

# Madama Butterfly

High School Study Guide  
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Music by Giacomo Puccini  
Text by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica

Premiered on May 1, 1786 in Vienna, Austria

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## TEACHER'S INTRODUCTION

This study guide will introduce your students to Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly* through lessons that will incorporate the opera's plot and elements of its and the composer's historical background. Short writing activities followed by class discussions will be central to the success of the lesson.

The following pages should ideally be copied and handed out to students. The basic structure of the study guide relies on a simple formula: the students will read, then be asked to participate in an activity or answer a few questions. The lesson plan also calls for a screening of select films, the details of which are listed at the bottom of the page.

The teacher's role is implied in the handouts and should be easy to grasp without further instruction. The structure of the study guide allows a great deal of freedom on the part of the teacher to introduce alternative questions or subjects as they pop up, so feel free to take detours when inspiration takes hold.

The recommended lesson plan is as follows:

1. Distribute and read Puccini's contemporary bio.
2. Distribute and read the contemporary synopsis of the opera.
3. Making Connections: Screen portion or entire "Madama Butterfly" (see suggested DVD list)
4. Distribute, write and discuss writing prompt: "If I Am The Director"
5. Making Connections: Screen portion or entire "Where The Heart Is."
6. Discuss any similarities to any other stories, fiction, TV, or film.
7. Distribute, write and discuss writing prompt: "I've Had My Heart Broken and I've Been a Heartbreaker"
8. Making Connections: Screen portion of "Fatal Attraction" (scene where she plays "Butterfly" album in her apartment).
9. Distribute and read "*Butterfly Was a Bomb*"

"Madama Butterfly" - Amsterdam Opera (2005)

[http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000BA8EES/sr=1-3/qid=1155058792/ref=sr\\_1\\_3/102-9860333-5786532?ie=UTF8&s=dvd](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000BA8EES/sr=1-3/qid=1155058792/ref=sr_1_3/102-9860333-5786532?ie=UTF8&s=dvd)

"Fatal Attraction" – 1987

[http://www.amazon.com/Attraction-Special-Collectors-Michael-Douglas/dp/B00003CXA0/sr=1-1/qid=1157727033/ref=pd\\_bbs\\_1/104-8154740-7582315?ie=UTF8&s=dvd](http://www.amazon.com/Attraction-Special-Collectors-Michael-Douglas/dp/B00003CXA0/sr=1-1/qid=1157727033/ref=pd_bbs_1/104-8154740-7582315?ie=UTF8&s=dvd)

"Where The Heart Is" – 2000

[http://www.amazon.com/Where-Heart-Matt-Williams-II/dp/B00004WI5F/sr=1-1/qid=1158186508/ref=pd\\_bbs\\_1/104-8154740-7582315?ie=UTF8&s=dvd](http://www.amazon.com/Where-Heart-Matt-Williams-II/dp/B00004WI5F/sr=1-1/qid=1158186508/ref=pd_bbs_1/104-8154740-7582315?ie=UTF8&s=dvd)

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GIACOMO PUCCINI (1858 - 1924)

Giacomo Puccini was born in Lucca, Italy and his family was always involved with music. People didn't live to be too old back then and Puccini's dad died when he was only five years old. After his father died his uncle Fortunato tried to take care of him, but Fortunato was frustrated with Puccini because he was not a good student. Eventually Puccini got a job at a church playing the organ, but his future was not promising. Then he saw a production of the opera *Aida* by Verdi. After that, he wanted to compose operas himself.

In 1880, when he was 22 years old, he wrote the "Glory Mass" for church and it sounded like he was ready to write very dramatic music for opera. The talent demonstrated in the mass qualified him for a spot in the Milan Conservatory, a college of music, and he studied there for three years.

In 1882 Puccini decided to enter his first opera *La Villa* into a one-act opera contest. Even though he didn't win, he got the attention of a music publisher—the equivalent of a record company today—called Ricardi, and they paid him to write another opera.

He wrote *Manon Lescaut* and it was a hit. It is also still produced in opera houses today (Arizona Opera staged it in 1995). Puccini proceeded to produce hit after hit. The now very famous *La Boheme* came next. *La Boheme* is staged every few years by almost every opera house in the world. It's that good. It is also the opera that the movie "Moulin Rouge" was based on. Following *La Boheme*, Puccini's wrote *Tosca*, which was initially a huge success and continues to be successful today.

After this series of hits, Puccini thought he could do no wrong and was very confident that *Madama Butterfly* would be a success too. But despite his confidence and his track record, it bombed on the first showing. Eventually the opera was a success, but at the time of *Madama Butterfly's* premiere, nothing was going right for Puccini: he almost died in a car accident; his maid committed suicide after Puccini's wife accused him of having an affair with her; his publisher died.

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Puccini died of cancer in 1924. He was writing his last opera, *Turandot*, when he died and it remained unfinished until a person named Berio completed it in 2001.

## MADAMA BUTTERFLY SYNOPSIS

### Act I

At the beginning of the 20th century in Japan an American could “marry” a Japanese girl just in the same way he can rent a house, and he can end the marriage in the same way too—with 30 days’ notice. In a beautiful garden of a perfect Japanese home outside of Nagasaki a marriage broker, Goro, tells an United States Naval officer, Lieutenant Pinkerton, that he has set-up a marriage with a teenage Japanese girl, Cio-Cio-San. The marriage contract includes a rental agreement for the home for Pinkerton to enjoy while working in Japan, and Pinkerton can cancel both agreements with thirty days’ notice.

Pinkerton’s friend and associate, Sharpless, stops by and warns Pinkerton that agreements like these never turn out well. Sharpless also tells Pinkerton that the girl, Cio-Cio-San, is also known as Madame Butterfly because she is very feminine and sensitive and that she may not survive such a cold thing as a temporary marriage. Pinkerton ignores Sharpless’ warning and even tells him that this marriage will be a fun game and the only serious marriage he’ll have will be in United States to an American woman.

Young, innocent fifteen year-old Madame Butterfly shows up with her family. The only personal belongings she has are some jewelry and a dagger that her father used to commit suicide. The wedding starts and seems like a happy occasion until the Bonze, a Japanese priest, comes in and curses Butterfly because she’s adopted Christianity as her new religion in honor of her new husband. He tells her she’s now an outcast and her entire family agrees.

Pinkerton sends everyone away and tells Butterfly he’s attracted to her. She tells him she’s attracted to him and they walk into their new home.

### Act II

It’s now three years later, Madame Butterfly lives alone in the home above Nagasaki and she hasn’t seen or heard from Pinkerton in a long time, ever since he moved back to the States. Suzuki, her maid, tries to help Butterfly realize that Pinkerton may never come back but Butterfly believes that his ship will come back into the harbor and he will walk up the hill to their home.

Sharpless shows up with a letter and wants to read it to Butterfly but Goro walks in to introduce a new “husband” to Butterfly. She tells them that she is already married. Sharpless knows the letter says that Pinkerton has married an American girl, so he asks Butterfly, What if Pinkerton never comes back? She tells him that he will come back and that if he doesn’t she’ll kill herself. She also introduces her young son, Trouble, whose name she’ll change to Joy when Pinkerton comes home.

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Butterfly and Suzuki hear a cannon fire in the harbor, that's the cannon from Pinkerton's ship! Now happy, they set the house up so it looks its best and wait quietly for Pinkerton to walk up the hill.

### Act III

Trouble and Suzuki fall asleep waiting for Pinkerton, but Butterfly stays awake all night. The sun rises but Pinkerton doesn't show up so Butterfly puts Trouble to bed to the tune of a lullaby. Sharpless arrives in the garden with Pinkerton...and his American wife, Kate. Suzuki figures out what has happened and is brokenhearted. Looking around his once happy home, Pinkerton sings a farewell to his past. Butterfly comes back in and tells Kate that they can have Trouble.

Shattered, Madame Butterfly blindfolds Trouble, steps behind a screen, and stabs herself to death. Pinkerton rushes into the house calling to her, "Butterfly! Butterfly!" but he's too late.

## WRITING AND DISCUSSION: IF I WERE THE DIRECTOR...

A lot of operas are presented in many different ways. A director can change the setting of an opera from Japan to Guatemala, from the early 1900's to the late 1980's. If you were the director, how would you tell the story of Cio-Cio-San? What would be the setting? What would be the time period? What kind of clothes would the characters wear? In a couple of paragraphs, write your "vision." You can use the white space below or a blank sheet of paper. Be prepared to explain your staging choices in the class discussion that will follow.

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## WRITING AND DISCUSSION:

### I'VE HAD MY HEART BROKEN AND I'VE BEEN A HEARTBREAKER

Love isn't easy. You can get your heart broken. You can be a heartbreaker.

Usually it's when things don't work out that hearts get broken, like when the girl or guy you had a crush on doesn't live up to your expectations. But hearts also get broken through carelessness: someone lets the relationship go on too long, giving hope where there should be none.

Write a couple of paragraphs of a time you had your heart broken or when you broke somebody else's heart. You can use the space below or a separate piece of paper.

Consider the following while writing your narrative: What was the worst part? Were you able to forgive that person? Were they able to forgive you? Were you sad? Were you angry? Was your behavior justified? Would you do it again? What would you do differently?

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## CONTEMPORARY REACTION: *BUTTERFLY* WAS A BOMB

There's an old saying in the world of theatre, "Terrible rehearsal, great show." But there could also be a terrible rehearsal *and* a terrible show. Puccini loved the tragic play, "Madame Butterfly" by David Belasco and wanted to turn it in to an opera. Puccini's "Madama Butterfly" seemed to be doomed from the start, even when he was writing it. The first disaster was when he was almost killed in a car accident. Cars were a new invention in 1903 and people were still learning how to drive them. There were no seatbelts either back then, so when Puccini's car flipped, he was tossed out and got trapped under it. He survived and felt great about "Butterfly" – believing it was going to be his best. It would also premier in the best opera house in the world: La Scala in Milan, Italy.

The problem began when the singers were trying to learn their roles, but were only given a few pages at a time from the printing company, Ricardi—who also thought it would be a good idea to keep the opera "secret" and didn't allow the singers to take the pages out of the opera house. The press was also not allowed to visit—something they were usually able to do. This made reporters angry and angry reporters usually write bad things.

On opening day, Puccini invited his family to attend. This was unusual. He never extended such an invitation for his other new operas, but did this time because he really thought it was going to be a huge success. Then the curtain rose and he started to hear the shouts and boos, giggles and groans.

The problem began when the audience thought they heard music from another popular Puccini opera, "La Boheme." the Italians hated it when composers borrowed from another opera. So when Act I was over, half of the audience was booing and hissing, even when the singers and Puccini came out to bow!

Act II was even worse. The hecklers were so loud that the singers couldn't hear the orchestra. Somehow a draft came in and blew Butterfly's dress up, which made everybody laugh. And the audience made animal noises during Cio-Cio-San's all-night vigil. When the curtain fell, it seemed like no one applauded.

It got worse: the newspaper reviews had titles like: "Puccini Hissed!" and "Fiasco at La Scala" and, the worst, "Butterfly (is) The Result of an Automobile Accident." Puccini was so upset that he pulled the opera and paid back the printer, even though it would mean losing a lot of money.

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Puccini was devastated, but it was still his favorite opera. There's a theory that, because of the secrecy, people had already planned to hate the opera, no matter how good it was. Maybe this sounds familiar. It happens today with films. The Bennifer *Gigli* fiasco comes to mind. Whether the audience's reaction was warranted or not, however, the disaster made Puccini rethink some scenes, and when he fixed them he presented it again at a smaller house—and after that performance it was a hit.