Context – Ozymandias was written by Percy Bysshe Shelley, and was first published in January 1818.

Percy Bysshe Shelley – Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) was one of the major English Romantic Poets. Shelley was not particularly famous in his lifetime, but his popularity grew steadily after his death. Shelley was involved in a close circle of poets and writers, for example his second wife Mary Shelley (the author of Frankenstein) and Lord Byron. His poems have been influenced by a number of social and political movements since, particularly his theories on non-violence in protest and political action.

Ancient Egypt – Ancient Egypt refers to a civilization of ancient north-east Africa, along the lower reaches of the Nile River. At its peak, Ancient Egypt held both significant territory and power over the surrounding areas, including the Near East. Part of the success of the civilization has been attributed to the ability to adapt to the conditions of the Nile Valley for agriculture, the formation of military forces, and the influence of scholars and educators – all overseen by a ‘Pharaoh’ or ‘Emperor’.

Egyptian Ruins – A number of remnants of the Egyptian culture exist as ruins today. Each complex houses the tomb of a different Egyptian pharaoh, and in front of them lies the Sphinx. One of the largest (and most famous) of these is the Pyramid of Giza (just outside Cairo). The Valley of Kings is located opposite Luxor on the west bank of the River Nile, where pharaohs (including Ramses II) were mumified and buried in deep tombs along with sacred artifacts.

Coelacanth – Caesurae is a break in the rhythm within a line – Shelley does this at several points throughout the poem, each time to create significant effects. For example, the first break is after ‘Who said’ on the second line. This pause mimics the traveler’s short intake of breath before recalling the details of the scene. Another example comes after ‘Stand in the desert.’ The use of the full stop at this point reinforces the isolation of the narrator, Ozymandias.

Varied Verbs – Varied verbs are used to show the reader what Ozymandias was like as a ruler e.g. the verbs ‘frown’, ‘sneer’, ‘command’ make the reader consider Ozymandias as a tyrant-like ruler. This influences the reader to sympathy with the ruler’s fall from grace. Varied verbs are also used to show that the emperor’s power no longer stands in the way it once did, for example ‘shattered’, ‘stand’, ‘stretch’ show its decay and isolation.

Alliteration – Shelley uses the sounds within words to create harsh and soft enunciation, meaning that each line contains 5 stressed and 5 unstressed syllables. This creates a consistent rhythm across the poem – relentless like time.

Juxtaposition/Ozyman – The juxtaposition of contrasting vocabulary, i.e. ‘vast’ and ‘trunkless’, ‘Besiegers and Besieged’ – suggests that the statue is dethroned, or that it no longer stands in the way it once did for example ‘shattered’, ‘stand’, ‘stretch’ show its decay and isolation.

Form/Meter – The poem is a sonnet (it is in one stanza and has 14 lines) however it does not fit the rhyme scheme of a traditional sonnet. Some lines are split/separated by full stops. It is written in iambic pentameter, meaning that each line contains 5 stressed and 5 unstressed syllables. This creates a consistent rhythm across the poem – relentless like time.

Structure – The opening line and a half are the narrator’s words (up until the colon) at which point the traveller’s words make up the rest of the poem. This makes the message seem more objective – these aren’t the thoughts of the narrator, rather the musings of someone who has visited the place first-hand. The traveller is merely recalling what has been seen.

Fate – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Ozymandias - The underlying message is exceptionally bleak. Shelley doubtless intended to send a message to those in his contemporary society who abused positions of power and oppressed others – it won’t last forever.

Theme – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Trance – The ‘colossal wreck’ that has become of Ozymandias’ statue is a clear demonstration of the idea that everything, no matter how grand and vast it once was, is temporary, and will fall victim to the sands of time. Shelley’s underlying message is exceptionally bleak – in time, nothing that any of us will eventually matter.

Power and Oppression – Ozymandias’ power, although once substantial, is one attribute that has failed to stand the test of time – the surroundings of his ruins making his assertions of power seem ridiculous. His oppressive nature (“hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed”; literally in this case) to his knees. Conversely, the soft command. The harsh command, possibly to reflect the ruler’s harsh command. The traveller suggests that these features of the ruler remain impressed upon lifelike objects, even though the ruler and the statue are now dead. Line 11 gives more details of the king’s nature.

Analysis – The engraving on the pedestal gives an indication of the power that Ozymandias once had. Whoever had the statue commissioned (likely Ozymandias himself) believed that the remnants of his legacy would still intimidate visitors/observers far into the future. Line 1 is one of the most famous lines in poetry – “Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!” is a proud boast of his immense power. The imperative verb and the use of the exclamatory ‘despair’ lends sense of authority and animation.

Poems for Comparison

Charge of the Light Brigade

Ozymandias can be compared and contrasted with transience (COLB aims to create a positive memory of the soldiers)

London

Ozymandias can be compared and contrasted with this poem in the approach to the theme of power and oppression

Influences on the Poet

Shelley ordered a copy of Biblotheca Historica 1787, which contained a section on a statue of Ramses II. One of these, made in sitting posture, is the greatest in all Egypt, the measure of his feet exceeding seven cubits... This piece is not only commendable for its greatness, but admirable for its cut and workmanship, and the excellency of the stone. So great a work there is not to be discerned the least flaw, or any other blemish. Upon it there is this inscription – ‘Ramses, king of kings, if you would know how great I am, and where I lie, let me see my name in every word, every letter of mine.’ (p. 53)