Ozymandias: A Complete Analysis

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."

Ozymandias is one of the most well-known European sonnets of all time, and for good reason. Strong imagery and literary techniques make the short sonnet surprisingly complex and deep. Along with an implied commentary on the actions of the British Empire during the time, this poem's description of an egotistical tyrant, has an underlying theme that all people, leaders, and empires, no matter how great, will eventually succumb to time, and come to an end.

Ozymandias was written by romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Percy was the husband of *Frankenstein* author Mary Shelley. Similar to the impetus for *Frankenstein*, Ozymandias came about from a little writing competition, this time between Percy Shelley and his friend Horace Smith. Egyptian treasures brought back to England, and the description of Ramses II by Roman-era historian Diodorus Siculus were the two biggest pieces of inspiration (Mikics). This poem recounts a story told by a traveler from some ancient desert, describing the ruined remains of a statue. The statue was of a great, boastful ruler, whose glory and empire have now vanished.

In the words of H. M. Richmond "The poem's distinctive feature is the vivid visual impression created by the images of the ruined statue and the contrasted level sands of the desert" (65). The countless paintings, drawings, and digital renderings of the poem's statue and setting are testaments to this statement. Richmond compares the "dreamlike simplicity" of the imagery to surrealist paintings, like those by Salvador Dali. The ability of Shelley to craft such an evocative picture in the minds of the reader is even more impressive due to the fact that Shelley never actually saw the statue he wrote about. The inspiration he received from the statue of Ramses II was purely verbal.

Although a short poem, every line is filled with meaningful literary choices, and every word was chosen to be as powerful as possible. The purposeful diction becomes apparent as early as the fourth and fifth lines as Shelley describes Ozymandias's face. The nasty words "frown, wrinkled lip, and sneer" all emphasize to the reader the anger and arrogance of the ancient ruler. The mean, hard-sounding alliteration of consonants in "cold command" helps to give the feeling of his empty, ruthless rule.

On line 7, the words “survive” and “lifeless” serve several purposes. The juxtaposition of these two contrasting words highlights the absurdity of what is being stated. How can the King’s emotions still survive if they are only being represented by an inanimate piece of rock? Maybe something being lifeless is the only way for it to truly live on forever. This paradoxical element strengthens the overall theme of the poem; all living things, no matter how great, can not outmatch the force of time.

The ninth line, besides the use of the word “pedestal” to once again show the status and mightiness of the King, may seem devoid of meaning compared to the rest of the text, but it serves a very important purpose in the overall structure of the poem. This simple line serves as the turn in the poem, setting up the exclamation that succeeds it. The end of the line has the poem’s first and only colon, serving to hold back the reader from moving on, building up anticipation of what the words might say. It may seem insignificant, but if this was not organized exactly how Shelley constructed it, it would not nearly be as effective.

The King’s engravings on lines 10 and 11 serve as the “climax” of the poem, and every word exudes power, prestige, and boastfulness. “My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!” The first thing he does is state his name, reminding his subjects and informing every traveller who passes by that the immense statue and empire they are looking at is indeed his. He immediately proceeds to bestow upon himself the ultimate title “King of Kings”, the same title used to refer to Jesus Christ. If the reader did not know the extent of how highly Ozymandias thought of himself, the blasphemous audacity that he has to call himself the “King of Kings” should make his narcissism very clear.

Line 11 is a peremptory exclamation, commanding the person reading the pedestal to look on his "Works." The capitalization of "Works" again alludes to Ozymandias believing himself to be a divine being. The capitalization of the complement "Mighty" is interesting because this adjective would be describing the person reading the pedestal, so it seems odd that Ozymandias would forfeit such a praise to one of, in his opinion, lowly subjects. It is likely that Shelley has Ozymandias say this because he believes that just being in the presence of such a glorious monument and empire would make the spectator worthy of being called "Mighty" just in this moment. Or it could be that it is used mockingly, and Ozymandias draws attention to the difference in status and wealth between him and the reader of the pedestal.

The final word of this line is perhaps the most genius and expressive one in the entire poem. Instead of telling the reader to "admire" or "respect" his empire, he instead wants them to "despair". He wants everybody else to be envious of or flat out saddened by his awesome empire. "Despair" also has an ironic effect, because if Ozymandias were to read his words and see his destroyed kingdom now, "despair" is the exact thing he would do. He did not know that he was foreshadowing the eventual decline of his empire.

The short sentence "Nothing besides remains." is another example of how Shelley expertly uses punctuation to enhance the poem. This is the only time that he uses a period in the entire poem, and it completely halts the reader's momentum and even expectations to some degree, similarly to the colon in line 9. The reader was just previously visualizing the King's proud, thriving empire, and now, although hinted at earlier, is told that nothing of it is left. This information is presented as succinctly as possible, in less than a line, with a long pause at the

end. This sharp contrast in the two situations the reader is imagining reaches an almost humorous point, due to such a large difference.

Another comedic and ironic touch that Shelley puts in is the capitalization of "Wreck" in line 13. Just like the capitalized "Works" mentioned previously, the "Wreck" is referring to the same thing, just now in a destroyed state. The capitalization in "Wreck" is used to mock Ozymandias's former accomplishments in accordance with the saying "The bigger they are the harder they fall." If Ozymandias was willing to braggingly capitalize "Works", then he should have to suffer through either Shelley or the traveller's capitalization of "Wreck."

The conclusion of the poem describes the setting of the desert as "boundless and bare" and "lone and level." These alliterations help the reader visualize just how expansive the landscape around the crumbled statue is. Boundless means it goes on forever, and bare means there is nothing else there. It emphasizes just how insignificant Ozymandias's statue and empire is when compared to the physical setting. These adjectives also work if viewed through the mindset of time, instead of location. Time is boundless, it will continue to go on indefinitely, and Ozymandias's few decades of supremacy will forever be lost as time goes on. It will only ever be bare and lonesome.

This ending leaves the reader with a sense that they just learned a great lesson, but also with a general feeling of emptiness. Just as the words characterize Ozymandias as insignificant, it also reminds the reader of their own impermanence and overall trivial impact on the world. Whether this is intentional or not, it is undoubtedly a lasting effect of Shelley's work. The self-aware Shelley seems to accept, and even acknowledges this somber fact by realizing that although his works may live on for centuries to come, he will not.

This poem has a total of four unique characters: the narrator, the traveller, Ozymandias, and the sculptor. The narrator, who is most likely Shelley himself, is the one recalling the poem as told to him by the traveller. The introduction of this mysterious traveller may serve multiple roles. The most immediate effect is that it instills a sense of fantasy, wonder, and even adventure. Admittedly cliche, many grand tales start off similar to this, with phrases like "Once upon a time, in a faraway land…" Another use of the traveller, is that if Shelley did take any heat due to his British anti-colonialism sentiments, he could pass the blame to the fact that he is not actually the one saying these things, he is just innocently passing on the message. Although a weak excuse at best, it does at least somewhat distance himself from what is being said.

Shelley distancing himself from the poem via the interjection of a traveller perplexes William Freedman, especially because he considers him the "preeminently personal poet" (65). Freedman argues that the character is used for the main purpose of adding or removing validity to the story. "For what is quite undeniable is that - whether at the price or added profit of credibility - the poet distances himself from the poem's subject by having all details supplied by some unnamed traveler" (Freedman 65). He follows this thought by again remarking how unconventional this is for Shelley.

Ozymandias never actually appears in the story, only his statue, but the titular tyrant's few words help characterize him perfectly. The sculptor, on the other hand, contrasts Ozymandias's vanity and pride with his own forethought and experience. In the words of William Spanos, the two characters are "Ozymandias, who obviously symbolizes the innocent arrogance of youth and the unconscious life of action; and the sculptor, who symbolizes the

experienced humility of age (in the sense that the artist is the inheritor of the age-old wisdom of human experience) and the life of conscious contemplation" (14).

The "age-old wisdom" of the sculptor is easily seen by the words Shelley uses in the poem. The sculptor purposely depicted him with a frown, wrinkled lip, and sneer, and while this may be flattering to Ozymandias because it makes him seem strong and powerful, the sculptor did it ironically. He knew that Ozymandias was an egotist, and put those features on the statue to deride him, although Ozymandias remains unaware. This is reinforced by the clever but obvious double meaning of the phrase "The hand that mocked them" (line 8). The word mocked means created, as well as made fun of something. Sapnos also relates the two sets of characters by saying "The sculptor is to Ozymandias what the traveller is to the speaker" (15).When you think of this claim in terms of past vs present, as well as in terms of knowledge/experience vs ignorance/inexperience, it is a fitting analogy by both Sapnos and Shelley.

Besides the technical aspects and purely literary merit of the text, it functions as a political commentary by Shelley on the increasing cruelty and repression of regimes during his time, especially the empire of his homeland, Great Britain. Shelley just missed the French and Indian War and the American War of Independence, but was born just in time (1792) to grow up during both the French Revolutionary (1793-1801) and Napoleonic Wars (1802-1815). Britain's financial domination over the rest of Europe and naval superiority let them form the largest global empire in all of history (Morgan). Shelley was alive during the peak of this empire, and his opportunities to observe some of England's more unscrupulous tactics, from their countless military engagements to their championing of the slave trade, undoubtedly caused him to formulate some opinions that are evident in his writings.

It does not take much searching to find the political overtone in Ozymandias. Even just the basic themes of large empires falling and the ironic hubris of rulers applies to Britain just as well as any superpower. By writing a poem like this, Shelley takes on the role of the traveller or the sculptor in real life, trying to warn the country of their destructive ways and growing conceit. In an essay written by John Rodenbeck in which he inspects the factors that influenced the creation of Ozymandias, he remarks that "our own democratic age- an era when elected governments outdo any ancient monarchy in callousness and cruelty, in hypocrisy and mendacity, in globalized rapacity and greed-"Ozymandias" may well have more pith and relevance than ever before" (139-40). Even though some that argue the poem is not an explicit criticism of the British Empire, the political parallels that can be drawn and the lessons taught by the poem are timeless.

The ideas expressed in "Ozymandias" can also be found in many of Shelley's other poems. Supporting liberty and ridiculing large political powers are major themes in both Shelley's "England in 1819" and "The Masque of Anarchy."

"England in 1819" is a much less disguised condemnation of Britain by Shelley. The poem is a sonnet with an unorthodox rhyming scheme, just like "Ozymandias." In just 14 lines, Shelley criticizes the King, princes, the quality of life for the citizens, the corrupt army, the worthless laws, the immoral religion, and the senate. While "Ozymandias" is a subtle poke at the establishment, "England in 1819" is fundamentally a poetic rant. Without going into too much detail, one of the things that stands out about it is the powerful words used throughout, again like "Ozymandias". The multiple parts of the institution are described as "despised, muddy, leechlike, sanguine, Christless, Godless, and tempestuous." This clear frustration possessed by Shelley

makes it more likely to see the motives behind “Ozymandias” and understand the mentality he may have had while writing it. A noticable difference between the two poems besides the tone, is the ending. The ending of “England in 1819” reads “Are graves from which a glorious Phantom may / Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day” (lines 13-14). This is an optimistic take on a situation that was described as dire and unbelievable by Shelley in the preceding 12 lines. He still believes that somebody, something, or idea can save them from the current state of their country. This is very unlike the hopeless ending of “Ozymandias” which just leaves the reader with the complete destruction of a former empire.

Shelley’s other political poem “The Masque of Anarchy” is more overt than “Ozymandias” but not quite as blatant as “England in 1819.” “The Masque” is based on the Peterloo Massacre, an event similar to the Boston Massacre, where fifteen innocent civilians were killed by an oversized and agitated army. Once again, Shelley makes the regime look despotic and shameless by personifying Murder, Fraud, Hypocrisy, and their leader Anarchy, and their ruthless campaign of terror against a group of nonviolent citizens. Just like the profound and powerful line “My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings” (line 10), “The Masque” has its own inscription of power, this time on the brow of Anarchy himself. This chilling phrase “I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW!” (line 37) is then repeated by Anarchy’s followers. In both works, these bold words underscore the self-serving ambitions of the rulers. Just like “England in 1819”, it differs from “Ozymandias” by having a hopeful tone as the end approaches. “By fostering critical reflection, Shelley hopes, nonviolence can expose the reality of Anarchy's "ghastly masquerade" by which violence is dressed up with symbols of power, the "sceptre, crown and globe, / And the gold-inwoven robe" (lines 80-81)” (Borushko 104-105). Alongside a

physical embodiment of Hope being revived to take down Anarchy, the stanza “Rise like Lions after slumber / In unvanquishable number, /Shake your chains to earth like dew / Which in sleep had fallen on you -- / Ye are many -- they are few” (lines 151-155) is repeated over and over to enforce the belief that the collective resistance of citizens can defeat even the most repressive authority.

“Ozymandias” is the superior of these poems, because it conveys these sentiments and ideas succinctly and elegantly. It does not explicitly mention the British Empire or any governments of the time, so it can stand on its own, devoid of any political context, and still remain a forceful poem, with its universal themes applicable to multiple subjects. The careful word choice is apparent in every single line, and punctuation and structure only adding to the poem’s beauty. Full of wit and irony, hopefully Shelley’s “Ozymandias” can withstand the test of time, and not crumble away, like all great things do.

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