

Enriching the Humanities Through Opera

Title: 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)

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 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Shakespeare), 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 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Shakespeare), presentation slides (includes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 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, 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.
- **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 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).

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,” “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” 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 literary work (Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Resolution).
 - 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.
- Read through the full synopsis (see below) of the opera *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 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.
 - For a more detailed exploration, visit: [A Midsummer Night's Dream: Libretto Vs. Script](#)

- 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 summary, libretto excerpts, and viewing options):

- Key Scene #1: Act II, Scene 1: Puck “makes an ass” of Bottom
 - Key Scene #2: Act III, Scene 2: Pyramus and Thisbe
 - Key Scene #3: Act III, Finale & Puck’s Epilogue
- 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:
 - “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?”

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?”
- Conduct a critical analysis of film adaptations compared with literary work and opera.

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1960)

Benjamin Britten, composer; Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, librettists

A Midsummer Night's Dream, an adaptation of Shakespeare's play, was first performed in 1960 at the Aldeburgh Festival. Benjamin Britten, alongside his partner Peter Pears, condensed the original text, emphasizing the interplay between the human world, the fairy realm, and the comic mechanicals. The opera is renowned for its dreamlike atmosphere, haunting orchestration, and innovative vocal writing. Britten's music amplifies the fantastical elements of the story, blending ethereal sounds with playful moments, making it a hallmark of 20th-century opera. Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears made significant adjustments to streamline the narrative and enhance its musicality by reducing the text, paring down Shakespeare's five acts into three. Many of Shakespeare's lengthy monologues and dialogues were either condensed or eliminated to suit the musical pacing. The opera emphasizes lyrical moments, focusing on emotional intensity rather than the intricacies of Shakespeare's wordplay. The opening scenes in Athens, including Theseus and Hippolyta's early interactions, were cut entirely. Instead, the opera begins directly in the enchanted forest, reinforcing the dreamlike atmosphere from the start. This shift heightens the sense of magic and otherworldliness, placing more focus on the interactions between the fairies, lovers, and mechanicals.

Creative casting decisions were made as well to enhance the fairy world's strangeness. Oberon, for instance, was reimagined as a countertenor rather than a traditional male baritone, giving his character a delicate and ethereal quality. Tytania (Titania) also sings in high, shimmering lines, emphasizing her supernatural nature. Meanwhile, the mechanicals' music is comic and earthy, highlighting their humor in contrast with the elegance of the fairies. The opera focuses more on mood and atmosphere than on the play's intricate subplots. Music plays a key role in distinguishing the three distinct worlds—the dreamy textures of the fairy realm, the passionate but confused emotions of the young lovers, and the bumbling comedy of the mechanicals. Britten's adaptation emphasizes the emotional essence of Shakespeare's work, enhancing the surreal, poetic quality of the story through music. The result is an opera that distills the original's humor, magic, and romance into a compact, dreamlike experience.

Short Synopsis

In the woods outside Athens, Oberon, King of the Fairies, quarrels with his queen, Tytania, over a boy she refuses to give up. Oberon sends his servant, Puck, to retrieve a magic flower to enchant her and distract her. Meanwhile, Lysander and Hermia flee into the forest to escape a forced marriage, pursued by Demetrius and Helena. Puck accidentally enchants Lysander instead of Demetrius, creating chaos. A group of workers also enters the forest to rehearse a play, and Puck further complicates matters by turning one of them, Bottom, into an ass, causing Tytania to fall in love with him. In the end, the enchantments are undone, the lovers are reconciled, and they all return to Athens for Theseus's wedding, where the workers perform their play.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM OPERA SYNOPSIS

Benjamin Britten, composer; Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, librettists

ACT I

Night has fallen in the woods outside Athens. Oberon, King of the Fairies, is quarrelling with Tytania, his queen, over a young boy who is under her protection. She refuses to give him up. Oberon sends his servant Puck to find a magic flower, whose juice, sprinkled on Tytania's eyelids, will make her fall in love with the first creature she sees upon waking. He plans to steal the boy while she is under the spell.

Lysander and Hermia have escaped from the city and its law, which allows Hermia's father to force her into marriage with Demetrius. They decide to elope and set off into the woods. Demetrius, who loves Hermia, chases after her, himself pursued by Helena, who is hopelessly in love with him. But Demetrius scornfully rejects her and runs off into the forest. Oberon, who has witnessed their argument, orders Puck to seek out Demetrius and make him fall in love with Helena with the help of the magic juice.

Six working men have also left the city to discuss in secret a play they hope to perform at the wedding of Theseus, Duke of Athens, to Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. There is some disagreement over casting, with Bottom, the weaver, and Flute, the bellows-mender, finally agreeing to play the parts of Pyramus and Thisbe, the star-crossed lovers of the play's title. Quince, the carpenter, as well as the author and director of the play, hands out scripts, and all agree to meet later that night to rehearse.

Exhausted and lost, Lysander and Hermia lie down to sleep. Puck, who thinks he has found Demetrius, sprinkles the juice of the magic flower on Lysander's eyes. Demetrius appears, still pursued by Helena, and angrily abandons her. Alone and in despair, she sees the sleeping Lysander and wakes him. Under the effect of the spell, he immediately declares his love. Helena is furious and runs off, thinking he is making fun of her. Lysander follows. Hermia awakes from a terrible dream to find herself alone.

In the heart of the forest, the fairies help their mistress Tytania to sleep. Oberon steals in to put the juice on her eyes, hoping she will "wake when some vile thing is near."

ACT II

Later that night, Quince and his men meet to rehearse. Puck, seeing them at work, decides to amuse himself by turning Bottom into an ass. At the sight of this strange and terrifying transformation, the others run off. Bottom sings out loud to keep his courage up. This wakes Tytania, who immediately falls in love with him. With the help of the fairies, she manages to coax him to bed.

Oberon is delighted to find Tytania in love with an ass. But when Demetrius arrives, still in pursuit of Hermia, he realizes Puck has made a mistake. Demetrius falls asleep, and Oberon pours the juice on his eyes. The arrival of Helena and Lysander wakes Demetrius, who now declares his passion for Helena. When Hermia appears as well, only to be rejected by Lysander, Helena is convinced that the men have planned it all to mock her. The four quarrel furiously. Enraged at Puck, Oberon gives him an antidote to

administer to Lysander. Puck leads the lovers away through the forest until they fall asleep and puts the herb on Lysander's eyes.

ACT III

Shortly before dawn, Oberon releases Tytania from the spell. Daybreak rouses the four lovers, who are finally reconciled—Demetrius with Helena and Lysander with Hermia. Bottom, restored to human shape, wakes from what he thinks was a strange dream. He wanders off while his friends search for him. They're about to give up when he returns with news that their play has been chosen to be performed at court.

Back in Athens, the four lovers ask Theseus's forgiveness for their disobedience to the law. Theseus decides that they shall be married together with him and Hippolyta. Quince and his players finally give their performance of "Pyramus and Thisbe," and the three couples retire to bed. Oberon, Tytania, and the fairies bless the sleeping household—with Puck having the last word.

Synopsis courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera.

Key Scenes in Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
Video excerpts and timestamps are pulled from YouTube.

KEY SCENE #1: Act II, Scene 1: Puck "makes an ass" of Bottom

[Act II, Scene 1: Puck "makes an ass" of Bottom](#)

06:19 – 8:50

The mechanicals rehearse their play. Puck transforms Bottom by giving him the head of a donkey (an "ass").

Libretto Excerpt

QUINCE:

Why, you must not speak that yet;
that you answer to Pyramus:
you speak all your part at once,
cues and all.
Pyramus enter:
your cue is past;
it is, 'never tire'.

FLUTE

O, as true as truest horse,
that yet would never tire.

*(Enter Puck and Bottom with an
ass's head upon his shoulders.)*

BOTTOM

If I were fair, Thisbe,
I were only thine.

(Puck flies off.)

THE OTHERS

O monstrous! O strange!
we are haunted.
Pray, masters! fly, masters!
Help!

*(Exeunt Quince, Snug, Flute, Snout,
and Starveling.)*

BOTTOM

Why do they run away?
this is a knavery

to make me afeard.

(Flute reappears.)

FLUTE

O Bottom, Bottom,
thou art changed!
what do I see on thee?

(Exit Flute.)

BOTTOM:

What do you see?
you see an asshead of your own,
do you?

*(The rustics reappear from behind
the trees.)*

ALL

Bless thee, Bottom! bless thee!
thou art translated.

(They disappear.)

BOTTOM

I see their knavery:
this is to make an ass of me;
to fright me, if they could.
But I will not stir from this place,
and I will sing, that they shall hear
I am not afraid.

(Singing)

The woosell cock, so black of hue,
with orange-tawny bill,
the throstle with his note so true,
the wren with little quill,...

KEY SCENE #2: Act 3, Scene 2: Pyramus and Thisbe

Act III, Scene 2: Pyramus and Thisbe

00:06 – 2:01

The mock-tragic play-within-the-play, Thisbe, portrayed by Flute, discovers the lifeless Pyramus (portrayed by Bottom), who believed Thisbe to have been killed by a lion. Thisbe sings the aria “Asleep, my Love?” as a lament and stabs herself.

Libretto Excerpt

THISBE

Asleep, my love?

What, dead, my dove?

Pyramus, arise!

Speak, speak. Quite dumb?

Dead, dead? A tomb

must cover thy sweet eyes.

These lily lips, this cherry nose,

these yellow cowslip cheeks,

are gone, are gone:

Lovers, make moan:

His eyes were green as leeks.

Tongue, not a word:

Come, trusty sword;

come, blade, my breast imbrue:

And, farewell, friends;

thus Thisbe ends:

(She stabs herself.)

Adieu, adieu, adieu.

KEY SCENE #3: Act III, Finale & Puck’s Epilogue

Act III, Finale & Puck’s Epilogue

0:03 – 3:02

The various stories have been resolved: the lovers are united, the mechanicals presented their play, and the fairies have restored order. Puck then breaks the "fourth wall" and talks openly to the audience, apologizing if the performance has offended anyone.

Libretto Excerpt

OBERON AND TYTANIA

Hand in hand, with fairy grace,

Will we sing, and bless this place.

OBERON, TYTANIA, FAIRIES

Now, until the break of day,
through this house each fairy stray.
To the best bride-bed will we,
which by us shall blessed be;
and the issue there create
ever shall be fortunate.
So shall all the couples three
ever true in loving be.
With this field-dew consecrate,
every fairy take his gait;
and each several chamber bless,
through this palace,
with sweet peace;
ever shall in safety rest,
and the owner of it blest.

OBERON

Trip away; make no stay;
meet me all by break of day.

(Exeunt all but Puck.)

PUCK

If we shadows have offended,
think but this,
and all is mended,
that you have but slumber'd here
while these visions did appear.
Gentles, do not reprehend:
If you pardon,
we will mend:
Else the Puck a liar call;
so, good night unto you all.
Give me your hands,
if we be friends,
and Robin shall restore amends.

(He claps his hands.)

Libretto excerpts courtesy of [opera-arias](#).