

The Fragility of Human Life

“We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race, and the human race is filled with passion.” This is the opinion about poetry from the English teacher, John Keating, in the movie of *Dead Poets Society*. People usually have strong instincts to express themselves in order to prove that they exist. This desire is the passion that motivates people to write poetry. Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ozymandias”, and William Shakespeare’s “Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day?” (Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18) are famous poems specifically called sonnets that consist of 14 lines, and they are filled with the passion of a writer’s self-assertion. Each sonnet depicts the same theme, which is the fragility of human life, by contrasting it with eternal time, by defining arts as an exceptional power that can triumph over time, and by conveying the theme through its own music in a unique way.

First, both the sonnets succeed in showing the fragility of human life in relation to time. Although Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 was made to praise a person’s beauty, the fragility of human life is well shown in this sonnet. First of all, this sonnet is a love poem dedicated to a specific person. Shakespeare starts this poem with a question, “Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day?” This is very romantic because readers feel Shakespeare’s reserved attitude and respect toward the beauty of the person with an English gentleman’s manner. Then he declares that the person’s beauty is more than the beauty of a summer’s day. However, he admits that merciless time is likely to erode all valuable things including the beauty of the person. He shows the sentiment of evanescence best in the seventh and eighth lines: “And every fair from fair sometime declines, / By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd [.]” In short, Shakespeare

succeeds in showing the fragility of human life by contrasting the person's intense, but transitory beauty with everlasting time.

Similar to Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, Shelley's "Ozymandias" also shows the fragility of human life due to the irresistible effect of time. In the sonnet, a ruined statue of Ozymandias in the Egyptian desolate landscape is illustrated. The run-down statue makes an ironic contrast in its haughty inscription, "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" Ozymandias' possessions have gone except this haughty inscription on his ruined statue. This scenery depicts the frailty of human life well by contrasting Ozymandias' past power to his ruined statue; it shows the fact that even the powerful king, Ozymandias, is not an exception from a destiny of evanescence caused by the significant influence of time.

Second, in the sonnets, both Shakespeare and Shelley suggest that poetry can have more power than time by opposing artworks to the fragility of human life. In the ninth line of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, the poem shows a "turn" from showing the fragility of human life to showing the strength of his poem. It says, "But thy eternal summer shall not fade," Then Shakespeare denies having the beauty faded by transferring it into his poem as following, "Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st / Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade," Subsequently, Shakespeare gives a solution how he makes it possible, "When in eternal lines to time thou grou'st. / So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." This is a metapoetry that prizes a person's beauty and the power of this poet itself. In other words, Shakespeare ascribes the immortality of the person's beauty to the immortality of this poem. This is why Shakespeare emphasizes the endless power of not only time but also artworks like his poetry so that the fragility of human life can be prominent.

Similar to Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, Shelley's "Ozymandias" succeeds in

showing the unlimited power of arts in a limited style of art, sonnet. A freelance writer and former college English instructor, Michael J. Cummings, affirms one of the most important theme of this sonnet is, “the might and majesty of a king do not last; only great art endures” in his website, *Cummings Study Guides*. I agree with him. Although the powerful king and the sculptor vanished a long time ago, the detailed expression of the statue has remained and inspired Shelley to compose this sonnet. The sonnet implies that the potential power of the sculpture is more than the power of king Ozymandias as following, “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 [.]” Similarly, now this beautiful sonnet that expresses the impression of Ozymandias’ sculpture moves present readers regardless of Shelley’s death. The sequence of passions for expressing is the power of arts which Shelley shows in this sonnet. In other words, Shelley proves that arts can triumph over time. Shelley’s use of a traveler in the poem makes the triumph of arts more outstanding. I am not sure whether Shelley really heard the description of the statue from a traveler or not, but Shelley must put the traveler intentionally in the sonnet to make it more interesting. In my translation, the traveler is the symbol of time that travels from generation to generation because Shelley charges the traveler with a role of connecting the sculpture, Shelley, and present readers by quoting the traveler’s words. In fact, time is sometimes symbolized as a traveler in Japan because one of the most famous Japanese poets, Basho Matsuo, personifies time as an eternal traveler, who never goes back, in his travel diary called *Okunohosomichi*. Artworks can keep influencing on people beyond time. Therefore, Shelley opposes the long-lasting sculptor’s work against the short-lived power of Ozymandias which represent human fragility in the sonnet.

Third, Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 and Shelley’s “Ozymandias” have their own

music that fit their theme. Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 is perfect for a sonnet regarding music, and this perfection supports the immortality of this sonnet that is compared with the fragility of human life. For example, its rhythm is perfect. According to our textbook, *Backpack Literature – An introduction to Fiction, poetry, and Drama*, rhythm of a poem means "the recurrence of stresses and pauses" (Kennedy and Gioia 418). Concerning stresses, Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 shows a regular, recurrent pattern that is called iambic pentameter. Each line consists of ten syllables that make up "a succession of alternate unstressed and stressed syllables" (419). Take the syllables of the first line for instance, "Shall I com-pare thee to a sum-mer's day". The stressed syllables fall on the syllables, "I, -pare, to, sum-, and day". In terms of pauses, each line of this sonnet "ends in a full pause—usually indicated by some mark of punctuation", and this is called "end-stopped" (422). Therefore, this sonnet has a perfect form of an English sonnet or a Shakespearean sonnet by means of the perfect rhythm. One of the other factors which are related to music of poetry is rhyme. Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 also has the perfect rhyming of ABABCDCDEFEGG. In other words, this sonnet consists of three quatrains and one couplet; the ending words of every other line form a rhyme in the quatrains, and the two lines of the couplet form a rhyme. Although Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 could have ended up with a cheesy love sonnet that is filled with Shakespeare's vanity, the perfect music of this sonnet does not let it be a cliché. Because the sonnet has a perfect form of an English sonnet, readers feel a control and extraordinary talent of the poet. Therefore, this is a perfect sonnet concerned with music and succeeds in proving its immortality which is contrary to human life.

Unlike Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, Shelley's "Ozymandias" is far from a perfect sonnet concerned with music. This imperfect music directly produces the unstable atmosphere that implies the fragility of human life. Regarding to the recurrence of

stresses, Ozymandias does not show the typical meter of iambic pentameter as Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 does. According to "Ozymandias Rhyme, Form, meter – Shmoop", some lines start with "a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable", and this is prominent in the line 12, "No-thing be-side re-mains. Round the de-cay". It says that the syllables, "no-, -side, -mains, round, and -cay" in the line fall on the stressed syllables. This does not fit a typical form of a sonnet. In addition, this sonnet consists of some run-on lines regarding pauses. In terms of rhyme, Shelley's "Ozymandias" also has an unusual rhyming ABABACDCEDEFEF. Furthermore, some of them have slanted rhymes. For example, "stone" in the second line loosely rhymes with "frown" in the fourth line, as well as "appear" in the ninth line and "despair" in the eleventh line. For the above reasons, "Ozymandias" has unusual, irregular meter, pauses, and rhyme. Its broken style of music makes this sonnet loose and gives readers special feelings such as awkwardness, discomfort, and instability. In other words, the music has the effect of reminding readers of something imperfect that is ruined Ozymandias' statue and the fragility of human life.

Some people say that poetry has died in the USA. This may be true in a sense of daily life. However, the human passion for self-expression is never going to die as long as humans exist. People still appreciate the two sonnets which present universal ideas about the fragility of human life concerning eternal time, the passionate attitude toward arts, and their own well-planned music. The arts of the USA such as Hollywood movies, pop music, and contemporary art are dominant in the world because these poem's theme, passion, and music are surely alive in this country, as well as being inherited and exhibited by American artists in different ways.

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