

Enriching the Humanities Through Opera

Script for Lesson: Exploring Story Adaptation

Grade Level: 9-12th

Length: 45 minutes

Literary Work: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (William Shakespeare)

Opera: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Benjamin Britten, composer; Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, librettists)

Slide 1:

Today, we're going to explore the concept of story adaptation.

Slide 2:

Our inquiry question is: "What is story adaptation and how is it relevant to opera?" By the end of the lesson, we will be able to: (List off objectives from slide.)

Slide 3:

We are going to begin with a word association exercise. Write down the first word that comes to mind for these words... (opera, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, adaptation).

(Reveal each word independently to give students a chance to write down/come up with their answers.)

****Instead of having students write down their answers, instructor could create a live word cloud such as with *Mentimeter*. Students can add their responses via their phones/computers/tablets (repeated words will increase in size.**

What comes to mind when you hear the word "opera"?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Those are some great responses! It seems like many of you think of (examples: music, singing, and performance, etc. ... that's all part of opera!) Opera is a dramatic work set to music, with singers performing entire roles accompanied by an orchestra. It typically includes arias, duets, and ensembles, and is known for its elaborate costumes, sets, and vocal prowess. Has anyone seen an opera before?

What words did we associate with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?

Provide students space to share their thoughts. (Possible responses: fantasy, magic, comedy, fairies, love/lovers, dreams, spells, moon, forest, Athens, transformation, theatricality, etc.)

Finally, what about “adaptation”? What does that mean to you?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

That's a great start! Adaptation is when a creative work, such as a film, television show, play, opera, musical, or even book, is based on an existing story, like a novel or short story. It's when we take an idea and make changes to fit it into a new medium or vision.

Slide 4:

Let's review the story arc of our literary work. Can anyone remind us of the exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution of this story?

Review the story arc as a class.

Exposition: Oberon (King of the Fairies) and Tytania (Queen of the Fairies) at odds over a young changeling boy. The young lovers — Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius — whose romantic entanglements drive much of the drama. Hermia loves Lysander, but her father wants her to marry Demetrius, who is pursued by Helena. A group of amateur actors (the mechanicals), led by Bottom, prepare a play for the Duke of Athens' wedding.

Rising Action: Oberon, to resolve his quarrel with Tytania, orders Puck to use a magic flower's juice to make Tytania fall in love with the first creature she sees upon waking. Oberon also instructs Puck to use the same magic on Demetrius to make him fall in love with Helena. Puck accidentally enchants Lysander instead, causing him to fall in love with Helena. Lysander and Demetrius both pursue Helena, leaving Hermia heartbroken.

Climax: Puck transforms Bottom's head into that of a donkey, and Tytania, under the magic spell, falls in love with him, creating a bizarre and comical moment. Lysander and Demetrius profess their love for Helena, escalating tensions between all four lovers. Oberon realizes Puck's mistake and orders him to rectify it.

Falling Action: Oberon releases Tytania from the spell, and the fairy king and queen reconcile. Puck restores Lysander's love for Hermia, setting the young lovers back to their original pairings. Bottom is restored to normal, and the Mechanicals present their hilariously inept play, “Pyramus and Thisbe,” to celebrate the Duke's wedding.

Resolution: The lovers return to Athens, with their relationships properly aligned. Oberon, Tytania, and the fairies bless the three weddings—Theseus and Hippolyta, Lysander and Hermia, and Demetrius and Helena. Puck addresses the audience, asking for forgiveness if the play has offended.

Slide 5:

Great! Now we are going to look at an opera synopsis based on Shakespeare's play.

(Pass out opera synopsis handout.)

Read through the synopsis as a class.

Slide 6:

I would like for us to compare the story structure of the opera with the original literary work. Turn and talk with your neighbor and discuss what are some differences and similarities you noticed?

Questions on slide:

- Is the setting/time period the same for both the opera and literary work?
- Is there a difference in point of view? In historical context? In narrative structure?
- What else did you notice?

Give students a couple of minutes to discuss the questions in pairs or small groups.

Would anyone like to share what they discussed?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

We are now going to delve deeper into the opera *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Slides 7-12: Key Scenes: choose which key scene to introduce to the class.

Slide 7: Key Scene #1

Let's look at this key scene. The moment when Puck transforms Bottom's head into that of a donkey's is both comical and pivotal, setting up the humorous encounter with Titania, the queen of the fairies, who falls in love with Bottom while he has the donkey head due to a spell placed on her by Oberon. The transformation of Bottom is central to the opera's comedic subplot.

Discuss any prominent and notable features in the image, including the identification of characters as well as any significant details that highlight their interactions or setting.

Slide 8: Key Scene #1

Here is an excerpt from that scene. As we watch, notice how any differences in the scene compared with the original literary work.

*Act II, Scene 1: Puck "Makes an ass" of Bottom
06:19 – 8:50*

(Watch excerpt.)

What did you notice?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Slide 9: Key Scene #2

Let's analyze this key scene. The mechanicals perform their play-within-the-play, featuring the aria "Asleep, my Love?" after Theseus and Hippolyta's and the lovers' weddings — a moment serving as the play's climactic parody of tragic love stories, such as *Romeo and Juliet* (suicide warning). The exaggerated emotions are meant to be humorous, poking fun at overly dramatic tales of doomed romance, and how the actual story breaks away from this kind of ending.

Discuss any prominent and notable features in the image, including the identification of characters as well as any significant details that highlight their interactions or setting.

Slide 10: Key Scene #2

Here is an excerpt from that scene. As we watch, notice how any differences in the scene compared with the original literary work.

Act III, Scene 2: Pyramus and Thisbe
00:06 – 2:01

(Watch excerpt.)

What did you notice?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Slide 11: Key Scene #3

Let's examine this key scene. The different storylines come to a close with a sense of harmony and whimsy. When Puck speaks directly to the audience, this is referred to as breaking the "fourth wall," the imaginary barrier separating the world of the performer from the audience, and in doing so, the character acknowledges being a part of an act.

Discuss any prominent and notable features in the image, including the identification of characters as well as any significant details that highlight their interactions or setting.

Slide 12: Key Scene #3

Here is an excerpt from that scene. As we watch, notice how any differences in the scene compared with the original literary work.

Act III, Finale & Puck's Epilogue
0:03 – 3:02

(Watch excerpt.)

What did you notice?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Slide 13:

Why do we adapt stories?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

How does storytelling and adaptation add relevance for an audience?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Unlike many composers who simply adapt their operas from a story, play, or idea, Britten and Pears chose to keep the libretto (the text or script of the opera) adhered closely to the play's original script omitting a few lines, with the exception of one added line — “the sharp Athenian law (compelling thee to marry with Demetrius) cannot pursue us.” He also excluded Act I entirely, as it takes much longer to sing a word than to speak it, making his opera begin with the fairies in the woods. As a result, the libretto for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is significantly shorter than Shakespeare's original script.

With the exception of two characters, Egeus and Philostrate, all the characters are retained, creating an opera that features a vibrant and diverse cast of nearly 20 characters. These characters are organized into three groups, each following a largely independent plot, similar to Shakespeare's play. Britten skillfully conveys these distinct narratives through contrasting soundscapes, from the ethereal beauty of the fairies to the boisterous antics of the mechanicals.

Slide 14:

To further our understanding of the adaptation process, we will create an adaptation pitch for one of the three chosen key scenes from the opera. Before we do, let's look at the adaptation guidelines. We will focus on the Who, What, When, and Where in the scene. When we say, “who,” we mean the characters in the scene, “what” means the action in the scene, “when” means the time period and time of day and/or year, and “where” is the location and setting. Please note that the character identity can be adapted, but characters may not be eliminated or added to the scene.

Our adaptation pitches are to be intentional, thoughtful and show our knowledge of the original literary work.

What questions do you have?

Take time to answer any questions students may have.

Slide 15:

Using the background knowledge of the story and our new understanding of the opera, let's do a quick adaptation pitch for the key scene we just looked at. How could we adapt the "who?"

(Add student suggestions to the slide.)

The action? The "what?"

(Add student suggestions to the slide.)

The "when?"

(Add student suggestions to the slide.)

The "why?"

(Add student suggestions to the slide.)

Please note that each decision you make will have a ripple-like effect on the overall story.

Are there any other questions?

Take time to answer any questions students may have.

****Students can either work in groups selected by the instructor or students choose their own groups – number of students per group depends on class size. Students can either adapt the same key scene or choose a different key scene provided using their laptops/tablets. Libretto excerpts of the key scenes can be accessed on the OPERA America website. Print outs of the libretto excerpts can be distributed as well.**

We are now going to break out into groups and choose one of the three key scenes from the opera and brainstorm an adaptation pitch. You may use your laptop/tablet to find the additional key scenes provided in the slides. You will have 10 minutes to create your opera adaptation pitches and answer the questions. Each group will be given a worksheet with the same questions on the slide to complete and help guide the process. Please answer the last two questions using complete sentences.

(Return to Slide 14. Have students break out into groups by preferred method. Pass out the opera adaptation pitch worksheets, 1 per group, or have students answer the questions on a separate piece of paper [stay on Slide 15]. Students work in groups for 10 minutes.)

Begin!

(Walk around the classroom, offering assistance as students work. Provide a 5-minute, 2-minute, and 1-minute warning.)

Slide 16:

Now it's time to share our ideas! Each group will present their opera adaptation pitch to the class. Remember to explain your creative decisions and rationale.

Groups take turns presenting their opera adaptation pitches.

Slide 17:

Thank you for sharing! How did your understanding of the story change as you adapted it?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Have any new insights or perspectives emerged?

Allow a moment for reflection, then invite students to share their thoughts.

Slide 18:

Thank you all for your work today!

****If planning to continue with Responding to Key Scenes lesson, add an announcement about exploring the opera more next class.**