

Enriching the Humanities Through Opera

Title: Responding to Key Scenes

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)

Content Warning: While the selected scene excerpts from *Champion* contain minimal inappropriate language, please be aware that the full work includes themes of adult content and language. Please review the material and provide appropriate context to ensure it aligns with the needs and maturity of students.

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 *Knock Out!: The True Story of Emile Griffith*, presentation slides (includes *Champion* 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 an excerpt of Young Emile’s Act I aria, “What Makes a Man a Man.”
 - [Act I, Scene 21: “What Makes a Man a Man”](#)
00:00 – 1:36
 - 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 *Champion*.
 - 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.
 - Identify the character 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 “A Man Said to the Universe” by Stephen Crane, “Invictus” by Ernest Henley, and excerpt of Young Emile’s Act I aria, “What Makes a Man a Man.”

- 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 Young Emile's Act I aria, "What Makes a Man a Man."
 - Identify the character who could have written the poem (Emile's mother, Emelda), 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/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 response poem to support the mood and action of the scene.
- Students can write response poems/arias for the key scene they created adaptation pitches for in the Exploring Story Adaptation lesson.

Champion: An Opera in Jazz (2013)

Terence Blanchard, composer; Michael Cristofer, librettist

Champion is an opera by composer Terence Blanchard, with a libretto by Michael Cristofer. Premiering in 2013 at the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, it is a contemporary opera that combines elements of jazz and classical music, which reflects Blanchard's background as a jazz musician and composer.

The opera is based on the life of boxer Emile Griffith, a six-time world champion who became famous in the 1960s and 70s. The central theme of *Champion* is Griffith's internal struggle with his identity and the consequences of a tragic incident in the ring. In 1962, Griffith accidentally caused the death of his opponent, Benny "The Kid" Paret, during a championship fight. This event haunted Griffith for the rest of his life, and the opera explores his emotional turmoil, guilt, and the complexities of his personal life, including his relationships with family, friends, and his own sexuality.

The music in *Champion* blends Blanchard's jazz influences with traditional opera elements, creating a distinctive and powerful soundscape that enhances the emotional depth of the story. The opera's libretto examines issues of masculinity, identity, and the consequences of violence, both within and outside the boxing ring.

Blanchard, along with librettist Michael Cristofer, drew inspiration from various sources to shape the narrative and emotional depth of the opera, and Kleist's graphic novel was one of the key texts that helped inform their understanding of Emile Griffith's life, with its combination of vivid imagery and poignant storytelling, offered valuable insight into Griffith's complex character and the psychological aftermath of the tragic Paret incident, themes that are central to *Champion*. While Blanchard did not directly adapt Kleist's graphic novel into the opera, the book's exploration of Griffith's identity, guilt, and emotional turmoil played an important role in the opera's development, particularly in portraying Griffith's personal and psychological journey.

The work was praised for its bold approach to opera and its exploration of contemporary themes, blending elements of American history, culture, and the challenges of the human condition. It has been hailed as an important contribution to modern opera and a reflection of Blanchard's vision as a composer.

Short Synopsis

The powerful and deeply personal story of Emile Griffith, a six-time world champion boxer, whose life was shaped by triumph and tragedy. Griffith rose from a hat factory worker to a boxing legend, culminating in his infamous 1962 fight with Benny "Kid" Paret, which resulted in Paret's death. Haunted by this event and grappling with his identity, Griffith seeks forgiveness and reconciliation in his later years.

CHAMPION: AN OPERA IN JAZZ OPERA SYNOPSIS
(Terence Blanchard, composer; Michael Cristofer, librettist)

ACT I

In his apartment on Long Island in the present day, Emile Griffith struggles to dress himself, suffering from dementia and confused. Luis, his adopted son, and caretaker, helps him get ready for an important meeting, and Emile's memories intensify...

In the 1950s on the island of St. Thomas, Emile is a young man who dreams of reuniting with his mother, Emelda, and becoming a hat maker. He moves to New York City and finds her, and though she doesn't recognize him, she is overjoyed to reunite with one of the children she left behind. She brings him to meet Howie Albert, a hat manufacturer, hoping to find Emile work. Howie sizes up Emile and immediately recognizes his potential as a boxer. He offers to train him as a welterweight, and Emile quickly develops his natural talent and physique, as Emelda urges him to give up his other dreams. But Emile is lonely and struggles with his identity. He goes to a gay bar in Manhattan and meets Kathy, the owner, who welcomes him into an exciting but scary new community. Emile opens up to Kathy about his childhood and the cruelty he experienced from a fundamentalist relative.

In 1962, Emile is set to fight Benny "Kid" Paret in a high-profile match. When they face off at weigh-in, Paret taunts Emile, calling him "maricon," a Spanish slur for homosexuals. Emile is furious, and they nearly come to blows right there. Howie pulls him away, but when Emile begins to explain why the insult hit so close to home, Howie refuses to have the conversation, telling him that the boxing world is not a place where he can be open about his sexuality. Alone, Emile wrestles with his sense of manhood and self. The fight begins and quickly becomes heated. Paret continues to mock him, and as the fight escalates, Emile delivers seventeen blows in seven seconds. Paret collapses, falls into a coma, and later dies.

ACT II

Back in the present day, lost in his memories, Emile thinks that he sees Paret and speaks with him. Luis reorients him and reminds him that today, they will go to meet Paret's son.

As the 1960s continue, Emile amasses more wins, more fame, and more notoriety, but internally, he is haunted by memories of Paret and grapples with his identity. He marries a woman named Sadie, going against the advice of Howie and Emelda. In the 1970s, however, his luck changes. He is on a losing streak and starting to show signs of "boxer's brain" due to chronic traumatic brain injury. Emile rejects the support of his family and Howie, returning to Kathy's bar, where he is brutally beaten by a group of bigots.

In the present, overcome with memories of the attack, Emile becomes agitated and confused; Luis calms him, reminding him all of that is in the past. They go to meet Kid Paret's son, Benny Paret, Jr., and Luis tells Benny about Emile's condition. Emile expresses regret and asks Benny for his forgiveness, as voices from Emile's past intensify and crescendo in his mind.

Luis takes Emile back home. Alone once more, Emile's memories recede and hush.

Synopsis courtesy of Boston Lyric Opera.

Key Scene/Aria in Blanchard's *Champion: An Opera in Jazz*

Video excerpts and timestamps are pulled from the Metropolitan Opera on Demand and YouTube. Performance Dates: Apr. 29, 2023 & Feb. 2, 2024

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KEY SCENE/ARIA: Act I, Scene 21: "What Makes a Man a Man" (Excerpt)

[Met Opera on Demand](#): Track #26. ACT I: What makes a man a man?
00:00 – 01:35

OR

[Act I, Scene 21: "What Makes a Man a Man"](#)
00:00 – 1:36

When they face off at the weigh-in, Paret taunts Emile about his sexual orientation. Emile is furious, and they nearly come to blows right there. Howie pulls him away, but when Emile begins to explain why the insult hit so close to home, Howie refuses to have the conversation, telling him that the boxing world is not a place where he can be open about his sexuality. Alone, Emile wrestles with his sense of manhood and identity.

Libretto Excerpt

YOUNG EMILE

What makes a man a man
What makes a man the man he is?
Is it the flesh and bone?
Inside? Outside?
Is it the skin he wears?
The color of his voice?
The walk he walks?
The talk he talks?
Inside? Outside?
What makes this man a man?
Is it the life he's lived?
The yesterdays?
Or what he dreams for the tomorrow-days?

Libretto excerpts courtesy of Boston Lyric Opera.

Poetic Devices used: repetition, rhyme, imagery, personification

RESPONSE POEM EXAMPLE

You ARE a man, a man to me.
My boy turned man, strong and free.
I am so proud of who you are.
So go fight hard—and win, my star!

Poetic Devices used: repetition, rhyme, metaphor, imagery