

Exemplar for Unit 2: Poetry
Ozymandias by P.B. Shelley

Ozymandias

The narrative position distances the reader from the subject – the narrator is retelling a traveller's tale

Forbidding details of the statue's appearance indicate the character of Ozymandias

Whose hand and heart? Ozymandias' – he has not survived despite the mockery of and feeding on his people, or the sculptor's – a subversive artist creating the official portrait?

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.

Vocabulary of size and solidity contrasts with language of destruction

Reference to the accuracy of the sculptor and his art perhaps links with the poet and the poem

Ozymandias' defiant voice is recorded – a mighty act of hubris which the reader already knows is forlorn. This is confirmed by the emphatic short sentence.

The poem ends with vocabulary of wreckage and isolation – all that is left of Ozymandias' pride, reinforcing the irony of the poem

The poem is a sonnet; the octave establishes the character of the king and the state of his statue in the desert, while the sestet drives home the irony by directly comparing Ozymandias' hubristic challenge to the gods with the wreckage of his statue, abandoned in the desert. The name of the figure is given only here – the condition of the statue is given precedence in the octave. This also recalls the importance of the double narrative, a narrator retelling a story he has heard from a traveller, suggesting that Ozymandias and his story are little known and his former kingdom seldom visited – a far cry from his self-proclaimed status as 'king of kings'.

Note the way the reversal of the prevailing rhythm gives particular emphasis to 'Stand' (l.3) 'Look' (l.11) and 'Nothing' (l.13), while the double stress 'Half sunk' (l.4) emphasises the near-obliteration of the statue.