

Enriching the Humanities Through Opera

Script for Lesson: Exploring Story Adaptation

Grade Level: 9-12th

Length: 45 minutes

Literary Work: *Knock Out!: The True Story of Emile Griffith* (Reinhard Kleist)

Opera: *Champion: An Opera in Jazz* (Terence Blanchard, composer; Michael Cristofer, librettist)

Slide 1:

Today, we're going to explore the concept of story adaptation.

Slide 2:

Our inquiry question is: "What is story adaptation and how is it relevant to opera?" By the end of the lesson, we will be able to: (List off objectives from slide.)

Slide 3:

We are going to begin with a word association exercise. Write down the first word that comes to mind for these words... (opera, Emile Griffith, adaptation).

(Reveal each word independently to give students a chance to write down/come up with their answers.)

****Instead of having students write down their answers, Instructor could create a live word cloud such as with *Mentimeter*. Students can add their responses via their phones/computers/tablets (repeated words will increase in size.**

What comes to mind when you hear the word "opera"?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Those are some great responses! It seems like many of you think of (examples: music, singing, and performance, etc. ... that's all part of opera!) Opera is 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. Has anyone seen an opera before?

What words did we associate with Emile Griffith.

Provide students space to share their thoughts. (Possible responses: boxer/boxing, legacy, tragedy, champion, ambition, redemption, identity, stigma, forgiveness, strength, LGBTQIA+, humanity, mortality, love, etc.)

Finally, what about “adaptation”? What does that mean to you?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

That's a great start! Adaptation is when a creative work, such as a film, television show, play, opera, musical, or even book, is based on an existing story, like a novel or short story. It's when we take an idea and make changes to fit it into a new medium or vision.

Slide 4:

Let's review the major events of Emile Griffith's life.

Review timeline of major events as a class.

1938: *Emile Griffith was born in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands.*

1950s: *Moved to New York City and began working at a hat factory. His boss noticed his physique and introduced him to boxing.*

1958: *Made professional boxing debut, defeating Joe Parham.*

1961: *Won the welterweight title by defeating Benny "Kid" Paret in a 13th-round TKO.*

1961: *Lost the title to Benny Paret in their rematch.*

1962: *Defeated Paret in their infamous third fight, regaining the welterweight title. Paret fell into a coma and died on April 3, 1962, 10 days later.*

1962-1977: *Competed across multiple weight classes, becoming a six-time world champion in welterweight and middleweight divisions.*

1977: *Retired with a professional record of 85 wins, 24 losses, and 2 draws.*

1992: *Brutally attacked in New York City, an incident speculated to be a hate crime, leaving him with significant injuries and worsening health issues.*

2005: *Came out publicly as bisexual in an interview and began advocating for LGBTQIA+ inclusion in sports.*

2013: *Died at the age of 75 in Hempstead, New York, due to complications from dementia.*

Slide 5:

Great! Now we are going to look at an opera synopsis based on Emile Griffith's life.

(Pass out opera synopsis handout.)

Read through the synopsis as a class.

Slide 6:

I would like for us to compare the story structure of the opera with the original literary work. Turn and talk with your neighbor and discuss what are some differences and similarities you noticed?

Questions on slide:

- What events did the librettist choose to include and what did they leave out?
- Is there a difference in point of view? In historical context? In narrative structure?
- What else did you notice?

Give students a couple of minutes to discuss the questions in pairs or small groups.

Would anyone like to share what they discussed?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

We are now going to delve deeper into *Champion*.

Slides 7-12: Key Scenes: choose which key scene to introduce to the class.

Slide 7: Key Scene #1

Let's look at this key scene. Emile relocates to New York from the U.S. Virgin Islands in search of his mother, Emelda, who, after they reunite, introduces him to Howie Albert, a hat manufacturer who recognizes Emile's athletic potential and trains him as a boxer.

Discuss any prominent and notable features in the image, including the identification of characters as well as any significant details that highlight their interactions or setting.

Slide 8: Key Scene #1

Here is an excerpt from that scene. As we watch, notice how any differences in the scene compared with the original literary work.

*Met Opera on Demand: Track #12. ACT I: Hey Mr. Albert
00:00 – 3:43*

(Watch excerpt.)

What did you notice?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Slide 9: Key Scene #2

Let's analyze this key scene. During the weigh-in, Benny "Kid" Paret taunts Emile about his sexual orientation, escalating tensions that culminate in the ring where, fueled by anger and Howie's encouragement, Emile unleashes a furious flurry of hits, leaving Paret in a coma.

Discuss any prominent and notable features in the image, including the identification of characters as well as any significant details that highlight their interactions or setting.

Slide 10: Key Scene #2

Here is an excerpt from that scene. As we watch, notice how any differences in the scene compared with the original literary work.

*Met Opera on Demand: Track #27. ACT I: Don't listen, Emile. Don't think—In my head it happens fast
04:56 – 07:03*

(Watch excerpt.)

What did you notice?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Slide 11: Key Scene #3

Let's examine this key scene. Emile, struggling with memory loss and brain trauma from years of boxing, meets Benny Paret Jr., the son of the man he killed in the ring. In this emotionally raw exchange, Emile seeks forgiveness while grappling with his fractured sense of self. Emile reveals he was not allowed to visit Benny in the hospital and begins to confuse Benny Jr. with Benny "Kid" Paret himself. The scene poignantly explores the lingering impacts of violence and the human need for redemption.

Discuss any prominent and notable features in the image, including the identification of characters as well as any significant details that highlight their interactions or setting.

Slide 12: Key Scene #3

Here is an excerpt from that scene. As we watch, notice how any differences in the scene compared with the original literary work.

*Met Opera on Demand: Track #47. ACT II: What is it you want from me?
00:00 – 03:02*

(Watch excerpt.)

What did you notice?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Slide 13:

Why do we adapt stories?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

How does storytelling and adaptation add relevance for an audience?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Composer Terrance Blanchard and librettist (writer of the text) Michael Cristofer drew on a range of sources to shape the story and emotional depth of *Champion*. One of the key influences was Kleist's graphic novel, which provided vivid imagery and poignant storytelling that offered deep insight into Emile Griffith's life. While the opera isn't a direct adaptation of the graphic novel, Kleist's exploration of Griffith's identity, guilt, and emotional struggles—especially following the tragic Paret incident—played a significant role in shaping the opera. These themes became central to portraying Griffith's personal and psychological journey in *Champion*.

Slide 14:

To further our understanding of the adaptation process, we will create an adaptation pitch for one of the three chosen key scenes from the opera. Before we do, let's look at the adaptation guidelines. We will focus on the Who, What, When, and Where in the scene. When we say, "who," we mean the characters in the scene, "what" means the action in the scene, "when" means the time period and time of day and/or year, and "where" is the location and setting. Please note that the character identity can be adapted, but characters may not be eliminated or added to the scene.

Our adaptation pitches are to be intentional, thoughtful and show our knowledge of the original literary work.

What questions do you have?

Take time to answer any questions students may have.

Slide 15:

Using the background knowledge of the story and our new understanding of the opera, let's do a quick adaptation pitch for the key scene we just looked at. How could we adapt the "who?"

(Add student suggestions to the slide.)

The action? The "what?"

(Add student suggestions to the slide.)

The "when?"

(Add student suggestions to the slide.)

The “why?”

(Add student suggestions to the slide.)

Please note that each decision you make will have a ripple-like effect on the overall story.

Are there any other questions?

Take time to answer any questions students may have.

****Students can either work in groups selected by the instructor or students choose their own groups – number of students per group depends on class size. Students can either adapt the same key scene or choose a different key scene provided using their laptops/tablets. Libretto excerpts of the key scenes can be accessed on the OPERA America website. Print outs of the libretto excerpts can be distributed as well.**

We are now going to break out into groups and choose one of the three key scenes from the opera and brainstorm an adaptation pitch. You may use your laptop/tablet to find the additional key scenes provided in the slides. You will have 10 minutes to create your opera adaptation pitches and answer the questions. Each group will be given a worksheet with the same questions on the slide to complete and help guide the process. Please answer the last two questions using complete sentences.

(Return to Slide 14. Have students break out into groups by preferred method. Pass out the opera adaptation pitch worksheets, 1 per group, or have students answer the questions on a separate piece of paper [stay on Slide 15]. Students work in groups for 10 minutes.)

Begin!

(Walk around the classroom, offering assistance as students work. Provide a 5-minute, 2-minute, and 1-minute warning.)

Slide 16:

Now it's time to share our ideas! Each group will present their opera adaptation pitch to the class. Remember to explain your creative decisions and rationale.

Groups take turns presenting their opera adaptation pitches.

Slide 17:

Thank you for sharing! How did your understanding of the story change as you adapted it?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Have any new insights or perspectives emerged?

Allow a moment for reflection, then invite students to share their thoughts.

Slide 18:

Thank you all for your work today!

****If planning to continue with Responding to Key Scenes lesson, add an announcement about exploring the opera more next class.**