What happens?

A ruined statue exposes the gap between a ruler’s ambition and what survives.

The main idea

Power leaves claims behind; surviving art makes those claims vulnerable to judgement.

1. “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone”

Method: Contrasting adjectives

The monument’s vast scale suggests power, but its missing body exposes that power as broken.

2. “sneer of cold command”

Method: Alliteration

Hard consonants sharpen the impression of severity.

3. “Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

Method: Imperative and irony

The ruler commands admiration; the surrounding ruin makes the command an ironic warning about failure.

4. “Nothing beside remains.”

Method: Abrupt sentence

A short declaration punctures the ruler’s expansive boast.

Form and structure

A 14-line sonnet in one stanza; mainly iambic pentameter with an interwoven rhyme scheme.

Development, voice and tone

Opening encounter — Detached. The opening speaker reports a traveller, placing the ruler at several removes from the reader.

Statue and inscription — Critical, then commanding. Fragments reveal cruelty before the inscription briefly restores the ruler’s own voice.

Final landscape — Bleak and ironic. The account answers the boast with emptiness, then expands beyond the monument.

Context

Shelley published the poem in 1818. The ruined monument recalls Ramesses II; its political warning reaches beyond one ruler.

Comparison links

My Last Duchess: controlling men and the limits of power. The Prelude: human confidence challenged.

Recall question

How does the ending answer the ruler’s boast?