Ozymandias

Percy Bysshe Shelley

What is it about?

Shelley's poem imagines a meeting between the narrator and a 'traveller' who describes a ruined statue he - or she - saw in the middle of a desert somewhere. The description of the statue is a meditation on the fragility of human power and on the effects of time.

The Poem

I met a traveller 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."

Summary

The speaker of the poem meets a traveller who came from an ancient land. The traveller describes two large stone legs of a statue, which lack a torso to connect them, and stand upright in the desert. Near the legs, half buried in sand, is the broken face of the statue. The statue's facial expression—a frown and a wrinkled lip—form a commanding, haughty sneer. The expression shows that the sculptor understood the emotions of the person the statue is based on, and now those emotions live on, carved forever on inanimate stone. In making the face, the sculptor's skilled hands mocked up a perfect recreation of those feelings and of the heart that fed those feelings (and, in the process, so perfectly conveyed the subject's cruelty that the statue itself seems to be mocking its subject). The traveller next describes the words inscribed on the pedestal of the statue, which say: "My name is Ozymandias, the King who rules over even other Kings. Behold what I have built, all you who think of yourselves as powerful, and despair at the magnificence and superiority of my accomplishments." There is nothing else in the area. Surrounding the remnants of the large statue is a never-ending and barren desert, with empty and flat sands stretching into the distance.

Form

The rhyme scheme is somewhat unusual for a sonnet of this era.

It does not fit a conventional Petrarchan pattern, but instead interlinks the octave (a term for the first eight lines of a sonnet) with the sestet (a term for the last six lines), by gradually replacing old rhymes with new ones in the form ABABACDCEDEFEF.

It's not a Shakespearean sonnet, nor is it a Petrarchan - the poet made certain of its individuality by choosing not to introduce a 'turn' after the second quatrain. Instead there is a simple shift of emphasis, the narrator sharing the words on the pedestal that are in effect, the words of the fallen leader.

In this sonnet, the first part sets up the frame narrative and then describes the statue and the second part ironically relates the king's words and adds the final description of the desert setting.

There are three voices, the original "I", the traveller and the voice of Ozymandias himself.

What makes the whole so successful is the way the poet has seamlessly woven all three together, the final image of the distant, endless sands contrasting powerfully with the now hollow words of Ozymandias.