

Enriching the Humanities Through Opera

Script for Lesson: Exploring Story Adaptation

Grade Level: 9-12th

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)

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, Everest, *Into Thin Air*, 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"?

Give 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 Everest and *Into Thin Air*?

Allow students to share their responses. (Possible responses: climbing, summit, expedition, risk, survival, tragedy, disaster, isolation, teamwork, fear, human spirit, etc.)

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

Give 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, which we will get into a little bit more this lesson.

Slide 4:

Let's review the story arc of our literary work. Can anyone remind us of the exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution of this story?

Review the story arc as a class.

Exposition: *Jon Krakauer arrives at Everest Base Camp, introducing the climbers and the challenges of the expedition.*

Rising Action: *The climbers ascend towards the summit, facing increasing physical and environmental difficulties.*

Climax: *A deadly storm strikes as climbers, including Krakauer, are descending from the summit, leading to chaos and tragedy.*

Falling Action: *Survivors struggle to make their way back to safety amid worsening conditions and dwindling resources.*

Resolution: *Krakauer reflects on the disaster, the loss of life, and the decisions made during the climb, grappling with guilt and the impact of the tragedy.*

Slide 5:

Great! Now we are going to look at an opera synopsis based on this tragic event, titled *Everest*.

(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:

- Is the setting/time period the same for both the opera and literary work?
- 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 *Everest*. The production we will be analyzing is an animated version of this opera.

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. Doug, driven by determination and Rob's encouragement, finally reaches the summit after a grueling ascent, only to confront the emotional weight of his journey as time and exhaustion take their toll.

Discuss any prominent and notable features in the images, 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.

Everest - Scene 4. Doug's Ascent Excerpt

(Watch excerpt.)

What did you notice?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Slide 9: Key Scene #2

Let's analyze this key scene. As a storm looms, Jan learns that her husband Rob, stranded on the mountain with Doug, refuses to abandon his friend despite desperate pleas for assistance and advice to save himself.

Discuss any prominent and notable features in the images, 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.

Everest - Scene 9 The Storm Hits Excerpt

(Watch excerpt.)

What did you notice?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Slide 11: Key Scene #3

Let's examine this key scene. As the chorus marks the passing hours, Jan and her stranded husband Rob share a tender, bittersweet conversation about their love and future child, despite the dire circumstances on the mountain.

What do you think the chorus represents?

Provide students space to answer question. ("voice of the mountain" and souls of lost climbers).

Discuss any prominent and notable features in the images, 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.

Everest - Scene 12 The Phone Call Excerpt

(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.

The composer, Joby Talbot, focused on capturing the emotional and psychological states of the characters involved in this disastrous event. His compositional approach was to create a soundscape that reflected the intense conditions of Everest and the

inner turmoil of the climbers. Gene Scheer’s libretto (text/script of the opera) did not adapt *Into Thin Air*, but rather an exploration of the same stories. Scheer conducted his own interviews, focusing on the personal stories and the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by the climbers, and used that as a springboard to explore the broader themes of human endurance, the confrontation with mortality, and the emotional complexities of those who face extreme situations. For *Everest*, he drew on both the *Into Thin Air* story and other accounts of the 1996 disaster to create a narrative that was both faithful to the real events and artistically engaging. The adaptation process was meticulous, with Scheer ensuring that the narrative was not just a retelling of events, but a profound meditation on the human spirit in extraordinary circumstances.

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. 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.

Were there any new insights or perspectives that 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.**