

## Enriching the Humanities Through Opera

**Title:** Responding to Key Scenes

**Grade Level:** 9-12<sup>th</sup>

**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:** 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 read the literary work, have analyzed characters and can name the (Who, What, When Where), have participated in the previous adaptation lesson.

**Materials:** Copies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare, presentation slides (includes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 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 Oberon’s Act I aria, “I know a bank.”
  - [Act I, Scene 2: “I know a bank”](#)  
00:07 – 4:14
  - 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 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.
  - 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.
  - 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 includes “Sonnet 27: Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed” by William Shakespeare, “First Alzheimer’s Sonnet” by Marilyn Nelson, and Oberon’s Act I aria, “I know a bank.”
- 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 Oberon's Act I aria, "I know a bank."
  - Identify the character who could have written the poem, as well as their emotions and response to the action in the scene.
  - Bonus response poem provided in presentation slides.

**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.

## **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 Scene/Aria in Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Video excerpt and timestamp are pulled from YouTube.

### KEY SCENE/ARIA: Act I, Scene 2: "I know a bank"

#### Act I, Scene 2: "I know a bank"

00:07 – 4:14

Oberon is giving Puck instructions on how to carry out his plan to enchant Tytania. He describes the magical flower, the "love-in-idleness," and tells Puck to fetch it so they can use its juice to cast a spell. This flower will make Titania fall in love with the first creature she sees when she wakes up, leading to the humorous and chaotic events that follow.

#### Libretto Excerpt

OBERON

Welcome, wanderer!

Hast thou the flower there?

*(Puck gives Oberon the flower and lies at his feet.)*

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,  
where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,  
quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,  
with sweet musk-roses and with eglantine:  
There sleeps Tytania sometime of the night,  
lull'd in these flowers with dances and delight;  
and there the snake throws her enamell'd skin,  
weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in:  
and with the juice of this I'll streak her eyes,  
and make her full of hateful fantasies.  
Take thou some of it, and seek through this grove:  
a sweet Athenian lady is in love  
with a disdainful youth: anoint his eyes;  
but do it when the next thing he espies  
may be the lady: thou shalt know the man  
by the Athenian garments he hath on.

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

**Poetic Devices used:** imagery, personification, metaphor, meter, rhyme

## RESPONSE POEM EXAMPLE

That bank you speak of — oh, I know it well!  
Where thyme whispers secrets no mortal can tell,  
Tytania's heart shall twist and stray,  
And love's mischief will have its way.  
Oh, what sport! Human fates we shall spin  
Twisting hearts like leaves in the wind.  
Fear not, good Oberon, I'll find them with glee,  
And misplace their reason most artfully!

**Poetic Devices used:** personification, simile, imagery, rhyme

## BONUS RESPONSE POEM EXAMPLE

*inspired by genz slang*

If we peeps have sussed  
While we cooked  
Brush this off as  
no cap rizz sorry

**Poetic Devices used:** alliteration, imagery