

THE TRANSIENCE OF POWER AND HUMAN PRIDE IN PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY'S OZYMANDIAS: A LITERARY REFLECTION ON THE NATURE OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

Noni Andriani, Ahmad Laut Hasibuan

Fakultas Sastra, Universitas Muslim Nusantara Al-Washliyah

noniandriani@umnaw.ac.id

Abstract

Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem Ozymandias is not simply a story about an old statue in the desert it is a mirror that stares back at us humans thirsting for traces and fearing oblivion. This study reads Ozymandias as a meditation on the transience of power and human arrogance, as well as an invitation to reflect on the meaning of existence. Through a close reading of the text and a comparison with modern critical discourse, the study finds that Shelley writes with subtle irony. The king's claims of immortality turn into the silence of ruins, while language and art bear a meaning more enduring than worldly greatness. Using a qualitative descriptive approach focused on close reading and thematic analysis, this study explores how symbols, imagery, and irony work together to emphasize the existential idea that human endeavors to defy time ultimately reveal their own vulnerability. The results demonstrate two complementary principle first, that power and pride often lead to alienation and destruction second, that art and reflection can transform ruin into a source of wisdom. Through this interpretation, Ozymandias regains its relevance for today's readers it reminds us that a meaningful life is determined not by visible traces, but by a deep awareness of our limitations. This poem positions mortality not as a disability, but as a call to live more honestly and meaningfully.

Keywords: Human Pride, Reflection, Human Existence, Ozymandias, existentialism

Abstrak

Puisi Ozymandias karya Percy Bysshe Shelley bukan sekadar kisah tentang patung tua di padang pasir, melainkan cermin yang menatap balik kita manusia yang haus akan jejak dan takut akan kelupaan. Studi ini membaca Ozymandias sebagai meditasi tentang kefanaan kekuasaan dan kesombongan manusia, serta undangan untuk merenungkan makna eksistensi. Melalui pembacaan teks yang cermat dan perbandingan dengan wacana kritis modern, studi ini menemukan bahwa Shelley menulis dengan ironi yang halus. Klaim raja tentang keabadian berubah menjadi keheningan reruntuhan, sementara bahasa dan seni mengandung makna yang lebih abadi daripada kebesaran duniawi. Menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif yang berfokus pada pembacaan cermat dan analisis tematik, studi ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana simbol, citra, dan ironi bekerja bersama untuk menekankan gagasan eksistensial bahwa upaya manusia untuk menentang waktu pada akhirnya mengungkapkan kerentanan mereka sendiri. Hasilnya menunjukkan dua prinsip yang saling melengkapi: pertama, bahwa kekuasaan dan kesombongan seringkali menyebabkan keterasingan dan kehancuran; kedua, bahwa seni dan refleksi dapat mengubah reruntuhan menjadi sumber kebijaksanaan. Melalui interpretasi ini, Ozymandias kembali relevan bagi pembaca masa kini puisi ini mengingatkan kita bahwa kehidupan yang bermakna tidak ditentukan oleh jejak yang terlihat, tetapi oleh kesadaran mendalam akan keterbatasan kita. Puisi ini menempatkan kematian bukan sebagai suatu kekurangan, tetapi sebagai seruan untuk hidup lebih jujur dan bermakna.

Kata kunci: Kebanggaan Manusia, Refleksi, Eksistensi Manusia, Ozymandias, eksistensialisme

1. INTRODUCTION

Human civilization has always sought to preserve itself through achievement, power, and symbols intended to outlast human time. The desire for immortality arises from the conflict between human ambition and the reality that life is fleeting. Although people often believe that power or material success can guarantee their survival, history shows that all forms of glory fade, crumble, and are forgotten. In this context, literary works play a crucial reflective role, as through literature, images of human identity, mortality, and the search for meaning can be expressed poetically yet profoundly. This research builds on this idea, focusing on the themes of the impermanence of power and human arrogance in Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem *Ozymandias*. *Ozymandias* is a 14-line sonnet written by Shelley in 1818. The poem tells the story of a traveler who discovers a statue of a once-great king in a dry, lifeless desert. This sonnet combines the structures of two sonnet styles, Petrarchan and Shakespearean, creating a narrative that evolves from a physical description of the statue's remains to a philosophical irony (Imran et al., 2024). The statue remains only with two stone legs, devoid of a body, and a cracked face half-submerged in the sand. The irony arises from the inscription on the statue that reads, "Behold my work, strong one, and despair!" Although no work remains, only the emptiness of the desert is depicted. (Dixon et al., 2018) explain that the desert imagery in this poem conveys the concept of deep time, namely the vast span of time in an environmental context, indicating that human structures cannot withstand the forces of nature. Today, humans still harbor an ambitious attitude similar to the desire to gain status, build self-image, and create achievements to perpetuate their existence. According to (Tracy et al., 2023), forms of modern arrogance, especially haughty arrogance, are related to a sense of emptiness and vulnerability within the soul. Thus, this poem not only depicts the downfall of an ancient king but also reflects the living conditions of modern society as it continually strives to maintain its identity amidst the ever-changing world.

From a philosophical perspective, the poem *Ozymandias* is very consistent with the study of existentialism. Existentialism states that humans have no fixed meaning in life and must create their own meaning by understanding finitude, freedom, and death (Flynn, 2019; Webber, 2009). Several elements in this poem, such as the broken statue, the boundless and barren desert, the cracked face, and the irony of the inscription, serve as existential metaphors that demonstrate the fragility of human identity and ambition. These symbols also depict what Heidegger calls existence toward death and what Sartre considers the nothingness that drives humans to create authentic meaning (Martin Heidegger, 1962).

However, although numerous previous studies have addressed the aspects of power, history, and symbolism in this poem (Eragamreddy, 2024; Sultana, 2025), there are still gaps in the research that remain unfilled. First, previous studies have not systematically incorporated existentialist theory in analyzing elements within *Ozymandias*. Most studies have focused solely on moral vanity without understanding how the poem's symbols and structure shape its existential message. Second, no research has comprehensively connected the poem's existential message to the modern human situation, although the current phenomena of identity crisis, ambition, and emptiness have strong connections to Shelley's criticism. Third, a structural approach combined with existentialism has not been widely used, even though the poem contains many symbols suitable for analysis with this approach. Thus, *Ozymandias* is able to depict human existence and human arrogance in contemporary life by combining existentialist theory.

2. METHODOLOGY

The approach used is qualitative and uses a descriptive-interpretive design. (Creswell, 2018), qualitative research is the process of exploring and understanding the meaning produced by individuals or groups based on interpretive and contextual perspectives. This method was chosen because this study does not aim to collect numerical data. Instead, the research goal is to interpret the existential and philosophical meaning contained in the poem *Ozymandias* by Percy Bysshe Shelley. (Creswell, 2018), qualitative research emphasizes an in-depth understanding of phenomena through the analysis of text, symbols, and context. These sources are used as theoretical support and references to enrich the interpretation of the text. The data collection process is carried out using documentation techniques and in-depth reading, which are characteristic of qualitative literary research. (Creswell, 2018) explains that in qualitative research, data collection is done through textual and contextual engagement, direct engagement with the text to understand its meaning comprehensively. Three main stages were used to conduct the analysis:

a. Description

To gain a better understanding of the narrative and artistic structure of the poem *Ozymandias*, this stage focuses on explaining the elements present in the poem: theme, characters, symbols, imagery, and irony.

b. Interpretation

In this stage, the researcher seeks to understand the hidden meaning behind the symbols and irony found in the poem. Existentialist theory (Shao et al., 2021; Tietjen, 2023) and

the concept of romantic mortality (Erdem Ayyıldız, 2015; Sultana, 2025) refer to the interpretation process.

c. Explanation

In the final step, the results of the interpretation must be connected to contemporary literary criticism and existential philosophy. Here, Shelley's poem is seen as a philosophical reflection on human life, where egoism, power, and arrogance ultimately lead to death. The principles of analysis (Creswell, 2018) this process is carried out cyclically by reading, analyzing, and reflecting on the results to ensure that the meaning obtained is contextual, in-depth, and comprehensive.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

a. Intrinsic elements of the poem "Ozymandias"

The main theme of *Ozymandias* is the temporary nature of power, human pride, and the strength of time. Shelley shows that power is not eternal, human pride can ultimately lead to destruction, and time is stronger than mankind. This idea is clearly reflected in the line, "*Nothing beside remains*," which confirms that all of Ozymandias glory and power have completely disappeared. Symbolism is one of the most dominant intrinsic elements in *Ozymandias*. The broken statue symbolizes the collapse of power, the destruction of the king's ego, and human mortality. The desert represents the infinity of time, existential emptiness, and the power of nature over human achievements. The king's inscription, "*My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings*," symbolizes arrogance, the desire for eternal recognition, and the illusion of superiority. Meanwhile, the cracked face represents the human ego, authoritarianism, and the fragility of identity. The sculptor also has an important symbolic meaning because his artwork survives beyond the king's political power, suggesting that art can be more lasting than power and can immortalize the truth about a person. Shelley also uses strong visual imagery throughout the poem. For example, the line "*Two vast and trunkless legs of stone*" allows the reader to imagine a huge statue whose body has been destroyed, leaving only its enormous legs standing. Another example is "*The lone and level sands stretch far away*," which creates an image of a vast and seemingly endless desert. This imagery strengthens the atmosphere of desolation, emptiness, and destruction, emphasizing how completely Ozymandias' once-great empire has disappeared.

Irony is also one of the most important elements of the poem. Ozymandias proudly commands, “*Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!*” as if his achievements will last forever. However, the reality is that “*Nothing beside remains.*” The contrast between the king’s proud words and the complete destruction of his empire creates the greatest irony in the poem. His confidence in his eternal power becomes meaningless because time has destroyed everything he built. In terms of diction, Shelley carefully chooses words that carry strong meanings and contribute to the poem’s atmosphere. Words and phrases such as “*colossal wreck,*” “*boundless,*” “*bare,*” “*shattered,*” “*sneer,*” and “*cold command*” create impressions of destruction, emptiness, arrogance, and mortality. These carefully selected words help the reader understand the contrast between Ozymandias’ former greatness and his present condition. Although Ozymandias is a short poem, it contains several important characters. The Traveler functions as an observer and a seeker of meaning who introduces the story of Ozymandias to the reader. Ozymandias himself represents a man driven by power, arrogance, and ego. The sculptor represents an artist and creator who is able to capture and preserve the character of Ozymandias through art, even though the king’s political power has disappeared. The main setting of the poem is a vast desert. The desert represents the passage of a long period of time, silence, emptiness, and the power of nature to overcome human achievements. The fact that the remains of the statue stand alone in the desert emphasizes that Ozymandias’ empire has been forgotten and destroyed by time. Finally, the poem consists of fourteen lines and combines elements of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet forms. Its rhyme scheme does not strictly follow one traditional pattern, reflecting the poem’s complex structure. The structure also supports the poem’s movement from the description of Ozymandias’ greatness, to the destruction of his statue, and finally to the philosophical reflection on the temporary nature of human power and achievement.

b. The Case of “Technological Supremacy Doctrine” and Technological Ambition

A recent study by (Pérez-Urbina, 2025) introduced the concept of Techno-Supremacy Doctrine (TSD), the exaggerated belief that technology especially artificial intelligence (AI) can solve all the complex problems facing global society. This research found that technology leaders often combine positive narratives about technological progress with assertions that future dominance is inevitable, while ignoring or only briefly acknowledging the risks as insignificant. This demonstrates an overconfidence in one's own existence, such as Ozymandias' claim that his power would never be defeated, when in reality that power is unstable and still unclear. Significantly, after the launch of ChatGPT and other AI technologies, the narrative of technological dominance has intensified, but

criticism of AI systems has also intensified, highlighting the inequalities, biases in algorithms, and the social risks that arise from the assumption of technology's unlimited superiority. This phenomenon is similar to the story of Ozymandias, which shows how arrogant statements about the future are often accompanied by a much more complex and fragile reality.

c. The Collapse of Political Power

In today's world, we often encounter political leaders who cultivate an image of strength, unwavering power, and will be remembered forever. However, modern history shows that seemingly solid regimes can collapse quickly due to economic crises, popular demonstrations, or changes in the system. For example, the fall of several regimes in the Middle East during the Arab Spring demonstrated that power, thought to be permanent for decades, is actually fragile (Effendi, 2024). This aligns with Ozymandias' message no matter how powerful a ruler is, they are always subject to the changing times, and their glory can become the ruins of history.

d. The Collapse of Political Authority: The Case of Ferdy Sambo

Another significant case in Indonesia is that of Ferdy Sambo, who previously held one of the highest positions in the Indonesian National Police. His authority, influence, and institutional prestige reflected modern forms of political and organizational power. However, following the revelation of the murder case involving Brigadier Nofriansyah Yosua Hutabarat, Sambo's authority rapidly collapsed. His dismissal from the police force, his criminal conviction, and the subsequent loss of public trust illustrate how quickly institutional power can disappear. This phenomenon is strikingly similar to the symbolic destruction of the statue of Ozymandias. The inscription "King of Kings" made it seem as if his power would endure forever. However, all that remained were the ruins of the statue in the desert, symbolizing that time and reality ultimately overcome all forms of human domination. Similarly, in the case of Ferdy Sambo, a high position that once symbolized authority became a symbol of downfall due to the abuse of power. This demonstrates that power without integrity is a form of hubristic pride, that is, arrogance based on dominance and the illusion of superiority, rather than on moral values or personal authenticity (Tracy et al., 2023). From an existentialist perspective, this case demonstrates that human identity cannot be maintained solely through position, power, or social influence. As Webber (2009) explains, authentic meaning in life arises from an awareness of human limitations and responsibility for the choices made. When power is used as a means to maintain the ego and avoid existential limitations, destruction becomes an inevitable consequence. Thus, Ferdy Sambo's case is a vivid reflection of Shelley's

message that power is temporary, while moral integrity is a more enduring foundation than position or social status. Its relation to the symbols in Ozymandias:

Table 3.1 Relation to the symbols in Ozymandias

Symbols in Poetry	The Ferdy Sambo Case
Broken Statue	The collapse of position, power and reputation after the case was revealed.
King of Kings	A high position that creates the impression of having great authority and control.
Nothing beside remains	Loss of the honor and influence previously held.
Sneer of Cold Commad	Sikap otoritatif dan penyalahgunaan kekuasaan yang akhirnya membawa kehancuran.
Boundless and Bare	Time and legal process prove that no power is truly eternal.

e. False Immortality on Social Media

Many people today pursue symbolic immortality through social media popularity. They pursue followers, virality, and a lasting image. However, trends change quickly, platforms can disappear, and public attention can easily shift. According to a Hack Spirit review, many people now use social media to create their own image by sharing carefully curated content. Filters, lighting, and the right angles can enhance the look. However, reality is often less clear-cut than it appears on screen. Many people feel lonely, depressed, and even face life pressures they never reveal to anyone (Lachlan B.,2025). According to Hack Spirit, many people use social media as a way to escape from everyday reality. When life feels particularly difficult, whether due to stressful work, strained relationships, or financial instability, many people try to avoid problems by sharing seemingly happy moments on social media. The virtual world becomes a place of refuge, not a place to confront them. Digital culture demands that everyone appear happy, successful, and accomplished (Lachlan B.,2025). According to social psychologists, this pressure makes people afraid to show their vulnerable side. They only present things that appear perfect, but behind the scenes, there's a lot of effort and struggle that goes unseen. Like the once-magnificent statue of Ozymandias, then forgotten, a digital identity that seems grand today could vanish

tomorrow. This demonstrates that the human desire for recognition and immortality is often elusive.

f. Existential Meaning for Modern Humans

Ozymandias' message in these three examples still seems highly relevant: technological dominance is not absolute, political power is not eternal, and digital popularity and identity are not eternal. This poem suggests that arrogance and the desire to live forever through power or success in this world will inevitably be met with the reality that time passes and everyone passes away. Wisdom emerges when humans begin to recognize their own limitations, adopt humility, and seek the meaning of life not through mastery, but through an understanding of themselves and the values of human life. Therefore, Ozymandias is not only a poem about an ancient king, but also a mirror for modern humans who still struggle with ego, power, and the search for meaning in a world that is constantly changing.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The existential message conveyed by the poet through the intrinsic elements of the poem "Ozymandias" is that decline is inevitable and eternal power is merely an illusion. Through images such as the irony of the inscription, the corpse, the symbol of the broken statue, and the contrast between ostentation and emptiness, Percy Bysshe Shelley conveys a powerful reflection or depiction of human arrogance. The poem also illustrates that no matter how powerful, influential, or dominant a person is, time will eventually bury all success in the dust. The broken statue serves as a reminder that arrogance built on power and dominance will not last forever. This existential message is also clearly visible in modern life. In today's society, people still desire recognition, a prominent role, and a lasting memory, whether through government positions, social standing, business success, or online presence. However, monuments like Ozymandias demonstrate that many forms of modern success are only temporary. Leaders lose influence, popularity fades, companies go bankrupt, and digital trends disappear quickly and easily. This reality demonstrates the poem's central idea the fragile uncertainty of human life, and how lasting impressions are often mere illusions. Ozymandias remains remarkably relevant today, reminding us that true meaning in life comes not from arrogance or attempts to dominate, but from humility and an understanding of our own limits. By recognizing that power is temporary, one can live more consciously and with greater peace. Shelley's poem ultimately asks readers to consider, not how to be remembered forever, but how life is meaningful while they are still alive.

5. REFERENCES

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