Theme and Point of View: “Ozymandias”
Foundation Lesson

Read the poem below. Use the activities that follow it to help understand its meaning.

**Ozymandias**

I met a traveler 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,
(5) 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:
(10) “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.

*by Percy Bysshe Shelley*

**Point of View**

What is First Person Point of View?

When an author chooses to use first person point of view, he or she tells the story as though the narrator, or speaker, were speaking directly to the reader. The narrator uses the word “I” as a subject and tells the story using only what he or she, the narrator/speaker, personally knows or feels about it.

This poem is complicated in its point of view—it has a “frame story” that surrounds the real story. There are multiple persons in this poem: a first speaker who introduces the second speaker, a second speaker who truly tells the story, a sculptor who does not speak, and Ozymandias, whose words are chiseled into the base of an ancient ruined statue.

In prose, the person who speaks is called the [narrator](#). In poetry, the person who speaks is referred to as the [speaker](#).
1. Using the pronouns listed below, fill in the second column of the chart with the pronouns associated with that speaker.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person in poem</th>
<th>Pronouns referring to this person</th>
<th>Phrases that refer to or describe this person</th>
<th>Speaker’s opinion about Ozymandias’ accomplishments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Speaker</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Second Speaker</td>
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<td>Sculptor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ozymandias</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How does he view himself?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Fill in the third column of the chart with the words or phrases listed below. Tell to whom it refers by placing it with the corresponding speaker in the first column.

a. “traveler” (line 1)

b. “from an antique land” (line 1)

c. “Who said” (line 2)

d. “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone stand in the desert” (lines 2-3)

e. “on the sand” (line 3)

f. “a shattered visage” (line 4)

g. “frown,” “wrinkled lip,” “sneer of cold command” (lines 4-5)

h. “well those passions read” (line 6)

i. “these lifeless things” (line 7)

j. “the pedestal” (line 9)

k. “king of kings” (line 10)

l. “the decay of that colossal wreck” (lines 12-13)

3. For the fourth column, consider each speaker’s role in the poem. In the box, describe briefly the speaker’s view of Ozymandias.
4. Go back to the poem and consider each speaker.
   a. Highlight the first speaker’s words.
   b. Highlight the words in quotation marks in a different color. Whose words are they? How do his own words give the reader a sense of his character?
   c. Highlight the words of the second speaker in a third color.
   d. What is the role of the first speaker?
   e. Why does the first speaker tell this story?
   f. Why do you think the poet chose to include the first speaker rather than have only the second speaker tell the story?

Characterization
5. Create a character journal entry by listing words, images, and details used to describe Ozymandias. From this evidence, write in the second column adjectives describing him and an analysis of how the evidence leads you to this inference.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence (important words, images, and details used to describe Ozymandias)</th>
<th>Inferences—Commentary (based on the evidence selected)</th>
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<tr>
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<td>adjective</td>
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<td>adjective</td>
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The analytical chunk incorporates direct evidence from the passage or poem combined with context, inferences and commentary. It consists of one or more sentences which reinforce assertions made in the essay or the paragraph.
6. Fill in the blanks below to write an analytical chunk, using evidence, inferences, and commentary from the journal entry. The analytical chunk should contain an assertion, along with evidence and commentary.

Ozymandias is portrayed as a(n) ______________________ person, as illustrated through his ______________________ (line _). ______________________

____________________________

____________________________

____________________________

____________________________

Commentary

Commentary

Diction, Imagery, and Contrasts
7. The following chart associates two contrasting ideas.
   a. The last word of line 12 is “decay.” Fill in the first column of the chart below with all the words or phrases in the poem that you associate with decay or ruin.
   b. The last words of line 10 are “king of kings.” Fill in the second column of the chart with all the words or phrases in the poem that can be associated with kings or rulers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words or Phrases Associated with Decay</th>
<th>Words or Phrases Associated with Rulers</th>
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8. What ideas are contrasted in the poem? ______________________

9. What does this contrast suggest about the attitude of the speaker toward Ozymandias?

While Ozymandias saw himself as a(n) ______________________,
the speaker sees the ancient ruler as ______________________.

9. Look at the word “despair” in line 11. Define the verb “despair.” ______________________

____________________________
Student Activity—Theme and Point of View
“Ozymandias”

a. Paraphrase what Ozymandias means by “despair” in his message to the viewer of the statue.

b. How might the reader interpret the word “despair” in the context of the entire poem?

Tone and Theme

I**rony** is a literary technique marked by surprising, interesting, or amusing contradiction. Irony can be classified as:

- **verbal** (when a speaker says one thing while meaning the opposite).
- **dramatic** (when a character says or does something that has a different meaning for the character than for the audience).
- **situational** (when a situation turns out differently from what one would normally expect).

10. Look again at the words on the pedestal (lines 10-11). What is ironic about this message, considering the condition of the colossal statue?

11. Why is it ironic that the poem has survived for all these years?

Theme is the generalization about life—the universal meaning—that is revealed in a literary piece.

12. What does the poem suggest about these aspects of life?

   a. human achievement
   
   b. power
   
   c. arrogance
   
   d. nature
   
   e. art
   
   f. fame and wealth

Composition Ideas

1. Write a story or narrative poem in which a person from the future discovers a remnant of our own civilization (perhaps a monument, a building, or a diary) and ponders about what America in the twenty-first century must have been like. In your story or narrative poem, experiment with Shelley’s technique of using multiple narrators. Include some other elements of Shelley’s writing such as vivid diction and imagery.
2. Write an essay in which you analyze how the speaker’s attitude toward Ozymandias is developed by the poet. Consider such elements as point of view, syntax, diction, and imagery.

3. Write an essay in which you describe what you wish your legacy to be and why.

4. If you had a statue made of yourself to last through time, what message would you have inscribed on the base of the statue? Explain why you would choose this message.