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Ozymandias Poem

Summary, Analysis, Theme, Line by Line Analysis

Ozymandias Poem

Ozymandias Meaning

Ozymandias was one of the Greek names of **Rameses II** (1301-1234 B. C.). Ozymandias was a powerful king of ancient Egypt. This poem is about the ruins of his statue, said to have been found in the Sahara desert. Ramesseum (of Rameses II) at Thebes is described by Diodorus Siculus as the tomb of Ozymandias.

Ozymandias Context

There is an interesting story about how **Shelley** was inspired to write the poem one evening Shelley and his friend **Horace Smith** or discussing **Napoleon's** conquest of Egypt they talked about the statue of **Osman** an Egyptian ruler was also known as Ramses the second their conversation led to a competition between them and they both decided to write a poem on the statue both poems tell the same story however Shelley's poem is more popular.

In this poem Shelley describes the broken statue and reflects upon the impermanence of earthly things. The king, once powerful, is no more. His relic, the statue, is broken to pieces and will soon crumble to dust. Time destroys everything.

Ozymandias Poem Summary

The narrator of the poem meets a traveler from an ancient land the traveller talks about a massive statue which lies shattered in the desert what remains of the statue are its two huge legs without an upper body the shattered face of the statue is partially buried in the sand nearby there is a frown on the face and the expression is cold commanding and arrogant the emotions on the face are so realistic and detailed that it is clear the sculptor had an acute understanding of the king the face chiseled by the sculptor still survives in that barren land on the pedestal of the statue is an inscription by the king the King introduces himself as **Ozymandias the king of all kings** the inscription further claims that even the mightiest men will look at the King's achievements and despair that they have achieved nothing compared to the king now the once mighty statue lies in ruins there is nothing around except vast stretches of sand.

Ozymandias Poem Theme

Ozymandias composed by Percy Shelley is a masterpiece establishing the philosophy of life through irony and sarcasm. The shattered and ruined statue of Ozymandias is itself a glaring example of irony as it was engraved with the word “*Look upon my work, ye mighty.*” Now his very own word is mocking on his vain pride and arrogance. The poet through this irony wants to highlight the utter futility of human effort to immortalize them and exposes the theme that everything irrespective how powerful would be, must be perished or ravaged through the passage of time.

Ozymandias Analysis

Written in 1817, the sonnet illustrates Shelley’s ‘growing interest in things Greek. It also reveals his great gift to adapt himself to any form and use it with consummate skill in rivaling even the best in the field. Probably he wrote it in friendly rivalry with Horace Smith whose sonnet ‘**On a Stupendous Leg of Granite**’ appeared in **Hunt’s Examiner** three weeks after Shelley’s. The traveler’ was most likely a book, Pococke’s illustrated **A Description of the East** (1743), which supplied features from several ruined statues near Thebes (Luxor) in Egypt, especially those of Memnon and Rameses II (“Ozymandias”, in Greek). The latter once bore the inscription :

‘I am the king of kings, Ozymandias- if anyone would know how great I am, and where I lie, let him exceed the works that I have done.’

Ozymandias is a powerful expression of the moral idea that it is futile to be proud of the worldly pomp and glory which will not live for a long time. Ozymandias, a famous Egyptian king (1292-1225 B. C.) got a mighty statue of his own placed in a temple. It was a wonderful work of the art showing the skill and imagination of the sculptor who had successfully transplanted on stone the passions of the proud king. With the passage of time, however, **Ozymandias’s empire** was ruined and the statue of the king lay broken and neglected, with nothing but desert all around. Ozymandias, who called himself ‘**king of kings**’, and boasted that no other king could equal him in glory, could not save himself from the ravages of Time in spite of his power and pelf.

Shelley detachers the thought of the poem from and, although he had almost certainly read detailed accounts of the statue in the ruined city of Thebes, beside the Nile, he deliberately sets the statue in isolation in the desert. The enormous size of the disremembered figure emphasizes the vanity of Rameses, the legs standing on their own look ridiculous, the body seems to have disappeared and the face of the Pharaoh is reduced to a series of expressions. The arrogant inscription (lines 10-11) now reads as an ironic comment on the proud Pharaoh and Shelley completes the image of futility with his description of the empty desert around

the ruin. 'Look on my works, the inscription commands, but "*Nothing beside remains to be seen.*"

There is a **touch of melancholy about the poem** because it makes us reflect over the vanity of human wishes and the failure of all our efforts to keep our memory alive for ever. The contrast between the past glory of the king and the present condition of the statue is very striking to the mind and emphasizes the **moral of the poem**. The concluding **lines of the poem** are particularly remarkable for their suggestiveness. The sonnet contains two noteworthy imageries. One is the picture of the broken statue, a huge wreck, the face of which still wears a frown and the sneer of cold command (Lines 4-5). The other is the picture of the lone and level desert, boundless and bare, stretching far away (Lines 12-14).

In **The Revolt of Islam** we were bludgeoned; here the detached tone lulls our suspicions and the irony appeals to our vanity. The first ten words of the poem, though standing a part, contribute to the effect, for in them Shelley exploits the age-old lure of travelers' tales and at the same time implies he himself will merely report, not interpret, what the traveler has to say. The tale begins well, with a series of arresting visual images. Then we have the deliberate diminuendo of the lines about the sculptor, with the involved grammar, the gentle speculation and the archaic mocked (for mimicked) creating an olde-worlde air.

The poem subtly flatters our vanity. We feel after reading it that we are wiser than Ozymandias, who never knew the irony of his inscription, and wiser too than the traveler, who seems unaware of any moral to be drawn from his plain tale. A real traveler's tale does lie in the background, for Ozymandias, like **Kubla Khan** and the ballad of **The Revenge**, is one of those poems which can clearly be tracked to a prose source.

No one who was asked to select a typical poem of Shelley's would choose Ozymandias : intuitively one feels the poem is completely untypical, and it is not difficult to see why.. first there is the subject: Shelley usually wrote about things dear to his heart, while Ozymandias is a little remote. Then there is the tone, which, partly because of the subject, is passionless, objective and calm, instead of being passionate, subjective and excited.

Such being some of the possible aberrations, **let me give the sonnet's** plain sense: In the desert lie the remains—two legs and a head-of a colossal statue of an Egyptian king called Ozymandias. The face preserves the cynical and the tyrannical passions that animated the king. But the sculptor in making the portrait knew his model and brought out those qualities in a satirical spirit. These passions and the sculptor's shrewd and satirical sense of them have outlasted, through the preservation of the fragments, both the hand of the sculptor who mockingly made the statue and the king out of whose heart the passions sprang. The words on the pedestal belong to Ozymandias and show that round about the statue stood all the works—temples, basilicas, statues—he had caused to be set up. These were so many and so

large that other mighty kings are bidden despair of competing. Now, nothing remains of all these works but the fragments of his own shattered image.

The climax comes with a piece of irony. When Ozymandias tells the mighty to look on his work and despair he meant their motive of desperation to be their inability to build so solidly and so vastly as himself. But his words became true in another sense. His works have perished, and the mighty of the world may despair of ever erecting anything to resist the consuming force of time. Even the most arrogant assertion of the human spirit in the most massive material is ludicrously weak. Thus **Ozymandias**, thinking he says one thing, actually says another.

The last three lines,

“Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,

The lone and level sands stretch far away,”

are powerful in feeling and much more than mere descriptive setting. Shelley heightens the sense of the man’s grasping pride. By reducing the counter-statement to three lines he implies that it must be surpassingly powerful to need so little space, thereby hinting at the nature of the power that confronts the great king’s assertions. The novelty of these last three lines is that in them Shelley’s feeling for the metaphysical has revealed itself. The desert has become a **symbol**: it is the same as the deserts of vast eternity in Marvell’s **To his Coy Mistress**.

Ozymandias Sonnet

Among is sonnets, Ozymandias is worthy of occupying a unique place. In it Shelley ‘successfully challenges the master (Shakespeare) on his favorite ground, the ravages of time.’ (Desmond King-Hele). With a remarkable economy of words, the **poem brings** alive an ancient anecdote but imbues it with an **immense historical perspective** and conveys a great moral from the lives of those to whom **might is right** and who believe that they can do no wrong.

The sonnet form and particularly its more usual [rhyme](#) schemes can be very constricting, but Shelley succeeds in writing a sonnet which sounds unforced and even conversational. The unusual rhyme scheme he adopts allows him to control his thought but not in an obtrusively obvious manner. He is prepared to use half-rhyme in lines 2 and 4, and 9 and 11. and throughout the poem the syntax and punctuation units are varied to interplay with the rhyme scheme and the regular length of the lines. Small variations in the basic iambic stress pattern help to avoid monotony. The octave is connected to the sestet by the rhyming words “things’ and ‘kings’ in lines 7 and 10 and the cool statement of the final three lines is emphasized by the repetition of the rhyming vowel which gathers together remains’. ‘decay. ‘bare’, away’ and links them with ‘despair in line 11.

Desmund King-Hele writes,

“Few of Shelley’s sonnets can bear comparison with Shakespeare’s, but in Ozymandias he successfully challenges the master on his favourite ground, the ravages of time, Shelley seems here to wriggle out of the fetters of the sonnet form, flouting the rules with narrative, doubly reported speech, and a curious rhyme-scheme. He is justified by the result one of those rare poems which can, on occasion, please even poetry hater.”

Rhyme Scheme of Ozymandias

In terms of its [rhyme scheme](#) it is a very unconventional Sonnet, punctuation and sense, however preserve the common division between the octave (the first eight lines) and the sestet (the final six lines). The rhyme-scheme is irregular-aba bac dcdereg which does not obey the accepted conventions of the form [Shakespearean or Miltonic form of the sonnet](#).

Ozymandias Analysis Line by Line

Who was Ozymandias?

Ozymandias was the Greek name of Rameses II (1304-1237 BC) who, according to the biblical scholars of Shelley’s time, was the pharaoh of Egypt who oppressed the captive Hebrews and opposed the wishes of [Moses](#) to free them. He had many huge buildings and monuments constructed in his own honour.

I.a traveller : The simulated narrative gives an objectivity to the poem, seldom attained in a sonnet. The traveller may be Walter Coulson, editor of *The Traveller*, who visited the Shelley’s in late 1817, but more probably there is a reference to Robert P ocke’s *A Description of the East* (1743) which portrays several statues of Rameses and of Memnon in various stages of disintegration.

Shelley may have met someone (probably Walter Coulson) who had visited Egypt but it is more probable that he had read about the statue in a book such as Richard Pococke's *A Description of the East and Some Other Countries* (1743).

1. *antique*: with an ancient history. The simulated narrative gives an objectivity to the poem, seldom attained in a sonnet.

2. *trunkless* : without a body.

3. *shattered* : broken to pieces. *visage* : face.

4. *frown*: drawing together of the brows to express displeasure,

5. *wrinkled lip* : his lip curled in contempt or disdain.

sneer : a derisive smile, a contemptuous look.

Sneer of cold command: the contemptuous manner in which Rameses was wont to give his commands to every subject who was forced to obey him, *cold* : arrogant, unfeeling.

6. *sculptor* : one who carves images out of stone or metal.

passions : emotions. *passions read* : understood the feelings expressed by the frown and wrinkled lips. *Tell that its sculptor well those passions read*: It is clear that the sculptor who made the statue correctly understood the passions or feelings of the king and, therefore, successfully reproduced them on stone.

7. *yet survive* : outlive (the "hand" and "heart" of the following line). The expression on the king's face is still there (even after the death of both the sculptor and the king). *stamped* : depicted, carved. *lifeless things*: stones.

7. *hand*: the sculptor, *mocked them* : imitated; showed artistically the passions Ozymandias, or showed the passions as contemptible, *heart that fed*: the heart of Ozymandias which encouraged such passions.

7-8. *Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless thing*: The passions or feelings of the king still exist on the face of the statue, while the sculptor who carved those passions or feelings on stone, and the king who experienced those passions or feelings, are dead and gone.

The hand that mocked them: The sculptor hand which reproduced or represented the king's feelings on stone. *Mocked* is here used in the sense of imitating them without feeling any admiration for them. *Them* refers to those passions.

Note: To be able to get the meaning, we should read these lines thus : “Whose frown and wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command, tell that its sculptor well read those passions which, stamped on these lifeless things, yet survive the hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.” The idea is that the king's passions still remain depicted on stone, while the sculptor's hand and the king's heart are no more, both the sculptor and the king having died long ago

6-8, *those passions* *fed* : carved on the dead stone, his passions have outlasted the sculptor's hand that copied (ridiculed and derided) them, and his own heart that nourished them.

9. *pedestal* : base of a statue, these words appear : there is an inscription on the pedestal, **My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings**

My name is Ozymandias : King Ozymandias flourished about 1301 B.C. He was the first soldier-king to invade Asia.

10. *despair* : grieve, loss of hope, or feel helpless (because you cannot become as powerful as I am).

Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair: Look at my great deeds, my achievements and my victories, you powerful and brave warriors, give up all hope of equaling me. Nobody can become as great as I am.

Note: The inscription on the foot of the pedestal reveals the name of the king, and gives us an idea of how great and powerful he was.

10-11. *My nameand despair* : Diodorus Siculus, a Greek historian of the first century B. C., quotes an inscription on a huge statue in Egypt: 'I am Ozymandias, king of kings if anyone wishes to know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass any of my works.'

13. *colossal*: huge (originally used by the Greeks to describe the huge statues of Ancient Egypt). *Wreck*: that which is broken.

12-14. *Nothing beside remains stretch far away* : There is nothing else to be seen near the statue. A vast, desolate and barren desert surrounds the remains of that he statue which lies broken,

Note: The last three lines describing the present ruined state of the statue present a vivid and pathetic contrast with the preceding two lines which convey the glory and greatness of Ozymandias.