

Summary and Analysis Ozymandias

A traveler tells the poet that two huge stone legs stand in the desert. Near them on the sand lies a damaged stone head. The face is distinguished by a frown and a sneer which the sculptor carved on the features. On the pedestal are inscribed the words "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: / Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" Around the huge fragments stretches the empty desert.

Analysis

Shelley's irregular sonnet on the fragments of a huge statue of an Egyptian pharaoh begins with a statement that arouses the interest of the reader at once:

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert.

The mention of a traveler is a promise of a story. The story is a characteristically Shelleyan one about tyranny and how time makes a mockery of the boastfulness of even the most powerful kings. The story is over and Shelley's point is made before the reader realizes that he has been subjected to a moral lesson.

The fine beginning is followed by a condensed and vigorous account of what the traveler saw in addition to the two huge legs standing in the desert: a shattered visage, a pedestal, and on it a boastful inscription. Nothing more except the empty desert. Shelley puts the words of the inscription in effectively ironic contrast with the surroundings. The rulers of the world, "ye Mighty," are told by Ozymandias, "king of kings," to look upon his works and despair of emulating them. Now one looks and sees nothing whatsoever. Instead of the architectural marvels promised by the inscription, "the lone and level sands stretch far away." Just as the sculptor mocked Ozymandias by putting on the face of the colossal monument a "frown / And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command," so time has also mocked him by reducing his vain boast to nothingness. The works that were to be the despair of other pharaohs have completely disappeared. Even the gigantic statue of himself that he had commissioned has been reduced to two legs, a shattered face, and a pedestal.

"Ozymandias" was written by Shelley in competition with his friend Horace Smith. The superiority of Shelley's choice of details and of the vigor of his diction are splendidly illustrated by a comparison with the octave of his friend's sonnet:

In Egypt's sandy silence, all alone
Stands a gigantic leg, which far off throws
The only shadow that the desert knows.
"I am Great Ozymandias," saith the stone,
"The king of kings; this mighty city shows
The wonders of my hand." The city's gone!
Nought but the leg remaining to disclose
The site of that forgotten Babylon.

Both poets remove the city of Thebes, the site of the statue, from their poems for artistic purposes.

Ozymandias was the name by which Ramses II, a pharaoh famous for the number of architectural structures he caused to be erected, was known to the Greeks. Shelley had read of the statue in Diodorus Siculus, a Roman writer, who had described it as intact. He had obviously read about it in some other source also since he knew that the statue was no longer intact. The problem of Shelley's sources is discussed in an interesting, illustrated article by Johnstone Parr, "Shelley's 'Ozymandias,'" *Keats-Shelley Journal* Vol. VI (1957).

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