

# Explanation: Ozymandias

 *EXPLORING Poetry*, 2003

## Line 1

By prefacing the narrative with this line, the speaker makes the story that follows both more and less reliable. Because the following description comes from someone who went to Egypt and actually saw the statue, the story seems more credible. At the same time, however, the fact that the reader hears the story from 'the friend of a friend' could make its validity seem questionable. These two vastly different perspectives on how the tale is told anticipate the many crossroads of interpretation in "Ozymandias".

## Lines 2-3

As soon as the traveller begins describing the crumbling statue, the rhyme and meter of the poem begin to fall apart. His sentences, in their broken bursts, serve to distinguish his voice from the speaker's, to show how excited he is about his discovery, and to recreate verbally the fragmented statue.

## Lines 4-7

The description of the statue's face introduces the poem's central irony: the power that Ozymandias meant to capture for eternity has, instead, become a testament to the mutability of such power. The lines also suggest that the sculptor was a keener observer than the king himself, who might have objected to the portrayal of himself had he understood the implications of his own frown.

## Line 8

This difficult line is composed in the traveller's typical, fragmented style; the reader should note that it is the traveller, not the speaker or Shelley, who is struggling so with language. Taking into account that the "hand" is the sculptor's, the "heart" is the king's, and "them" refers to the "passions" of Ozymandias (line 6), the statement becomes more clear: while the sculptor "mocked" (i.e., both imitated and derided) his subject's intensity of emotion, Ozymandias continued to feed his pride— though he was already "full of himself."

## Lines 9-11

Shelley's reader encounters this message through the screen of many other interpreters. The inscription was initially Ozymandias' own idea; then the sculptor provided an artistic interpretation of the words, in the pedestal as well as the face of the statue; the traveller viewed the wreckage, and passed along the information to the speaker, who relays it to his reader. Ozymandias' words have indeed survived through time, but change and time have created a new context and thus a new meaning for his words. His "Works" might now just be represented by the crumbling image of himself, instead of the vast creation that would have caused subsequent rulers to know they could never match his power. The "Mighty" might be the average visitor to the site, instead of those younger rulers, since

almost anyone has to look down to see Ozymandias' face now. Perhaps viewers feel "despair" not because Ozymandias' fate is unachievable, but because it will be shared by all humankind.

### Lines 12-14

In these lines, a sense of stillness, timelessness and infinite distances achieved through alliteration ("boundless" and "bare", "lone" and "level") and long vowels sounds ("decay", "bare") reflects the depiction of the vast desert (where processes of growth and decay are extremely slow) in Egypt, a civilization even older than ancient Greece or Italy.

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