

The famous sonnet entitled “Ozymandias,” written by Percy Bysshe Shelley, is a canonized poem centered on the ruins of the kingdom of a once great and ruthless ruler. This sonnet, which is a piece consisting of fourteen lines, typically of iambic pentameter, encompasses the fall of the Egyptian pharaoh known as Ozymandias, also known as Ramesses II. Though Shelley composed this poem nearly two centuries ago (1818), “Ozymandias” influence can still be seen today. Be it in music, literature, or film and television, the character and persona of Ozymandias remains prevalent in today’s society, thanks in no small part to Shelley’s sonnet about the tyrannical leader.

“Ozymandias” is one of Shelley’s greatest works, and without question one of, if not his most influential and recognizable. However, in many ways it is one of his least examined pieces of literature, and has some qualities that are not indicative of a typical Shelley work. This will be expanded upon later on in the essay. What is indicative of Shelley is the topic of this sonnet. Shelley gained a tremendous amount of historical knowledge throughout his life through his meticulous and constant reading. In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume D: The Romantic Period*, his work is described as being “...enriched by Shelley’s omnivorous reading...reading that he carried on...until he became one of the most erudite of the English poets.”(Greenblatt) *Prometheus Unbound*, which is one of Shelley’s dramas concerning “...the Greek Titan’s survival and transcendence of oppression...”(Greenblatt) is one example of how the writer’s incessant studying of ancient culture and philosophy influenced his work. This can clearly be seen in his sonnet involving the ruins of Ramesses II’s empire.

This sonnet deals with several profound themes related to the human condition and society as a whole. This essay will deal with the work in its entirety, for due to its concise nature, each line carries tremendous weight and has significant contribution towards the overall scope of

the poem. One of the more prominent themes is a negative view towards tyranny and oppression that Shelley disdained tremendously throughout his life. This largely stemmed from personal experience in his early life, as described in *The Norton Anthology*, "...he saw the petty tyranny of schoolmasters and schoolmates as representatives of man's general inhumanity to man, and dedicated his life to a war against injustice and oppression." (Greenblatt) These negative feelings Shelley had can clearly be seen in "Ozymandias," for he himself wished for this to occur in the time that he lived, to a degree. As H.M. Richmond writes, "The ruin of imperial grandeur by irresistible fate was a theme after Shelley's own heart. His own treatment at the hands of authority made him delight in any demonstration of its impermanence and the supremacy of the artist." (Richmond) Kingdoms may rise and kingdoms may fall, but his written words will last forever, thus the "supremacy of the artist." This attitude of his, coupled with Shelley's immense knowledge of ancient history exposing him to the tremendously tyrannical rule of Ramesses II, make him (Ozymandias) an easy target for a sonnet centered on the ruins of his once far-reaching kingdom.

The poem is also critical of autocracy. Shelley shows the futility of Ozymandias' all-powerful reign, for in the end, it was all for naught. The wasteland that once was his empire shows how a government ruled by one person will fail due to the greedy nature of human beings, no matter how great the person is. All of these factors present in "Ozymandias," as well as Shelley's mastery of the sonnet and the myriad influences it has had on different aspects of the arts, validate its canonization.

"Ozymandias" is a canonized piece of English literature for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it is a masterpiece of the sonnet form that uses several interesting techniques not especially common at the time, or since. Some of these techniques were not common even for Shelley's

own works. As William Freedman writes, "...the poet (Shelley) distances himself from the poem's subject by having all details supplied by some unnamed traveler." (Freedman) The very first line of "Ozymandias" establishes this gap, as it begins with, "I met a traveler from an antique land..." This rift between the writer and the one who provides the descriptions of Ozymandias and his ruined kingdom and visage in the poem is much of the reason why this sonnet has been a little bit of a question mark among many literary critics. As Freedman writes, "This distance, supported by the detached tone of the poem, is markedly atypical of Shelley, and it provides another explanation for the poem's neglect among writers interested in Shelley's poems... There may be much to learn about the poet Shelley from the seemingly aberrant detachment of this poem." (Freedman) Clearly, there is a mystery surrounding "Ozymandias," which may add to its mystique as being a canonized poem.

There are more examples of innovation in "Ozymandias," for the poem uses a unique rhythm that features several pauses created by dashes, commas, colons, and ellipses in order to create depth and power behind each word. After all, Shelley must depict Ozymandias as a once god-like and all-powerful ruler in order to create irony in his precipitous fall, as evident by the wasteland that was once his kingdom. Freedman also comments on the static and pause-filled meter of the poem when he writes, "The fragmented construction is doubtless a verbal replication of the fragmented statue it describes." (Freedman) The poem becomes more concrete in this way and consistent with what is being described.

The sonnet is also unique and innovative for its several characters and points of view. The narrator begins the action, but really only appears for the first line of the sonnet. After he claims to have met a "traveler from an antique land," he does not make another appearance, for the story is handed off via several agents, beginning with the traveler. The traveler describes the

crumbled, enormous statue of the great Ozymandias, then switches the focus to the sculptor of the pharaoh. The sculptor acknowledges the flaws in the inspiration for his piece, Ozymandias, and reflects by creating his “wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command.” The sonnet then shifts to the point of view of the pharaoh himself, as he describes himself on the engraving at the base of the statue as the “King of Kings.” There are fourteen lines in the poem, and four different perspectives, making that a remarkable feat in and of itself. Freeman describes the various vantage points by writing that, “...they represent a considerable range of types of readers, of ways in which written or other material may be approached- different types...of creators and interpreters, since all are in some ways both.”(Freeman) The fact that this poem is able to encompass so much and remain such a conundrum to many critics affirms its canonicity. Shelley thought differently than he usually did when writing this poem, taking a step back and presenting several other viewpoints in order to display the dangers of the pursuit of power and tyranny. However, the well extends far deeper with this poem. The following section will discuss how this sonnet has affected several areas of modern day culture, further proving that “Ozymandias” indeed deserves its canonization.

The concept of a ruler that proclaims immortality and omnipotence, only to have his or kingdom crumble around their feet (pun intended) is a tried and true archetype. Perhaps there is no better example and depiction of this character mold than Ozymandias, the “King of Kings.” This character presents an opportunity for a classic tragic hero who fails in his or her attempt to mimic God through power on earth. It is no surprise then, that this character has been such a recurring theme in several different areas of the arts and pop culture. Walter Stephens writes, “...a search for ‘Ozymandias’ on the Internet reveals three rock-and-roll songs, an album by a German "electro-medieval" musical ensemble, a pianist's musical project, three different comic-

book characters, and elements of video games and science-fiction.”(Stephens) But why has this character, and more specifically, this sonnet, resonated with us so strongly? It cannot simply be enough to create a character that fits the billing of a popular archetype. Stephens addresses that as well when he writes, “The poem solicits our wonder, not just our moral or ethical satisfaction at a tyrant's comeuppance. If Ozymandias' achievement was commensurate with his colossal statue, it must have been awe-inspiring; if the end of his civilization was proportional with the shattering of his statue, it must have been sudden and cataclysmic.”(Stephens) Indeed, the sonnet lures us in as much with what it tells us as what it does not tell us. We are only presented with the aftermath of what appears to be a tremendous catastrophe. The reader is charged to fill in the blanks as to how this once great ruler and kingdom suffered its downfall. Shelley is expressing the power of Father Time, who is undefeated and untied, as well as the dangers of greed.

As stated previously, Shelley also tells us just enough in order to lure us in, particularly with the documented words of the great pharaoh himself. Stephens writes, “The presence of writing makes possible the daydream, the romance, the epic of Ozymandias, whether for Shelley's ‘traveler from an antique land’ who reads the inscription, the ‘I’ who hears and repeats the tale, or the generations of Shelley's readers.”(Stephens) These reasons are among the many that make “Ozymandias” resonate so loudly today. One of the aforementioned examples is that of the character named Ozymandias in the popular graphic novel by Alan Moore, entitled *Watchmen*.

In *Watchmen*, the character of Adrian Veidt is a billionaire/genius/playboy by day and a crime-fighting member of the Watchmen, a team of troubled heroes, by night. His alias is Ozymandias, which unveils its appropriate nature as the graphic novel goes on. As the original Ozymandias was, Veidt was always rising above the rest. As Matthew Wolf-Meyer writes,

“Veidt simply overcame humanity, he transcended the bounds yoked upon him by culture and achieved his genetic potential, thereby becoming the ‘world’s smartest man.’”(Wolf-Meyer) But being Ozymandias involves so much more than superiority. There must be an unquenchable thirst for power and perfection, and Veidt falls right in line with these characteristics. Wolf-Meyer goes on to write that “...Veidt (Ozymandias)...demonstrate(s) contempt for the genetically inferior...Veidt so actively underestimates humanity that he provides the underlying plot of *Watchmen*, hoping to show humanity the error of its ways.”(Wolf-Meyer) As the poem says, “Look on my Works, ye mighty, and despair!” Veidt’s superiority to all others is a trademark of an Ozymandias-like character, showing the influence of Shelley’s poem in the sharing of the namesake.

However, a character named Ozymandias is incomplete without a need to rule over anything and everything. *Watchmen* eventually reveals Veidt’s master plan, which involves instantly wiping out millions of people in order to better mankind as a whole. The only conceivable difference between Alan Moore’s Ozymandias and Shelley’s Ozymandias is the consequences of their actions. While Shelley’s tragic character clearly ends up paying for his actions, as his kingdom is now in ruins, Moore leaves far more up for interpretation, as the reader is left not knowing if Ozymandias’ plan for humanity ultimately works. A few things remain constant however, and that is a ruined civilization or community of some sort, a lust for power, and superiority above all others. Put all of these together, and you can see the evidence of Shelley’s influence on one of the greatest and most popular graphic novels of all time, adding to his works’ validity as a canonized piece.

Another popular cultural reference to Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem can be seen in the hit TV-drama, *Breaking Bad*. At the conclusion of the series, there is a prelude to the final episode,

in which Walter White, the protagonist, recites Shelley's "Ozymandias." In the show, White, a high school chemistry teacher, becomes entrenched in the world of crystal meth production and distribution, eventually becoming a successful kingpin in the industry by any means necessary. The actions he takes in order to get the edge on his competitors include money laundering, murder, theft, and countless other things that transform Walter from an unassuming, passive, teacher to a power-hungry, ruthless, murdering, meth lord.

However, his characteristic as a ruler who utilizes an iron fist is not the only reason his recitation of "Ozymandias" is prevalent. White is eventually uncovered by law enforcement, causing him to leave his family and friends in shambles, as well as dozens of people he worked with in the methamphetamine industry. Walter became the most successful meth producer in the world, garnering significant monetary gain from it, yet was undone by his incessant desire for more, leaving a path of destruction behind him in the process.¹ This is the true reason why "Ozymandias" is recited prior to the series finale. Walter was the "King of Kings" who was brought down his own greed, and now nothing remains but ruins of his once great kingdom. White battles cancer throughout the series, which he finally succumbs to at the conclusion of the finale.² His kingdom has fallen and his visage is no more, much like that of Ozymandias.

Breaking Bad was one of the most successful television shows of all time. Walter White's character is a perfect representation of Ozymandias due to his ruthless nature, his lust for power, and his tragic fall from glory. "Ozymandias" has influenced one of the greatest graphic novels of all time, as well as one of the greatest television shows of all time. The fact that these fourteen lines have influenced the arts nearly two centuries after they were written speaks volumes to their importance and brilliance. "Ozymandias" rightfully belongs in the canon and

¹ "The Secret Life of Walter White," by John Wrathall

² "The Secret Life of Walter White," by John Wrathall

will continue to inspire artists of all sorts in today's culture.

“Ozymandias” was a poem originally written as a literary challenge between one of Percy Bysshe Shelley's peers at the time (1818), Horace Smith. As John Rodenbeck writes, “Smith was equally talented as a financier, a verse parodist, and an author of historical novels. The talk seems to have drifted around to Egyptian antiquity...and a friendly competition ensued in which each writer was to produce a sonnet on the subject of ‘Ozymandias, the King of Kings.’”(Rodenbeck) As the old adage goes, competition breeds improvement. Were it not for this friendly rivalry between two literary geniuses, Shelley might not have written “Ozymandias,” and the aforementioned literature and television pieces may never have come to fruition.

This competition garnered a decent amount of success for both Smith and Shelley, as it was published at a time when there was a heightened interest for things related to Ancient Egypt. The visage that Shelley speaks of in his sonnet had been discovered and was being delivered to Great Britain, as Rodenbeck writes, “Publication of the sonnet was obviously timed...to capitalize on public excitement in anticipation of the arrival of (Henry) Salt's collection at the British Museum; and enthusiasm for things ancient and Egyptian continued for several weeks...”(Rodenbeck) Salt was the one responsible for shipping the Egyptian artifacts to England, which included the famous head. The timing was key, and Smith and Shelley both reaped the benefits of their genius.

“Ozymandias” belongs in the canon for numerous reasons. The first is its sheer brilliance in terms of actual text, for Shelley displayed his mastery of the sonnet form in this poem. It stands alone compared to most of his other works, making it even more memorable. The second is the tremendous influence it has had upon Shelley's literary successors, as well as the arts in

general. Few pieces of literature can claim to have had a hand in music, film, and other literature. However, Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias" holds that distinction, affirming its rightful place among the immortals of the English language.

Works Cited

- Freedman, William. "Postponement and Perspectives in Shelley's 'Ozymandias'." Studies in Romanticism 25.1 (1986): 63-73.
- Richmond, H.M. "Ozymandias and the Travelers." Keats-Shelley Journal 6 (1962): 65-71.
- Rodenbeck, John. "Travelers from an antique land: Shelley's inspiration for 'Ozymandias'." Journal of Comparative Ethics. 2004
- Stephens, Walter. "Ozymandias: Or, Writing, Lost Libraries, and Wonder." Johns Hopkins University Press 24, 2009
- Wolf-Meyer, Matthew. "The World Ozymandias Made: Utopias in the Superhero Comic, Subculture, and the Conservation of Difference." Journal of Popular Culture. 2003
- Wrathall, John. "The Secret Life of Walter White." Sight and Sound. (2013): 34-36.
- "Percy Bysshe Shelley." The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume D: The Romantic Period. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York, (2012): 748-869.