

On the Appropriation of Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias"
in AMC's *Breaking Bad*

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It seems fair to attribute at least part of the success of AMC's TV show *Breaking Bad* to the resonance of its main character, Walter White (played by Bryan Cranston), with viewers. Walter is a sort of "everyman" in that he experiences many social strains that make him relatable—particularly for an audience situated in, or gradually emerging from the Great Recession (Osborne 102). This is an important period of time to consider as *Breaking Bad* ran from 2008-2013 while the Great Recession officially lasted from 2007-2009. The Great Recession marked high rates of unemployment, reductions in spending, pessimistic stock market and housing price expectations, and general monetary constraints (Hurd n.p.). An audience enduring the effects of the Great Recession is inevitably more likely to sympathize with some of the social strains that afflict Walter White. The need for financial stability and established autonomy brings Walter—an obedient, unimposing "straight" (as Jesse calls him in "Pilot") high school teacher—to begin manufacturing and selling methamphetamine. Walter laments his social strains in season two, episode three:

My wife is seven months pregnant with a baby we didn't intend. My fifteen-year old son has cerebral palsy. I am an extremely overqualified high school teacher. When I can work, I make \$43,700 per year. I have watched all of my colleagues and friends surpass me in every way imaginable, and within eighteen months I will be dead. ("Bit By a Dead Bee")

Many can relate, in some capacity, to the social strains that affect Walter. David R. Koepsell and Robert Arp explain that, in some ways, “we are all Walter White”:

Breaking Bad emerged on the airwaves at a critical time in American history. Deep in a never-end[ing] recession, losing confidence with our technical and innovative prowess worldwide, outpaced by competitors, and nervous about the future and what we leave the next generation, we are all Walter White. (Koepsell vii)

It is largely Walter’s relatable everyman status that makes his arc of transformation into shrewdly arrogant Heisenberg so intriguing. This transformation “from Mr. Chips to Scarface,” as creator, writer, producer, and director of *Breaking Bad* Vince Gilligan calls it, seems to suggest *it could happen to anyone* under certain social strains (Gross n.p.).

As Walter White increasingly transforms from relatable everyman to overzealous tyrant, *Breaking Bad* uses Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ozymandias” both implicitly and explicitly. Partly functioning as a marketing technique to draw attention to the show, the appropriation also links *Breaking Bad* to the classic narrative Shelley’s poem remains rooted in—tyrannical hubris climaxing in devastation. Walter, particularly from the beginning of season five to the show’s end, evokes the tyrannical aspirations of invincibility and arrogance of Ozymandias himself as represented in Shelley’s poem. Ultimately, the foolish vanity and

overzealous aspirations of both Walter and Ozymandias result in a destructive path culminating in each figure's demise.

Background: Shelley and his Poem

Interestingly, Percy Bysshe Shelley was no stranger to social strains. Though financial insecurity was not an issue, Shelley experienced a variety of misfortunes stemming from the displeasure of his parents, University, society, and elsewhere. An eccentric personality in his youth earned him the nickname "Mad Shelley." He was expelled from Oxford University for writing a pamphlet entitled "The Necessity of Atheism" (Daiya 154). His first wife, Harriet Westbrook committed suicide (Johnson 3). He remarried before writing his classic Egypt-inspired "Ozymandias."

In 1816, Italian explorer Giovanni Battista Belzoni excavated a fragment weighing over seven tons of the head and torso of a Ramesses II statue from Thebes, Egypt. The British Museum soon announced its acquisition of the statue, which accounts for part of Shelley's inspiration for "Ozymandias" (Daiya 155). The name Ozymandias is a Greek translation of "cUser-macat-rec," which is the Egyptian praenomen for the pharaoh better known as Ramesses II (Rodenbeck 122).

With the news of the excavated statue a hot topic at the time, Shelley and his friend (also a poet) Horace Smith engaged in a friendly competition. Likely focusing on the epitaph ascribed to Ramesses II by Diodorus Siculus, which was so well known it "had become virtually a commonplace in the romantic period," each writer was to produce a sonnet on the subject of Ozymandias (Parr 34). Smith wrote a

forgettable sonnet titled, “On a Stupendous Leg of Granite, Discovered Standing by itself in the Deserts of Egypt, with the Inscription Inserted Below.” On the other hand, Shelley wrote the classic “Ozymandias,” which was published only a few weeks later in January of 1818 in Leigh Hunt’s *The Examiner*:

I met a traveller from an antique land
 Who said: “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
 And on the pedestal these words appear:
 ‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
 Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

The obscured narration of the poem is enigmatic and drawing, as the initial first-person speech is almost immediately shifted to dialogue from a different person (perhaps equally enigmatic, a “traveller from an antique land”). William Spanos

notes that shift provides for a “framework of a contemporary conversation,” which engages the reader (Spanos 14). The narrator describes a once mighty tyrant arrogantly declaring his power and demanding others observe at his works. The King presumably ordered the sculptor to create a giant statue representing his enduring power (Edwards Recommended n.p.). The great irony, however, is that the tyrant has nothing to show for his power. Instead of “works,” there are only ruins—fragmented remains of what once was in a vast and empty desert.

Furthermore, the message comes from a distant traveller—not the ancient king. This narrator thus renders the king even less commanding. As Krishna Daiya writes, this distanced narration “absolutely undermines his power” (Daiya 156).

On another level of irony, the statue’s “frown,” “wrinkled lip,” and “sneer of cold command” illustrates a once-powerful figure, but also speaks to the sculptor’s skill in representing the tyrannical vanity of the subject (Edwards Masterplots n.p.). Of course, while the “sneer of cold command” remains, the ruler obviously no longer commands anyone (Edwards Recommended n.p.).

Appropriating “Ozymandias”: Walter White and Beyond

Particularly from season five until *Breaking Bad*’s end, the increasing tyrannical aspirations of invincibility and arrogance of Walter invoke Shelley’s poem. Yet, it is not just Walter White who seeks undying legacy, as *Breaking Bad* itself does as well. AMC released a teaser trailer two months before the final eight episodes of the show were scheduled to start. The trailer features a voiceover from

lead actor Bryan Cranston (Walter White), reciting Shelley's poem in full. Various video clips of settings accompany the reading from the show, none of which include a single person. Over the final shot, Cranston reads, "Nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away." The camera slowly pulls back in the middle of a New Mexico desert, reminiscent of the "boundless and bare" and "lone and level" sands in Shelley's poem. Walter White's signature hat comes into view in the foreground, sitting in the middle of an otherwise empty desert, recalling the lone wreck of statue in Shelley's poem. The trailer provides a narrative framework for how viewers should watch the concluding episodes of the show, as the allusion to "Ozymandias" indicates a climactic moment for Walter White. Thus, *Breaking Bad* uses Shelley's poem as a kind of marketing technique that simultaneously invites the audience to ask, predict and watch how Walter White will ultimately fare and be remembered, and how *the show* will be remembered as well.

Moreover, the third to last episode in the final season of *Breaking Bad* is, in fact, titled "Ozymandias," and marks the beginning of the end for Walter's seeming invincibility. In the episode, Walter's lack of invincibility is actualized as he is *finally* powerless in a sequence of cascading loss. In a vicious turn of events, his brother-in-law is murdered right in front of him by a group of neo-Nazis. In horror, he falls to the ground resulting in an uncanny resemblance to Shelley's line describing a "half-sunk shattered visage." Following this tragedy, the neo-Nazis dig just four shovel-fulls of dirt before finding all of Walter's buried money. As Donna Bowman of A.V. Club acknowledges, the swift find accentuates just how quickly and easily one can go

from “having everything to having nothing” (Bowman n.p.). In just seconds, Walter goes from being so powerful to powerless, echoing the king’s demise to ruins in Shelley’s poem.

After the gas tank of his car is shot in a barrage of gunfire, Walt is left in the desert with only a miniscule fraction of the money he had accumulated. As he must walk through the desert on foot seeking refuge, The Limeliter’s “Take My True Love by the Hand” plays. The song repeats the lyrics, “say goodbye to everyone, goodbye to everyone.” After losing his brother-in-law, money, and car, the song fittingly comments on Walter’s losses and foreshadows the final estrangement of his family as well.

Once he returns home and engages in knife fight with his wife, his son contacts the police, leaving Walt alienated by his own family. As a result, Walter is forced to leave, and takes his infant daughter with him. When he stops at a public bathroom to change her diaper, she utters her first words, “mama.” This visibly pains Walter, as it seems he is unwanted by absolutely everyone (except for punishment reasons). At the end of the episode, he retreats to utter isolation in the wilderness, removing himself entirely from society. As a result, he loses his identity—or at least prominence—which functions as an ironic juxtaposition for a man so chiefly concerned with his reputation and mightiness. This irony is comparable to the irony in Shelley’s poem, which leaves a once arrogantly powerful force with nothing to show for his works but rubble (“Ozymandias”).

In the episodes leading up to “Ozymandias,” Walter White increasingly echoes the arrogant, merciless, power-hungry sentiments in Shelley’s poem. I will detail some of these key scenes in chronological fashion:

Even as early as the first episode of season five, Walter exhibits such intense vanity it could feasibly be considered a God complex. After damaging all police evidence with an elaborate magnet scheme, Walter dismisses the concerns of his partner, Mike. “Untraceable salvage, all of it,” he claims. His partner responds, “I’m supposed to take that on faith? Why? How do we know?” With a slow, arrogant smirk, Walter retorts, “Because I said so” (“Live Free or Die”).

Early on in the series Walter attempts to justify selling meth to his partner, Jesse, noting that he is not in the meth business, but the money business. Later however, in episode six of season five Jesse wants to quit and get out of the business with the money they’ve made. Jesse recalls what Walt once said and asks him, “because when it comes down to it, are we in the meth business, or the money business?” Walt eventually responds, “neither. I’m in the empire business” (“Buyout”). The scene brings to mind the utter desire for almighty, commanding power in Shelley’s poem.

In the following episode (seven), Walter prompts a competing drug lord, “You know who I am. Say my name.” The drug lord, after a moment of realization, responds, “You’re Heisenberg,” which is Walter White’s alias. Walter responds, “You’re goddamn right” (“Say My Name”). This scene particularly evokes Ozymandias’ “sneer of cold command” and the arrogant hubris implied in the line, “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings.”

Perhaps the most absurd of these “echo scenes” is when Walter’s DEA agent brother-in-law finds out what Walter has become (but doesn’t have enough evidence to make an arrest). In shock, his brother-in-law says to Walter, “I don’t even know who you are.” Walter responds in a slowly drawn-out arrogant tone, “If that’s true, if you don’t know who I am, then maybe your best course, would be to tread lightly” (“Blood Money”). Even in the face of the DEA, Walter’s outrageous hubris shines through, echoing the notions of vainglorious invincibility in Shelley’s poem.

Inspiration for Shelley’s “Ozymandias”

By examining certain scenes, it is evident that *Breaking Bad* was inspired to use Shelley’s classic poem. Exploring sources of inspiration for Shelley’s poem helps to provide a sense of timelessness of such a classic narrative.

Popular belief dictates that Shelley was inspired by the statue he saw at the British Museum (D’haen 108). However, this is untrue. While Shelley was certainly inspired by it, it seems he never saw the statue in person. Shelley could never have seen the sculpture unless he had travelled to Egypt to see it before he wrote his poem. This event is highly unlikely as there is no record of his travel or even his contemplating such a visit (Rodenbeck 125-126). As John Rodenbeck details extensively, “the itineraries of the poet and the Egyptian head that is alleged to have been his inspiration make it clear that they never crossed paths” (Rodenbeck 125). In fact, the statue was not publicly displayed until late 1818 when Shelley and his

family moved to Italy. As Rodenbeck continues, Shelley could possibly have revisited England sometime between then and his death in 1822, but “such a visit, unrecorded anywhere, seems enormously unlikely” (Rodenbeck 126).

Consequently, Shelley either had no idea of what the statue truly looked like, or found the information useless for his poem. While Shelley’s statue features a “wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command,” Belzoni described the head as “smiling upon me, at the thought of being taken away to England.” This smiling that Belzoni describes can be exhibited in the *Description d’Egypte* (which Shelley also may have seen) (Rodenbeck 126).

Nevertheless, Shelley’s interest in Egypt is apparent even in his own writing (before “Ozymandias”). For example, his piece “Alastor” features a variety of references to pyramids, obelisks, sphinxes and ruined temples. “Mont Blanc,” among other works, uses pyramids as metaphors.

Among the primary works of inspiration for Shelley’s poem includes Constantin François de Chassebœuf, comte de Volney’s *Les Ruines (Ruins of Empires)*. In his work, Volney writes:

I salute you, solitary ruins, sacred tombs, silent walls! It is you I invoke, you to whom I address my prayer! Yes! Though the sight of you may affright the gaze of the vulgar-minded with an unknown dread, in contemplation of you my heart finds the charm of deep emotion and high thought. How many useful lessons, how many tender or powerful ideas do you not afford the mind that knows how

to pay heed to you! It is you, when the entire earth stood submissive and mute before tyrants, who were already at work proclaiming the truths they detest, and who, making no difference between the ultimate dispossession of kings and that of the lowest slave, bore witness to the sacred dogma of EQUALITY.

As scholar Ralph Nablo identifies, themes and principles from Volney's piece—namely “the vanity of worldly glory, the vicissitudes of empire, and the ephemerality of the works of men”—are clearly echoed not only in “Ozymandias” but also in other Shelley works as well (“Mont Blanc” being a prime example). Mary Shelley describes Volney's *Ruines* in her novel *Frankenstein*, which was written and published in the same years as “Ozymandias,” further indicating the Shelley family's familiarity and interest in the work (Nablo 172). Scholars have further noted similarities between Volney's work and Shelley's pieces “Queen Mab” and “The Revolt of Islam” (Nablo 172).

Besides the inspiration from Volney and Diodorus' aforementioned descriptions of the statue and its epitaph, it is likely that Shelley was familiar with the descriptions and drawings of Upper Egyptian ruins made between July and October of 1798 by diplomat and spy Dominique Vivant, Baron Denon (1747-1825). As Eugene Waith notes, “Shelley is known to have read *Quarterly Review* for October 1816,” which included discussion of the fragmented statue and its inscription (Waith 158). Several quotations from the English translation of Denon's *Voyages dans la basse et la haute Egypte, pendant les Campagnes de Bonaparte* (English

translation: *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt, during the campaigns of General Bonaparte in that country*) were included in the same article (Waith 159). In Denon's *Travels*, Denon describes a site further down the Nile from the findings of the fragmented statue:

Benesech was built on the ruins of the ancient city of Oxyrinchus, the capital of the thirty-third Nome or province of Egypt. Nothing, however remains of this city but some fragments of stone pillars, marble columns in the mosques, and a single column left standing, along with its capital, and part of the entablature. . . . This solitary monument brings a melancholy sensation to the mind. Oxyrinchus, once a metropolis surrounded by a fertile plain . . . has disappeared beneath the sand. . . .

A few lines later he writes:

The prospect of the desert which presents such a gloomy idea to all who have once beheld it; a boundless horizon of barrenness, which oppresses the mind by immensity of distance, and whose appearance, where level, is only a dreary waste. . . . (Wraith 160).

The close similarities in diction strongly indicate that Shelley drew from Denon's descriptions in creating "Ozymandias." The descriptions "Nothing, however, remains

of this city but some fragments . . .” and “boundless horizon of barrenness . . .” call to mind Shelley’s phrases “Nothing beside remains” and “boundless and bare” respectively.

While it is likely that Shelley drew inspiration from a variety of different Egyptian travel literature and other sources, his distinct use of both Volney and Denon testifies to a certain timeless quality in the narrative of “Ozymandias.” The inspiration of these sources illuminates just how far back intrigue in certain things—ruins and ancient cultures, tyranny, almighty power, and vanity (among others)—dates. The tracking back of these interests gradually becomes a sort of black hole in that the digging grows increasingly ambiguous. We can track Shelley’s inspiration to Volney and Denon, and then to Greek writings and Diodorus Siculus (90 BC – 30 BC) before ultimately linking back to Ramesses II (1303 BC – 1213 BC). Similar interests could in fact date even further before Ramesses II’s existence, perhaps in the form of paintings or drawings, but the linking would likely become vague and indefinite. While there are still obvious gaps between Shelley and the other historians, there is something to be said of the fact that many of the aforementioned interests have resonated for such a great span of time (even if in varying degrees). This reality affirms timelessness in these topics, and ultimately assists our understanding of how a classic like “Ozymandias” came to be just that.

Legacy

Perhaps Walter Stephens put it best when he wrote, “Shelley’s poem has made Ozymandias an emblem of self-deluding hubris, the ambition to be remembered favorably by posterity, and the refusal to acknowledge time’s destruction of human achievement” (Stephens 155). Still, his achievements were once very real, as evidenced by the fragmented remains. It seems then that the message of the poem underscores the fallibility of everything except for time. Only time is invincible—as it ruins everything with its impersonal and destructive nature (Daiya 154). The poem demonstrates that no tyrannical structure lasts forever, and serves as a warning for overzealous, power-hungry despots like Walter White.

A cursory Google search of “Ozymandias” reveals a range of appropriations across several mediums. Three comic book characters, a young-adult novel character, a sea ship and star ship in video games, four songs, an album, and of course a television episode all bear the name of Shelley’s classic poem. Its resonance and legacy is simply undeniable.

Ultimately, the discussion of archetypal overzealous antiheroes has been extended and renewed by *Breaking Bad*’s use of Shelley’s “Ozymandias.” The show’s invocation of the classic poem functions, in part, to underscore and warn of the ramifications of vanity. The narrative framework of Shelley’s poem has stood the test of time, and what better way to market oneself as a classic than *with* a classic? By appropriating the classic “Ozymandias,” *Breaking Bad* seeks to sustain cultural life and power. For a show that only ended in 2013, it is still early to comment on such things, but with a perfect 10/10 IMDB rating (with over 58,000 votes) for its

episode “Ozymandias” and 9.5 overall show rating (over 593,000 votes), its safe to say *Breaking Bad*'s legacy is, at least, off to a good start.

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