

Transience in Shelley's Ozymandias: A Poetic Appeal to Human's Finer Instincts

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Abstract: This study sets to show the univocal consistency in the poetic portrayal of Ozymandias through the setting, images, symbols and the thematic content. The poetic appraisal and the rhetoric of the poem reinforce the central idea of transience and survival of creativity, the essence of the poem. Shelley makes an invincible attempt to create an aura of positivity in the living conditions of all transient things in the poem "Ozymandias". It is displayed through the tangible nature of living things and their embodiments as is expressed in the poem as insolence of power. Nothing remains static nor can avoid the grasp of fatal death yet the art as a piece of creativity transcends the level of tyranny which aligns with the poetic essence of Shelley. This paper centers around the vain feelings of Ozymandias that create a new aspiration paradoxically deriding the insolence of the history. The ever conflicting inner state of the mighty ruler displays the focal idea of the poem that nothing can avoid the grasp of time. The broken image of the statue parallels the all-inclusive decadence.

Key Words: Transience, ruin, representation, mighty

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I. LITERATURE REVIEW

A series of incidents gave rise to the Romantic Period. The entire domain faced the outbreak of the colonists' rebellion in North America, their successful defense and their achievement of independence mark the romantic period. The period is notable not only for these turbulence and transitions in the social, political and cultural arena, but it was remarkable for the diversity of the outlooks and systems of value that were held together, in spite of mutual antipathies and revulsions, in a common English culture.

Shelley is widely known as a rebel poet. He spoke against the conventionalized norms and manners vehemently in his poems and an advocate of beauty and charm. In *Ozymandias*, he derided the pride and vanity of a once powerful man contrasting the state of vanity with an aesthetic appeal of the sculpture which is a part of progressive society. Setting the scene outside the usual human society that is in a desert is a typical romantic essence of Shelley. Besides the idea that how power makes man ruthless and alienated from its surroundings has also been reinforced through the lonely and uninhabited desert. Setting the scene in a desert also enhances the desolation of the prospect. As an advocate of love and tenderness, Shelley stands against the tyranny thinking that only gives birth to hatred and antagonism.

Shelley heard about the sculpture and its inscription and presumably the inspiration for writing this poem was verbal rather than visual which also guarantees the aesthetic focus/ romantic legacy of Shelly. Hence, in "*Ozymandias*", the historicity of the monument gets less attention and consequently, the proud claim on the pedestal is made on behalf of art (the tomb and its creator), not the deceased. Though *Ozymandias* believes he speaks for himself, in Shelley's poem his monument testifies against him.

The subjective 'I' quickly fades away as 'a traveler from an antique land' is confronted and immediately takes charge of presenting the situation in a more realistic manner. The monument itself with its vastness and vain glory justifies the haughty inscription that results in the total destruction of the megalomaniac monument. Shelley more ingeniously shows the doom that power inherits and instills in a human being by inhibiting the consequences to be felt and experienced. Hence, the portrayal of a broken image of a tyrant becomes aesthetically realistic by the hands of the artist as Shelley is seen appreciating the sculptor and the permanence of the sculpture in contrast to the impermanence of the supremacy of power. Shelley's own state of being tortured at the hands of the authority lays a basis for this kind of portrayal in the poem *Ozymandias*. The inevitability of the ruin of the imperial grandeur seems to be predestined and thus, incurs triviality. The paradoxical vastness and fragility of the monument aligns with the vainglorious epitaph. After Richmond, "It might be the moral to the sonnet. 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 H.M. 1962, P 71)

The conflicting aspects of the state of being simultaneously “Mighty and despair” – form a setting for the juxtaposition which is evolved through ‘mundane glory and its impermanence’ concept. It is evident from the random observations, shifting of the tone and the usage of literary terms and words that how passionately Shelley hates the tyrants. That also shows the poetic insight and the judgments he passes on to the consequence of the tyranny and the colossal destruction. All these expressions reinforce the idea of a transitory state of a supine sculpture and have given the poem a symbolic unity. We do well to remember that, as Aristotle said, poetry is neither history nor philosophy.

Nature thus implied considerably more to the Romantics, who were fervent to consider emotional states significant, from whatever source they arose. Their spotlight was substantially more on investigating the unfamiliar domain of heart which so far has dependably been disregarded. At the point when Shelley gives pictorial images, as he does in the depiction of the historical figure Ozymandias, and it at that point progresses toward becoming clearer that he is beginning from a passionate state and feeling pictures and thoughts with which to carry it into the domain of thought.

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. (L. 10-13)

He has just words with which to express mind-set, mentality, and passionate state, and the words cannot work except if they are passing on thoughts also. He puts moderately more prominent accentuation on the mental states than on the more exact and possible thoughts. Apparently this attempt may look disarrayed, yet the manipulation of the words and certain expressions sum up to an agreeable intricacy.

The way Shelley forgoes the conventional rhyme scheme underscores the poem’s essential irony. The syntactical structure forced by the unusual pattern of the poem unfolds the tension that matches the theme of the poem. The theme eventually becomes a universal one.

The sands at the end in Ozymandias are endless and indicate a tangible representation of the expanse of past and future. Thus Shelley’s way of depicting the stature or the figure becomes more artistic than historic. The critic Leslie Brisman’s remarks “the way the timelessness of metaphor escapes the limits of experience” in Shelley verify the authenticity of the statement.

The period Shelley lived in was an extremely chaotic one. The British Government was afraid of any kind of revolution and used to meet any such occasions with oppression and tyranny. Shelley hated tyranny, oppression and violation of human rights all his life. Several political events inspired and shaped Shelley’s writing but he never employed any devices to make any explicit remark about politics or argue about morality. Shelley thus creates subtle literary effects, powerful but tightly controlled mood to stick to the poetic unity. The use of unconventional rhyme scheme, ringing phrases such as lone and level, boundless and bare epitomizes the binary kind of poetic insight that is evoked out of chaos signifying a vital uniformity, a longing for a harmony.

The first part of the poem is a mere description of a proud and egotistical ruler. The end of the poem then with a shifting tone and mood appears like a sermon with an admonishing tone putting emphasis on how human’s false sense of pride and accomplishments become meaningless under the endless marching of time. From the description Shelley gave it looks more like a reading of the statue and its surroundings, its context than a mere description. The traveler understands the frown, sneer command; the passions engraved and thus relate the passions to its existence. The truth of the representation only comes out when it is tested by time. Truth here needs to be discovered; truth evolves and is perceived in the course of time. As a piece of art, time remains the recurrent figure in the poem rather than a mere documentation and henceforth, reaffirms its invincibility. The literary art engraves and instills the story of past, present and future. The information and message in these stories is conveyed through literary devices and thus manifest the timelessness of art. The assembled images like trunkless legs, wrinkled lip, half sunk form of the statue, pedestal legend from various texts and passages echo the invincibility of time. Shelley’s portrayed statue is nowhere to be found but makes it evident that the statue exists only in the romantic imagination of time. Shelley’s poem unlike the other textual and historical references does not refer to any particular context but only is visible in the poem.

Shelley’s attempt to display the triumph of the form of expression, the victory of art over the unsettling matters of life is a dramatic representation of the perceived moments at the sight of a broken, decayed statue. The poem itself takes a look of a monument, a fake ruin recalling the mutability of mortality. The rhyming is not even regular implying an idea of not conforming to any conventional patterns or any traditions. The title of the poem is a name taken from history while not giving any historical references. The mechanics used in the poem reinforce Shelley’s longing for a better world. Henceforth, he manages to impinge the transcendence of oppositions into unity which is laid out with the overall symmetry of the poem.

The ruins of a statue in the desert are the vivid visual impression created by Shelley in Ozymandias to put light on the momentary transcendence of power. The power and its hollowness is shown to be lost in time’s triumph and the surrounding void. All the scattered and fragmented images of the statue establish Shelley’s romantic legacy of transience. The decadence, the fragility, the transience of power and gory are shadowing the

once powerful pharaonic king of Egypt in the hegemonic wake of Napoleon. The image of a broken decrepit statue unveils such a powerful and impelling issue about the life of human beings.

The usage of historical figure is a ploy to Shelley as he gives a new dimension and a new meaning to it. The myth becomes a means for the embodiment of his symbolic ideas. He makes his ideas vivid and convincing by using coherent symbols that make the presentation more poetry than the repeated story of a historical figure. Choosing a familiar story to express his own ideas gives him an advantage over his readers so that/in that they can approach it without any misgivings. Without recapitulating about what has already been told about Ozymandias, Shelley gives a new shape to huge modern issues. It becomes evident as we see what matters to the poet is not the personal destiny but something universal. Henceforth, the poet does not give any details of the traveler's whereabouts. The speaker and the character themselves are not the main focus but what they present is more important. The good and evil forces of human are translated to the spatio-temporal arrangement of a speaker that has given his ideas a local habitation and a name. The dichotomy in human existence exhibited in the figure of Ozymandias gives the theme a far greater cogency and clarity.

The poetic excellence of Shelley lies in his foreseeing a change in the conditions of human life. In his view, all physical things are really meaningful and spiritual. His story telling remains a bit diaphanous in that it eludes us as real experience. The presentation of actual facts which set a tone and create an atmosphere is realistic. But in the progression of the story Shelley holds us back and makes it appealing to our human soul. The human values are the prime concern of Shelley that has aroused his finest emotions.

Shelley always seeks to affirm to a single reality amidst the false reflections in the phenomenal world. Therefore, he turned naturally to the universal and the permanent. To him the ultimate truth can be grasped through imagination not through intellect and can be expressed only in the poem.

The power in the beginning foreshadows the doom later. Though the Pharaonic Egypt seemed to be eternal, never-ending in the beginning, eventually is derided by its ruins. The enjoyment of power lies in its having an oxymoronic fear which is accomplished by exerting more tyranny. The derisive laughter and the sneer command in the face of the sculpture of Ozymandias reinforce the image of a tyrannical emperor. Tyranny, the evil force in human nature breeds its own opposite, the demise. The incarnation of evil shown in the figure of Ozymandias reinstates the idea that evil must be overthrown by itself.

“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings. /Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” The inscription inscribed on the pedestal of the shattered statue of Ozymandias is ironic. The ironic comment issues a reassuring solidity on the transience of human power and accomplishment. The statue of Ozymandias sets an example for the other rulers, though not for his achievements but as a reminder to the same fate they are going to meet. The feeling and the perceived moment /the idea is/are registered through the images of art which is lifeless yet bearing life in it. This is an aesthetic triumph over mortality.

The statue in the desert in its present state with having no sign of any animated or inanimated beings justifies the validity and the weight of the works of the king. The vast, empty and lifeless space where the statue stands has been very skillfully phrased as ‘boundless and bare’ and ‘lone and level’ using alliteration.

‘The lone and level sands stretch far away’ at the end of “Ozymandias” is extremely abstract and nebulous, and the content has become remarkably diluted through verbal luxuriance ‘king of kings’, ‘Mighty and despair’, ‘my Works’. The elements, imageries, all act as artificial stimulants to the favourite emotional states of Shelley that he was determined to stir in himself. The conflicts give spontaneous expression to the contrasting aspects of his emotional state: appreciating the piece of art and simultaneously recalling the decadence. In Freedman's words, “But the point that emerges as a reflection and consequence of our reading of these wreathed lines is that what survives and thus, by implication, what is of consequence, is neither life nor the ordinary manifestations of power, but art. One must wait centuries, perhaps millenia or a few disturbingly situated phrases to learn it, but life, in so far as it survives at all, survives only in the lifeless images of art”. Hence Shelley differs from the historic description of the monument given by Diodorous. His statue is standing, not sitting and is to be found in a deserted desert than in a temple entrance. This is evident that Shelley created this figure out of his imagination rather than attempting at historical reconstruction. The aesthetic appeal towards human's finer instincts that he has longed for all his life over all corruptive practices and institutions in the society is vividly aligned with the colossal damage of a vast figure.

In this poem, the speaker describes meeting a traveler “from an antique land.” Here at the very outset the poet sets up a melancholic mood which he stretches out throughout the poem. In the last two lines “boundless and bare” or “lone and level sands” reflect on the melancholic mood again. There was no sign of life around the traveler. The land is barren. The desert speaks to the fall of realms. The tone is by all accounts ironic. The inscription on the pedestal demonstrates that it was previously an image of incredible power. Unfortunately, that power did not last for Ozymandias. “Two vast trunkless legs of stone Stand in the desert....” Here the declining statue metaphorically stands for declining power of the pharaoh Ozymandias.

Shelley's sonnet outlines how the triumphs of even the mightiest despot are decimated by time. The speaker meets a traveler who has recently seen the great statue of the powerful pharaoh Ramses II, or Ozymandias. The traveler tells the speaker that the statue is in pieces in the sand amidst the desert. .

Ozymandias used to be an extraordinary and compelling ruler, however there is nothing left of his domain any longer. The dilapidated remains of a colossal statue of once all-powerful in the barren desert preserve the tyrant's 'sneer of cold command'.

Shelley has utilized words such as 'antique', 'vast', 'shattered', 'cold command', 'despair', 'nothing...remains', 'decay', 'wreck' to emphasize ephemeral nature of power. The sonnet features the truth that all of mankind and our manifestations are fleeting. Regardless of a man's status or power in their day, they will in the long run die. The broken and abandoned statue very well reflects on Shelley's mastery over using irony. The ramshackle statue is not a demonstration of the pharaoh's greatness but his pride and arrogance, and ironically the sculptor could see it when he was working. The sculptor read the emotions of the subject well and sculpted the "frown, And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,..." The memories of these emotions still survive on the lifeless statue. These inscriptions bring in nothing but an ironic contrast where Ozymandias has been represented as the 'King of Kings' but his works have been represented as 'Mighty and despair'. Shelley, being a revolutionary poet has always represented himself as a utopian dreamer. His hatred against tyranny is eminent and was eloquently articulated in much of his writings. The dilapidated statue is nothing but a true demonstration of ephemeral nature of hubris and political power. The statue which was built of stone also unveils the ironical truth of life that even stone is perishable, not to mention flimsy human beings, be they incredible primitive dictators or common people.

Shelley, a rebel by nature has always directed himself to break the prevailing traditions of the society. By nature he was visionary and hypersensitive and could expound his ideas and aspects of life and society in his poetry. He not only broke the shells of traditional norms but also created a different ideology and genre for his poetry where he reflects on his own outlook on life. Where the other romantics have sought a refuge from reality, Shelley created a platform for the most serious purposes in his poetry. To Shelley life is the great unreality, painted veil, and the triumphal procession of a pretender. O.W. Campbell found a strong resemblance between Shelley and Plato in terms of their ideologies and two of the ideas which recur most frequently in his poetry and prose are essentially platonic. "These were the belief that life, as man knows it, is only an unreal show or a dream, and the conception of some all-pervading Spirit of Reality dwelling behind this painted veil of life." (Campbell, 1924, p 279). He was surely aware of the evils of the time in which he lived and projected it in his poetry through his bold and fearless manner.

The pharaoh's "wrinkled lip" and the "sneer cold command" -all depict the ruthless nature of the tyrant who was so deeply swollen with pride that he did not even hesitate to compare himself with God. He announced himself to be the "King of Kings" where In Revelation 19:16 Jesus is given the full title "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS". The title demonstrates someone who has the power to practice outright domain over the entirety of His domain. In the case of the Lord Jesus, the realm is all of creation. Ozymandias' inflated vision of his power and grandeur made him believe that in the end, all other rulers will be conquered or abolished, and he alone will reign supreme as King of his mighty kingdom. But pessimism and optimism run one next to the other in Shelley's poetry. At whatever point he thinks of the corruption and tyranny prevailing in this world he becomes extremely pessimistic. However the poet is extremely idealistic about the eventual fate of mankind. He earnestly trusts that a world ensuring happiness for all is coming to supplant the present period of tyranny, oppression and corruption. Being a utopian dreamer he believes that all power gives way for the new power. On the pedestal of the king's statue it read 'Look on my Works, ye Mighty and despair!'

II. CONCLUSION

Percy Bysshe Shelley's Ozymandias, since its publication in 1817, was appreciated a lot for its being somewhat strange. The presentation is strange in that it does not conform to the conventional themes like love, beauty, imagination etc. The poem is considerably the most famous and the most anthologized one. From its inception, it has widely been accepted and acclaimed to be a milestone in Shelley's career upholding the universal and philosophical ideas regarding transience of every living and their attributes. The inspiration for writing this poem in Shelley is roused from a pure exalted passion. Shelley's works have influenced many contemporary poets, critiques and philosophers for being steadfast in thought and expressions. This study has not dug out anything new out of the poem but keeping the bird's eye view of the poem, it has thoroughly researched the eternal metaphor for the pride and hubris and the short-lived existence of all of humanity, in any of its manifestations. In the development of this paper,

the idea that a piece of art somewhat outlives the mortal life and its attributes has been reached. The short-lived existence in the poem is evolved through the metaphors, alliteration, assonance, setting, imageries, tone and mood. The focus lies on the literary devices to extract the presentation of a universal non-eternal stay of the person as well as his stature depicted.

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