



COMPARISON OF *MY LAST DUCHESS* AND *OZYMANDIAS*

100% Essay Sample

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Ozymandias and My Last Duchess both explore how the relationship between hubris, power and truth is symbolised by two tyrants' commissioned works of art. Percy Bysshe Shelley presents his vision of Ramases' statue, a 'colossal wreck', while Robert Browning explores a Duke's view of his own self-importance through a fresco painting of his wife.

Shelley's 'Ozymandias' begins as a framed story about a non-specific time and place, '[an antique land](#)'; clearly this poem is not based on personal experience, but the recounts of stories and of books read about 'antique lands' such as Egypt; this structural feature creates a sense of distance and obscurity about Ozymandias because we are thrown into a 'vast' and empty space which reflects the obscurity of the title, 'Ozymandias' – the Greek name for Ramases II; it seems as though Shelley may have chosen this name precisely because it may not have been well-known to the general public, but only to those who studied Greek; The multi-layered story and Greek title appear to drive home the emptiness of Ramases' boasts and how, in the grand scheme of time and nature, tyrannical power only lasts for a fleeting moment.

In contrast, Browning's 'My Last Duchess' creates surprise and drama by beginning in media res, forcing us to catch up with the speaker; the reader 'stumbles' upon a crucial moment where the Duke begins to reveal his troubling sense of reality. His first line, '[That's my last duchess on the wall](#)', exudes an unsettling sense of objectification; the possessive pronoun, 'my', is repeated in various forms throughout the poem and becomes a revealing trait of the Duke's possessive nature, an expression of his inherent obsession with power; additionally, his second line, '[looking as if she were alive.](#)', introduces the subjunctive mood, indicating he takes pleasure in imagining her alive, yet, ironically, suggesting she is dead, which is echoed by the ironic terminal caesura after 'alive'; his power is expressed in the pleasure he gains by controlling her through death and the representation of that control through his fresco painting of her.

Both poets appear focused on imitating natural language through a combination of (partial) iambic pentameter and enjambment, with undertones of irony. In Shelley's case, the speaker's blasé tone reflects the loss of grandeur in Ramases' '[shattered](#)' empire. The unimpressed conversational style also seems to emphasise the irony of observing such 'vast' yet 'half sunk' remnants of a once powerful ruler, which was meant to make the '[mighty... despair](#)', but now appears so helpless against the backdrop of time and nature. Unlike Browning, however, Shelley appears to employ a higher concentration of adjectives, such as '[half sunk... wrinkled... cold... lifeless](#)' in an effort to persuade us to a negative view of Ramases and that which he represents: empire and tyranny. Shelley believed that poetry is the best teacher of morals and his moral here appears to be about how tyranny and power will be wiped away by time and nature.

Browning's Duke also speaks naturally; for example, he says '[she smiled](#)' but she gave everyone '[much the same smile](#)': a '[trifling](#)', placing no special importance on his 'gift' to her - his '[nine-hundred-years-old name](#)'. He imagines she may have been unfaithful to him with the painter, Fra Pandolf, despite acknowledging his '[hands /worked busily a day](#)' to finish the fresco painting; there was no chance of infidelity, but, in his perception of reality, he felt she did not place him above others so he '[gave commands / then all smiles stopped together](#)'. Presenting such reasonable and matter-of-fact logic for killing her emphasises his cold and sinister mindset but because he has wealth, power and status, he is untouchable; Browning seems to be pointing out how power shields tyrants from accountability, and how this seems to allow them to construct a perspective of moral truths that is different from ours.

Shelley argued that the poet creates a broad vision that transcends his time and place, to create a dialogue with past and future generations. It appears that he has used the sonnet form for exactly this reason; to show how poetry can bring order to the





disorder of life, by using the lessons of the past to teach those of the present and future of the futility of tyranny; the imperative, 'look on my works ye Mighty and despair' embodies this message in the most ironic way - Shelley wants present and future tyrants to look at what befell powerful empires of the past and despair at how they all became lost in time.

In contrast, Browning's 'My Last Duchess' is often taken as 'the definition' of the dramatic monologue form; it creates a narrative-driven poem that takes us on a journey of a downward psychological spiral into the warped mind, psyche and soul of one of the most evil characters in English poetry, yet he speaks in iambic pentameter, rhyming couplets and exudes an unshakeable sense of confidence in his logic; on finishing reading the poem, our perspective of the objectiveness of truth becomes questionable and this is possibly as Browning intended the effect to be.

Ultimately, both poets want us to examine the reality of truth; Shelley uses the desert and time to teach us that nature and time overcome tyranny; he was a deep believer in the equality of men and so his overall point may be to work towards equality as a legacy worth leaving behind. Browning wants us to beware of apparent objective rationality, maybe especially those told by the powerful, whose view of truth and rationality may be different to ours.

