

"Ozymandias" (1817) by Percy Bysshe Shelley

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."

Source: Shelley's Poetry and Prose (1977)

Analysis

"Ozymandias" is one of the most famous poems of the Romantic era. It was written by Percy Bysshe Shelley in 1817 and eventually became his most famous work. In this poem, the speaker describes meeting a traveler "from an antique land." The title, 'Ozymandias', notifies the reader that this land is most probably Egypt, since Ozymandias was what the Greeks called Ramses II, a great and terrible pharaoh in ancient Egypt. The traveler tells a story to the speaker. In the story, he describes visiting Egypt and seeing a large and intimidating statue in the sand. He can tell that the sculptor must have known his subject well because it is obvious from the statue's face that this man was a great leader, but one who could also be very vicious: he describes his sneer as having a "cold command." Even though the leader was probably very great, it seems that the only thing that survives from his realm is this statue, which is half buried and somewhat falling apart.

1/Form and Meter

The poem is written in pentameter, meaning there are five (penta-) groups of two syllables in each line. Shelley's poem makes it really hard to use that designation. Iambic pentameter means that each line contains five feet or groups, each of which contains an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, as in this line:

I met / a trav- / ler from / an an- / tique land.

2/Rhyme Scheme

Contrary to many other sonnets though, "Ozymandias" has an unusual rhyming scheme, following the pattern **ABABA CDCEDF**E. Most sonnets follow the rhyme scheme ABBAABBA and CDECDE or CDCDCD.

Alliteration

Alliteration is the repetition of a sound or letter at the beginning of multiple words in a sentence or paragraph. There are several instances of alliteration in "Ozymandias" including the phrases "cold command" and " boundless and bare."

3/Major Themes

•The Theme of Power

In "Ozymandias," Percy Shelley presents the theme of power through the portrayal of Ozymandias, the once mighty ruler who is now reduced to a crumbling statue in the desert. The poem explores the dynamics of power as it is depicted through the remnants of Ozymandias's authority and the inevitable decay of his legacy. The statue, with its inscription boasting of Ozymandias's power and grandeur, serves as a stark reminder of the transience of human power and the fleeting nature of earthly accomplishments. Shelley employs vivid imagery and descriptive language to convey the vastness of Ozymandias's dominion and the overwhelming sense of his authority. However, the juxtaposition of the ruined statue with the vast, desolate landscape emphasizes the insignificance of human power in the grand scheme of things. The theme of power is further underscored by the narrator's commentary on the sculptor's skill in capturing the arrogance and hubris of Ozymandias in the stone features of the statue. Through this, Shelley prompts the reader to contemplate the nature of power and its enduring impact, or lack thereof, on the world. Overall, Shelley's presentation of the theme of power in "Ozymandias" serves to provoke reflection on the fleeting nature of human accomplishments and the inevitable decline of earthly power. The poem invites us to consider the transient and ultimately inconsequential nature of power, challenging us to question the enduring legacy of our own achievements.

•The Theme of History

"Ozymandias" is a bit of history told by a traveler to the speaker, who then tells it to the reader. It has a strong tie to the oral tradition that has kept literary and historical traditions and lessons alive for hundreds of years. This fact alone prompts the reader to look for an historical lesson in the poem. The lesson reveals itself early; the poem is a cautionary tale about the transitory nature of rulers and their nations. After all, not only is Ozymandias gone, but so is the rest of his particular slice of civilization. The poem is a reminder of the historical reality of cycles of authority and the rise and fall of nations. Because the statue is from an ancient civilization, and others have come and gone between Ozymandias and the speaker's present, the reader can cull a historical lesson. The poem also demonstrates that tyrannical rulers are nothing new, and that this tendency in man should be watched for among those in power.

• The Theme of Pride

In the inscription on the pedestal Ozymandias calls himself the "king of kings" while also implying that his "works" (works of art like the statue, pyramids, that sort of thing) are the best around. Ozymandias thinks pretty highly of himself and of what he's achieved, both politically and artistically. The fact that he commissions this "colossal" statue with "vast legs" points to his sense of pride, while the statue's fragmentary state indicates the emptiness of Ozymandias's boast.

• Art and Culture

"Ozymandias" was inspired by a statue, and it's no surprise that art is one of this poem's themes. The traveler makes a point of telling us that the statue was made by a really skilled sculptor, and the poem as a whole explores the question of art's longevity. The statue is in part a stand-in or substitute for all kinds of art (painting, poetry, etc.), and the poem asks us to think not just about sculpture, but about the fate of other arts as well.

4/Symbols

•The Statue

The statue of Ozymandias has a few different symbolic meanings. First, it is a physical representation of the might of human political institutions, such as Ozymandias's empire; this

is the symbolic purpose for which Ozymandias himself had the statue built. However, because the statue has fallen into disrepair, it also holds a symbolic meaning that Ozymandias didn't intend: how comparatively fragile human political institutions actually are in the face of both time and nature's might. The statue also symbolizes the power of art. Through the sculptor's skill, the statue captures and preserves the "passions" of its subject by stamping them on "lifeless" rock.

•**Sand**

Sand is a symbol for nature's power and also for time itself. The sand has eroded and buried the statue and all of Ozymandias's works, a reminder that nature can destroy all human achievements, no matter how substantial. Because it also destroyed the statue over time, and because of the idea of sand in an hourglass, sand is also a symbol for time, which has similarly worn down and eventually buried Ozymandias's empire

5/Metaphor

"Ozymandias" is a metaphor for all kingdoms, which eventually pass out of time to make room for another kingdom, ruler, or ideology. Shelley demonstrates that nothing lasts forever, even a ruler as powerful and fearsome as Ozymandias.

6/Tone

Irony is when tone or exaggeration is used to convey a meaning opposite to what's being literally said. The Ozymandias meaning is full of irony. In the poem, Shelley contrasts Ozymandias' boastful words of power in with the image of his ruined statue lying broken and forgotten in the sand. Ozymandias might have been powerful when he ordered those words written, but that power is now long gone, and his boasts now seem slightly silly in the present time.

7/Imagery

The poet paints the **images** of the sculpture in the middle of the desert so that the reader can visualize the scene. One can see the huge legs of the statue standing out. Nearby lying sunken into the sand is the crushed face of the statue. Its expression has been left for time immemorial: frowning and wrinkled lip and sneer, representative of his rule.