

Enriching the Humanities Through Opera

Title: Exploring Story Adaptation

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: 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 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, Story arc (Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Resolution Ripple effects).

Materials: Copies of literary work, presentation slides (includes *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* 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.
- Define historical fiction and name one or more methods a creator can take creative license when creating a piece of historical fiction.
- 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.9-10.3: Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.

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.11-12.3: Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

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,” “Malcom X,” 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 (20-30 minutes):

- Create a timeline of major events in Malcolm X’s life based on his autobiography, highlighting the important people in his life.
 - *Optional* - have your student’s trace Malcolm X’s life as defined through the different names he was associated with (Malcolm Little, Detroit Red, Malcolm X and Malik El-Shabazz).
 - Suggested major events in Malcolm X’s life:
 - 1925: Born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska.
 - 1929: Malcolm’s family home is burned down, likely by the Ku Klux Klan.
 - 1931: His father, Earl Little, a preacher and member of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), is killed in a streetcar “accident.”
 - 1937: Malcolm’s mother, Louise Little, is institutionalized in a mental hospital, and Malcolm and his siblings are sent to different foster homes.
 - 1946: Sentenced to prison for burglary, where he converts to the Nation of Islam.

- 1952: Released from prison and becomes Malcolm X, a key figure in the Nation of Islam.
 - 1958: Married Betty Shabazz.
 - 1963: Breaks from the Nation of Islam due to ideological differences, and clash with leader and mentor Elijah Muhammad.
 - 1964: Forms Muslim Mosque, Inc. and later travels to Mecca for Hajj, converting to Sunni Islam and changing his name to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz.
 - 1965: Assassinated while delivering a speech in New York City.
- Read through the full synopsis (see below) of the opera *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* as a class and discuss the fundamental elements of the story.
 - Conduct a “Turn and Talk” activity. (Students chat in pairs, or small groups)
 - Ask students to discuss how the opera plot compares with their timeline of Malcolm’s life, and the corresponding literary work. (What events did the librettist choose to include and what did they leave out?)
 - For a more detailed exploration, visit:
 - [How to Make an Opera about a Revolutionary](#)
 - [The Making of Malcolm](#)
- 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: Act I, Scene 1: A man was on the tracks (Reverend Little is Dead)
 - Key Scene #2: Act II, Scene 2: You are not empty
 - Key Scene #3: Act III, Scene 4: I have learned so much in Africa
- Define historical fiction and discuss how a librettist, author, and/or screenwriter can take creative liberties to breathe new life into historical events and make them more relevant for their audiences. 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 and the importance of making adaptation choices that stay true to the essence of who Malcolm X was and what he accomplished. Questions to consider:
 - How could you retell the story of Malcolm X?
 - Can Malcolm X’s story be set in the present? Is his story still relevant today? Why or why not?
 - Consider the key themes of his story that are conveyed, how can those connect to a current audience well?
 - Can adaptation work for historical events and figures? Why or why not?
 - 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.*
 - *If students choose to change elements of Malcolm X's identity, they should justify why and how they've chosen to keep their core essence in that change.*
- 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 choose a major event from the timeline that is also found in the opera to brainstorm for an adaptation pitch.

Present/Share (8 minutes):

- Each group will present their pitch for an 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?”
 - “Were there any new insights or perspectives that emerged?”

Extension/Follow-up/Next steps:

- Ask and discuss:
 - “Can the story of Malcolm X work be set in the present? Is it still relevant today? Why or why not?”
 - “Should we even adapt Malcolm X's story? Why or why not? What might be the benefits to adaptation? What do we lose in adapting the story?”
 - “Can adaptation work for historical events and figures? Why or why not?”
- Critical analysis of film adaptations compared with literary work and opera.

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 in Davis' *X: The Life and Times of Malcom X*

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

KEY SCENE #1: Act I, Scene 1: A man was on the tracks (Reverend Little is Dead)

Met Opera on Demand: Track #6. Act I: A man was on the tracks (Reverend Little is Dead)

00:00 – 02:43

The police arrive at the Little family home with news that Reverend Little, Malcolm's father, was found dead on the train tracks. A family friend breaks the news to Louise Little.

Libretto Excerpt

MEN

A man was on the tracks.
A streetcar ran him down.
Reverend Little is dead.
He says that Earl was on the tracks.
He says the streetcar ran him down.
A white man cut him down
Some white men cut him down.
They pushed him on the tracks.
These devils hunt us down... like cursed dogs.

LOUISE

The air seems thin and fragile.
In these twilight hours,
every light's a fire, fire
Now mine tonight

MEN

They pushed him on the tracks.
Those devils dressed in white
They want to kill us all without a fight
They killed his brothers too.
It could be me or you.
Hung one high in Georgia!
Shot one dead up north.
Murdered one low in the night
and Earl tonight.
Some white men cut him down.
They pushed him on the tracks.
These devils hunt us down... like cursed dogs.

KEY SCENE #2: Act II, Scene 2: You are not empty

Met Opera on Demand: Track #16. ACT II: You are not empty

00:00 – 5:45

After studying the Koran and the teachings of the Nation of Islam during his time in prison, Malcolm leaves and meets with the leader of the Nation, Elijah Muhammed. Elijah tells Malcolm to denounce his last name inherited from a history of enslavement and replace it with an X. Thus, Malcom X is born.

Libretto Excerpt

ELIJAH

Malcolm,
who have you been?
Malcolm,
from where do you come?
Why are you so thirsty and worn?
Who would you be?

MALCOLM

I came from a desert
of pain and remorse,
from slavery, exile,
from jail's brute force.

ELIJAH

Who would you be?

MALCOLM

I would just be a man
who knows right and wrong,
who knows the past was stolen away.

ELIJAH

A life we see.
A reason to be.
But who will you be?

MALCOLM

My name means nothing.

ELIJAH

An "X" you must claim.

MALCOLM

My name means I was a slave.

ELIJAH

An “X” you must claim
for what was lost –
your African name,
an ocean crossed.
An “X” will stand
until God returns
to speak a name
that will be yours.
Come, Malcolm X,
let me teach you.
Allahu-Akbar
Allah is the greatest.
Let me teach you.

ELIJAH

As Salaam-Alaikum,
Peace be unto you.

MALCOLM

Wa-Alaikum-Salaam,
and unto you be peace.

KEY SCENE #3: Act III, Scene 4: I have learned so much in Africa

[Met Opera on Demand](#): Track #30. ACT III: I have learned so much in Africa
00:00 – 5:39

Not long before his assassination, Malcolm X speaks to his newly founded Organization of Afro-American Unity. He shares what he learned in Africa—that their struggle connects to a larger, global fight against colonialism and racism. Though he’s warned of threats against his life, Malcolm stands firm, unaffected by the fear surrounding him.

Libretto Excerpt

MALCOLM

I have learned so much in Africa.
We’re apart of something so big,
a movement spanning the globe.
We’re freedom fighters all,
from here to Angola,
Mozambique, Ghana,
Zimbabwe, South Africa.
Chosen, destined by guns to fall...
Ballots or bullets, your call!
This is not race revolt.

Settlers came, took the ground
from Black, Yellow folks, and Brown.
A global struggle is now on.
The settlers' power will come down.
Human rights for all, not just some!
We have the right to self-defense.
We're done with slavers' crumbs,
promises, and small reforms.
We're sick from deaths of daughters,
from burying our sons.
The world hears our call
in our loss and pain.
We hear them all.
We must aim well for freedom.
Cards teeter and fall.
The house collapses.

REGINALD

Who set the bomb –
destroyed your home?
Men are hunting you down.
Where will you go?

MALCOLM

We've been hunted before
by men who hid in darkness.
There is nowhere to hide.
We do not know
which mask evil wears.
These men don't wear white hoods
but hide on the street in suits.

BETTY

Who set the bomb,
destroyed our home?
Men are hunting you down.
Where can we go?
America is a house of glass.
Anyone can see the violence inside.
Bricks fly to the walls.
The roof shatters.
The Nation is a house of cards.
Men like Malcolm push too far.
Men like Malcolm light the match!

Libretto excerpts courtesy of Seattle Opera.

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