

# The Universality of Art and Literature in P.B. Shelley's "Ozymandias"

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## ABSTRACT

*Ozymandias is about collapsed statue, constructed by Memnon, of Egyptian king Ramesses II in an empty desert. The people know about malicious King's viciousness through poetry otherwise, all his city, empire and memorial on his praise have vanished over time. This research paper explores the theme of the universality of art over absolute monarchy, death and time. The hubris and dictatorship of the Egyptian ruler Ramesses II was transitory which faded in the past while the narration of the poem where an unnamed narrator at the beginning connects every normal individual around the world; the poetry establishes itself as the classic one passing down to many generations revitalizing the adept of the sculptor as well. Tyranny is not something to be praised over the years whereas art transfers its beauty to generations. Overall, the poet succeeds to prove the universality of art over absolute monarchy, death, and time. This article is researched through the lens of romanticism and mimetic theory. The romanticism not only centralizes the feelings and emotions of the innocent people who are subjugated to tyrants like Ramesses II but also normalizes the idea that such haughtiness, power and tyranny is common worldwide. Next, mimetic theory reflects the supremacy of imitation in art. This article shows how art is timeless in front of the so-called monarchy because the sculptor and poet of Ozymandias are alive forever but not the monarch.*

**Key Words:** *Imitation, means, object, manner.*

## Introduction

Shelley's "Ozymandias", mimetically, does not captivate the readers only reflecting the self-deceptive and egoist nature of the king, but its imitation of the colossal remnants of the statue and the archive of the long lost civilization ensnares the readers for two centuries- to believe what the king swaggered of his achievements were real. Romanticism places human at center. Therefore, "Ozymandias" is timelessness because the concept of hubris, tyranny and power reside in every generation universally. Thus, the poem is relatable to every individual. However, "Ozymandias" is a sonnet about the absolute monarchy of an Egyptian King Ozymandias (alternative name of Egyptian pharaoh Rameses II) who ruled over there from 1304 to 1237 BC. Shelley attempts to present the result callous

autocracy through his creative imitation. Aristotle considers mimesis as the imitation of basic human faculty, which expresses itself in a wide range of arts. He defines it as an imitation of something with creativity. It is the imitation of nature as well as a mixture of real feelings of the artist. He views that an artist borrows the matter from nature and infuses it with the medium of mode from their creativity. Shelley as well becomes successful to show the reality of the Egyptian state with the deep irony of the King. Here, John Carey (2020, p.124) opines that “Shelley hated tyranny and his most famous poem, ‘Ozymandias’, scorns the pride and futility of tyrants. It was written in 1818 when he heard that a huge fragment of a statue of Ramses ruler II, ruler of ancient Egypt, was being brought to a British museum.” Therefore, he becomes different than historians only because of his dare to point the finger towards the cruelty and dictatorship of the king with the deep moral message-‘Life is mortal and either sooner or later we have to embrace death.’ Hence, there is nothing universal except poetic art which immortalizes people forever. Materialistic things, cruelty, and despotism are limited to certain times having only particular value but art remains forever having universal value. Shelley tries to represent the futility of absolute monarchy in front of the inevitability of death and the universality of art and literature by means of three modes of imitation: means, object, and manner.

### **Methods and Materials**

The poem Ozymandias is explored through the perspectives of mimesis and romanticism. Aristotle’s concept of mimesis (imitation) with the prompts of means, object and manner is applied to discover the universality of art and literature in front of mere mortality of human being. This article shows that the power, supercilious dictator and arrogance exist in every generation throughout the universe and thus, the Ozymandias relates to each individual until and unless the world remains. The article is based on qualitative research by reading the theoretical books and articles of mimesis and romanticism. The researcher investigates upon the poem with the support of theoretical insight from Aristotle’s *Theory of Criticism: A Reader*, Janko Richard’s *Aristotle’s Poetics*, and Frederick Burwick’s *Romanticism: Keywords*. The references of other supportive researched theoretical books and articles on mimesis and romanticism are also drawn as per necessity.

### **Result and Discussion**

The poet composes this poem imitating the sculpture of the king Ozymandias made by ‘Memnon’. He was a very cruel dictator who was vainglorious of his power and kingdom. Once, he threatened a sculptor ‘Memnon’ to erect his colossal statue out of rocks. He designated his monument on a large scale with the real expression of King as a cruel and enraged ruler carving his words under the pedestal, ‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!’ (Shelley, 2020, lines 10-11). By collapsing the challenge into one word “despair!” Shelley sets

up the irony that exists between what the inscription was originally meant to mean –despair at being unable to surpass Ozymandias’s achievements –and what it actually does to the nineteenth-century observer and subsequently contemporary respondents to his poem (Freeman, 2020, p.124). The Ozymandias were indeed titanic in scale whose estimated height might fall between sixty to sixty-five feet tall. The historian Diodorus as well wrote about the statue of the king after his visit to Egypt during the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. He exalted the King despite knowing his cruelty. This huge and great statue makes him think that the King is no less than God. In the same way, P.B. Shelley as well imitates the sculpture and composes the poem so it is the imitation of an imitation, and means of imitation are sculpture, words, rhythm, rhyme, and music. In this context, Bennett and Nicholas (2014, p.10) have used the notion of Paul de Man:

The poem then concerns a series of framed acts of reading. The sculptor reads the face of the king, the traveler reads the inscription, the narrative ‘I’ listens to the tale and finally we read the poem. The poem can be thought about as what Paul de Man calls an ‘allegory of reading’ (De Man, 1979) it is not only a poem which can be read, it is also a poem about reading. . . .

Shelley’s imitation of sculpture to investigate the absolute monarchy of the King functions as a milestone to make his poetic art immortal. In “Ozymandias” Shelley describes the arrogant visage of the broken statue of Ramses II and the impotent claim of power that survives in the inscription. . . Ironically, the cause of despair lies not in military might, but in its ephemerality (Burwick, 2015, p.275). As there is a proverb: “Picture speaks for itself,” Shelley attempts to present the ditto face of the nasty monarch in his poetic words. He uses the words frown, sunk shattered, visage lies, and wrinkled lip to manifest his veracity. It is an irony because the king ordered him to erect his grand statue with the hope that his power will be recognized by all generations but in fact, Memnon made his statue portraying his reality. Regarding this Lowood and Nitsche (2011, p.165) opine that, “To be sure, the sonnet contains the act of reporting an ancient inscription that commands the reader to be in awe of a grand (yet fallen) ruler, but it is quite evident that the sculptor’s reading of the “hand that mocked them” and the royal visage was already no mere copy but also an act of ridicule and distancing, long before the statue falls into ruin.” The power of imitation by means of words enables the vicious King to be imprinted in pages and read by the reader in the future not about his braver but about his insanity. The sculptor was impotent before the King but his carve made him potent enough to be imprinted in the pages of history. Richard Janko (1987, p.xiv) forwards the Aristotle’s concept that, “Poetry is a mimesis (representation) of reality.” Similarly, Shelley as well transits the physical appearance of the statue into words that gives us a negative impression of the King. Thus, there is no place for savagery but kindness and aptitude in this universe.

Shelley imitates the statue with his artistic creativity. Here, Aristotle comes

close to redefining poetry as a representation of universals, whether it is in verse or prose (Janko, 1987, p.xv). Initially, imitating the veracity of the sculpture and transferring it into the different sonnet of ABABACDCEDFEF is laudable. He does not follow the traditional sonnet patterns. He makes his own unique rhyming pattern. It is a sonnet having fourteen lines, metered in iambic pentameter but it is neither like an English nor Petrarchan sonnet but instead interlinks the octave (a term for the first eight lines of a sonnet) with the sestet (a term for the last six lines) by gradually replacing old rhymes with new ones. He uses half rhyme {stone (second)-frown (fourth)} and feminine rhyme {command (third) -stand (fifth)} (Shelley, 2020). There is also the syllabic variation (twelve syllables in first line- ten syllables in second line) which makes an irregular rhythm that signifies the nonstandard, violent, and unsatisfactory ruling of the King (Shelley, 2020). In *Ozymandias*, it is illuminating to chart the use of internal rhyme, the picking up, say of land, the first of the poem's three rhymes, by standing at the opening of line 3, which, arguably reinforces the imposing "stance" of the ruin (Donald H. Reiman et al., 2012, p.950). *Ozymandias* describes a past tyranny visible in the present only as a desert (Morton, 1994, p.225). Morton (1994, p.225) further argues that "It is not so much that the tyrant created the wilderness. Rather, the desert is a sign of the lack of benign culture (including agriculture). Culture in *Ozymandias* is present only as a series of empty gestures: the very speech of the 'traveler', the 'legs of stone' without a trunk, and the shattered visage of the tyrant." In this very short poem, Shelley writes the whole life of the King. Hence, it is not totally copied; he only imitates the structure of the statue and then composes the poetry with his artistic creativity which makes it really a genius work. Fiona Stafford (2014, p.14) argues that:

The detail of the sculptor's clear understanding of his master, still evident in what is left in the statue- the 'frown/ And wrinkled lip, the sneer of cold command' (4-5)- shows that even during the King's life, there were those less delighted than he was by his power. The choice of 'mock' for the sculptor's activity suggests not only a straightforward artistic imitation of the King's expression but also ideas of ridicule and falseness.

Shelley, with the assistance of the sculptor, develops his own rhyming pattern to mock the poor opinion of the King. His idea is that the cruelty and materialistic things get destroyed by the passing of time but artistic creation remains forever; he is laughing at the traditional pattern as well. He paints the King's wickedness in words easily looking at the sculpture of the modeler. In this regard, Richard Janko (1987, p.31) holds that "The reassessment, in turn, will enable us to reevaluate some of the text's apparent technical imperfection and to reconceive '*Ozymandias*' as a sophisticated and even daring poetic creation." It proves the power of art, which is a universal matter. Physical things decay, they do not remain forever because they are not as great as time. However, what remains alive is a work of art and literature.

Memnon's skill of art is renowned until the present time even after the destruction of the statue. P.B. Shelley composed this poem in 1818 and his art of literature is so valuable and precious until today.

The evil character of the king and references to historical allusions to some dictators are the objects of imitation. King boasts that he is 'the King of Kings'. According to Christopher Bennett (2015, p.16):

Ozymandias is a great symbol of human hubris: the human tendency to set too great a store by our own achievements, to overestimate their value, and to fail to look at our own lives from an eternal point of view. Once we do think about the perspective of posterity, however, can we really accept that what we do with our lives is meaningful?

The king is too much thirsty for admiration. But his atrocity and autocracy compel people to loathe him. The citizens were unable to express their abhorrence overtly due to the totalitarian regime of the king. Memnon could not dare to open his mouth in front of the king's ferocity. Though he had disgust towards him, he could not expose his antipathy and therefore forms the statue as real as king was 'with his half sunk, a shattered visage lies whose frown... and wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command' (Shelley, 2020, lines 4-5). The statue itself is derision to him. Its scattered parts are laughing at his brag which is now limited to its disperse splits of rocks 'which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things, the hand that mocked them and the heart that fed' (Shelley, 2020, lines 7-8). In this regard, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Payle (2014, p.14) hold that:

The word 'mocked' means both imitated or copied and ridiculed (a misrepresentation that represents more accurately or more cruelly). The commanding power of the king- his power, not least, to make the sculptor 'read' his face and to copy it onto stone- is resisted in that very reading in that mockery. The sculptor's reading is a copy, a faithful representation, and a reading which ridicules. Reading here is figured as both faithful, an action of subservience, and a subservience act of resistance to power, a transfer and transformation of power.

Those who would see the sculpture could easily imagine how much the king was vindictive. Parramore (2008, p.74) views that, "Ozymandias foreshadows the terrifying monsters that break free from their museum cases in subsequent treatments of Egypt in Literature and popular fiction." He was a narcissist. He demanded his statue must be a colossal one in the world. What little study the poem has stimulated has been devoted chiefly to the quest for sources, predictably in the accounts of traveler-historians, for Shelley's powerful description of the shattered statue and its suggestive prescription (Freedman, 1986, p.63). This way, Shelley shows the venomous and derogative nature of the King. He successfully shows the difference between appearance and reality by the objects of imitation.

He satirizes the attitude of the king. On the surface, he seems to be very powerful, great, and brave but in reality, he is corrupted, merciless, malicious, and authoritarian. He is not great rather he is below the level of ordinary people. As Aristotle (1998, p.46) says, "The objects the imitator represents our actions, with agents who are necessarily either good men or bad- the diversities of the human character being nearly always derivative from this primary distinction, since the line between virtue and vice is one dividing the whole of mankind." The poet even seems angry towards the King and ironically expresses his wrath towards him. He is not afraid of him. The poem was written many centuries after the collapse of Kingdome and Shelley got the liberation to comment on the defeatism of the king. He also could be like historians who bowed themselves in front of the power of the cruel king, but he showed his dare to mark out his bad aspects. This feature of the poets and artists does not surrender themselves in front of any kind of dictatorship. They are the milestone of social change and civilization. The objects of imitation deal with the universal theme, which shows the distinction between poet and historian because history deals with a particular issue. In this context, Richard Janko (1987, p. 15) forwards the Aristotelian notion that "From the theory of representation just outlined he draws a still more significant conclusion. He argues that poetry is "more philosophical" than history, because history represents action and events ("particular") i.e. what actual historical characters said or did, whereas poetry tends to represent generalized ones ("universal")." The historian always glorifies the power of the king because s/he does not have any courage to raise a finger towards the king. They always flatter the king and other political leaders so that they can remain under their shade and live peacefully. Diodorus does not explore his dictatorship behind the construction of the statue. To support this notion, Carlene Adamson et al. (2023, p.64) view:

But Diodorus's account has frequently been attributed by travelers to a different Egyptian statue, the Colossus of Memnon at Thebes, renowned in Strabo's account of the sound it was reputed to emit at dawn. This has led to bewildering confusion among the many accounts of travels in the East which may possibly have been in Shelley's mind when composing the sonnet.

Diodorus is sightless to see the ingenuity and aesthetic genius of Memnon but valorizes the king as God. However, what Diodorus glorifies about the king remained only up to a certain period. It was valid only in the past. His glorification was ruined by the death of the King and the demolition of sculpture. Cruelty never existed neither in the past nor in the present. Vicious and worst deeds always have corruptive ends. Roy Bearden- White (2015, p. 391) forwards the opinion that, "There is nothing left of the King of the King's empire but a broken statue. All of the people, buildings, and animals are gone, and what was left was such a horrible leader that the people within his command and civilization thought it best to pick up and start over somewhere far away.... He must have been one ruthless and

horrible leader to cause his people to become so desperate to get away from him that they would abandon the safety of their homes and their way of life.” Nevertheless, the king’s totalitarianism ended with the doom of the king himself. This type of governance does not exist in the present society. Our society does not digest such an authoritarian government. Thus, the praise that Diodorous made about the king, even after knowing his apathetic nature, became indigestible to society. Glorification of absolute monarchy is transitory. Historians always capitulate themselves in front of the power of the King. Therefore, it has a particular value.

The poet describes the cruelty of the king without any fear. The poets never get afraid to write about the dire aspects of society. Shelley deals with eternal values and satirizes the absolute monarch and his ego of feeling himself king of kings. He orders to make his great sculpture to show his greatness. However, absolute power compels oppressed citizens to raise their voices against it. Therefore, revolution against the cruelties and dictatorship existed in the past; it is even in the present and will also continue in the future. King is braggadocio and supercilious and considers himself immoral. His haughtiness even dies with his death. Memnon as well dies and his sculpture also disperses but what remains alive is the skill of art that Memnon has created. His skill and artistic creation will be praised forever.

To clarify the universal theme, the poet uses another allegorical theme. He uses the allegory of Napoleon Bonaparte under the objects of imitation to mock the king. Napoleon Bonaparte causes his own downfall (1815) which symbolically deals with the wickedness and downfall of the king Ozymandias. He composes this poem being inspired by Napoleon who destroys himself in the battle of ‘Waterloo’. Through this context, the poet wants to convey the message that dictators always bring their own downfall. Jalal Uddin Khan (2015, p.185) opines that:

With the Egyptian art of sculpture, sculptural inscription, pyramids, and mummification- all for the purpose of artistically displaying worldly fame and glory and achieving and idealized immortality through defeating death- lying in the immediate vicinity of Shelley’s Ozymandias, its subtext is the general heroic yet human quest for pride and performance in life through afterlife and at the same time the eventual and ultimate inevitability that mocks the sad and solemn preparation for such a quest.

In 1818 King George Third was a dictator of England (1760-1820). In 1716 there was an American war in which the king wanted to get victory over America but could not get success. He was very self-centered, did not want to borrow help from others, and used to take all the decisions of the nation autonomously. Through this allegory, P.B. Shelley is challenging the absolute monarchy because he loves democracy. Thus, this is not a feeble imitation of Shelley’s “Ozymandias”, as one might think, but its precursor (Allen, 2011, p.76). The poem is the harbinger of all those atrocities and rebellious movements situating ahead. Shelley deals with such

an eternal theme, which has universal significance because insurgency against tyranny has existed ever in our society.

While describing the manner, the poem is in dramatic mode. . There is not a single speaker rather multiple characters speak as if they are performing in a drama. It is simultaneously a poem concerned with poetic effort and anxiety of whether that effort will be remembered (Bloom, 2001, p.18). Though it begins with the narrative mode of the speaker using the first person pronoun, 'I met a traveler from an antique land'. However, in the second line, he lets the other characters speak. The narrator speaks only in the first line. In the second line, he tells the story of a traveler who had told him about the destructive statue of the Ozymandias. In the middle section, the traveler informed him what Ozymandias ordered Memnon to write on his pedestal. In this case, Peter Stockwell (2015, p.45) holds that:

However, Shelley places his most dramatic lines ( 'My name is Ozymandias...and despair') five lines before the end, in order further to emphasize their multi-centered and polyvalent nature. The inconclusiveness of the form is matched, of course, by the very weak sense of closure in the final lines ('The one and level sands stretch far away'), which also takes the scene spatially away from the deictic center of the ruin.

In totality, three characters play their role in the poem so there is enactment because characters are speaking their dialogue. There is drama in the narration. In this case, Harold Bloom (2001, p.18) regards that, "The most significant key to understanding Shelley's agenda in "Ozymandias" resides in the "verb to mock." *To mock* frequently means to treat an object, person, or idea with contempt or ridicule." In support of this Michael Macovski (1997, p. 31) states that, "That reassessment in turn will enable us to reevaluate some of the text's apparent imperfections and to reconceive "Ozymandias" as a sophisticated and even dragging poetic creation. The key to achieving that ambitious goal lies in various aspects of the poem's discourse structure." Overall, Shelley imitates the sculpture and presents the reality of the King in a dramatic narrative manner. Mimesis and realism are really linked together here.

By the manner of imitation, Shelley attempts to show the universal theme of the power of death. Death is inevitable. King is very boastful about his power because he never thinks that he will die eventually. He threatens Memnon to design his sculpture because he wants to show his power through his outsized sculpture. Ferocity towards the citizens never makes a king great and immoral. Though the citizens respect him outwardly but they are cursing him inwardly. He says that no one is greater than him but in reality, he gets defeated in front of the power of time. Mohit K. Ray (2002, p. 194) views that "In Shelley's Ozymandias the poem is unified by the inscription (My name is Ozymandias) on the pedestal of the broken states lying scattered on the desert that brings the part into a dynamic relationship with the present in which the tyranny of the king is finally superseded by the

tyranny of time.” The material sculpture gets damaged by the passing of time; the sculptor remains alive forever because of his skill and talent. People never remember the dictators after their death. So the poet tries to ironically present the power of death. The so-called great king even becomes small in front of death. No one can get triumph over death. Everyone has to surrender in front of it.

## Conclusion

To conclude, Shelley becomes able to articulate the universality of the art that is above absolute monarchy, death, and the power of time. By using the Aristotelian theoretical concept of mimetic representation, this research paper endeavored to justify the ubiquitous nature of art and literature. Shelley imitates the actions of both tyrant and the gullible sculptor in the narrative form. The imitation of real scenario in the poetic form is exceptional. The brutality and disgrace of the pharaoh Rameses II stands for each dictatorship inhibiting in each corner of the world although it fades before the timeless creativity. Therefore, the gullibility and adept crafting of the Sculptor is animated ever. Nonetheless, another poetic craft of Shelley equally becomes immortal one. Only the creative imitation of monument and the corrupted nature of the tyrant in the form of dialogue justify the universality of art and literature.

Shelley imitates the statue of Ozymandias with the illumination of his creativity. Modes of imitation wheel around the theme of the eternity of poetic art. The once haughty king is ironically doomed. His civilization is gone and he turns into the dust because of his own cruelty, injustice, and practice of absolutism. It shows that human being is vulnerable in front of the power of the time. Ozymandias was in vain that his colossal monument would spread his greatness but now it is shattered as rubbish in the midst of Westland that betokens how short life is and how time makes all of us its victim. Shelley wonderfully satirizes the so-called political monarchs of his time with the help of this great metaphor ‘ruined statue’. This metaphor symbolizes the wickedness and arrogance of all humanity. All the things become powerless but Shelley’s sonnet and Memnon’s art remain eternal.

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