

# ZIPTALES™

## Reading the Poem

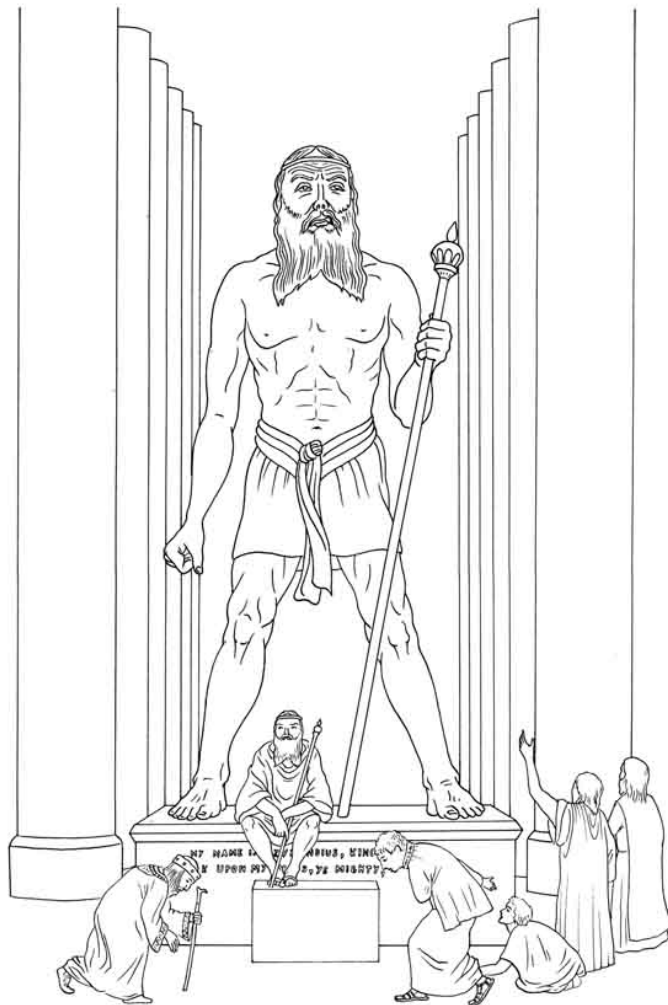
### Ozymandias

#### The Poet

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) was born in Sussex, the son of a wealthy aristocrat, Baron Shelley. He was educated at Eton and Oxford. However, he was unhappy at school, and became quite rebellious. He was finally expelled from university for publishing an essay arguing in favour of atheism.

In the same year (1811), he eloped with an heiress, Harriet Westbrook (16 at the time), whom he married in Edinburgh. Because he was of private means, he was able to continue travelling and writing. His fame gradually spread.

In 1814, his first marriage ended, and he eloped a second time, with Mary Godwin. The two left England, married and lived in Italy for the next few years. They were to have two children, though both of them died in infancy, to the terrible sorrow of the parents. Among the famous writers of the time with whom the Shelleys associated was Lord Byron. During one long wet summer on lake Geneva, Byron and the Shelleys undertook a competition to scare one another with ghost stories. Mary Shelley, after a nightmare, conceived of the idea of a man who creates a monster. The name of the man: Frankenstein. The novel would eventually become world famous.



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#### The Poet

Back in London again, the Shelleys mixed in literary society, and during this period, he produced the immortal '**Ozymandias**', written as part of a friendly competition with a friend on the theme of travel in foreign lands (a popular topic of the time).

In 1818, he left for Italy again. However, the tragedies that had intruded on his life took their toll, and his work became increasingly despairing. Mary had a miscarriage and a nervous breakdown, and his first wife drowned (back in England). One day, while returning from a yachting trip, a storm blew up, and all on the vessel (including the poet) were drowned.

Shelley is remembered as one of the greatest of the so-called Romantic poets – whose work celebrated Nature and individual destiny. He is famous for many works, but '**Ozymandias**' continues to be a major favourite.





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### The Poem

'**Ozymandias**' is a sonnet. That means that it is only fourteen lines long. Like all sonnets, the poem follows a strict rhyme scheme – **a/b/a/b/a/c/d/c e/d/e/f/e/f**. All lines are ten syllables long – in the traditional 'iambic' (soft/hard) pattern. It is considered one of the greatest of all literary challenges to write a meaningful poem in so few lines, with such a tight rhyme scheme. Only a few of Shakespeare's great sonnets, and this classic by Shelley, pass the test.

It tells an apparently simple tale. A traveller comes upon a ruin of a statue in the desert. It turns out to be the statue of a great king, whose 'sneer of cold command' is still evident on the 'shattered visage [face]'. On the base of the statue is the inscription: "**My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings: Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!**" Yet the statue lies in the middle of nowhere. Nothing remains of his long lost kingdom.

The theme of worldly pride is breathtakingly expressed in the contrast between the king's arrogant face and boastful inscription – and the fact that everything he believed he owned is gone. The underlying theme is of course the brevity of life, and the grim idea of mortality. Even the greatest king will die, and become nothing – the poem says. It is one of the great themes of life, and in this perfect poem, brilliantly expressed.

Why is the poem famous? Because it is about something so important – the theme of a short life and the inevitability of death – and so successfully evoked in just fourteen lines – that it has become one of the most celebrated of all poems.