

# Understanding Ozymandias essay

[Religion](#), [God](#)



Inspired by Greek historian Diodorus Siculus's record of King Ramses II of Egypt, poet Percy Bysshe Shelly wrote the sonnet *Ozymandias*, which is the Greek form of the king's name (Black, 2010). The sonnet resonates with the free-flowing imaginative and emotive style distinctive of the romantic era (Morner, 1997). Shelly had written the sonnet in a friendly competition with his friend Horace Smith, and it was first published under the pen name Glirastes in 1818 in a weekly London literary paper, *The Examiner* (*Ozymandias*). The fourteen-line sonnet is expressed as the contemplations of a traveller on the statute of King Ozymandias, which lies shattered and alone in the desert. The ruins of the statue are a reminder of the fact that as glorious as the king's reign was, death reduced him to insignificance. This paper discusses the transient nature of power and dominance as expressed in *Ozymandias* and the metaphorical instruments used by Shelly in writing the sonnet.

## **Thesis**

*Ozymandias* propounds the idea that human life and its ambitions and desires are transient, and to gain true fulfilment, humans should live by nurturing creativity and tranquillity.

## **Discussion**

It is apparent that *Ozymandias* (Shelly, 1826), does not disparage power; rather, it decries the ability of power to belittle humans. All human beings die, irrespective of their stature and achievements in their lifetime. Thus, death makes all the aspects of human life transient. The powers of mighty kings and their wealth awes us in life, but once they are dead and their

wealth and fame used and forgotten, we cease to recall them. Similarly, all that remains of King Ozymandias are the fragments of his statute. Only a contemplative traveller, to whom the sight of the ruins of a once magnificent statue in an “ antique land” (Shelly, 1826, p. 100, line 1) is novel, halts by Ozymandias’ once colossal statue. Shelly’s words here give us an image of a vast endless desert, where the dilapidated ruins of the statue lie forgotten. Thus, the kingdom that should have been within the purview of Ozymandias’ statue has seemingly been dissolved, and his people seem have forgotten his existence. This image reinforces the thought that power and might are only transient.

The statue’s face is described having a “ wrinkled lip” and as wearing a “ frown” and “ sneer of cold command” (lines 4-5). The sculptor is congratulated for correctly deciphering and emulating the passions of the king in his work (line 6). These words show that Ozymandias was an ambitious and ruthless man who, depending on whether he or his predecessors constructed the statue, believed or propounded his own godly stature among his people. Paradoxically, the great king’s humble servant, the sculptor, is today remembered with far more respect for his art than the king is remembered for his rule over the country. Here, Shelly also advocates the everlasting prominence of art, which outlasts life as shown by the fact that the sculptor’s art survives “ stamped” on “ lifeless things”. Thus, art with its ability of imitating life is more robust and has a better opportunity of surviving the atrocities of fate than the human body that decomposes and leaves nothing behind.

The sonnet further speaks of the qualities of the king and carries us into a world where Ozymandias was a god and his subjects his followers. His vanity has been recorded in the words “ I am Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” on the pedestal (lines 9–11). That he desired to command and influence after his death is clear here. However, the very next lines “ Nothing beside remains. Round the decay Of that Colossal Wreck, boundless and bare, The lone and level sands stretch far away” (lines 12–14) hurl us back to reality. The starkly contradictory images—that of Ozymandias majestically and dominantly ruling his kingdom and that of him lying dead and broken or even non-existent— presented by these above-mentioned lines are again indicative of the transience of life and of all that is acquired and accumulated in it.

The line that stands out in the poem is, “ the hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:” (line 8). The mention of the sculptor and his work in the previous lines leads us to believe that Shelly was probably speaking of the “ sneer”, “ frown”, and “ wrinkled lip” that the sculptor had mockingly depicted in Ozymandias’ statue (lines 4–7). However, the sculptor was a servant in those times, and it is more likely that the reference here is to god. The “ hand that mocked them” is a metaphor for the fact that god created humans with several imperfections such as “ a heart that fed” the zeal to own, conquer, and rule. The image formed here is that of god creating humans as a travesty in comparison to all his creations, such as the rock that formed the statue of Ozymandias. Thus, although humans realize the inconstancy of their life, they continue to chase things that would not last for eternity.

## **References**

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