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## Ozymandias

### The Poem

“Ozymandias” is a sonnet composed by the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and named for its subject, with the Greek name of the Egyptian king Ramses II, who died in 1234 b.c.e. The poem follows the traditional structure of the fourteen-line Italian sonnet, featuring an opening octave, or set of eight lines, that presents a conflict or dilemma, followed by a sestet, or set of six lines, that offers some resolution or commentary upon the proposition introduced in the octave.

The poem is conventionally written in iambic pentameter (that is, ten syllables per line of coupled unstressed then stressed sounds), so the poem’s subject matter is framed both by the structural and metrical constraints chosen by the poet.

The first-person narrator of “Ozymandias” introduces a conversation he has chanced to have with a “traveller from an antique land” in line 1. The reader knows neither the identity of the traveler nor the circumstances wherein the poet has encountered the traveler but may assume he is a source of information about a strange and unfamiliar world.

The remaining thirteen lines of the poem quote verbatim the tale that the traveler has borne from his trek into the desert. The intrepid explorer has encountered “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone,” the vestiges of a statue in disrepair whose head lay as a “shattered visage” nearby. Despite its broken state, the “frown,” the “wrinkled lip” and “sneer of cold command” of the statue’s face bespeak its sculptor’s skill in capturing the vanity and self-importance of its subject.

The traveler remarks that the artist has “well those passions read which yet survive”—that is, those indications of the subject’s character, indelibly “stamped on...lifeless things”: “the hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed.”

The octave thus confronts the reader in its first movement with an ironic portrait of an ancient monarch whose fame and stature have been immortalized in a static gaze that connotes paradoxically both celebrity and dissolution. In the revelatory sestet which follows, the poet posits, through the testimony of the traveler, the fate of vainglorious men. On the pedestal, he finds written the great man’s empty boast: “My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,/ Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

Yet “Nothing beside remains” but ruin, a “colossal Wreck, boundless and bare” against the lonely landscape of sand and cruel, penetrating sunlight. A double irony is at work; neither the great man nor the work of the artist remains in credible shape to challenge or delight the imagination of those who would encounter it. King and artisan, mover and maker, share the same destiny. The poem ends with the reader/observer’s gaze fixed upon this pathetic legacy, contemplating his own mortality.

## Forms and Devices

The Italian sonnet presents the poet with the challenge of using an utterly familiar form in an innovative or provocative way. The chief variables within this form involve rhyme scheme. The traditional Italian sonnet features an *abba, abba, cde, cde* rhyme scheme, each letter representing a different end rhyme that is repeated in pattern.

In “Ozymandias,” Shelley chooses to forgo the conventional scheme and employs a more eccentric *abab, acdc, ece, fef* pattern that creates the immediate effect of a woven tapestry of sound and rhythm that helps to underscore the poem’s essential irony. As the reader’s expectations are unmet, the very syntax forced by the unusual rhyme of the poem creates tension that matches that of the theme.

Critics have long noted the “Chinese box” frame in which the story of Ozymandias has come to the poet and thus, indirectly, to the reader. Each line of the poem, from first to last, reveals successively one more layer of the narrative’s essential irony.

One learns first something of the poet’s conversation with the mysterious traveler “from an antique land.” The poet, in turn, reports but one tidbit of that conversation, “Who said—,” in the very words of the traveler. Laboriously, the speaker then moves through each wave of recognition and interpretation of what he has encountered, climaxing with the presentation of Ozymandias’s inscription.

Shelley’s sonnet is remarkable for its spare and stark imagery. The poet is determined to re-create the barren desert landscape, the poetic counterpoint to the morbid and deserved fate of Ozymandias, the pompous fool. To do so requires that he carefully circumscribe his choice of descriptors to connote neither grandeur nor panoramic vista, but rather singular loneliness and constrained, fragmented solitude. Hence such modifiers as “trunkless,” “Half-sunk,” “shattered,” “decay,” and “wreck” serve his purpose well.

Consequently, the compression of the sonnet form, the unconventional rhyme scheme, the point of view chosen for reader entry, and the carefully wrought diction of the poem achieve the effect the poet was seeking. Amid vast stretches of unbroken sameness, the traveler—followed by the poet, then the reader—comes upon a bleak personage whose severed limbs and head first shock and dismay, then elicit reluctant mockery for the egotism of its subject.

## Themes and Meanings

“Ozymandias” is at first glance a sonnet about the transitory nature of life and its pretensions of fame and fortune. The decaying, ancient statue bears witness to the fact that the pursuit of power and glory for their own sakes are not only fleeting, but they are also illusory, unworthy ambitions even within the lifetime of their seekers.

The nineteenth century was filled with “discoveries” of ancient landscapes, built upon a historiography of “great men,” who were to elicit the attention and admiration of a generation of scholars and writers. Shelley chose, however, to poke holes in the “great man” theory of history, questioning its validity and its rationality.

The poem also works on another level, however—as a candid, poignant confession by the artist that his work is also ephemeral, and that as style, manner, and fashion change, so do reputation and honor. Such a confessional spirit was particularly appropriate for Shelley and other Romantics, that clan of “rebel spirits”—among them William Blake; George Gordon; Lord Byron; John Keats; Samuel Taylor Coleridge; and William Wordsworth.

This new generation of poets flouted tradition, inventing their own vocabularies, subject matters, and poetic form, and generally laboring to raise the poet's consciousness of his own imagination to an unprecedented level. "Ozymandias" exemplifies both in theme and in execution these "rebellious" notions.

Often, the poet himself was the topic and focus of his poetry, rather than the grander themes of man and God or the courtship of ladies and gentlemen. Audiences for the first time were confronted with the artist's "personality," and not only his work. Autobiography, not history, was to become the focal point of literary endeavor—and literary criticism.

The Romantics revitalized the craft of poetry in the nineteenth century, rescuing it from the narrow constraints of "classicism" built upon elevated language, artificial form, and exaggerated dependence on tradition. The price paid for this departure was the risk of alienating themselves from public taste and private virtue. The Romantics, Shelley chief among them, constructed their own "traditions" in various manifestos about the components, meaning, and social utility of poetry, even offering advice about how their poetry should be interpreted.

More than that, Shelley, in works such as *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) and *A Defence of Poetry* (1840), attempted to create a public persona for the poet as an arbiter of morality, genius, and political order. Thus, the Romantic, as exemplified in Shelley himself, was peculiarly subject to the rather pretentious self-promotion of his vocation—not unlike the wizened Ozymandias of his sonnet.

The ancient king's narcissism, his relentless declarations of immortality and supremacy, might serve as warning also to the artist whose folly may lead him to similar vanity. Read this way, "Ozymandias" is a sober exhortation to poets and politicians alike to foster realistic assessments of their influence and worth; the disposition to make truth serve the selfish ends of vainglorious men is a theme of history Shelley discerned well in his own time and attempted to expose in his poetry. In that regard, "Ozymandias" remains a powerful antidote to artistic pretensions and political hypocrisy.

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