

Representations of Power and Legacy: A Comparative Study of Ozymandias and Breaking Bad (2013)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of power and legacy in Ozymandias and the Breaking Bad episode "Ozymandias," aiming to identify their similarities and differences and to explore their intertextual relationship. Grounded in Michel Foucault's concept of power and Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, this study employs a qualitative approach through comparative textual analysis of selected lines from the poem and dialogues from the series. The findings reveal that both texts construct power as dominant yet unstable and legacy as ultimately unsustainable. In the poem, power is symbolically expressed through "King of Kings" but undermined by "Nothing beside remains," indicating its collapse over time. In contrast, the series represents power through Walter White's verbal dominance, such as "I built this," which is later challenged by other characters, leading to the breakdown of his control. In both texts, legacy fails to endure, as reflected in the ruined monument in the poem and the collapse of family and identity in the series. The study also shows that the relationship between the two works functions as a reinterpretation of classical themes within a contemporary context, demonstrating that power and legacy remain fragile despite differences in medium and representation.

Keywords: Comparative Literature; Intertextuality; Power; legacy; Ozymandias; Breaking Bad

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines the representation of power and legacy in Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ozymandias* and the *Breaking Bad* episode "Ozymandias," aiming to identify their similarities and differences as well as their intertextual relationship. Positioned within comparative literature, this research explores how literary and media texts from different periods and forms construct and reinterpret shared themes, particularly power, authority, and legacy. Power is understood as a symbolic and relational force shaping identity and ambition, yet it remains unstable due to moral consequences, temporal decline, and shifting social contexts. These ideas are evident in both texts, where the illusion of enduring power and legacy becomes a central concern despite differences in genre and historical background.

The theoretical framework draws on Michel Foucault's concept of power and Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, supported by additional perspectives from Max Weber (1947), Hannah Arendt (1970), and Antonio Gramsci (1971). Weber defines power as the ability to impose will despite resistance, Arendt emphasizes collective and consensual dimensions of power, while Gramsci highlights ideological dominance through cultural hegemony. Foucault further extends this view by explaining power as something exercised through discourse and social relations rather than merely possessed. In *Ozymandias*, power is represented through imperial authority and its symbolic permanence, yet it is ultimately destroyed by time, as shown in the contrast between "King of Kings" and "Nothing beside remains." Similarly, in *Breaking Bad*, Walter White's constructed dominance, expressed through statements like "I built this," is gradually dismantled through narrative and social resistance, leading to the collapse of his authority and identity.

Kristeva's intertextuality explains how texts are shaped through their relationship with other texts, forming a "mosaic of quotations" (Kristeva, 1980), while Genette (1997) emphasizes textual transformation across works. In this context, the title "Ozymandias" in *Breaking Bad* functions as a direct intertextual link that reframes Shelley's poem within a modern narrative of power and downfall. Both works similarly depict the fragility of legacy, where monumental authority in the poem and criminal empire in the series ultimately collapse due to time, morality, and social dynamics. Although previous studies have examined each work separately, comparative intermedial analysis remains limited.

Using a qualitative comparative textual approach, this study analyzes selected lines and dialogues to explore how power and legacy are constructed and destabilized. Findings show that both texts portray power as dominant yet unstable, while legacy is ultimately unsustainable. The poem presents collapse through physical ruin, while the series shows it through psychological and social disintegration. The intertextual relationship between the two works demonstrates a reinterpretation of classical themes in contemporary media, reinforcing the idea that power is always fragile regardless of form or era.

The topic is selected due to increasing scholarly interest in linking classical literature with modern media. The shared thematic focus and explicit intertextual reference between the two works make them suitable for comparative analysis, supported by the relevance of Foucault's and Kristeva's theories in understanding power and textual relations. The study aims to answer how both works represent power and legacy across media and how intertextuality connects them. It contributes theoretically by integrating power and intertextuality frameworks and practically by showing how classical texts influence contemporary narratives.

The study is limited to Shelley's *Ozymandias* and the *Breaking Bad* episode "Ozymandias," focusing only on relevant dialogues, imagery, and symbolic moments related to power and legacy. It does not cover the entire series or broader Romantic literature, nor does it analyze formal equivalence between media, but

instead focuses on thematic and discursive comparison using qualitative interpretation. The thesis is organized into five chapters covering introduction, literature review and theory, methodology, findings and discussion, and conclusion with recommendations.

RESEARCH METHOD

This chapter explains the methodological framework of the study, including the research approach and design, procedure, data sources, data collection, and data analysis. It outlines how the research is systematically conducted to ensure clarity and coherence in addressing the research questions.

1. Research Approach and Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, which is appropriate for literary research as it focuses on interpretation and meaning rather than numerical data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The research is designed as a comparative literary analysis to examine similarities and differences between Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ozymandias* and the *Breaking Bad* episode "Ozymandias." According to Tötösy de Zepetnek (1998), comparative literature emphasizes relational analysis across texts, media, and contexts. The analysis is guided by Michel Foucault's theory of power and Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality to explore how power and legacy are constructed and represented. The findings are presented descriptively, focusing on meaning construction rather than statistical measurement.

2. Research Procedure

The research was conducted through several steps:

- a. Selecting the primary texts: Shelley's *Ozymandias* and *Breaking Bad* episode "Ozymandias."
- b. Conducting initial reading and viewing to understand overall themes.
- c. Performing close reading and viewing to identify relevant data on power, authority, and legacy.
- d. Analyzing data using Foucault's power theory and Kristeva's intertextuality.
- e. Comparing findings across both texts to identify similarities and differences.
- f. Presenting results in the analysis chapter.

3. Data Sources

The data are textual and divided into:

- a. Primary data: Shelley's *Ozymandias* and selected dialogues from *Breaking Bad* episode "Ozymandias," obtained from an authorized streaming platform. The poem is analyzed through selected lines, while the episode is analyzed through transcribed dialogues with context.
- b. Secondary data: Books, journal articles, and previous studies related to Romantic poetry, *Breaking Bad*, Foucault's theory of power, and Kristeva's intertextuality, sourced from academic databases such as Google Scholar.

4. Data Collection Method

Data were collected through document analysis. The poem and episode were accessed from reliable sources, while secondary literature was gathered from academic databases. Relevant excerpts were selected, organized, and documented based on their relation to the research focus on power and legacy.

5. Data Analysis Method

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively through the following steps:

1. Close reading of the poem and repeated viewing of the episode.
2. Identification of key elements such as power, authority, downfall, and legacy.
3. Interpretation using Foucault's power theory and Kristeva's intertextuality.

4. Comparative analysis of both texts.
5. Synthesis of findings to answer the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Representation of Power and Legacy

The representation of power and legacy in Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ozymandias* and the *Breaking Bad* episode "Ozymandias" is evident through textual evidence from both works. In the poem, power is expressed through the inscription, "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; / Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" (Appendix A), which signifies absolute authority. However, this is immediately undermined by "Nothing beside remains" and "the lone and level sands stretch far away," which emphasize the total collapse and impermanence of power.

Similarly, in *Breaking Bad*, power is constructed through Walter White's authoritative statements such as "There is no time" (Dialogue 7) and "You cross me, there will be consequences" (Dialogue 13). However, this dominance is challenged by resistance from other characters, including Skyler's "Get out of here now" (Dialogue 8) and Walter Jr.'s "I need the police" (Dialogue 10), which signal the breakdown of his control.

In terms of legacy, both texts reveal a contradiction between intention and outcome. Ozymandias' desire for immortality is destroyed by the ruined statue, while Walter White's attempts to secure a lasting legacy through wealth and self-assertion, such as "I have \$11 million in cash" (Dialogue 3) and "I built this. Me alone" (Dialogue 16), are undermined by the collapse of his family and identity. Thus, both works demonstrate that power is initially constructed through dominance but ultimately collapses, while legacy is unstable and ultimately fails to achieve permanence.

Table 1 Similarities and Differences in the Representation of Power and Legacy

Aspect	<i>Ozymandias</i>	<i>Breaking Bad</i>
Power Expression	"King of Kings" (symbolic authority)	"I built this" (verbal dominance)
Form of Power	Monumental / symbolic	Relational / interactional
Legacy Form	Statue (physical)	Money & family (social/emotional)
Collapse	Already destroyed	Ongoing breakdown
Outcome	Emptiness ("Nothing beside remains")	Family rejection & isolation

Table 4.1 compares the representation of power and legacy in *Ozymandias* and *Breaking Bad*. In the poem, power is shown through "King of Kings," while in the series it appears in Walter White's "I built this." Legacy in the poem is a ruined monument ("Nothing beside remains"), whereas in the series it is wealth and family that ultimately collapse.

Power

Power in *Ozymandias* and *Breaking Bad* is shown in different forms but leads to the same outcome: collapse. In Shelley's poem, power is expressed through absolute authority in "King of Kings" and "Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!", yet it is destroyed by time, shown in "Nothing beside remains." This contrast shows that symbolic power appears strong but is ultimately empty.

In *Breaking Bad*, Walter White's power is more relational and built through speech and fear, such as "I built this" and "There will be consequences." However, his authority depends on others' reactions and

weakens when they resist, especially Skyler.

Using Foucault's idea, power is not permanent or owned but exists through social relations. Both texts reflect this: the poem shows power after it has collapsed, while the series shows it collapsing in real time. In the end, both works show that power is unstable and cannot last.

Legacy

Legacy in both texts also fails to achieve permanence. In *Ozymandias*, legacy is represented by a ruined statue and the phrase "Nothing beside remains," showing total erasure of Ozymandias' greatness. The desert imagery reinforces the idea of complete loss over time.

In *Breaking Bad*, Walter White tries to build a legacy through family and wealth, but both collapse. His statements like "We're a family!" and "\$11 million" show his attempt to preserve meaning, yet Skyler's rejection ("Get out") confirms the breakdown of both authority and family bonds.

Through Foucault's view, both material and social legacy depend on relations, not objects or wealth. Kristeva's intertextuality shows that both texts rework the same idea across different contexts. The statue and Walter's money both represent failed attempts to secure permanence.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality, as conceptualized by Julia Kristeva, emphasizes that meaning is produced through relationships between texts rather than within a single text. In this study, it is used as an analytical tool to examine how *Ozymandias* is echoed and transformed in the *Breaking Bad* episode "Ozymandias." The shared title serves as a clear intertextual marker, indicating that the episode reworks the thematic concerns of the poem.

This connection is most evident in the representation of power and its collapse. In Shelley's poem, power is shown through symbolic imagery of a ruined statue and desert landscape, emphasizing the inevitable decline of authority. In contrast, *Breaking Bad* translates this abstraction into narrative form through Walter White's downfall, where his loss of control over both empire and family reflects the same thematic structure. Legacy is also reinterpreted: while the poem presents it as fading into obscurity, the episode shows it as fractured and contested through lived experience.

Thus, intertextuality here does not only identify connections but also explains how meaning shifts across media. The episode does not merely reference the poem but recontextualizes its themes in a modern setting, showing that power and legacy remain unstable across time and form.

Connection Between the Two Texts

Although *Ozymandias* and *Breaking Bad* are linked by shared themes and title, their representation of power and legacy shifts across media. In Shelley's poem, power is embodied in the statue of Ozymandias, which is ultimately reduced to ruins, reinforced by "Nothing beside remains," highlighting the complete erasure of authority.

In contrast, Walter White's power is expressed through dialogue, actions, and relationships rather than monuments. His belief in control is reflected in "\$11 million," which represents wealth as a modern attempt to preserve legacy. However, this effort fails, as his family and authority collapse, mirroring the poem's message that permanence is impossible.

Using Foucault's concept, power is not fixed but relational and constantly shifting. In both texts, authority exists only within interactions and ultimately breaks down when those relations fail. Kristeva's intertextuality further shows that the episode does not copy the poem but transforms its meaning into a contemporary narrative.

Intermediality also explains this shift: the poem presents collapse as a completed event, while the

series shows it unfolding in real time, making it more immediate and emotional. Despite differences in form, both texts reinforce the same idea that power and legacy are inherently unstable.

Transformation of Meaning

The transformation of meaning between *Ozymandias* and *Breaking Bad* shows how power and legacy are reshaped across media. In Shelley's poem, power is represented through a ruined statue, where "Nothing besides remains" emphasizes total loss and the failure of permanence.

In *Breaking Bad*, power is expressed through action and relationships rather than monuments. Walter White's reliance on wealth, such as "\$11 million," reflects his attempt to secure legacy through material means. However, this also fails, as his family collapses and control is lost.

Foucault's theory explains this instability by showing that power is produced through discourse and social relations, not fixed possession. Kristeva's intertextuality further suggests that the episode does not simply repeat the poem but reinterprets it within a modern context. The shared title functions as a bridge, but meaning expands through narrative form.

Although the forms differ—static ruin in the poem and unfolding collapse in the series—both ultimately show the same conclusion: power is unstable and legacy cannot be sustained. Intertextuality thus allows meaning to evolve while preserving its core thematic idea.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that both Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ozymandias* and the *Breaking Bad* episode "Ozymandias" present power as dominant yet ultimately unstable. In the poem, power is represented through symbolic imagery, particularly the ruined statue, which reflects the gradual erosion of authority over time. In contrast, the series expresses power through dialogue, interaction, and control, especially in Walter White's character. Despite these differences, both texts consistently demonstrate that power cannot sustain itself and ultimately collapses.

Similarly, legacy is portrayed as impermanent in both works. *Ozymandias* attempts to preserve his legacy through monumental construction, while Walter White seeks to secure his through family and wealth; however, both efforts ultimately fail. The poem presents this collapse as a completed event, whereas the series depicts it as an ongoing process, reinforcing the idea that legacy, like power, is temporary and unstable.

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