



Ozymandias, by Percy Bysshe Shelley

In A Nutshell

Late in 1817 Percy Shelley and his friend Horace Smith decided to have a sonnet competition – that's right folks: a sonnet competition! For the subject of their sonnets, Shelley and Smith chose a partially-destroyed statue of Ramses II ("Ozymandias") that was making its way to London from Egypt, finally arriving there sometime early in the year 1818. In the 1790's Napoleon Bonaparte had tried to get his hands on the statue, but was unable to remove it from Egypt. That's partly because it weighs almost 7.5 tons. Shelley, like Napoleon, was fascinated by this giant statue. Here's a picture of it.

Shelley published his poem in January of 1818 in *The Examiner*, a periodical run by his other friend Leigh Hunt (pronounced "Lee"). Smith published his poem less than a month later, with a title almost as long as the poem itself: "On A Stupendous Leg of Granite, Discovered Standing by Itself in the Deserts of Egypt, with the Inscription Inserted Below." You can take a look at Smith's poem here.

While Shelley has a reputation for radical and experimental poetry, "Ozymandias" is a pretty "tame" poem compared to many of his other works; it is written in a well-known and widely-used form – a fourteen-line sonnet – and doesn't say anything too offensive like "We should all be atheists" (Shelley was expelled from Oxford for writing a pamphlet advocating just this).

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Where do you think the encounter between the speaker and the traveler takes place? Is it on the street? Is it in the speaker's head? What does this vagueness contribute to the poem?
- 2 In this poem three different people speak (the speaker, the traveler, and Ozymandias). What do you make of this? Does it make the poem seem more like a novel or a play, where different voices are permitted to speak?
- 3 There's a lot of alliteration in this poem. There's also plenty of rhyming. What do you make of all this repetition? Does it suggest some kind of cyclical, history-repeats-itself, idea?

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