



## Ozymandias

by Percy Bysshe Shelley

### In a Nutshell

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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).

### Why Should I Care?

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Why read this poem? As a sonnet, it has only fourteen lines, but in this limited space, Shelley explores a number of issues with enduring relevance. "Ozymandias" explores the question of what happens to tyrant kings, and to despotic world leaders more generally. As we all know, nothing lasts forever; that means even the very worst political leaders - no matter how much they boast - all die at some point. If Shelley were writing this poem now, he might take as his subject the famous statue of [Saddam Hussein](#) that was pulled down after the dictator was overthrown. Like the fallen statue in Baghdad, the broken-down statue of Ozymandias in Shelley's poem points to the short-lived nature of political regimes and tyrannical power.

But, Shelley doesn't just come out and say "nothing lasts forever" and "there is always hope." He writes a sonnet with a really cool rhyme scheme. Just try reading the poem out loud, and you'll see what we mean.