

Exploring Impermanence and Arrogance through Formal Analysis: A Study of ‘Ozymandias’**Sumayya Imran¹, Noorwash Tanoli², Aleena Saleem³**

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Abstract

This paper presents a formal analysis of Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias" concentrating on the themes of impermanence and the constraints of human ambition, examined through the use of irony, imagery, and symbolism. The analysis begins by exploring the fragmented statue, symbolizing the unavoidable decline of human creations and the inability of even the most formidable rulers to leave a lasting legacy. Through the imagery of the "colossal wreck" and the "lone and level sands," Shelley emphasizes the transience of human power, depicting the remnants of Ozymandias's empire as a metaphor for the ephemeral nature of political authority. The poem's inscription, stating, "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" is interpreted as an ironic commentary on the futility of Ozymandias's boast, as it contrasts sharply with the barren and decayed remains of his once-mighty kingdom. Shelley's use of symbolism in the shattered visage of Ozymandias critiques the arrogance of authoritarian power, implying that even the most tyrannical rulers are ultimately subject to the forces of time and nature. The paper examines how the poem's formal elements—its structure, language, and imagery—strengthen its central theme: the transient nature of power and the constraints of human ambition. By conducting a thorough analysis of these literary devices, this study provides a deeper insight into how Ozymandias serves as a timeless commentary on the fallibility of political rulers and the inevitability of decline.

Keywords: Ozymandias, Formal Analysis, Irony, Imagery, Symbolism, Impermanence, Ambition, Authoritarian Power, Shelley.

Introduction

Ozymandias is a poem of the famous English Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley that was composed in 1817 and published in 1818 and, to a considerable extent, is devoted to the topic of the ephemeral nature of the royal and tyrant's might. The poem's subject is revealed when the poet addresses a man who wanders in a vast desert and stumbles across great heaps of a giant figure in pieces. Originally built to symbolize the grandeur of a great king, Ozymandias, the name the Greeks gave to Ramesses II the statue is in ruins with its face barely protruding from the sand. They have written on a pedestal, "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" It is ironic say now knowing that this great scene lies in the purity of desert, sandy wasteland today. Ozymandias is a poem that bespeaks sarcasm and warns against the hubris of kings who build scepter-like monuments with the intention that they may be around for eternity. Nevertheless, even the mightiest of all empires have fallen as a result of the old argument of time and Shelley metaphorically illustrates this theme by representing the statue through erosion. The transcendental powers of nature, the transience of mankind's achievements, and also the vital role of art in capturing human experience are all core Romantic themes that have been reflected in the poem. Through the use of stunning imagery, maximum symbolism, and the least amount of irony possible, Shelley invites us to reflect on pride, legacy, and ambition while conveying a timeless truth about the limitations of government and the unshakable forces of nature and time. Moreover, the use of Ozymandias as a historical figure, derived from Ramesses II, adds strength even here to the poem's sentiment of the fragility of empires and

the limits human ambition can take. The statue's text, once a claim of dominance, now serves as a harrowing reminder of just how vain those pursuits may be. Ozymandias explores the power of time in erasing human achievement and geographic dominion, and all that is captured in, but cannot be controlled, the human mind, which resonates well with the Romantic interest in decay and abandonment. The sculptor shows that Ozymandias retains his superhuman strength by carving the ego of the ruler on the pedestal long after his kingdom collapsed.

Problem Statement

Percy Bysshe Shelley's Ozymandias has been described as a masterpiece that reflects on the transience of power and human ambition that is impossible to surmount. Its laborious irony and symbolism are so eloquent that it has prompted meandering readings of it which have fluttered around for decades, leading to detailed studies that mysteriously conclude with new perspectives. Shelley seems to attack the arrogance of despots, highlighting their fleeting power in the face of time's erasure. At the same time, he expresses the immutability of nature, suggesting that, despite human ambition and grandeur, nature ultimately prevails, with human creations fading into obscurity. While some interpretations are primarily features of Shelley's critique of the tyrant, another group of researchers holds that the poem does also contemplate the artist's expression of human emotions and preservation of the human 'memory'. This set of different interpretations points to the lack of in-depth scholarship, thus creating a demand for a critical analysis of how Shelley's figures of speech, the structure, and symbolism illuminate his multiple views on ambition, legacy, and the transmitting power of art.

Research questions:

1. How are themes of impermanence and the limits of human ambition evident in Percy Bysshe Shelley's Ozymandias through the use of irony, imagery, and symbolism?
2. How does Shelley's Ozymandias employ figurative language to challenge the idea of authoritarian power?

Objectives:

To evaluate the theme of impermanence and the limits of human ambition in Percy Bysshe Shelley's Ozymandias through the use of irony, imagery, and symbolism.

To investigate the use of figurative language in Shelley's Ozymandias to challenge the idea of authoritarian power.

Significance of the Study

This study will help the scholarly study of Romantic literature by creating an analytical lens to better understand and examine the poem Ozymandias by Shelley. It aims to explain how Shelley employs irony to criticize Ozymandias's tyranny and assert that regardless of the scale of human accomplishment it is grounded by nature's powers. Furthermore, this paper's objective is to define how Shelley complicates the narrative of art heritage. Thus the author transposes the decline of Ozymandias's power to the ruination of the statue, but the author, the sculptor, remains; while mighty kings fall, artists record their reign in stone so that a piece of their humanity may survive. However, this study follows and expands on how Shelley engages with the philosophical issues of his epoch in addition to offering more layers for understanding the poem's commentary on human pride. This research aims at presenting a combined analysis of Ozymandias aiming at presenting a short story as a warning against Power and, at the same time, a contemplation of the relevance of Art within society. By exploring these dimensions, this study aims to contribute to Shelley's work, the scholars' discussions of the canon of Romantic literature, and the power, time, and art entanglements.

Literature Review

Introduction

Shelley's sonnet *Ozymandias* remains the object of considerable analyses due to its innovative nomination and its multiple meanings. It has been analyzed for aspects of its view on art and memory, on the topicality of the subject of power elusiveness or on condemnation of human greed (Bloom, 1970; Abrams, 1993; Mellor, 1972). Besides this cultural-philosophical context have a great focus rich images and irony and the role of the play's symbols the sonnet form was widely discussed together with the have thought-provoking the relation to Shelley's political theory and to the romantic movement. Sarcasm and power and the presence of imagery and symbolism that symbolise the bitterness of life, the idea of the Romantic movement concerning art and legacy are the three main subject areas for this review of *Ozymandias*, synthesizing critical views regarding the poem.

Irony and the Critique of Power

Irony is often used by Shelley in *Ozymandias* to explain the nature of this destruction - this version of art, of longing for unveiling of self and omnipotence which leads to its own obliteration. According to Bloom (1970) the pedestal with the inscription, "Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" is a metaphor of *Ozymandias*'s inflated opinion of himself and an instance of situational irony. It is Bloom's belief that Shelley uses this irony to criticize the arrogance of rulers who see themselves as immortals, only to be swept away by time and nature-two elements that are out of human control. Moreover, this idea is also expressed by ideas of Abrams, who shows how the contrast between the authority of *Ozymandias*' original assertion and the surrounding emptiness of his place is not only ironic but also very effective in denoting the limitations of human might in 1993. In addition, Mellor (1972) in analyzing the poem wants to discuss irony in relation to Romanticism points out that Shelley rejected imperial and materialist ambition in the image of the ruined statue. Mellor notes that Shelley's sonnet with a sarcastic warning against the veil of coming authority and advice of the irresistible power of dramatic ability which makes people fall under the sway of the rulers, is the main theme of the work, one of the themes of Romanticism condemning the dictators of that time. Shelley proclaims the ultimate outcome of the oppressors of people's welfare instead of its encouragement and Sar castigates worshiping of kings as delusion by speaking of the destroyed image of *Ozymandias*. Thus, *Ozymandias* provides international commentary on political instability, thereby rising above the figure of Ramesses II.

Imagery and Symbolism: Decay and Transience

'*Ozymandias*' by Shelley explores ephemerality and decay through the use of images and symbols. According to George (1998), the share of the sonnet is emphasized in the captivating images, such as "the stone legs without a trunk" and "the broken face," which demonstrate both physical and figurative damage. It is stated by George that these images are apparent praise for the disintegration of the empire of *Ozymandias*, and thus the weakness of all human efforts. Rotting imagery is one of the characteristics that support Shelley's worldview that power is not lasting, George says. This image focuses on the fact that everything created by men is subject to the passage of time and cannot last forever. In addition, Abrams (1993) points out that the symbolic significance of the 'lone and level sands,' – sands that 'stretch far away,' provides a reference to period rather than space. In Abrams' opinion, the sand means an amorphous power that swallows the real world, all productions of human genius, and only results in the appearance of voids in their stead. In a similar respect to the former, Mellor (1972) sees the surrounding desert as a Romanticism of slavish submission to nature in a manner that underscores the futility of *Ozymandias*'s ambitions. That the prospect of the 'works' of a great king is described in such terms as empty and characterized by decay after the reader is led to expect that he or she is to be presented with the marvels conceived and executed by a monarch, this form of barrenness serves to heighten the potential irony.

Art, Legacy, and the Role of the Sculptor

The other topic of critical discussion in *Ozymandias* is tradition and the art of legacy, which is something that the poem examines, particularly in relation to or investigating the sculptor's creations that capture the essence of *Ozymandias*. The sculptor's portrayal of *Ozymandias*'s "sneer of cold command" illustrates the ruler's likely demeanor, as Wood (1985) has rightly noted. The ability to depict the old "sneer" carved into stone is one of the sculptor's signatures; in this instance, it demonstrates how art imparts inanimate objects with human personality. Wood suggests, although the authority of the king has been eroded, his statues remain the only reminders of character of *Ozymandias* beyond the impressive construction. Ferguson (2006) also discusses the topic of the lasting strength of art, arguing that in the sculptor's design, Shelley undermines even the very notion of legacy. He observes that the artist's hand "held *Ozymandias* in mockery". This indicates that here art is that which censors as well as preserves. Casting the image of the king filled with pride and disdain above his enemies, the sculptor admonishes future generations about foolish conceit. The above view correlates with the Romantic understanding of art as an instrument of truth; one which, despite the changes in time from which it emerged, has edifying principles that go beyond that subject. Abrams (1993) points out that ruins and broken narratives are what captivates Romanticism in Shelley's work. The structure is in disrepair, yet it signifies the immortality of creativity and human brilliance, suggesting that while political structures and hierarchies are subject to decay, creative forms can escape annihilation in their contexts. In those respects, *Ozymandias* according to Abrams, is rather a tribute to the power of art to reveal the deepest secrets of mankind regardless of the subject matter being long lost, and a cautionary plea against human beings' thirst for achievement.

Ozymandias is an intricate reflection on power, ephemerality and the legacy of art with its ironic tone, decayed imagery and symbolic elements, Shelley's sonnet criticises the pride that rulers assume to achieve immortality through monuments and political power. Readers generally agree that the poem is a vivid reminder of nature's superiority and the futility of human ambition, as presented in ruin and devastation. Simultaneously, the sculptor character captures *Ozymandias*'s nature reveals the Romantic notion of art as providing a permanent snapshot of what it means to be human. In placing *Ozymandias* within the Romantics tradition, Shelley does not merely comment on the ephemeral character of magnificence but also investigates the dense interrelations between art and memory, indicating that while empires fall into ruins, artistic manifestation may linger.

Methodology

This research adopts a formal analysis approach to examine Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem "*Ozymandias*." The primary objective is to examine how Shelley employs literary devices, including irony, imagery, and symbolism, to discuss themes of impermanence and the limitations of human ambition, while also critiquing the notion of authoritarian power. The methodology is designed to meticulously examine the poem's textual features, guaranteeing a comprehensive understanding of its thematic and structural components.

Theoretical framework

The study is based on formal analysis, a theoretical approach that emphasizes the intrinsic elements of the text, including language, structure, and stylistic devices (Culler, 1997). Formal analysis focuses on a meticulous review of the poem's form and content, setting aside external factors like historical context or the author's biography. This framework facilitates a comprehensive exploration of how Shelley's literary techniques enhance the themes of the poem, specifically the ephemeral nature of power and the hubris of rulers.

Research Design

The research employs a qualitative design focused on textual analysis. The emphasis is on comprehending how particular literary devices in "*Ozymandias*" convey essential themes concerning

human ambition and political power. The research focuses on a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the poem's language, structure, and symbols rather than relying on numerical data to derive conclusions about the poem's broader implications (Eagleton, 2008).

Approach: Detailed examination and formal analysis of the text.

Focus: Literary elements including irony, imagery, symbolism, and structure.

Outcome: A critical analysis of the poem, emphasizing its thematic concerns and the ways in which these are expressed through the poem's formal attributes.

Population and sample

Due to the specific focus of the research, the population for this study is confined to a single text: Percy Bysshe Shelley's sonnet "Ozymandias." The poem's structure, language, and themes render it an excellent subject for formal analysis. Consequently, the sample is limited to this specific poem rather than being extracted from a broader range of text

Population: Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias."

Sample: The poem itself, analyzed in its entirety.

Instrument

The research relies on qualitative analysis rather than quantitative methods, the primary instrument utilized is the text of "Ozymandias" itself. The close reading process will entail identifying and analyzing specific literary devices within the poem, including:

1. **Irony:** Recognition of both verbal and situational irony, especially in Ozymandias's inscription, highlighting the disparity between his grandiose claim and the barren landscape.
2. **Imagery:** Examining vivid visual descriptions, such as the shattered statue and the desolate desert, to interpret how they symbolize impermanence and the decline of political authority.
3. **Symbolism:** Analyzing symbols like the "colossal wreck" and the "lone and level sands" to interpret the poem's message regarding the fleeting nature of human achievements.
4. **Structure:** Examining the poem's Petrarchan sonnet form, emphasizing how the structure enhances the poem's thematic development. The close reading approach will be utilized for each of these components, focusing on their contribution to the poem's overall themes. This will entail a comprehensive, line-by-line examination that takes into account both the literal and figurative interpretations of the poem's language.

Procedure

The poem will be read in full to understand its overall meaning and tone. Detailed analysis: Each line of the poem will be scrutinized to identify examples of irony, imagery, symbolism, and structural elements. Thematic interpretation: The identified literary devices will be analyzed to understand their contribution to the themes of impermanence, ambition, and the critique of authoritarian power. Synthesis of Findings: The insights gained from the close reading will be combined to create a thorough interpretation of the poem's significance. This methodology emphasizes a systematic formal analysis of "Ozymandias," utilizing close reading to investigate the poem's themes through its language and structure. The analysis will offer a comprehensive understanding of how Shelley employs literary devices to critique human ambition, the transience of power, and the hubris of rulers. By adhering to the principles of formal analysis, the research will provide a comprehensive examination of Ozymandias, facilitating a nuanced interpretation of the poem's thematic concerns.

Discussion and Analysis

This chapter provides a thorough analysis of Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias," emphasizing how the poet's use of irony, imagery, and symbolism enhances the thematic exploration of impermanence and the limitations of human ambition. The analysis corresponds with the research questions that explore the emergence of themes related to impermanence and the constraints of

political power through Shelley's literary devices, as well as how the poem utilizes irony and figurative language to critique authoritarian power. Each section is organized to meet the specific objectives of assessing the poem's use of irony, analyzing the portrayal of political power, and investigating the symbolic representation of decay and ruin.

Text

“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.”

Impermanence and the Limits of Human Ambition

The poem expresses the theme of impermanence and the boundaries of human ambition. Shelley employs vivid imagery to underscore the transitory nature of human accomplishments, implying that even the most imposing structures cannot endure the ravages of time. For example, in the opening lines, the depiction of “two vast and trunkless legs of stone / stand in the desert” instantly introduces a fragmented statue, signifying the decay of what was once a magnificent monument. The “trunkless legs” highlight the statue's incomplete condition, symbolizing the erosion of Ozymandias's power. This illustrates the poem's examination of the transience of human efforts, which aligns with the research aim of analyzing how the poem portrays the boundaries of ambition. *Example from the text:* The phrase “half sunk, a shattered visage lies” emphasizes the concept of impermanence. The “shattered visage,” or broken face of the statue, rests partially buried in the sand, symbolizing the erosion of Ozymandias’s identity and legacy. The imagery of the “shattered visage” acts as a metaphor for the unavoidable deterioration of all human endeavors, reinforcing the aim of examining the poem’s representation of the constraints of political power. This analysis illustrates how Shelley's representation of the fragmented statue starkly contrasts with Ozymandias's grand inscription, highlighting the futility of human aspiration to attain immortality, as specified in the research questions.

Irony as a Critique of Authoritarian Power

Shelley's use of irony is a crucial tool in emphasizing the contrast between Ozymandias’s perception of his legacy and the harsh reality of his shattered statue.

Example from the text: The inscription on the pedestal states: “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings; / Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” This declaration is marked by arrogance and confidence, as Ozymandias revels in his greatness and dares others to feel despair at his accomplishments. The surrounding context highlights the irony: instead of a magnificent empire, the statue is encircled by desolate desert, with “nothing beside remains”. This irony stems from the discrepancy between Ozymandias’s intended assertion of eternal power and the reality of his neglected and deteriorating legacy, directly aligning with the research objective of examining the poem’s use of irony to challenge Ozymandias’s arrogance.

An example from the text: The lines “round the decay / of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare, / the lone and level sands stretch far away” emphasize the poem’s ironic tone. The once-great “colossal wreck” is now nothing more than a ruin, encircled by vast, desolate sands. The imagery of the “lone and level sands” symbolizes the relentless force of time, which reduces all human power, regardless of how mighty it once appeared. This analysis aligns with the goal of examining how irony is used to contest the concept of perpetual political supremacy. The dramatic irony in Ozymandias’s arrogant declaration acts as Shelley’s critique of absolute authority, highlighting the gap between human aspirations for immortality and the reality of unavoidable decline, thereby addressing the research questions regarding the poem’s subversion of authoritarian principles.

Imagery and Symbolism in Depicting Ruin and the Environment

Shelley’s employment of detailed imagery and symbolic elements paints a striking representation of the statue’s decay, highlighting the fleeting nature of human power.

Example from the text: The vivid imagery of the “frown, / and wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command” conveys Ozymandias’s demeanor of arrogance and contempt. The sculptor’s ability to convey these emotions implies the oppressive nature of Ozymandias’s reign. However, these expressions, etched in stone, represent the sole remnants of the ruler’s legacy, symbolizing the empty vestiges of his power. This corresponds with the research objective of investigating how the poem employs figurative language to illustrate the constraints of political authority.

An example from the text: The lines “tell that its sculptor well those passions read / which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things” highlight the ironic persistence of the sculptor’s artistic vision over the king’s legacy. The sculptor’s depiction of Ozymandias’s arrogance has endured beyond the reign of the ruler, indicating that the artist, rather than the king, has attained a kind of immortality. This aligns with the goal of examining the symbolic depiction of decay alongside the enduring nature of art.

An example from the text: The “boundless and bare” sands encircling the statue symbolize the relentless strength of nature. The vast, desolate desert starkly contrasts with the remnants of Ozymandias’s monument, underscoring the insignificance of human accomplishments in the face of the immense forces of time and nature. This imagery underpins the research objective of exploring how the poem’s environment mirrors the constraints of political power. Through these symbolic representations, Shelley illustrates the transient nature of political authority, emphasizing the central theme of the impermanence of all human constructs, as detailed in the research questions.

Questioning Ozymandias’s Arrogance and the Illusion of Eternal Power

Shelley utilizes figurative language to reveal the king’s erroneous belief in his own invulnerability.

An example from the text: The metaphor of the “colossal wreck” encapsulates the irony of the poem. The term “colossal” denotes greatness and magnitude; however, it is contrasted with “wreck” indicating decay and ruin. This contrast illustrates the decline of Ozymandias’s empire, demonstrating that even the most magnificent accomplishments are vulnerable to the passage of time.

An example from the text: The command “look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” serves as a notable instance of irony, as it was meant to demonstrate the king’s authority. Instead, it acts as a caution against the hubris of assuming the permanence of one’s own authority. The absence of any remaining “works” underscores the king’s overconfidence and the illusory nature of his purported eternal power.

The poem’s closing lines, featuring the “lone and level sands” extending “far away,” represent the inevitable fate of all rulers who believe in their own invincibility, consistent with the research objective. The analysis of “Ozymandias” illustrates that Shelley skillfully employs irony, imagery, and symbolism to explore themes of impermanence and the constraints of human ambition. By challenging the notion of enduring power and illustrating the inevitable deterioration of human

creations, Shelley critiques the hubris of authoritarian figures such as Ozymandias. The poem offers a timeless reflection on the futility of pursuing immortality through political power, thereby fulfilling the research objectives and addressing the questions raised by this study. Ultimately, “Ozymandias” serves as a profound reflection on the fleeting nature of human accomplishments and the lasting dominance of time and nature.

Conclusion

The analysis of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ozymandias” demonstrates how the poem employs irony, imagery, and symbolism to critique the themes of impermanence and the limitations of human ambition. By analyzing the textual elements, this study addresses the research questions and objectives related to Shelley’s examination of authoritarian power and the ultimate fate of human endeavors. The poem effectively communicates the impermanence of power and legacy, challenging the notion that rulers can attain immortality through grand monuments or assertions of dominance. The use of dramatic and situational irony—particularly through the juxtaposition of the inscription “Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” with the surrounding desolate landscape—emphasizes the futility of Ozymandias’s arrogance and his belief in everlasting power. Rather than inspiring awe, the broken statue and its desolate surroundings evoke a sense of mockery, illustrating how time diminishes even the most powerful rulers and their empires. Through vivid imagery and symbolism, Shelley highlights the decline of both the statue and Ozymandias’s power, employing the fragmented “trunkless legs” and “shattered visage” to represent the physical and symbolic demise of the king. The poem’s portrayal of the surrounding desert, characterized by its “lone and level sands,” symbolizes the unavoidable decline of political power and the transient essence of human accomplishments. This paper has demonstrated that Shelley employs figurative language and irony to challenge the hubris of Ozymandias and the concept of everlasting political supremacy. The imagery of ruin and desolation starkly illustrates the constraints of human ambition, emphasizing the disparity between Ozymandias’s assertion of greatness and the reality of his neglected, decayed legacy. Ultimately, “Ozymandias” serves as a poignant reminder of the transience of human creations and the eventual insignificance of authoritarian power in the face of time’s passage. Shelley’s poem serves as a timeless critique of hubris, indicating that the aspiration for eternal dominance is an illusion, ultimately destined to be erased by the unyielding forces of nature and history. This analysis enhances our understanding of Shelley’s poetic techniques while also highlighting the broader philosophical message of the poem: that all human power is temporary, and the true legacy of any ruler is found not in their monuments, but in the transient impressions they create.

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