

The Marriage of Figaro

High School Study Guide

Written by Robert Hollman



Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Text by Lorenzo da Ponte

Based on the play by Pierre de Beaumarchais, “La folle journée, ou Le mariage de Figaro”

Premiered on May 1, 1786 in Vienna, Austria

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TEACHER'S INTRODUCTION

This study guide will introduce your students to Mozart's opera *The Marriage of Figaro* 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 instructions. 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 Mozart's contemporary biography.
2. Discuss, write and share writing prompt: "Was Mozart The First Rock Star?"
3. Distribute and read the contemporary synopsis of *The Marriage of Figaro*.
4. Screen portion of "Amadeus" – scene where Mozart composes *Figaro* and a small opera house, frequented by peasants, performs it.
5. Discuss, write and share writing prompt: "Love Can Be a Funny Thing"
6. Screen portion of or entire "Marriage of Figaro."
7. Discuss, write and share writing prompt: "My Favorite Love Triangle."
8. Discuss any similarities to any other stories, fiction, TV, or film.
9. Screen portion of or entire "Runaway Bride."

"Marriage of Figaro" – Glyndebourne Festival Opera (1994)

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00008DDRM/sr=1-1/qid=1155054459/ref=sr_1_1/102-9860333-j5786532?ie=UTF8&s=dvd

"Amadeus" – Director's Cut (1984)

http://www.amazon.com/Amadeus-Directors-Cut-Two-Disc-Special/dp/B00006DEFA/sr=1-1/qid=1157726915/ref=pd_bbs_1/104-8154740-7582315?ie=UTF8&s=dvd

"Runaway Bride" - 1999

http://www.amazon.com/Runaway-Bride-Richard-Gere/dp/B00003IPFP/sr=1-1/qid=1157730121/ref=pd_bbs_1/104-8154740-7582315?ie=UTF8&s=dvd

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WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART 1756 — 1791

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was bound to be in the music business but nobody knew that he would be both a child prodigy (a person with great talent) and a genius. His father was a successful composer, violinist and was the assistant concertmaster for the royalty of Austria in Salzburg.

When Mozart was three years old he was playing the violin in concerts. When he was five he was composing short pieces, called “minuets.”

When he was six he was going on tours with his older sister, Anna Maria, to Munich and Vienna to play concerts. In 1763, when Mozart was seven, his father resigned so that he could take Wolfgang and his sister on a tour of Western Europe including Stuttgart, Frankfurt, Brussels, Paris, London and Amsterdam. While they were on these three-year tour, Wolfgang wrote his first symphony. At that time, he was nine years old.

When Mozart was only twelve he wrote his first opera: *La Finta Semplice*. His dad was upset that it took another year to get it performed, but, because of its success, Wolfgang was made an honorary concertmaster for the Austrian court.

Wolfgang and his dad went on the road again in 1769. This time it was a yearlong Italian tour covering Rome, Milan, Florence, Naples, and Bologna. He also wrote another opera, *Mitridate, re di Ponto* (*Mitridate, king of Ponto*) and it was performed in front of the Pope.

Problems began for Wolfgang when an archbishop of the Salzburg court died in 1771 and the new archbishop was not as supportive, not giving as much work to Mozart as the last. Mozart started to travel again, this time with his mom. Their trips included Paris, where he wrote the very successful “Paris Symphony,” but also where his mom got sick. Not long after he premiered the symphony she died.

He went back to Salzburg to be the concertmaster and composed a lot of music, including the “Coronation Mass” and the famous opera, *Idomeneo, re di Creta* (*Idomeneo, King of Crete*), which premiered in Munich. The archbishop wanted him back in Salzburg, but Mozart refused because he didn’t like how he was being treated there.

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It was time to get married and he met a beautiful woman named Constanze Weber. Mozart’s dad didn’t want him to marry Constanze. He wanted Wolfgang to marry a “better” woman. But Wolfgang was defiant and married her anyway.

They tried to have many children and had six but only two lived. Mozart was made the emperor's "Chamber composer" and that's when he was probably the most productive. He composed some of his most famous works including *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* as well as a lot of piano concertos. Unfortunately, Mozart's income did not keep up with his success.

Even though Mozart was successful he spent excessively. He made a good amount of money but he and his wife spent more than what they made and they were always in debt.

In the late 1780s Mozart was very stressed out and started to get sick. He wrote another successful opera, *The Magic Flute*, but again it couldn't get him out of debt. He also got in trouble with his fellow Masons (a secret society) because he revealed Masonic secrets in *The Magic Flute*. In November of 1791 he got very sick and on December 5, 1791, at the young age of 33, he died.

His official cause of death was kidney failure, but there have been a lot of conspiracy theories as to how he died. Was it poisoning by the Masons? Or by a jealous composer named Salieri? To this day, it remains a mystery. When he was buried, his family was too poor to get him a proper cemetery plot so he was buried in a "pauper's" (poor person's) mass grave that was unmarked.

WRITING AND DISCUSSION: WAS MOZART THE FIRST ROCK STAR?

Given the European tours, lavish overspending, and death at a young age, it could be argued the Mozart was the first rock star—almost 200 years before rock & roll came into existence.

In an article entitled "Mozart Was a Punk, So Schubert Was a Goth," published by The Kansas City Star, a talented musician and trained opera singer named Nathan Granner concludes that Mozart and many other Classical composers were rock stars in their own way. He says of Mozart: "Mozart was the world's first well-known punker, the first rock 'n' roll punk band... I would liken Mozart to the Clash. He just wanted to write his music and play it. He didn't care about norms. His first concert was cancelled because people didn't like what he was doing." Granner then added, "Mozart played in bars. He did *The Magic Flute* in a ... bar."

On a sheet of paper, compare and contrast Mozart's young celebrity and those musical celebrities of a more recent time who have also been very successful, but who also had tragically short lives. After comparing rock stars of today with Mozart, write down why you think music, money, and fame

sometimes combine to have negative effects on individuals, causing bankruptcy, premature death, drug addiction, and so on. Is it the person, the circumstances, cultural expectations, a combination of all three? Write down what you think. When you are done writing, a class discussion will begin.

Literature Cited

Horsley, Paul. "Mozart was a Punk, So Schubert was a Goth." **Kansas City Star**. 16 September 2006. <http://www.kansascity.com/mld/kansascity/entertainment/15520469.htm>.

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THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO SYNOPSIS

Setting: A Castle near Seville, Spain in 1778

ACT I

Figaro and Susanna are getting married today and Figaro, a servant, and Susanna, a maid, measure the small room that their bosses—the Count and Countess Almaviva (“The Living Soul”)—gave them for their bedroom. Susanna hates the room because she thinks it’s too close to the Count’s rooms. She also tells Figaro that she thinks the Count wants her, but then the Countess needs Susanna’s help so she leaves. Figaro gets very upset and swears that he’ll stop the Count from going after his new bride.

Dr. Bartolo and Marcellina come in to the room and Figaro is nervous because he owes Marcellina a lot of money and promised to marry her if he couldn’t pay her back. Bartolo thinks this is hilarious because it’s payback for when Figaro arranged the elopement of the Count and Countess, Rosina, and Bartolo was in love with Rosina and wanted to marry her. Bartolo leaves, Susanna comes back in and gives Marcellina attitude until she leaves too.

Cherubino (“little fat angel”), the Count’s messenger runs in and says that the Count is mad at him and is ready to fire him because the Count found Cherubino fooling around with the gardener, Antonio’s daughter, Barbarina. The real problem is that Cherubino is in love with every woman he sees, especially the Countess, and he asks Susanna to give a song he’s written to the Countess for him.

They hear the Count walking down the hallway, so Cherubino hides behind a chair. The Count comes in the room and, thinking that he is alone with Susanna, tries to make some moves on her until Don Basilio the music teacher shows up. Now the Count hides behind the same chair and Cherubino moves and covers himself with a blanket. Basilio gossips with Susanna about all of the crazy business in the castle, including Cherubino’s crush on the Countess and the Count’s crush on Susanna. The Count is furious and jumps out from behind the chair. He finds Cherubino too and is so angry with him that he sends Cherubino to the Count’s own army and sends him away.

Figaro comes back with Susanna’s wedding veil and some villagers who really like the count. Figaro thanks the Count for not insisting on having the wedding-night custom of sleeping with the bride (the mythical *Droit de Cuissage*¹) and asks the Count to give Susanna the veil as a symbol of purity. The Count says he wants to postpone the ceremony until he can throw a great party. After the villagers leave, both Figaro and Susanna try to persuade the Count to allow Cherubino to stay, but the Count won’t let him.

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ACT II

The Countess is sad that the Count won't give her any attention. Susanna and Figaro come in and tell the Countess that the Count is trying to seduce Susanna so now the Countess is even more upset, but they make a plan: The Count will be given a note that says that the Countess is cheating on him. While the Count is investigating, Figaro and Susanna will be married quickly. At the same time, they will disguise Cherubino to look like Susanna and catch the Count in the act.

Cherubino arrives and tries on his disguise. He sings a love song to the Countess. The Count arrives. Cherubino hides in the dressing room and Susanna hides behind a screen. The Count is suspicious because he got the anonymous letter about the Countess' supposed cheating. The Count hears a noise behind the door of the dressing room and demands to know who it is, but the Countess refuses to tell him so he takes her with him to find a hammer to break the door down.

Cherubino jumps out a window and Susanna hides in the dressing room. The Countess tells the Count that it's Cherubino hiding in her dressing room. The Count demands that the door be opened and Susanna calmly enters the room. When the Count can't find Cherubino he begs forgiveness from Susannah.

Antonio, the gardener, bursts in and complains that someone just jumped out of a window and crushed his flowers. Susanna and the Countess try to convince the Count that Antonio is drunk again but it is Figaro who takes the blame, saying he was the one who jumped from the window. Marcellina enters with Dr. Bartolo and Basilio to demand that Figaro must marry Marcellina or repay his debt.

Act III

The Count thinks about what's been going on when Susanna shows up. She says she's prepared to meet him later that evening in the garden if he will give her the money he had promised to give her so she can pay off Marcellina and marry Figaro. Susanna leaves and meets Figaro and promises him they will be married. The Count overhears all of this and is infuriated that his servants are happy with their lives and he's not.

Figaro, Marcellina, Dr. Bartolo and the Count meet and the Count tells Figaro he must marry Marcellina or repay his debt. Figaro tries one last way out: he can't marry until he gets his parents' permission - but he was stolen as an infant! Right then and there, Marcellina realizes that Figaro is her long lost son that she had with Dr. Bartolo! Mom and son are reunited and everyone decides that there will be a double wedding, with Marcellina marrying Dr. Bartolo and Figaro marrying Susanna.

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But the Countess is still sad and wants her husband to love her. Susanna has an idea and writes a letter for the Count, telling him to wait in the pine grove. They seal the letter with a pin.

Barbarina and the disguised Cherubino, along with other village girls, arrive with flowers for the Countess. The Count shows up with Antonio, who says it was Cherubino who jumped out of the balcony window into the flowers. The Count wants to punish Cherubino but Barbarina asks the Count to fulfill her wish to give her anything she wants and make Cherubino marry her. The Count agrees.

At the wedding, Susanna passes the note to the Count, who pricks his finger on the pin. This makes Figaro laugh because the Count's been "pricked" by romance. The Count laughs too and promises a fun night for all.

Act IV

Figaro and Marcellina find Barbarina looking for that pin. The Count had asked her to return to Susanna and Figaro realizes that it was Susanna who sent the Count the love letter and tries to find out where they're having their "affair." Figaro complains to Marcellina about Susanna's supposed cheating and seeks vengeance, even though Marcellina tries to explain that nothing's going on.

Barbarina returns, as she has a date with Cherubino, but is frightened by a noise and runs into one of the pavilions. Figaro returns with Bartolo and Basilio as witnesses to his wife's infidelity. Figaro tells them to hide until he gives the signal and then Figaro moves to another part of the garden, still defending the jealousy of men and determining not to trust women.

Marcellina, Susanna, and the Countess enter. Susanna and the Countess have switched clothing. Susanna, aware that Figaro is listening, sings about her approaching happiness with her lover. The Countess (now disguised as Susanna) awaits the planned tryst with the Count. However, Cherubino comes in and flirts with her. The Count enters and tries to seduce "Susanna." The real Susanna (disguised as the Countess) is confronted by Figaro and he tells her that the Count is with his Susanna. She asks Figaro to be quiet, but forgets to disguise her voice.

The truth begins to dawn on Figaro, who then pleads passionate love to the "Countess." A furious Susanna slaps Figaro who tells her that he knew she was in disguise all along. Continuing the prank, Figaro and the "Countess" loudly confess their love and the Count rushes in to catch the two lovers.

Basilio, Bartolo, Don Curzio, and Antonio all rush in to investigate the ruckus and the Count yells at his cheating wife and everyone begs the Count to forgive his wife. He refuses until the real Countess unveils herself. Almaviva realizes that this was all a big prank and asks to be forgiven. The Countess forgives him and everyone celebrates the end of a very crazy day.

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Notes

1. The *droit de cuissage*, also known as the *droit de seigneur*, existed in the middle ages and gave a lord the right to be the first to sleep with a newly

wedded bride. The origins of this right extend back thousands of years. In earlier times, it was exercised for religious reasons and considered a duty of priests and other agents of gods. Gods were the creators and had to give that ability of creation, i.e. fertility, to women in order for them to bear children. This was achieved by priests and chiefs having sexual intercourse with them. During the middle ages, this right lost its religious significance and was rarely exercised. It became a political tool and was used more often as a bargaining chip than it was to ensure fertility or satisfy the sexual appetite of a lord.

WRITING AND DISCUSSION: LOVE CAN BE A FUNNY THING

Love can give us a lot of anguish, especially in our teenage years. But it can also make us laugh sometimes too. *The Marriage of Figaro* proves that love makes great fodder for comedy, as does the large volume of romantic comedies that are released each year at your local theatre. Love can make us unreasonable, and the absence of reason is the very definition of absurd. Love can be painful, but it can be funny too.

How many times have you laughed over how you tried to tell someone that you're in love with him or her, only to stutter, trip, or generally look silly doing so?

Can you recall a time when something love-related funny happened to you or one of your friends? Take out a sheet of paper and write down a brief narrative of the event. It's happened to everybody, so don't be shy.

After you've written your narrative, share the story with the class if you're comfortable doing so. Try to determine what made the situation funny and whether it was funny to all involved, or whether it was only funny to you. Consider also whether it was truly funny at the time or whether it was funny only later. What's funny on-screen to an audience watching a sit-com or movie is often not funny to the characters involved in the situation. Why does that happen?

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WRITING AND DISCUSSION: MY FAVORITE LOVE TRIANGLE

You've got a crush on someone, but that person has a crush on both you and somebody else and is toying between the two. Congratulations, you're involved in a love triangle. Love triangles have been around forever, it seems, and you only have to watch a show like the "O.C." or "Gray's Anatomy" to see that we're still entertained by watching them too.

On a sheet of paper, or in the white space below, write a couple of paragraphs about your favorite fictional love triangle. Make sure to answer the following questions:

- What is the name of the book or movie or show?
- What characters are involved in the triangle and what causes the triangle to develop?
- What makes it your favorite? The characters? The drama? The comedy?

If there's a real life love triangle experience that you'd have and would like to share, write down the details of that triangle too, using made up names for those involved.

After you're done writing, the class will begin a discussion about love triangles. Here are some points of discussion that you should consider:

- Why are love triangles so interesting and exciting to hear about and watch?
- What causes a love triangle to develop?
- Is there one person most at fault for allowing the triangle to develop?
- Is a love triangle something that should or can be resolved?
- How can a love triangle be peaceably resolved?
- What do you think about the person at the apex of a love triangle?

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