



## San Francisco Opera's

### ***THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER***

***Getty's Usher House and Debussy's La Chute de la Maison Usher***

## Curriculum Connections

California Content Standards

Kindergarten through Grade 12

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## LANGUAGE ARTS

### WORD ANALYSIS, FLUENCY, AND VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

#### **Phonics and Phonemic Awareness:**

Letter Recognition: Name the letters in a word. Ex. Usher = U-s-h-e-r.

Letter/Sound Association: Name the letters and the beginning and ending sound in a word. R-oderic-k

Match and list words with the same beginning or ending sounds. Ex. Poe and Primus have the same beginning letter "P" and sound /p/; but end with the different letters and ending sounds.

Syllables: Count the syllables in a word. Ex.: Ma-de-line

Match and list words with the same number of syllables. Clap out syllables as beats. Ex.: 1 syllable 2 syllables 3 syllables bass = bass tenor = ten-or soprano = so-pra-no

Phoneme Substitution: Play with the beginning sounds to make silly words. What would a "boprano" sound like? (Also substitute middle and ending sounds.) Ex. *soprano*, *boprano*, *toprano*, *koprano*.

Phoneme Counting: How many sounds in a word? Ex. bell = 3

Phoneme Segmentation: Which sounds do you hear in a word? Ex. bell = b/e/l.

#### **Definitions:**

Find words in *The Fall of The House of Usher* that are unfamiliar and find definitions and roots.

Learn Opera vocabulary: soprano, mezzo-soprano, bass.

#### **Word analysis:**

Examine contrasting vocabulary. Create lists of good vs. evil words from opera; write definitions.

Take lines from Italian libretto and translate the text using Google translate or Babelfish; do the supertitles match exactly? If not, why not?

Find analogies in *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

Explore the use of metaphors, ex.: the house.

Concepts of Print: Sentence structure, punctuation, directionality.

Parts of speech: Noun, verb, adjective, adverb, prepositions.

## **Reading Comprehension:**

Story Development: Character desires and motivation;

Cause and effect: What made this happen? Sequencing of events, climax, resolution.

Read: Source material for *The Fall of The House of Usher*, libretto, letter from Poe, biographies, etc.

Read sections of the English translation of the libretto. Write a brief synopsis based on the libretto.

Read the original Edgar Allan Poe novel, *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

Types of text: Poetry, fairy tale, song text, libretto, script for media arts, biography, etc.

Reading Skills: Build skills using the subtitles on the video and related educator documents.

## CREATIVE WRITING

Creative writing: Interpret the story and create a new version. Create your own characters.

Write about main characters' before the story starts. Write about Rodericks's childhood.

Write an alternative ending. Where would you begin your new ending?

Explore the emotions and motivations of the various characters.

How could the story have ended differently if characters had worked out their differences constructively?

Write about a good character or an evil character.

Pick a scene and write from the point of view of the house.

Put yourself in the position of one of the characters; make an argument for your philosophy of life.

Explore different genres of writing: poetry, song text, libretto, script for media arts, biography, autobiography, short story, historical novel, etc.

Explore literary devices such as the use of point of view, internal/external conflict, repetition of phrases, foreshadowing, building of tension.

## LITERARY RESPONSE AND ANALYSIS

### **Elements of a Story:**

Character, plot, setting, conflict.

Identify rising action, climax, falling action.

### **Vocabulary:**

Reading for understanding using the subtitles on videos and related educator documents.

Libretto, soprano, tenor, parlando, adaptation, etc.

Hyperesthesia, hypochondria, fantasmagorical, macabre, spectral, Gothic.

Dual meanings of the phrase "House of" – the building or the family.

**Genres:**

Gothic

Fantasy vs. Reality, non-fiction, novel, play.

Play 15-minute segments of the opera; students journal after watching the segments.

Students respond to a letter from Roderick asking them for advice.

Chart out the elements of the plot.

Read a synopsis of Act I; how would you complete this story?

Examine the use of letters in operas or other works of art. How do they act as plot devices?

Examine character development: do the characters grow beyond their expected roles?

**Themes:**

Examine the themes of the opera:

Gothic – What are Gothic themes?

Natural vs. supernatural.

Love & Madness - Claustrophobia and paranoia, deception, self-centeredness, envy, grief, bitterness, rage, evil; The spread of madness and how easy it is to get swept away by others. Artist and sensitivity (madness). Madness vs. reality. Madness of reality. Sensitivity and weakness.

Family - familial influence, family feuds, religion. Incest.

Repressed fears and desires, Redemption and Resurrection.

Suspense (vs. violence) and the association of frightening things with impending violence.

Death and The Afterlife

**Character actions and motives:**

Explore each lead character's actions and why they do the things they do.

How do the contrasting characters traits in *The Fall of The House of Usher* drive the story forward?

What are Roderick's character traits? Edgar Allan Poe?

How do characters' actions move story along?

How could characters have changed their actions to alter the course of the story?

What are characters' real motives?

Explore the dynamics between the doctor and the brother in the Debussy. How does their relation differ from Getty's opera.

Madeline is heard off stage, but not seen - Is she real or imagined? Is Madeline a figment of Roderick's imagination. Is she his "madness"?

The relationship between friend and Roderick – they are childhood friends, but he didn't know that Roderick had a twin. The House disappears in the end and the friend escapes. What does that mean he is the only character remaining to tell the tale? Would anyone believe him?

**Archetypes:**

The sensitive, mad artist

The beauty gone mad

The loyal friend

**Character Development:**

Analyze the characters in the opera. What motivates their actions? What are their main traits?

How does Roderick change over time?

How does the character of Madeline develop over time?

Do you see Edgar Allan Poe as a strong character or a weak character?

Are the characters emotionally strong or weak?

How are characters developed through dialogue and soliloquy? How do characters change over course of opera?

How could the characters have altered their actions for a more favorable outcome? How are characters affected by outside events beyond their control? How do they react?

Examine character development: do the characters grow beyond their expected roles?

Pick your favorite character in the opera and describe him/her. Write a letter from his/her point of view to another character.

Examine the use of works of art in the opera, ex: *The Haunted Palace* (song) and *The Mad Tryst* (novel).

**Figurative Language: Simile, Metaphor, Hyperbole, Personification, Allegory:**

Language style and music reflects emotion of characters, and instrumental sounds or musical phrases can be used symbolize character.

What does the house symbolize in the title itself? The last generation of Ushers, the madness in the house. Is there something rotten with the house or rotten with the family?

The anthropomorphizing of objects blurs the lines between living things and inanimate objects, such as the house.

The “House of Usher” has double meaning, as the word “house” could refer to the genetic line of the Usher family.

Held captive in the house, Madeline feels trapped and claustrophobic.

With *The Mad Tryst*, there is the telling of a story within the story, and the frightening noises happen while he’s telling the story.

**COMPARATIVE LITERATURE**

How do scary stories differ across cultures? Compare them to the gothic tale.

Explore other works of literature in which characters go mad.

Compare different types of horror stories.

Compare the difference in how the two operas use the narrator. Getty’s opera has Poe as the story’s narrator. The doctor is given a name in the Getty Opera and he quotes other works of Poe.

Compare and contrast how Debussy and Getty use or depart from the original source material. Getty’s story opens word for word.

Why did Poe incorporate the story of *The Mad Tryst* of Sir Lancelot Canning into his tale? How does the story parallel what's happening in Roderick's life and his current state of madness? Actions in the story happen simultaneously as Madeline is forcing herself out. Does she represent the dragon in the story?

Metaphor: Madeline shrieks at the moment when the dragon shrieks as it dies.

## WRITING STRATEGIES

### **Analysis and Interpretation:**

Expository writing, critiques/reviews

Poetry, fairy tale, song text, libretto, script for media arts, biography, program, program article, synopsis, etc.

*The Fall of The House of Usher* production materials: artist biographies, program and program notes, synopsis, expository writing, critiques/reviews, etc.

How does Debussy grab attention at beginning of opera with his prelude? How does Poe grab the reader's attention?

Composer/librettist may take liberty in bringing in the characters from another story and in portraying well-known figures from history, such as Poe and his characters.

If you are basing your work off of someone else's but take liberties, what do you owe the initial creator?

Curatorial combination – taking source material and mashing it up. Using poetic license.

### **Persuasive Writing:**

Letter writing, copywriting: advertising, fundraising, press release.

Scenes, letters, diary or blog pages can be written from a particular character's point of view; make sure to take relationships between characters into account. Diary pages could focus on how characters convince themselves to do something—internal debate or use stream of consciousness.

Explore biographies of the historical characters; write biographies of their real-life counterparts. How does their depiction in the opera correspond to historical accounts?

Research the source materials for *The Fall of The House of Usher*. How does the opera differ from the story? What do they share in common?

Write a modern-day version.

Write a different ending for the opera.

Write or draw a deleted scene for the opera; a scene we hear about, but don't see.

Persuasive writing: create posters, advertisements for one of the characters.

Keep journals from the point of view of the characters during the events of the opera.

Write a "me" poem for each of the characters: begin the poem with "I am" and list the characteristics of each person in separate phrases.

Write parrot poems from the point of view of the characters. Parrot poems are conversational poems in which partners write each line in turn.

Rewrite libretto using today as a setting. Use contemporary characters: who would be Roderick today? Madeline?

Rewrite a scene from the opera, switching the genders of the characters. How does the scene change? Rewrite a scene, changing the ethnicities. How does it change?

Write a passage expressing several characters' inner thoughts at the same time.

Writing exercise in which feelings are expressed like those in *The Fall of The House of Usher* arias.

Create a storyboard of *The Fall of The House of Usher* as manga.

## WRITTEN AND ORAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS

Spelling: Spell the names of the characters in *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

Watch different versions of the opera on DVD and write reviews. Read example reviews first.

Debates between characters. Deliver persuasive speeches, identify tactics used.

Write a monologue with two scenes based on the alternate points of view held by a single character.

Facial cues, expressions, gestures can sometimes amplify message being delivered, or can sometimes run contrary to meaning of words.

Analyze ensembles; how does music allow multiple people to say very different things at the same time? Can you do this in spoken word—improv activity

## LISTENING AND SPEAKING

### **Oral Speaking:**

Connection between the written words and oral interpretation (recitative and sung), the phrasing and musicality of speech.

Act out main events of the story, in tableaux or longer scenes. Improvise. Give small groups different scenes, and then act out in succession.

Write two speeches about the same thing; write one to be delivered to a friend, and one to be delivered to a person of authority. How does your language differ?

### **Reflection:**

What did you see, think, hear and feel? Ex. Verbal & written responses to *The Fall of The House of Usher*.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Composers Debussy and Getty: Biographies, timeline of works.

Settings of story, opera. Where do characters come from?