

Enriching the Humanities Through Opera

Title: Responding to Key Scenes

Grade Level: 9-12th

Length: 45 minutes

Literary Work: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Malcolm X and Alex Haley)

Opera: *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (Anthony Davis, composer; Thulani Davis, librettist)

Inquiry Question: How can poetry and music enhance a key scene in a story?

Lesson Focus: This lesson will focus on responding to the context in a key scene or turning point in the opera by devising a poem based on a character's emotions in that moment.

Prior Knowledge: : Students have studied the history of Malcolm X and read a literary work inspired by his life, have analyzed characters and can name the (Who, What, When Where), have participated in the previous adaptation lesson.

Materials: Copies of literary work, presentation slides (includes *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* short opera synopsis with video examples and libretto excerpts), poetic devices definitions handout, libretto excerpts of key scenes, interactive board, paper, and pens/pencils.

Key Vocabulary: Aria, poetic devices (rhyme, repetition, meter, alliteration, metaphor, simile, imagery, personification, onomatopoeia, etc.)

Definitions

- **Aria:** A self-contained piece for solo voice typically found in opera, oratorio, and cantata. It typically showcases the vocal abilities of the singer and often serves as a moment of introspection or emotional expression for the character.
- **Poetic Devices:** Refers to techniques and tools used by poets to create a desired effect in their writing. These devices include features such as rhyme, meter, metaphor, simile, alliteration, imagery, and symbolism, among others. Each device helps to enhance the meaning, emotions, or aesthetics of a poem.
 - **Rhyme:** Where words have similar sounds, usually at the end of the word, creating a harmonious and pleasing effect in poetry or song lyrics.
 - **Symbolism:** The use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities, often conveying deeper meanings or emotions beyond literal interpretation. Symbols can be objects, images, words, or gestures that carry symbolic significance and are used to enhance the meaning of a text, artwork, or communication.

Repetition: Refers to the deliberate use of the same word, phrase, line, or stanza multiple times within a poem. This technique helps emphasize certain ideas or themes, create rhythm, and establish a sense of unity or structure.

- **Meter:** Refers to the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of verse. It provides a rhythmic structure and helps to create a sense of musicality in the poem. Different poetic forms and styles may have varying meters, such as iambic pentameter or trochaic tetrameter.
- **Alliteration:** The repetition of the same sound at the beginning of neighboring words in a sentence or phrase. It is often used in poetry, literature, and advertising to create a rhythm or musical effect.
- **Metaphor:** A figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable to imply a resemblance, typically for rhetorical or expressive effect.
- **Simile:** A figure of speech in which two things are compared using "like" or "as" to show similarities between them. It is used to make descriptions more vivid and engaging by creating a clear image in the reader's mind.
- **Imagery:** Refers to the use of descriptive language that appeals to the senses, creating vivid mental images for the reader or listener. This technique helps to evoke emotions, set the mood, and enhance the overall meaning.
- **Personification:** Refers to the use of human characteristics or qualities attributed to animals, objects, or abstract concepts. This technique is used to give non-human entities human-like traits to create vivid imagery or convey deeper meanings.
- **Onomatopoeia:** A word that phonetically imitates, resembles or suggests the sound that it describes, such as "buzz," "meow," or "splash." It is a figure of speech that uses words to mimic the sounds of the real world, creating a sensory experience for the reader or listener.

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

- Identify characters' emotions and responses in a key scene.
- Identify poetic devices found in presented examples.
- Create a poem, at least four lines in length, using two poetic devices to represent a character's response to a key scene in the work.
- Demonstrate their understanding of their chosen key scene through their poems.

Assessment: Evaluate students' understanding of their chosen key scene and character from their writing of a minimum of four-line poems incorporating at least two poetic devices.

Assessment Rubric

4: The student's poem is highly creative, effectively uses at least two poetic devices, and is well-structured with descriptive language demonstrating understanding of character's emotions and response to action in key scene.

3: The student's poem is moderately creative, uses at least two poetic devices, and is mostly well-structured with some understanding of character's emotions and response to action in key scene.

2: The student's poem lacks creativity, struggles to incorporate poetic devices, and is poorly structured with minimal understanding of character's emotions and response to action in key scene.

1: The student's poem lacks creativity, fails to use poetic devices, and is poorly structured with a significant lack of understanding of character's emotions and response to action in key scene.

Learning Standards:

Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

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.6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on other's ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.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.9-10.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone)

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.11-12.6: Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

National Core Arts Standards

MU:Cn10.o.T.Ia. Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choice and intent when creating, performing, and responding to music.

MU:Cn11.o.T.Ia. Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.

TH:Cr2-II.a. Refine a dramatic concept to demonstrate a critical understanding of historical and cultural influences of original ideas applied to a drama/theatre work.

TH:Pr4.1.I.a. Examine how character relationships assist in telling the story of a drama/theatre work.

TH:Pr4.1.I.b. Shape character choices using given circumstances in 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.

Procedure:

Introduction/Hook (5 minutes):

- Begin with a listening activity of an excerpt of an aria from *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*.
 - Option 1: Act I, Scene 3: “You want the story, but you don’t want to know”
OR
 - Option 2: Act III, Scene 2: “When a man is lost”
00:00 – 01:28
 - Have students first listen to the music without text displayed on board and take notes of the emotions being expressed in the music.
 - Discuss findings and make a list of answers to create an emotion vocabulary “toolbox.”

Main Narrative/Sequence (20 minutes):

- Explain that this aria comes from the opera *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*.
 - Read/Review opera’s short synopsis found in the presentation slides.
- Display aria text and/or aria text translation on board. Have students listen again either following along with the text or watching a video performance and taking note of any new ideas.
 - Identify the character singing and the emotions expressed.
 - Compare initial reaction to new understanding.
 - Ask questions such as, “How does viewing the text change your understanding?” “Does knowing the character singing change your understanding?” “How does the text and music add to your understanding of the scene?”
- Discuss/review the definitions and use of poetic devices.
 - Show examples of several poetic devices in presentation slides (rhyme, repetition, meter, alliteration, metaphor, simile, imagery, personification, onomatopoeia, etc.)
 - Ask students to identify poetic devices in the provided examples.

- Presentation slides include excerpts from “The Highwayman” by Alfred Noyes, “After Apple Picking” by Robert Frost, “A Red, Red Rose” by Robert Burns, “The Raven” by Edgar Allen Poe, “Because I could not stop for Death” by Emily Dickinson, and Malcolm X’s Act I aria (option 1) or Betty’s Act III aria (option 2).
- Discuss guidelines for response poems:
 - Poems should be at least four lines in length, from one of the characters’ perspectives in the scene using at least two poetic devices.
- Show an example of a response poem to Malcolm X’s Act I aria (option 1) or Betty’s Act III aria (option 2).
 - Identify the character who could have written the poem (Opt. 1: Malcolm X’s father, Earl, Opt. 2: Malcolm X) as well as their emotions and response to the action in the scene.

Activity/Practice (12 minutes):

- Students, independently, write a response poem based on this lesson’s key scene/aria or their chosen key scene from the Exploring Story Adaptation lesson.
 - Exploring Story Adaptation lesson key scenes: Students can review their chosen key scenes and identify the characters’ emotions and responses to the action in the scene. Students will choose a character’s point of view, how the character feels about the initial aria, and their response. Students can take into consideration how their adaptation choices may influence the character’s response.

Present/Share (5 minutes):

- Willing students share or perform a dramatic reading of their poems in front of class.
 - Encourage students to explore the musical aspects of their poem when performing (e.g. rhythm, tempo, inflection/intonation, etc.)

Reflection (3 minutes):

- Reflect on how poetry and music can enhance the scene, and what was learned in viewing and presenting poems. Ask and discuss:
 - “How does poetry and music enhance the scene?”
 - “What did you learn from viewing and presenting our response poems?”

Extension/Follow Up/Next Steps:

- Create a soundscape/backing track using garage band or chrome music or curate a playlist for the key scene to support the mood and action.
- Students can write response poems/arias for the key scene they created adaptation pitches for in the Exploring Story Adaptation lesson.

X: *The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (1985)

Anthony Davis, composer; Thulani Davis, librettist

X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X premiered in Philadelphia in 1985 with a revised version premiering in 1986 at New York City Opera, has only been produced a handful of times, until recently when The Metropolitan Opera, Seattle Opera, Opera Omaha, and Detroit Opera launched a co-production of this piece all directed by Robert O'Hara. Each company produced a slightly different version of the production to fit their stage. One of the largest variations on this production is the Metropolitan Opera included a chorus of Afrofuturistic characters that framed the action on stage.

The music and libretto of *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* are deeply rooted in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with composer Anthony Davis and librettist Thulani Davis translating Malcolm X's narrative into operatic form. The opera doesn't merely recount events from his life; instead, it distills his psychological, emotional, and ideological journey, giving audiences an immersive experience of his transformation.

Anthony Davis's score blends jazz, blues, and elements of classical opera with African and African American musical traditions. This fusion mirrors the layered identity of Malcolm X himself—an individual shaped by Harlem's vibrant culture, his family's activist legacy, and his experiences with racial injustice. Just as *The Autobiography* traces Malcolm X's ideological evolution, the opera's music reflects different stages of his life. For instance, moments from Malcolm X's early life in Lansing, Michigan, are often set to rhythms that evoke spirituals and African traditions, symbolizing his heritage and the resilience of his ancestors. As Malcolm X evolves from "Detroit Red" to a prominent leader, the music follows suit. The jazz idioms Davis employs in these segments communicate Malcolm X's immersion in urban Black culture, his transformation into an outspoken figure, and his rebellious spirit. Later, as Malcolm X embraces Islam and a more global view on race and social justice, Davis incorporates musical motifs that reflect this broader worldview, utilizing more lyrical, introspective themes.

Each act centers on pivotal events, with dialogues and arias inspired by Malcolm X's own words and the autobiography's intense reflection on his experiences. By condensing complex ideas and life events into poetic language, the libretto captures the philosophical and emotional weight of Malcolm X's journey, giving it both a historical and universal resonance. Malcolm X's powerful arias, often inspired by speeches or inner monologues, create moments of deep introspection, while choruses amplify the collective voices of Black communities impacted by systemic oppression.

Short Synopsis

The opera presents 12 vignettes from the life of Malcolm X, from youth to his death: abject poverty in Depression-era Lansing to adolescence in Boston to Mecca (the site of his pivotal hajj, the traditional Muslim pilgrimage), as well as a number of places in New York City, including a mosque, the streets of Harlem, and, finally, the site of his assassination in 1965, the Audubon Ballroom and West 165th Street.

X: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MALCOLM X OPERA SYNOPSIS

(Anthony Davis, composer; Thulani Davis, librettist)

ACT I

1931, Lansing, Michigan. At the home of Reverend Earl Little and his wife, Louise, a meeting is taking place of the local chapter of Marcus Garvey's Universal Improvement Association, and Rev. Little is late. Louise has been tense all day, and members of the meeting are concerned about active white supremacist groups terrorizing local people. Louise remembers past attacks that haunt her. A policeman arrives to say that Rev. Little was killed in a streetcar accident. The neighbors ponder what may have really happened, and Louise becomes distraught, sings to herself, and soon becomes unreachable. A social worker comes to the home sometime later and declares the Little children to be wards of the state. Malcolm tries to reach his mother, who does not react to him. She is hospitalized. His older half-sister appears to take him to her home in Boston.

About 1940, Boston. Still very much a country boy, Malcolm is introduced to Ella's middle-class black Boston and, through his discovery of the music there, finds himself in the local after-hours life, with his guide, a character named Street. But as a young adult, he gets involved with some people who rob a wealthy home, and he is arrested.

In an interrogation room, Malcolm reveals the anger over the troubles that have long plagued people like him.

ACT II

1946–48. Malcolm broods in jail when his brother Reginald comes to visit. Reginald tells him about Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam, whose teachings he thinks will help his brother. Malcolm begins to study the Nation's teachings and read many books. He becomes a serious and more hopeful man. Malcolm X is born. The jail recedes as Malcolm hears and then sees Elijah. It is as if the word removed the bars. They come face to face. Elijah embraces Malcolm like a son. He tells him he has much to learn to spread Allah's word and sends him out to start temples. He is an electrifying speaker.

1954–63. Malcolm begins his ministry, helping to found temples in Boston, Philadelphia, Springfield, Hartford, Atlanta, and New York. This scene spans several years in telescopic fashion. The period includes some of the heights of the civil rights era and closes with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Malcolm is seen speaking on various Harlem street corners as time passes. He always takes the crowd. Malcolm warms to his task when speaking before more and more exuberant crowds and decries some of the peaceful protests in the South as Malcolm defines his own political position.

He leads an anthem declaring "We are a nation." At the end, he is asked about Kennedy's death and makes a remark lacking in sensitivity to the nation's mourning. Elijah is enraged.

Malcolm and Betty briefly discuss his upcoming meeting with Elijah. They express the hope that their children will be free to dream without fear.

ACT III

Malcolm is called to see Elijah, who is both disturbed that this spokesman for the Nation may have put the organization in jeopardy and that he may have become too powerful. Malcolm is disparaged by other Muslims as he comes to the meeting. The Nation is splintering into vying factions. Elijah silences Malcolm for three months, and Malcolm consents to the will of his leader.

He visits with his family, disheartened by the turmoil dividing his community and reporters hounding his every step. Betty hands him a ticket and tells him to go to Mecca, to spend time alone, and find his way. He decides to simply trust in Allah and ask for His help.

Malcolm is in Mecca, dressed in the simple cloths of a hajji and awaiting word as to whether he will be permitted in as a convert and not a man born in Islam. The call to morning prayer sounds, and people there begin to go through the traditional motions of prayer, which are new to him. He watches, imitates the others, and tries to learn the orthodox ritual. He has a larger vision of people across the world united together in faith, rather than by a single ideology.

1964–65. Just before he returns to Harlem, a riot breaks out there. He returns, now a changed man but outwardly the same. He is greeted by reporters who question him about the rioting.

Later, he delivers a speech before his own newly formed group, the Organization of Afro-American Unity. He tells his supporters what he has learned in Africa—that they are a part of a larger movement against colonialism and racism. He is warned of death threats. He is not concerned with the fear so evident around him.

He arrives to give a speech at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem. After greeting his audience, he is gunned down.

Opera synopsis courtesy of Detroit Opera via the Metropolitan Opera.

Key Scenes/Arias in Davis' X: The Life and Times of Malcom X

Video excerpts and timestamps are pulled from the Metropolitan Opera on Demand and YouTube. Performance Date: Nov. 18, 2023

OPTION 1 KEY SCENE/ARIA: Act I, Scene 3: "You want the story, but you don't want to know" (Excerpt)

Met Opera on Demand: Track #13. ACT I: I wouldn't tell you what I know (Malcolm's Aria)

05:31 – 07:16

OR

Act I, Scene 3: "You want the story, but you don't want to know"

In a police interrogation room, Malcolm expresses his anger over the struggles and injustices that have long burdened people like him.

Libretto Excerpt

MALCOLM

I've shined your shoes, I've sold your dope,
Hauled your bootleg, played with hustler's hope.
But the crime is mine, I will do your time
so you can sleep.
I won't be out to get you on the street at night
but I won't forget any evil that's white.
My truth is a hammer coming from the back.
It will beat you down when you least expect.
I would not tell you what I know.
You want the truth,
You want the truth,
You want the truth, but you don't want to know.

Libretto excerpt courtesy of Seattle Opera.

Poetic Devices used: repetition, metaphor, imagery, rhyme

RESPONSE POEM EXAMPLE

I know this rage that lives inside of you.
It burns and consumes,
It fueled me too.

**OPERA
AMERICA**

Use this fire to fight this foe,
Lead with purpose and show them what you know.

Poetic Devices used: rhyme, personification, and alliteration

OPTION 2 KEY SCENE/ARIA: Act III, Scene 2: "When a man is lost" (Excerpt)

Met Opera on Demand: Track #26. ACT III: When a man is lost (Betty's Aria)
01:49 – 03:25

OR

Act III, Scene 2: "When a man is lost"
00:00 – 01:28

Malcolm is disheartened by the turmoil dividing his family and the reporters hounding his every step. His wife, Betty Shabazz, hands him a ticket and tells him to go to Mecca to spend time alone and find his way.

Libretto Excerpt

BETTY

Alone with his dreams in a light seldom seen.
Soon the henchmen will come take his sky and stars,
and leave only blood.
When a man is lost what is left inside?
What makes him take one step
or keep on breathing?

Libretto excerpt courtesy of Seattle Opera.

Poetic Devices used: imagery, symbolism, metaphor, alliteration

RESPONSE POEM EXAMPLE

I walk with the weight of shadows behind,
but truth carves a path, fierce and unkind.
If blood stains my stars and clouds my sight,
let justice rise bold, let it burn bright.

Poetic Devices used: metaphor, alliteration, rhyme