



Sonnet as a Weapon: Structure, Irony and meaning in P.B Shelley's Ozymandias

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Abstract

Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ozymandias* exemplifies how poetic form can function as a powerful instrument of critique. This paper examines the sonnet as "weapon" in Shelley's hands, analysing how its unconventional structure, layered narration, and pervasive irony dismantle the very notion of political and imperial permanence. Though traditionally associated with love and ideal beauty, the sonnet form is deliberately subverted in *Ozymandias* to expose the fragility of human power and the futility of tyrannical pride. The poem's fractured rhyme scheme and disrupted Petrarchan expectations mirror the broken statue it describes, reinforcing the theme of decay. Further, Shelley's use of narrative distancing—through the traveller's voice—intensifies the irony by separating the ruler's grandiose self-image from the desolate reality of his legacy. By juxtaposing the arrogant inscription with the surrounding "lone and level sands," the poem transforms language itself into an agent of resistance against authoritarian authority. The study argues that Shelley's sonnet does not merely depict the downfall of empire but actively enacts it through form and irony, thereby affirming Romantic poetry's capacity to challenge power, rewrite history, and assert the supremacy of time and nature over human ambition.

Keywords: Sonnet, Ozymandias, petrarchan, skepticism, Romantic, Shakespearean, volta

Introduction

Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ozymandias* (1818) stands as one of the most powerful poetic meditations on the transience of political authority and human pride in English Romantic literature. Composed during a period marked by revolutionary fervour and resistance to tyranny, the poem reflects Shelley's deep scepticism towards absolute power and imperial ambition. What makes *Ozymandias* particularly striking is not merely its theme but the manner in which Shelley employs the sonnet form itself as an instrument of critique. Traditionally associated with harmony, order, and idealised emotion, the sonnet is radically reconfigured in this poem to undermine the very ideals of permanence and grandeur it once celebrated.

This paper proposes that Shelley transforms the sonnet into a "weapon" by manipulating its structure, narrative voice, and irony to expose the hollowness of authoritarian power. The poem's unconventional rhyme scheme and hybrid sonnet form disrupt formal expectations, symbolising the fragmented remains of *Ozymandias*'s shattered monument. Furthermore, Shelley's strategic use of layered narration—where a traveller recounts the words and ruins of a once-mighty ruler - creates ironic distance between *Ozymandias*'s boastful self-representation and the desolate reality of his legacy. The inscription, intended to immortalise power, becomes instead a testimony to its inevitable collapse.

By examining the interaction between poetic structure and meaning, this study argues that *Ozymandias* does more than describe the fall of tyranny; it enacts that fall through form and irony. In doing so, Shelley demonstrates the Romantic belief in poetry as a subtle yet potent force capable of challenging historical authority, destabilising political arrogance, and affirming the enduring supremacy of time and nature over human ambition.

P.B Shelley's "*Ozymandias*" is one of the most celebrated sonnets in the English language, primarily because it uses the rigid constraints of the poetic form to dismantle the very

idea of absolute power. By examining its structure and irony, we can see how Shelley transforms a traditional "love poem" format into a political weapon.

Structural Subversion

The structured subversion of a sonnet is an intentional act of poetic rebellion. It involves setting up the reader's expectation for a traditional 14-line form - with its specific rhythm and rhyme - and then methodically breaking those rules to mirror a breakdown in theme, logic, or emotion.

Here is how one can systematically deconstruct the sonnet form.

1. Subverting the Architecture (The "Broken" 14)

The most immediate way to subvert a sonnet is to manipulate its physical footprint.

The Curmudgeonly Sonnet: Shrink the proportions. Instead of 14 lines of iambic pentameter, use 14 lines of dimeter (two beats). The "structure" remains, but the "breath" is suffocated.

The Curtal Sonnet: It is popularized by Gerard Manley Hopkins, this uses a 10.5 line structure. It maintains the sonnet's spirit but cuts it short, creating a sense of urgency or incompleteness.

The Ghost Line: It provides 13 lines, leaving a visual gap where the final resolution should be. This forces the reader to provide the "missing" closure themselves.

2. Attacking the Meter (Rhythmic Dissonance)

Traditional sonnets rely on Iambic Pentameter (da-DUM five times). Subversion replaces this heartbeat with "*arrhythmia*."

The Spondaic Slam: Use heavy, stressed syllables (DUM-DUM) to slow the poem to a crawl, subverting the natural flow.

The Prose-Sonnet: Keep the 14 lines and the rhyme scheme, but use completely flat, conversational prose rhythms. The tension between the "*fancy*" rhyme and the "*boring*" rhythm creates a dry, ironic tone.

3. The Failed Volta (The Turn)

In a standard sonnet, the Volta (usually at line 9 or 13) provides a "twist" or a new perspective. To subvert this:

The Anti-Climax: Instead of a revelation, have the speaker arrive at the exact same conclusion they started with, suggesting stagnation or obsession.

The False Turn: Start line 9 with "But" or "Yet," then proceed to describe the exact same thing as the first eight lines.

The Multiple Voltas: Shift the perspective every two lines so the poem never gains a solid foundation.

4. Subverting the Rhyme (The "Unraveling")

Rhyme usually provides a sense of "order" and "inevitability." You can subvert this to show psychological distress:

The sonnet is traditionally a form associated with praise, beauty, and eternal love. Shelley subverts this by applying the form to a "colossal wreck."

The Hybrid Form: Shelley blends the Petrarchan (Italian) and Shakespearean (English) sonnet structures.

It begins like a Petrarchan sonnet (ABBA), but the rhyme scheme shifts unexpectedly (ABAB/ACDC/EDEFEF).

The Meaning: This structural "instability" mirrors the crumbling ruins of the statue itself. The rhyme scheme is decaying and evolving as the reader moves through the poem.

The Triple Frame: Shelley creates distance through layers of narration:

1. The Poet (Shelley).
2. The Traveler.
3. The Sculptor.
4. Ozymandias (The King).

This "distancing" ensures that the King's voice is the weakest in the poem - it is a filtered, echoing memory rather than a direct command.

The Engine of Irony

In Shelley's Ozymandias, the engine of irony is a multi-layered mechanism that pits human hubris against the indifferent march of time. Shelley doesn't just use irony as a punchline; he embeds it into the very structure of the poem, creating a system where every boast made by the king is physically dismantled by the surrounding imagery.

1. The Core Engine: Situational & Dramatic Irony

The primary irony is the discrepancy between Ozymandias's intended legacy and his actual remains.

The Inscription vs. The Reality: The pedestal commands: "Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" In its original context, this was a threat of overwhelming power. In the poem's context, the "mighty" should despair because even the greatest empire will eventually become "nothing."

The Survival of the "Passions": Lines 6-8 describe how the sculptor "well those passions read." It is ironic that Ozymandias's pride and "sneer of cold command" survive, but his empire does not. The king wanted to be remembered

for his works (cities, conquests), but he is only remembered for his personality defects, preserved by an artist he likely looked down upon.

2. Structural Subversion as Irony

Shelley uses the sonnet form - traditionally a monumental and perfectionist poetic structure - to mirror the decay of the statue itself.

The Hybrid Form: The poem is a "mutant" sonnet. It begins with the rhyme scheme of a Petrarchan sonnet (ABAB) but then shifts into a Shakespearean-esque pattern (CDCD...), eventually breaking away from both. This "shattered" rhyme scheme mirrors the "shattered visage" of the statue.

The Volta (The Turn): In line 9, Ozymandias speaks. This is the traditional "turn" of a sonnet where a new perspective is offered. Usually, this resolves a problem; here, it introduces the peak of arrogance just before the "sestet" (the final six lines) describes the "boundless and bare" desert. The structure sets the King up for a fall.

3. The "Mocking" Hand

A crucial engine of irony lies in the word "mocked" in line 8: "The hand that mock'd them, and the heart that fed."

Double Meaning: In Shelley's time, to "mock" meant both to copy/imitate and to make fun of.

The Irony: The sculptor was mocking the king's arrogance while carving it. Ozymandias was too blinded by his own vanity to realize that his official portrait was actually a permanent record of his cruelty. The king "fed" the sculptor's creativity with his own tyranny.

4. Distance and Narrative Layers

The poem is told through four levels of distance, which diminishes Ozymandias's importance:

- a. The Reader hears from...
- b. The Narrator (Shelley) who met...
- c. A Traveler who saw...
- d. The Ruins of the King.

By the time we hear Ozymandias's voice, it is a "third-hand" account. This distance serves as a structural irony: the man who wanted to be the center of the world is now a footnote in a traveler's story.

The core of the poem's power lies in the situational irony found in the juxtaposition of the inscription and the surroundings.

The Inscription

*"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"*

Ozymandias intended these words to intimidate his rivals by showing off his vast empire. However, in the context of the poem, the meaning "flips":

Original Intent: Despair because you can never be as powerful as I am.

Shelley's Reality: Despair because no matter how powerful you are, you will end up as "boundless and bare" sand.

The Sculptor's Mockery

In Ozymandias, the sculptor's mockery operates as a subtle yet powerful instrument of irony that undermines the tyrant's claim to eternal authority. Though the sculptor is

absent as a speaking presence, his art silently records and exposes the true nature of Ozymandias.

The line "*Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things*" foregrounds the sculptor's enduring agency. The word "stamped" suggests both artistic skill and a forceful imprint, implying that the sculptor has fixed the king's passions permanently in stone. The "*frown*," "*wrinkled lip*," and "*sneer of cold command*" are not marks of greatness but of cruelty and arrogance. By faithfully reproducing these expressions, the sculptor unwittingly - or perhaps deliberately - mocks the ruler, allowing future generations to see the despot's moral barrenness.

Shelley deepens this irony by distinguishing between power and perception. Ozymandias intended the statue to immortalize his glory, yet the sculptor has preserved his tyranny, not his majesty. Art thus becomes an ironic counterforce to political authority. While empires crumble, the sculptor's interpretation survives, converting royal propaganda into satirical testimony.

The mockery is further intensified when the sculptor's work is juxtaposed with the boastful inscription: "*Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!*" The arrogance of the words clashes sharply with the sculpted sneer and the surrounding desolation. This contrast suggests that the sculptor's art has outlived and effectively ridiculed the king's intention, transforming the monument into a monument of failure.

Therefore, the sculptor in Ozymandias functions as an agent of historical and moral irony. His silent mockery reveals that artistic representation, even when commissioned by power, can subvert authority by preserving truth rather than illusion. Shelley thereby elevates art as a force capable of exposing tyranny and outlasting temporal power.

Shelley notes that the sculptor "*well those passions read / Which yet survive.*" The sculptor understood the King's arrogance and carved it into the stone. Thus, the King is "*mocked*" twice: once by the artist who saw through him, and once by Time itself.

Meaning: The Great Leveler

Ultimately, the poem serves as a Memento Mori for political tyranny.

The Power of Art vs. The Power of Politics:

In Ozymandias, Shelley presents a cold, structural victory of Art over Politics. While political power is depicted as a self-deluded attempt at immortality, art is shown as the only medium capable of preserving "truth" - even if that truth is a critique of the ruler himself.

The Artist as the "Silent Assassin"

The most profound subversion in the poem is the role of the sculptor. Ozymandias commissioned the statue to glorify his reign, but the artist used the opportunity to stage a subtle rebellion.

The "Mocking" Hand: Line 8 contains the pivotal phrase, "*The hand that mock'd them.*" In the 19th century, "mock" meant both to copy and to ridicule.

The Power Shift: The sculptor "*read*" the king's passions (his arrogance and "*sneer of cold command*") so ac...

The Superiority of the "Word"

The final layer of irony is the Pedestal. Ozymandias used language to command the "*Mighty*" to despair at his works.

However, through the engine of irony, the words now serve a completely different master.

Contextual Hijacking: Art has the power to change the meaning of political statements over time. The king's words, "Look on my Works," now refer to the "nothing" that remains.

The Poet's Victory: By writing this sonnet, Shelley proves that his "*work*" (the poem) is more durable than Ozymandias's "*work*" (the empire). The poem acts as a second "*statue*," but one that is portable and immune to the "*lone and level sands.*"

The Narrator's Distance

The political power of Ozymandias is further diminished by how many "*filters*" it must pass through to reach us.

- The King (Original Power)
- The Sculptor (Interpreter of Power)
- The Traveler (Witness to the decay of Power)
- The Narrator/Poet (Curator of the story)

By the time the reader encounters Ozymandias, he is a fourth-hand anecdote. His political "voice" has been completely absorbed and silenced by the artistic framework of the traveler's tale.

Conclusion

In Ozymandias, P.B. Shelley transforms the sonnet from a lyric of harmony into a weapon of critique, using its very structure to dismantle claims of political permanence and absolute power. By subverting the traditional sonnet form - through an unstable rhyme scheme, a delayed volta, and an unresolved closure - Shelley mirrors the fragmented ruins of Ozymandias's empire. The poem's form thus enacts its meaning: structural disintegration becomes an analogue for historical decay.

Irony operates as the sonnet's sharpest edge. The sculptor's silent mockery, the king's vainglorious inscription, and the surrounding "*lone and level sands*" together expose the futility of authoritarian ambition. Shelley weaponizes irony not merely to ridicule a single tyrant but to universalize the lesson that power founded on arrogance is inherently self-destructive. The sonnet's compactness intensifies this irony, compressing vast historical collapse into fourteen lines of devastating precision.

Ultimately, Ozymandias demonstrates that poetic form is never neutral. Shelley reclaims the sonnet - traditionally associated with love and idealism - as a medium of political resistance and philosophical warning. By allowing structure, irony, and meaning to work in concert, the poem asserts the enduring power of art over empire. While kingdoms vanish into sand, the sonnet endures as a lasting testament to poetry's capacity to challenge authority and to speak truth across time.

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