

## Enriching the Humanities Through Opera

**Title:** Responding to Key Scenes

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

**Length:** 45 minutes

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

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

**Inquiry Question:** 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 *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster*, have analyzed characters and can name the (Who, What, When Where), have participated in the previous adaptation lesson.

**Materials:** Copies of *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster*, presentation slides (includes *Everest* 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:** Quartet, poetic devices (rhyme, repetition, meter, alliteration, metaphor, simile, imagery, personification, onomatopoeia, etc.)

### Definitions

- **Quartet:** A quartet is a group of four musicians who perform together. The term is commonly used in various contexts, particularly in music, where it often refers to specific ensembles such as a string quartet (typically consisting of two violins, a viola, and a cello) or a vocal quartet. In a broader sense, the term can also apply to any composition or work written for four parts or performers, as well as to a group of four people in any other context.
- **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 ‘Scene 10: The Huddle’ - a quartet between the 4 main characters of *Everest* and an important musical moment in the opera.
  - [Everest - Scene 10: The Huddle Excerpt](#)
  - 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 *Everest*.
  - Read/Review opera’s short synopsis found in the presentation slides.
- Display quartet text 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 characters 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 multiple short poetic device examples and the ‘Scene 10: The Huddle’ quartet.
- 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 ‘Scene 10: The Huddle.’
  - Identify the character who could have written the poem, 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/quartet or their chosen key scene from the Exploring Story Adaptation lesson.
  - Students can review their previously 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.

## **Everest (2015)**

Joby Talbot, composer; Gene Scheer, librettist

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

### **Short Synopsis**

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

## EVEREST OPERA SYNOPSIS

Joby Talbot, composer; Gene Scheer, librettist

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Synopsis courtesy of Opera Parallèle.*

**Key Scene/Quartet in Talbot's Everest**  
Video and libretto excerpt courtesy of Opera Parallèle.

**KEY SCENE/QUARTET: Scene 10. The Huddle**

[Everest - Scene 10: The Huddle Excerpt](#)

Rob and Doug inch towards the South Summit, battling the brutal elements, while Jan anxiously awaits further news. In a poignant quartet, Rob, Doug, Jan, and Beck reflect on the excruciating cold and the thin line between life and death, as Beck collapses unconscious on the South Col.

Libretto Excerpt

*Lights up on Rob and Doug who are now past the Hillary Step on the roof like incline of the traverse, making their way inch by inch to the South Summit. Lights up on Jan who is still waiting for the next phone call.*

ROB / DOUG / JAN / BECK

Too easy to die,  
Easy as falling asleep.  
To float, to let go, to be carried away...  
Tell me you feel the unbearable cold.  
The burn, the shiver...  
the crush of the wind,  
Feel it...Feel it...  
The surge of blood,  
like a million knives  
cutting the tips of your fingers.  
Tell me you feel all of this...  
For now--only life's pain  
says it is not over yet.

*Beck takes his position on the South Col among those in the huddle. He lies down and closes his eyes. He is unconscious. Lights fade on Beck and the huddle.*

**Poetic Devices used:** simile, imagery, repetition, personification, alliteration

**RESPONSE POEM EXAMPLE**

In the bitter cold's embrace, they abide,  
Where death whispers softly by their side.  
Blood surges like knives, yet they defy,  
Life's pain insists, it's not time to say goodbye.

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