Ozymandias

POEM TEXT

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.

THEMES

THE TRANSIENCE OF POWER

One of Shelley's most famous works, "Ozymandias" describes the ruins of an ancient king's statue in a foreign desert. All that remains of the statue are two "vast" stone legs standing upright and a head half-buried in sand, along with a boastful inscription describing the ruler as the "king of kings" whose mighty achievements invoke awe and despair in all who behold them. The inscription stands in ironic contrast to the decrepit reality of the statue, however, underscoring the ultimate transience of political power. The poem critiques such power through its suggestion that both great rulers and their kingdoms will fall to the sands of time.

In the poem, the speaker relates a story a traveler told him about the ruins of a "colossal wreck" of a sculpture whose decaying physical state mirrors the dissolution of its subject's—Ozymandias's—power. Only two upright legs, a face, and a pedestal remain of Ozymandias's original statue, and even these individual parts of the statue are not in great shape: the face, for instance, is "shattered." Clearly, time hasn't been kind to this statue, whose pitiful state undercuts the bold assertion of its inscription. The fact that even this "king of kings" lies decaying in a distant desert suggests that no amount of power can withstand the merciless and unceasing passage of time.

The speaker goes on to explain that time not only destroyed this statue, it also essentially erased the entire kingdom the statue was built to overlook. Shelley immediately follows the king's declaration found on the pedestal of the statue—"Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"—with the line "Nothing beside remains." Such a savage contradiction makes the king's prideful dare almost comically naïve. Ozymandias thought his works and legacy would live forever and while he himself died he believed that he would leave a lasting and intimidating legacy through what he had built, but his words are ultimately empty, as everything he built has crumbled. The people and places he ruled over are gone, leaving only an abandoned desert whose "lone and level sands" imply that not even a trace of the kingdom's former glory can be discerned. The pedestal's claim that onlookers should despair at Ozymandias's works thus takes on a new and ironic meaning: one despairs not at Ozymandias's power, but at how powerless time and decay make everyone.

Shelley also uses the specific example of Ozymandias to make a broader pronouncement about the ephemeral nature of power and, in turn, to implicitly critique tyranny. Shelley's language

evokes the image of a cruel leader. His Ozymandias wears a "frown" along with the "sneer of cold command." That such "passions" are now recorded only on "lifeless things" (i.e. the statue) is a clear rebuke of such a ruler, and suggests that the speaker believes such tyranny now only exists on the face of a dead and crumbling piece of stone.

The poem's depiction of the destruction of Ozymandias and his tyranny isn't entirely fictional: Ozymandias is the Greek name for the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II, who dramatically expanded Egypt's empire and who had several statues of himself built throughout Egypt. In fact, the Ancient Greek writer Diodorus Siculus reported the following inscription on the base of one of Ozymandias's statues: "King of Kings am I, Ozymandias. If anyone would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass one of my works." By alluding to an actual ancient empire, and an actual king, Shelley reminds readers that history is full of the rises and falls of empires. No power is permanent, regardless of how omnipotent a ruler believes himself to be. Even the "king of kings" may one day be a forgotten relic of an "antique land."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-5
- Lines 8-13

THE POWER OF ART

Shelley's poem "Ozymandias" famously describes a ruined statue of an ancient king in an empty desert. Although the king's statue boastfully commands onlookers to "Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair," there are no works left to examine: the king's cities, empire, and power have all disappeared over time. Yet even as the poem insists that "nothing beside" the shattered statue and its pedestal remains, there is one thing that actually has withstood the centuries: art. The skillful rendering of the statue itself and the words carved alongside it have survived long after Ozymandias and his kingdom turned to dust, and through this Shelley's poem positions art as perhaps the most enduring tool in preserving humanity's legacy.

Although the statue is a "wreck" in a state of "decay," its individual pieces show the skill of the sculptor and preserve the story of Ozymandias. The face is "shattered," leaving only a mouth and nose above the desert sand, but the "frown," "wrinkled lip," and "sneer" clearly show Ozymandias's "passions" (that is, his pride, tyranny, and disdain for others). The fragments interpret and preserve the king's personality and show onlookers throughout history what sort of a man and leader Ozymandias truly was. These fragments, then, are examples of art's unique ability to capture and relate an individual's character even after their death. In fact, the poem explicitly emphasizes art's ability to bring personalities to life: the speaker explains that Ozymandias's "passions" "yet survive" on the broken statue despite being carved on "lifeless" stone. Ozymandias may be dead, yet, thanks to the sculptor who "read" those "passions" and "mocked," or made an artistic reproduction of them, his personality and emotions live.

In addition to highlighting the sculptor's artistic skill, Shelley's poem also elevates the act of writing through its focus on the inscription of the statue's pedestal. The pedestal preserves Ozymandias' identity even more explicitly than the statue itself. The inscription reveals his name, his status as royalty ("King of Kings"), and his command for "Mighty" onlookers to "despair" at his superiority and strength. His words are thus a lasting testament to his hubris, yet it is notably only the words themselves—rather than the threat behind them—that survive. Without this inscription, none would know Ozymandias's name nor the irony of his final proclamation. In other words, his legacy and its failure only exist because a work of art—specifically, a written work—preserved them. The poem therefore suggests art as a means to immortality; while everything else disappears, art, even when broken and half-buried in sand, can carry humanity's legacy.

This power of art is reflected by the composition of the poem itself. Shelley was aware that the ancient Greek writer Diodorus Siculus had described a statue of the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II and had transcribed the inscription on its pedestal as "King of Kings am I, Ozymandias. If anyone would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass one of my works." Shelley's poem exists solely because of Siculus's description: Shelley and his friend and fellow writer Horace Smith had challenged each other to a friendly competition over who could write the best poem inspired by Siculus's description. This poem was Shelley's entry, and it became by far the more famous of the two. Like Siculus' description of the statue, this poem keeps Ozymandias's story and words alive for subsequent generations. The very composition of this poem, then, dramatizes the power of art: art can preserve people, objects, cities, and empires, giving them a sort of immortality, and letting future generations "look on [past] works" not with despair, but with wonder.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-12

MAN VERSUS NATURE

As a Romantic poet, Shelley was deeply respectful of nature and skeptical of humanity's attempts to dominate it. Fittingly, his "Ozymandias" is not simply a warning about the transience of political power, but also an assertion of humanity's impotence compared to the natural world. The statue the poem describes has very likely become a "colossal Wreck" precisely because of the relentless forces of sand and

wind erosion in the desert. This combined with the fact that "lone and level sands" have taken over everything that once surrounded the statue suggests nature as an unstoppable force to which human beings are ultimately subservient.

Shelley's imagery suggests a natural world whose might is far greater than that of humankind. The statue is notably found in a desert, a landscape hostile towards life. That the statue is "trunkless" suggests sandstorms eroded the torso or buried it entirely, while the face being "shattered" implies humanity's relative weakness: even the destruction of a hulking piece of stone is nothing for nature. The fact that the remains of the statute are "half sunk" under the sand, meanwhile, evokes a kind of burial. In fact, the statement "nothing beside remains" can be read as casting the fragments of the statue as the "remains" of a corpse. The encroaching sand described in the poem suggests that nature has steadily overtaken a once great civilization and buried it, just as nature will one day reclaim everything humanity has built, and every individual human as well.

The desert, not Ozymandias, is thus the most powerful tyrant in Shelley's poem. It is "boundless" and "stretch[es] far away" as though it has conquered everything the eye can see, just as it has conquered Ozymandias's statue. Ozymandias may be the king of kings, but even kings can be toppled by mere grains of sand.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-4
- Lines 12-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said

The opening line and half of the poem introduces two of the poem's speakers: the "I" of the poem who meets a traveller, and the traveller whose words make up the rest of the poem. Put another way, these lines establish a structure in which the speaker acts as a kind of frame through which the reader is exposed to what the traveler has seen. The speaker has never actually seen the land the traveller comes from, nor the statue that the traveller will go on to describe.

The reader, then, encounters the statue through first the words of the speaker, and then also through the words of the traveller. By building such a layered structure, Shelley begins to establish the theme of art in the poem, and the way that art, and interpretations of art, can reverberate from person to person in a way that can endure.

It's also worth taking a few moments to consider the traveller in the poem. On the one hand, the traveller can be read as being exactly as described: a traveller coming from a journey in a land with a deep history—an ancient, or "antique," land. However, there is a second way to interpret the traveller. Shelley was inspired to write "Ozymandias" after reading the ancient Greek writer Diodorus Siculus's description of a real-life statue of Ozymandias. As a result, it's possible to argue that the traveller from an ancient land who the speaker encounters actually is Siculus himself, and that the meeting between the speaker and traveller actually occurs when the speaker reads Siculus' account.

LINES 2-3

—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,

"Ozymandias" is an example of ekphrasis, which is a written representation of visual art. The ekphrasis in Ozymandias begins in its second line, as the traveller describes the statue in the desert. The details of that description are both important and symbolic. The traveller's description of the "vast" legs emphasizes the large proportions of the statue, and by extension the might and power of whoever built the statue (or ordered it to be built). The fact that the legs still "stand" upright makes the statue seem stable and immovable, as though it has firmly planted its feet. However, this stability is at odds with the fact that the statue is actually in ruins: it is "trunkless," or missing its torso. The legs stand alone, sticking up strangely from the desert. The poem then emphasizes the brokenness of the statue through what might be called a purposeful vagueness: note how the third line ends with the words "Near them, on the sand," without actually describing what is near the legs. This vagueness creates a sense of ruins that are indistinct and hard to make out. In just these two lines of description the poem has made clear that a once huge statue has collapsed, and in doing so it begins to sketch the various meanings that this destroyed work of art communicates: the "vast" power it was originally *meant* to convey, and to an extent still does, but also the loss of that power.

The traveller also introduces the relationship between nature and the statue in this section: sandstorms and time itself probably caused the statue to collapse. Since the statue naturally functions as a symbol of the human culture and power that built it, having it be broken apart by sand suggests nature's even greater power, and mankind's helplessness in the face of nature's indifference.

The punctuation of these lines dramatizes both the broken glory of the statue and the power of nature. Line 2 is enjambed—there is no punctuation to pause the flow of the line after the word "stone." The description of the legs, then, stretches across two lines, much the way that the legs still stand, stretching across time from Ozymandias's era until now.

However, the poem has a caesura both before and after the description of the legs: a dash precedes the description, and an ellipsis follows it. These punctuation marks break up the lines into fragments, both visually and aurally, and these fragments are reminiscent of the fragments of the statue itself. In fact, an ellipsis itself is dots separated by spaces(....), and is therefore reminiscent of the fragments of the statue that are spread out on the sand. Meanwhile, the two caesuras mean that the description of the legs is literally cut off from the rest of the description, just as the legs themselves are cut off and "trunkless." The structure of the poem mirrors and enhances the meaning of its words.

The meter in this lines also evokes both the power and the brokenness of the statue being described. "Ozymandias" is a sonnet, and sonnets are typically written in iambic pentameter. And these lines *are* written predominantly in iambic pentameter. But there are also irregularities to the meter. "Two vast" is actually a spondee, in which both syllables are stressed, rather than the unstressed-stressed pattern of an iamb. The double stress on "Two vast" puts extra emphasis on the immense size of the legs. In addition, the meter of the third line looks like this:

Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,

The line starts with a trochee ("Stand in") that puts an unexpected stress on the first word, again emphasizing those immense legs standing in the desert. Then it has a standard iamb with the unstressed "the" followed by the stressed first syllable of "desert." And then, while the next foot is also an iamb, it splits the foot in half with the ellipses. The foot, in other words, is broken in two, just as the legs are just two separate things, no longer connected by the rest of the statue's body, because that body has collapsed.

LINES 4-5

Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,

These two lines continue the description of the statue, and continues to juggle the themes of art, nature, and the transience of power.

On the one hand, the face (or "viasage") of the statue has been damaged by time and nature. It is "half sunk" in sand. It's been "shattered." And yet, even so, the parts of the face that remain are enough to convey realistic facial expressions and, therefore, a sense of the statue's subject. The statue "frowns," "sneers," and has a "wrinkled lip," an expression often connected to disgust or scorn. Line 5 ends on the words "cold command," which emphasizes that the statue is of someone who commanded, a ruler or tyrant. In conveying all of this information, the poem:

- Establishes that the subject of the statue, Ozymandias, was politically powerful, and yet at the same time the brokenness of the statue emphasizes that such power does not last.
- Makes clear that nature, in the form of the sands into which the "visage" is half sunk, is what has undone the statue. Further, because sand is commonly used in hourglasses, the use of sands point also to the role that time plays in breaking down things of human power
- Portrays the way that art can capture and communicate the personality and ruling style of someone from thousands of years ago, the way that art can endure.

Shelley also plays with alliteration in these lines to highlight both the brokenness of the statue and Ozymandias's cruelty. The sibilant "s" sound dominates line 4 ("Half sunk a shattered visage lies"), suggesting a hissing, like the sound of something slowly sinking under sand. Meanwhile, the percussive "c" alliteration in "cold command" gives the line a hard, militaristic feel, suggesting Ozymandias's iron rule.

Also note that the rhyme scheme in these two lines breaks from that of the sonnet tradition. In a normal Shakespearean sonnet that follows a typical ABABCDCD pattern through the first 8 lines of the poem, a new rhyme, the "C" rhyme, would occur at the end of line 5. However, Shelley has put an extra "A" rhyme at that location with the word "Command" (so lines 1, 3, and 5 all rhyme). There are a variety of ways to interpret this broken rhyme scheme, all of which are valid and intertwined. First, it emphasizes the word "command," and therefore Ozymandias's former political power. Second, breaking the rhyme scheme here thematically connects with the broken statue. Third, it's possible to argue that Shelley is suggesting that time broke Ozymandias's cruel commands as easily as he himself broke the commands of the sonnet form.

Shelley also plays with rhyme in these lines in another way: "frown" in line 4 is supposed to rhyme with "stone" in line 2, but do not quite have matching vowels. This is an example of a slant-rhyme. In this case the discordance introduced by the slant rhyme can be read as another way of breaking the traditional pattern of the sonnet, or as a way of hinting that Ozymandias's sense of having eternal "cold command"—as communicated by the statue with that expression—is inaccurate.

LINES 6-8

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;

In lines 6-8, the poem shifts from describing the statue to focusing on the sculptor who made the statue. According to the traveller, the realism of the features on the statues face reveal

that the sculptor did not simply portray Ozymandias's physical characteristics, but rather could "read" the "passions" that drove Ozymandias, as though those passions were lines in a book. In other words, the poem describes the artist as having a deeper kind of understanding that allows him (or her) to not just represent the surface of things, but rather to know and recreate the heart. The sculptor originally read those "passions" on Ozymandias, and then carved them onto the stone, where they could be likewise read by passersby such as the traveller who then went on to describe the statue to the speaker. The "passions," so perfectly "read" and then re-created by the sculptor, thus live on even though the statue itself is mostly destroyed, showing the power of art to "survive" when other things fail. The fact that the traveller says the emotions "survive" instead of some other synonym for "last" or "endure" heightens the contrast between the seemingly alive emotions and the "lifeless" statue. Ultimately, because of art, Ozymandias's personality lives on, even though he is long dead.

Line 8 is notable because it makes a subtle pun by playing on different meanings of the word "mock."

- "Mock" can refer to creating a design or copy, as in the sentence, "The designer mocked up a front page for the website."
- "Mock" can mean "to make fun of."

In line 8, then, the traveller is simultaneously saying that the sculptor made an excellent likeness of Ozymandias, *and* that by portraying Ozymandias's cruelty so vividly, that the sculptor ridiculed, or at least implicitly critiqued, him. This double meaning of mock also resonates with a possible double meaning of the phrase "which yet survive" in line 7. That phrase can be read as meaning that Ozymandias's tyrannical passions live on through the art of the statue. But it can also be read to mean that Ozymandias's tyrannical passions, which are portrayed on the statue, continue to survive among modern humanity. In that reading, the sonnet, which describes Ozymandias becoming forgotten, could be read as a warning or mockery of any modern people who hold ideas about power that are similar to Ozymandias's.

Another aspect of line 8 that bears some exploration has to do with the phrase "the heart that fed." While it's fairly clear that the "hand" mentioned in the first half of line 8 belongs to the sculptor (and not to Ozymandias), it's harder to figure out who the "heart" belongs to. The "heart" can be read as belonging to Ozymandias, in which case the heart is feeding Ozymandias's passions. Alternatively, the heart can belong to the sculptor, in which case the sculptor's heart feeds the sculptor's hand—the heart drives the sculptor's artistic skill. What's interesting is that in *either* reading, it is the art that has allowed Ozymandias's passions to survive through time. Either the sculptor's art has captured and portrayed Ozymandias's "heart," or the sculptor's art, driven by his heart, has captured Ozymandias's "passions." It is only art, and not political might, that gives Ozymandias any kind of immortality.

Meanwhile, as these lines praise the artistic craft of the sculptor who made the statue, they also display Shelley's own mastery of poetic craft. Shelley's use of enjambment at the end of line 6 stretches the phrase about Ozymandias's emotions "surviving" through art into the next line—so as a line describes something surviving (or "stretching") across time, the line itself stretches as well. Line 7 is then marked by the use of a caesura, in the form of a comma after the word "survive," followed by a shift in meter: "stamped on" is trochaic, not iambic.

> Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,

The caesura and unexpected stress on "stamp" strongly emphasize that word, and by extension the way that an artist can turn the lifeless into something that lives—which Ozymandias's own power couldn't do at all. Further, by showing his own artistic hand so clearly at the very moment when his poem is discussing the sculptor's skill, Shelley reminds his readers that he himself is as artistically adroit as the sculptor his poem praises.

LINES 9-11

> *And on the pedestal, these words appear:*
> *My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;*
> *Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!*

Line 9 explains that not only did some of the visual artistry of the sculpture survive the ravages of nature and time, so too did some words. The poem then quotes the words ("My name is Ozymandias...") and it becomes clear that the words are not the sculptor's, but rather Ozymandias's own. Ozymandias's statement is enormously boastful, and basically say that he is so powerful and accomplished that even other powerful and accomplished people will despair if they try to measure themselves against him. Ozymandias's words are also revealing about *his* views about legacy and political power. Ozymandias believes that his legacy will outlive him, and that those who see this statue will also see all of his "works," which can be understood to mean the entire empire over which he rules. Put more broadly, Ozymandias believes that political power, and the things that can be built with political power, will endure, and that therefore his own legacy will endure as well.

Of course, since the poem before these lines has made clear that the statue is "shattered," Ozymandias's lines are delightfully ironic: the arrogant Ozymandias thought things would turn out one way, but they turned out a different way. His statue is in ruins, which implies that he—who thought all others would quake at his memory—has been forgotten. His political power could not outlast the ravages of nature or time, and the art through which he sought to project his power has

instead captured his essential cruelty and vanity.

The meter and rhyme scheme seem to highlight the hollowness of Ozymandias's words, as nothing in these lines quite follows the expectations of the sonnet form. The rhyme scheme, for one, has gone haywire, with a rogue D rhyme appearing in line 10 ("Kings" which rhymes with "things" in line 7), when in a typical sonnet that D rhyme would be in line 8. Meanwhile, "appear" in line 9 is only a slant rhyme with "despair" in line 11, so the sounds do not properly align as one might expect. The meter is similarly a bit off in these lines. Line 10 has eleven syllables rather than the usual ten, while line 11 has two trochees in it ("Look on" and "y, and," where the "y" is the second syllable of "mighty"). These deviations from the typical sonnet rules imply that Ozymandias's great vision of himself as an eternally terrifying ruler is itself discordant, and does not match reality.

LINES 12-14

> *Nothing beside remains. Round the decay*
> *Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare*
> *The lone and level sands stretch far away."*

When, in lines 10 and 11 of the poem, Ozymandias's proclamation implying that he will always be remembered and feared himself is quoted, it was immediately clear that his boast was empty. After all, the boast was made on the pedestal of a toppled, ruined statue. But line 12 ratchets the irony of Ozymandias's failed claims to another level. First, the line links the statue fragments to rotting human flesh rather than stone: they are "decay," and the word "remains" in the phrase "Nothing beside remains" could just as easily refer to human remains, or a corpse, as it could to the verb "to remain." Through this language, the poem connects the statue's collapse to Ozymandias's death—both his literal death and his "death" from history in the form being forgotten.

But these lines also mark a more profound change in the nature of the poem's irony. In these lines, the focus of the poem shifts from the statue itself to the land surrounding. As it does, the subject of the poem's irony *also* shifts. Up until this point, the irony in the poem might be described as being a *delicious* irony, in which the reader could enjoy how the arrogant Ozymandias, who was so certain of his legacy, had in fact been forgotten. But as the poem concludes and it becomes clear that not only was Ozymandias buried by nature and time, so was the entire empire he once commanded, the irony ceases to be something that the reader can enjoy. The poem concludes with an image of a monotonous expanse of sand: nothing grows on or in it, it doesn't vary, and it stretches as far as the eye can see. Since the desert has destroyed *everything* human-made (and not just Ozymandias), the poem implies that the joke, which up until this point the reader thought was being played on Ozymandias, is in fact being played on all of humanity. It's not just Ozymandias who will end up lost and forgotten. It's everyone, and everything human-made. While it would be silly to despair at the might of forgotten Ozymandias, the poem's conclusion suggests that the reader *should* despair about ending up like him: forgotten, buried by the awesome and implacable sands of nature and time.

However, despite this pessimistic reading, an optimistic one can simultaneously exist. After all, the statue may be broken, but it still caught the traveller's attention enough for him to tell the speaker about Ozymandias, and then the speaker in turn preserved Ozymandias's legacy in this poem. This chain of events demonstrates that art, whether statue or sonnet, can preserve individuals, passions, and even give a form of artistic immortality.

The formal elements of the poem also show this tug of war between nature's all-encompassing force and art's power to preserve and persevere. The period at the end of the phrase "Nothing beside remains" creates a caesura in the middle of line 12, which offers a kind of moment of silence. This silence can be seen as embodying the "nothing" that remains, but also as creating a moment of pause in which the reader can realize the full import of the fact that the cosmic joke being played on Ozymandias is also being played on them.

Meanwhile, Shelley uses his craft to fully portray the sublime beauty and awesome power of nature. Lines 12 and 13, which describe the desert, are both enjambed—the only two consecutive enjambed lines in the poem. This stretching of the description of the desert across two lines enhances the sense of the desert being "boundless," since the lines themselves continue one to the next without bound. Shelley also uses alliteration to augment his description of the desert. The desert is: "Boundless and bare," "lone and level," and the "sands stretch." This dense alliteration of echoing B's, smooth L's, and hissing S's perfectly capture an endless desert of flat, shifting sands.

Finally, the rhyme scheme of the sonnet has up until this point mostly followed the template of a Shakespearean sonnet, except with an extra A and E rhyme inserted into the pattern. However, the pattern breaks more dramatically at the poem's end: because two additional rhymes have been inserted earlier in the poem, the poem can't fit within its fourteen lines the traditional rhyming couplet that typically ends a Shakespearean sonnet. With the couplet missing, it is as though the sonnet itself is fractured, like the statue. And yet, even though the poem is fragmented, the fact that is being read means that it, like the statue it describes, survives. Where all else fails, art endures and preserves.

It is almost as if in writing the poem that Shelley is responding to Diodorus Siculus's original transcription of the inscription on the real-life statue of Osymandias: "King of Kings am I, Osymandias. If anyone would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass one of my works." Osymandias's empire was lost to time, his statue shattered, but so long as Shelley's poem

is being read, it survives. Even as his poem describes Ozymandias's works, Shelley seems to imply that great art in general, and this poem in particular, surpass those works.

SYMBOLS

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 .

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "sand"
- **Lines 13-14:** "boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away"

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. And the statue also symbolizes the way that art can have power beyond the intentions of even those who commission it. While Ozymandias saw the statue as a way to forever capture his power and magnificence, the poem hints that the statue so thoroughly reveals Ozymandias's haughty cruelty that it also serves to mock him. While Ozymandias's great works have been destroyed and disappeared by nature and time, art in the form of the stature endures, both keeping Ozymandias's memory alive, but not in entirely the ways he would have wanted.

It is also possible to interpret the statue in a third way. Because Ozymandias is clearly a tyrant, the fact that the statue has become a "wreck" hints that the statue might symbolically represent the speaker of the poem's hope and belief that tyranny will always crumble, which also happened to be one of Shelley's own personal political passions.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-8
- Line 13

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

Shelley uses enjambment, which involves a string of words stretching across the boundary of the end of one line into the beginning of the next, to have his lines enact the stretching of time or sand that his words describe. This use of enjambment occurs first in line two, when describing the statue's legs that still stand despite the passage of time: the fact that the content of the line stretches to the next mirrors the way that the legs themselves have also endured through time. Shelley's enjambment of line 6 stretches the phrase about Ozymandias's "passions" being preserved in his stature all the way into line 7; this stretching of the flow of the text across two lines again seems to mirror the way that the sculpture has allowed Ozymandias's passions to similarly survive.

The poem also uses enjambment to end the poem, in lines 12 and 13. Once again this use of enjambment seems to support the idea of vastness and the passage of time, but these lines describe not the survival of a human structure, such as the statue, through time, but rather the "boundless" desert that has swallowed up all remnants of Ozymandias's empire other than the stature. It is also worth noting that lines 12 and 13 are the only two consecutive enjambed lines in the poem—which suggests that the endurance of the desert is even more powerful than the endurance of any human artifact, and will in the end wear all traces of humanity away.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "stone / Stand"
- **Lines 6-7:** "read / Which"
- **Lines 12-13:** "decay / Of"
- **Lines 13-14:** "bare / The"

CAESURA

Shelley's caesuras create moments of unexpected silence and break lines into smaller pieces, which echoes the fragmentation of the statue and silence of the desert. For example, lines 2 and 3 feature a dash after "who said" and an ellipsis after "desert." These punctuation marks break each line up into small fragments, and since they are introduced for the first time when the poem describes the statue fragments, these broken up lines are reminiscent of the fragments of the statue itself. In fact, the ellipsis itself is a punctuation mark made up of

fragments: it contains three dots separated by spaces. As a result, it even more closely embodies the fragments of the statue spread out on the sand.

Also note how the caesura in line 12 following "Nothing beside remains" creates a moment of silence after the sentence. This unexpected pause accomplishes a number of things. It is an aural echo of the nothingness that remains. It serves as an actual kind of "moment of silence" at a funeral, in this case a funeral for all of Ozymandias's dead empire. And it creates a moment of reflection in which the reader can experience (and enjoy) the full irony of Ozymandias's arrogance about his enduring legacy and the actual fact of that legacy having been wiped away by time and nature.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "—"
- **Line 3:** ". . . ."
- **Line 12:** "."

ALLITERATION

Shelley uses alliteration most frequently in the poem to enact the all-encompassing nature of the sand. For instance, the "s" dominates line 4 ("Half sunk a shattered visage lies"), a hissing sound like the sound of something slowly sinking under sand.

The alliterative sounds Shelley uses to describe the sand in other parts of the poem function similarly: the desert is "Boundless and bare," "lone and level," and the "sands stretch." This dense alliteration in so few lines likewise enhances the monotony of the endless sand that has swallowed up Ozymandias's empire.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "s," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 13:** "b," "b"
- **Line 14:** "l," "l," "s," "s"

IRONY

As the inscription on the pedestal demonstrates, Ozymandias thought his "works" — both his statue and the presumably vast empire that his statue once overlooked — would testify to his might and strike terror in the hearts of onlookers forever. Instead, the desert and time together destroyed those works, leaving only tiny scraps of their former glory and sand. "Nothing beside remains."

There is irony in this outcome: what Ozymandias expected is not the outcome that occurred. But there is a deeper irony as well. Ozymandias commanded all onlookers to "Look on my Works, ye MIghty, and despair!" The irony is that after reading the inscription on the stature, onlookers *will* look on Ozymandias's now invisible "Works" and despair. But what they will fear is not Ozymandias, but rather nature and time, which destroyed whatever it was that Ozymandias built.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-14:** "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."

VOCABULARY

Antique (Line 1) - The traveller comes from an "antique" land, which implies that his nation is ancient in the sense that it has a deep connection to the past, or perhaps even that its past outweighs its present.However, the word "antique" in the poem also has a metatextual connotation: Shelley's poem was inspired by the ancient Greek writer Diodorus Siculus's account of a real-life destroyed statue of Ozymandias, and the poem even paraphrases Siculus's account in lines 10 and 11. As a result, the traveller from an "ancient" land could be Siculus himself (and the "meeting" between the speaker and the traveler would actually be the act of reading Siculus's account). In this way of looking at the poem, "antique" can be seen as referring to the book containing the account, which could be described as being "antique" either because it is itself old, or because it contains ancient writings.

Trunkless (Line 2) - Trunkless here means "without a torso." Shelley uses this word to introduce readers to the statue's ruined condition. It has two legs standing upright, but the body to which those legs should connect has fallen and disappeared.

Visage (Line 4) - Visage means "face," and in this case refers to the face of Ozymandias's statue. Though shattered, at minimum the face's mouth and nose are intact, which is enough to convey the ancient ruler's personality: cruel, condescending, and tyrannical.

Passions (Line 6) - "Passions" refers to Ozymandias's emotions, and in particular, his arrogance, hatred, and sense of superiority. The sculptor originally read those "passions" on Ozymandias, and then carved them onto the stone, where they could be likewise read by passersby like the traveller who describes the statue to the speaker.

Stamped (Line 7) - Stamped means "carved or engraved." However, "stamped" also calls to mind what Ozymandias wanted to do to his opposition: stamp them out. The use of "stamped" implies that Ozymandias's tyranny is permanently branded into the statue along with his other features.

Mocked (Line 8) - As he describes the artist who made the statue of Ozymandies, the traveller notes the features of the statues face as well as the "hand that mocked them." Mock, in

this context, has two meanings. First, it means both to make a copy or replica, as in the phrase "mock up." Second, it means to make fun of someone, as in "the bully mocked his victim's appearance."By using the word "mock," the traveller suggests on the one hand that the sculptor made an excellent likeness of Ozymandias, but also that, by portraying Ozymandias's arrogant cruelty so vividly, the sculptor ridiculed, or at least implicitly critiqued him.

Pedestal (Line 9) - A pedestal is a platform on which something—in this case, a statue—stands. Ozymandias's words are inscribed on the statue's pedestal.

Ozymandias (Line 10) - Ozymandias is the ancient Greek name for the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II. Shelley had read the ancient Greek writer Diodorus Siculus's transcription of the inscription on Ozymandias's pedestal, and this poem emerged from a friendly poetry competition Shelley had with a friend, where the prompt was to compose a sonnet incorporating that transcription. Shelley may also have been influenced by newspaper reports that the British Museum had acquired the large head of an Egyptian statue, which ultimately turned out to be Ozymandias's.

Remains (Line 12) - "Remains" in this poem can have three different meanings. It can be the verb "to remain," so the sentence reads "Nothing else is left," or it could be one of two nouns. "Remains" can refer to a historical relic or object, so the sentence would mean that there is nothing left apart from the artifact of the statue. Or "remains" could mean a corpse, in which case the broken statue is being metaphorically portrayed as a dead human body: there was nothing besides these remains.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Ozymandias" is a sonnet, and as is traditional for a sonnet the poem is made up of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter. However, after fulfilling those two most basic rules of the sonnet, "Ozymandias" then goes on to play with and break the form.

The poem does this in a few ways. First, it plays with rhyme scheme by generally, but completely, following the scheme of a famous type of sonnet called a Shakespearean sonnet.

In addition, while the poem's rhyme scheme is mostly that of a Shakespearean sonnet, its structure is more similar to that of another type of sonnet called a Petrarchan sonnet. More specifically, the poem uses the Petrarchan structure of having an eight line octave followed by a six-line sestet:

- Octave: Lines 1-8 of the poem focus on the statue
- Sestet: Lines 9-14 of the poem focus on the pedestal and surroundings.

The poem, then, invokes two of the most prominent types of sonnet—Shakespearean and Petrarchan—but then breaks both types by refusing to follow the full conventions of either one. This "breaking" of the poetic conventions that it references can be read as an echo of the broken work of art—the statue—that "Ozymandias" describes.

METER

As is typical for a sonnet, the meter of "Ozymandias" is generally iambic pentameter, in which lines are ten syllables long with an alternating unstressed-stressed pattern. For instance, line 9 of the poem is perfect iambic pentameter:

> And on the pedestal, these words appear:

However, the meter of the poem also has several moments of irregularity that it uses to create particular effects. For instance, in line 2, there is a slight spondee (stressed-stressed) on "two vast" that emphasizes the immensity of the statue's legs:

> Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone

Similarly, the third line begins not with the expected iamb but with a trochee (stressed-unstressed) before returning to iambs for the rest of the line:

> Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,

The trochee puts the stress on "stand," emphasizing the strange sight of these two legs (and nothing else) sticking up out of the flat desert.

In line 7, Shelley includes a caesura in the form of a comma, and then emphasizes the pause from the comma by changing the meter: "stamped on" is trochaic, not iambic.

> Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,

The caesura and break in the metrical pattern serve to emphasize the "stamp," which in turn highlights the way that the sculptor's artistic talent permanently captures the traits of Ozymandias such that they have endured through time when everything else that Ozymandias created has disappeared. (It also hints that Shelley believes that his own artistic talent, which is exemplified in his use of the caesura and changed meter, also can create an enduring work of art.)

In lines 10 and 11, the poem's play with meter gets a bit more extreme.

> My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;

Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!

The best way to look at the meter of line 10 is probably to read the "dias" in Ozymandias as a single syllable (though of course it isn't). Doing so makes that line iambic pentameter in theory, but in practice the fact that "dias" truly is two syllables elongates the line in odd ways. The metrical oddities then continue in line 11, too, since “Look on” is trochaic, as is the foot made up of the "y" in "mighty" followed by the "and." Rather than being smooth, the meter of these lines is spiky. This spikiness, in the only lines of the poem that quote Ozymandias directly, makes them stand out against the more regular meter of the rest of the poem. This fits with Ozymandias's speech in two ways: first, it shows how Ozymandias saw himself as standing above and separate from the rest of the world. Second, though, it also echoes the way that only the legs of Ozymandias's statue now spike up from the otherwise flat, regular sands of the desert. Ozymandias may have stood out for a while, but nature and time have ground him back down.

Overall, throughout the poem, then, Shelley plays with, or breaks, the meter. In part, he does this to emphasize aspects of individuals lines. But it is also possible to argue that the shifting meter in the poem has a more general thematic purpose as well: that it makes the poem feel as “broken” as the statue, while at the same time showing Shelley's skill to be at least the equal of the sculptor.

RHYME SCHEME

"Ozymandias" is a sonnet, and sonnets have strict rules about rhyme scheme. However, Shelley deliberately broke those rules when writing the poem. More specifically, the poem largely follows the rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet, which traditionally follows the pattern of ABABCDCDEFEFGG: six sets alternating rhymes braided together, and then a rhyming couplet at the end.

"Ozymandias" mostly follows this pattern, but introduces three important deviations:

- An extra A rhyme inserted into line 5
- An extra E rhyme inserted into line 9
- No concluding couplet

The result is an entirely non-standard sonnet rhyme scheme of ABABACDCEDEFEF. Note also that the poem plays with its rhymes in another way: a number of its rhymes are actually slant rhymes (“stone” and “frown” in lines 2 and 4, "read" and "fed" in lines 6 and 8, and “appear” and “despair” in lines 9 and 11).

These changes to the traditional rhyme scheme heighten the similarities between the poem and the statue that it describes: both are works of art that appear to be broken and missing pieces, and both still endure despite the passing of time.

SPEAKER

The poem's primary speaker is anonymous and genderless, and all Shelley tells us about them is that they "met a traveller from an antique land." The poem pointedly does not include details about what this speaker thinks about the traveller, about Ozymandias, or about the destruction of Ozymandias's works. In fact, the speaker seems to primarily serve a function of distancing the reader from what is being told, as the speaker is relating a story told to him or her by the traveller.

This traveller, the poem's second speaker, is likewise anonymous and genderless (although statistically, their extensive travels to the middle of isolated deserts would make it likely they were male, as women were strongly discouraged from being adventurers or making any sort of perilous journey when Shelley wrote the poem). Some readings of the poem speculate that the "traveller" is actually the ancient Greek writer Diodorus Siculus, whose description of a statue of Ozymandias inspired Shelley to write his poem. In this interpretation, the "meeting" of the speaker and the "traveller" occurs through the act of the speaker reading Siculus's words.

Regardless, the traveller seems interested in art and the way it functions, but spends even more time describing the personality of the poem's third speaker: Ozymandias himself, through his words on the pedestal. Of all three speakers, the poem provides the most details about Ozymandias: he announces himself as a king whose concerns focus on his own greatness, power, and legacy.

SETTING

“Ozymandias” has two primary settings. The first is an unspecified time and place—most likely, early 19th century England when the poem was written—where the speaker and the traveller meet. The second is the recent past in Egypt, where the traveller sees a ruined statue of Ozymandias in the desert. The poem only spends a line and a half on the first setting, devoting the remaining twelve and a half lines to the desert scene: by focusing on nature and the crumbling remnants of a statue, the poem shows how nature can destroy everything human-made, from political systems to statues, and yet how art, even when broken, can provide a kind of artistic immortality.

It's worth noting that if one subscribes to the theory that the traveller to whom the speaker refers is actually Diodorus Siculus, an ancient Greek writer whose description of an actual destroyed statue inspired Shelley's poem, then the settings of the poem subtly shift. In this case, the first setting is any location in which the speaker can "meet" Siculus (i.e. by reading Siculus's passage in a book), while the second setting is still the desert in Egypt, but it is Egypt not during Shelley's time but

rather during the time of the ancient Greeks.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Shelley was a Romantic poet, and as such, was very interested in the sublime power of nature and both individual's and art's connections to it. This poem addresses those concerns on a grand scale. Shelley was also a political writer. Several years after the publication of "Ozymandias," he published a pamphlet entitled "A Philosophical View of Reform" in which he called for an end to tyranny and discussed the history of empires crumbling over time. "Ozymandias" displays many of Shelley's concerns, both in terms of its depiction of man versus nature and its apparent politics.

"Ozymandias" has several literary predecessors and contemporaries. Shelley and his friend and fellow writer Horace Smith challenged each other to write about Ozymandias and his destroyed statue after reading about the statue in a description written by the ancient Greek writer Diodorus Siculus. Siculus described the pedestal of the real-life statue as containing an inscription that read "King of Kings am I, Osymandias. If anyone would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass one of my works." Shelley's poem then, is a re-telling of an already-told story, and one can argue that in retelling the story in his poem Shelley is actually taking up Osymandias's challenge—that in writing "Ozymandias" Shelley sought to surpass Osymandias's works.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The historical Ozymandias' legacy was not actually entirely dead when Shelley wrote this poem. In fact, Shelley may have been inspired to write this poem by newspaper reports that the British Museum had acquired the large head of an Egyptian statue: a statue that later turned out to be of Ramses II, also known by his Greek name, Ozymandias. This fragment of a sculpture of Ozymandias produced not despair at the futility of human achievements, but rather excitement, enthusiasm, and ultimately, preservation in a museum, where the artifact would be protected from the elements and, as much as possible, from time itself.

Some critics believe that the poem is partly—though certainly not entirely—a response to the rise and fall of the Emperor Napoleon, in France. In this reading, the poem serves as a warning to those who seek political and military power, that they will fall be eventually be forgotten, just as Ozymandias was.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- British Museum: The Younger Memnon — This website shows the statue of Ramses II (Ozymandias), the discovery of which may have inspired Shelley's poem. (https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=117633&partId=1)
- Breaking Bad and Ozymandias — The tv show Breaking Bad featured the poem "Ozymandias" in a trailer for the final season. The BBC explains why and embeds the trailer in the webpage. (https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-magazine-monitor-23528902)
- British Library's "Introduction to Ozymandias" — The British Library has a short introduction to "Ozymandias" that includes excerpts of potential sources for the poem, historical information about Ramses II (Ozymandias), as well as details about Shelley's radical politics. (https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/an-introduction-to-ozymandias)
- Draft of "Ozymandias" — The Bodleian Library at Oxford University digitized and transcribed an early draft of "Ozymandias" from 1817 and made it available online. (http://shelleysghost.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/draft-of-ozymandias#Transcript)
- "Ozymandias": Original Printing — Shelley first published "Ozymandias" in The Examiner in 1818, under the name "Glirastes." This is a scan of the first edition printing. (https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=inu.30000093206054;view=1up;seq=36;size=175)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY POEMS

- Love's Philosophy
- Ode to the West Wind

HOW TO CITE

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