

Summary

The **narrator** tells us that he met a traveller who told him about two huge legs of a statue standing in the desert. (Notice the use of reported speech here. This distances the reader from the story giving a dream-like, mysterious quality to the poem.) Nearby, there's the broken head of the statue. He describes the expressions on the face showing a 'sneer' and 'cold command' (these expressions suggest a tyrannical ruler). The narrator remarks that the sculptor must have seen these expressions to create them, and they survive on the broken statue's face. (Notice the word-play on 'mocked'; as an artist you 'mock up' a sculpture but mock also means to make fun of.)

There is an inscription on the broken statue that gives his name, 'Ozymandias', this reveals that he thought he was the greatest ruler, 'king of kings' and then states that powerful rulers should look at his achievements and 'despair' at their own. (Notice the irony: he is saying that they must be unhappy about their own power and achievements, while his power and achievements have crumbled into dust and no one is listening!)

We are told that nothing else remains, either of the statue or the civilisation that created it. The sands stretch all around the 'wreck' – the broken statue. (Remember that sand is often used as a symbol for the passing of time.)



DEFINE IT!

antique – ancient, old

boundless – never-ending, limitless

colossal – huge, massive, vast

mighty – powerful

pedestal – stand for a statue

trunkless – without a body

vast – huge

visage – face

wrinkled lip – mouth curled into a threatening expression

DO IT!

What point do you think Shelley is making in this poem?



STRETCH IT!

Explain how Shelley uses irony to emphasise his key point.

Context

When Shelley was writing the poem, Egypt and the ancient world was a fashionable subject. Shelley was radical in his political thinking, and in this poem we see his political message that power is temporary and will crumble into dust just like this 'colossal wreck'.