

STUDY GUIDE

La traviata

Music by Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave

Based on the novel *La Dame aux Camélias* (1848) by Alexandre Dumas fils

Characters

Violetta Valery, a courtesan, soprano

Alfredo Germont, a wealthy young man in love with Violetta, tenor

Giorgio Germont, Alfredo's father, baritone

Flora Bervoix, Violetta's friend, soprano

Annina, Violetta's maid, mezzo soprano

Gastone, Alfredo's friend, a count, tenor

Baron Douphol, Violetta's escort, baritone

Dottore Grenvil, Violetta's doctor, bass

Synopsis

Premiered at Teatro la Fenice in Venice on March 6, 1853

The Setting is Paris and vicinity around 1850

A C T 1

Violetta's house, Paris, August 1850

A party is underway. A group of latecomers arrive and Violetta, a courtesan, is introduced to Alfredo Germont by Gastone. Violetta, who has been ill, is told that Alfredo had worried about her during her illness. Violetta is confused by Alfredo's concern. She barely knows him. At dinner, Alfredo gives a toast to love. Violetta counters with a toast to pleasure. Violetta is certain she will never love. A dance has begun. The party exits into the next room but Violetta grows faint and is unable to join the others. Alfredo stays behind. He warns her that she must take care of herself. She responds that this is impossible. He tells her he loves her and will take care of her. She takes it as idle chatter and laughs it off. He proclaims his love again and she realizes that he is sincere. She tells him he must look elsewhere for love, for she cannot love. She gives him a flower and tells him to return when it has withered. Dawn approaches and the party ends. Violetta thinks back on her innocence, Alfredo's kindness, and questions her hasty repulsion of him. But her destiny is settled, she knows it's foolish to dream.

A C T 2

A country house near Paris, January 1851

Violetta has forsaken her lavish life in Paris for Alfredo's love. They have lived a humble life together for three months. Alfredo returns from hunting and finds Annina dressed for travel. She explains she has been to Paris to sell off Violetta's possessions. Alfredo was not aware that they lacked for money and is ashamed to discover that Violetta has been supporting him. He leaves immediately for Paris to request money from his father. Violetta receives an invitation to a dance at Flora's in the evening. She is amused by the invite and has no intention of attending. A gentleman arrives to speak with Violetta. It is Giorgio Germont, Alfredo's father.

He explains that Violetta's connection with the family has endangered his daughter's hopes of marriage. He requests that she leave Alfredo for the sake of his daughter's happiness. Violetta sees her dreams slipping away, and agrees to sacrifice herself for the sake of Giorgio's daughter, on the condition that Alfredo is told the truth upon her death. Violetta returns to Paris and Baron Douphol. Alfredo is devastated by her departure. Giorgio tells him he must forget her, but he cannot. He finds Flora's invitation and leaves for Paris to find her at the party. Alfredo arrives at Flora's and feigns indifference to Violetta. Baron Douphol commands Violetta to ignore Alfredo. The people at the party, including Alfredo, play cards. Alfredo wins one round after another. The game escalates to an aggressive competition between Douphol and Alfredo before it is interrupted by dinner. Violetta tells Alfredo they need to talk. She pleads for him to leave. She fears an impending duel between Douphol and Alfredo. Alfredo says he'll leave if she follows. She tells him that a sacred oath demands that she stay. The oath was given to Baron Douphol, she tells Alfredo that she loves the Baron so that he will go away and she can keep her promise to his father. Alfredo calls the party over to witness his settlement of debt. He throws the money he has won playing cards at her feet with great contempt. Violetta is stunned and faints. The party is disgraced by his behavior. Alfredo, too, is horrified by what he has done.

ACT 3

Violetta's bedroom, Paris, February 1850

Violetta is dying. Dr. Grenvil tells Annina that she only has a few hours left. Violetta sends Annina on an errand and begins to read a letter from Alfredo's father. A duel has taken place between Alfredo and Baron Douphol. Douphol has been wounded and Alfredo has gone abroad. But Giorgio has revealed Violetta's sacrifice to Alfredo, and he and his son will soon be by her side. Annina returns and announces she has visitors. It is Alfredo and his father. Alfredo and Violetta embrace and dream of a new life together. There is a moment of hope, but it soon vanishes. Violetta collapses and the doctor proclaims her dead.

GIUSEPPE VERDI

Biography

Born in 1813 in the Italian village of Le Roncole near Busseto, Giuseppe Verdi spent his early years studying the organ. By the age of seven, he had become an organist at San Michele Arcangelo. It was there that the young Verdi was an altar boy and, according to myth, his mother saved him from the French in 1814. In 1823, Verdi moved to Busseto and attended the music school run by Antonio Provesi. By the age of 13, he was an assistant conductor of the Busseto orchestra. After finishing the school, Verdi applied for admission to the Milan Conservatory. He was rejected for admission, although one of the examiners suggested that he "forget about the Conservatory and choose a maestro in the city." Verdi studied composition in Milan with Vincenzo Lavigna, a composer and the maestro at La Scala. Verdi bounced back and forth between Milan and Busseto until he was named maestro of the Busseto Philharmonic in March 1836.

By May 1836, he had married childhood sweetheart, Margherita Barezzi, his greatest benefactor's daughter. He returned to Milan several years later, this time with a young family. Verdi's first opera, *Oberto*, was brought to the stage at La Scala in November 1839, and ran for multiple performances. The noted Ricordi firm published *Oberto* and, based upon his initial operatic effort, Verdi won a contract for three additional operas. He

began work on his next opera, *Un Giorno di Regno* but was interrupted when, one by one, his children fell ill. A little over the course of a year, Verdi lost his son, his daughter, and his beloved wife to illness. Unfortunately, *Un Giorno di Regno* was a complete failure. Verdi vowed never to compose another comedy and developed a fatalistic belief in inescapable destiny.

Even so, the director at La Scala kept faith with Verdi, who later declared that with his next work, *Nabucco*, "my musical career really began." At dress rehearsals for *Nabucco* in the La Scala Theater, carpenters making repairs to the house gradually stopped hammering and, seating themselves on scaffolding and ladders, listened with rapt attention to what the composer considered a lackluster chorus rendering of "Va, pensiero." At the close of the number, the workers pounded the woodwork with cries of "Bravo, bravo, viva il maestro!" The opening of *Nabucco* was a triumph. Verdi was famous, commanding a higher fee than any other composer of his time. *I Lombardi* followed *Nabucco* and won an unprecedented victory over Austrian censors. Verdi's triumph in retaining the libretto and melodic themes the censors had hoped to ban as "religious" in nature forged the composer's lifelong reputation as an ideological hero of the Italian people. This would be the first of his many battles with censors for artistic freedom.

Over the next seven years, the composer penned ten additional operas of varied success, gradually making the transition between two distinct eras of Verdi composition. Initially captive of the "bel canto" style, a style in which beautiful singing reigned supreme and the story was not so important. Verdi wanted to produce his own style in which the drama and the essence of each character took center stage as an equal to vocal purity and elegance. It was an inspired stroke of boldness about which Verdi commented in explaining the innovative core of his work, *Il Trovatore*, "I think (if I'm not mistaken) that I have done well; but at any rate I have done it in the way that I felt it." In saying so, he defined his own creative hallmark. Although a musical genius, Verdi composed spontaneously from the heart. A brilliantly schooled musician, he placed emotional sensibility above intellect in all that he wrote. In the process, he created the remarkable marriage of dramatic characterization and vocal power, an indelible artistic signature.

The creation of an operatic tour de force based upon his ingenious artistic formulation assured Verdi's immortality, beginning in 1851 with *Rigoletto*, followed soon after by *Il Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, and ultimately in 1871, by *Aida*. Even without the masterpieces that followed - *Simon Boccanegra*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *La Forza del Destino*, and *Don Carlos* or his great Requiem Mass - the Maestro could have afforded to rest on his musical achievements and stand unchallenged as the premier operatic composer of any age. In fact, with the success of *Aida*, Verdi seemed to have abandoned composing altogether, producing no new works for fifteen years.

Fortunately for posterity, an electrifying libretto, *Otello*, created by poet Arrigo Boito, brought the composer out of his self-imposed retirement. The opening of *Otello* in February of 1887 attracted an international audience to Milan for a dramatic event which ended only after the citizenry had showered Verdi with gifts and applause throughout twenty curtain calls and towed his carriage to the hotel. Public festivities continued until dawn.

In 1893, with the premiere of *Falstaff*, Verdi and his adoring audience repeated the entire sequence of events at La Scala - all in honor of a comedy he had vowed as a young man never to write since his very early attempt at a comedy was a complete failure. The maestro finally retreated to his country home in Sant' Agata with his second wife, singer Giuseppina Strepponi. They spent several peaceful years in retirement until her death in 1897. His wife's death left Verdi in a state of unbearable grief. He immediately fled Sant' Agata for the Grand Hotel in Milan and, after four unhappy years, Verdi died in 1901, the victim of a massive stroke. Verdi's death left all Italy in mourning.

He is still revered throughout the music world as the greatest of operatic composers and, more particularly, in Italy as a patriotic hero and champion of human rights.

Musical Technique

Giuseppe Verdi crafted his music to make the listener aware of certain elements of the plot. See if you can detect the following techniques as you watch and listen to *La Traviata*:

› Reoccurring musical themes

The first notes of the prelude, played before the curtain rises, establish the theme of Violetta's suffering from her illness, tuberculosis. This same theme is heard in the final act as Violetta nears death. In this same prelude a theme is introduced that portrays Violetta's love. This love theme is repeated in Act II when Violetta bids Alfredo goodbye.

› Contrasting melodic lines played simultaneously. Verdi illustrates the two very opposing life styles of *La Traviata*: The desperate, suffering and sad love story of Violetta, and the merry life of a Parisian courtesan. At the beginning of the opera superimposed over Violetta's love theme is a bright and witty melodic line that makes us think of parties and festivities- of people enjoying the good life. In the final act, as we hear the sad theme associated with Violetta's illness, counter-balanced is the music and singing heard in the streets outside of Violetta's apartment.

› Familiar music

So much of Verdi's music is used in popular commercials and as background music because you can easily sing or hum his thematic lines. Have you ever heard the music of the drinking song, "Libiamo?" Can you hum the melody? This theme, and other Verdi has written, are so engaging that they have become recognizable by many people who are not all that familiar with the entire opera. The party scene in

Act II with the gypsies and matadors is memorable for the bright and exuberant singing and the dancing in colorful costumes by the entire opera chorus. One of the most popular arias of *La Traviata* is known as "Sempre Libera (Forever Free)." This aria is a musical form known as a "cabaletta." It is sprightly, fast, short in length and catches our attention. It makes us immediately aware of Violetta's interest in returning to her former merry life.

› Theatrical devices

When Violetta reads the farewell letter she has written to Alfredo, she "speaks" the words. There is a musical background, but it serves to echo her feelings, rather than to accompany her voice. The technique employed here is called "melodrama," that is, a dramatic reading with a melodic background.

› **A superstar soprano**

In Act I when Violetta first discovers her love for Alfredo, Verdi writes a bold coloratura solo (coloratura sopranos have very strong voices, sing in the highest vocal range and specialize in florid runs and trills). At one point, the orchestra drops out and Violetta sings a “cadenza” (a section of an aria that shows off the singer’s virtuosity) by herself. Verdi wrote difficult parts for soprano singers. In *La Traviata* the coloratura singer is expected to push the limits of her vocal range, sing powerfully and, in addition, be an excellent actor to portray the difficult role of Violetta. The singing role is so difficult in the first act that Verdi gives the singer a little rest at the beginning of the second act while Giorgio Germont sings. In the rest of the opera, the soprano is required to sing dramatically. Coloratura sopranos are not usually required to be dramatic sopranos in the same opera, so the role of Violetta requires a virtual superstar to sing the part.

LESSON PLANS

Duration 10 minutes

OVERVIEW

Students listen to opera selections in a different language and create a storyline that might be happening based on the style, tone, and characteristics of the music. Students will then act out the story while the music plays.

MATERIALS

› CD player and CD of opera arias in different languages (e.g. Italian, French, or German), preferably a selection from *La Traviata*.

Fine Arts Academic Content Standard Addressed Are:

Creative Expression and Communication
Analyzing and Responding
Valuing Music/Aesthetic Reflection

Spotlight Activity

The Spotlight is designed to be used at the beginning of class or as a transition to a lesson; the Spotlight is an activity that can be used daily to reinforce listening skills, oral language, and creative thought. Give students a brief overview of the piece of music that you will be playing for the class. Make this a “mini-lecture” of no more than five minutes. You might include what the name of the piece is, when it was composed, who was the composer, what country the music comes from, what language the words are in, the genre of the piece of music (e.g. opera), or why it was composed. Give as much information as you think is important for the piece of music, but not too much that you might limit the students’ creativity and imagination when listening. When giving important information about the piece of music, ask one question about that information. The student who answers that question correctly “wins a ticket to the Spotlight!” Invite the student to come to the front of the room to sit in the comfiest seat in your classroom. This student is the one chosen to be in the Spotlight, so he or she will get the opportunity to share thoughts and stories about the music that will be played.

Teaching the Lesson

Once the Spotlighter is in the front of the classroom, have everyone close his or her eyes while you play the aria on the CD player. Eyes should be closed while listening to help eliminate all visual distractions; this also allows students to feel more comfortable while listening should they want to move or sway with the music. Instruct them to listen and imagine what they think might be happening on stage and what story might be going on during this aria. Listen for tone, style, and vocal inflections for clues. After the music selection is over, have the students open their eyes and let the student in the Spotlight have the chance to voice opinions, summaries, and critical thinking about the topic. Ask open-ended and thought-provoking questions to promote critical thinking. Help guide the student through questioning that allows the Spotlighter to develop answers that demonstrate knowledge and proficiency in the given topic.

Questions might include:

- › Did you like or dislike that piece of music? Why?
- › Can you describe the music using musical or non-musical terms?
- › Could you tell a story that goes along with the music?
- › Was there a beginning, middle, and end? How did you know?
- › What in the singer's voice helped you come to this story?
- › Does this piece of music or the story behind it remind you of any experiences you've had?
- › Was it effective to tell this story through music and not writing?

Although it is only one student's turn in the Spotlight, keep the rest of the class engaged by asking them some questions as well or have them respond to the Spotlighter's story about the music. You might want to ask for other stories students heard in the music.

Review / Concluding the Lesson

The Spotlighter can pick a partner (or two) and act out the story that he/she came up with while the music plays. The students cannot talk but have to show the story through movements and body language. At some point during the aria, pause the music and have the actors "tag in" other students to take their places. This keeps all students engaged and focused on understanding the action portrayed by the actors and the music.

Fine Arts Academic Content Standards Addressed Are:

Creative Expression and Communication
Analyzing and Responding
Connections, Relationships, and Applications

To meet the standards, the student must organize and articulate ideas sequentially and logically. The student must describe the music and relate the selection to personal experiences.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Students can write a story based on what they heard in the music or imagined in their heads while listening.

Students can draw a picture or storyboard based on the events of the story in the music.

OTHER STANDARDS BEING ADDRESSED

Language Arts

- › Making predictions.
- › Retelling or re-enacting a story, placing the events in the correct sequence.
- › Identify the purpose.
- › Responding appropriately to questions based on facts, heard or read.
- › Relating information and events in a selection to life experiences.
- › Sequencing a series of events in a selection, heard or read.
- › Comparing events, characters and conflicts from a variety of cultures to their experiences.
- › Participating in a group discussion in response to a given piece of literature that connects: to self (personal connection), to world (social connection), to text (compare with multiple texts).
- › Demonstrating sequencing or patterning.
- › Use beginning and ending statements.
- › Delivering oral interpretations of literary or original works.
- › Delivering creative and dramatic interpretations of literary or original works.

STANDARDS ADDRESSED FOR FOREIGN AND NATIVE LANGUAGE

- › Interpret gestures, intonation and other visual or auditory cues.
 - › Comprehend the main ideas and identify the principal characters of short stories
 - › Comprehend the main ideas or themes and identify and describe the main characters in selected literary texts.
 - › Recognize how the target language and its culture add to the richness of our own cultural diversity.
 - › Identify, analyze and discuss various patterns of behavior or interactions typical of the culture studied.
- Identify music from various genres and diverse cultures.
- › Explain the musical characteristics of a piece of music.
 - › Describe the historical context and/or influence if music on daily life, culture, politics, etc.
 - › Describe what a piece of music makes them think about.
 - › Describe why they like particular pieces of music.
 - › Express personal reactions to music through words or drawings.
 - › Respond to various moods heard in music through facial expression and/or movement.
 - › Name the contributions of significant composers and performers specific to the music they play/sing.
 - › Explain and apply the musical characteristics that make a piece of music appropriate for a specific event or function.
 - › Express personal reactions to musical experiences, and identifying which musical aspects evoke these reactions.
 - › Identify characteristics that influence their preference.
 - › Listen to and describe music from various cultures and genres.
 - › Listen to musical examples with sustained attention.
 - › Cooperate in the dramatic process.

Duration 60 minutes

OVERVIEW

Students will rewrite the ending of *La Traviata* to make it into a fairytale with a happy ending. Standards addressed are listed at the end of the activity.

MATERIALS

- › Paper and pencils/pens.
- › Copies of the opera synopsis

LESSON PLAN DESIGN

A Intro Activities / Activation of Prior Knowledge

Review the synopsis and then take a vote: how many like the ending of the opera; and how many wished the ending was different? Close eyes and have students imagine a different ending to the opera. What would make this story have a happy ending? What events would need to change?

Teaching the Lesson

We become invested in characters and want good things to happen to the characters, students will create a new ending and rewrite the opera synopsis as a fairytale. Give them adequate time to write their short fairytales (1-2 pages each).

Review / Concluding the Lesson

Let students pass their fairytales to a neighbor. Students will read their neighbor's fairytale silently and then pass it back. Let the partners briefly discuss the positive aspects of each other's fairytale. Then take volunteers to read their fairytales to the class.

ASSESSMENT

To meet the standard, the student must rewrite the ending of *La Traviata* as a happy fairytale using the conventions of writing. The writing should demonstrate the purpose, style, and audience of a fairytale.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- >Students can dramatize the new fairytales through improvisation and creative movement.
- >Students can explore the concept of voice and writing style by writing different versions of the fairytale.
- >Students can write the story as a scary story, as a poem, as a happy love story, as a romantic comedy, as a sad story, etc. You can guide students through the methods and techniques needed to portray different

LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS BEING ADDRESSED

- › Retelling or re-enacting a story, placing the events in the correct sequence
- › Relating information and events in a selection to life experiences and life experiences.
- › Sequencing a series of events in a selection, heard or read.
- › Comparing events, characters and conflicts from a variety of cultures to their experiences.
- › Comparing interactions among major characters and minor characters in literary text with emphasis upon how the plot is revealed through action.
- › Participating in a group discussion in response to a given piece of literature that connects: to self (personal connection), to world (social connection), to text (compare with multiple texts).
- › Demonstrating sequencing or patterning.

- › Using beginning and ending statements.
- › Delivering interpretations of literary or original works.
- › Including ideas and details that show original perspective and insights.
- › Writing in a variety of expressive forms (e.g. poetry, drama) that use voice and style appropriate to purpose, organize ideas to ensure coherence, and employ literary devices

B Performance Objective for Foreign and Native Language

- › Comprehending the main ideas and identify the principal characters of short stories or children’s literature.
- › Comprehending the main ideas or themes and identify and describe the main characters in selected literary texts.

C Performance Objectives for Fine Arts

- › As a character, play out his/her wants by interacting with others and contributing to the action of classroom improvisation.
- › Cooperate in the dramatic process.
- › Write and revise a play/opera based on personal experience, imaginations, literature, and/or history.

Duration 45 minutes

LESSON PLAN DESIGN

Intro Activities / Activation of Prior Knowledge

After reviewing the synopsis of the opera, have students close their eyes and have them imagine the story from different points of view. If students were in the different characters’ positions, how would they feel? For example, how would Violetta feel after first seeing Alfredo? How would Alfredo feel when the truth was revealed about his father’s visit?

CONTENT STANDARDS FOR FINE ARTS BEING ADDRESSED:

- › As a character, play out his/her wants by interacting with others and contributing to the action of classroom improvisation.
- › Responding to various moods heard in music through facial expression and/or movement.
- › Cooperating in the dramatic process.
- › Interpreting characters representing various historical periods and cultures, and apply the and place.
- › Describing how the characters in a situation might be similar to or different from a real life experience.
- › Inferring a character’s motivations and emotions.

Duration 30-45 minutes

OVERVIEW

Students will gain practical and active reading practice. Students will practice working in teams. Standards addressed are listed at the end of the activity.

M A T E R I A L S

LESSON PLAN DESIGN

Intro Activities / Activation of Prior Knowledge

Have students read the synopsis of *La Traviata*. After reading, discuss the characters and the plot. Discuss the dilemmas and their resolutions. Which characters are good; which are bad? How do you know?

Teaching the Lesson

Take the opera synopsis and divide it up into short sections for reading out loud (e.g. by scene change). Give each section to a small group of students. "Cast" each section/scene. Either let students choose their character or assign them a part. Assign one student narrator to each group to read the section. Give the students time to practice their scene. As the student narrator reads the section, other students in the group act out the story. Encourage accurate portrayals of the characters.

Review / Concluding the Lesson

Perform the opera in order with the students narrating and acting. When students are not actively reading or acting, they are the audience for their classmates.

To meet the standards being addressed, the student must summarize the story, identify and demonstrate accurate characterizations, and read the synopsis of the opera. Students will show comprehension through pantomime.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Add inexpensive props to your scenes. Perhaps students can perform their "opera" for another class.

STANDARDS BEING ADDRESSED

Performance Objectives for Language Arts

- › Making Predictions
- › Retelling or re-enact a story, placing the events in the correct sequence.
- › Identifying the purpose.
- › Responding appropriately to questions based on facts, heard or read.
- › Relating information and events in a selection to life experiences and life experiences.
- › Sequencing a series of events in a selection, heard or read.
- › Comparing events, characters and conflicts from a variety of cultures to their experiences.
- › Participating in a group discussion in response to a given piece of literature that connects: to self (personal connection), to world (social connection), to text (compare with multiple texts).
- › Demonstrating sequencing or patterning.
- › Using beginning and ending statements.
- › Delivering oral interpretations of literary or original works.
- › Delivering creative and dramatic interpretations of literary or original works.

STANDARDS ADDRESSED FOR FOREIGN AND NATIVE LANGUAGE

- › Interpreting gestures, intonation and other visual or auditory cues.
- › Comprehending the main ideas and identify the principal characters of short stories or children's literature.
- › Comprehending the main ideas or themes and identify and describe the main characters in selected literary texts.
- › Recognizing how the target language and its culture add to the richness of our own cultural diversity.

› Identifying, analyzing and discussing various patterns of behavior or interactions typical of the culture studied.

FINE ARTS CONTENT STANDARDS BEING ADDRESSED:

- › Responding to various moods heard in music through facial expression and/or movement.
- › As a character, playing out his/her wants by interacting with others and contributing to the action of classroom improvisation.
- › Dramatizing scenes that develop theme, plot, conflict, and dialogue.
- › Cooperate in the dramatic process.

Duration 60 minutes

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Students can write thank you notes to the performers or company. These letters can describe specifics that students enjoyed about coming to see the opera.