



The Nutcracker Study Guide

History

The Nutcracker has become the most popular ballet of our times. It was first presented in 1892 at the Maryinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, Russia. The ballet was an adaptation of the 1816 story by E. T. A. Hoffman, *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*. *The Nutcracker* was choreographed by Lev Ivanov, with music by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Marius Petipa, the reigning choreographer at the Maryinsky, fell ill, so the job passed to Ivanov. Tchaikovsky only reluctantly accepted the commission to compose the score, which when completed he considered "infinitely worse than *Sleeping Beauty*." At the premiere, the ballet was deemed a complete failure. More than 60 years and many productions would pass before *The Nutcracker* would become a staple of the repertoire in ballet companies around the world and one of the universal traditions of the holiday season.

ACT I

Guests are arriving for a Christmas Eve party at the home of Dr. and Mrs. Silberhaus and their children, Clara and Fritz. Clara's godfather, the eccentric Herr Drosselmeyer, arrives with toys for all the children and a mysterious vision of something special in store for Clara. With the party in progress, Drosselmeyer produces another wonderful surprise, life-size dolls, who dance to the children's delight. He then presents Clara with a special gift, a wooden nutcracker in the shape of a soldier, a strange gift for a little girl; but Clara falls in love with the doll and proudly shows it to everyone. Fritz, wanting the Nutcracker for himself, breaks the doll. Clara is heartbroken, but Drosselmeyer fixes the Nutcracker to everyone's relief. As the party comes to an end, the children are sent off to bed. Clara, however, is too excited to sleep, and she sneaks downstairs to be with her new Nutcracker doll. Strange things begin to happen. Huge mice almost as big as she, scurry across the floor. The clock strikes midnight and her whole house begins to transform. The Christmas tree grows to an enormous size, and a great battle ensues between the mice, led by the Mouse King, and the Nutcracker, now life-sized, leading an army of toy soldiers. It looks as though the Mouse King might win the battle when, just in time, Clara steps in and hits him with her shoe, distracting him so that the Nutcracker can kill him. The mice carry off their fallen leader. The Nutcracker transforms into a Prince and leads Clara on a fantastic journey, which begins with the wintry Kingdom of Snow. In the final tableau, the entire Snow Kingdom sends Clara on to the Sugar Plum Fairy's palace in the magical Land of the Sweets.

ACT II

The scene opens in the garden of the Sugar Plum Fairy, where everyone is gathering to welcome Clara. As the Angels move about, the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier meet Clara and the Nutcracker Prince and call all the characters to enter for a royal greeting. In the language of mime, the court servants describe to all assembled how the fearless Clara helped to win the battle with the Mouse King. Then the Sugar Plum Fairy arranges a great party with grand entertainment. Dancers from faraway places like China, Spain, Arabia and Russia have come to perform for Clara. Mother Ginger is also there with her eight children. The Rose Queen leads the beautiful Waltz of the Flowers, and then the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier perform the most beautiful dance of all. Finally, all the characters gather to say goodbye to Clara and send her on her journey home.

The Composer

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

1840 – 1893

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in Kamsko-Votinsk, Russia on May 7, 1840. He was a very bright child who could read Russian, French and German by the time he was six years old. He disliked physical exercise, did not like to wash and didn't care about how he looked or what he wore. He showed an interest in music that was so strong for a young child that his governess worried about him. If he could not find a piano to try out the music he made up, he would use his fingers to tap out his tunes on the window panes of his house. One time while he was doing this he tapped so hard that he broke the glass of the window, and cut himself very badly. Peter began taking piano lessons when he was six years old. After attending boarding school he studied law and mathematics and got a job as a clerk working in the Ministry of Justice. After just four years he quit his job to go to music school full time in order to study composition. He was soon invited to teach classes. Tchaikovsky was a nervous, unhappy man all his life, yet his beautiful music made him the most popular of all Russian composers. He wrote the music for the three most famous ballets of all time, The Nutcracker, Swan Lake, and Sleeping Beauty. In his lifetime he also wrote nine operas, six symphonies, four concertos, three string quartets, and numerous songs, suites, and overtures. One of his most famous pieces is the 1812 Overture, which uses cannons and church bells; because it sounds so grand it is often chose to accompany fireworks at 4th of July celebrations. Tchaikovsky was only 53 when he died in St. Petersburg in 1893. He had just completed his sixth symphony, which he felt was the best piece of music he ever created.

Classroom Activities

Language Arts: Writing

Have students write a friendly letter to one of the characters or dancers from the Nutcracker. Have students use sensory details to describe what they liked best about the character they chose.

Language Arts: Compare/Contrast

Read a different version of the Nutcracker aloud to your students. The version of the The Nutcracker that you have read is slightly different from what students will see in the ballet. Have students chart the differences they notice on a Venn diagram or other graphic organizer. Depending on the grade level, have your students use their or graphic organizer to write compare and contrast sentences, paragraph(s) or an essay.

Language Arts: Parts of Speech Activity

Written and Oral English Language Conventions

Select one part of speech for students to act out every time it occurs in a read aloud of The Nutcracker (i.e. nouns, or verbs, or adjectives, or adverbs.) Nouns and an introduction to adjectives are particularly good for Grade 2. Verbs and an introduction to adjectives and adverbs are useful for Grade 3. Nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs are all excellent for Grade 4.

Use the “fill in the blank” passage as a comprehension exercise. This can be done together as a class for younger or primary grades. A variety of additional tasks can be built into this one exercise.

- Variation #1: Parts of speech – students can underline each example of a specified part of that occur in the passage speech (i.e. all of the nouns, verbs, etc.).
- Variation #2: Synonyms and Antonyms - Students may provide either a synonym or an antonym for each example of a specific part of speech. (i.e. verbs, adjectives, adverbs) to create a more vivid description.
- Variation #3: Syllables – Have students underline all words in the passage that have 2 syllables, etc. (Grade 3 & up)

Language Arts: Nutcracker Mad Lib

Written and Oral English Language Conventions

Students are given a synopsis of The Nutcracker story and then are asked to create their own version, replacing designated words with new grammatically correct words. Students can be assigned to create a specific genre (i.e. scary, silly, fantasy) or left to choose their own.

Social Studies & Language Arts

Social Studies: Change the Setting for the Nutcracker

- 1.) For this production of The Nutcracker, the ballet had been set in Western Europe in the 1800s. Have students write about what would happen if the story took place in a different time period and a different location. What would you change? (Costumes, sets, characters, folk dances, music, landmarks, locations, events, animals, etc.)
- 2.) Have students re-write their own version of the story using a different setting, time period, or both be sure that they consider how costumes, sets, characters, folk dances, music, landmarks, locations, events, and animals might be different.

Social Studies: Families & Traditions

The Nutcracker story takes place at Christmas and shows how Clara's family celebrates the holiday. What holiday traditions are special to your family? Use a Venn diagram or other graphic organizer to compare and contrast your holiday traditions with your parents or guardian. How are your parents' tradition different than those of your grandparents?