

Enriching the Humanities Through Opera

Title: Exploring Story Adaptation

Grade Level: 9-12th

Length: 45 minutes

Literary Work: *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster* (Jon Krakauer)

Opera: *Everest* (Joby Talbot, composer; Gene Scheer, librettist)

Inquiry Question: What is story adaptation? How is it relevant to opera?

Lesson Focus: Students will use critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration while exploring the concept of story adaptation and how it relates to opera stories.

Prior Knowledge: Students have read *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster*, have analyzed characters and can name the Who, What, When, Where, Story arc (Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Resolution Ripple effects).

Materials: Copies of *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster*, presentation slides (includes *Everest* short opera synopsis with photography and video examples), libretto excerpts of key scenes, opera synopsis handout, opera adaptation pitch worksheet, student laptops/tablets, interactive board, paper, and pens/pencils.

Key Vocabulary: Opera, composer, librettist, libretto, adaptation, historical fiction, key scene, and pitch.

Definitions

- **Opera:** 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.
- **Composer:** The person who writes the music for an opera, symphony, movie score, etc.
- **Librettist:** The person who writes the text of an opera.
- **Libretto:** The words or text of an opera.
- **Adaptation:** A creative work, such as a film, television show, play, or book, that is based on an existing story, such as a novel, short story, or historical event, and has been modified or reimagined to fit a different medium or audience. Adaptations often involve changes to the characters, setting, or other elements of the original story to make it more suitable for the new format.
- **Historical Fiction:** A literary genre where the story takes place in the past and is characterized by an imaginative reconstruction of actual historical events and people.

- **Key Scene:** A pivotal moment in a story, play, or film that significantly impacts the narrative and characters. It is often a turning point that advances the plot, reveals important information, or changes the direction of the story.
- **Pitch:** A compelling summary of a proposed story idea that typically includes an overview of the plot, characters, setting, and themes of the story, as well as any unique or marketable aspects that make it stand out. The goal of a story pitch is to persuade the recipient to greenlight the project or take further action.

Objective(s): At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Analyze an opera synopsis based on a literary work.
- Compare a literary work with the opera adaptation synopsis.
- Identify elements of adaptation across multiple versions of the same key scene present in the literary source and opera.
- Collaboratively brainstorm a pitch for an opera adaptation of the literary work.

Assessment: Groups present their opera pitches following the guidelines for adaptation.

Adaptation Guidelines:

- Who: character/character identity
Note: character identity can be adapted, but students may not eliminate or add characters.
- What: key scene, action in the story - what is happening?
- When: time period, time of day, year, etc.
- Where: location and setting

Assessment Rubric

4: Presentation is thorough and comprehensive, providing detailed and specific information on the Who, What, When, and Where. Pitch is highly detailed, insightful, and well-supported, demonstrating a deep understanding of the literary work and creative approach to the adaptation guidelines.

3: Presentation includes detailed information on the Who, What, When, and Where. Pitch is clear and well-developed, showing a strong understanding of the adaptation guidelines.

2: Presentation provides some detail on the Who, What, When, and Where. Pitch is somewhat clear but lacks depth and specificity. Basic knowledge of the literary work is present.

1: Presentation lacks specific and clear information on the Who, What, When, and Where. Pitch provided is vague, lacking depth, and knowledge of the literary work.

Learning Standards:

Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.5: Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the

choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7: Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment (e.g., Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” and Breughel’s Landscape with the Fall of Icarus).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.RL.9-10.3: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3: Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.5: Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5: Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.9: Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work (e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from Ovid or the Bible or how a later author draws on a play by Shakespeare).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.RH.9-10.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.RH.9-10.6: Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.RH.11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.RH.11-12.7: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visual, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

National Core Arts Standards

TH:Cr2.I.a. Explore the function of history and culture in the development of a dramatic concept through a critical analysis of original ideas in a drama/theatre work.

TH:Cr2-II.b. Cooperate as a creative team to make interpretive choices for a drama/theatre work.

TH:Cr1.1.I.c. Use script analysis to generate ideas about a character that is believable and authentic in a drama/theatre work.

TH:Cr2-I.a. Explore the function of history and culture in the development of a dramatic concept through a critical analysis of original ideas in a drama/theatre work.

TH:Cr2-II.b. Cooperate as a creative team to make interpretive choices for a drama/theatre work.

TH:Re7.1.I.a. Respond to what is seen, felt, and heard in a drama/theatre work to develop criteria for artistic choices.

TH:Re7.1.II.a. Demonstrate an understanding of multiple interpretations of artistic criteria and how each might be used to influence future artistic choices of a drama/theatre work.

Procedure:

Introduction/Hook (5 minutes):

- Begin with a word association exercise to spark students' interest and creativity.
 - Words: “opera,” “Everest,” “*Into Thin Air*” and “adaptation.”
 - Ask students to write down the first word that comes to mind.
 - Students share their answers while the instructor writes down their responses on the board. Keep in mind any repeated words.

OR

- Create a live Word Cloud with [Mentimeter](#).
 - Students can add their responses via their phones/computers/tablets (repeated words will increase in size.)
- Discuss findings.
- Define opera.
- Introduce the concept of adaptation and discuss its relevance in literature.

Main Narrative/Sequence (20 minutes):

- Review story arc of *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster* (Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Resolution).
 - Exposition: Jon Krakauer arrives at Everest Base Camp, introducing the climbers and the challenges of the expedition.
 - Rising Action: The climbers ascend towards the summit, facing increasing physical and environmental difficulties.
 - Climax: A deadly storm strikes as climbers, including Krakauer, are descending from the summit, leading to chaos and tragedy.
 - Falling Action: Survivors struggle to make their way back to safety amid worsening conditions and dwindling resources.
 - Resolution: Krakauer reflects on the disaster, the loss of life, and the decisions made during the climb, grappling with guilt and the impact of the tragedy.
- Read through the full synopsis (see below) of the opera *Everest* as a class and discuss the fundamental elements of the story.
 - Conduct a “Turn and Talk” activity. (Students chat in pairs, or small groups)
 - Students compare the story structure of the opera with the original literary work.
 - Compare setting/time, historical context, point of view, narrative structure, etc.

- The instructor chooses one of three provided key scenes in the opera, sharing photo and video examples to enhance understanding.

Scene Selections (see below for summaries, libretto excerpts, and viewing options):

- Key Scene #1: Scene 4. Doug's Ascent
 - Key Scene #2: Scene 9. The Storm Hits
 - Key Scene #3: Scene 12. The Phone Call
- Ask and discuss questions such as, “why do we adapt stories?” “How does storytelling add relevance for an audience?”
 - Discuss the adaptation process for the chosen key scene, outlining guidelines for adaptation and pivotal considerations. Discuss the ripple effects of making these changes.
 - Guidelines for adaptation:
 - Consider the Who, What, When, and Where.
 - Who: character/character identity
 - *Note: character identity can be adapted, but students may not eliminate or add characters.*
 - What: key scene, action in the story - what is happening?
 - When: time period, time of day, year, etc.
 - Where: location and setting
 - Students may use their prior knowledge of literary work and opera synopsis/libretto excerpts as resources.
 - Together as a class, guide students through the adaptation process for the chosen key scene.

Activity/Practice (10 minutes):

- Students will work together to decide how they are going to adapt the opera, and brainstorm ideas for those changes based on the provided guidelines for adaptation: Who, What, When and Where. Each group will fill out an opera adaptation pitch worksheet.
 - Have students break out into groups and either adapt the same key scene viewed as a class or choose another key scene from the opera to brainstorm for an adaptation pitch.

Present/Share (8 minutes):

- Each group will present their pitch for an opera adaptation to the class, explaining their creative decisions and rationale.
- Encourage feedback and discussion from peers.

Reflection (2 minutes):

- Conclude the lesson with a recap of learnings about adaptation.
- Invite students to reflect on their collaborative work and share their thoughts on the adaptation process. Ask and discuss:
 - “How did your understanding of the story change as you adapted it?”
 - “Have any new insights or perspectives emerged?”

Extension/Follow-up/Next steps:

- Ask and discuss:
 - Can this literary work and storyline be set in the present? Is it still relevant today? Why or why not?
 - Can adaptation work for historical events and figures? Why or why not?
- Critical analysis of film adaptations compared with literary work and opera.

Everest (2015)

Joby Talbot, composer; Gene Scheer, librettist

The opera is based on interviews with real life subjects conducted by the librettist - the same subjects as *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster* - a 1997 bestselling nonfiction book written by Jon Krakauer. The same story was also adapted for the screen in 2015, also named *Everest*, directed by Baltasar Kormákur.

Short Synopsis

The opera *Everest* follows the harrowing true stories of climbers Rob Hall, Doug Hansen, and Beck Weathers during their 1996 attempt to summit Mount Everest. It shifts between the climbers' present struggles on the mountain, their past memories, and the perspectives of their loved ones, including Rob's wife, Jan, who is contacted in New Zealand about his perilous situation. As Beck battles delirium and Rob tries to save Doug during a fierce storm, the climbers confront haunting realizations and their deep connections to those they love.

EVEREST OPERA SYNOPSIS

Joby Talbot, composer; Gene Scheer, librettist

Everest follows the true-life stories of three climbers, Rob Hall, Doug Hansen, and Beck Weathers as they attempt to summit Mount Everest in 1996. Throughout the opera we move between the climbers' present realities on the mountain, that of their loved ones and their pasts as they slip in and out of consciousness.

From the shadows of Mount Everest, the spirits of all those who have died attempting to reach the summit sing to Beck Weathers, who is unconscious on the mountain's South Col, the final stop in the push to reach the summit. These ethereal spirits now turn their attention to Rob Hall, the expedition leader and guide, who is just reaching Everest's highest peak at 2:30 p.m., thirty minutes past the safe turnaround time. Rob sees his client Doug Hansen a mere forty feet below.

The scene shifts back to Beck Weathers. In his unconscious, dreamlike state, the stranded climber hallucinates that he is enjoying a Texas barbecue in his backyard. Beck holds court and begins to describe his experiences on Everest. Suddenly, from the edge of Beck's consciousness, the voice of his daughter Meg sings to him.

As we see Rob straining to help Doug reach the summit, time stops, and Doug sings an aria in which he describes the tormenting, deep-seated obsession that has led him to this moment. Rob takes a picture of Doug at the instant he has achieved his goal, and the guide is jarred by the memory of photographing his pregnant wife, Jan, before leaving their home in New Zealand for the Himalayas.

While Rob endeavors to get his client down from the summit of Everest, we see Beck lying, delirious, on the South Col. Once again, his daughter calls out to him in vain. From the depths of his consciousness, ruminations on his struggle with profound depression slowly merge with the memory of the events that took place on the climb earlier that same day. Rob is increasingly desperate. He has a disabled client on the top of the mountain as the storm begins raging around them both. Jan, Rob's wife, is contacted and told of her husband's life-threatening situation.

Beck, beginning to emerge from his coma, sees the climbers on the South Col huddling together in a frantic attempt to survive the storm. Beck's internal soliloquy slowly allows him to make sense of what is happening and comprehend the cold, hard truth: he is dying.

In a quartet, Doug, Rob, Jan, and Beck sing of their plight. As the quartet concludes, we see Rob propelling Doug toward a sheltered spot on the South Summit, where he hopes they can make it through the night.

Beck has finally awakened to the harsh reality that if he is going to survive another hour, he will have to save himself.

Synopsis courtesy of Opera Parallèle.

Key Scenes in Talbot's Everest

Video and libretto excerpts courtesy of Opera Parallèle.

KEY SCENE #1: Scene 4. Doug's Ascent

Everest - Scene 4. Doug's Ascent Excerpt

Doug, nearing exhaustion, struggles to complete his ascent to the summit with Rob's encouragement. The chorus underscores the dangerous passage of time as Doug rests frequently, each pause marked by labored exclamations. In a climactic moment, Doug reflects on his arduous journey and determination before finally reaching the peak, only to realize the emotional toll of his quest.

Libretto Excerpt

Time stops before Doug takes the final step. With lighting and staging there is a sense, heightened of course by music, that time stands still before Doug takes the final step.

DOUG

One more step...

CHORUS

Three fifty-six...

DOUG

More than anything, I just want the pain
of wanting this so much to go away forever.

One more step...

I worked three jobs...saved...

...gave all I have...

One more step...

One more try...

One last try...

One more step...

Thank you, Rob...

After failing last year...

I stopped believing...

You never did...

A dozen phone calls,

Urging me to believe...

Earlier today I clicked out of the line...

I stopped believing...

You whispered to me...

"One more try...

One last try...

One more step..."

Look...one... more... step...
I did... not let you... down...

CHORUS
Three fifty-six...
Four o'clock...

Doug is getting weaker and his cognition is really beginning to fail him.

DOUG
Why do I climb?
Why am I... here?
I... don't... remember...
More than anything...
I just wanted... the pain of wanting...
This... so much to... go... away... forever...

When the chorus says "Four o'clock" time resumes, and the spell of Doug's reflective moment is suddenly broken.

CHORUS
Four o'clock.

ROB
You are on top of the world!

DOUG
Take a picture...I'm not coming back here.

KEY SCENE #2: Scene 9. The Storm Hits

[Everest - Scene 9 The Storm Hits Excerpt](#)

As a storm approaches, Jan anxiously receives troubling news about her husband, Rob, who is stranded on the mountain with Doug. Rob, desperate for help, radios for oxygen and assistance but is advised by Guy to abandon Doug and save himself. Despite the dire situation and Doug hearing the conversation, Rob resolves to stay and help his friend.

Libretto Excerpt

We watch Beck being prepared to be short roped by Mike as lights come up both on Rob and Doug, who has collapsed on the ground, and on Jan who, stunned, holds the phone as she continues to listen to the disturbing news of her husband's plight. She has just received word that there is a problem. Finally she responds. Lights fade on Beck and Mike.

JAN (confused)
Rob told you to call me?
So he's fine?
I mean...No one is fine...
that high... this late...
He should have been back
on the South Col in the tents by now.
I was the expedition doctor...
I've been there...
No one is fine...
that high... this late...

ROB / JAN
Please... Please...

JAN
...Call me...

Jan hangs up the phone.

ROB (on the radio)
...I need oxygen.
Send someone up.
I'm on the top of the Hillary step.
I can get myself down.
But I don't know how the fuck
I'm going to get this man down.
Is that you, Guy?

GUY (on the radio)
Rob, Rob, the storm is big,
coming from below.
Trust me, mate. There's no time...
No other way.
Save yourself. Leave Doug behind.
It's the only choice...I'm sorry...
But you must move now... Save yourself...

(pause) Doug has heard the radio transmission.

ROB
Doug can hear you.... I have to go. (to Doug) Come on...

KEY SCENE #3: Scene 12. The Phone Call

Everest - Scene 12 The Phone Call Excerpt

As the chorus counts the agonizing hours, Jan, at home in New Zealand, receives a phone call from her husband, Rob, who is stranded on the mountain. Despite their dire situation, they share a tender conversation about their love and the future, contemplating the name Sarah for their child. Rob reassures Jan, asking her not to worry, while Jan expresses her deep concern and affection, trying to comfort him from afar.

Additional Reference: [Phone Call Scene from 'Everest' \(film 2015\)](#)

Libretto Excerpt

CHORUS

Two a.m.

How many breaths will you take in your life?

Will you only count the last ones you take?

Three fourteen a.m.

How can you know when you gently started letting go?

Four nineteen.

Five ten.

Left for dead.

Lights up on Jan at home in New Zealand.

ROB

Hello Jan, my sweetheart.

JAN

Rob, my darling...

ROB

I hope you're tucked up in a nice warm bed.

JAN

How are you my love?

I can't tell you how much I'm thinking about you.

You sound so much better than I expected.

Are you warm, darling?

Are you warm, darling?

ROB

Sarah...Sarah...How about Sarah for the name?

JAN / ROB
Sarah... Sarah... Sarah...
Ours forever...
I love you.

ROB
Sleep well, my sweetheart.
Please don't worry too much.

JAN
Rob, my darling,
Don't feel that you're alone.