

Notes on Ozymandias by Percy Shelley:

In A Nutshell

Late in 1817 Percy Shelley and his friend Horace Smith decided to have a sonnet competition – that's right folks: a sonnet competition! For the subject of their sonnets, Shelley and Smith chose a partially-destroyed statue of Ramses II ("Ozymandias") that was making its way to London from Egypt, finally arriving there sometime early in the year 1818. In the 1790's Napoleon Bonaparte had tried to get his hands on the statue, but was unable to remove it from Egypt. That's partly because it weighs almost 7.5 tons. Shelley, like Napoleon, was fascinated by this giant statue. Here's a picture of it.

Shelley published his poem in January of 1818 in *The Examiner*, a periodical run by his other friend Leigh Hunt (pronounced "Lee"). Smith published his poem less than a month later, with a title almost as long as the poem itself: "On A Stupendous Leg of Granite, Discovered Standing by Itself in the Deserts of Egypt, with the Inscription Inserted Below." You can take a look at Smith's poem here.

While Shelley has a reputation for radical and experimental poetry, "Ozymandias" is a pretty "tame" poem compared to many of his other works; it is written in a well-known and widely-used form – a fourteen-line sonnet – and doesn't say anything too offensive like "We should all be atheists" (Shelley was expelled from Oxford for writing a pamphlet advocating just this).

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Why read this poem? As a sonnet, it has only fourteen lines, but in this limited space, Shelley explores a number of issues with enduring relevance. "Ozymandias" explores the question of what happens to tyrant kings, and to despotic world leaders more generally. As we all know, nothing lasts forever; that means even the very worst political leaders – no matter how much they boast – all die at some point. If Shelley were writing this poem now, he might take as his subject the famous statue of Saddam Hussein that was pulled down after the dictator was overthrown. Like the fallen statue in Baghdad, the broken-down statue of Ozymandias in Shelley's poem points to the short-lived nature of political regimes and tyrannical power.

But, Shelley doesn't just come out and say "nothing lasts forever" and "there is always hope." He writes a sonnet with a really cool rhyme scheme. Just try reading the poem out loud, and you'll see what we mean.

The speaker describes a meeting with someone who has traveled to a place where ancient civilizations once existed. We know from the title that he's talking about Egypt. The traveler told the speaker a story about an old, fragmented statue in the middle of the desert. The statue is broken apart, but you can still make out the face of a person. The face looks stern and powerful, like a ruler. The sculptor did a good job at expressing the ruler's personality. The ruler was a wicked guy, but he took care of his people.

On the pedestal near the face, the traveler reads an inscription in which the ruler Ozymandias tells anyone who might happen to pass by, basically, "Look around and see how awesome I am!" But there is no other evidence of his awesomeness in the vicinity of his giant, broken statue. There is just a lot of sand, as far as the eye can see. The traveler ends his story.

Lines 1-2

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said...

The poem begins immediately with an encounter between the speaker and a traveler that comes from an "antique land."

We're not sure about this traveler. He could be a native of this "antique" land, or just a tourist returning from his latest trip.

We don't know where this encounter is taking place; is it on the highway? On a road somewhere? In London? Maybe if we keep reading we'll find out.

"Antique" means something really old, like that couch at your grandmother's or the bunny ears on top of your television. The traveler could be coming from a place that is ancient, almost as if he were time-traveling. Or he could just be coming from a place that has an older history, like Greece, Rome, or ancient Egypt.

Lines 2-4

...Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies...

Here the traveler begins his speech. He tells the speaker about a pair of stone legs that are somehow still standing in the middle of the desert.

Those legs are huge ("vast") and "trunkless." "Trunkless" means "without a torso," so it's a pair of legs with no body.

"Visage" means face; a face implies a head, so we are being told that the head belonging to this sculpture is partially buried in the sand, near the legs. It is also, like the whole statue, "shatter'd." The image described is very strange: a pair of legs, with a head nearby. What happened to the rest of the statue? War? Natural disaster? Napoleon?

Lines 4-6

...whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read

The traveler now gives a fuller description of the "shatter'd visage" lying in the sand. As it turns out, the "visage" (or face) isn't completely "shatter'd" because one can still see a "frown," a "wrinkled lip," and a "sneer."

We still don't know whom this statue represents, but we do know that he was upset about something because he's frowning and sneering. Maybe he thinks that the sneering makes him look powerful. It conveys the "cold command" of an absolute ruler. He can do what he wants without thinking of other people. Heck, he probably commanded the sculptor to make the statue.

After briefly describing the "visage" (3), the lines shift our attention away from the statue to the guy who made the statue, the "sculptor."

"Read" here means "understood" or "copied" well. The sculptor was pretty good because he was able to understand and reproduce exactly – to "read" – the facial features and "passions" of our angry man. The sculptor might even grasp things about the ruler that the ruler himself doesn't understand.

The poem suggests that artists have the ability to perceive the true nature of other people in the present and not just in the past, with the benefit of hindsight.

"Tell" is a cool word. The statue doesn't literally speak, but the frown and sneer are so perfectly rendered that they give the impression that they are speaking, telling us how great the sculptor was.

Lines 7-8

Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,
The hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed

The poem now tells us more about the "passions" of the face depicted on the statue.

Weirdly, the "passions" still survive because they are "stamp'd on these lifeless things." The "lifeless things" are the fragments of the statue in the desert.

"Stamp'd" doesn't refer to an ink-stamp, but rather to the artistic process by which the sculptor inscribed the "frown" and "sneer" on his statue's face. The word could also make you think of the ruler's power. Had he wanted to, he could have stamped out any of his subjects who offended him.

"Mock'd" has two meanings in this passage. It means both "made fun of" and "copied," or "imitated." "Hand" is a stand-in for the sculptor. So the sculptor both belittled and copied this man's passions.

"The heart that fed" is a tricky phrase; it refers to the heart that "fed" or nourished the passions of the man that the statue represents. But if you think these lines are unclear, you're right. Even scholars have trouble figuring out what they mean.

The passions not only "survive"; they have also outlived both the sculptor ("the hand that mock'd") and the heart of the man depicted by the statue.

Note the contrast between life and death. The fragments of the statue are called "lifeless things," the sculptor is dead, and so is the statue's subject. The "passions" though, still "survive."

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!"

The traveler tells us about an inscription at the foot of statue which finally reveals to us whom this statue represents.

It is "Ozymandias," the figure named in the title. "Ozymandias" was one of several Greek names for Ramses II of Egypt. For more, see "What's Up with the Title."

The inscription suggests that Ozymandias is arrogant, or at least that he has grand ideas about his own power: he calls himself the "king of kings."

Ozymandias also brags about his "works." Maybe he's referring to the famous temples he constructed at Abu Simbel or Thebes. He could also be calling attention to the numerous colossal statues of him, such as the one described in this poem.

Ozymandias's speech is ambiguous here. On the one hand he tells the "mighty" to "despair" because their achievements will never equal his "works." On the other hand, he might be telling the "mighty" to "despair" as a kind of warning, saying something like "Don't get your hopes up guys because your statues, works, political regimes, etc. will eventually be destroyed or fade away, with nothing to recall them but a dilapidated statue half-buried in the sand."

Lines 12-14

Nothing beside remains: round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

After the traveler recites the inscription, he resumes his description of the statue and the surrounding area.

We are reminded again that "nothing" remains besides the head, legs, and pedestal; as if we didn't know the statue has been destroyed, the traveler tells us again that it is a "colossal wreck."

The very size of the statue – "colossal" – emphasizes the scope of Ozymandias's ambitions as well; it's almost as if because he thinks he's the "king of kings" (10), he also has to build a really big statue.

To complement the "decay" of the statue, the traveler describes a desolate and barren desert that seems to go on forever: the "sands stretch far away."

The statue is the only thing in this barren, flat desert. There was probably once a temple or something nearby, but it's long gone. The "sands" are "lone," which means whatever else used to be "beside" the statue has been destroyed or buried.

Several words in these lines start with the same letter; for example "besides," "boundless," and "bare"; "remains" and "round"; "lone" and "level"; "sands" and "stretch." Using multiple words with the same initial letter is called alliteration.