

Nothing lasts forever: critical analysis of ozymandias

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Nothing Lasts Forever: A New Critical Analysis of “ Ozymandias. ”

Throughout the history of man, there has always been a select few who wish for immortality. They build awe-inspiring kingdoms, erect massive statues, all in a vain effort to leave their mark on the world. None of them has been successful, thus far, and Ramesses II is no exception. In the poem “ Ozymandias,” by Percy Bysshe Shelley, a traveler shares his experience at the site of a statue depicting Ramesses II. The statue has fallen into disrepair at the hands of the harsh environment, as well as the eroding process of Time.

At first reading, the text presents itself as a poem about the withering away of a once great statue. However, through the use of symbolism, setting, diction, and irony, the poem reveals that while men may strive for immortality, the true “ king of kings” (line 11) is Time. Legs on the human body are necessary for motion and balance, but they also act as an important symbol of Ramesses II’s kingdom. Without these twin apparatuses, the human body is incapable of moving forward. In this respect, the two “ vast and trunkless legs of stone” (line 2) found bodiless in the poem symbolize the overthrow of Ozymandias’s empire by Time.

Without legs on which to stand, his kingdom has lost its momentum and has subsequently been devoured by the sand. In addition, the top half of the statue—the head and part of the torso—is laying in the sand “ half sunk” (line 4). As with the legs, the positioning of the head and torso is symbolic. Ozymandias is gazing at the sky, looking up what remains of his decimated kingdom, a “ wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command” (line 5) on his face.

To look up to someone else is to acknowledge their position of authority over others.

Through the positioning of the statue, Ramesses II is acknowledging that Time has conquered him. His empire has been reduced to dust, claimed by the sands of Time. The poem describes the setting as “ boundless and bare/The lone and level sands stretch far away” (line 13-14), which amplifies Time’s dominance as a theme. What is a desert? To the unknowing reader, it is nothing more than a large sandbox. With the exception of sand and rocks, it’s an empty, dead land. However, when compared to other terrains, such as a forest or mountain range, it is surprisingly uncomplicated. In “ Ozymandias,” the harsh environment and unforgiving terrain is a symbol of brutal honesty. Humans are poorly tolerated in deserts, and should a man decide to build his empire in one, he will be faced with brutal honesty and will be tested. The choice of location is just as crucial to the theme as the location itself. Since the statue is in its original environment, overtaken by the harsh winds and buried in the sand, and not preserved behind a glass case, it argues against Ozymandias’s immortality.

Rather than be displayed for others to learn and respect his accomplishments, the remains of his kingdom have been left behind, deemed useless and unwanted by the world. Had the traveler viewed the remains of the statue in a museum, Time’s purpose in the poem would have taken on a whole new meaning. Given the state of his later surroundings, Ozymandias’s words “ Look at my works, ye Mighty, and despair” (line 11) are ironic, and the imagery of his former kingdom proves that Time has

conquered him. When the traveler recounts his visit to the “ antique land” (line 1), he describes a landscape that is covered in sand.

A statue is a symbol of longevity and permanence. Its appearance, if well-maintained, does not wane or deteriorate, forever capturing the beauty and magnificence of the subject for which it was created. Such is the case with Michelangelo’s “ David”, which has only continued to thrive because it is maintained. However, there are no servants remaining to tend to Ramesses II’s statue, no one to remember his legacy. The statue of Ozymandias has broken in half, and the head lays on the ground close by. “ Nothing beside remains” (line 12) the traveler explains, noting “... the decay/Of that colossal wreck” (lines 12 – 13).

Can the King of kings’ legacy continue without proof that it ever truly existed? No, it cannot, which means the words scripted on the pedestal have taken on an entirely different meaning. It is not Ozymandias that the Mighty should fear, but the true King of kings—Time. Time’s empire is in actuality the thing that is “ boundless” (line 13), not the kingdom of Ozymandias, which had a time limit all along. The diction choices in the sonnet are very specific, particularly those describing the statue, and they serve to reflect Ramesses II’s downfall. The traveler describes the statue as being “ on the sand/Half sunk” (line 3-4), which is often interpreted to mean that the statue is buried halfway in the sand. Considering the ironic words engraved on Ozymandias’s statue, the word “ sunk”—the past participle of the word “ sink”—takes on a different meaning. What is sand, and more importantly, how does it relate to the theme of the poem? When used in conjunction,

sand and Time make up an hourglass—the universal symbol of time. The sand surrounding the statue is not merely a mass accumulation of sedimentary rock, but a symbol for the Sands of Time, a term given to the inside of an hourglass.

The statue, as well as the kingdom has been devoured by Time. Another few centuries, and the last remnants of Ramesses II's empire will fall through the hourglass completely. Furthermore, line four continues with “ a shattered visage lies” (line 4). When something is shattered, it is almost impossible to reassemble them. Even a shattered limb takes months to heal properly, and it is never quite the same from then on. The “ shattered visage” (line 4) spoken of in the poem isn't just Ramesses II's statue; it is his legacy that has been broken. The empire that he had created, the one that he was so sure would endure, has collapsed.

The hubris of kings is pride and the desire for immortality. Unfortunately, as Shelley's poem demonstrates, Time is not something that can be manipulated. With his death, Ramesses II's empire came to a standstill, but Time continued to move and ultimately overthrew the pharaoh. Time is the true King of kings. Through the use of symbolism, setting, diction, and irony, Shelley proves that humans are finite beings and nothing lasts forever.

Works Cited Shelley, Percy Bysshe. “ Ozymandias. ” *Literature: Reading and Writing with Critical Strategies*. Ed. Steven Lynn. Pearson-Longman. New York City. 2004. 618 - 619. Print.