



Artistic Interpretation of a Classic: The Author's Role

This lesson uses video segments from *Great Performances: The Little Mermaid* from San Francisco Ballet to help students explore the role of the author in relation to his/her work.

Lesson Summary

Overview

This lesson uses video segments from *Great Performances: The Little Mermaid* from San Francisco Ballet to help students explore the role of the author in relation to his/her work. In the Introductory Activity, students discuss the structure of the original *The Little Mermaid* tale as they remember it. Students then read the original story and compare their memories to the original text. In the Learning Activity, students examine John Neumeier's artistic interpretation of the classic fairy-tale by looking at two video segments that feature the main characters of the ballet. Finally, for the Culminating Activity, students craft their own contemporary interpretation of a classic fairy-tale (e.g., Snow White, Beauty and the Beast, Sleeping Beauty).

Grade Level:

9-12

Suggested Time

(1-2)50-minute session(s)

Media Resources

[Artistic Interpretation in The Little Mermaid Video](#)

[The Little Mermaid: Transformation Video](#)

[Great Performances: Interview John Neumeier, Choreographer Video](#)

Optional:

[Great Performances: Interview with Lera Auerbach, Composer Video](#)

Materials

[The Little Mermaid by Hans Christian Andersen Document](#)

[Author's Inspiration Document](#)

Web Sites

Great Performances: The Little Mermaid from the San Francisco Ballet

The Lesson

Part I: Introductory Activity

1. Ask students if they are familiar with Hans Christian Andersen's story *The Little Mermaid*. Discuss with students the structure of the story as they remember it. To help facilitate discussion, ask the following questions:

- What do you know about the story of The Little Mermaid? Did you read the story or watch the animated film as a child? If so, what are your memories of it? How did the film compare with the original story?

2. Distribute [The Little Mermaid by Hans Christian Andersen](#) handout. Ask students to read the full text. Once completed, lead a class discussion. Prompt discussion with the following questions:

- How does the story compare to your memory of it?
- Who are the main characters in the story? Encourage students to provide detailed descriptions of the characters.
- What surprised you about Hans Christian Andersen's story? Encourage students to be specific.
- Why do you think this story resonates with people after all these years—why are we drawn to it?

3. Tell students they will be watching video segments from *Great Performances: The Little Mermaid from San Francisco Ballet*, a ballet choreographed by John Neumeier for the San Francisco Ballet. Explain that this ballet incorporates dance, theater, and a unique artistic interpretation of this classic tale.

Part II: Learning Activity

1. Tell students they will watch a video that offers a different perspective on the original Hans Christian Andersen tale. In this video, they will see how the ballet introduces the story of the Little Mermaid. *Note: There is no sound when this video begins.* Play the [Artistic Interpretation in The Little Mermaid Video](#).

2. Ask students to compare the introduction in the original story to the introduction in the video. Tell the students to watch the video again. This time, ask them to look for the elements that tell the story (e.g., dancer's movements, facial expressions, music, symbolism, etc.). Play the video again.

3. In a class discussion, encourage students to answer the following questions:

- In the ballet, the character of The Poet acts as the creator of the Little Mermaid. What do you think is the motivation behind this artistic decision?

- What elements are used to tell the story (e.g., the set design, costumes, music, the conch shell, the notebook, the way the mermaids move, etc.)? How do they compare to the original story?
- Describe how the dancers show the connection between The Poet and the Little Mermaid.

4. Next, ask students to summarize the passage in the original story when the Little Mermaid makes her fateful decision to become human and meets the Sea Witch.

5. Tell students they will now watch a video highlighting the Little Mermaid's transformation from sea creature to human. As they watch the video, encourage students to take notes on the different ways the Little Mermaid and the Sea Witch interact and how this tells their story. Play the [The Little Mermaid: Transformation Video](#).

6. After watching the video, use the following questions to stimulate discussion:

- Describe the movements of the dancer portraying the Little Mermaid. Explain why the character's movements are meaningful to the story. How does she tell her story without saying a word?
- Compare the Sea Witch in the original story to the character in the ballet. How are the characters similar? How are they different? Describe the movements of the Sea Witch in the ballet. How do his movements tell his story?
- Compare the transformation scene in the original story to the same scene in the ballet. Which version resonated with you? Why?

Part III: Culminating Activity

1. Tell students they are going to adapt a well-known fairy-tale such as Snow White, Beauty and the Beast, or Sleeping Beauty into a contemporary story. Explain that just as John Neumeier used the Little Mermaid narrative in a new, unique way, they will do the same. Tell students to watch the interview with John Neumeier. In this video he describes his artistic vision and inspiration for The Little Mermaid ballet. Students may also watch a video interview with Lera Auerbach, the composer of the original score for San Francisco Ballet's *The Little Mermaid*.

- [Great Performances: Interview John Neumeier, Choreographer](#)
- *Optional:* [Great Performances: Interview with Lera Auerbach, Composer](#)

2. Distribute the [Author's Inspiration](#) handout. This handout will help guide students as they develop the narrative for their story. Students may work in pairs or small groups to complete the handout and devise their story ideas.

3. Encourage students to watch the Little Mermaid video segments again. Tell students to analyze how different characters' movements develop the Little Mermaid narrative and use this as inspiration to develop character(s) in their own fairy-tale. Instruct students to complete their interpretations on their own.

Reprinted from *PBS LearningMedia: Artistic Interpretation of a Classic: The Author's Role*
<https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/pbsfa11.la.rv.genre.lpartinterol/artistic-interpretation-of-a-classic-the-authors-role/>

© 2013-10-22 20:00:00 WNET. All Rights Reserved. For personal or classroom use only.
Not for redistribution.