Ozymandias

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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.”

General explanation: The speaker describes a meeting with someone who has traveled to a place where ancient civilizations once existed. We know from the title that he’s talking about Egypt. The traveler told the speaker a story about an old, fragmented statue in the middle of the desert. The statue is broken apart, but you can still make out the face of a person. The face looks stern and powerful, like a ruler. The sculptor did a good job at expressing the ruler’s personality. The ruler was a wicked guy, but he took care of his people.

On the pedestal near the face, the traveler reads an inscription in which the ruler Ozymandias tells anyone who might happen to pass by, basically, “Look around and see how awesome I am!” But there is no other evidence of his awesomeness in the vicinity of his giant, broken statue. There is just a lot of sand, as far as the eye can see. The traveler ends his story.

## Lines 1-2

*I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said...*

* The poem begins immediately with an encounter between the speaker and a traveler that comes from an "antique land."
* We're not sure about this traveler. He could be a native of this "antique" land, or just a tourist returning from his latest trip.
* We don't know where this encounter is taking place; is it on the highway? On a road somewhere? In London? Maybe if we keep reading we'll find out.
* "Antique" means something really old, like that couch at your grandmother's or the bunny ears on top of your television. The traveler could be coming from a place that is ancient, almost as if he were time-traveling. Or he could just be coming from a place that has an older history, like Greece, Rome, or ancient Egypt.

## Lines 2-4

*…Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies…*

* Here the traveler begins his speech. He tells the speaker about a pair of stone legs that are somehow still standing in the middle of the desert.
* Those legs are huge ("vast") and "trunkless." "Trunkless" means "without a torso," so it's a pair of legs with no body.
* "Visage" means face; a face implies a head, so we are being told that the head belonging to this sculpture is partially buried in the sand, near the legs. It is also, like the whole statue, "shatter'd."
* The image described is very strange: a pair of legs, with a head nearby. What happened to the rest of the statue? War? Natural disaster? Napoleon?

## Lines 4-6

*…whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read*

* The traveler now gives a fuller description of the "shatter'd visage" lying in the sand.
* As it turns out, the "visage" (or face) isn't completely "shatter'd" because one can still see a "frown," a "wrinkled lip," and a "sneer."
* We still don't know whom this statue represents, but we do know that he was upset about something because he's frowning and sneering. Maybe he thinks that the sneering makes him look powerful. It conveys the "cold command" of an absolute ruler. He can do what he wants without thinking of other people. Heck, he probably commanded the sculptor to make the statue.
* After briefly describing the "visage" (3), the lines shift our attention away from the statue to the guy who made the statue, the "sculptor."
* "Read" here means "understood" or "copied" well. The sculptor was pretty good because he was able to understand and reproduce exactly – to "read" – the facial features and "passions" of our angry man. The sculptor might even grasp things about the ruler that the ruler himself doesn't understand.
* The poem suggests that artists have the ability to perceive the true nature of other people in the present and not just in the past, with the benefit of hindsight.
* "Tell" is a cool word. The statue doesn't literally speak, but the frown and sneer are so perfectly rendered that they give the impression that they are speaking, telling us how great the sculptor was.

## Lines 7-8

*Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,
The hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed*

* The poem now tells us more about the "passions" of the face depicted on the statue.
* Weirdly, the "passions" still survive because they are "stamp'd on these lifeless things." The "lifeless things" are the fragments of the statue in the desert.
* "Stamp'd" doesn't refer to an ink-stamp, but rather to the artistic process by which the sculptor inscribed the "frown" and "sneer" on his statue's face. The word could also make you think of the ruler's power. Had he wanted to, he could have stamped out any of his subjects who offended him.
* "Mock'd" has two meanings in this passage. It means both "made fun of" and "copied," or "imitated." "Hand" is a stand-in for the sculptor. So the sculptor both belittled and copied this man's passions.
* "The heart that fed" is a tricky phrase; it refers to the heart that "fed" or nourished the passions of the man that the statue represents. But if you think these lines are unclear, you're right. Even scholars have trouble figuring out what they mean.
* The passions not only "survive"; they have also outlived both the sculptor ("the hand that mock'd") and the heart of the man depicted by the statue.
* Note the contrast between life and death. The fragments of the statue are called "lifeless things," the sculptor is dead, and so is the statue's subject. The "passions" though, still "survive."

## Lines 9-11

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

* The traveler tells us about an inscription at the foot of statue which finally reveals to us whom this statue represents.
* It is "Ozymandias," the figure named in the title. "Ozymandias" was one of several Greek names for Ramses II of Egypt. For more, see "What's Up with the Title."
* The inscription suggests that Ozymandias is arrogant, or at least that he has grand ideas about his own power: he calls himself the "king of kings."
* Ozymandias also brags about his "works." Maybe he's referring to the famous temples he constructed at Abu Simbel or Thebes. He could also be calling attention to the numerous colossal statues of him, such as the one described in this poem.
* Ozymandias's speech is ambiguous here. On the one hand he tells the "mighty" to "despair" because their achievements will never equal his "works." On the other hand, he might be telling the "mighty" to "despair" as a kind of warning, saying something like "Don't get your hopes up guys because your statues, works, political regimes, etc. will eventually be destroyed or fade away, with nothing to recall them but a dilapidated statue half-buried in the sand."

## 12-14

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

* After the traveler recites the inscription, he resumes his description of the statue and the surrounding area.
* We are reminded again that "nothing" remains besides the head, legs, and pedestal; as if we didn't know the statue has been destroyed, the traveler tells us again that it is a "colossal wreck."
* The very size of the statue – "colossal" – emphasizes the scope of Ozymandias's ambitions as well; it's almost as if because he thinks he's the "king of kings" (10), he also has to build a really big statue.
* To complement the "decay" of the statue, the traveler describes a desolate and barren desert that seems to go on forever: the "sands stretch far away."
* The statue is the only thing in this barren, flat desert. There was probably once a temple or something nearby, but it's long gone. The "sands" are "lone," which means whatever else used to be "beside" the statue has been destroyed or buried.
* Several words in these lines start with the same letter; for example "besides," "boundless," and "bare"; "remains" and "round"; "lone" and "level"; "sands" and "stretch." Using multiple words with the same initial letter is called alliteration. For more, see "[Sound Check](http://shmoop.com/literary-device/poetry/percy-bysshe-shelley/ozymandias/sound-check.html)."

## Symbol Analysis – statues and sculpting

Because the poem is inspired by a statue of Ramses II, we shouldn't be surprised to find so many references to this statue and to sculpting more generally. The "colossal" size of the statue is a symbol of Ramses's lofty self-promotion royal ambition. But statues and sculpture aren't all bad in this poem; they are also a vehicle for the poet to explore questions about the longevity of art, and its ability to capture "passions" (6) in a "lifeless" (7) medium like stones (or painting or even poetry).

* Line 2: The traveler describes two "legs of stone" with no torso, our first indication that the statue is partly destroyed.
* Line 4: The head of the statue is "shatter'd" and partially buried in the sand. "Visage" is a stand-in for the statue's head. (The use of one part of any object or entity to describe the whole is called synecdoche.)
* Line 6-7: The sculptor was pretty good at representing Ramses's "passions" in the statue, which are "stamp'd" or engraved in stone. Even though the stones are "lifeless," they paradoxically give life to the "passions" that still "survive." There are three words in these two lines that start with "s"; the use of multiple words starting with the same letter is called alliteration.
* Line 8: The "hand that mock'd" is another reference to the sculptor and the work of imitation he performs. "Hand" is another example of synecdoche, in which a part (the hand) stands in for the whole (the sculptor).
* Line 9: Describes the base of the statue and the boast engraved on it.
* Line 11: The inscription refers to "works," which might be a reference to other statues, works of art, or monuments commissioned by Ozymandias. This line is ambiguous; Ozymandias could be telling the mighty to despair because their works will never be as good as his or he could be telling them to despair because their works will all eventually crumble just like his. Ozymandias clearly doesn't intend this second meaning, but it's there whether he wants it or not. That's called dramatic irony.
* Line 13: The poem again reminds us that there is a huge statue in the desert that is now a "colossal wreck."

## Symbol Analysis - destruction

The statue that inspired the poem was partially destroyed, and the poem frequently reminds us that the statue is in ruins. The dilapidated state of the statue symbolizes not only the erosive processes of time, but also the transience of political leaders and regimes.

* Line 2: The "legs" of the statue don't have a torso ("trunkless").
* Line 4: The statue's head is "shatter'd" and partly buried in the sand.
* Line 11: The inscription implores the viewer to "look on" Ozymandias's "works." One of those "works" is the statue described in the poem, and it's only a pair of legs and a "shatter'd" head.
* Line 12-13: The statue is described as in a state of "decay" and as a "colossal wreck."
* Line 13-14: We're assuming this statue wasn't always in the middle of nowhere – there must have been some kind of temple or pyramid nearby. Not anymore; the area around the statue is "bare" and the desert is "lone," or empty. The traveler calls our attention to the barrenness of the desert through the extensive use of alliteration (beginning multiple words with the same letter): "boundless and bare," "lone and level," "sands stretch."

## Symbol Analysis - life

There is a lot of death in this poem; the figure represented in the statue is dead, along with the civilization to which he belonged. The statue is destroyed, and so it too is, in some sense, dead. And yet amidst all the death, there are several images of life that give the poem a sense of balance, however slight.

* Lines 1-2: Most of the poem describes a statue, but these first two lines describe an encounter between two living people, the speaker and a "traveler from an antique land."
* Line 6-7: The description of the "sculptor" making a statue introduces another living figure into the poem, as does the reference to the "passions" of Ozymandias. Furthermore, even though the sculpture is "lifeless," the passions still "survive."

## Symbol Analysis – passions and feelings

While most of the poem describes a statue, the traveler makes a point of telling us that Ozymandias's "passions" still survive: they are "stamp'd" on the statue, giving all those who view the statue a sense of what Ozymandias's disposition was like, or at least what it was like when the statue was made.

* Lines 4-5: The poem describes the features on the face of the statue and, by extension, the features of Ozymandias. He must have been angry about something because his face has a "sneer," a "frown," and a "wrinkled lip."
* Line 6: We are told that the sculptor "well those passions read," that he was somehow able to capture them fairly well in his statue.
* Line 8: The "heart" is the organ most often linked to feelings and passions; it "fed" the passions depicted in the statue. Because the heart didn't literally "feed" the passions, "fed" here is a metaphor.