

Transient Empires and Eternal Art in Percy Shelley's 'Ozymandias'

Empires, no matter how powerful, eventually fall, as is the case of Ramses II's empire, the ancient king of Egypt also known as Ozymandias. Percy Bysshe Shelley encapsulates this idea in his sonnet 'Ozymandias' by using a statue as a symbol for his dwindling influence. By contrasting Ozymandias' previously mighty empire to the ruins that remain, Shelley comments on the transience of power, as compared to the immortality of words.

In this sonnet, Shelley uses the statue of Ozymandias to symbolise his empire, and uses specific imagery and stylistic devices to convey its past power and influence. The legs and head of the statue are all that remain of Ozymandias' empire, yet their descriptions indicate how powerful it once was in the lines: 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone/Stand in the desert' (2-3). The word 'vast' (2) indicates the impressive size of the stature, and the legs being made of stone indicates their solidity. The strength and persistence of the statue, and therefore the empire, is conveyed by the repeated "st" sound, as well as the stress placed on 'Stand' (3) when the rhythm switches from iambic to trochaic. The resistance of the statue is further elaborated on when Shelley writes that its passions 'yet survive...the hand that mocked them' (7-8). The word "mocked" has a double meaning: to imitate, and to ridicule, both of which are applicable in this case, as the latter indicates that the statue outlived its sculptor, while the former implies that the empire survived through ridicule and opposition. By creating the image of an impressively resistant statue, Shelley gives Ozymandias' empire a powerful and immovable quality.

Despite the influence that the empire may have had in the past, the currently broken state of the statue shows its ultimate impermanence. Despite it being made of stone, the statue is 'trunkless' (2), implying its fragmentation, which is also conveyed through the fragmented description of the head. 'Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown/And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command' (4-5) contains numerous commas, reflecting the 'shattered' (4) state of the visage. It is also 'half-sunk' (4) and '[lying]' (4), further emphasising its weakness. While the statue may have once been great and impressive, this is no longer the case.

The pitiful state of the statue and, by extension, the empire's dwindled power is attributed to the effect of time. The description of the statue's lips as 'wrinkled' (7) creates an association with

old age, therefore indicating the passage of time as the cause of its, and the empire's, ruin. While the marks of the empire 'survive' (7), they are stamped on 'lifeless things' (7) and are therefore inactive and powerless. So while the few remnants of the past still survive, time has rendered them useless, transforming them into symbols of what was.

The few remnants of the statue are all that remains of the empire, as evidenced by the descriptions of the desolate surroundings. As described in the last few lines:

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away. (12-14)

The statue was found in a desert, which is inherently empty, but the emptiness is emphasised by the caesura in line 12. The full stop creates a pause in the middle of the line, reflecting the 'Nothing' (12) around. Many sounds are repeated in consecutive words, such as "r", "b" and "l", mimicking the effect of an echo and further emphasising the isolation of the statue. While the empire was once massive and impressive, as indicated by 'Look on my works' (11) in Ozymandias' epitaph, all that remains is a 'wreck' (13). His empire is reduced to nothing, which is emphasised by the emptiness that surrounds what is left of the statue.

While all scraps of the power and influence that the empire once had are gone, its legacy lives on through words. At the beginning of the poem, Shelley creates distance between the reader and the statue by relaying its description through the narrator, as told by a traveller from an 'antique land' (1). Yet despite the distance, the legacy is carried on because the traveller speaks of it. Also, what remains of the statue includes the epitaph on the pedestal, a message from Ozymandias to the world, which is another example of words surviving through time. Therefore, while the empire is long gone, and the statue almost completely destroyed, Ozymandias' legacy lives on through words.

In his sonnet 'Ozymandias', Shelley emphasises the impermanence of empires. Though they may be powerful as the stone statue, and equally resistant, they are susceptible to time. The only way they live on is through words. This interpretation testifies to the immortalising power of art: much like the sculptor's work immortalised him, so do words and stories immortalise an empire.