

OZYMANDIAS by Percy Shelley

BACKGROUND TO THE POET

- ✓ Percy Shelley was born in Sussex in 1792 to a wealthy family.
- ✓ He attended Eton and Oxford University but was expelled for speaking out about Atheism.
- ✓ This caused a rift between him and his family.
- ✓ He was passionate about politics, considering himself to be a pacifist.
- ✓ Generally classified as a romantic poet.

BACKGROUND TO THE POEM

- ✓ Written in 1817 during the reign of King George III.
- ✓ Shelley did not like the way King George III ruled, believing that he abused his power.
- ✓ Shelley wrote the poem following the discovery of a statue of Rameses II (an Egyptian Pharaoh, known as Ozymandias).
- ✓ Shelley could not openly criticise King George III so wrote the poem from the perspective of a traveller, and used it to draw similarities between the king and Ozymandias.

WHAT IS THE POEM ABOUT?

- ✓ A statue of the Egyptian Pharaoh, Rameses II was discovered in the desert. He was known to be a particularly aggressive leader and Shelley draws similarities between him and King George III in the poem.
- ✓ Pharaoh's believed themselves to be Gods in human form, believing that their legacy would be eternal.
- ✓ The poem presents the statue as an allegory, not just for Ozymandias and King George III but for all those in power.
- ✓ Shelley uses irony to emphasise the downfall of those who rule and abuse their power.

THEMES

- ✓ Power of humans: the poem shows that power is fleeting and does not last forever.
- ✓ Power of nature: shows that nature is powerful above all.
- ✓ Pride: the arrogance of humans believing they are all powerful.

COMPARISONS

Power of humans	Power of nature	Pride / arrogance
London, My Last Duchess, Storm on the Island, Tissue, Checking out me History	The Prelude, Exposure, Storm on the Island, Tissue, Kamikaze	Charge of the Light Brigade, My Last Duchess

FORM

- ✓ The poem takes the general form of a sonnet which is typically used for poems about love.
- ✓ The choice of form perhaps represents Shelley's love at the situation seeing the once great power has crumbled.
- ✓ Does not strictly adhere to the rules of any particular sonnet form, instead is a mixture of historical forms: supporting the theme that everything changes.

STRUCTURE

- ✓ Has a complex, unpredictable rhyme scheme. Again supports the theme that life, and power, is unpredictable.
- ✓ The rhythm of the poem is iambic pentameter (every other syllable is stressed).
- ✓ This is typically referred to as a 'marching' beat, which could represent the fact that time marches on and things change.

LANGUAGE / QUOTES

- ✓ Shelley writes the poem from the perspective of a third party so as not to be seen as directly critical of the King "I met a traveller from an antique land".
- ✓ Language used described Ozymandias in a grand way: "antique", "vast", "visage".
- ✓ "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone, stand in the desert" reflects the statue is barely standing, struggling to survive, with no one around to care.
- ✓ Cumulative negative language makes it clear Shelley is criticising Ozymandias (and those in power): "shattered" "lifeless" "remains" "decay".
- ✓ Use of alliteration in "cold command" repeats the 'ck' sound and emphasises Ozymandias' cruel, ruthless nature.
- ✓ Biblical reference to "King of kings" on the inscription to the statue (how Jesus was described) shows how great Ozymandias thought he was, but also creates an element of criticism towards the church from the poet (Shelley was an atheist!).
- ✓ "Look on my works ye mighty, and despair!". This rather arrogant claim highlights the ego and vanity that those in power have.
- ✓ Further use of alliteration "boundless and bare" "lone and level" in the final lines further emphasise the fact that nothing remains. Nature is the powerful one.
- ✓ Use of enjambment 'Nothing beside remains' forces the reader to stop, emphasising the line and therefore the impermanence of power.
- ✓ "The lone and level sands stretch far away". Final line is a powerful one which shows that nature has conquered and the statue, and Ozymandias' legacy is in ruins.