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The Strength of Time, Nature and Humanity

Percy Shelley and Thomas Hardy both write about the vulnerability of man to the authority of time and nature. They both speak of manmade objects that crumble and fall to these formidable forces when challenged by them. Shelley and Hardy lived in different times, nearly one hundred year apart, Shelley during the Romantic period and Hardy during the modern years when human technology began to rapidly take off. Shelley seems to have written his poem with an introspective view that followed his well known beliefs in the spiteful nature of man and how harsh life can truly be. He wrote Ozymandias near the end of his life when he had lost relations with his father, fallen in and out of love with two wives and lost all but one of his children (Reiman, pg. 743- 744). Hardy on the other hand, wrote more about societal issues and the workings of fate within people’s lives. He wrote a lot about the ironies of life and believed these were evidence that there could not be a benevolent God (Gibbon, pg. 1852). You can get a sense of this in “The Convergence of the Twain,” which highlights the vulnerability of human construction to the awesome force of nature. Both the poems are a testament to the fragility of humanity in the hands of time and against the force of nature.

The sound of a poem is made of many different things working together. Ozymandias is written in the form of a sonnet; however it deviates from the standard rules of sonnets. First, the end rhyme scheme is ABABA CDC EDE FEF; these breaks in the rhyme seem to indicate different parts of the story. During the first five lines (ABABA) the poem opens with a traveler telling a tale, then the next three (CDC) tell of the sculptor creating the statue. This is followed by the “EDE” reciting the words engraved on the pedestal, and the last three lines (FEF) describe the dilapidated remains of the statue. Hardy uses a much different style. He uses numbered triplets (single rhyme tercets). The end rhymes are AAA BBB CCC DDD EEE FFF GGG HHH AAA CCC EEE. Each one is like its own little poem, but you can tell it is still a continuation of the last stanza. The whole poem flows there is no real breaking points determined by the form. The next part of the sound I looked at is the meter. In Hardy’s poem there was no regular meter that I found. He seemed to make the line whatever meter it took to make the last word of the sentence stressed. The first two lines of every stanza make a very rhythmic sound while the last sentence, because it is so much longer, sound more awkward but it still has faintly the same rhythm. In Shelley’s poem this part was confusing to me because the meter was irregular in one line and it was hard for me to decipher weather Ozymandias had three, four or five syllables (it has four). Each line has ten metric feet and for the most part is in iambic pentameter but in line 12 it deviates. The first foot and the foot after the period in this line switches from iambic to trochaic. The switch is put after the period to accentuate the pause created by the period. This brings me to the other pauses in the poem, the first of which is in the second line. This pause acknowledges the difference in speaker; it goes from the poet to the traveler here. The second pause, in line 3, adds dramatic effect, while transferring from the broad scene to the specific details of the vision. In Hardy’s poem the pauses are mostly at the ends of lines adding more the constant rhythm. He often puts a pause in the middle of the third line, which complements the rhythm. This rhythm is almost like a rhythm I would here from a Jazz bass. The specific words and letters used in the poems also affect the way it sounds. In Ozymandias the words that stand out have hash alliteration like: “**s**unk and **sh**attered,” “**co**ld, **co**mmand,” “**st**amped…,” “**b**oundless and **b**are.”(Shelley, pg.768) These sounds emphasize the lifelessness of the statue and the harshness of time. In Hardy’s poems he cause the meter to stress important words like the end rhymes or when he listed things the stressed part would be the descriptive word. This caused those words to stand out, so to emphasize their importance. For example “grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent,” and “bleared and black and blind.”(Hardy, Pg. 1878) In both poems the sounds help to show the reader just how much of the greatness and vanity of these masterful creations of humanity remains after time and nature run their course. When put all together the sounds of a poem contribute to the tone the author wants the reader to hear.

In poetry you can generally get a sense of how the poet feels by the way they write, this is called the tone. In Ozymandias the tone that is set by Shelley changes from part to part. The first three lines have a tone that is full of awe. The traveler is opening his story and drawing in the listener, using words like “…vast and trunkless…” to create a feeling mystery that leaves you wanting to know more (Shelley, pg. 768). The pause that follows this builds the tension; in theater it is called a “pregnant pause” meant to capture the attention of your audience. The second part, lines 4-8, is critical and reproachful. It speaks of the sculptors ability to capture the “…wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,” that is on the face of Ozymandias, criticizing his vanity (Shelley, pg. 768). The last part is more of sorrowful reflection. On the Pedestal at the bottom of the statue is the words of Ozymandias and his challenge for the rest of the world to match his greatness, while the pedestal now sits in a sea of sand, wore down and almost erased by time. Hardy’s tone is much the same, critical and almost mocking, but his refers to the general vanity of man that lead to the creation of this massive ship. He also brings in the inevitability of fate, bringing the iceberg and the ship together. The first five stanzas refer to the ship sitting on the bottom of the sea, very dismal and bleak. All the opulence lost, swallowed by the sea, very mournful. Then in the next half of the poem he speaks of the workings of fate which give off an ill feeling of foreboding. The phrases he uses to describe fate, such as: “The Immanent Will” “intimate welding” or “the Spinner of the Years,” creates an omnipresence which adds to the foreboding feeling (Hardy, pg. 1878).

Poetry is a type of creative expression, the words that are used generally have meaning behind them and phrases, sentences and stanzas they create are meant to send a message. For Ozymandias you get a vision of a man in a tavern (or somewhere public) approached by this nomad. This nomad tells the speaker a story of a king who once thought he was on top of the world, a king who world is nothing but this lone statue in a sea of sand. Shelley uses many grand words (“antique”, “vast”, “visage”) to build up the greatness of the statue and then counters with “broken” words (“decay”, “colossal Wreck”, “boundless and bare”) to contrast what was with what is (Shelley pg. 768). The traveler does not approve of Ozymandias because he describes the face of the statue with words like, “sunk”, “shattered”, “wrinkled”, “sneer”, and “cold” (Shelley, Pg 768). Hardy does the same things with his diction. He creates the images he wants you to see by using words that stick out. The words he uses are in between plain and fancy, so the poem is still easy to read but it retains the elegance befitting a poem about the Titanic. He contrasts what the ship was to what the remains have become. He uses words like “opulence”, “gilded”, “smart”, and “grace” to describe the ships magnificence (Hardy Pg. 1878). He uses words like “creature of cleaving wing” and “sinister mate” to personify the ship and iceberg (Hardy pg 1787). This helps the reader to connect the vanity he criticizes to the ship by making the ship a creature. Hardy also personifies fate as the “Spinner of the Years,” or as a great unseen force forever observing the world. He wants want to remind us of how much vanity, pride, and the power of nature played a part in this disaster and like the statue in the desert human creations are still at the mercy of this Spinner (Hardy pg. 1787).

The speaker in both poems seems to be the poet. Shelley sets his poem up as a description of a scene and then a reflection of that scene. To show us the scene he recites a story he once heard, he uses a second hand account to make the moral he is trying to get across more legitimate, rather than preachy. Hardy is the poet reflecting on the disaster of the Titanic. He describes the ship at the bottom of the ocean and then begins to describe the events leading up to the crash. They both seem to be speaking to society. They are addressing no one in particular, but they want humanity in general to hear what they are saying. The purpose of their poems is to get a moral across. Shelley is telling people that all great things, even a King of Kings, will see an end. Hardy is telling people that no matter how great man builds his creations fate will always determine the outcome and nothing man can build is immune to the powers of nature.

Time and nature have always found a way to change the flow of the life of man. Man and nature continue to dance this perilous dance that they have been dancing since the beginning of time and these are two poems are depicting casualties of their fatal attraction. All throughout history there have been times when the heights of civilization have been brought down by nature; by droughts, storms, and other catastrophic events. Perhaps it is fate and what will be will be, I think what these two poets are trying to remind us of are our limits. Pride and vanity can be very costly flaws in which to indulge. On the other hand, I think man should strive for progress. I think that what could be inferred is not that man should not attempt to create new things but to exercise a touch of humility and a little respect for the forces that work around us.

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