Story Activities

Understanding the plot and characters before attending a performance greatly enhances the experience. The activities below will help you explore *Eugene Onegin* and prepare you for an enriched overall appreciation for to examine the opera from the audience.

Fun with Translations

Pushkin is considered Russia's greatest poet and his work is well known across Russia. The original **Eugene Onegin** is written in prose with distinctive rhyming patterns that are notoriously difficult to translate. Pushkin's verse poem **Eugene Onegin** consist of some 100 14-line sonnet-like stanzas written **in iambic tetrameter**, with a rhyme scheme of **ABAB; CCDD; EFFEGG**. To translate a work with this structure while maintaining the meaning, rhythm, and rhyme of the original text is a delicate task.

Below are four different versions of a section of **Eugene Onegin** in which Onegin talks about his uncle, who has recently died, leaving his estate to Onegin. The first selection is from the libretto of Tchaikovsky's opera **Eugene Onegin**. The next three are translations of the first chapter of Pushkin's verse novel. Go deeper into the text by considering the following questions as you compare the different versions.

- What are the emotions being expressed through the language?
- What can you learn about Onegin's character from reading these translations?
- What differences do you notice among translations (choice of words, rhyme, rhythm, etc.)?
- Which version is your favorite? Why?

Finally, you can look at the same verse in Russian. Have fun deciphering it!

1. From the libretto of the opera.
Translator anonymous.
My Uncle was a man of the highest principles;
when he finally took to his bed
he forced the respect of all
and it was the best thing he could do.
May others profit from his example!
But, my God, what a bore it was,
sitting by an invalid day and night,
never daring to move a step away!

Read more at http://www.opera-guide.ch/opera.php?uilang=de&id=373#libretto

2. From Pushkin's novel *Eugene Onegin* (also written Yevgeny Onegin and Евгений Онегин)
Translation by Charles H. Johnson
My uncle—high ideals inspire him;
but when past joking he fell sick,
he really forced one to admire him—
and never played a shrewder trick.
Let others learn from his example!
But God, how deadly dull to sample
sickroom attendance night and day
and never stir a foot away!

And the sly baseness, fit to throttle,
of entertaining the half-dead:
one smooths the pillows down in bed,
and glumly serves the medicine bottle,
and sighs, and asks oneself all through:
"When will the devil come for you?"

Read more at
http://www.lib.ru/LITRA/PUSHKIN/ENGLISH/onegin_j.txt

3. From Pushkin's novel *Eugene Onegin*
Translation by G.R. Ledger
My uncle, a most worthy gentleman,
When he fell seriously ill,
By snuffing it made us all respect him,
Couldn't have done better if he tried.
His behaviour was a lesson to us all.
But, God above, what crushing boredom
To sit with the malingerer night and day
Not moving even one footstep away.

What demeaning hypocrisy
To amuse the half-dead codger,
To fluff up his pillows, and then,
Mournfully to bring him his medicine;
To think to oneself, and to sigh:
When the devil will the old rascal die?

Read more at
http://www.pushkins-poems.com/Yev001.htm

4. From Pushkin's novel *Eugene Onegin*
Translation by James Falen
My uncle, man of firm convictions...
By falling gravely ill, he's won
A due respect for his afflictions—
The only clever thing he's done.
May his example profit others;
But God, what deadly boredom, brothers,
To tend a sick man night and day,
Not daring once to steal away!

And, oh, how base to pamper grossly
And entertain the nearly dead,
To fluff the pillows for his head,
And pass him medicines morosely—
While thinking under every sigh:
The devil take you, Uncle. Die!

Read more at
https://www.york.ac.uk/depts/maths/histstat/pml1/onegin/

5. From the Russian text of the same chapter
"Мой дядя самых честных правил,
Когда не в шутку занемог,
Он уважать себя заставил
И лучше выдумать не мог.
Его пример другим наука;
Но, боже мой, какая скука
С больным сидеть и день и ночь,
Не отходя ни шагу прочь!
Какое низкое коварство
Полуживого забавлять,
Ему подушки поправлять,
Печально подносить лекарство,
Вздыхать и думать про себя:
Когда же Черт возьмет тебя!"
Read more at http://www.pushkins-poems.com/Yev001.htm

The RUNDOWN

Organize the principal characters by description and voice type to the story RUNDOWN! Use details from the synopsis to support your answers.

Character	Description	Voice Type	The LOWDOWN
			• Enlists the loyal Filipevna's help to deliver her letter to Onegin.
			• Is earnest, idealistic, and deeply in love with Olga, Tatyana's sister.
			• More extroverted than her sister, her innocent flirtation with Onegin ultimately leads to tragedy.
			• Is surprised to find love late in life, following a career in the army. He is decent and honorable.
			• Wants her daughters to marry well but reminisces about the man she loved before her own arranged marriage.
			• Disillusioned and aloof, dismissive of the world and people around him. His careless attitude will lead him to tragedy and loss.
			• Life has been secluded, and although she is shy and bookish, she is capable of passionate expression and deep attachment.

Characters:

Tatyana (ta-TYAH-na), **Eugene Onegin** (yoo-JEEN oh-NYEH-gin), **Lensky** (LEN-skee), **Olga** (AWL-guh)

Prince Gremin (GREH-min), **Madame Larina** (LAH-ree-na), **Filipevna** (Fil-eep-YEV-nah)

Voice Type: Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Contralto, Tenor, Baritone, Bass

Character Description:

- The sisters' aging nanny
- The mother of Tatiana and Olga
- A wealthy aristocrat
- A young poet and neighbor of the Larin family
- A young aristocrat
- Tatiana's younger sister
- A young woman from a country estate

Create your own Ballad

Create your own Ballad using Iambic Tetrameter Rhyme Scheme:

Whether you've taken a literature class, read poetry, or simply listened to music, you've probably heard or read ballads. The core structure for a ballad is a **quatrain**, written in either *abcb* or *abab* rhyme schemes.

- The first and third lines are iambic tetrameter, with four beats per line
- The second and fourth lines are in *trimeter*, with three beats per line.

Example:

"My uncle, man of firm convictions…
By falling gravely ill, he's won
A due respect for his afflictions—
The only clever thing he's done ."
 —Excerpt from Pushkin's novel *Eugene Onegin.* Translation by James Falen

The second ingredient is the story you want to tell. It can be about you, someone you know, a relationship, or an experience.

To begin:

1. Write the narrative. Don't worry about beats per line, rhyme schemes, or stanza breaks. Simply write the story you want to present as a ballad.
2. Once you've written the narrative, pare down the length and strike all words that don't propel or describe the action.

Hook your Audience

- Look at your piece and listen for the beat or tempo of the words.
- Re-form your language into **balladic form**, making sure to open with a stanza that sets the scene for the story to unfold.

Tell your Story

Finish the setting in the second *quatrain*, and then unfold the story with artful emotion, letting the natural rhythm of the ballad flow from your mind and heart onto the page.

Close with Purpose!

As you conclude your ballad, you can retain the rhyme scheme for the closing stanza or go off-beat with an **envoi** (a short stanza concluding a ballade), or refrain. Either way, use the next to the last quatrain to make the turn for your ending and the final *quatrain* to close the poem with purpose.

From Ordinary to Mystical

As you develop your narrative, remember the ballad's focus is on music and the narrative. Even if you write the most ordinary story about riding your bike, the music could transform your story into a mystical piece. As you revise your story into the **ballad form**, sharpen the rhythm and rhyme. Focus on the language, and you'll inevitably write something worthy of singing.
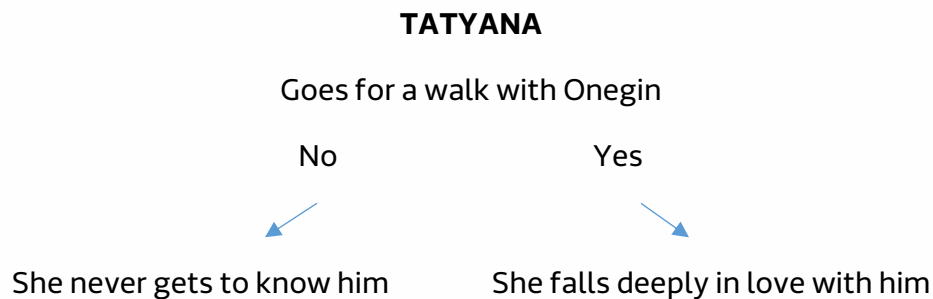
At the Opera: *Decisions, Decisions*

* This activity can be modified for use as a pre-performance in-class activity using the Met Live in HD broadcast of *Eugene Onegin* or another recording of the opera. https://www.metopera.org/season/on-demand/opera/?upc=811357019443

Every decision has consequences. Just as in real life, the characters of ***Eugene Onegin*** are faced with situations that compel them to choose one path over another. In combination, these choices lead to the opera's tragic end. One can imagine that if they had made different choices, the story would have ended very differently.

Pick one of these characters to follow throughout the opera: **TATYANA   OLGA   ONEGIN   LENSKY**

As you watch the opera, write down the moments in which your character makes a decision. Later, during intermission, begin drafting your "decision tree" on a blank sheet of paper to explore what might have happened if your character had done something different. For example:

TATYANA

Goes for a walk with Onegin

No   Yes

She never gets to know him   She falls deeply in love with him

You can continue to record important moments of decision during the second and third acts, and keep building your tree throughout the broadcast. Use your decision tree not only to explore how successive decisions lead to later situations, choices, and outcomes, but also what might have happened if the characters had made different choices.

ACT I	**ACT II**	**ACT III**
Decision 1:	**Decision 1:**	**Decision 1:**
_____	_____	_____
Decision 2:	**Decision 2:**	**Decision 2:**
_____	_____	_____
Decision 3:	**Decision 3:**	**Decision 3:**
_____	_____	_____

Create a Sequel

Write a sequel using the characters from *Eugene Onegin.* What situations do the characters encounter? What plot twists occur?