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From Solid Stone to Sandy Ruins

From passages in the Bible to lyrics in a Pink Floyd song, the issue of time has seemingly never escaped the pen of mankind. As self-conscious creatures, it is no wonder that we have struggled countless years to find ways to cope with our mortality. However, the harsh nature of life remains: time always wins. Or does it?

In his sonnet entitled “Ozymandias,” Percy Shelley attacks the problem of finality in an interesting way. Published in 1818, Shelley’s poem “was written quickly, and in friendly competition with another poet, Horace Smith” (Stephens 156). After hearing that the British Museum received parts of a statue of Ramesses II – another name for Ozymandias – Shelley and Smith were inspired to test each other’s literary acumen using the emperor as their topic (Daiya 155). Aside from the mundane news of a museum’s newest addition, broader historical events likely influenced Shelley to compose “Ozymandias.” The late 1700s can only be described as an era of revolution. Notably, the bloody revolution in France had a profound impact on the “very fabric of … European society,” (Daiya 154). Given the rapid toppling of global powerhouses that characterized Shelley’s sphere of perception, it is logical that he felt a desire to write about a prominent emperor. Yet, “Ozymandias” is not merely the hasty stanzas of a competitive, history-buff, but rather an iconic poem with a profound antidote for mortality itself.

“I met a traveller from an antique land, / Who said …” (lines 1-2). From the very beginning of his poem, Shelley adopts a frame-shift manner of storytelling. Essentially, the first frame is the traveler who tells his/her story to Shelley’s narrator, the second frame. By employing this frame-shift manner of description, Shelley gives his poem verisimilitude, or rather a likeness to truth. This literary device grounds “Ozymandias” in a believable reality, adding more impact to the traveler’s tale:

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 (lines 2-5).

The harsh, cacophonous diction throughout the octave, but more so in lines 2-5, serves to build tension before the sestet. Notably, the repetition of the serpent-like ‘s’ sound in “shattered visage lies” complements the imposing descriptions of this statue: “frown,” “wrinkled lip,” and “sneer of cold command.” The mysterious, foreboding tone of the octave culminates to a release of tension once the traveler tells of what is inscribed below the statue: “My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; / Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!” (lines 10-11). Yet, as the sestet finalizes, all this built tension falls apart just like the ruins of the once great king. The traveler points out that Ozymandias’s works are now but a “colossal Wreck” that serves only to entertain the “lone and level sands” (lines 13-14). The imposing, authoritative statue is ironically in ruins with nothing left for a kingdom, bar “sand” (line 3). The powerful King Ozymandias is shown to succumb to time and “decay” like all living creatures (line 12).

It is not surprising that many view “Ozymandias” as simply an example of time’s power over temporary life. However, hidden amongst the sandy stanzas is a golden, glimmer of hope. The traveler mentions that the sculptors prowess in displaying Ozymandias’s “passions … yet survive[s]” (lines 6-7). Even with hundreds of years between them, the sculptor is still able to affect a random traveler with his art. Whatever humans create – whether it be books, songs, buildings, sports records, families, friends – leave an indelible mark of their legacy on future generations. “It is only the survival of the remnants of culture, conquest, or human achievement that” questions the power of time (Freedman 73). “Ozymandias” seems at first to be a straightforward tale of the transience of life, yet a greater meaning is buried underneath the literal interpretation. Despite our mortality, humans are able to transcend death through the memories we leave behind.

Works Cited

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