

***Die Walküre Lesson Plan:***  
***Myths and Themes Adapted to Speak to Present Audiences***  
*Written by Olga C.G. Bezrukova*

Duration: 1 lesson/ 50 Minutes  
(Can be adapted for 2 lessons by increasing discussion time)

Grade Levels: Secondary

Subjects: Theater, Literature, English

**Grade Levels:** 9-12

**Subjects:** Literature, English, Theater

**Standards:**

*California State Board of Education Language Arts Content*

- Grade 9/10; 2.0 Reading Comprehension (focus on informational materials): Students read and understand grade-level-appropriate material. They analyze the organizational patterns, arguments, and positions advanced.
- Grade 9/10; 3.0 Literary response analysis: Students read and respond to historically or culturally significant works of literature that reflect and enhance their studies of history and social science. They conduct in-depth analyses of recurrent patterns and themes
- Grade 9/10; 3.3 Analyze interactions between main and subordinate characters in literary text (e.g. internal and external conflicts, motivations, relationships, and influences) and how they affect the plot
- Grade 9/10; 3.4 Determine characters traits by what they say about themselves in narration, dialogue, dramatic monologue, soliloquy
- Grade 9/10; 3.5 Compare works that express a universal theme, and provide evidence to support the ideas
- Grade 11/12; 2.4 Deliver oral responses to literature:
- a. Demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the significant ideas of literary works (e.g., make assertions about the text that are reasonable and supportable).
  - b. Analyze the imagery, language, universal themes, and unique aspects of the text through the use of rhetorical strategies (e.g., narration, description, persuasion, exposition, a combination of those strategies).
  - c. Support important ideas and viewpoints through accurate and detailed references to the text or to other works.
  - d. Demonstrate an awareness of the author's use of stylistic devices and an appreciation of the effects created.
  - e. Identify and assess the impact of perceived ambiguities, nuances, and complexities within the text.

**California State Board of Education Visual and Performing Arts Standards**

*Theater – Advanced*

- Grades 9-12      Improvise or write dialogues and scenes, applying basic dramatic structure (exposition, complication, crises, climax, and resolution; and including complex characters with unique dialogue that motivates the action.

## Goals & Objectives

1. Introduce students to a synopsis of *Die Walkure*.
2. Introduce students to excerpts of mythology that Wagner may have used to write *Die Walkure*.
3. Teachers will guide students in discussion as they read **Handouts 1-4** and fill out **Worksheet A** and **Worksheet B**.
4. Students will be able to discuss their thoughts and findings in class discussion.
5. Students will be able to analyze different myths and theorize on how Wagner has adapted them for his audiences in *Die Walküre*.
6. Students will be able to identify themes that are relevant to the present society.
7. Students as a class will be able to brainstorm some of myths in American culture.
8. Students will be able to adapt elements from several of the myths discussed and create a story with themes that Students will write a paragraph based on some of the myths in our culture, using the discussed elements to create a work for contemporary audiences.
9. Homework: The paragraph will be expanded into a full story.

## Preparatory:

1. **Copies of Synopsis, Handouts1-4, Worksheet A, Worksheet B**

## Procedure

1. Teacher will distribute a synopsis of *Die Walkure*.
2. Teacher will give **Synopsis, Handout 1** and **Worksheet A** to the class.
3. As a class, students will read excerpts from different works based on the same story.
4. Students will fill out **Worksheet A**.
5. Teacher will facilitate a discussion of students' ideas.
6. Teacher will distribute **Worksheet B**.
7. The teacher will guide a class discussion, and students will fill out **Worksheet B** as a class.
8. Students will share ideas about how our society is portrayed in some of the American myths. Additionally, the students will talk about some of the universal themes that occur in myths.
9. Students will write a short paragraph based on myths, using the ideas discussed in class.
10. Assignment: the paragraph will be expanded into a full story as homework.

## Assessment:

1. Students will be able to read and discuss a variety of written works.
2. Students will be able to complete **Worksheet A** and **Worksheet B**.
3. Students will be able to participate in class discussion.
4. Students will be able to write paragraphs incorporating the elements discussed in class.
5. Homework: Students will be able to expand written paragraphs into a full story.

## Handout 1

**Instructions:** Read the following excerpt, underlining the key elements that in your opinion are necessary to the story line. Using the Die Walküre column in Worksheet A, write down the key elements that you have underlined.

Synopsis of Die Walküre, 2<sup>nd</sup> drama from *The Ring* by Richard Wagner, accessed from:  
<http://www.laopera.com/production/0809/walkure/synopsis.aspx>

### Act One

Siegmond collapses from exhaustion after taking refuge in an unfamiliar house. Sieglinde, startled to find a stranger in her home, tells him that her husband Hunding will return home shortly. Siegmund assures her that she has nothing to fear from an unarmed, wounded man. He tells her that his name is "Wehwalt" (Sorrowful) and rises to leave, but Sieglinde convinces him to stay and rest. When Hunding arrives, Siegmund relates the tragic tale of his life. Fighting a gang of ruffians who had killed his mother and kidnapped his twin sister, he became separated from his father. He was left alone, rejected by all he encountered and treated like an outcast. He had tried to rescue a girl who was being forced by her family to marry. Although Siegmund tried to shield her from her furious kinsmen, his weapons were shattered and the girl was killed. Hunding has, in fact, just returned from a search party he had joined with the girl's surviving family, hunting for Siegmund. He tells Siegmund that he may stay the night, but that they will fight to the death in the morning.

Left alone, Siegmund despairs at having no weapons to defend himself, even though his father had once promised him a sword in his hour of direst need. Sieglinde returns, having drugged her husband. She tells him how, during her wedding to Hunding, a stranger entered the house, which had been constructed around an ash tree. Clad in grey with a hat slung low over one of his eyes, he plunged a sword deep into the trunk of the tree; nobody has subsequently been able to pull it out. Sieglinde hopes that "Wehwalt" might be the one to seize the sword and free her from her unhappiness. Gazing intently at him, she realizes that he looks familiar; even his voice begins to stir her memory. When Siegmund tells her that his father's name was Wälse, Sieglinde excitedly recognizes him as her long lost twin. Siegmund triumphantly pulls the sword from the tree and, rejoicing in the reunion of the Wälsungs, hails Sieglinde as both sister and bride.

### Act Two

The king of the gods, Wotan, urges Brünnhilde to protect his mortal son Siegmund in the coming fight. Brünnhilde is one of the nine Valkyries, immortal daughters of Wotan and the earth goddess Erda, who ride to battle in search of the bravest warriors. Wotan's wife Fricka arrives in a fury. As goddess of marriage, she is horrified at the incestuous and adulterous union of Siegmund and Sieglinde, and shamed by Wotan's own adultery. She demands that Hunding be avenged. Wotan is determined that Siegmund survive the fight so that he can win back an all-powerful ring forged from the Rhinegold. The ring had been stolen from Alberich by Wotan, but has come into the possession of the giant Fafner. By acting independently from his father, Siegmund would enable Wotan to circumvent his guilt for stealing the ring. Fricka points out that, by leaving a sword behind for his son, he has merely made Siegmund his unwitting player in his plan. Wotan reluctantly agrees that neither he nor Brünnhilde will protect Siegmund in the coming fight.

Alone with Brünnhilde, Wotan laments that the gods would be overthrown easily if Alberich were ever to regain the ring. Furthermore, Erda had foretold that the reign of the gods would end if Alberich were ever to have a son, and Wotan has heard that the dwarf has done so, after using his gold to entice a

mortal woman. To Brünnhilde's shock, Wotan orders her to make certain that Hunding is victorious. Wotan's laws, carved onto his spear, must be upheld or Wotan's reign is meaningless.

Fleeing from Hunding, Siegmund and Sieglinde pause to rest. As Sieglinde sleeps, Brünnhilde appears, telling Siegmund that he must follow her to Valhalla. Siegmund refuses to leave his beloved behind. Moved by his passion, Brünnhilde determines to save Siegmund after all. When Hunding arrives, she shields Siegmund in the fight. Wotan then appears, shattering Siegmund's sword with his spear, and Hunding is now able to slay his rival easily. Brünnhilde, gathering up the broken sword, hurries Sieglinde away to safety. Wotan contemptuously kills Hunding, then vows to punish Brünnhilde for her disobedience.

### **Act Three**

On a mountaintop, the Valkyries gather together before carrying slain warriors to Valhalla, where they will help guard the fortress of the gods. Brünnhilde soon joins them, fleeing from her father's wrath to protect Sieglinde. Unwilling to defy their father, the Valkyries refuse to help her. Sieglinde mourns the death of Siegmund, but Brünnhilde tells her that she must live for the sake of their unborn child, who will grow up to become the greatest of all heroes. Brünnhilde gives Sieglinde the pieces of Siegmund's broken sword, and tells her to seek shelter in the forest where Fafner guards his hoard, for Wotan would not dare to follow her there.

When Wotan arrives, he tells Brünnhilde that she must be stripped of her divinity, and left there in exile, locked in sleep, for any man to claim as his own. Brünnhilde tells him that although she disobeyed his orders, she knew that she was merely following what his heart desired most. Deeply moved by her courage, Wotan eventually agrees to Brünnhilde's one request, that he surround her with flames that only the bravest of men might penetrate. Wotan says his final farewell to his daughter. As she sinks into her long sleep, he calls upon Loge, the god of fire, to encircle the rock with terrifying flames; only one who knows no fear will be able to awaken her.

(Synopsis by Mark Lyons)

**Instructions for Handouts 2-4:** The subsequent excerpts are from Nordic and Scandinavian myths that Wagner may have used in creating his story for *The Ring*. Read the following excerpts and underline the elements in each of the myth that you feel Wagner used in writing *Die Walküre*.

**Of the Sword that Sigmund, Volsung's son, drew from the Branstock**  
**Excerpt taken from *Saga of the Volsungs*, CHAPTER III (accessed on line at The Online Medieval and Classical Library: <http://omacl.org/Volsunga/chapter3.html> )**

There was a king called Siggeir, who ruled over Gothland, a mighty king and of many folk; he went to meet Volsung, the king, and prayed him for Signy his daughter to wife; and the king took his talk well, and his sons withal, but she was loth thereto, yet she bade her father rule in this as in all other things that concerned her, so the king took such rede (1) that he gave her to him, and she was betrothed to King Siggeir; and for the fulfilling of the feast and the wedding, was King Siggeir to come to the house of King Volsung. The king got ready the feast according to his best might, and when all things were ready, came the king's guests and King Siggeir withal at the day appointed, and many a man of great account had Siggeir with him.

The tale tells that great fires were made endlong the hall, and the great tree aforesaid stood midmost thereof, withal folk say that, whenas men sat by the fires in the evening, a certain man came into the hall unknown of aspect to all men; and suchlike array he had, that over him was a spotted cloak, and he was bare-foot, and had linen-breeches knit tight even unto the bone, and he had a sword in his hand as he went up to the Branstock, and a slouched hat upon his head: huge he was, and seeming-ancient, and one-eyed. (2) So he drew his sword and smote it into the tree-trunk so that it sank in up to the hilts; and all held back from greeting the man. Then he took up the word, and said --

"Whoso draweth this sword from this stock, shall have the same as a gift from me, and shall find in good sooth that never bare he better sword in hand than is this."

Therewith out went the old man from the hall, and none knew who he was or whither he went.

Now men stand up, and none would fain be the last to lay hand to the sword, for they deemed that he would have the best of it who might first touch it; so all the noblest went thereto first, and then the others, one after other; but none who came thereto might avail to pull it out, for in nowise would it come away howsoever they tugged at it; but now up comes Sigmund, King Volsung's son, and sets hand to the sword, and pulls it from the stock, even as if it lay loose before him; so good that weapon seemed to all, that none thought he had seen such a sword before, and Siggeir would fain buy it of him at thrice its weight of gold, but Sigmund said --

"Thou mightiest have taken the sword no less than I from there whereas it stood, if it had been thy lot to bear it; but now, since it has first of all fallen into my hand, never shalt thou have it, though thou biddest therefore all the gold thou hast."

King Siggeir grew wroth at these words, and deemed Sigmund had answered him scornfully, but whereas was a wary man and a double-dealing, he made as if he heeded this matter in nowise, yet that same evening he thought how he might reward it, as was well seen afterwards.

**ENDNOTES:**

(1) Rede (A.S. raed), counsel, advice, a tale or prophecy.

(2) The man is Odin, who is always so represented, because he gave his eye as a pledge for a draught from the fountain of Mimir, the source of all wisdom.

## Handout 3

### 4. THE VALKYRIE

Excerpt taken from *The Children of Odin* by Padraic Colum, chapter 4-“The Valkyrie”

Can be accessed at Project Gutenberg (<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/24737>) or the following site:  
<http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/ice/coo/coo22.htm>

AGAINST the time when the riders of Muspelheim, with the Giants and the evil powers of the Underworld, would bring on battle, Odin All-Father was preparing a host of defenders for Asgard. They were not of the Æsir nor of the Vanir; they were of the race of mortal men, heroes chosen from amongst the slain on fields of battle in Midgard.

To choose the heroes, and to give victory to those whom he willed to have victory, Odin had battle-maidens that went to the fields of war. Beautiful were those battle-maidens and fearless; wise were they also, for to them Odin showed the Runes of Wisdom. Valkyries, Choosers of the Slain, they were named.

Those who were chosen on the fields of the slain were called in Asgard the Einherjar. For them Odin made ready a great Hall. Valhalla, the Hall of the Slain, it was called. Five hundred and forty doors had Valhalla, and out of each door eight hundred Champions might pass. Every day the Champions put on their armor and took their weapons down from the walls, and went forth and battled with each other. All who were wounded were made whole again, and in peace and goodly fellowship they sat down to the feast that Odin prepared for them. Odin himself sat with his Champions, drinking wine but eating no meat.

For meat the Champions ate the flesh of the boar Sæhrimnir; every day the boar was killed and cooked, and every morning it was whole again. For drink they had the mead that was made from the milk of the goat Heidrun, the goat that browsed on the leaves of the tree Læradir. And the Valkyries, the wise and fearless battle-maidens, went amongst them, filling up the drinking-horns with the heady mead.

Youngest of all the battle-maidens was Brynhild. Nevertheless, to her Odin All-Father had shown more of the Runes of Wisdom than he had shown to any of her sisters. And when the time came for Brynhild to journey down into Midgard he gave her a swan-feather dress such as he had given before to the three Valkyrie sisters--Alvit, Olrun, and Hladgrun.

In the dazzling plumage of a swan the young battle-maiden flew down from Asgard. Not yet had she to go to the battlefields. Waters drew her, and as she waited on the will of the All-Father she sought out a lake that had golden sands for its shore, and as a maiden bathed in it.

Now there dwelt near this lake a young hero whose name was Agnar. And one day as Agnar lay by the lake he saw a swan with dazzling plumage fly down to it. And while she was in the reeds the swan-feather dress slipped off her, and Agnar beheld the swan change to a maiden.

So bright was her hair, so strong and swift were all her movements, that he knew her for one of Odin's  
LA Opera- *Die Walküre: Myths and Themes*

battle-maidens; for one of those who give victory and choose the slain. Very daring was Agnar, and he set his mind upon capturing this battle-maiden even though he should bring on himself the wrath of Odin by doing it.

He hid the swan-feather dress that she had left in the reeds. When she came out of the water she might not fly away. Agnar gave back to her the swan-feather dress, but she had to promise that she would be his battle-maiden.

And as they talked together the young Valkyrie saw in him a hero that one from Asgard might help. Very brave and very noble was Agnar. Brynhild went with him as his battle-maiden, and she told him much from the Runes of Wisdom that she knew, and she showed him that the All-Father's last hope was in the bravery of the heroes of the earth; with the Chosen from the Slain for his Champions he would make battle in defence of Asgard.

Always Brynhild was with Agnar's battalions; above the battles she hovered, her bright hair and flashing battledress outshining the spears and swords and shields of the warriors.

But the gray-beard King Helmgunnar made war on the young Agnar. Odin favored the gray-beard King, and to him he promised the victory. Brynhild knew the will of the All-Father. But to Agnar, not to Helmgunnar, she gave the victory.

Doomed was Brynhild on the instant she went against Odin's will. Never again might she come into Asgard. A mortal woman she was now, and the Norns began to spin the thread of her mortal destiny.

Sorrowful was Odin All-Father that the wisest of his battle-maidens might never appear in Asgard nor walk by the benches at the feasts of his Champions in Valhalla. He rode down on Sleipner to where Brynhild was. And when he came before her it was his, and not her head that was bowed down.

For she knew now that the World of Men was paying a bitter price for the strength that Asgard would have in the last battle. The bravest and noblest were being taken from Midgard to fill up the ranks of Odin's Champions. And Brynhild's heart was full of anger against the rulers of Asgard, and she cared no more to be of them.

Odin looked on his unflinching battle-maiden, and he said, "Is there aught thou wouldst have me bestow on thee in thy mortal life, Brynhild?"

"Naught save this," Brynhild answered, "that in my mortal life no one but a man without fear, the bravest hero in the world, may claim me for wife."

All-Father bowed his head in thought. "It shall be as thou hast asked," he said. "Only he who is without fear shall come near thee."

Then on the top of the mountain that is called Hindfell he had a Hall built that faced the south. Ten Dwarfs built it of black stone. And when the Hall was built he put round it a wall of mounting and circling fire.

More did Odin All-Father: he took a thorn of the Tree of Sleep and he put it into the flesh of the battle-maiden. Then, with her helmet on her head and the breast-mail of the Valkyrie upon her, he lifted Brynhild in his arms and carried her through the wall of mounting and circling fire. He laid her upon the couch that was within the Hall. There she would lie in slumber until the hero was without fear should ride through the flame and waken her to the life of a mortal woman.

He took farewell of her and he rode back to Asgard on Sleipner. He might not foresee what fate would be hers as a mortal woman. But the fire he had left went mounting and circling around the Hall that the Dwarfs had built. For ages that fire would be a fence around where Brynhild, once a Valkyrie, lay in sleep.

#### **Handout 4**

Excerpt taken from *The Children of Odin* by Padraic Colum,  
“The Sword of the Volsungs.”

Can be accessed at Project Gutenberg (<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/24737> ) or the following site:  
<http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/ice/coo/#contents>

Excerpt of the story as told by Sigmund’s wife, Hiordis:

“Know that I am Hiordis, a King’s daughter. Many men came to my father to ask for me in marriage, and of those that came there were two whom I heard much of: one was King Lygni and the other was King Sigmund of the race of the Volsungs. The King, my father, told me it was for me to choose between these two. Now King Sigmund was old, but he was the most famous warrior in the whole world, and I chose him rather than King Lygni.

“We were wed. But King Lygni did not lose desire of me, and in a while he came against King Sigmund’s kingdom with a great army of men. We hid our treasure by the sea-shore, and I and my maid watched the battle from the borders of the forest. With the help of Gram, his wondrous sword, and his own great warrior strength, Sigmund was able to harry the great force that came against him. But suddenly he was stricken down. Then was the battle lost. Only King Lygni’s men survived it, and they scattered to search for me and the treasure of the King.

I came to where my lord lay on the field of battle, and he raised himself on his shield when I came, and he told me that death was very near him. A stranger had entered the battle at the time when it seemed that the men of King Lygni must draw away. With the spear that he held in his hand he struck at Sigmund’s sword, and Gram, the wondrous sword, was broken in two pieces. Then did King Sigmund get his death wound. ‘It must be I shall die,’ he said, ‘for the spear against which my sword broke was Gungnir, Odin’s spear. Only that spear could have shattered the sword that Odin gave my fathers. Now must I go to Valhalla, Odin’s Hall of Heroes.’

“‘I weep,’ I said, ‘because I have no son who might call himself of the great race of the Volsungs.’

“‘For that you need not weep,’ said Sigmund, ‘a son will be born to you, my son and yours, and you shall name him Sigurd. Take now the broken pieces of my wondrous sword and give them to my son when he shall be of warrior age.’

“Then did Sigmund turn his face to the ground and the death struggle came on him. Odin’s Valkyrie took his spirit from the battle-field. And I lifted up the broken pieces of the sword and with my serving-maid I went and hid in a deep dell in the forest...”

**Worksheet A**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

|                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| 4th Excerpt             |  |
| 3 <sup>st</sup> Excerpt |  |
| 2 <sup>st</sup> Excerpt |  |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> Excerpt |  |
| Opera Synopsis          |  |

**Worksheet B**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Some believe that Wagner wrote his libretto by taking the existing myths and creating a story that would fit his purposes and speak to the society of the time. State is your opinion. Why do writers change existing stories? Use some examples and elements from discussion.**

**What are some of the universal themes in *Die Walküre* that may speak to the audiences of today?**

**Make a list of some of the additional themes that can be considered universal, or that may speak to the audiences of today.**

**What are some of the myths that still exist in American culture? Make a list. (ex. Daniel Boon, Davy Crockett, The Army of the Dead, Big Foot)**

**Are there any universal themes in American myths that could speak to generations in the future?**

Assignment: Brainstorm and write a short paragraph incorporating ideas from myths (either American or the ones in this packet) for a short drama that would be based/or incorporate existing myth elements to suit present society and audiences. Some of the questions to consider: Which myths am I using? Who would be telling the story? (ex. child, maid) How will the story end? What kind of developments in our society should be portrayed? What are some of the things that are prominent in our news? What would the similarities/differences to other excerpts be? Where is our society going? Would this affect the story?

**Discuss your ideas with class. Assignment: Take the paragraph that you wrote and expand it. Make sure your teacher approves the paragraph before you expand it.**

