

"ozymandias": a close reading



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Percy Shelley's sonnet "Ozymandias" (1818) is, in many ways, an outlier in his oeuvre: it is short, adhering to the fourteen line length of most traditional sonnets; its precise language, filled with concrete nouns and active verbs, contrasts against the circuitous, abstract language of "O World! O Life! O Time!" (1824); and, most saliently, it does not seek to radicalize or shock, like the "The Necessity of Atheism" (1811) or *The Cenci*, his 1819 closet drama about incest and murder. Shelley's often combative, politically-charged style makes "Ozymandias" seem tame in comparison to most of his other poems. That said, a close reading of the sonnet reveals its political and theological heart. Shelley's core beliefs—like the importance of atheism, the impermanence of man-made societal structures, and the unpreventable certainty of oblivion—thematically buttress the foundation of "Ozymandias." With uncharacteristic subtlety and nuance, Shelley uses the poem's eponymous statue to evidence the ephemerality of power and civilization as a whole.

Structurally, "Ozymandias" does not adhere to one specific form, although it does contain elements of both the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet. It operates in a loose iambic pentameter, with every line consisting of ten syllables, except for the first and tenth, which have eleven. Lines three and twelve, meanwhile, open with trochees, ignoring the idea that a sonnet must solely consist of iambs. The rhyme scheme, too, is abnormal, conforming to no historically precedented pattern. Shelley's frequent use of enjambment further obfuscates the rhymes and makes them less pronounced.

Additionally, "Ozymandias" is not broken into an octave and a sestet.

Instead, it is presented in one block of cohesive text. As a result, the poem

has a tight, prose-like quality to it, reading smoothly and quickly. Shelley's disregard for conventional forms reinforces the poem's themes. He does not consider the Petrarchan or Shakespearean sonnet an immortal form, just like Ozymandias's kingdom cannot possibly stand forever.

The sonnet's liveness leaves no room for abstractions. Accordingly, Shelley's language is precise and concrete, making the poem dense with specific imagery. Lines two and three—"two vast and trunkless legs of stone/Stand in the desert"—situate the reader geographically and establish the dilapidated state of Ozymandias's statue. The two lines that immediately follow describe the statue's partially obscured head, which is "Half sunk" in the sand. Ozymandias's "frown, And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command" is the first instance of Shelley planting dramatic irony into the poem: Ozymandias's facial features are frozen in a menacing expression of confidence and power, yet his kingdom has long since crumbled, and his statue is not even whole anymore. Shelley adds a subtle critique on Christianity to this argument in line ten by having Ozymandias declare himself the "King of Kings," a moniker often assigned to Jesus. This conspicuously loaded word choice further reinforces the overarching project of "Ozymandias": no one is immortal, and no civilization or construct can stand forever. Shelley is not simply content to display the intrinsically fleeting nature of power, he also wants to highlight the hubris of individuals who believe they can defy this inevitability. He accomplishes this through an obvious use of irony: the "colossal Wreck" of the deserted statue declares, "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,/Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" The irony, of course, lies in the fact that the statue is now

surrounded only by nothing but “ lone and level sands.” Going further, Shelley implies that the sculptor had subversive intentions when carving the “ sneer of cold command,” knowing that the exaggerated expression would speak to Ozymandias’s misplaced pride, instead of his all-encompassing power. Shelley’s use of the word “ mocked” when describing the sculptor’s technique functions as a double entendre: “ mocked,” in this context, means both to copy and to deride. While Ozymandias saw his statue as an imposing manifestation of his power, the sculptor saw it as an example of his subject’s overwhelming hubris. This hubris is most obvious in the pedestal’s inscription in lines ten and eleven, which works on two levels: when the statue was erected, it was ostensibly part of a prominent kingdom, making the inscription read as a boast, an assertion that Ozymandias’s empire is unsurpassably vast and majestic; when the statue’s current state is taken into account, though, the inscription reads more like a warning, a declaration that even the mightiest kingdoms will eventually disintegrate.

The conceit of the poem—that the speaker “ met a traveler from an antique land” who described the “ shattered” statue of Ozymandias—conceptually evidences Shelley’s project: the speaker hears about the statue secondhand, which means the reader receives the information thirdhand, opening up the possibility that the details may have been distorted in the transmission process, as is often the case with orally communicated stories. In reality, the actual inscription on the statues reads, “ I am Ozymandias, king of kings; if anyone wishes to know what I am and where I lie, let him surpass me in some of my exploits.” Admittedly, Shelley likely augmented the inscription so it could more easily fit the meter of the poem, but that does not trivialize

the fact that Ozymandias's authoritative words—which were deliberately chosen to exhibit his power—appear paraphrased in the body of the poem. This makes his declaration more of a distorted echo than a resounding assertion of power, undercutting his intended message. Likewise, and for the same reason, it is significant that the poem is called "Ozymandias"—and that the statue, and the emperor it is portraying, is referred to as Ozymandias—because it is a Greek transliteration of the name Ramses II. This is another example of Shelley showing the reader that Ozymandias's power is gradually fading away.

Shelley denounces the hopeful—and widely held—idea that people, even a "King of Kings," can become immortal through their accomplishments. In doing so, he is offering a critique of both church and state, showing that everything that is erected will eventually collapse, be it a physical statue or an abstract concept, like Christianity. Even though "Ozymandias" does not contain the radical language that Shelley is famous for, it addresses the same themes as his more overtly political poems.