

Critical Analysis Essay Example: Poem

Ozymandias: As Relevant Today as It Was 200 Years Ago

Percey Bysshe Shelley's famous sonnet, *Ozymandias*, was published in 1818, but the themes are still relevant today. In the poem, a speaker tells of a ruined statue of a great, forgotten ruler who had the hubris to believe his deeds would make him immortal in the eyes of history. Without overtly saying it, the poem asks whether today's civilization and the deeds of ordinary people will also be forgotten as surely as this ancient emperor. Even more than 200 years later, the question is still a haunting and relevant one.

In the first part of *Ozymandias*, the narrator tells of meeting a traveller. The traveller then becomes the speaker for the rest of the poem. This nested style of narration is rare, and its distance gives the poem a sort of historical weight. Even though truth tends to be lost in the retelling, reading *Ozymandias* feels a bit like reading a history book. It seems like a real event that happened.

In the poem, the traveller describes seeing the statue's face "half-sunk" in the sand near the body. The face has a "sneer of cruel command" that is very much like the expression of a real person. The artist who carved that face did not try to make it look kinder, and the facial features tell about the personality of the ruler. If that isn't enough, the ruler's words appear on the pedestal of the statue and reinforce the expression on the face: "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings. Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair."

The final lines of the poem speak of the transience of this type of fame and the short memory of society: "Nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare, the lone and level sands stretch far away." *Ozymandias*' "mighty" works have come to nothing.

This type of narcissism is familiar in today's culture as well. Politicians sometimes focus on their own desires and image above the needs of the people they serve. One can imagine a leader of today commissioning a huge statue of himself, only to be forgotten at some later time. Similarly, celebrities and artists can believe their work will endure when in reality, civilizations rise and fall and forget the work of their greatest citizens. This poem is just as haunting and relevant as it was the day it was published more than 200 years ago.