

# AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Power and Conflict

*Ozymandias - Percy Shelley*



# OZYMANDIAS

Percy Shelley

## Brief Summary

The poem concerns the discovery of a semi-destroyed and decaying statue of Ramesses II, also known as Ozymandias, and shows how power deteriorates and will not last forever.

## Synopsis

- Report from a stranger of a statue in a desert
- Statue is falling apart and decaying
- The sculptor has made it in a way that portrays the cruelty of the king
- King's pedestal claims he was "**king of kings**" – shows his arrogance
- Irony of his claims when the statue is surrounded by endless featureless desert

## Context

### Percy Shelley (1772-1822)

Shelley was a **radical, romantic poet**; he was vegetarian, strongly **anti-monarchy**, a **pacifist**, an **atheist**, **anti-religion**, and **supported social justice**. He wanted to end the oppression of ordinary people, inspired by the French Revolution. He got expelled from Oxford University for publishing an atheist pamphlet and delivering it to religious figures. At 19 he got married after running off from his first wife who killed herself. He came from a very wealthy family, and was set to have a comfortable life with inheritance and a government role from his grandfather. He was a second generation romantic.

### Romantic Era

Shelley often focused focus on the subjective and the emotional, which contrasted with enlightenment values. During the enlightenment, writers would center their work on the beauty of nature and simplicity of the past, with an appreciation of the sublime, the overwhelming power and awe of the natural world. Writers would protest the present/future of mankind by returning to the past, and within their writing repurpose old literary conventions. There was a **rejection of institutions of power**, and poetry was used to **spread messages and political ideas** which needed to be accessible to all.

### Historical influences in the poem

The first reference is **Ramesses II**, who was an Egyptian pharaoh from 1279-1239 BC, in fact believed to be the pharaoh involved in Moses' exodus. He was later defeated by the 12 tribes of Israel, and used the throne name "Ozymandias". He is the subject of the poem – his statue had just

### Summary

**Context** – radical romantic poet // anti-monarchy/organised religion/pacifist – analogy for Ramesses II (Egyptian pharaoh – Moses)

**Structure** – irregular rhyme scheme (ABAB CDCD EFEF GG) // single stanza

**Form** – sonnet // combine Petrarchan lines w/ Shakespearean rhyme + iambic pentameter (evolution art, arrogance)

**Language** – alliteration (monotony/expanse) // harsh "c"-symbolism dessert and sand (time/nature/empty)

**Key idea** – human power is transient but art will survive // transient compared to nature and time // a warning to all institutions of power that they will not last (but their treatment of others and how artist portray them will)



been discovered at Shelley's time of writing, which made it a very topical piece of content to reference in his poem. Shelley and Horace Smith had been challenged to write a poem about it. Ramesses is remembered for his tyranny and military exploits, had a large empire over Egypt and vassals, as well as being remembered for his defeat.

**King George III** arguably has impact over Shelley's poem, as his poem written during his reign; he had reigned longer than any king before, but had outstayed his welcome. He engaged in many military conflicts and was remembered for oppression and tyranny – during his rule, the 13 colonies rebelled. Shelley was pacifist and positioned himself against Georges' military exploits. Some consider George III the inspiration for Ozymandias, who is seen historically as a tyrant.



### **Ozymandias**

Shelley, one of the most famous poets of his time, explores conflict in his poem Ozymandias, which was named after the Egyptian pharaoh, Rameses II. It is thought that Shelley, a radical romantic poet who often criticised society in his works, was making implicit links between Rameses' powerful but violent rein with that of George III. George III reigned during the time the poem was written, and was generally disliked.

George III has been seen historically as a tyrant. The poem engages in these issues of power and conflict through the discussion of a huge statue in the desert, which is of Ozymandias. All of the pharaoh's works haven't lasted, and the statue is almost destroyed. This decay reflects how exploits which are impressive but not morally good will be criticised and forgotten about after they end. The poem explores conflict between man and time and memory, as Ozymandias was largely forgotten, even though he thought his memory would last forever. The poem also touches on the power of art and words, as people may not have remembered Ozymandias, but part of the statue remained, as well as the words placed on the inscription. Overall, the message of the poem could be considered to be a reminder that **power will not last forever**.



## Ozymandias

*Desert suggests a lifelessness and lack of culture.*

*The image of a shattered visage creates a sense of irony: a King who believed so strongly in his own power and superiority, and who tried so hard to present this image of greatness through his statue, has now been forgotten and destroyed by time other than the visage that had been intended to show he was unforgettable.*

*contemptuous/mocking smile, remark or tone, which connotes malicious cruelty and heartless. It's like he is mocking his subjects, and hows his insolence and contempt for subjects that he views as below him. This presents the King's arrogance, confidence and sense of superiority. This is reflective of Shelley's own anti-violence stance, as he was against all military exploits and thus also against the "cold commands" that initiate them.*

*The artist's work is mocking the king. Sees glory in a statue that is criticising, yet his confidence in his own supremacy means he overlooks any evidence that contradicts their grandeur. "Mocked" can also be interpreted as "to make a model of" as the*

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 **shatter'd visage** lies, whose frown

And **wrinkled lip** and **sneer** of **cold command**

Tell that its sculptor well those passions read

Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,

**The hand that mock'd them** and the heart that fed;

And on the **pedestal** these words appear:

*Legacy is so insignificant it is known only by travellers – Egypt is seen as an antique land (failed in trying to increase influence).*

*A wrinkled lip conjures the image of someone grimacing in disgust and contempt, thus displaying the king's disregard for his subjects, viewing them as inferior and below him. This antipathy is then paired with immense power which enables him to exploit and torture the people he rules with no empathy or remorse. Shelley can use this to show the danger of a single individual having unlimited power invested in them (be it political or religious), as it enables them to see all other people as inferior and thus derive an ability to oppress them.*

*Irony of pedestal message: pedestal by idiomatic connotation presents his power as undeserved*



*sculptor has literally made a model of the king - perhaps it was not his intention to portray him negatively – he had a “heart that fed” the king through its intention to please him - but that simply by modelling Ozymandias, it was inevitable that his cruelty would show due to it being an inextricable part of him.*

*The King clearly expects his empire and kingdom to survive, which is dramatic irony.*

*Level - monotonous and featureless – no sign of his legacy. Lone – isolated – statue is all that remains – his cruelty is only remembrance. These are also alliterative.*

*The literal sand has covered over Ozymandias’ statue; the figurative “sands of time” have covered over Ozymandias’ memory.*

‘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**

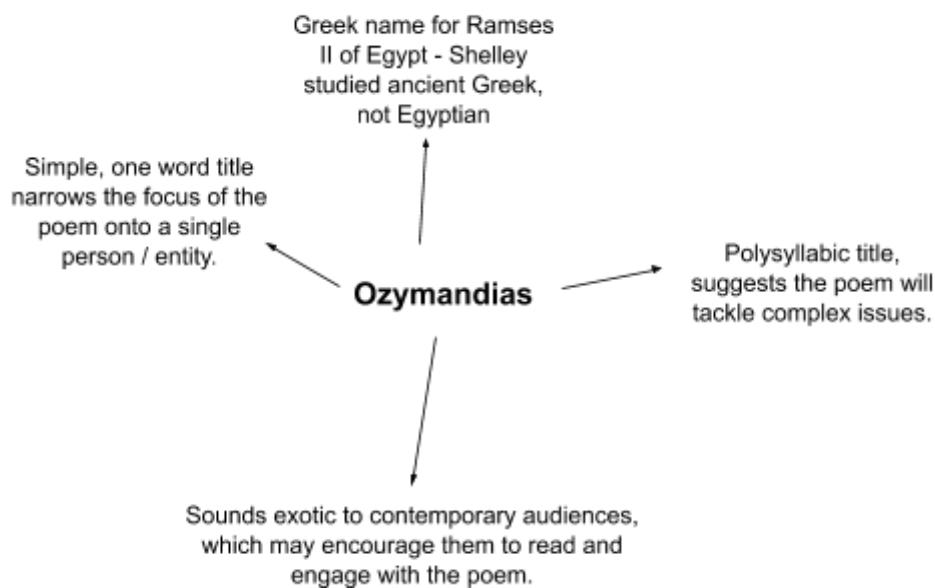
*This claim seems ironic to the reader when they are known only via the report of a traveller. Ozymandias’ pride and arrogance led to his perception of himself as the “king of kings”: criticizes leaders and their ideas of themselves and ability to rule suggests he views himself as omnipotent.*

#### *Alliterative*

*The statue is in a “far away” where it stands so insignificant and unrecognised that only travellers know it exists. Egypt (the statue of the poem exists, and originated from the Ramesseum in Egypt) which Ozymandias had tried so hard to extend and empower. His pursuits are condemned to failure when the insignificance of Egypt allows it to be dismissively deemed “far away”*



## The title “Ozymandias”



## Perspective

The poem is written from the **first person perspective**, however, the speaker is never revealed nor named nor assigned any identifying characteristics. In this respect he can be considered an **omniscient** speaker.

The **pronoun “I”** is only used once in the poem, right at the start, which shows how little the perspective actually matters. This may be intentionally to disconnect the speaker from Shelley, as he was attempting to impart a political message through his work. Through disguising this as a message from a fictional character he is removing any blame that society may try and pin on him, as the writer.

## The opening

**I met a traveller** from an antique land

The poem begins with **“I met a traveller”** which instantly passes any responsibility for the opinions within the poem onto a (probably fictional) stranger. Shelley opens his poem with the **detached narrative** of a traveller to distance himself from the political messages of his poem.

Shelley uses Ozymandias as an allegory for King George III. This shows readers that he's willing to risk criticism that would have come with this move. This detachment means Shelley is free to comment on the monarchy or religion as he wishes for the rest of the poem because the views





expressed are being presented as the views of someone else. Equally, having the poem communicated by **reported speech** serves to trivialise the reign of Ozymandias.

## Structure

### Rhyme Scheme

The **irregular rhyme scheme** contrasts with the single stanza as the former suggests a lack of power and control of the ruler, whereas the single stanza suggests order. These contrasts could reflect how different groups of people view war and conflict as either beneficial or detrimental to society.

### Sonnet

The poem blends **Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets**, and Shelley does this in order to demonstrate that all power – even the power of literary conventions – is transient and subject to evolution.

- The poem takes the traditional fourteen lines and Octet-Volta-Sestet structure of **Petrarchan sonnet**
- Whereas the **irregular rhyme scheme** is closer to **ABAB CDCD EFEF GG**, typical of Shakespearean sonnets, plus it uses consistent **iambic pentameter**.

**IAMBIC PENTAMETER** | Technique where the poet uses ten syllables in each line, with pairs of sounds going da-DA with the emphasis on the second syllable.

However, the **irregular rhyme scheme** breaks away from the **sonnet form** which enables Shelley to imply how poetry and literature can **defy tradition and give way to new power**. He is directly demonstrating that conventions can be changed, replaced and edited. This is a literary attitude characteristic of the romantic poets, who focused their work on defying old ideas be them ideas of rhythm or religion, meter or monarchy. By adding his own style to the sonnet, he encourages the belief that convention should never be accepted without challenge.

It is through poetry, a medium that facilitates and invites change, that Shelley chooses to present his ideas about the need for power to be relinquished and transferred - which was not occurring during the reign of George III.

Sonnets are traditionally love poems, and by Shelley selecting to make the statue to focus of the poem, it could be argued that he is making this an object of love and respect. This may work to disguise political messages, whilst still focusing on the power of nature.



## Language

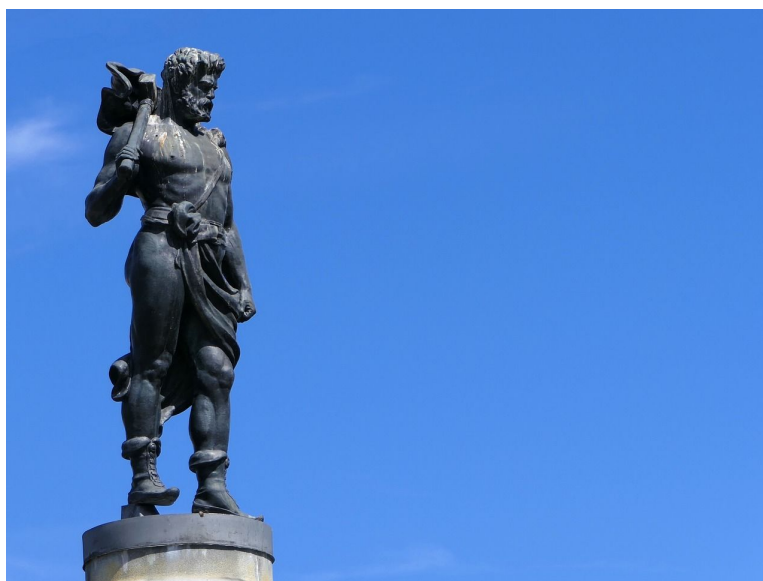
### Alliteration

Shelley uses **alliteration** to demonstrate the vast, unending power of the desert, and to contrast and belittle the limited power of man. The statue can be seen as a **representation of human power** – it is a king's attempt to evade death and cement himself in history, yet it lies broken as a **“colossal wreck”**. The statue is stripped of all power as it lies broken on the floor, yet the desert around it remains endless and overwhelming in its size.

Shelley describes it as **“boundless and bare”, “lone and level”**, and this use of alliteration serves to communicate the **vast, powerful extent of nature**, and its ability to outlive all other forms of power and deem them insignificant by comparison. It also works to present the desert as vast, monotonous and featureless.

### Consonance

The repetition of the harsh **“c”** sound helps to reflect the callous lack of compassion the king had for his subjects, and how oppressive his rule was. The sound bleeds into the reader's perception of the king, helping to portray him as aggressive and callous, and also connotes portrays cruelty and aggression. This shows Shelley's disapproval of military campaigns.



The **consonance** also suggests a use of power for military aims (and indeed, Ramesses II was remembered for his military expansion of Egypt) without any interference from empathy or compassion. This is reflective of Shelley's own anti-violence stance, as he was against all military exploits and thus also against the **“cold commands”** that initiate them.

### Metaphors

The poem can be seen as an **allegory**. Shelley is using Ozymandias as a representation of King George III and all figures of power. He plays with the literal and the metaphorical to create an overwhelming sense of irony surrounding the fall of the King's influence.

The image of a shattered visage creates a **sense of irony**. The poem portrays a King who believed so strongly in his own power and superiority, and who tried so hard to present this image of greatness through his statue. Yet this statue has now been forgotten and destroyed by time. Therefore, the visage of power that he wore during his reign was little more than a mask for the true vulnerability of his authority.





The transient and insignificant nature of human power is a key message in Shelley's poem, because it was this power that he wanted to reform and reassign **in order to better structure a corrupt industrialising society**.

### Symbolism

The use of a desert setting also strips Ozymandias of his legacy. The land surrounding the plaque that boasts of his works is a barren, featureless wasteland, devoid of any culture or life. The emptiness of the desert is symbolic of how his reign was pointless and insignificant as he has been forgotten by history. Instead he has been dwarfed by greater the greater forces of nature and time. Ozymandias has no legacy despite his orders to **"look on my works"** – they no longer exist.

- This has some contextual irony, as Ramesses hoped to expand power and influence of Egypt, but it's now just a featureless desert and "antique land".

Sand is often associated with time. Within the poem Shelley uses sand to show how time can erase the power of man. The sand has literally covered over Ozymandias' statue; the **figurative "sands of time"** have covered over Ozymandias' memory. This shows the reader that regardless of how powerful man becomes nature will always prevail. It also shows that everything comes from the earth and everything will return to it.



### Focus on Power and Pride

Overall, Shelley is **criticising power**. There is a **negative semantic field** surrounding this theme, including the language: **wrinkled / shattered / frown / sunk / sneer**. It could be argued that his aim was to make the reader more receptive to ideas about corruption of power when paired with a **negative tone**.

The speaker is criticising Ozymandias and all he represents, including his power and pride, suggesting that those with power are deluded in their belief of the supremacy of their power. The statue is **personified** and described as sneering, cold and mocking.

The King is confident that the legacy of his power will remain throughout history and this



confidence makes him commemorate himself in statue. However, the speaker sees that the statue, and therefore the King's legacy, is destroyed. This is Shelley's use of **dramatic irony**, the statue has been broken and forgotten with his legacy and empire having been reduced to

sand.



### Shelley's Message

Shelley has sculpted his poem to **reflect the oppression of powerful leaders and the transience of mankind's power**. It mocks rulers past, present and future for thinking they will be any different from the previous one. The King used his power to oppress others – power allows for oppression, pride allows for it without guilt

Shelley can be seen to be criticising systems in which individuals are given so much power that despite their abuse of it, the population are unable to remove them because there is no alternative. This ties in with his anti-religion and anti-monarchy views as he is criticising all power being centred on a person who derives their importance from an image – a **“visage”** – and perceived divine right to power. It is his pride that gives him a sense of entitlement to power. Indeed, he views himself as the **“king of kings”**.

### Comparisons

Ozymandias	Tissue
Misassignment of power to humans, not god.	Misassignment of power to leaders and individuals, not time/nature/art.
Shelley sees loss of power as inevitable and natural, suggesting art will prevail, whereas Dharker tries to offer solutions and a new way to treat power.	
Both show a loss or undermining towards human power.	

### Ozymandias & My Last Duchess

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both poems suggest overarchingly that humanity's pride / power is unfounded. For example, in Ozymandias the poet shows a loss of power over time and in competition with nature, as the characters are surrounded by desert which is a symbol of nature and time. Similarly, MLD shows the duke's power constantly undermined by the enjambment, caesura and single stanza.</li> <li>In both poems, the origin of pride is love for oneself and one's power. This is expressed in Ozymandias through the form of the Sonnet, as it is a love poem to show the king's love for himself. In MLD, the duke loves his "nine hundred year old name" and feels entitled to authority and control because of it</li> </ul>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Whilst both poets overarchingly suggest that pride and power leads to oppression, the subjects of the oppression are different in each poem. For MLD, the Duchess is shown as the symbol of oppression - "then all smiles stopped" - whereas in Ozymandias the statue is used as a symbol for all institutes or figures of power - "cold command" = cruel and harsh oppression.</li> </ul>



## Ozymandias & The Prelude

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Both poems display nature as more powerful than mankind; in Ozymandias, human power is shown as intrinsically weak and transient and lost to time and nature. Meanwhile, in The Prelude, failed attempts of mankind to overpower and manipulate a force beyond its control are displayed.</li><li>• The theme of pride is key in both, it being the cause of the speaker's eventual fall. They both link to Milton's Paradise lost in this sense of the "fall of man" and also to epic poetry in general. This links to the irony of statue in desert in the poem Ozymandias.</li></ul>
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Whilst both poets explore how pride is unfounded because human power is inferior to the power of nature, they present this in different ways. In The Prelude, the overwhelming power of nature leads to the speaker's loss of eloquence and how he becomes unable to define his world. On the other hand, in Ozymandias, this power is conveyed through the symbolism of the desert and time</li></ul>

