

THE BASICS

OZYMANDIAS AND PERCY SHELLEY

BACKGROUND TO THE POET: PERCY SHELLEY

- Born in 1792 in Sussex into a wealthy family. As the eldest son he was set to inherit riches and become a member of Parliament.
- Attended Eton & Oxford University but was expelled for speaking out about Atheism (the Christian Church being dominant at the time). This caused a rift between him and his family. Later married Mary Shelley (author of Frankenstein) (she was his second wife) and they moved to Italy.
- Shelley was passionate about politics and considered himself a pacifist (supported non-violent protest). He is largely considered a romantic poet (see below for further information).
- He died in 1822 when he drowned after his boat overturned.

BACKGROUND TO THE POEM: OZYMANDIAS

- Written in 1817 during the reign of King George III. Shelley did not like the way he ruled. His dislike of those in power, and particularly those who abuse that power, is evident from the poem.
- The poem was written in response to the acquisition of the remains of an ancient statue of Rameses II, an Egyptian Pharaoh also known as Ozymandias. Rameses was believed to be an aggressive leader, and similarities were drawn between him and King George III.
- Shelley does not openly criticise King George III in the poem; instead the poem speaks from the perspective of a third party 'traveller'.

One of the hardest things about these poems, for me, is understanding them! I'm sure many English teachers and professors may consider me a philistine, but they can be very hard to read. How can anyone be expected to write an analysis about something they don't understand? So, below, I've included a basic outline of the poem, written in plain and simple English; as well as a 'plain and simple' definition of some of the key poetry terms you'll need to understand what it's all about!

The Poem—A Literal Translation

Percy Shelley met someone (a traveller!) from a far off land.

This traveller told Percy about the legs of a statue that could be found in a desert far away.

The statue was in ruins and the head of the statue lay nearby. The face of the statue looks mean; frowning and sneering.

The sculptor knew the subject well and captured a true likeness of them.

The pedestal that the statue stood on bears a bold inscription telling that the statue is of 'Ozymandias' and he was the 'King of Kings', that when people looked at the statue they would feel worthless in comparison.

Despite the bold statement the statue is in ruins, all alone in the desert, with nothing for miles around.

Key Poetry Terms

Sonnet: A poem that takes a specific form: 14 lines long. Typically used for love poems.

Rhyme Scheme: A pattern of rhyme between the lines of the poem, ie, Do any of the last words between lines rhyme?

Rhythm: Do the lines in the poem follow a particular pattern or rhythm? This specifically looks at the structure of the syllables within each line.

Iambic Pentameter: A particular rhythm where there are 10 syllables in a line of poetry, and every other syllable is stressed. Creates a marching beat.

Enjambment: A sentence within a poem runs on past the end of the line of a poem.

Caesura: A forced break within a line of poetry created by punctuation. Forces the reader to pause.

Now for the poem itself....

OZYMANDIAS BY PERCY SHELLEY

What is the poem about?

- Inspired by the discovery of a statue of Egyptian Pharaoh, Rameses II.
- Pharaohs believed themselves to be Gods in human form: believed that their legacy would be eternal.
- The statue is an allegory not just for Ozymandias but for those in power.
- Shows that whilst they may be powerful at one time, this does not last.
- Shows power of nature—how it is stronger than man.
- Poem is ironic: emphasising the inevitable downfall of those who rule.

Themes

- POWER of HUMANS**—it is fleeting and not everlasting.
- POWER of NATURE**—conquers all.
- PRIDE**—arrogance of man.

What other poems does it compare well to?

| POWER OF HUMANS | POWER OF NATURE | PRIDE / ARROGANCE |
|-------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| London | The Prelude | Light Brigade |
| My Last Duchess | Exposure | My Last Duchess |
| Storm on the Island | Storm on the Island | |
| Tissue | Tissue | |
| Checking Out Me History | Kamikaze | |

POWER OF NATURE:

Statue is barely standing; it is being eaten away by the desert. Struggling to survive in a place where no one is around to care.

Alliteration of 'c' emphasises harshness of Ozy's character

Ambiguity in meaning:

Mock = create: referring to the sculptor who created the statue. Is he making fun of Ozy?

Mock = make fun of. Was Ozy cruel mocking his people?

Writing about something he was told: not something he himself saw. NOT openly criticising power: doing it diplomatically. Reflective of time it was written (1800's).

I met a traveller 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,

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;

And on the pedestal, these words appear:

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
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."

Alliteration emphasises the emptiness of the desert: Ozy's legacy is nothing.

Enjambment (sentence ending in middle of line) forces the reader to stop. This line is important. Emphasises the impermanence of POWER.

Negative language makes it clear the poem is ATTACKING Ozy. Suggests a callous, ruthless leader.

Biblical reference: Jesus is referred to 'King Of Kings' in the bible. Emphasises the power that Ozy

PRIDE:

Arrogant claim on inscription of statue. Repetition of imperative verb 'my' highlights ego and vanity.

POWER OF NATURE:

Nature has endured but Ozy has crumbled.

Structure & Form

- Written as a SONNET:
 - Unusual: more usual for a poem about LOVE.
 - Perhaps represents Percy Shelley's love of the situation: how power is not eternal.
- Mixture of TRADITIONAL & SHAKE-SPEAREAN sonnet forms:
 - Mirrors the fact that everything changes: nothing is eternal.
- Has a COMPLEX rhyme scheme
 - Representative that power is consistent or predictable.
- Rhythm is IAMBIC PENTAMETER (every other syllable is stressed).
 - Gives a sense of marching.
 - Represents time marching on.

Language Choices:

- Language choices describing Ozy portray him as a grandiose character:
 - 'antique' 'vast' 'visage'
- Negative language throughout echoes the decay of the statue / power
 - 'shattered' 'lifeless' 'remains' 'decay'
- Uses irony to contrast statue's arrogant inscription with the remains of it's Ozy's power
- Alliteration in final lines highlights all that remains of Ozy and his power are worthless.