

OZYMANDIAS — Percy Bysshe Shelley



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Central idea of the poem

The poem describes the broken statue of a once-powerful king, **Ozymandias**, lying in a vast desert. Although the king believed that his power and achievements would last forever, his statue is now broken and surrounded by empty sand.

Main message:

Power, pride, wealth and human achievements are temporary. Time eventually destroys even the greatest rulers and their monuments.

Line 1

“I met a traveller from an antique land”

Meaning:

The poet says that he once met a **traveller** who had come from an **ancient/very old country**.

- **traveller** = a person who travels from one place to another
- **antique** = very old; ancient
- **land** = country or region

The poet does not directly describe the statue himself. Instead, he tells us what the traveller saw.

Important point:

This creates a **story within a story**:

Poet → Traveller → Statue of Ozymandias

Line 2

“Who said: ‘Two vast and trunkless legs of stone’

Meaning:

The traveller describes seeing **two enormous stone legs** standing in the desert.

- **vast** = extremely large
- **trunkless** = without the body or torso
- **legs of stone** = the stone legs of a huge statue

The statue has been destroyed, and only its enormous legs remain.

Important idea:

The word **“vast”** suggests that the statue was once magnificent and impressive.

Line 3

“Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,”

Meaning:

The two huge stone legs are standing alone in the middle of the desert. Nearby, lying on the sand, is another part of the broken statue.

The use of “. . . .” creates a pause and gives the reader a feeling of emptiness and loneliness.

Image created:

We can imagine:

- endless desert
 - two giant legs
 - broken pieces of a statue
 - complete silence and loneliness
-

Line 4

“Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,”

Meaning:

A **broken face/head** of the statue is lying partly buried in the sand.

- **half sunk** = partly buried
- **shattered** = broken into pieces
- **visage** = face
- **frown** = an angry or displeased expression

The face is broken, but its expression of anger can still be seen.

Important idea:

Although the statue has been destroyed, the **expression on the face has survived**.

Line 5

“And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,”

Meaning:

The broken face has:

- a **wrinkled lip**
- a **sneering expression**
- the appearance of someone giving orders with authority

Difficult words:

- **wrinkled** = having lines or folds
- **sneer** = an insulting or contemptuous smile/expression
- **cold command** = harsh, emotionless authority

The king appears **arrogant, proud and cruel**.

Character of Ozymandias:

From his facial expression, we understand that he was probably:

- proud
- arrogant
- commanding
- ruthless
- contemptuous of others

Line 6

“Tell that its sculptor well those passions read”

Meaning:

The expression on the statue's face shows that the **sculptor understood the king's emotions and personality very well**.

- **sculptor** = an artist who creates statues
- **passions** = strong emotions

- **read** = understand or recognise

The sculptor successfully captured the king's **pride, anger and arrogance** in stone.

Important point:

The sculptor has captured the personality of Ozymandias so accurately that even after the king has disappeared, his character can still be understood.

Line 7

“Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,”

Meaning:

Those strong emotions of the king **still survive** in the expression carved into the lifeless stone.

- **survive** = continue to exist
- **stamped** = strongly impressed or marked
- **lifeless things** = the pieces of the dead statue

Deeper meaning:

The king himself is dead and his empire has disappeared, but his **pride and arrogance remain visible in the statue.**

This is an important irony:

The king's power has disappeared, but his arrogant expression has survived.

Line 8

“The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;”

Meaning:

The **hand** of the sculptor reproduced or **mocked** the king's emotions in the statue.

- **hand** = the sculptor's artistic skill

- **mocked** = imitated or represented, with an implied sense of exposing its foolishness
- **heart that fed** = the king's heart that nourished or encouraged those emotions

Here, “**heart**” represents the king's inner feelings and personality.

Deeper interpretation:

There is a subtle contrast:

The sculptor's hand preserved the king's pride, while **the king's heart** was responsible for that pride.

The sculptor may also be seen as subtly **mocking the king's arrogance** by preserving it in such a way that later generations can see how foolish his pride was.

The Inscription

Line 9

“**And on the pedestal, these words appear:**”

Meaning:

Written on the base of the statue is an inscription.

- **pedestal** = the raised base on which a statue stands
- **appear** = are written/visible

The inscription gives us the king's own words.

Line 10

“**My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;**”

Meaning:

The king proudly announces:

“**I am Ozymandias, the greatest king of all kings.**”

- **King of Kings** = a ruler claiming supreme power over other rulers

This shows his enormous **pride and arrogance**.

Important:

The title “**King of Kings**” suggests that Ozymandias considered himself **supreme and unbeatable**.

Line 11

“**Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!**”

Meaning:

Ozymandias tells other powerful people:

“**Look at everything I have built and accomplished, you powerful rulers, and feel hopeless because you cannot equal my greatness.**”

- **ye** = you
- **Mighty** = powerful people/rulers
- **works** = buildings, monuments, achievements, empire
- **despair** = lose hope

Why should others “despair”?

Because Ozymandias believed that his achievements were so magnificent that **no other ruler could ever equal him**.

But Shelley makes this statement deeply ironic.

The Great Irony

Line 12

“Nothing beside remains.”

Meaning:

Nothing else from Ozymandias's great kingdom remains.

The king once commanded a mighty empire, but now **everything has disappeared**.

This is the turning point of the poem.

The inscription says:

“Look on my Works... and despair!”

But the reality is:

“Nothing beside remains.”

That contrast creates powerful **irony**.

Line 13

“Round the decay”

Meaning:

All around the broken statue there is **decay and destruction**.

- **decay** = gradual destruction or deterioration

The once-glorious monument has become a ruined object.

Line 14

“Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare”

Meaning:

Around the enormous broken remains of the statue, there is nothing except the endless, empty desert.

- **colossal** = extremely huge
- **wreck** = something that has been completely destroyed
- **boundless** = endless; without limits
- **bare** = empty; without vegetation or anything else

Important contrast:

Colossal → suggests enormous power and greatness.

Wreck → suggests complete destruction.

The combination shows how completely time has defeated Ozymandias.

Line 15

“The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

Meaning:

The lonely, flat desert stretches endlessly in every direction.

- **lone** = lonely
- **level** = flat
- **sands** = desert sand
- **stretch far away** = continue into the distance

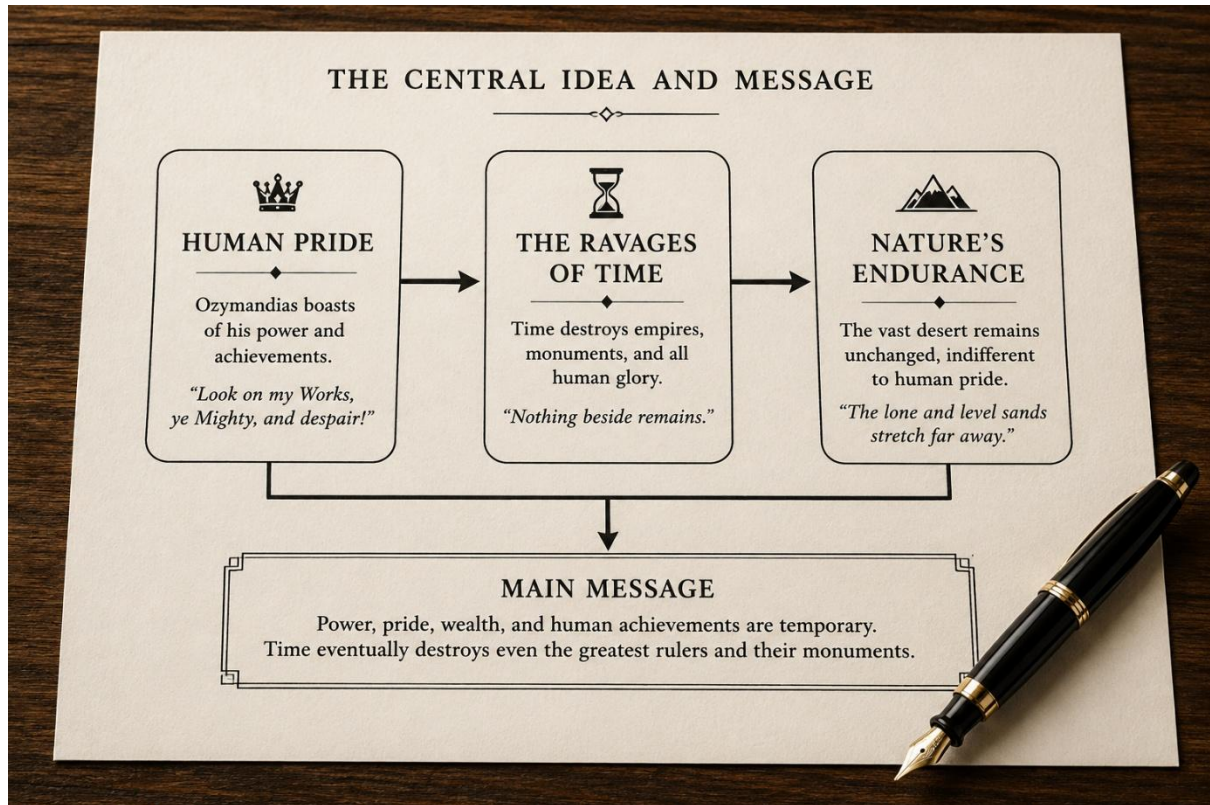
Final image:

The poem ends not with the king or his empire, but with **empty desert**.

This is extremely significant.

The king wanted people to remember his greatness forever, but what remains is only:

a broken statue + endless sand.

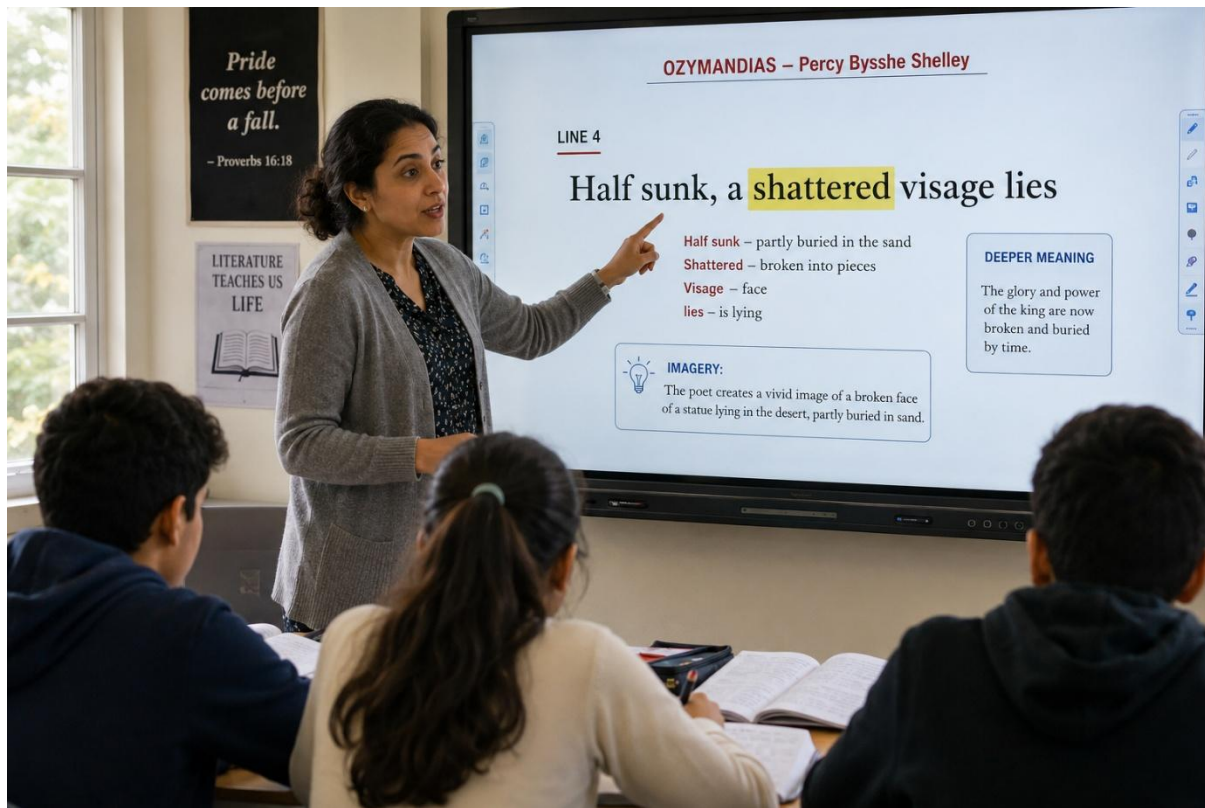


🌟 Important Word Meanings

Word	Meaning
Ozymandias	Name/title associated with an ancient Egyptian ruler, traditionally identified with Ramesses II
antique	ancient; very old
traveller	one who travels
vast	extremely large
trunkless	without a body/torso

Word	Meaning
shattered	broken into pieces
visage	face
frown	angry/displeased expression
wrinkled	marked with lines or folds
sneer	contemptuous or mocking expression
command	authority/order
sculptor	person who makes statues
passions	strong emotions
stamped	strongly marked/impressed
lifeless	without life
mocked	imitated; represented, often ironically
pedestal	base supporting a statue
ye	you
Mighty	powerful people
works	achievements/buildings/creations
despair	lose hope
decay	gradual destruction
colossal	enormous
wreck	remains of something destroyed
boundless	endless
bare	empty
lone	lonely

Word	Meaning
level	flat



Important Poetic Devices

1. Irony

The greatest example is:

“Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

But immediately afterwards:

“Nothing beside remains.”

Ozymandias believed his achievements would last forever, but they have completely disappeared.

2. Alliteration

“boundless and bare”

The repeated **b** sound creates emphasis.

Also:

“lone and level”

The repeated **l** sound produces a musical effect.

3. Imagery

Shelley creates a powerful visual picture of:

- broken stone legs
- a shattered face
- desert sand
- a ruined statue
- endless emptiness

We can almost **see the lonely ruins in the desert.**

4. Personification

The statue's expression is described as if it communicates the king's personality:

“sneer of cold command”

The lifeless stone appears to possess human emotions.

5. Symbolism

The **broken statue** symbolises the temporary nature of:

- political power
- wealth
- fame

- pride
- human achievements

The **desert** symbolises the power of **time and destruction**.

6. Contrast

Shelley contrasts:

Past greatness
with
Present destruction

“King of Kings”

vs.

“Nothing beside remains.”

This contrast is the heart of the poem.

★ The Most Important Message

The poem is ultimately a warning against **pride and arrogance**.

Ozymandias believed:

“I am the greatest.”

He believed his achievements would make him immortal.

But time proved him wrong.

His empire disappeared.

His statue broke.

His face lies buried in sand.

His proud inscription remains—but ironically, it now proves his **failure** rather than his greatness.

In one sentence:

Shelley shows that no matter how powerful, wealthy or proud a person may be, time will eventually destroy all worldly power and human achievements.

OZYMANDIAS

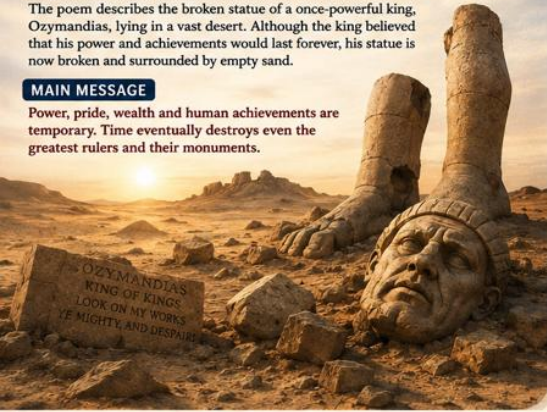
– Percy Bysshe Shelley

CENTRAL IDEA

The poem describes the broken statue of a once-powerful king, Ozymandias, lying in a vast desert. Although the king believed that his power and achievements would last forever, his statue is now broken and surrounded by empty sand.

MAIN MESSAGE

Power, pride, wealth and human achievements are temporary. Time eventually destroys even the greatest rulers and their monuments.



LINE-BY-LINE EXPLANATION

1 "I met a traveller from an antique land"	• The poet met a traveller from an ancient country.
2 "Who said: 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone"	• The traveller saw two enormous stone legs in the desert.
3 "Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand."	• The legs stand alone in the desert; nearby lies another part of the broken statue.
4 "Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,	• A broken face lies partly buried in the sand; its angry frown is still visible.
5 "And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,"	• The face has a wrinkled lip and a look of harsh authority.
6 "Tell that its sculptor well those passions read"	• The sculptor understood the king's emotions very well.
7 "Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,	• Those emotions still survive in the lifeless stone.
8 "The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;	• The sculptor's hand imitated (mocked) the emotions that the king's heart had nurtured.
9 "And on the pedestal, these words appear:	• An inscription is written on the base of the statue.
10 "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;	• The king proudly declares himself the greatest of all kings.
11 "Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"	• He tells other powerful rulers to look at his achievements and feel hopeless.
12 "Nothing beside remains."	• Nothing else remains of his kingdom or achievements.
13 "Round the decay	• All around the broken statue there is decay and ruin.
14 "Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare"	• Around the huge ruin stretches endless and empty desert.
15 "The lone and level sands stretch far away."	• The lonely, flat sands of the desert extend far away.

IMPORTANT WORD MEANINGS

antique	: ancient; very old	pedestal	: base of a statue
traveller	: one who travels	ye	: you
vast	: extremely large	mighty	: powerful people
trunkless	: without a body/torso	works	: achievements; creations
visage	: face	despair	: loss of hope
frown	: angry expression	decay	: gradual destruction
wrinkled	: having lines or folds	colossal	: enormously huge
sneer	: contemptuous expression	wreck	: remains of something destroyed
command	: authority; order	boundless	: endless; without limits
sculptor	: artist who makes statues	bare	: empty
passions	: strong emotions	lone	: lonely
stamped	: strongly impressed	level	: flat
lifeless	: without life		
mocked	: imitated; represented ironically		

IMPORTANT POETIC DEVICES

Irony	The king says, "Look on my Works... and despair!" But the reality is "Nothing beside remains."
Imagery	Creates a vivid picture of broken statue, desert sand, ruined face, and endless emptiness.
Alliteration	"boundless and bare", "lone and level" (repetition of initial consonant sounds).
Personification	The lifeless statue shows emotions ("sneer of cold command").
Symbolism	Broken statue = temporary nature of power, wealth and human achievements. Desert = the power of time and destruction.
Contrast	Past greatness vs Present destruction "King of Kings" vs "Nothing beside remains."

THEMES & MESSAGE

- The transience of power and human glory.
- The futility of pride and arrogance.
- The power of time over all human achievements.
- A warning against believing that achievements are permanent.

IN ONE SENTENCE

Shelley shows that no matter how powerful, wealthy or proud a person may be, time will eventually destroy all worldly power and human achievements.

★ FINAL IMAGE: The poem ends not with the king or his empire, but with empty desert. The broken statue and endless sand remind us that pride and power are temporary.

"Time is the ultimate destroyer of all human greatness."

OZYMANDIAS — Understanding the Poem

A. Answer the Questions

1.

"Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown, And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,"

a. What can we infer from the phrase 'half sunk'?

Answer:

The phrase **"half sunk"** means that the broken face of the statue is **partly buried in the desert sand**. It suggests that the statue has been neglected and gradually covered by the sand over a long period of time. It also emphasises the **destruction and decay of Ozymandias's once-great monument**.

b. What does the sculptor try to convey by sculpting a frown and cold sneer on the statue's face?

Answer:

The sculptor tries to convey the **pride, arrogance, cruelty and commanding nature** of Ozymandias. The “**frown,**” “**wrinkled lip,**” and “**sneer of cold command**” show that the king was a powerful and ruthless ruler who looked down upon others. The sculptor understood the king's strong emotions and captured them accurately in stone.

2.

**“Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare”**

a. What contrasting element do you find in these two lines?

Answer:

The contrast is between **Ozymandias's proud claim of greatness** and the **complete destruction of his achievements**.

He proudly says:

“Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!”

as if his achievements are so magnificent that other rulers should feel inferior.

But immediately afterwards, the poet says:

“Nothing beside remains.”

Thus, the contrast is between **past glory and present ruin**. This creates strong **irony**.

In simple words:

Ozymandias says: *“Look at my great achievements!”*

Reality says: *“Nothing remains.”*

b. Who is the person sculpted, and how does the person address himself?

Answer:

The person sculpted is **Ozymandias**, a once-powerful king. He addresses himself as:

“Ozymandias, King of Kings”

He considers himself the **greatest and most powerful of all rulers**. His words show his extreme **pride, arrogance and sense of superiority**.

c. What does the statue and its present state symbolise?

Answer:

The **broken and ruined statue** symbolises the **temporary nature of human power, pride, wealth, fame and achievements**.

Ozymandias once possessed great power and believed that his achievements would last forever. However, his statue is now broken and partly buried in sand, while his kingdom has disappeared.

Therefore, the statue symbolises the fact that **time eventually destroys even the greatest rulers and their monuments**.

Symbolically:

Broken statue → Fall of power

Desert → Passage of time and destruction

Ruins → Temporary nature of human achievements

3. Why do you think the poet uses a traveller from an antique land to narrate the story?

Answer:

Shelley uses a **traveller from an antique land** to create a **story within a story**. The poet does not describe Ozymandias's statue directly; instead, he tells us what the traveller saw and heard.

This technique is effective because:

1. It makes the description seem **distant and mysterious**.
2. It gives the impression that Ozymandias belongs to a **long-forgotten past**.
3. It emphasises the enormous passage of **time**.
4. It allows the reader to discover the ruined statue through the traveller's eyes.
5. Most importantly, it creates a contrast between the king's **past greatness** and his **present forgotten state**.

Exam-ready answer:

The poet uses a traveller from an antique land to create a **story-within-a-story** and to give the poem a sense of distance and mystery. The traveller's account makes Ozymandias seem like a ruler from a remote and forgotten past. It also strengthens the poem's central message that **time destroys human pride, power and achievements**.



★ Quick Revision — Remember These Four Ideas

Question	Key Answer
“Half sunk”	Statue's face is partly buried in sand; symbolises decay and neglect
Frown & cold sneer	Show Ozymandias's pride, arrogance, cruelty and authority
“Works... despair” vs “Nothing remains”	Past glory vs present ruin — irony
Broken statue	Symbolises the temporary nature of power, pride and human achievements
Traveller from an antique land	Creates a story-within-a-story and emphasises distance and passage of time

☀ One-line takeaway

Ozymandias thought his power would last forever, but the ruined statue proves that time is more powerful than any human ruler.

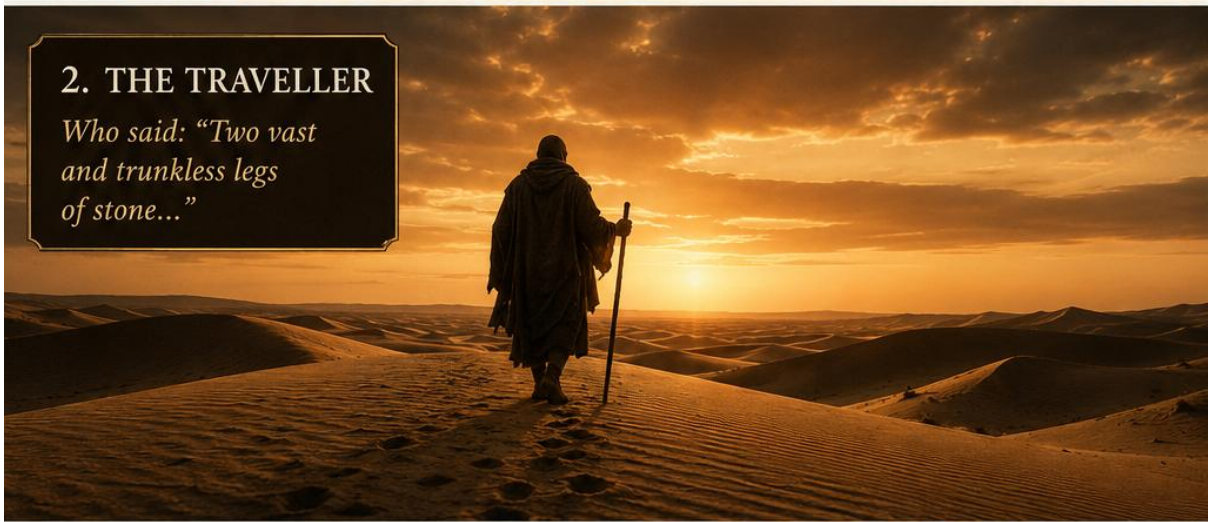
1. THE POET

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



2. THE TRAVELLER

*Who said: "Two vast
and trunkless legs
of stone..."*



3. THE RUIN

*Half sunk, a shattered
visage lies...*



Shelley uses a story-within-a-story framework, distancing the reader from the king through the poet and the traveler.

OZYMANDIAS — Think and Answer

1. Explain the impermanence of power with reference to the poem.

Answer:

The poem “**Ozymandias**” shows that **power is temporary and cannot last forever**. Ozymandias was once a mighty and proud king who believed that his achievements would remain forever. His statue proudly bears the words:

“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:”

and

“Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

However, the traveller finds only the **broken remains of his statue** in the middle of a vast desert. The poem says:

“Nothing beside remains.”

The once-powerful king and his great empire have disappeared, while only the ruined statue remains. The endless desert surrounding the wreck suggests that **time and nature are more powerful than human rulers**.

Thus, Shelley teaches us that **political power, wealth, pride and worldly achievements are temporary, whereas time eventually destroys them all**.

★ **Key idea:**

Ozymandias thought he was permanent; time proved that he was not.

2. Shelley demonstrates that art and words can outlive other legacies in this world. How? Also, do you know any other poet who has conveyed the same thought? Discuss.

Answer:

Shelley demonstrates this idea through the **sculptor's art and the inscription on Ozymandias's statue.**

Although Ozymandias's kingdom, power and monuments have disappeared, the **sculptor's representation of his face and emotions has survived.** The statue still shows his **“frown,” “wrinkled lip,”** and **“sneer of cold command.”** Thus, the sculptor has preserved the king's personality through art.

Similarly, the **words engraved on the pedestal** have survived:

“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings”

The irony is that Ozymandias's physical achievements have disappeared, but **his words and the sculptor's artistic representation remain.** Through these, people centuries later can still learn about his pride and arrogance.

A poet who expresses a similar idea is **William Shakespeare** in **Sonnet 55.** Shakespeare argues that **poetry can preserve a person's memory longer than marble monuments and royal memorials.** Physical monuments may be destroyed by time, but poetry can keep a person's name and memory alive.

Conclusion:

Both Shelley and Shakespeare suggest that **art and poetry can survive the destruction of physical monuments and preserve human memory across generations.**

APPRECIATING THE POEM

Understanding Irony

The page defines **irony** as a contrast between what is expected and what actually happens.

In “**Ozymandias**,” the clearest example is:

“Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

We expect to find magnificent works belonging to a mighty king.

Instead, we find:

“Nothing beside remains.”

The proud king's words have survived, but his great works have completely disappeared.

Therefore:

Expected: A magnificent empire and great monuments

Reality: A broken statue and empty desert

This makes the poem's message particularly powerful.

1. Find out a poem in which irony is used.

Answer:

One suitable example is “**The Unknown Citizen**” by **W. H. Auden**.

The poem describes a man who is presented as an ideal citizen because he apparently fulfilled all the expectations of society. However, the poem's praise is actually **ironic**, because we learn almost nothing about his individual personality, feelings or happiness.

The irony exposes a society that measures a person's worth through **statistics, conformity and social usefulness rather than individuality and human happiness**.

Another excellent example:

“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge also contains irony, particularly in the contrast between the Mariner's actions and their consequences.

**2. “Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,” —
What is the poetic device used in this line?**

Answer:

The prominent poetic device is **Alliteration**.

The **“s” sound** is repeated in:

“survive, stamped”

This repetition of the initial consonant sound creates **alliteration**.

There is also a deeper figurative idea:

The **“lifeless things”** are the pieces of stone, yet the emotions and personality of Ozymandias seem to **survive** in them. This gives the stone a sense of carrying human emotions.

Exam answer:

The poetic device is alliteration, as the initial “s” sound is repeated in “survive” and “stamped.”

3. Find out the lines where the poet has used the literary device of enjambment in the poem.

Answer:

Enjambment occurs when a sentence or thought continues from one line to the next **without a grammatical pause at the end of the line**.

Shelley uses enjambment several times in **“Ozymandias.”**

Important examples:

Example 1

**“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert.”**

The thought begins in the first line and continues into the next line.

Example 2

**“Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies...”**

The description continues naturally from one line into the next.

Example 3

**“whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,”**

The description of the statue's face continues across the line break.

Example 4

**“those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,”**

The idea is carried from **“read”** into the following line.

Example 5

**“Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare”**

The phrase **“decay / Of that colossal wreck”** flows continuously across the line break.

Example 6

**“boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”**

The description moves forward without a full stop at the line break.

🌟 Quick Revision Table

Topic	Answer
Impermanence of power	Ozymandias's great power and empire have disappeared; only a ruined statue remains.
Central irony	He commands others to admire his works, but “Nothing beside remains.”
Power of art	The sculptor's work and the inscription survive even though the king's empire has vanished.
Another poet	Shakespeare — Sonnet 55 expresses the idea that poetry can outlive physical monuments.
“survive, stamped”	Alliteration
Enjambment	A sentence/thought continues from one line into the next without a pause.
Major example	“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone / Stand in the desert.”
Main message	Time destroys human power, pride and material achievements.

★ Paul Sir's Exam Tip

For a **Think and Answer** question on *Ozymandias*, remember this chain:

POWER → PRIDE → MONUMENT → DECAY → TIME → NOTHING REMAINS

That six-step chain will help students answer almost any analytical question on the poem.

