



LEHÁR

The Merry Widow

A Guide for Educators

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Opera



The Merry Widow

Your wealthy husband just died, leaving you piles of money. The Pontevedrian ambassador in Paris wants to be your matchmaker. And your old boyfriend just appeared out of nowhere. What's a girl to do? Such is the conundrum facing Hanna Glawari, the "merry widow" at the heart of Franz Lehár's effervescent operetta. Based on a French play from the mid-19th century, *The Merry Widow* is one of the most successful romances ever written for the operatic stage, a delightful concoction of elegant romance, screwball comedy, and biting social critique, all wrapped up in infinitely hummable melodies and unforgettable dance tunes.

In director Susan Stroman's hands, *The Merry Widow* is also a story of self-discovery, as its title heroine endeavors to make sense of her changing social status. A woman raised in the Pontevedrian countryside and now comfortably ensconced in the richest echelons of Parisian society, Hanna has learned to navigate a country and culture not her own. Yet in a broader sense, too, Hanna occupies a sphere few women in the 19th century would have had the opportunity to enter: that of financial and social independence. Wily, resourceful, and savvy enough to surmount both romantic mishaps and diplomatic entanglements, Hanna is a woman unwilling to let societal expectations dampen her joie-de-vivre. She's strong, smart, and has grace in spades, ably emerging from her fellow Pontevedrians' madcap schemes with her fortune, her independence, and her heart still very much intact.

This guide invites students to examine the world of *The Merry Widow* through Hanna's eyes. More than simply serving up laughs, Lehár's work unveils many of the social and legal challenges that women have faced for centuries. As Hanna dances her way through the halls of the Pontevedrian embassy, students may enjoy exploring the broader socio-political landscape in which a woman like Hanna would have lived. The following pages include a selection of both primary and secondary sources that will serve as a road map to this 19th-century world. By engaging with Lehár's operetta as a socio-historical document, students may find a deeper understanding of both *The Merry Widow* and contemporary works of music, literature, and art. Yet above all, *The Merry Widow* is meant to be enjoyed, and this guide will empower students to engage with the work's clever comedy, tender romance, and enduring charm.

THE WORK

An opera in **three acts**, sung in **English**

Music by **Franz Lehár**

Libretto by **Viktor Léon** and **Leo Stein**

Based on the play *L'Attaché d'Ambassade* by **Henri Meilhac**

English version by **Jeremy Sams**

First performed **December 30, 1905**, at the **Theater an der Wien, Vienna**

PRODUCTION

Susan Stroman
Production

Julian Crouch
Set Designer

William Ivey Long
Costume Designer

Paule Constable
Lighting Designer

Susan Stroman
Choreographer

PERFORMANCE

The Met: Live in HD
Broadcast: January 17, 2015

Renée Fleming
Hanna Glawari

Nathan Gunn
Count Danilo Danilovitch

Sir Thomas Allen
Baron Mirko Zeta

Kelli O'Hara
Valencienne

Alek Shrader
Camille de Rosillon

Andrew Davis
Conductor

Production a gift of The Sybil B. Harrington Endowment Fund

HD Live in Schools is supported through a partnership with the New York City Department of Education



FLEMING



GUNN



O'HARA



SHRADER

Opera in the Classroom

The Metropolitan Opera Educator Guides offer a creative, interdisciplinary introduction to opera. Designed to complement existing classroom curricula in music, the humanities, STEM fields, and the arts, these guides will help young viewers confidently engage with opera whether or not they have prior experience with the art form.

On the following pages, you'll find an array of materials designed to encourage critical thinking, deepen background knowledge, and empower students to engage with *The Merry Widow's* story, music, and themes. These materials can be used in classrooms and/or via remote-learning platforms, and they can be mixed and matched to suit your students' individual academic needs.

Above all, this guide is intended to help students explore *The Merry Widow* through their own experiences and ideas. The diverse perspectives that your students bring to opera make the art form infinitely richer, and we hope that your students will experience opera as a space where their confidence can grow and their curiosity can flourish.

WHAT'S IN THIS GUIDE:

Philosophical Chairs: A series of questions that will introduce students to the opera's main themes while sparking their creativity and encouraging debate

Who's Who in *The Merry Widow*: An introduction to the opera's main characters and their roles in the plot

Synopsis: A complete opera synopsis for young readers

The Source: Information about the literary sources and/or historical events that inspired the opera

Timelines: One or more timelines connecting the opera to events in world history

Deep Dives: In-depth looks at various topics relating to the opera

Active Exploration: Interdisciplinary activities connecting the opera to topics in music, the humanities, STEM, and the arts

THROUGHOUT THE GUIDE, YOU'LL ALSO FIND:

Critical Inquiries: Questions and thought experiments designed to foster careful thinking

Fun Facts: Entertaining tidbits about *The Merry Widow*



FUN FACT

The Merry Widow has been translated numerous times into English, and many translators have taken considerable license in anglicizing the operetta's names and locations. In a 1907 production in New York, Hanna was renamed Sonia, and her country of origin was "Marsovia." In another version, Joan Sutherland played the widow "Anna," who hails from "Pontevedria."

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS AND THE MERRY WIDOW

This guide invites students to explore the opera through:

Literature
Drama
Creative Writing
History
Social Studies
Gender Studies
Technology and Media Literacy
Social and Emotional Learning
Law
Ethics
Debate
Dance
Music
Analysis
Composition

Philosophical Chairs

Philosophical Chairs is an activity designed to foster critical thinking, active inquiry, and respectful dialogue among students. To play a game of Philosophical Chairs, participants agree or disagree with a series of statements, but the game doesn't end there. The most crucial element of the game is what happens next: Participants discuss their points of view and can switch sides if their opinions change during the discussion. (For more tips on using Philosophical Chairs in a classroom or via a remote-learning platform, see the activity description in your Google Classroom.)

Each topic statement is deliberately open-ended yet ties into a number of the themes present in *The Merry Widow*—including the nature of love, the pressures of social status, and the difficulties that arise when politics and personal sentiments mix. As you and your students explore and learn about *The Merry Widow*, you can return to these statements: What do they have to do with the opera's story? How might these questions help us explore the opera's story, history, and themes?

THE STATEMENTS

- Flirting is harmless.
- Wealth is the key to happiness.
- You should always try to maintain your social status.
- Pride is a virtue.
- Pride is a vice.
- You should only marry within your social class.
- It is okay to tell a lie as long as it's not about something very important.
- Saying "I love you" is chock-full of meaning. (Ask students what it means to actually say "I love you" to someone. Does this phrase carry a duty to act in love, or is it just a meaningless phrase?)
- There is only one form of love.
- Marriage lasts forever.
- Cheating (in a relationship) is harmless.
- It is important to maintain a good reputation.
- A will (instructions for the distribution of one's belongings after one's death) must be followed to the letter.
- Politics should never impact personal matters.
- Personal matters should never get mixed up in politics.

Keep in mind that the process of this activity is just as important as the statements themselves. Imagine a world in which everyone actively listens to one another and engages in respectful dialogue, honoring others and showing respect for the wide array of diverse ideas and opinions that others hold. Philosophical Chairs fosters exactly this kind of space, encouraging students to take what they've learned and change the global landscape for generations to come.



Who's Who in *The Merry Widow*

CHARACTER	PRONUNCIATION	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Hanna Glawari A rich young widow	HAH-nah GLAH-vahr-ee	soprano	The “merry widow” of the opera’s title, Hanna is wealthy and beautiful—and surrounded by suitors who want her money.
Count Danilo Danilovitch An attaché at the Pontevedrian embassy	DAH-nee-loh dah-NEE-lo-vich	tenor or baritone	A ladies’ man, Danilo was once in love with Hanna. Nowadays, however, he is more interested in drinking and flirting with the dancers at Maxim’s than in a long-term relationship.
Baron Mirko Zeta Pontevedro’s ambassador in Paris	MEER-koh ZEH-tah	baritone	A pompous (and foolish) older man married to a younger woman, Zeta is desperate to keep Hanna’s money in Pontevedrian hands.
Njegus Baron Zeta’s assistant	NYEH-goosh	spoken	A comedic character who facilitates much of the operetta’s action, Njegus has a tendency to put his foot in his mouth—to great comic effect.
Valencienne Zeta Baron Zeta’s wife, in love with Camille de Rosillon	vahl-en-SYEHN	soprano	Passionate yet concerned about her reputation, Valencienne loves Camille, but she also wants to retain her respectability as a married woman.
Camille de Rosillon A young Frenchman, in love with Valencienne	cah-MEEL duh roh-see-YOHN	tenor	Camille loves Valencienne. But Valencienne, worried about being seen in the company of a single man, is encouraging him to marry Hanna.
Kromow Chief of staff at the Pontevedrian embassy	KROH-mohv	baritone	A jealous fool, Kromov constantly suspects that his wife is flirting with other men.



HANNA GLAWARI



COUNT DANILO
DANILOVITCH



VALENCIENNE ZETA



CAMILLE DE ROSILLON

CHARACTER	PRONUNCIATION	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Cascada and St. Brioche Rival suitors for Hanna's hand in marriage	CAH-scah-dah; SAN bree-OSH	baritones	Both men are desperate to marry Hanna—but only because she's rich.
Bogdanovitch and Pritschitsch Attachés to the embassy	bog-DAHN-oh-vich PRIT-chitch	baritones	As embassy officials, they tend to follow Zeta without questioning the intelligence of his plans.
Olga Kromow's wife	OHL-gah	mezzo-soprano	The embassy wives are catty snobs who look down on Hanna. They also all have something to hide: Olga is having an affair with St. Brioche, Sylviane is having an affair with Cascada, and Praskowia is convinced that Danilo is in love with her.
Sylviane Bogdanovitch's wife	sill-vee-AHN	mezzo-soprano	
Praskowia Pritschitsch's wife	prahs-KOH-vee-ah	contralto	
Froufrou, Joujou, Lolo, Margot, Cloclo, and Dodo Grisettes (dancing girls) at Maxim's	froo-FROO zhoo-ZHOO (otherwise as in English)	sopranos	The dancers at Maxim's are all very familiar with Danilo—and the other men of the Pontevedrian embassy.



Synopsis

ACT I *Paris.*

In the Grand Salon of the Pontevedrian embassy, a lavish ball is taking place. Yet despite the extravagant settings, Pontevedro is nearly bankrupt, and the Pontevedrian ambassador, Baron Mirko Zeta, hopes that the ball's Parisian guests will help raise the money Pontevedro so urgently needs. He's pleased when he sees his young wife, Valencienne, flirting with Camille de Rosillon, a handsome young Frenchman, since he assumes that she's merely trying to win French support for Pontevedro. In fact, Camille and Valencienne are having an affair, and although Valencienne is concerned about maintaining her reputation as a respectable wife, Camille would rather that she spend all her time with him. Seeking to prove the depth of his feelings for Valencienne, Camille writes "I love you" on her fan.

Meanwhile, Zeta eagerly awaits the arrival of the guest of honor: Hanna Glawari, a wealthy widow from Pontevedro. Zeta is desperate to keep her from marrying a Parisian and taking her money to France. Instead, he hopes to convince her to marry a Pontevedrian (which will keep her wealth in Pontevedro), and he has just the man for the job: Danilo Danilovitch, a Pontevedrian aristocrat with an eye for pretty ladies. In the meantime, two Frenchmen, Cascada and St. Brïoché, have overheard Zeta's conversation about Hanna's money and each resolved to marry her themselves. And Valencienne, hoping to distract attention from how much time she spends with Camille, has suggested that he marry Hanna, since if he is married to another woman everyone will assume that he and Valencienne are just good friends.

When Hanna arrives, the Parisian men shower her with compliments. Hanna, well aware that they are mostly interested in her money, expresses her frustration with their extravagant attentions. After she departs for the ballroom, Valencienne realizes she has lost her fan—the one with Camille's incriminating message—and rushes out to look for it.

Danilo finally arrives, fresh from a night of carousing at Maxim's, and takes a quick nap in the Grand Salon. When Hanna enters, she recognizes him immediately. It's soon revealed that they were once deeply in love, but Danilo's family, finding the farmer's daughter Hanna an unsuitable match for their aristocratic son, refused to let them marry. Now, Danilo swears that he has no interest in marriage and insists he'll never say the three little words "I love you."

In the meantime, Zeta's chief of staff, Kromow, finds Valencienne's fan and thinks it belongs to his wife, Olga. Zeta, wanting to spare Olga the scandal, convinces Kromov that the fan belongs to Valencienne. (The buffoonish Zeta has no idea that this is actually true.) When he bumps into Danilo, Zeta orders him to marry Hanna for the good of



Pontevedro. Danilo replies that he will happily prevent her from marrying a Parisian man, but he refuses to marry Hanna himself. When the “ladies’ choice” dance is announced, Hanna selects Danilo, and after some flirtatious bantering the two finally dance.

ACT II *Hanna’s villa outside Paris.*

The following day, Hanna hosts a garden party on her elegant villa’s sprawling terrace. Danilo arrives late, and Zeta orders him to pay more attention to his mission of keeping Hanna away from the Parisian men—particularly Camille, who has been seen hanging around her. Zeta’s assistant Njegus reveals that Camille is already in love with a mystery woman. Zeta wants to know who this woman is so he can get her to marry Camille, which would leave Hanna free for a Pontevedrian suitor. Certain that the fan inscribed with “I love you” belongs to the mystery woman, he orders Danilo to find its owner.

Hanna comes across the fan and, seeing its inscription, assumes it is a gift to her from Danilo. But no matter how she hints at his feelings, he refuses to admit that he loves her. As they talk, he happens to tell her about his favorite Parisian nightspot, Maxim’s. Hanna is intrigued.

Zeta, meanwhile, is desperate to learn the identity of Camille’s secret lover; he still has no idea that it is his own wife. Zeta, Njegus, and the other noblemen agree to meet in the pavilion of Hanna’s garden to discuss the matter.

Camille and Valencienne enter the garden. Valencienne knows that her husband is searching for the fan’s owner, and she is terrified of what will happen when he discovers that it belongs to her. Feeling that she has no choice but to leave Camille, she tells him that their love affair is over. Camille, heartbroken, asks her for a small memento of their time together. Just then, she sees her fan sitting on a garden bench. She adds a new inscription to the fan—“I am a respectable wife”—and gives it to Camille as a keepsake. Yet despite Valencienne’s intention to actually *be* respectable, she and Camille decide to hide in the pavilion for one last tryst.

Zeta arrives for his meeting with the other noblemen only to find the pavilion locked. Njegus, meanwhile, has seen Valencienne and Camille together. To protect Valencienne from her jealous husband, Njegus sneaks Hanna into the pavilion to take Valencienne’s place. Zeta thinks he sees his wife in the pavilion and is outraged—until Hanna emerges from the pavilion and announces that she and Camille are engaged. Danilo departs in a huff for Maxim’s, which Hanna takes as proof of his love.



FUN FACT

When *The Merry Widow* premiered in New York in 1907, it was so popular that a roaring industry of *Merry Widow*-themed merchandise sprang up to capitalize on the show’s success. These items included scarves, cigars, hats, and corsets—as well as a cocktail, “The Merry Widow,” which (according to a version published in 1917 by New York bartender Hugo R. Ensslin) was essentially a gin martini spiced up with herbal liqueur and absinthe.

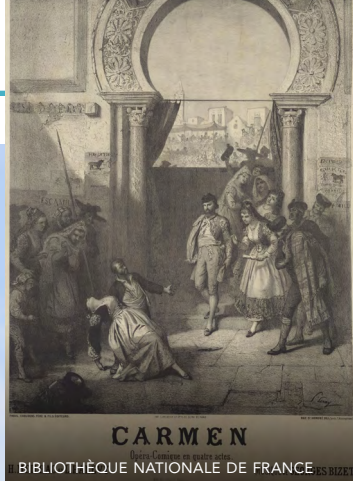
ACT III *Maxim's.*

Camille and Valencienne arrive at Maxim's. They are supposed to be searching for Danilo, but soon they sneak off to enjoy one of the restaurant's private rooms instead. Zeta and the other Pontevedrians appear, and the dancing "grisettes"—now joined by a very drunk Valencienne—entertain them.

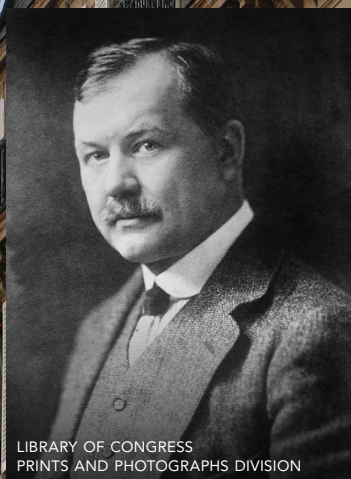
Eventually both Danilo and Hanna arrive at Maxim's. Danilo forbids her to marry her supposed fiancé, Camille. When she explains that she was merely safeguarding another woman's reputation by pretending to be engaged, Danilo is delighted, but he still can't bring himself to tell Hanna that he loves her.

As the guests reassemble, Njegus produces the missing fan, which he found in the pavilion. Zeta finally recognizes it as his wife's, declares himself divorced, and proposes to Hanna. She informs him that, according to her late husband's will, if she remarries she will lose her fortune. Hearing this, the men at the ball immediately lose any interest in marrying Hanna—all the men, that is, except Danilo, who finally declares, "I love you." After agreeing to marry her beloved Danilo, Hanna clarifies the content of her husband's will: Upon remarrying, she will lose her fortune because it will go to her new husband. Valencienne asks Zeta to read the other side of her fan, which reads "I am a respectable wife." Happily reunited, Zeta and Valencienne join Hanna and Danilo in celebrating their love.





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The Source

THE PLAY *L'ATTACHÉ D'AMBASSADE* BY HENRI MEILHAC

Across a career spanning some three and a half decades, the French playwright and librettist Henri Meilhac perfected a style of comic writing that merged biting satire, nimble parody, and good, old-fashioned fun. Bouncing effortlessly between humble mountain pastures and gilded salons, surprise reversals of fortune and shrewdly calculated encounters, tender romance and tawdry lust, Meilhac's comedies probed humanity's foibles while making their way to an inevitably celebratory dénouement. Meilhac wrote dozens of plays and librettos, and his musical collaborations have earned him an enduring place in opera history: The operettas he crafted with the composer Jacques Offenbach were blockbuster successes in their day, and his libretto for Bizet's *Carmen*, adapted with Ludovic Halévy from a 19th-century novel, is one of the most famous works ever written for the operatic stage. Yet among his spoken plays, only one is remembered by opera-lovers today—his razor-sharp romance *L'Attaché d'Ambassade*.



From left to right and top to bottom:
Poster for the opera *Carmen*,
Henri Meilhac, Franz Lehár,
Jacques Offenbach, *Die Lustige
Witwe* piano score

Written in 1861, *L'Attaché d'Ambassade* (*The Embassy Attaché*) dates from close to the beginning of Meilhac's career, yet it already includes the superbly crafted dialogue and comedic structure for which he would become known. Nevertheless, the play was a flop, and the premiere production closed after only 15 performances. Happily, the work found greater success in a German translation at the Carltheater in Vienna, where it was regularly revived to great popular acclaim. It was during one of these revivals that the librettists Viktor Léon and Leo Stein decided to turn Meilhac's comedy into an operetta. When they brought the idea to the management of Vienna's Theater an der Wien, the theater administrators blessed their choice of scenario. The Theater an der Wien had recently fallen on hard times, the administration was looking for a show that might raise its fortunes, and *L'Attaché d'Ambassade* had all the necessary ingredients for a smash hit, including lighthearted romance, exotic characters, and ample opportunity for the dance scenes that were the bread-and-butter of Viennese operetta.

Léon and Stein initially approached the composer Richard Heuberger about providing music for their new operetta. But Heuberger's drafts for Act I left the librettists deeply dissatisfied, and they convinced the directors of the Theater an der Wien to let them audition the military bandmaster and operetta composer Franz Lehár instead. In the course of a single day, Lehár wrote the duet "Dummer, Dummer Reitersmann" ("Hello, Here's a Soldier Bold"), and when he played this excerpt for the librettists over the phone, they promptly gave him the job. When the theater directors heard Lehár's full score, however, they were considerably less content; one even went so far as to offer Lehár 5,000 crowns to withdraw his score from performance. Lehár stood firm. The theater administration responded by refusing to invest in the production, and *The Merry Widow* premiered on December 30, 1905, with decrepit sets and tattered costumes. Yet neither the administration's sour outlook nor the show's ratty appearance could diminish *The Merry Widow*'s inherent sweetness and sparkle, and the work secured its place in history as one of the most popular operettas of all time.



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From top to bottom:
Viktor Léon, Leo Stein, an 1850
lithograph of the Carltheater in Vienna
by Nicolas-Marie-Joseph Chapuy

Timeline

THE COMPOSITION OF *THE MERRY WIDOW*



Johann Strauss Jr.
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY ARCHIVES

ca. 1770

The waltz first appears in European music. It gradually supplants the minuet, an earlier triple-meter dance form, and eventually becomes so popular that some composers build entire careers by specializing in waltz composition. Johann Strauss Jr., for instance, achieves such acclaim with his waltzes in the mid-19th century that he will become known as the “Waltz King.”

1801

The Theater an der Wien opens. Run by the impresario Emanuel Schikaneder (best known as the librettist of Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*), the theater hosts both plays and operas during its early decades before becoming the home of classic Viennese operetta in the 1860s.



Theater an der Wien
JAKOB ALT

1860s

The wildly successful works of Jacques Offenbach, many of which feature libretti by Henri Meilhac, establish operetta as one of France’s most popular musical genres and inspire imitations in other languages across Europe.

1861

Henri Meilhac’s comedy *L’Attaché d’Ambassade* premieres in Paris. A flop, it closes after only 15 performances.

1870

On April 30, Franz Lehár is born in Komárom, a small town astride the Danube on the border of modern-day Hungary and Slovakia (then both part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). His father is a military bandmaster who also plays horn in the Theater an der Wien’s orchestra. Franz Sr.’s military postings include Prague, Vienna, Budapest, and Sarajevo, and his son grows up listening to many different styles of folk music in Central and Eastern Europe.



Map of the Austro-Hungarian Empire,
with Lehár’s birthplace of Komárom
marked with a red star
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Lehár
LUDWIG GUTMANN



Die Lustige Witwe piano score

1874

Johann Strauss Jr. is already known as a composer of Vienna's most popular waltzes (including "By the Beautiful Blue Danube"), but with his operetta *Die Fledermaus*, which premieres in 1874, he achieves tremendous international acclaim. *Die Fledermaus* features numerous waltzes in the style for which Strauss is already well known, and its success helps cement the role of dance music in the operetta genre.

1882

Lehár enters the Prague Conservatory, where he takes lessons in violin, music theory, and composition. Antonín Dvořák, Prague's leading composer, encourages Lehár to pursue a career in composition.

1888

Following his graduation, Lehár is called up for military service. He plays violin in a succession of infantry regiment bands.

1889

Lehár is appointed bandmaster of the 26th infantry regiment band, a post previously held by his father. The new position allows him to move to Vienna.

1902

Enjoying a level of financial stability brought on by the success of his compositions (mostly marches and dance music), Lehár leaves military service to focus exclusively on conducting and composition. Before the end of the year, two of his operas have been performed in Vienna, one each at the Theater an der Wien and the Carltheater.

1905

On December 30, Lehár's new operetta, *The Merry Widow*, an adaptation of Henri Meilhac's *L'Attaché d'Ambassade* premieres at Vienna's Theater an der Wien. Although the theater directors had initially embraced the libretto, they are disenchanted by Lehár's score and refuse to invest in the production. Nevertheless, *Die Lustige Witwe* (as it is known in German) is an immediate success with the public.



Lehár, 1918
CHARLES SCOLIK



Lehár Villa in Bad Ischl, Austria
TOFFEL/WIKICOMMONS

1907

The Merry Widow soon proves to be a runaway international hit. By 1907, it has been performed on three continents and has made Lehár a millionaire.

1935

Lehár founds his own publishing house and buys back the rights to most of his compositions in order to profit from their publication. For the remainder of his life, he concentrates mainly on publishing activities rather than composition.

1948

Having suffered from ill health for some time, Lehár dies on October 24 at his villa in Bad Ischl, an Austrian spa town near Salzburg. His villa is now a museum dedicated to the composer's life and work.



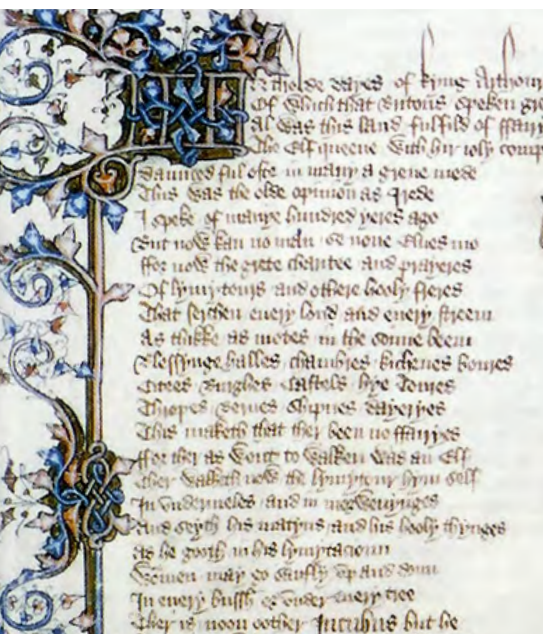
Poster for *The Merry Widow* film, 1925
METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER (MGM)

CRITICAL INQUIRY

Waltzes were a major part of 19th-century Viennese culture. What kinds of dance music are popular today where you live? What kinds of music do you like to dance to?

FUN FACT

Maxim's, which features prominently in *The Merry Widow*, is a famed restaurant on the Rue Royale in Paris that is still in operation today. Established in the 1890s, it has been a favorite haunt of writers (including librettist Viktor Léon), artists, and celebrities throughout its history, and it appears as a setting in a number of plays and films. Despite the establishment's depiction in *The Merry Widow*, however, Maxim's was never a bawdy cabaret; rather, it has always been an elegant, high-end restaurant.



Deep Dive

WHY IS THE WIDOW MERRY?

From the Wife of Bath in Chaucer's 14th-century *Canterbury Tales* to *The Merry Widow*'s Hanna Glawari, the widow in European art frequently appears as a carefree, powerful, and downright merry character. To modern observers, the idea of a “merry widow” may seem odd, but the idea is anchored in traditions and laws that for centuries affected women, their rights, and their place in society.

In the 19th century (and long before), the identity of European women was largely determined by their marital status. Unmarried women were typically viewed as subject to their fathers. Upon marriage, a woman became subject to her husband; her identity was subsumed by her husband's, and anything she owned immediately became his property. If a married couple separated (which, legally, only men could choose to do), women were typically left destitute. European women could not buy or sell property, nor could they engage in any financial transactions on their own behalf.

But if a woman became a widow, her story changed—at least if she had been married to a well-off man. In many European societies, widows were fully

independent. They often inherited their husbands' riches, and they typically faced no obligation to return to their fathers' homes. As such, a wealthy widow became a relative anomaly: a woman with the money and power to determine her own future. Some widows took over their husbands' businesses and, exercising their intelligence and financial acumen, considerably increased their personal wealth; one such example is the Widow (“Veuve”) Clicquot, who was made famous by her eponymous Champagne (and is the subject of another Deep Dive in this guide).

Of course, not all widows could be merry. Overwhelmingly, women suffered hardship and poverty when they lost their husbands, who typically provided married women's financial support. And even wealthy widows risked losing both their money and independence if they ever remarried. But it's the figure of the “merry widow”—free, wealthy, powerful, and independent—that appears again and again in European art and literature and continues to delight audiences today.

Above (left to right): A page from *The Wife of Bath's Tale* in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; *The Coquettish Widow*, 1724, by Bernard Lepicié; and Renée Fleming in the title role of Lehár's *The Merry Widow*

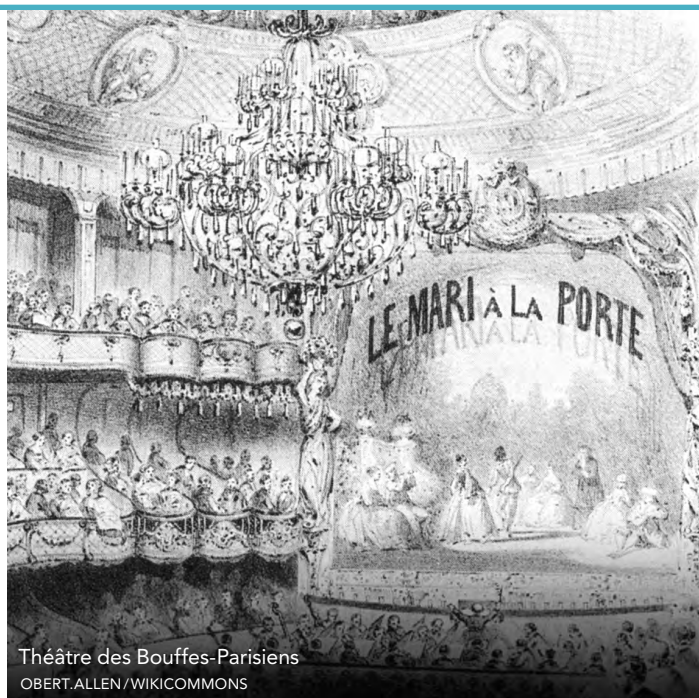
Deep Dive

LITTLE OPERA

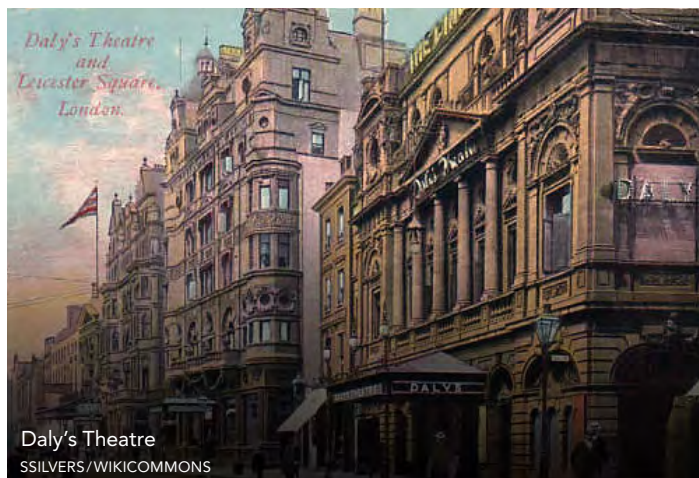
First produced in 1905, *The Merry Widow* was one of the last great examples of an art form highly popular at the time: Viennese operetta. Sometimes dismissed as “lesser” than opera, it is in fact a distinct genre with its own colorful history and artistic profile.

The name operetta means “little opera,” a reference to the fact that these works tend to be shorter than operas. This difference in length was especially true in the early days of the genre, when many operettas were written to be performed in one act. But there’s also a difference in tone between operetta and its “bigger” sibling. While operas often tackle grand and tragic themes, operettas tend to be light and comedic, typically presenting sentimental, romantic stories shot through with satire and even silliness. Plots often involve lovers’ spats, mistaken identities, sudden reversals of fortune, and glittering parties. Dance also plays a much more important role in operetta than in 19th-century opera, and operetta arias are typically separated by spoken dialogue rather than recitative.

The overall impression of operetta, then, is of a piece of entertainment that doesn’t take itself too seriously—though the music itself can be serious business. Operetta arias require the same degree of vocal prowess and technique as their counterparts in opera. In addition, operetta plots demand well-honed spoken-theater skills and flawless comic timing, and the Met’s production of *The Merry Widow* features several Tony Award-winning Broadway stars in addition to its roster of opera singers. Yet despite the challenges that operetta places on its performers, operetta is usually good fun for the audience, and the catchy tunes can be appreciated both by seasoned opera fans and the wider public alike.



Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens
OBERT.ALLEN / WIKICOMMONS



Daly's Theatre
SSILVERS / WIKICOMMONS

FUN FACT

The Merry Widow’s international popularity was not confined to New York. In Buenos Aires, five different theaters performed *The Merry Widow* in five different languages on the same evening in 1907. In London, *The Merry Widow* played nearly 800 times at Daly’s Theatre, and some Londoners were reported to have seen the show more than 100 times. Even the English King Edward VII got in on the fun: He attended no fewer than four performances of Lehár’s delightful work.

Deep Dive

THE WICKED WALTZ

Today, the waltz seems like a formal, dignified dance, but when it first swept Europe in the late 18th century, it was considered shocking and risqué. In the court dances that preceded it (such as the minuet, the polonaise, and the quadrille), dance partners kept a healthy distance from one another and moved at a stately pace. Not so with the waltz, which whirled by at a dizzying speed, dancers tightly clasped in one another's arms. Little wonder, then, that many a straitlaced aristocrat was scandalized by this newfangled dance form.

In 1774, the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe published a description of a waltz that embodied both the romance and perceived sensuality of the form. In the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Goethe's titular hero describes his ecstasy at waltzing with a woman with whom he was falling in love: "I'd never felt so light of foot. I was no longer human. [I had] the loveliest of creatures in my arms, and [I flew] with her like a wild wind until everything around us disappeared." Yet Werther quickly becomes possessive of this feeling. "I swore to myself that I'd never let a young woman with whom I was in love ... waltz with another man," he boldly declares, suggesting that the dancers' proximity was, in some minds at least, a form of profound physical intimacy.

Another source of disdain came from the waltz's probable heritage. Likely descended from heavy peasant dances, the waltz seemed clumsy and rough when compared to the delicate figurations of courtly dance. No matter how light on his feet Goethe's hero may have felt, other writers focused on the waltz's weightiness. In the poem "Don Ramiro," the poet Heinrich Heine describes a floor that "groans and shakes" under "the wild circles of the waltz." And the English poet Lord Byron nimblely characterized contemporary perceptions of the dance when, in a satirical poem, he trenchantly declared that among dance forms the waltz alone was "liberal of feet, and lavish of hands."

Despite—or perhaps because of—the waltz's reputation, the dance quickly became a sensation. Yet the disapproval the dance form encountered in society's upper echelons may have had greater cause than its supposedly salacious dance steps. Relatively easy to learn and master, the dance form was especially popular among Europe's rising middle class. The rise of public dance and concert halls catering to the bourgeoisie meant that musical-social events once available only to the continent's richest citizens could now be enjoyed by a wide portion of the population. As young dancers eagerly embraced the waltz (and one another), they also embraced a new social structure, one defined by relative equality and public displays of artistic appreciation and taste.

FUN FACT

The word "waltz" is derived from a German verb meaning "to turn or roll," a reference to the spinning motions that dancers make as they twirl around the dance floor.



Deep Dive

TO WED OR NOT TO WED?

The Merry Widow is a classic operetta—frothy, frivolous, and fun. But even a piece of light-hearted entertainment can offer us serious insights into its historical and cultural context. The relations between men and women, especially leading up to and within marriage, are a dominant theme in *The Merry Widow*, and the contrasting experiences of two real-life 19th-century women can offer the modern opera-goer a glimpse into the world that Hanna (and countless women before her) had to navigate and inhabit.

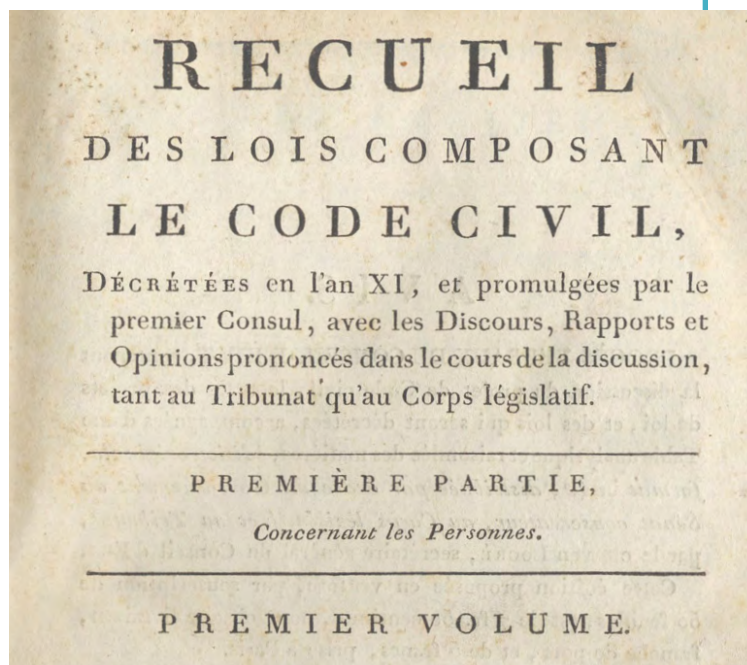
PRIMARY SOURCE: THE NAPOLEONIC CODE

The Napoleonic Code, also known as the French Civil Code, was a set of laws instituted in post-revolutionary France. As Napoleon expanded his control across Europe, he also spread the influence of this set of laws. The laws and practices regarding women's rights in marriage in countries from Italy to Poland reflected the Napoleonic Code for more than 150 years.

CHAPTER VI.

Of the respective Rights and Duties of Married Persons.

- Married persons owe to each other fidelity, succor, assistance.
- The husband owes protection to his wife, the wife obedience to her husband.
- The wife is obliged to live with her husband, and to follow him to every place where he may judge it convenient to reside: the husband is obliged to receive her, and to furnish her with everything necessary for the wants of life, according to his means and station.
- The wife cannot plead in her own name, without the authority of her husband, even though she should be a public trader, or non-communicant, or separate in property.



BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH: BARBE-NICOLE PONSARDIN

Barbe-Nicole Ponsardin was born in 1777 in France and married the well-to-do wine and textile merchant François Clicquot at the age of 21. But when her husband died just six years later, the still youthful Barbe-Nicole found herself a widow—or *veuve* ("voov") in French.

A single mother, the Widow Clicquot might have sought a second marriage to support herself and her daughter. Instead, she decided to follow a different path. She already knew of several successful widows in the wine industry: There was Dame Geoffrey, the widow of a local tax collector, who supplied wine to the famous Moët family. There was the widow Germon, a successful wine broker in the late 18th century who bottled her own sparkling wines. And there were the widows Robert and Blanc, who had found success in the wine industry following their husbands' deaths.

- The authority of the husband is not necessary when the wife is prosecuted in a criminal matter, or relating to police.
- A wife, although non-communicant or separate in property, cannot give, alienate, pledge, or acquire by free or chargeable title, without the concurrence of her husband in the act, or his consent in writing.
- If the husband refuse to authorize his wife to plead in her own name, the judge may give her authority.
- If the husband refuse to authorize his wife to pass an act, the wife may cause her husband to be cited directly before the court of first instance, of the circle of their common domicile, which may give or refuse its authority, after the husband shall have been heard, or duly summoned before the chamber of council.
- The wife, if she is a public trader, may, without the authority of her husband, bind herself for that which concerns her trade; and in the said case she binds also her husband, if there be a community between them. She is not reputed a public trader, if she merely retail goods in her husband's trade, but only when she carries on a separate business.
- When the husband is subjected to a condemnation, carrying with it an afflictive or infamous punishment, although it may have been pronounced merely for contumacy, the wife, though of age, cannot, during the continuance of such punishment, plead in her own name or contract, until after authority given by the judge, who may in such case give his authority, without hearing or summoning the husband.
- If the husband is interdicted or absent, the judge, on cognizance of the cause, may authorize his wife either to plead in her own name or to contract.
- Every general authority, though stipulated by the contract of marriage, is invalid, except as respects the administration of the property of the wife.
- If the husband is a minor, the authority of the judge is necessary for his wife, either to appear in court, or to contract.

Using these models and others like them, the Widow Clicquot committed herself to her husband's failing company. She was in a unique situation. In the French culture of her time, widows were granted both the social freedoms of married women and the financial freedoms enjoyed by men. Under the Napoleonic Code, a married woman had no legal identity and thus could not enter into contracts; by contrast, a widow could make her own financial and legal decisions.

Thanks to these newfound legal rights, her father-in-law's financial support, and the social connections of her own upper-class family, the Widow Clicquot had the freedom, influence, and funding she needed to make her late husband's company prosper. She developed a new method for clarifying Champagne—removing unpleasant sediments that were a byproduct of the production process—so that her wine, unlike that of her competitors, was crystal clear. And she gave her business a new name: Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin and Company.



Madame Clicquot
LÉON COGNIE

- A nullity, founded on defect of authority, can only be opposed by the wife, by the husband, or by their heirs.
- The wife may make a will without the authority of her husband.



Caroline Norton
NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY ARCHIVES

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH: CAROLINE NORTON

In 1836, English socialite and writer Caroline Norton left home to visit her sister. When she returned, she found her husband, George Chapple Norton, had sent her children to stay with his cousin and ordered his servants not to let her back into her house.

According to English common law, George was well within his rights: The law specifically allowed husbands to keep their wives away from their children. It also allowed George to lay claim to everything Caroline had left behind, including her personal correspondence, clothing, and jewelry. George then sued Caroline for divorce, claiming she had been unfaithful (the only legal grounds for divorce in England at that time). Under the law, Caroline was not permitted to testify at—or even attend—the trial.

PRIMARY SOURCE: CAROLINE NORTON'S LETTER TO QUEEN VICTORIA (EXCERPTS)

A letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth's marriage and divorce bill.

By the Hon. Mrs. Norton.

On Tuesday, June 13th, of last session, Lord Chancellor Cranworth brought forward a measure for the reform of the Marriage laws of England; which [...] was afterwards withdrawn. In March, 1855, in this present session, the Solicitor General stated, that a bill on the same subject was "nearly prepared." [But this bill has not yet arrived, and] as one who has grievously suffered, and is still suffering, under the present imperfect state of the law, I address your Majesty on the subject. [...]

- A married woman in England has *no legal existence*: her being is absorbed in that of her husband. Years of separation or desertion cannot alter this position. Unless divorced by special enactment in the House of Lords, the legal fiction holds her to be "*one*" with her husband, even though she may never see or hear of him.
- She has no possessions, unless by special settlement; her property is *his* property. [...] An English wife has no legal right even to her clothes or ornaments; her husband may take them and sell them if he pleases, even though they be the gifts of relatives or friends, or bought before marriage.
- An English wife cannot make a will. She may have children or kindred whom she may earnestly desire to benefit; she may be separated from her husband, who may be living with a mistress; no matter: The law gives what she has to him, and no will she could make would be valid.



Left: Portrait of Lord Cranworth
Right: Queen Victoria

Unable to present any evidence of Caroline's supposed guilt, George lost his divorce suit. Caroline, meanwhile, had no desire to remain married, so she approached a team of lawyers about initiating her own divorce proceedings. What she learned horrified her: Under English law, only a husband could file for divorce. Since George had already lost his case, divorce was effectively off the table for the couple. Even worse, Caroline learned that her husband had the legal right to demand sole custody of their children, an outcome that would have forbidden Caroline even to see her kids.

Caroline refused to accept this legal *status quo*. A passionate and capable speaker and writer, she soon set about lobbying for legal reform, composing a series of political pamphlets advocating changes in marital and custody law, including the "open letter to Queen Victoria," excerpted here.

Eventually, a new law was passed. Now, mothers were allowed to appeal for custody of children under the age of seven, as well as the right to see their children under the age of 16. Unfortunately, despite Caroline's remarkable victory, English custody law was powerless to reunite her with her children: Her husband

- An English wife cannot legally claim her own earnings. Whether wages for manual labour, or payment for intellectual exertion, whether she weed potatoes, or keep a school, her salary is *the husband's*. [...]
- An English wife may not leave her husband's house. Not only can he sue her for "restitution of conjugal rights," but he has a right to enter the house of any friend or relation with whom she may take refuge [...] and carry her away by force, with or without the aid of the police.
- If the wife sue for separation for cruelty, it must be "cruelty that endangers life or limb," and if she has once forgiven, or, in legal phrase, "*condoned*" his offences, she cannot plead them. [...]
- If her husband take proceedings for a divorce, she is not, in the first instance, allowed to defend herself. She has no means of proving the falsehood of his allegations. She is not represented by attorney, nor permitted to be considered a party to the suit. [...]
- If an English wife be guilty of infidelity, her husband can divorce *her* so as to marry again; but she cannot divorce the husband *a vinculo* [from matrimony], however profligate he may be. [...]

had taken them to Scotland, where English laws didn't apply. George also remained entitled to much of her income, including the money she earned from her political writing.

Caroline Norton continued to write political pamphlets publicizing the inequities of the law. Her lived experience, her willingness to fight for her cause, and her powerful and passionate voice helped change how English laws treated and viewed women—both in the home and beyond.

CRITICAL INQUIRY

Historians distinguish between two kinds of sources: "Primary" historical sources are documents *dating from* the period in question, while "secondary" historical sources are materials written by historians or other observers about the period in question. In this Deep Dive, the Napoleonic Code and Caroline Norton's letter are examples of primary sources, while the short biographies of each woman are examples of secondary sources. Why might it be important to differentiate between primary and secondary sources? When might we want to refer to secondary sources? When might we prefer primary sources?

FUN FACT

Pontevedro is a fictional country, but the name was a thinly veiled reference to the Balkan country of Montenegro. In fact, when *The Merry Widow* was written, the Montenegrin Prince Nicholas (a member of the house of "Njegoš") had two sons named Danilo and Mirko.

- She cannot sign a lease, or transact responsible business.
- Her being, on the other hand, of spotless character, and without reproach, gives her no advantage in law. She may have withdrawn from his roof [...] having suffered personal violence at his hands [...] and being able to prove it by unimpeachable testimony: or he may have shut the doors of her house against her: all this is quite immaterial: the law takes no cognisance of which [i.e., who] is to blame. As her husband, he has a right to all that is hers: as his wife, she has no right to anything that is his. As *her husband*, he may divorce her (if truth or false swearing can do it): as *his wife*, the utmost "divorce" she could obtain, is permission to reside alone.



Škrčko Lake, Montenegro
EMIL JOANOVIĆ/WIKICOMMONS

From Left to Right: Prince Mirko of Montenegro
MAYYSKIYYERGEYY/WIKICOMMONS

Nicholas I of Montenegro
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS/WIKICOMMONS

Nicholas I of Montenegro
ZOU PAN/WIKICOMMONS

Active Exploration

The following activities will help familiarize your students with the plot of *The Merry Widow*, forge connections between a variety of classroom subjects, and encourage creative responses to the opera. They are designed to be accessible to a wide array of ages and experience levels.

TEXTING SUBTEXTS

Use text messages and memes to recreate a flirtatious scene from *The Merry Widow*. Then use this updated version of the opera's libretto to discuss the subtext of the scene itself as well as how emojis or memes can be used to express complex ideas and emotions.

DANCE-CARD THE NIGHT AWAY

Teach your students about "dance cards" and their place in 19th- and early-20th-century society. Then invite students to create their own dance cards featuring songs from their favorite genres and host a class-wide dance party.

"DEAR HANNA ..."

Have students write a letter to Hanna advising her on whether or not she should get remarried. To deepen their understanding of the impact marriage had on women's rights in the 19th century, invite them to read about Barbe-Nicole Ponsardin and Caroline Norton, two historical women discussed elsewhere in this guide, as well as excerpts from the Napoleonic Code and Norton's "Letter to Queen Victoria." How does their new understanding of 19th-century marriage laws affect how they understand literature from this period?

THE MERRY WIDOW WALTZ

Introduce students to the waltz as both musical style and dance form. Listen to a selection of famous waltzes, discuss the iconic three-beat rhythmic pattern, and demonstrate the dance steps. Then invite students to write a waltz of their own.

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Excerpts from *The Merry Widow Ballet*, arranged by John Lanchberry, and Jeremy Sams's English version of "Liebe, du Himmel auf Erden," from Lehár's *Paganini*, are performed by arrangement with European American Music Distributors Company, as agent for and on behalf of Glocken Verlag, Ltd., London, publisher and copyright owner.

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THE MERRY WIDOW PRODUCTION PHOTOS: KEN HOWARD / MET OPERA



COMMON CORE STRANDS

These activities directly support the following ELA-Literacy Common Core Strands:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.9

Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.11b

Recognize and illustrate social, historical, and cultural features in the presentation of literary texts.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.