

Ozymandias (1818)

I met a traveler from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command, 5
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked* them and the heart that fed; imitated
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: 10
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Humans throughout history have striven to overcome their mortality by leaving something of themselves behind -- evidence of their existence. The subject of Shelley's poem "Ozymandias" is an ancient king who shared this common desire, but not in a common way. He not only wanted to leave behind a record of himself for future generations, he wanted his memory exalted above that of others, and even above the "Mighty" who would live after him. He did not want to give up at death the power he had wielded in life.

The irony in this poem lies in the difference between what Ozymandias intends -- to hold onto the glory of his works after time takes its course with him -- and what actually happens. This great monument's "frown, / And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command" and the inscription on the pedestal are all meant to inspire fear in the viewer. However, natural weathering and (possibly) destruction due to conquest have dismembered this image of the king and rid him of the awe-inspiring ability he once possessed.

Rhyme plays an elusive part in "Ozymandias," which, when one looks closer, emphasizes certain aspects of the king. While rhyme is present, no recognizable rhyme scheme is used. The pattern is as follows (with "/" representing a slant rhyme): a b a /b a c d c e d /e f /e f (the second "/e" is a slant of "e," not of the first "/e"). This "boundless" style seems to represent the way Ozymandias saw himself -- as one in complete control, bowing to no one. As this rhyme scheme does not rely on preconceived forms, neither does the "king of kings" believe he will have to capitulate to any other power (including time). The seemingly scattered rhymes, not even consistent in pattern within the poem, could also represent the toppled pieces of the ancient sculpture lying about in disarray.

The name "Ozymandias" refers to Ramses II (Ramses the Great), third king of the 19th dynasty of Egypt. Diodorus Siculus, a Greek historian in the 1st century BC, recorded the name when he made reference to the Ramesseum -- Ramses II's mortuary temple -- as "the Tomb of Ozymandias." "Ozymandias" is actually a flawed spelling of the first part of Ramses' name. This tie between Shelley's poem and history gives greater depth to one's interpretation of the poem, knowing that its subject was a real man, and that he was probably much like the character portrayed therein. His reign (1279-13 BC) was the second longest in Egyptian history. He fought wars against the Hittites and Libyans, and is remembered for his expansive building programs and for the many gigantic statues of him found throughout Egypt. These "works" would certainly have made some "Mighty" people despair -- before time took away the threat. The Ramesseum contains the shattered statue that Shelley was most likely

writing about. It was a seated statue which would have stood 57 feet high and must have weighed about 1,000 tons -- a truly colossal figure. However, Diodorus Siculus does not tell of a pedestal, and it must be assumed that the haughty epitaph was Shelley's addition.

"Ozymandias" also seems to allude to another historical figure -- Charlemagne, also known as Carolus Magnus and Charles the Great. He conquered most of the Christian lands of western Europe, establishing the Holy Roman Empire and becoming its first emperor. Although he is probably a more known and revered historical figure than Ramses II, he too was left in the "lone and level sands [that] stretch far away." A giant statue of Charlemagne (the head is taller than a man of average height) was destroyed when his empire was dissolved. Fragments still remain, but the man's power has been gone for more than half a millenium. The difference between these two examples of an "Ozymandias," however, is that Charlemagne's effect on the world ("shaping" western Europe) can still be seen, while Ramses II's legacy is less evident.

Unlike the lost potency of Ramses II and Charlemagne's dreams, Shelley's poem still has its power. Through irony, unique use of rhyme, and historical allusion, "Ozymandias" reminds us of our mortality through the realization that our earthly accomplishments, so important to us now, will one day be covered by the "lone and level sands" of time.