



Activity 1: Ozymandias

In this activity we will look at two poems called ‘**Ozymandias**’.

You might already be familiar with this poem from your GCSE syllabus. In this sonnet, the ancient statue of Ozymandias, the ‘king of kings’ is decapitated, and lies as a warning against arrogance: all his works have fallen to the sands of time. ‘Ozymandias’ was probably inspired by an ancient statue of Rameses II, bought for the British Museum around the same time that the poem was written. In fact, Shelley wrote ‘Ozymandias’ in competition with his friend, Horace Smith, as they decided to see who could write the better sonnet on the same theme. Their poems were published a month apart in the same magazine, *The Examiner* (Shelley’s in January 1818, Smith’s in February 1818), under pseudonyms. However, Smith’s ‘Ozymandias’ is much less well known than Shelley’s.

Poem 1 By **Percy Bysshe Shelley** (1792–1822; ‘Ozymandias’ was written in 1817, published 1818)

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my Works, ye mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

Glossary

visage: face

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Poem 2 By Horace Smith (1818)

IN Egypt's sandy silence, all alone,
Stands a gigantic Leg, which far off throws
The only shadow that the Desert knows:—
"I am great OZYMANDIAS," saith the stone,
"The King of Kings; this mighty City shows
"The wonders of my hand."— The City's gone,—
Nought but the Leg remaining to disclose
The site of this forgotten Babylon.
We wonder,—and some Hunter may express
Wonder like ours, when thro' the wilderness
Where London stood, holding the Wolf in chace,
He meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess
What powerful but unrecorded race
Once dwelt in that annihilated place.

Glossary

Babylon: ancient ruined city in what is now Iraq

chace: an old spelling of 'chase'

Task

Why do you think Shelley's 'Ozymandias' is so widely known and read, while Smith's is much more obscure? Both poems are sonnets, and both carry a similar message. Which parts of the poems do you find more or less powerful, and why?