

LESSON PLAN

Bian Lian: Change in Storytelling



Subjects: English Language Arts, Visual Arts

Grade Level: Elementary School

Duration: One to three 45-minute class periods

Dynasty: Modern period (1912–present)

Object Type: Mask

Themes: Language and Stories; Daily Life and Folkways

Contributed by: Anjali Wells, Montgomery County Public Schools, MD

Objective

Students will be able to identify similarities in character development between the text of a story and a dramatic performance in order to create visual representations of character change.

Essential Questions

- What is change and why is it important?
- How do characters change in stories?
- Why do characters change in stories?
- How have you changed in the past year?

Background Information

Known in Chinese as *bian lian*, face changing is an important aspect of Chinese Sichuan opera. Faster than the eye can detect, the masks of opera performers may change multiple times during a performance. One technique allows the performer to whisk away one facemask while another is pulled down from the top of the head by a series of silk threads attached to different parts of the costume. An actor can change seven different faces in sixty seconds. The secrets of face changing have been passed down from generation to generation, but only some two hundred individuals have mastered the art. Traditionally restricted to males, the practice of *bian lian* is now being learned by women as well. The colors of the facemasks range from green and blue to red, yellow, brown, and gold, and they depict emotions such as fear, tension, relaxation, slyness, desperation, and outrage.

Vocabulary

bian lian: literally, “face changing”; a Chinese dramatic performance in which performers wear brightly colored costumes and several masks that quickly change.

character: a person or subject in a story.

emotion: the expression of a feeling.

mask: a face covering that usually has a design on it.

Sichuan opera: a type of Chinese traditional opera that originated in Sichuan, southwest China.

tradition: a practice, skill, or talent that is passed down from generation to generation.

Procedure

Day 1

1. Gather students onto the carpet/common space for a whole group discussion
2. Choose a story to read to the students during which the main character goes through a change; see <http://characterschange.weebly.com/> for some suggestions.
3. Have students complete the Character graphic organizer for the story.
4. Have students discuss why characters change in stories, and why they think it is important to change as a person.
5. Introduce *bian lian* using the information from the Object Description.
6. Before showing the video, provide students with another copy of the Character graphic organizer to track the changes in the masks.
7. Show the video “[Face Changing in Chinese Sichuan Opera](#)” and engage in discussion using the questions below.

Days 2–3

Choose an extension from below.

Discussion Questions

Describe

- What did you notice about the designs of the masks (colors, shapes, expressions)?
- How did they change (colors, shapes, expressions)?

Analyze

- Why do you think the masks change?
- What story do you think is being told in this performance? What makes you think that?
- What do you think the colors mean?
- How many characters do you think are included in the story?

Interpret

- Who do you think performs *bian lian*?
- Why do you think they use masks to tell their stories?
- Who do you think was the audience for *bian lian* historically?
- Why do you think the performers chose to use masks?

Inquire

- What types of performances have you seen? Do they have anything in common with the *bian lian* performance?
- Does *bian lian* remind you of anything else?
- Why do you think the art of *bian lian* has been passed down? Why do you think there are only two hundred performers in the world today?
- How is the idea of transformation and change included in other professions?

Extensions

Visual Arts

- Drawing: Draw and design two masks inspired by the *bian lian* performance masks to represent a change you have experienced in your life.
- Sculpture: In a group, generate a story or sequence of change. Select a character to act out in the story. Create a paper-mache *bian lian* mask that captures a moment or feeling of your character in the story.
- Theatre: Create a list of emotions. Brainstorm a facial expression for each emotion. Partner up and go through each facial expression. Your partner will guess what emotion is conveyed with each facial expression. Switch roles. Engage in a class discussion about how you manipulated your facial features to express different emotions. Connect those expressions to the screenshots of the performance in order to decode the emotions of the characters in the performance.

English Language Arts

- Review the *bian lian* performance and write your own story based on the masks in the performance.
- Choose a new book to read. Choose a character in the story and track their transformation. Write a paragraph explaining their transformation throughout the story.

Social Studies

- Compare and contrast *bian lian* masks with masks from a different culture of your choice.

Resources

How Characters Change over Time. <http://characterschange.weebly.com/>

View the video "Face Changing in Chinese Sichuan Opera" online:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1IVyo7Txus&list=PL6RoU6Y7k_2dR5vWYCYSJvCZ5EcfRWDiT&index=14&t=0s

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>