

Twelve River RIPPLES

Favourite Poem



Ozymandias

By Percy Bysshe Shelley

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.”

Favourite Poem cont.

Shelley drowned on 8 June 1822 when he was sailing from Livorno to Lerici and his open boat was overcome in a storm. His decomposed body was washed up on the beach at Viareggio ten days later. Some years ago, I visited Viareggio on 18 June to pay my respects to Shelley, only to be greeted by the sight of several hundred sunbathing Italians stretched out on identical sun loungers totally oblivious of the significance of the place or date. Ah well!

So here we are 200 years on and remembering the man who proclaimed that 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world'.

Shelley wrote this famous sonnet in the Christmas season of 1817. His friend, the banker Horace Smith, came to visit Shelley and his wife Mary and they discussed the archaeological discoveries in Egypt following Napoleon's conquest of the region in 1798. The Roman-era historian Diodorus had described a statue of Ozymandias (Rameses II) which carried the inscription 'King of Kings Ozymandias am I. If any want to know how great I am and where I lie, let him outdo me in my work.' The statue was never discovered but proved to be the inspiration for Shelley's sonnet. Politically, Shelley had no time for kings or emperors with a blind desire for self-aggrandisement rather than an enlightened desire to serve the people.

There are four people in Shelley's sonnet: the first-person narrator of the first line: *the traveller from an antique land* – whose voice is reported by the narrator as an astute observer for the next thirteen lines; the sculptor of the giant image of Ozymandias who *well those passions read* such as the *sneer of cold command* – suggesting that the sculptor could see the flaws in the tyrant and present them in such a way that the narcissist failed to see them in himself; and finally Ozymandias – the self-absorbed empire-building tyrant who thought he was the *King of Kings* and yet all that remained to remind the world of his existence were a pair of giant legs and a part-buried face amidst *the lone and level sands that stretch far away*. How hollow are the bragging words *Look on my Works, ye mighty, and despair*.

And here we are in 2022 with the rise of populism and totalitarianism in the world. A perfect time to be reminded of the impermanence of all the Ozymandias types, both then and now. This is a timely and timeless sonnet. Thank you, Percy Bysshe.

Ref: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69503/percy-bysshe-shelley-ozymandias>

Fran Reader