Single Poem Essay

The poem ‘Ozymandias’ is all about an “antique land” and the ancient ruler called “Ozymandias” as referred to in the title, who described himself rather arrogantly as “King of Kings”. Shelley presents themes of war and conflict through Ozymandias as he is presented as a ruthless ruler. The poem is an anecdote with a message that even though something seems great (like Ozmandias’ empire) it doesn’t necessarily last forever. Shelley might also want us to feel happy the reader with they already have and shows this through ‘Ozymandias’ ambition for more, eventually destroying what he already had.

In the poem the persona wants the reader to know about the “two vast and trunkless legs of stone” which stand in the desert and have been abandoned, perhaps to suggest that no matter how powerful and mighty you are in life, once you are dead and have been buried you too will be forgotten. Despite being “king of kings” and the arrogance that this assumes, the once great and mighty ruler has been abandoned to the elements and nature. A desert is a dry, barren land, so it is inevitable that at some point the statue will be destroyed and diminished. With the adjective “shattered visage” describing how the features are no longer fearful, as they once were in life. The alliteration in “cold command” and the use of the facial expression in the verb “sneer” implies that Ozymandias was a difficult, unlikeable and strong presence in life. However, Shelley uses the context of the ancient Egyptians to show us that any regime which interprets itself as being bigger than or better than another is liable to ruin and corruption. Shelley was writing this poem (perhaps) as a warning to others in government or positions of authority to be careful of their intentions and habits, as he was seen as a ‘radical’ in his lifetime, meaning that he was willing to stand up and go against the mainstream ideas or popular ideas of the time period.

Another example where radical thinking is prevalent can be seen in the final line with “level sands stretch far away.” Maybe this sibilant phrase could suggest that emptiness is all that will follow the desire for power. By using words like “colossal” and “boundless and bare” Shelley is emphasising the lack of any focus on the now deserted rulers’ statue.