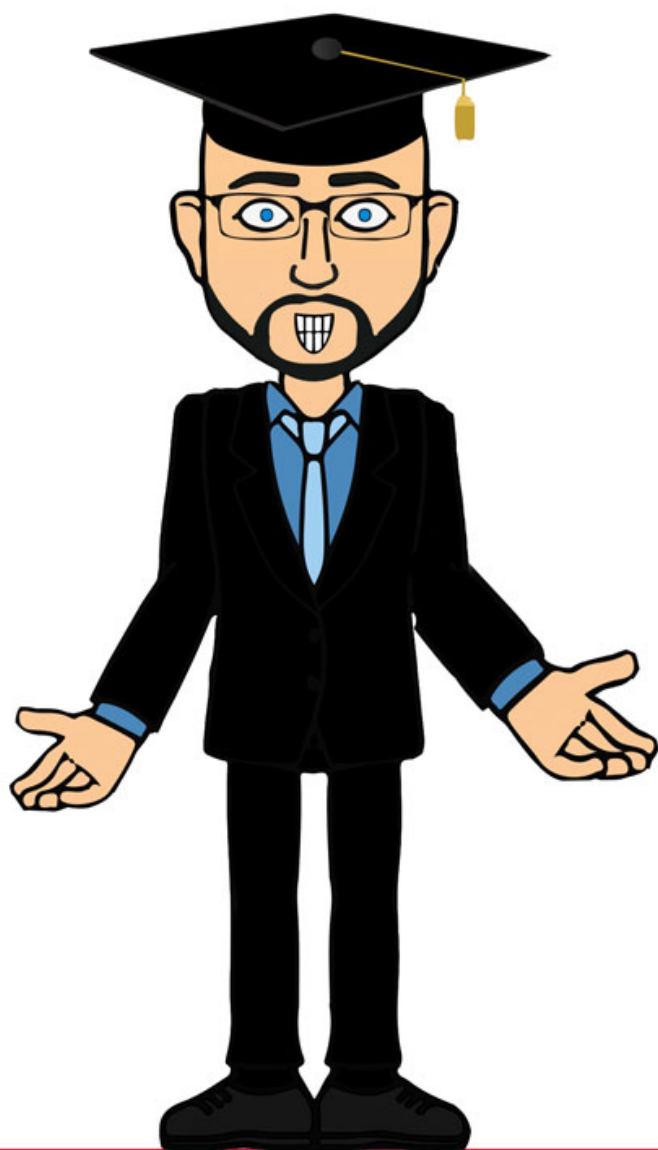


Mr Bruff

ONLINE REVISION

MR Bruff's Guide To

POWER & CONFLICT POETRY



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SAMPLE

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY: 'OZYMANDIAS'

Ozymandias

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.

Poem Summary

The speaker meets a traveller, who describes a statue that he saw when in a desert. The traveler first noticed two huge stone legs standing without a body. Near the legs, on the sand and partially sunk into the ground, was the head of the statue; on its face, despite being shattered and cracked, was a nasty, arrogant look. The sculptor who made the statue made it look very lifelike. At the foot of the statue was an engraving, which read 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'. Clearly, the statue had once stood in the midst of a vast and impressive empire, but that's the irony: by the time the traveler sees the statue, not only is it crumbled and broken, but it's isolated and in the middle of the

The Poet:

- Percy Shelley was born in Sussex in 1792.
- He came from a wealthy family and was set to inherit riches and become a politician.
- Shelley attended Eton and Oxford University but was expelled from university for writing in favour of atheism.
- He married Mary Shelley, the author of 'Frankenstein', in 1816.
- Shelley died at the age of 29 when he drowned in a boating accident off the coast of Italy in 1822.

Context:

King George III

Shelley had a great dislike of the monarchy, including King George III who was King when the poem was written. He also had a strong dislike of religion, both of which were key themes in Shelley's writings. For example, in 1811 he published 'Poetical Essay on the Existing State of Things', where he criticised the monarchy, attacking the 'cold advisers of yet colder kings' in a line which reminds us of the 'cold command' of Ozymandias. Shelley was also very anti-religion, publishing 'The Necessity of Atheism' which resulted in his being thrown out of Oxford University. In 'Ozymandias', we can see criticism of monarchy (Ozymandias was an Egyptian monarch after all) and criticism of religion.

Shelley begins 'Ozymandias' by detaching himself from the story being told, supposedly retelling something he heard from 'a traveller' rather than something he himself saw.

The poet deliberately sets his poem in the 'antique land' of Egypt, supposedly criticising pharaoh Ozymandias. This creates a distancing effect, which makes the poem's criticism of monarchy subtler and less obvious: he immediately wants to make the point that he is not openly criticising British monarchy, yet the poem is clearly a thinly veiled attack on King George III.

Ramesses

It is useful to know a little about Ramesses II (also known as Ozymandias). Ozymandias was an Egyptian pharaoh who ruled from 1279 - 1213 BC. He is believed to be the Egyptian pharaoh who ruled during the Biblical exodus of Moses. He led many battles to protect and extend the borders of Egypt. In this way, he can be compared to King George III, who, like Ramesses, was an ambitious monarch.

Romanticism:

Shelley belongs to what is known as the second generation of Romantic poets. To understand Romanticism, we need to understand the literary movement that went before it: Enlightenment poetry.

Enlightenment poetry (1650s-1780s) focused on realistic poems which instructed people. This was a time of scientific developments and rationalism. The French Revolution was influenced by the Enlightenment, with its overthrow of the monarchy and striving for political freedom. Wordsworth himself was a supporter of the French Revolution at first. However, the French Revolution devolved into bloodshed and chaos, bringing home the evil of humanity. Suddenly it was no longer popular to write poetry which criticised society. A shift was needed to move away from this, and Romantic poetry moved back to a focus on the power of the imagination.

Romantic poetry can be defined as containing a number of conventions:

- 1) A dislike of urban life and embrace of the natural world (as a reaction to the effects of the Industrial Revolution)
- 2) A love of the supernatural
- 3) Use of ordinary, everyday language

The most famous early Romantics are Wordsworth and Coleridge. However, by the time Shelley was writing, it was felt that the early Romantics had sold out—Wordsworth, for example, was now working as a tax collector! So, the second generation of Romantics had to set themselves apart from the first generation. Byron, Shelley and Keats focused on ancient and foreign lands as the settings of their poetry to distinguish themselves from what had gone before. Of course, we see this in 'Ozymandias', which is set in a foreign land and refers to an ancient historical period. These second-generation Romantic poets often wrote against religion and political control.

Theme:

The major theme of 'Ozymandias' is misguided ideas about human power: those with power are deluded in their belief that it is invincible. The power of leaders does not last, but is transitory (open to change).

Form: Sonnet

'Ozymandias' is a sonnet. The sonnet is a genre of poetry which originated in Italy in the 13th century. The 14th-century poet Petrarch is the most recognised Italian sonneteer. Falling in love with a woman known only as 'Laura', he wrote hundreds of sonnets to her.

A Petrarchan (or Italian) sonnet follows these conventions:

- 14 lines
- The first 8 lines (known as the octave) present a problem
- The last 6 lines (known as the sestet) present a solution to the problem
- Line 9 (known as the Volta) introduces a sharp twist or turn, which brings about the move to the resolution
- The octave has an ABBAABBA rhyme scheme
- The rhyme scheme of the sestet will vary

The Shakespearean Sonnet

In the 16th century, the sonnet made its way into English poetry. Sir Philip Sidney developed it, but it came to be known as the Shakespearean sonnet after Shakespeare made it truly famous. This form is quite different to the Petrarchan sonnet:

- It is written in iambic pentameter (lines of ten syllables with alternating unstressed and stressed syllables)
- It is divided into 3 stanzas of 4 lines each, known as quatrains, and finished with a rhyming couplet which also serves as the volta
- Its rhyme scheme is also different: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG

A Note on Rhyme Schemes:

A rhyme scheme is the pattern of rhymes at the end of each line in a poem. To work out the rhyme scheme, we look at the final word of each line and consider the sound it creates. We start with the first line, which we label as 'A'. In 'Ozymandias', the final word of line 1 is 'land', and we label the line 'A'.

Next, we move to the second line and look at the final word there. In this poem, line 2 ends with 'stone'. We then ask ourselves if 'stone' rhymes with 'land'. If it doesn't, we label this line as 'B'. If a line ends with a word that rhymes with a previous line, we label it with the same letter as that previous line. If it doesn't rhyme, we continue through the alphabet.

For example, line 3 ends with 'sand', which rhymes with 'land' from line 1, so we label line 3 as 'A'. Line 4 ends with 'frown', which does not perfectly rhyme with 'stone' but is close, we label it 'B' because it is what we call an imperfect or half rhyme. This happens when the consonant sounds match but the vowel sounds are different, such as the 'oh' sound in 'stone' and the 'ow' sound in 'frown'. Try working out the full rhyme scheme of the poem (I'll give you the answer on the next page anyway!)

But What About 'Ozymandias'?

When we look closely at 'Ozymandias', we see that it does not fit neatly into either of the sonnet forms.

Many see elements of the Petrarchan sonnet in 'Ozymandias': there are 14 lines, structured as a group of eight lines (the octave) which focus on the statue, and a group of six lines (the sestet) which centres on the pedestal and the poem's wider message about power.

However, the opening rhyme scheme (ABAB) fits the Shakespearean sonnet model, not the Petrarchan model. Also, the poem is written mostly in iambic pentameter, like a Shakespearean sonnet. But it doesn't stop there! The continuing rhyme scheme : ACDCEDFEF, doesn't follow either sonnet form, but is doing something new again.

So whether you would choose to say the sonnet moves from a Petrarchan to a Shakespearean to a new form of sonnet, **or would simply summarise and say that the poem is a sonnet but one which is continually adapting and changing, lacking consistency, with the initial rhyme scheme being replaced with something new**, the question is WHY?

Well, remember what I said about the poem: power is transitory - it doesn't last forever - it changes over time? In the poem, the rhyme scheme is transitory - it changes over time as the poem progresses. Here we see form reflecting content to represent how human power (despite those who own it feeling invincible) is open to change. It's perhaps a warning to King George III that, despite his powerful position at the time the poem was written, his own power was transitory - it wouldn't last forever. Or we can interpret it as a message about power in general.

The Title:

The 'mandias' in the title 'Ozymandias' can be linked to the idea of a mandate or command; even the title of the poem reflects themes of power and control. The fact that this is the king's name suggests that his whole identity is closely linked to ruling and control. It shows that the king's power is so strong that it has become a part of who he is. This connection between his name and power also highlights the king's pride and arrogant belief that he could never be defeated. However, the poem's description of the ruined statue in a vast, empty desert challenges this idea, showing that human power doesn't last forever. What's left of Ozymandias is not the greatness he once had, but a broken statue in a deserted land, symbolising the transitory nature of human power.

Language:

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;

A huge amount of negative language is used to make it very clear that the poem is an attack on the powerful. Its intention is not to praise. The words describe a broken statue

with a sneering face, showing the king's arrogance and cruelty. The poet uses these harsh details to emphasise how the king's power and pride are now meaningless. The ruined statue, with its sneering expression, is meant to criticise the king's selfishness and the way he thought he was unbeatable. The poem uses this imagery to warn against the dangers of pride and to show that no amount of human power can escape the effects of time.

Intertextual Biblical Reference:

And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'

There is one key example of Biblical language in the poem, which help us to see Shelley's criticism of religion. Ozymandias' self-appointed title on the pedestal is 'King of kings'. In the Bible, in 1 Timothy 6:15, the title 'King of Kings' is given to God. So what can we say about this? Firstly, that Ozymandias sees himself as God-like in his power, and secondly that perhaps the whole poem can be read not as a criticism of some ancient Egyptian monarch, but of the Church and organised religion. Perhaps Shelley is saying the power of the Church will one day crumble like the statue.

Let's look at those words again: 'King of Kings'. Notice the hard alliterative 'k' sound there? We see it again in 'cold command'. Poet's often use the 'c' sound to create an aggressive, harsh tone, and here we can see this alliteration indicates the cruelty of Ozymandias - he was a powerful ruler who is presented as aggressive and oppressive. Clearly the poem is criticising this kind of leader, and again we draw parallels with Shelley's dislike of imposed control by those in power.

Caesura:

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

In terms of poetry, caesura is a stop or pause within a line of poetry, often indicated by punctuation such as a comma or full stop.

Look at this example with the full stop in 'Ozymandias': 'Nothing beside remains.' The full stop after 'Nothing beside remains' forces the reader to stop and reflect on the end of Ozymandias' power. This abrupt halt symbolises the finality of Ozymandias' legacy—what was once a symbol of immense power is now reduced to nothingness. This ties in with the message of this poem is about misguided notions of human power, how nothing lasts forever.

The Ending:

The poem ends with the image 'The lone and level sands stretch far away.' Shelley ends his poem about Ozymandias by not even mentioning the pharaoh at all – it's a structural decision to end the poem with a reminder that Ozymandias has been forgotten, and that human power does not last forever.

Which poems compare well with 'Ozymandias'?

As a poem about a misguided sense of human power, 'Ozymandias' might be compared with 'My Last Duchess', 'Extract from, The Prelude', 'Storm on the Island' or 'Tissue'.

SAMPLE