

6....**stamp'd: sculpted, chiseled.**

7....**hand . . . them: Hand of the sculptor, who mocked the Pharaoh's passions by chiseling them into**

the stone.

8....heart . . fed. The pharaoh's feelings (heart) fed his people as well as the sculptor's creativity.

9....Ozymandias: Egyptian Pharaoh who is the subject of the traveler's tale.

10...Look . . . despair: The pharaoh says his works are so magnificent that any attempts to equal or surpass their excellence will end only in despair.

11...Nothing else remains at the site of sculpture. The pharaoh's boasts are now as empty as the empty and boundless desert surrounding the decaying statue..

Literary Devices

1. Alliteration

Repetition of a Vowel Sound

two vast and trunkless legs

cold command

the hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed.

boundless and bare

lone and level

sands stretch

2. Anastrophe

Inversion of the Normal Word Order

Well those passions read (normally, read those passions well)

Extra Questions:

A. SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS:

1. How did the poet come to know about the broken statue of Ozymandias?
2. In what condition was the statue found?
3. Who had written the inscription on the pedestal below the statue?
4. Describe the surroundings of the statue of Ozymandias.

B. LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS:

1. Draft the character sketch of king Ozymandias as depicted in the poem.
2. What is the lesson ingrained in it for the rest of mankind? Justify your answer.

TEXT BOOK SOLVED QUESTIONS:

Answer the following

Q.1. (5b) 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings'...

Ans: Ozymandias was very mighty, conceited, arrogant, and was intoxicated with power. He was boastful and proud and so considered himself to be above all. He was certainly confident of his might and extraordinary power.

Q.2. (5d) Bring out the irony in the poem.

Ans: Ozymandias was very boastful of his power, his arrogant and shattered face, broken statue, the waste and ruins around prove that the great king's work and civilization has crumbled to dust. Time has levelled his fame and work and the ruins around along with the shattered statue bear a testimony to the fact that nothing lasts forever and all the boasts will be disproved ironically in the end.

Q.3. (5f) What is your impression of Ozymandias as a king?

Ans: Ozymandias was an arrogant king, who believed in his might to rule over his kingdom. He was egoistic, very conceited and he looked after and fed the citizens as a favour. He hankered all the immortality and eternal fame. Ozymandias believed that none could ever equal his exploits.

Q.4. (5g) What message is conveyed in the poem 'Ozymandias'?

Ans: The poet uses a shattered face to highlight the ephemeral nature of fame and popularity and power. The great king's proud (I king of kings, look on my work, ye mighty and despair) has been ironically disproved. Ozymandias not only symbolises political power, but the statue is a metaphor for the pride and 'hubris' (*great pride and belief in oneself*) for all mankind. It is worth noting that all the remains of Ozymandias is a work of art and a group of words demonstrates the fact that art and language outline the legacies of power.