**OZYMANDIAS**

**by: Percy Bysshe Shelley**

**Summary**

The speaker recalls having met a traveler “from an antique land,” who told him a story about the ruins of a statue in the desert of his native country. Two vast legs of stone stand without a body, and near them a massive, crumbling stone head lies “half sunk” in the sand. The traveler told the speaker that the frown and “sneer of cold command” on the statue’s face indicate that the sculptor understood well the emotions (or "passions") of the statue’s subject. The memory of those emotions survives "stamped" on the lifeless statue, even though both the sculptor and his subject are both now dead. On the pedestal of the statue appear the words, “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: / Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” But around the decaying ruin of the statue, nothing remains, only the “lone and level sands,” which stretch out around it.

**Form**

“Ozymandias” is a sonnet, a fourteen-line poem metered in iambic pentameter. The rhyme scheme is somewhat unusual for a sonnet of this era; it does not fit a conventional Petrarchan pattern, but instead interlinks the octave (a term for the first eight lines of a sonnet) with the sestet (a term for the last six lines), by gradually replacing old rhymes with new ones in the form ABABACDCEDEFEF.

**Commentary**

This sonnet from 1817 is probably Shelley’s most famous and most anthologized poem—which is somewhat strange, considering that it is in many ways an atypical poem for Shelley, and that it touches little upon the most important themes in his oeuvre at large (beauty, expression, love, imagination). Still, “Ozymandias” is a masterful sonnet. Essentially it is devoted to a single metaphor: the shattered, ruined statue in the desert wasteland, with its arrogant, passionate face and monomaniacal inscription (“Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”). The once-great king’s proud boast has been ironically disproved; Ozymandias’s works have crumbled and disappeared, his civilization is gone, all has been turned to dust by the impersonal, indiscriminate, destructive power of history. The ruined statue is now merely a monument to one man’s hubris, and a powerful statement about the insignificance of human beings to the passage of time. Ozymandias is first and foremost a metaphor for the ephemeral nature of political power, and in that sense the poem is Shelley’s most outstanding political sonnet, trading the specific rage of a poem like “England in 1819” for the crushing impersonal metaphor of the statue. But Ozymandias symbolizes not only political power—the statue can be a metaphor for the pride and hubris of all of humanity, in any of its manifestations. It is significant that all that remains of Ozymandias is a work of art and a group of words; as Shakespeare does in the sonnets, Shelley demonstrates that art and language long outlast the other legacies of power.

Of course, it is Shelley’s brilliant poetic rendering of the story, and not the subject of the story itself, which makes the poem so memorable. Framing the sonnet as a story told to the speaker by “a traveler from an antique land” enables Shelley to add another level of obscurity to Ozymandias’s position with regard to the reader—rather than seeing the statue with our own eyes, so to speak, we hear about it from someone who heard about it from someone who has seen it. Thus the ancient king is rendered even less commanding; the distancing of the narrative serves to undermine his power over us just as completely as has the passage of time. Shelley’s description of the statue works to reconstruct, gradually, the figure of the “king of kings”: first we see merely the “shattered visage,” then the face itself, with its “frown / And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command”; then we are introduced to the figure of the sculptor, and are able to imagine the living man sculpting the living king, whose face wore the expression of the passions now inferable; then we are introduced to the king’s people in the line, “the hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.” The kingdom is now imaginatively complete, and we are introduced to the extraordinary, prideful boast of the king: “Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” With that, the poet demolishes our imaginary picture of the king, and interposes centuries of ruin between it and us: “ ‘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.”