

SHELLEY'S 'OZYMANDIAS' THROUGH HARAWAYAN POSTHUMANIST LENS

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34293/shanlax.9789361632587.ch030>

Abstract

Posthumanism challenges human-centric worldviews, emphasizing entanglement with non-human entities (nature, time, technology, animals). In *Ozymandias*, this lens reveals a critique of anthropocentrism through the interplay of human ambition, art, and nature's dominance. This article aims at Shelley's atheism and belief in nature's power which aligns with posthumanist ideas, making *Ozymandias* a natural fit for such analysis. The hybrid sonnet structure blends Petrarchan and Shakespearean elements, mirroring the tension between human ambition (structured form) and chaos (irregular rhyme). Posthumanism might see this as reflecting the instability of human constructs within a larger non-human world. The desert in this poem is not passive scenery but an active force that reclaims space, aligning with posthumanist ideas of a world where humans are not central but part of a larger ecological temporal network. The poem is narrated through a traveller's account, not *Ozymandias* himself—displaces the human ego. The king's voice is reduced to a crumbling inscription, suggesting humans are transient in a posthuman world where material and environmental forces (stone, sand) outlast us. This decentering image echoes posthumanist thinkers like Donna J. Haraway, who argues for multispecies or material interconnectedness. Hence, the statue in this poem reveals as a cyborg - hybrid of human ambition and non-human decay, compelled to 'stay with the trouble' of nature's indifference and embrace a multispecies world where human power is transient. This analysis, therefore, not only bridges Romanticism with posthumanism but also resonates with modern concerns like environmental crises, where human dominance falters against nature's enduring power.

Keywords: Cyborg. P B Shelley. Posthumanism. Nature. Romanticism. Donna J. Haraway

Posthumanism is a philosophical and theoretical approach that questions the humanist views on human centrality, agency and exceptionalism highlighting the level of interaction between humans and non-human subjects, technology and the environment (Braidotti, 2013). It criticizes anthropocentrism, challenges the distinctions between human, machine and nature, and considers the issues of impermanence, hybridity, and decentering of human power. *Ozymandias* (1818) by Percy Bysshe Shelley is a classic text which echoes the posthumanist theories due to its dismissal of anthropocentrism which also indicates the aspects of atheism and awe of the permanence of nature underlying the transitoriness of human works. The irony here is that *Ozymandias* thinks that his reign will be eternal but this is made absurd by the decay of the ruins, says that human-centred worldviews are false claims that the human agency is more important than ecological systems (Morton, 2010).

Shelley was a very outspoken atheist when such opinions were then in vogue as it can be seen in his writings such as *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811), which made him be expelled out of Oxford. The themes and imagery in his poem *Ozymandias* (1818) are greatly influenced by his atheism, especially in the themes and imagery he uses to criticize human

hubris, the mortality of power, which can be related to his refusal of the authority of God and the permanence of constructs. Although there is nothing directly to do with atheism, the poem is informed by a lack of faith in a divine power or eternal structure and renders the image of a monument of a deceased usurper and the apathy of the natural world.

Atheism in *Ozymandias*: Critique of Divine and Human Authority

- The statue of Ozymandias, a once-powerful ruler now ruined, can be viewed as a metaphor to the insignificance of bringing proclamation to an immortal power, which was a notion that Shelley linked not only to human tyrants, but also to religious structures of divinity. The main aspects that can be regarded as a sign of his atheism are:
- Denial of Eternal Power: The inscription of Ozymandias, which is the reply to the Eternal Dominance in his inscription, which is: Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!, boasts of the eternity which exists between religious texts and their claims of immortality and omnipotence. Atheism by Shelley rejects this eternality, and the image of the vast wreck and bare and empty sands used in the poem depicts the indisputable corruption of all creations, even God-created ones. This is in line with what Shelley holds about the material forces of time and nature that no power, whether that of a king or that of a god is beyond it.
- The Uncaringness of Nature to the Divine Providence: In the atheism of Shelley, nature is not mindful or ethical, unlike the religious accounts of a providential universe. The huge, unthinking wilderness in *Ozymandias* simply keeps engulfing the statue as it serves as a reminder of the force of nature over the human desire to achieve. It is a materialist outlook of Shelley, in which the course of nature, rather than the will of God, dictates life and enhances the environmental quality of the poem with the notion of the unchanging power of nature over human ego.
- This conversation sees the statue as a cyborg, a blend of human desire and non-human corruption, which must remain with the trouble of uncaring nature in a multispecies earth. In this interpretation, Shelley adds to the theme of environmental impermanence and ecological boundaries by positing the ruin of the statue as the result of material and natural processes as opposed to divine akin to the theme of environmental impermanence and ecologicality.
- Atheism and Nature in the Desert: The fact that the sands of the desert in the poem are described as boundless and bare is indicative of the atheist attitude of Shelley towards nature and the fact that nature has no divine system of morality. This echoes current ecological disasters where such phenomena as climate change or desertification are inflicted on the world regardless of human intentions, and anthropocentric beliefs of control are thrown into question. The fact that Shelley denies the existence of the divine overseer is one of the most striking elements of the poem indicating that the dominance of people, be it over nature or other beings, is temporary, which is repeated in modern environmental appeals to ecological humility.

- **Posthumanist and Atheistic Oversight:** The posthumanist perspective of the analysis that de-centers human exceptionalism and adopts a world of multispecies concurs with atheism of Shelley. Shelley is implicitly challenging human dominance over nature by rejecting the nature of divine hierarchies, and this view anticipates posthumanist notions of interdependence. The withering of the statue, in its tangle with non-human elements such as wind and sand, is a tribute to this atheistic materialism, in which nothing, neither human, divine, nor otherwise, is permanently in power.
- **Environment Critique of Hubris:** The Shelley atheism criticizes the hubris of believing in omnipotence, in the religious or political sense. In *Ozymandias*, this egotism is reflected in the vain hope of the statue trying to resist time that is comparable to the current environmental disasters where human overuse of the environment through a misguided notion of technological or industrial superiority actually causes ecological destruction. The bleak scenery in the poem gives the idea of a cautionary sign of what occurs when man turns a blind eye on his boundaries, and this statement is enhanced by the fact that Shelley rebuffed the ideas of divine rescue or intervention.
- **Call to Humility:** In refusing both divine and human pretensions to permanency, Shelley is promoting atheism as the theme of humility, which corroborates the call to remain with the trouble of natural indifference in the analysis. This humility is crucial in solving any environmental crisis where human limitations are recognized as the only way to co-exist well with the non-human world.

The Hybrid Sonnet Structure of *Ozymandias* and Posthumanist Reflections

The structure of *Ozymandias* (1818) by Percy Bysshe Shelley is a hybrid sonnet that combines features of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean models to emphasize the conflict that exists between human aspiration and the unpredictable and uncaring nature of the non-human world. This discussion examines how the form of the poem reflects on this tension and how the structure of the poem corresponds to posthumanist concepts of how human constructs are unstable in a more ecological and temporal framework.

Hybrid Sonnet Structure

The classical Petrarchan sonnet is made up of an octave (eight lines, usually rhyming ABBAABBA) and a sestet (six lines, common CDECDE or CDCDCD), with an insistence on a definite separation between situation and solution. The Shakespearean sonnet, in its turn, is structured in three quatrains and a couplet (ABABCDCDEFEGG) which makes it possible to have a rather narrative structure and contain an ironical remark, which is made at the end of the sonnet. *Ozymandias* is a synthesis of these forms, which takes a 14-line structure with an octave-sestet division (more akin to Petrarchan) but with an irregular rhyme pattern (ABABACDCEDEFEF). This hybridity brings out a structural conflict, which is reflected in the thematic tension between a formal ambition of *Ozymandias*; his effort to establish order and permanence in his monument and the disorderly destruction of nature.

Conflict between The Will of Mankind and Anarchy.

The reason why the poem has the structured form serves as the reference point to the human ambition since the disciplined structure of the sonnet of 14 lines represents the power of the sonnet maker to establish dominance using his own colossal Wreck (Shelley, 1818, line 13). The awkward rhyme pattern, however, brings a sense of anarchy, which is equally disruptive to the strict form just as the lone and level sands (line 14) are wearing down the statue of Ozymandias. This play symbolizes the inability of people to create order in the non-human world which is not under human jurisdiction. The form of the poem therefore reflects the disintegration of man-centered dreams because the structured sonnet is interrupted by anomalies that reverberate the superiority of nature.

Posthumanist Interpretation

According to the posthumanist viewpoint, the unstable human form of the human constructs is indicated by the hybrid sonnet form in a broader non-human universe. Posthumanism is a form of anthropocentrism that puts a focus on the agency of non-human beings such as nature and time (Braidotti, 2013). The crumbling form, the non-metric rhyme pattern in Ozymandias disrupts human-centric beliefs in permanence and control, indicating that human forms are momentary in the world of the non-human. This decentering is similar to the formal hybridity of the poem which is neither entirely Petrarchan nor Shakespearean: it is also resistant to fixed human categories and reflects the non-human forces that are more enduring than the ambition of Ozymandias (Morton, 2010). This infinite and naked desert (Shelley, 1818, line 13) therefore forms a posthumanist image of the unchanging agency of nature that has made human constructions insignificant ephemera.

The Ozymandias by Shelley follows a hybrid sonnet form to contrast human ambition, which is in the form of an organized structure of the poem, with the disorder of a disorganized rhyming pattern, denoting the eventual disintegration of human works. Such formal tension is compatible with the posthumanist concepts, demonstrating the precariousness of anthropocentrism in the context of a bigger non-human world. Making Shakespearean and Petrarchan aspects mix, Shelley puts the power of human authority into the limelight, providing a critique that is echoed in posthumanist demands to reconsider the human position in the ecological and time-temporal hierarchy.

The poetry makes it accessible and posthumanist due to the craft used by Shelley.

- Irony: The major irony, which is the boastful inscription of Ozymandias against the colossal Wreck, helps to highlight human futility. This is enhanced by posthumanist readings which mention the meaninglessness of nature in its enormity satirizing human ambition.
- Imagery: The decay of the world is painted in vivid sensory images such as two huge and stump-less legs of stone, shattered face, and endless and naked sands. Those images base the posthumanist perception of the constant presence of nature over human objects.

- Framing Device: The narrative frame (story of a traveller told to the speaker) of the poem isolates the voice of Ozymandias, where the instability of the human power is highlighted. This corresponds to the decentering of the human subject that is the concern of posthumanism.
- Alliteration and Sound: Words such as cold command and lone and level sands alliteration are used to help stress the tone and rhythm, which leaves the poem memorable and supports the non-human, wasteland image.

Historical Context

- Based on a genuine statue of Ramesses II, as recorded in other works such as the *Bibliotheca Historica* by Diodorus Siculus and the purchase of a bust of Ramesses in 1816 by the British Museum.
- Shelley composed it as a friendly rivalry with a poet called Horace Smith whose own Ozymandias sonnet was printed alongside it.
- Shows the Romanticism-craze of ruins, the sublime nature power, and arguments against political oppression (the same applies to the radicalism of monarchy and empire as viewed by Shelley).
- Egyptomania: The beginning of the 19th century was characterized by fascination with ancient Egypt across Europe, due to the campaigns of Napoleon and archaeological finds. The poem exploits this but in an inverted form in that it is not glory, but decay, which posthumanism can interpret as the victory of nature over manmade heritage.

An Interpretation of Haraway Key Ideas in Ozymandias.

The poem of the desert consuming human work is a reflection of the role of climate change which threatens human systems and thus calls on us to reconsider our place in a multispecies world thus, *stay with the trouble* (2016) which recommends instead of pursuing dominance or purity, embrace complexity and interdependence in a multispecies world. The statue, in all its rottenness, is forced to co-exist with the insensitivity of the desert, the imposed confrontation with the agency of nature.

- The tyranny of Ozymandias is an arrogant attitude of colonialism, which Haraway criticizes as a human approach to the world that does not take into account the agency of the non-human, so Cyborg concept- a hybrid form of human ambition and non-human degradation.

There stand two huge and stumpeless stone legs
In the desert... Close beside them,
on the sand, / Half sunk a shattered visage lies
Vice versa (2-4)

- Cyborg Reading: The statue is a cyborg, a combination between the human will (the power of Ozymandias, the art of the sculptor) and the non-human one (the stone, which is eroded by sand). Haraway cyborg does not subscribe to absolute human control since the decay of the statue reflects the contribution of nature in molding it.

The broken face is not entirely human or entirely rocky, which is a symbol of hybridity. this hybridity challenges the efforts of humanity to control nature, with the concept of cyborgs interfering with established categories to create changes presented by Haraway.

My name is Ozymandias; King of Kings;/ Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair! (10-11)

- Remaining with the Trouble Reading: The irony here (nothing remains of the “works”) is in line with the urge of Haraway to confront messy realities. We are left with ruins instead of a heroic king and it urges us to remain with the bother of human impermanence instead of pursuing imaginary glory. which is a harbinger of Haraway environmental ethics where we must come to terms with the power of nature in opposing human ambition.

“Nothing beside remains. Of that gigantic Wreck, unbound and naked round/
Round the decay/ The solitary and level sands stretch in a long line away (12-14)

- Multispecies Worldmaking Reading: The sands and time are not merely a setting, but also co-creators of the story of the poem. The multispecies lens by Haraway views the desert as dynamic and removes the human presence and idealizing its grandeur. The narrative of the traveller continues to decentre Ozymandias so that non-human forces (ruins, sand) have their voices heard; this desert makes us think about how non-humans can be used to construct narratives in Haraway and her examples of social beings working in multi-species (e.g., coral reefs).

And when Shelley dwells on the might of nature it renders Nature as a sublime power, at that point it coincides with the emphasis of non-humanity of Haraway. There romanticism is related to modernity.

Resonance with Modern Environmental Crises

The ecological crisis in *Ozymandias* (1818) by Shelley is not addressed directly as a modern environmental problem such as climate change or deforestation but is evoked with the help of the imagery and theme of the poem that find an echo in the modern ecological issues, where human superiority is under the influence of the power of nature. The fragility of human systems facing the ecological limits, reflected in the ruin of the statue, provides a sad commentary on such problems as climate change or deforestation or loss of biodiversity. This relation highlights the topicality of the poem to contemporary discussions of sustainability where it is imperative to switch to a non-anthropocentric approach towards nature and coexistence. The setting of the poem a large unchanging desert highlights the indifference of nature to human activities. The endless and naked sands continue long past the statue, as nothing can stop them despite what Ozymandias claims to possess. Such lack of concern portrays the autonomy of nature which is another central motif of environmental crisis wherein nature systems are too large to be controlled by humans.

Conclusion

The posthumanist perspective of Donna Haraway is used to interpret *Ozymandias* by Percy Bysshe Shelley as a strong response to human exceptionalism, presupposing modern appeals to reconsider our role in a multispecies world.

The statue, a cyborg mixture of human desire and rotting limestone, is a representation of the concept of blurred boundaries that Haraway (1991) introduces in *The Strange Paradise* whereby the fragmented visage of the statue displays the involvement of nature in reworking human will. The immensity of the desert, destroying the claim of *Ozymandias* of having Works and replacing them with the solitary and flat sands (Shelley, 2002, p. 294), does the multispecies worldmaking by Haraway (2016) and places non-human forces as an equalizer in the world-making process. The poem challenges a successful human story but asks us to remain with the trouble of our precariousness, which concurs with Haraway as she urges us to be humble in a world of confined agencies (Haraway, 2016). The argument is that *Ozymandias* is still a shrinker of anthropocentric accounts in our global village (Heise, 2008). The idea of that the statue is a cyborg provides a new way to understand *Ozymandias* and deepen the criticism of the power and permanence. The combination of Romanticism and posthumanism is a way to emphasize that the poem is timeless, and the challenges it addresses in the 19th century are relevant to the challenges of the 21st century. It welcomes the readers to re-think human ambition as not a process of seeking power but as a temporary episode in a bigger, non-human environment. In such a way, Shelley has created a prophetic piece of reflection on the role of the human in the greater ecological context as well as time.

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