

DEAD MAN WALKING

DEAD MAN WALKING BEGINS AND ENDS WITH A MURDER: ONE BY A man, the other by the state. The question posed by Jake Heggie’s opera—based on activist Sister Helen Prejean’s bestselling eponymous memoir—is whether justice can be served, and forgiveness granted, in either case. Turning away from the public spectacle of investigations, trials, and convictions, *Dead Man Walking* instead welcomes audiences into the intimate and often unseen spaces where the innerworkings of the criminal justice system play out: prison cells, offices, visiting rooms, and parking lots. In so doing, it demonstrates how waves of grief, pain, doubt, and hope ripple through communities grappling with violence and its aftermath.

Following on the success of his debut production of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* during the Met’s 2022–23 season, Tony Award–winning director Ivo van Hove’s new staging of *Dead Man Walking* expands upon its predecessor’s abstract, minimalist vision. “We chose in this case, for this opera, not to create realistic sets,” van Hove remarks. “In the beginning, we are actually in a nunnery, then we go to a community center, and then we end up in the prison. And it’s that journey we wanted to bring to the stage in a more abstract way.” Using video projections to depict the central murder from three distinct vantages—those of a neutral observer, the perpetrator, and finally the victims—this production prompts a confrontation with the magnitude and humanity of the events that set it in motion.

This guide approaches *Dead Man Walking* as an entry point into contentious and evergreen conversations about the criminal justice system in the United States, as well as the powers—and limits—of faith, compassion, resentment, and love. The materials on the following pages include an introduction to Prejean’s writing and activism, histories of capital punishment in the United States and the linkages between mass incarceration and racial slavery, analyses of Jake Heggie’s musical language, and classroom activities that encourage students to tackle the work’s thorny issues with nuance and care while considering structural questions of plot and characterization. By exploring numerous curricular connections that reach well beyond contemporary public policy debates, students will gain a deeper understanding of how social, political, and legal structures shape the world we inhabit.



DIDONATO



McKINNY



MOORE



GRAHAM

THE WORK

An opera in two acts, sung in English

Music by Jake Heggie

Libretto by Terrence McNally

Based on the Book by Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J.

First performed October 7, 2000, at San Francisco Opera

PRODUCTION

Ivo van Hove Director

Jan Versweyeld Set and Lighting Designer

An D’Huys Costume Designer

Christopher Ash Projection Designer

Tom Gibbons Sound Designer

PERFORMANCE

The Met: Live in HD

October 21, 2023

Latonia Moore Sister Rose

Joyce DiDonato Sister Helen Prejean

Ryan McKinny Joseph De Rocher

Susan Graham Mrs. Patrick De Rocher

Yannick Nézet-Séguin Conductor

Production a gift of C. Graham Berwind, III; the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation; Ted Snowdon and Duffy Violante, in memory of Terrence McNally; and Mrs. Diane B. Wilsey

Additional funding from Franci Neely; Judy and Jim Pohlman; Denise Littlefield Sobel, in memory of Phyllis Cannon Wattis; and The H.M. Agnes Hsu-Tang, Ph.D. and Oscar Tang Endowment Fund

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Dead Man Walking Educator Guide
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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 regardless of their 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 opera. 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 *Dead Man Walking* 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 they will experience opera as a space where their confidence can grow and their curiosity can flourish.

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To access this guide online, including any audio selections and handouts, visit metopera.org/deadmanguide.

WHO'S WHO IN *DEAD MAN WALKING*

CHARACTER	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Sister Helen Prejean A nun and the spiritual advisor to Joseph De Rocher, an inmate on death row	mezzo-soprano	Sister Helen, a Jesuit nun at Hope House (an educational center for children), is asked to write letters to Joseph De Rocher, a convicted murderer on death row at the Louisiana State Penitentiary. When he asks to meet in person, Helen finds herself on a journey that will forever change her life and challenge her faith as she confronts Joseph, his family, and the families of his victims.
Sister Rose A fellow nun and Sister Helen's friend	soprano	Helen's closest friend and confidant, Sister Rose provides much-needed support for Helen as the date of Joe's execution nears.
Joseph De Rocher An inmate on death row	bass-baritone	A convicted rapist and murderer, Joe awaits his execution on death row at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, known as Angola. When he asks Helen to be his spiritual advisor, he is forced to reckon with the truth and consequences of his crimes.
Father Grenville The prison chaplain	tenor	In charge of religious services and counsel at the prison, Father Grenville is bothered by the fact that Joe turns to Helen for guidance rather than him.
George Benton The prison warden	bass-baritone	As the superintendent overseeing the prison, George Benton introduces Helen to the harsh realities of death row and questions her ability to serve as Joe's spiritual advisor. Ultimately, he is responsible for Joe's execution.
Mrs. Patrick De Rocher Joseph De Rocher's mother	mezzo-soprano	Joe's mother believes his innocence and insists upon his fundamental goodness, pleading before the Pardon Commission for his execution to be stayed and, ultimately, refusing to hear his confession.
Kitty and Owen Hart; Jade and Howard Boucher Parents of the teenagers killed by Joseph De Rocher	soprano and bass-baritone; mezzo-soprano and tenor	The victims' families are furious that Helen has been an advocate for and friend to Joe. They cannot understand why she would comfort the man who killed their children, which they consider a betrayal. Only Owen is willing to speak privately with Helen, inviting her to visit him and his family.

Synopsis

PRELUDE: *A wooded area near a lake in Louisiana.* Two teenagers have been skinny-dipping in a lake surrounded by woods. As they get out of the lake, they turn on their car radio and then lie down on a blanket on the ground to dry off. Two men slowly approach the young couple. Suddenly, they attack, raping the girl and shooting the boy. One man holds the girl down as the other stabs her. There are screams, then silence.

ACT I: *Hope House, an educational center run by the Sisters of St. Joseph in the New Orleans projects.* Sister Helen and Sister Rose lead a group of children in a hymn, “He Will Gather Us Around.” Helen keeps making mistakes as she sings. After the parents arrive to pick up their children, Helen admits to Rose why she has been so distracted: She has just received another letter from the death-row inmate she has been writing, Joseph de Rocher, asking to meet in person. Despite Rose’s warning, Helen agrees to visit Joe.

A highway, on the three-hour drive from New Orleans to Louisiana State Penitentiary. As Helen drives toward Angola, the prison where Joe is held on death row, she wonders what he will be like in person. She drives by the exit to her hometown and reflects on the happy days of her childhood. Her thoughts continue to race, and she drives more and more quickly—until she is pulled over by a policeman. Impressed that she is a nun, the policeman lets her go with only a warning and a promise to pray for his sick mother.



Entering the ‘Death Row’ enclosure at Angola Prison—a place where no photography is permitted

Louisiana State Penitentiary. When Helen arrives at the prison, she is greeted by Father Grenville, the prison’s chaplain. He cautions her that Joe shows no signs of remorse—instead, he maintains his innocence—and has been known to lie and insult others. Helen acknowledges Joe’s crimes yet remains invested in his human dignity. When

the chaplain leaves, she meets the warden, who warns her that Joe will likely ask her to be his spiritual advisor, requiring her to stay by his side until his execution. As they walk through death row, the prisoners taunt her from their cells.

Finally, Helen is led into the visiting room. She waits nervously until Joe arrives. Neither is comfortable, and when Helen asks Joe if he is afraid, he admits that while he fears some things—walking to the execution chamber, the possibly excruciating pain of lethal injection, the effect his death will have on his mother—he adamantly declares that he is not afraid of her. Joe recalls the many things that he misses about his life of freedom before asking Helen if she will come back. She promises to return.



Prisoner transport bus inside Angola prison

The courtroom, a meeting of the Pardon Board. Sister Helen, Joe’s mother, and the families of the murdered teens address the Pardon Board tasked with recommending to the governor whether the condemned person should be granted clemency. Joe’s mother tearfully addresses the board, saying that although she is horrified by the crimes Joe is accused of committing, she knows there is good in her son. She is interrupted by an angry outburst from Owen Hart, the father of one of the victims. The families wait in the parking lot for the Board’s decision. When Helen introduces herself to the victims’

A NOTE ON THE PHOTOGRAPHS The images of the Louisiana State Penitentiary, also known as Angola, throughout this guide are the work of award-winning photographer Giles Clarke. His work focuses primarily on social and environmental injustice, with much of his time now spent in conflict zones and regions of protracted humanitarian crisis. See more of his work at gilesnclarke.com

parents, they accuse her of betrayal. A paralegal exits the courthouse announcing that the Pardon Board has rejected Joe's petition for clemency.

Death Row. Knowing that Joe's only hope is for the governor to grant him clemency, Helen begs Joe to confess to his crime. The warden comes in and tells Helen to leave. Outside, she becomes faint from hunger as a cacophony of voices begins to pound in her head. The warden comes out of the visiting room and finds her slumped on a bench. He informs her that the governor has rejected Joe's request for a pardon. The voices return and Helen faints on the floor.

ACT II: *Death Row.* Joe is alone in his cell doing pushups when the warden enters to tell him that the date for his execution has been set: August 4, at midnight. Joe ignores the warden and keeps doing pushups. But when the reality of his predicament begins to sink in, he passes through bursts of anger and fear as he thinks back to the crime.

Sister Helen's room. Helen wakes up screaming from a nightmare about Joe and his victims. Rose rushes to her side and comforts her. When Rose reminds Helen that Joe has already been convicted of his crimes, Helen retorts that only God can choose whether to forgive him. Rose reminds Helen that she has agreed to help Joe—and she can only do so if she can forgive Joe herself.

August 4, around 7PM, Joe's prison cell. Helen and Joe sit in his cell. They both know that Joe's execution is only a few hours away, yet they still manage to make small talk, laughing and reminiscing about Elvis Presley. Helen encourages Joe to tell her the truth about the crime, but he angrily refuses. In the meantime, Joe's mother and two brothers have arrived for their final visit with him. Helen accompanies him. Joe's mother asks Helen to take a photo of the family and reminisces about happier times. The guard arrives to lead Joe away.

The death house. Outside the death house, the families of Joe's victims arrive to watch his execution, and they accuse Helen of being on Joe's side. Only Owen Hart expresses doubts about the closure and comfort Joe's death will bring. In a quiet moment with Helen, he invites her to visit him; she promises she will.

Inside the death house, guards prepare Joe for his execution. Left alone with Helen for the last time, he admits his guilt. The guards arrive to take Joe to the lethal injection chamber. As he walks, Helen walks behind him, her hand on his shoulder, reading from her Bible. In the background, the families and inmates can all be heard reciting the Lord's prayer. Joe apologizes to the victims' families before the lethal injection needle is inserted into his arm. In his final moment, Joe says to Helen: "I love you." After his death, the witnesses leave, and Helen is alone with Joe. One last time, she sings her hymn: "He Will Gather Us Around."

Dead Man Walking by Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J.

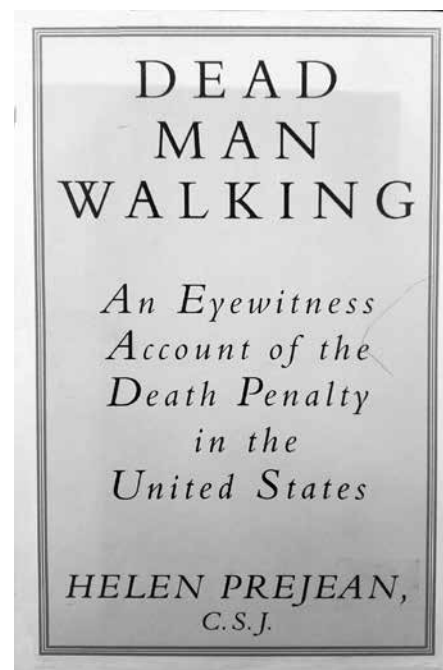
Dead Man Walking is adapted from Sister Helen Prejean's 1993 memoir of the same name, which was also made into a major motion picture directed by Tim Robbins and starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. Prejean's book, subtitled *An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*, chronicles her experiences serving as spiritual advisor to two inmates on death row at the Louisiana State Penitentiary—Elmo Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie—as well as her early activism and efforts to abolish the death penalty nationwide.

The narrative in *Dead Man Walking* is not merely a straightforward account of its author's respective relationships with Sonnier and Willie. It is interwoven with statistics on crime, punishment, and the uneven, often prejudicial administration of the death penalty in the United States; overviews of political attitudes toward and misinformation about the death penalty among the American population at the time of the book's writing; and anecdotes from the author's journey from a local community organizer and educator to a full-time advocate for the abolition of the death penalty—work that Sister Helen continues to this day.

Jake Heggie and Terrence McNally's operatic adaptation borrows and expands upon elements found in both versions of the story, Prejean's text and the Academy Award-winning film. In both the film and the opera, for example, the two death-row prisoners Helen advises are amalgamated into a single character: in the film, Matthew Poncelet; in the opera, Joseph De Rocher. The elements of the original crime described in the opera also derive from those committed by Sonnier (the shooting) and Willie (the stabbing), respectively. The double murder of a young teenage couple corresponds to Sonnier's alleged crime, but the inclusion of the perpetrator's family in the events leading to the execution—particularly his mother's tearful appearance at the Pardon Board meeting and final visit with her son, both of which take pride of place in the film adaptation—is taken from Prejean's experience with Willie.

There are also important distinctions between what occurs in Prejean's text and in Heggie's opera. Whereas Joseph De Rocher's quiet confession is a dramatic highpoint of the opera, neither Sonnier nor Willie ever admitted to their crimes—both maintained their innocence to the bitter end. In fact, Sonnier claimed that it was his brother Edward, then serving a life sentence at Angola, who fired the murder weapon. (In Prejean's memoir, Edward confesses to the murder in a last-ditch effort to halt his brother's execution.) In the film version of *Dead Man Walking*, however, Helen's advisee does ultimately confess to the crime before his execution.

Other elements from Tim Robbins's film that made its way into the opera include the execution by lethal injection, whereas both Sonnier and Willie were executed by electrocution; Helen's fainting spell, which occurred while she was working with Sonnier; and a short scene where Helen is pulled over by a cop while speeding down the highway. (This incident apparently happened to Prejean while filming the movie, and she insisted it be included in the script.)



The Creation of *Dead Man Walking*

1938 Terrence McNally is born on November 3 in St. Petersburg, Florida.

1961 Jake Heggie is born on March 31 in West Palm Beach, Florida. He learns piano as a child and starts writing music at age 11 before beginning more serious composition study as a teenager.

Having graduated from Columbia University the year prior, McNally is hired by novelist John Steinbeck to tutor his sons while the Steinbeck family travels the world. During this trip, Steinbeck asks McNally to write the libretto for a musical adaptation of his 1952 novel *East of Eden*.

1979 From 1979 until 2008, McNally is a regular guest panelist for the Texaco Opera Quiz during weekly Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts.

1984 Heggie graduates from UCLA after spending a gap year studying piano at the American University in Paris. After finishing college, he begins performing recitals with his piano teacher Johana Harris. They continue to tour until focal dystonia in Heggie's hand forces him to turn his attention to composition.

1989 McNally publishes *The Lisbon Traviata*, the first of a trilogy of plays—including *Master Class* (1995) and *Golden Age* (2014)—inspired by opera and specifically the Greek American soprano Maria Callas.

1993 Heggie moves to San Francisco and takes a job in public relations at San Francisco Opera. He continues to compose music, focusing on art songs.

Sister Helen Prejean publishes *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*. The book remains number one on *The New York Times* Best Seller List for 31 weeks and is eventually translated into ten languages.

1994 McNally's play *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1994) opens off Broadway in October and transfers to Broadway the following February. It wins the Tony Award for Best Play and the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play.

1995 McNally's *Master Class*, about Maria Callas, opens on Broadway and wins the Tony Award for Best Play and the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play.

Heggie wins the G. Schirmer Art Song Competition for his setting of "If you were coming in the fall..." a poem by Emily Dickinson.

Prejean's memoir *Dead Man Walking* is adapted into a major motion picture directed by Tim Robbins and starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. Sarandon goes on to win the Academy Award for Best Actress, and Robbins and Penn receive nominations for Best Director and Best Actor, respectively.

1998 Heggie is appointed composer-in-residence at San Francisco Opera, where general director Lotfi Mansouri commissions him to work with McNally on a new opera for the 2000–01 season.

1999 Heggie releases his first album of original compositions, *Faces of Love*, featuring songs for voice performed by sopranos Renée Fleming, Kristin Clayton, Nicolle Foland, Sylvia McNair, and Carol Vaness; mezzo-sopranos Zheng Cao, Jennifer Larmore, and Frederica von Stade; and countertenor Brian Asawa.

McNally contributes the libretto for *The Food of Love*, an opera by American composer Robert Beaser.

2000 *Dead Man Walking* premieres at San Francisco Opera in a production conducted by Patrick Summers and starring Susan Graham as Sister Helen, John Packard as Joseph De Rocher, and Frederica von Stade as Mrs. Patrick De Rocher. Erato Records releases a live recording of the premiere production the following year. Since its premiere, the opera has been performed internationally more than 150 times.

2002 Heggie composes *The Deepest Desire: Four Meditations on Love*, set to original poems by Prejean. The premiere performance features mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato and conductor Patrick Summers.



2007 Heggie composes a chamber opera, *Three Decembers*, with a libretto by Gene Scheer based on an original work by McNally, *Some Christmas Letters (and a Couple of Phone Calls, Too)* (1999). Heggie's opera *Moby-Dick*, adapted from the 1851 Herman Melville novel and with a libretto by Scheer, premieres at Dallas Opera. *Moby-Dick* is scheduled to premiere at the Met in the 2024–25 season.

2011 Virgin Classics releases a new live recording of Houston Grand Opera's production of *Dead Man Walking*, starring DiDonato, von Stade, and Philip Cutlip. The same year, Carnegie Hall commissions Heggie's *The Breaking Waves*, a setting of original texts by Prejean premiered by DiDonato.

2019 McNally receives a Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement.

2020 On March 24, at 81 years old, McNally dies in Sarasota, Florida, from complications of Covid-19.

The Life and Work of Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J.



1939 Helen Prejean is born on April 21 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

1957 At the age of 18, Prejean joins the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille, a Roman Catholic congregation.

1962 Prejean graduates from St. Mary's Dominican College in New Orleans, Louisiana, with a bachelor's degree in English and Education.

1972 In the case *Furman v. Georgia*, the Supreme Court finds that the "arbitrary and capricious" application of the death penalty in the United States violates the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, which protects against "cruel and unusual punishment."

1973 Prejean earns a master's degree in religious education from Saint Paul University in Ottawa, Canada.

1976 Citing improved policies for determining who should receive the death penalty, the Supreme Court reinstates capital punishment in *Gregg v. Georgia*. The first execution after the reinstatement takes place in 1977.

1977 On the night of November 4, David LeBlanc (age 16) and Loretta Bourque (18) are driven to a field in rural Louisiana by an unknown assailant or assailants. Bourque is raped; then she and LeBlanc are shot in the back of the head with a .22 caliber rifle.

On December 1, Elmo Patrick ("Pat") Sonnier (age 27) and his brother Eddie Sonnier (20) are arrested in connection with a series of rapes that have taken place in the area. They are soon charged with LeBlanc and Bourque's murder. Initially, both men are sentenced to death; Eddie's sentence, however, is commuted to life in prison when his lawyers argue that he merely assisted at the murder (rather than pulling the trigger himself).

1982 Having worked as a high school teacher and Religious Education Director at St. Frances Cabrini Parish in New Orleans, Prejean moves into the city's St. Thomas Housing Project to live and work with the poor.

In January, Prejean is contacted by the Louisiana Coalition on Jails and Prisons about writing letters to death-row inmates. Prejean agrees, and she is given the name of an inmate at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, known as "Angola": Pat Sonnier.

After several months of correspondence, Prejean offers to be Sonnier's "spiritual advisor"; Sonnier accepts, and Prejean gets clearance from the prison in July. On September 15, Prejean visits Sonnier in prison for the first time. Prejean will continue visiting Sonnier for the rest of his time on death row, eventually testifying at his Pardon Board hearing and organizing legal representation for him. Nevertheless, his capital conviction stands.

1984 On April 5, at midnight, Pat Sonnier, now 35 years old, is executed in the electric chair at Angola. Prejean reads to him from the Bible as he walks to the execution chamber and sits with witnesses as the execution takes place. Sonnier is pronounced dead at 12:15AM. Two days later, he is buried in New Orleans's Roselawn Memorial Park, in a plot secured by Prejean and her fellow nuns.

1993 Prejean publishes the memoir *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*. The book remains number one on *The New York Times* Best Seller List for 31 weeks and becomes an international best seller after being translated into ten languages. She also begins serving as the National Chairperson of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.

1995 *Dead Man Walking* is adapted into a major motion picture directed by Tim Robbins and starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. Sarandon goes on to win the Academy Award for Best Actress, and Robbins and Penn receive nominations for Best Director and Best Actor, respectively.



1999 Prejean establishes Moratorium 2000, a petition drive advocating a nationwide moratorium on executions. This project eventually expands into the Moratorium Campaign.

2000 Democratic Senator Russell Feingold of California introduces S.2463, the National Death Penalty Moratorium Act of 2000, into Congress; the bill does not receive a vote.

Jake Heggie and Terrence McNally's *Dead Man Walking* premieres at San Francisco Opera in a production conducted by Patrick Summers and starring mezzo-soprano Susan Graham as Sister Helen, baritone John Packard as Joseph De Rocher, and mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade as Mrs. Patrick De Rocher.

2002 Prejean founds Ministry Against the Death Penalty, an advocacy group "compelled by the compassion of Jesus and his strong expression of mercy and justice."

2003 Prejean and Ray Krone, the 100th person exonerated from death row in the United States, together establish Witness to Innocence, an anti-death penalty organization composed of and operated by death-row survivors exonerated for crimes they did not commit.

2004 Prejean publishes her second book, *The Death of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions*.

2007 *Dead Family Walking*, a book by D. D. DeVinci detailing the Bourque family's experience of Sonnier's trial and execution, is published. It is highly critical of what the Bourque family views as Prejean's efforts to protect Sonnier from the death penalty.

2013 On December 19, Eddie Sonnier dies at Angola of an illness contracted in prison. He is buried in the prison cemetery.

2019 Prejean publishes her third memoir, *River of Fire: My Spiritual Journey*.

Capital of Punishment

The death penalty has a long history in the United States, with the earliest examples of capital punishment in the American colonies dating to the 1630s. By the 1800s, however, the country faced increasing opposition to the death penalty. Early reformists included Thomas Jefferson, who introduced a bill to the Virginia assembly in 1779 curtailing the widespread use of capital punishment. In 1794, as advocated by statesmen Benjamin Rush and Benjamin Franklin, Pennsylvania repealed the death penalty for all crimes except first-degree murder and later became the first state to conduct executions in prisons rather than in public.

The early 20th century saw an uptick in the administration of capital punishment. Throughout the 1930s, the United States averaged 167 executions per year—more than in any other decade in American history. 1,298 executions were carried out in the following decade. These numbers began to fall gradually until 1972, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Furman v. Georgia* that the application of the death penalty in the United States violated the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, which protects against “cruel and unusual punishment.” Yet it was not the death penalty itself that the court found unconstitutional. Rather, it was the “arbitrary and capricious” application of the penalty. The imposition of the death penalty, they found, was highly dependent not only on a defendant’s geographical location (only some states had the death penalty), but also on the defendant’s race, class, and education (poor defendants and defendants of color were disproportionately sentenced to death). The Court did not find the death penalty itself to be an example of cruel and unusual punishment, instead conceding that, pending a change in sentencing laws, it would be willing to reinstate the death penalty.

States wishing to continue executing prisoners thus began drafting bills to minimize the arbitrariness of the death penalty’s implementation. One possibility was to impose a mandatory death penalty on capital offenses. Another possibility was to strike a balance between “mitigating” circumstances that would help explain the crime (e.g., the defendant’s mental capacity or history of abuse) and “aggravating” circumstances that made the crime more severe (e.g., killing women or children). The Supreme Court ruled that the mandatory imposition of the death penalty did not leave sufficient room for the nuances of individual cases and deemed it unconstitutional. The latter solution, however—considering mitigating and aggravating circumstances during sentencing—was allowed to stand. In three cases known together as the 1976 *Gregg* decision, the Supreme Court approved new statutes in Georgia, Texas, and Florida, in addition to holding that the death penalty itself was constitutional under the Eighth Amendment. The following year, executions resumed in those three states.

Serious concerns about the application of the death penalty remain. Over the past 25 years, following an increase in the administration of capital punishment in the 1980s and 1990s, new death sentences have declined by over 80%, and executions have

FUN FACT

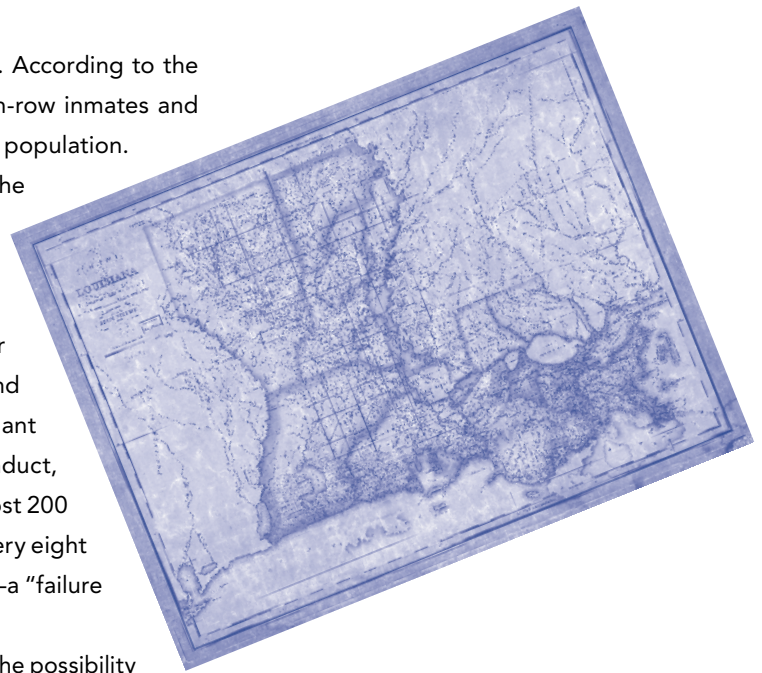
Mezzo-soprano Susan Graham originated the role of Sister Helen when *Dead Man Walking* premiered at San Francisco Opera in 2000. In the Met’s production, she sings the role of Mrs. Patrick De Rocher, Joseph De Rocher’s mother. Joyce DiDonato, meanwhile, appeared in the role for Houston Grand Opera’s 2010 live production recording of the work.

fallen by roughly 75%. In 2002, the Supreme Court ruled that executing death-row inmates with intellectual disabilities was a violation of the “cruel and unusual punishment” clause of the Eighth Amendment. Just a few years later, the Court likewise found that death penalty sentences for crimes committed before the defendant turned 18 years old were unconstitutional.

Still, 27 states currently administer the death penalty, three of which (California, Pennsylvania, and Oregon) have a governor-imposed moratorium on executions. There are five methods of execution used in the U.S.: lethal injection, electrocution, lethal gas, hanging, and firing squad. Since the reinstatement of the death penalty in 1976, nearly 90% of executions have been carried out by lethal injection—a method first developed in the U.S. and now used internationally. Of the 23 states that have abolished the death penalty, 11 have done so since 2004.

Capital punishment continues to be rife with racial disparities. According to the Equal Justice Initiative, Black Americans constitute 41% of death-row inmates and 34% of those executed, despite making up only 14% of the U.S. population. Defendants are 11 times more likely to get the death penalty if the victim is white than if the victim is Black, and defendants are 22 times more likely to get the death penalty if the victim is white and the defendant is Black. These biases are also reflected in exoneration cases. In 2018, official misconduct by police and/or prosecutors was found in nearly 80% of homicide exonerations, and misconduct is more common in death penalty cases if the defendant is Black. 87% of Black death-row exonerees suffered official misconduct, compared to 67% of white death-row exonerees. Since 1973, almost 200 people have been exonerated of death-penalty sentences. For every eight inmates who are executed, one is found innocent and exonerated—a “failure rate” of more than 10%.

Today, some 60% of Americans prefer life imprisonment without the possibility of parole to the death penalty, yet in 2019 the U.S. federal government began imposing death penalties again after a 16-year hiatus. In 2022, the United States voted against a United Nations resolution for a global moratorium on the death penalty, writing in a statement that, “the U.S. does not understand the lawful use of this form of punishment as contravening respect for human rights, both as it relates to the convicted and sentenced individual as well as the rights of others.” As of August, 17 people have been executed in the U.S. in 2023: five in Florida and Texas, four in Missouri, two in Oklahoma, and one in Alabama.



Hell on Angola

Dead Man Walking largely takes place at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, where Joseph De Rocher awaits his execution on death row. Known commonly as Angola, it is the largest maximum-security prison in the United States, incarcerating approximately 5,000 people on 18,000 acres of land—a property larger than the island of Manhattan.

The name “Angola” derives from the site’s connection to slavery. In the 19th century, the property now spanned by the facility was once occupied by seven neighboring slave plantations: Angola, Bellevue, Lake Killarney, Lochloland, Loango, Panola, and Monrovia. Most of this property, which originated from Spanish land grants awarded in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, was used for the cultivation of cotton.

In 1834, the majority of Angola was acquired by Francis Routh, who established a commercial partnership with Tennessee slave trader Isaac Franklin. When Routh’s finances collapsed in 1837, Franklin took possession of the Angola plantations. Franklin died shortly thereafter, and the property was inherited by his wife Adelia Hayes, who married businessman Joseph Alexander Smith Acklen in 1849. Hayes and Acklen split their time between Nashville and Angola, where in 1852 a newspaper reported that 700 slaves were cultivating cotton. In 1859, after Acklen had expanded his real estate portfolio by purchasing additional plantations, his and his wife’s properties produced 3,149 bales of cotton—the third most in Louisiana.

With the Civil War looming, Acklen pledged loyalty to the Confederacy, to which he donated \$30,000, and the Angola properties—adjacent to the Mississippi River—served as the main river crossing for Confederate troops and provisions. In 1880, Acklen’s widow Adelia and her third husband William Archer Cheatham sold their properties totaling over 10,000 acres to Louis Trager and Samuel L. James. A civil engineer, James had been awarded an exclusive contract with the Louisiana State Penitentiary under a system of “convict leasing” in 1870. This practice allowed states to lease their prisoners to private enterprises like plantations, mines, and railways. States would thus earn revenue from these contracts while businesses took advantage of cheap, coerced penal labor to further their commercial interests.

News spread widely of deleterious conditions at Angola, which became known as the “James Prison Camp.” The Prison Reform Association was founded in New Orleans in 1886, and the state of Louisiana bought back James’s property in 1900. After devastation caused by floods in 1902, 1912, and 1922, Angola was expanded to include additional neighboring plantations, bringing the total acreage to 18,000. Though federal management of the penitentiary aimed to improve working conditions for prisoners, the facility’s reputation for brutality persisted throughout the 20th century. In 1943, former prisoner William Sadler published “Hell on Angola,” a series of articles in *The Angolite*—the prison’s inmate-operated newspaper—exposing abuses at the institution. Just a decade later, a group of 31 inmates known as the “Heel String Gang” cut their own Achilles tendons to protest conditions at Angola. In the 1960s,

FUN FACT

Tony Award–winning Belgian director Ivo van Hove was slated to make his Met debut during the 2020–21 season with his production of *Dead Man Walking*. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, that production was postponed, and van Hove made his Met debut with a staging of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* during the 2022–23 season.



Headstones in the Angola prison graveyard. Ninety percent of prisoners who are incarcerated at Angola eventually die inside the prison grounds. They are buried in one of the two cemeteries on premises.

the prison was dubbed the “bloodiest prison in the South.” Women were permanently removed from the premises in 1961. And in 1971, prisoners brought a lawsuit against the state of Louisiana, alleging that the level of medical care provided at Angola violated the “cruel and unusual punishment” clause of the Eighth Amendment, in addition to the rights of disabled inmates covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act.

Today, Angola maintains several enterprises. Prisoners cultivate 38 types of vegetables, including corn, cotton, soybean, and wheat crops; herd 3,000 cattle (the prison has an annual rodeo); manufacture license plates (all Louisiana and Puerto Rico plates are made there); and operate a metal shop, silkscreen shop, and a factory that produces mattresses, brooms, and mops. As of 2021, Louisiana sentences prisoners to life without parole more frequently than any other state in the U.S. And as of 2022, 73% of all inmates serving life sentences at Angola are Black—more than twice their proportion of the state population. As of May 2023, the U.S. incarcerates 531 people for every 100,000 residents, while Louisiana has the highest incarceration rate in the nation. *Dead Man Walking* is thus set in one of the most carceral places in the world.

Gathered by Hymn

Just as *Dead Man Walking* begins and ends with a murder, the opera is also bookended by “He Will Gather Us Around,” an original hymn composed by Heggie. A hymn is a liturgical song—that is, a piece of music performed to worship or praise God, often in a group or public setting. Hymn texts are often derived from the Bible, but they can also be entirely new, as is the case with this piece. (Moreover, hymns are not limited to Christian devotional practice and can be found in many other religious traditions.) Hymns are typically short, often four lines of equal length, consisting of simple melodies that can be sung in unison by a choir or congregation. “He Will Gather Us Around” follows this model:

He will gather us around, all around.
 He will gather us around.
 By and by. You and I.
 All around Him. Gather us around.

The hymn’s melody is also roughly divided into four two-measure phrases:

The image shows the musical notation for the hymn "He Will Gather Us Around" in 4/4 time, starting with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The melody is divided into four two-measure phrases:

- Phrase 1: He will ga-ther us a - round, all a-round. He will ga-ther us a -
- Phrase 2: round. By and by. You and I. All a -
- Phrase 3: round Him. Ga - ther us a - - round.
- Phrase 4: (The final phrase is partially obscured by the next section's text)

The hymn reappears throughout the opera, functioning like a leitmotif for Sister Helen. The song first appears as Helen, alone in the dark, tries to comfort herself before shifting to a lively scene where she and Sister Rose teach the hymn to a group of rambunctious children at Hope House, the housing project where they live and work. The melody comes back in Act I, Scene 9, when Helen returns to visit Joseph De Rocher at the prison after the Pardon Board has rejected his appeal for an execution stay. Helen encourages Joe to admit his guilt, which he refuses to do, and she responds with words from the Bible (John 8:32): “The truth will set you free.” When she recites this text, the score repeats verbatim the first two phrases of the hymn’s melody:

The image shows a musical score snippet where the first two phrases of the hymn's melody are repeated verbatim. The lyrics are: "The Bi-ble says 'The Truth will set you free?' The Truth will set you free. Set you free? The Truth will set you free?"

As Joe questions Helen’s counsel, his vocal line mirrors the F-major arpeggio in the second phrase. The first time he asks, “Set you free?,” he ends the question on an A-flat, clashing with the A-natural in Helen’s assurance that “The truth will set you

FUN FACT

Mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade originated the role of Mrs. Patrick De Rocher in the premiere production of *Dead Man Walking* at San Francisco Opera in 2000. Von Stade was integral to Jake Heggie’s early success as a composer. The pair met while Heggie was working in the press department at SFO. After Heggie showed von Stade several of his compositions, she championed his work, leading to the commission of *Dead Man Walking* for SFO’s 2000–01 season.

free” in the same bar. The next time he repeats the phrase, however, he sings an A-natural, and the third and final time he sings “The truth will set you free”—this time as a statement, not a question—he lands on a high D, harmonizing in a minor-third interval with Helen’s cadence on F. A musical conversation at first characterized by conflict and skepticism is now one of agreement and consolation.

This moment of resolution quickly gives way as Helen, exhausted and hungry, begins to hear voices. As the cacophony of the scene builds, the voices of Sister Rose and the schoolchildren singing the hymn collide with Joe’s calls for help, his mother’s desperate pleas, and the other inmates chanting, “Woman on the tier.”

The hymn melody later reappears in subtle variations before its recapitulation at the opera’s conclusion. In Act II, Scene 2, Helen wakes up screaming from a nightmare and Rose comforts her. When Helen seeks Rose’s help in forgiving Joseph, Rose responds by humming a short melody echoing the hymn:



In this scene, the roles have been reversed. Rather than administering spiritual guidance to someone in need, Helen is now in need of spiritual guidance. As Rose assumes that responsibility, Helen’s leitmotif is also passed to her, signaling the transference of spiritual authority from one character to another.

Act II, Scene 4 also includes a variation of the hymn’s text. For the last time before his execution, Joseph meets with his mother, younger brothers, and Helen in the prison waiting room. Joe’s mother asks Helen to take a family photo, remarking, “Gather ‘round me boys.” Though the musical setting here does not reflect the original hymn melody, the phrase “gather ‘round” is a clear evocation of the motif. If anything, this melodic divergence suggests the vast gulf between Helen and Joe’s mother—while the former acknowledges Joe’s guilt, the latter cannot face the truth of his crime.

Finally, “He Will Gather Us Around” returns when Helen sings to herself in two instances: first, when Joe finally confesses, and second, after the execution has been carried out. At the conclusion of the opera, Helen performs the full hymn, alone, as she did at the very beginning. But this time its implications have shifted. She seems not to be comforting herself, but instead Joe’s soul, or perhaps the audience. And it is no longer clear if the “He” is God or Joe, for it is his crime and fate that have brought together Helen, the families of Joe and his victims, the prison staff, and all others who bear witness to his death—including the performers and us, the spectators.

Given its pride of place in *Dead Man Walking*, “He Will Gather Us Around” has been arranged by Heggie and recorded as a standalone a cappella piece for chorus.

Philosophical Chairs

MATERIALS

Handout

COMMON CORE

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6–11-12.1

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D

Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

Philosophical Chairs is an activity designed to foster critical thinking, active inquiry, and respectful dialogue among students. To play, participants agree or disagree with a series of statements, but the game doesn't end there. The most crucial element is what happens next: Participants discuss their point of view and can switch sides if their opinions change during the discussions.

Each topic statement is deliberately open ended yet ties into a number of the themes present in *Dead Man Walking*—including the ethics of capital punishment, the desire for retribution, and the possibility of redemption, as well as our capacities for forgiveness, justice, and goodness. Offer students a brief overview of the opera's plot, setting, and context, and remind them how to build a safe space for productive conversation. Some of the topics might be confusing or hard—that's okay! As you and your students explore and learn about *Dead Man Walking*, 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?

A NOTE TO FACILITATORS: Between statements, provide some clarity as to why that statement was chosen. Explain to students where and how each particular theme shows up in the opera, or invite students to offer their own explanations.

STEP 1. INQUIRE

Distribute the included handout with guidelines and statements, making sure to review the rules of engagement as a group. Next, invite students to read one of the statements—out loud as a class, to themselves, or in small groups. As they read, they should ask themselves:

- Do I understand the statement?
 - If not, what questions might clarify it for me?
- What immediately comes to mind when I read the statement?
 - What is my initial reaction: Do I agree or disagree?
- What led me to that decision?
 - What opinions do I hold about this statement?
 - What life experiences may have led me to think this way?

STEP 2. RESPOND

Read the statements again out loud and ask students to commit to one side. They can agree or disagree, but there is no middle ground. (Many will not be completely comfortable committing to one side over the other—that's part of the game. It will help foster conversation and debate.)



Guard tower above the East Yard in Angola Prison

STEP 3. DISCUSS

Start a conversation! Use the following questions to guide discussion:

- Does anyone feel very strongly either way? Why or why not?
- Does anyone feel conflicted? Why or why not?
- Give voice to what you thought about in the first step:
 - What led me to make my decision?
 - What opinions do I hold with regard to this statement?
 - What life experience may have led me to think this way?
- What might you have not considered that others are now bringing up in the discussion?
- Did any new questions arise during the discussion?

As the conversation continues, students are free to change their minds or develop more nuanced perspectives.

Repeat steps 1 through 3 for each statement.

Dead Reckoning

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

English/language arts, ethics, visual arts, psychology, drama

MATERIALS

Handouts

Synopsis

“Who’s Who in *Dead Man Walking*”

COMMON CORE

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5

Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

CORE ARTS

TH:Re7.1.HSI.a

Respond to what is seen, felt, and heard in a drama/theatre work to develop criteria for artistic choices.

TH:Re9.1.HSI.b

Consider the aesthetics of the production elements in a drama/theatre work.

In *Dead Man Walking*, Joseph De Rocher is a convicted murderer facing the death penalty. Sister Helen Prejean, however, invites us to see him for more than the crime he has committed. Through her, we come to know De Rocher as a flawed person with undeniable dignity in the wake of all he’s done and all that’s being done to him—that is, as a person worthy of spiritual care. As a result, the audience, who is privy to his final reckoning, is compelled to wonder whether this man’s death offers ways to find healing after a heinous crime and for whom this healing is valuable.

This activity introduces and connects two crucial concepts: five-point plot structures and the five stages of grief. By looking at these concepts together, students will be able to develop a greater appreciation for the opera’s dramatic and emotional unfolding while questioning whether complex works of art can ever be fully explained by conventional interpretive models.

STEP 1. REVIEW

Because this activity requires that students have a firm grasp of the opera’s plot, you should begin class by distributing copies of the synopsis and the “Who’s Who in *Dead Man Walking*” chart, both included in this guide. You may choose to have students read them silently, have volunteers alternate in reading them aloud, or cover the plot material in an interactive game.

STEP 2. CHART

Using the included handout outlining five-part plot structures (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution), have students create a plot graph for the opera by deciding the placement of moments, events, or scenes. You may choose to have students complete this activity individually, in small groups, or as a whole class on a whiteboard or chart paper. If there are any disagreements or discrepancies among the students’ charts, feel free to discuss them as a class. Be sure to keep the plot charts handy to revisit later.

There are several ways to proceed with this part of the activity:

- If you are introducing students to *Dead Man Walking* before attending a screening in theaters, their work will be largely speculative. They can complete charts based on the included synopsis, but they will not yet know how the events of the opera are treated musically or in terms of staging. Students can even bring their charts with them to the screening to examine how closely they align with the production itself. This exercise could thus be an excellent opportunity to discuss how music and text together contribute to the work’s dramatic structure.
- You are also welcome to use one of the two commercially available live production recordings of *Dead Man Walking* by Houston Grand Opera (Virgin Classics, 2012)

and San Francisco Opera (Erato, 2001). Students could listen to the opera or key scenes before or while they make their charts.

- Alternatively, this activity could be completed after students have attended a screening in theaters. If so, they will have a firmer grasp of both the plot structure of the opera and its musical setting. Students could also create charts before and after attending the screening—this strategy would allow them to consider whether their expectations were met or subverted, setting the stage for a broader discussion of specific creative choices made in the work and production.

STEP 3. REFLECT

Using the included handout, introduce the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). Bring the discussion back to focus on Joseph De Rocher. Since his eventual death is largely a foregone conclusion, he also moves through each of these stages as the opera progresses and he tries to come to terms with the consequences of his actions. You might also prompt your students to consider that,

The “punishment wing” of Louisiana State Penitentiary, where conditions are tougher, houses inmates who have misbehaved in the main prison



CRITICAL INQUIRY

Both the film and opera adaptations of Prejean's *Dead Man Walking* condense two figures in the book—Elmo Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie—into a single character: Matthew Poncelet in the film and Joseph De Rocher in the opera. The film's director, Tim Robbins, explained it this way: "Sister Helen and I agreed that we needed to concentrate on the least attractive aspects of the two of them in order to tell the story in a challenging way. To achieve a character that would resonate, we couldn't engage in propaganda or in manipulation that implied innocence, or attempt to paint the murderer as a victim of circumstance. We needed to challenge audiences with the question of whether it was ever justifiable to take anyone's life, regardless of guilt." How does this decision to merge two characters into one affect your understanding of the opera? What are the narrative or dramatic consequences of this change? Can you imagine how the opera might work with both men featured?

just as Joseph is making his way through the stages of grief to come to terms with his own impending death, Owen Hart and the other victims' family members are also moving through those same stages as they process what happened to their loved ones, as are Sister Helen and Joseph's mother.

Using the same handout, ask students to create a chart indicating how Joseph De Rocher passes through the five stages of grief. If you have time, you can have students complete additional charts for other characters in the opera, or you can also divide students into groups and have each group make a chart for a different character.

As with the previous step, this part of the activity can either be done in preparation for the screening in theaters, after the screening, or both.

STEP 4. COMPARE

Have students compare the two charts, one on grief and the other on plot structure, that they have created for *Dead Man Walking* and discuss whether they reflect each other. Ask students:

- What do they notice about the two charts?
- How do the five stages of grief map onto the five stages of plot? Where are the convergences or divergences?
- If they rearranged certain plot elements, how would that affect the work's treatment of grief? And vice versa?
- If students completed charts for multiple characters, how do they relate to each other? Do some characters have similar movements through grief, or are they all distinct?
- Is there any connection between the depiction of grief and/or catharsis in the opera and the audience's hypothetical path toward acceptance?

DIVING DEEPER

As a homework assignment or additional class project, you can have students explore some alternative ways to draw, chart, or map the narrative structure and stages of grief in *Dead Man Walking*. They can use digital visualization tools, multimedia programs, or crafting materials to produce an original interpretation of the opera. You might also ask students to include a written component with this assignment that explains how their new method of visualizing *Dead Man Walking* addresses aspects of the work that the conventional, five-point charts do not.

Jake Heggie’s Musical Style

Jake Heggie’s unique compositional voice is influenced by several contrasting musical styles. Heggie infuses his work with nonclassical musical genres like gospel and jazz, creating a modern melting pot of operatic style unique to him. This musical mixing is evident in *Dead Man Walking*, which combines prerecorded music, references to Elvis Presley, Christian hymns, and conventional operatic writing to great dramatic effect.

In this activity, students will explore Heggie’s compositional voice by comparing excerpts from some of his most important musical influences with selections from *Dead Man Walking*. After actively listening to Heggie’s compositional mentors and influences, they will use their newly discovered knowledge to fill in a chart tracking how specific elements of style appear in the score for *Dead Man Walking*.

STEP 1. REVIEW

Before we examine his musical style, we need to learn a bit about Heggie’s life, education, and career. Distribute copies of the “The Creation of *Dead Man Walking*” timeline included in this guide. Students can read the timeline independently or in small groups.



Composer Jake Heggie
PHOTO: JAMES NIEBUHR

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

Music history, popular music, English language, cultural studies

MATERIALS

Handout

“The Creation of *Dead Man Walking*”
Timeline

Large paper, posterboard, or sticky note

Colored markers or pencils

Audio tracks

COMMON CORE

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CORE ARTS

MU:Re7.2.8.b

Identify and compare the context of programs of music from a variety of genres, cultures, and historical periods.

MU:Re8.1.C.HSI.a

Develop and explain interpretations of varied works, demonstrating an understanding of the composers’ intent by citing technical and expressive aspects as well as the style/genre of each work.

CRITICAL INQUIRY

At the time that Sister Helen wrote *Dead Man Walking*, the mode of execution employed at the Louisiana State Penitentiary was electrocution. In both the film and opera adaptations of the book, however, the inmate advised by Sister Helen is executed by means of lethal injection. The Louisiana legislature retired the electric chair in 1990 and began using lethal injections the following year. Why do you think the film and opera made this shift? Why might lethal injection be (or not be) more dramatically effective? How might the conclusion of the opera sound if it retained the original execution by electric chair?

To conclude the examination of Heggie's life and work, share the quotation below from an interview published in the *San Francisco Bay Times*:

"I think I've been influenced in one way or another by everything I've ever heard! That definitely started when I was growing up with movies, musicals, jazz, pop and rock. My dad was a fan of classic big band music and singers like Frank Sinatra, Jo Stafford, Peggy Lee, and Ella Fitzgerald. Specific composers who've influenced me include Sondheim, Bernstein, Gershwin, Rodgers, Britten, Poulenc, Debussy, Ravel, Mozart, Chopin, Puccini, Verdi, Janáček, Tchaikovsky, etc. It's a long list! Certainly, I've been very influenced by great pop singers like Barbra Streisand, k.d. lang, Carly Simon, Joni Mitchell, and yes, even Lady Gaga. But also great opera stars throughout history. I didn't find opera until I was in my late 20s, but once bitten I was forever hooked."

STEP 2. WARM UP

Now that students have learned a bit about Heggie's life and work, it's time to jump in and prepare to analyze some music. First, we will do a brief word-cloud warm up. Select a free word-cloud generator from the list below:

freewordcloudgenerator.com
wordclouds.com
monkeylearn.com/word-cloud

Students may access the generator on their personal devices. Use the topics below as inspiration for your word clouds, and encourage students to use only one-word responses to the prompts.

- How are you feeling today?
- What did you eat for breakfast?
- What is your favorite TV show?
- What kind of pet do you have?
- Who is your favorite singer?
- What is your favorite movie?

STEP 3. DESCRIBE

Now that students are warmed up and have their brains turned on, they are ready to jump into the main lesson. But before they begin listening, they must first assemble a word bank of descriptive language to use in their analysis. These very basic descriptive words will provide students with vocabulary that they can use to reach more specific characterizations of each track.

Follow these steps to create your class's word bank:

- Divide students into groups of four or five.
- Assign each group one of the following words: happy, sad, angry, tired, fast, and slow.
- Once all groups have been assigned a term, they will have ten minutes to come up with 10–15 synonyms for their word. Groups must decoratively write their synonyms on a large piece of paper, sticky note, or posterboard that they will present to the class. They should use colored markers or pencils to decorate the word bank.
- Have each group read and display their decorated word banks so everyone in the class can see it.

STEP 4. LISTEN

Now students will listen to several of the musicians who influenced Heggie’s compositional style, using the included handout to track specific qualities of each composition.

- Introduce the activity by beginning the “Elements of Style” chart as a class before students complete the handout on their own. Listen to any one of the tracks listed below, focusing on the second column (“Significance”) of the chart, where students should jot down ideas about the importance of different instruments, lyrics, and melodic lines in the selection. There are no right or wrong answers here! Students should note whatever they hear for each item listed in the first column. (If one element isn’t present in the track, they can leave it blank.)
- As a class, discuss the observations in column two: Was there anything that someone heard that others did not? Are there any disagreements? Why?
- Have students move on to the third column (“Descriptive Language”). Referring to the word banks that the class has already created, play the selection again as students fill in the third column with descriptive words for the items listed in the first column.
- Discuss these entries as a class. Are there any words that need to be added to the word banks created at the beginning of this exercise? As students share, they should feel free to add new descriptions to the third column based on the conversation.
- Divided into pairs, students will then select a piece from the list of musicians that influenced Heggie’s compositional voice. Students should work with their partners to complete the chart again, this time for the selection of their choice. Make sure students listen to the selection at least twice and try to have at least one group for each of the selections. Audio tracks can be found on YouTube, Spotify, or any other streaming platform.
 - Frank Sinatra, “My Way”
 - Steven Sondheim, “Children will listen,” from *Into the Woods*
 - George Gershwin, “A Woman is a sometimes thing,” from *Porgy and Bess*
 - Leonard Bernstein, “A boy like that,” from *West Side Story*

- Richard Rodgers, "This nearly was mine," from *South Pacific*
- Ella Fitzgerald, "Dream a little dream"
- Carly Simon, "That's the Way I've Always Heard It Should Be"
- Benjamin Britten, "The Sally Gardens"
- Barbra Streisand, "Woman in Love"
- Lady Gaga, "Poker Face"

Share out!

STEP 5. COMPARE

Now that students are acquainted with the work of some of Heggie's influences, we will return to the "Elements of Style" chart once again to analyze a few musical moments from *Dead Man Walking*. Students can work individually or remain in pairs, completing each column of the handout for each selection from the opera.

Track 1 ACT II, SCENE 3: "Well? Well?"

Track 2 ACT I, SCENE 2: "How fast was I going, officer?"

Track 3 ACT I, SCENE 8: "You don't know what it's like to bear a child"

Once students have listened to each excerpt from *Dead Man Walking* and filled out their charts, have them compare their observations about these selections to their earlier notes on Heggie's musical influences.

Finally, convene a group discussion about students' findings. Ask:

- What connections can you make between the first selections and the *Dead Man Walking* clips?
- Which specific elements of style does Heggie use in his writing that speak to you?
- Which elements of style that you heard in the earlier selections does Heggie not use in his score for *Dead Man Walking*?
- Which composer/performer/musical style do you believe most strongly influenced Heggie? Why?

Dead Mind Thinking

Dead Man Walking invites us deep into the inner workings of the American criminal justice system—and into the hearts and minds of the characters who populate it. Part of the tremendous difficulty of Sister Helen’s task as Joseph De Rocher’s spiritual advisor is to come to her own understanding of his personality and psychology, to recognize how others perceive him, and to discover how Joseph understands his own violent past and doomed future.

In this activity, which can be completed before or after a screening of the opera, students will analyze the passages from Sister Helen Prejean’s memoir that form the basis of Heggie’s opera. Then, they will listen to excerpts from the opera to assess how Joseph is perceived by others and perceived by himself, setting the stage for a creative “open-mind” portrait that plumbs the psychological depths of *Dead Man Walking*.

STEP 1. READ

Divide your class into two groups. Distribute the two excerpts from *Dead Man Walking* (1993) included with this guide. In previewing these excerpts, explain to students that the opera is based on the events described in this book, which was written by the nun who experienced them. These excerpts should be treated as nonfiction. Additionally, it might be helpful to share (or ask students to briefly write about) these words from Sister Helen Prejean’s afterword: In describing her writing of the book, she said, “I’d have to ‘walk a razor’s edge on every page,’ holding within myself the horror of the killings while at the same time descending into the horror of watching the convicted man strapped down and killed before my eyes.”

Before students begin reading, make sure each has two different-colored pencils or markers. As students in group one read the excerpts, ask them to color code the text, marking evidence that demonizes the perpetrator in one color and evidence that humanizes him in another. As students in group two read the excerpts, ask them to color code the text, marking perceptions that other people have about him in one color and perceptions that he has about himself in another.

STEP 2. COMPARE

Once each group has finished color coding the excerpts, ask students to partner with someone from the other group for a pair-share. Ask students to compare their color coding and discuss the following questions:

- What do they notice?
- Are there any similarities in coloring?
- What is the relationship between evidence used either to demonize or humanize the prisoner and the source of those descriptions?

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

English/language arts, ethics, visual arts, psychology, drama

MATERIALS

Handouts
Colored pencils or markers
Drawing paper or poster board
Audio tracks

COMMON CORE

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3

Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.7

Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment.

CORE ARTS

TH:Re7.1.HSI.a

Respond to what is seen, felt, and heard in a drama/theatre work to develop criteria for artistic choices.

TH:Re9.1.HSI.c

Formulate a deeper understanding and appreciation of a drama/theatre work by considering its specific purpose or intended audience.

At the conclusion of the pair-share, ask partners to share their insights in a whole-class conversation.

STEP 3. LISTEN

As you transition from text to opera, it is important for students to understand that the characters' names in the text are different from those in both the award-winning film and opera. In the book, Sister Helen tells the story of two men, Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie. In the film and operatic adaptations, these two characters are merged into one man.

Next, distribute the "Active Listening" handout and invite students to listen to the eight audio tracks in order (**Tracks 4 through 11**). Ask them to consider what is revealed about Joseph De Rocher along four axes: external perception (what others think of him); self-perception (what he thinks of himself); character traits (his personality or general attributes); and grief or catharsis (whether he can achieve emotional release and spiritual renewal). Students should place their evidence on the chart provided.

This activity could easily be done as a whole class or as a jigsaw, with different groups of students being responsible for different tracks followed by a class discussion.

STEP 4. TRANSLATE

Using their observations from the charts that they have just completed, students will make an "open-mind" portrait, which is a graphic representation of a character-analysis essay. Students should select colors, icons, and images that represent Joseph De Rocher's character. One side of the open mind should depict how others perceive him: De Rocher's visible, projected external self. The other side should reflect his inner self: De Rocher's private interior.

On each side of the open mind portrait, students should write and draw thoughts, feelings, and images that represent the character as morally ambiguous but complexly human, including his motivations, personality, and perceptions. Students' image choice and placement should employ complex symbolism that effectively conveys an understanding of the character. Students should also attend to the visual appeal of their open-mind portraits.

DIVING DEEPER

For a homework assignment, students can also include a written explication or key explaining their choices and connecting their symbols and images to specific evidence from *Dead Man Walking*. You can also display all the open-mind portraits around the classroom and have students go a gallery walk. Then, have students share something that they learned from another classmate's portrait or submit a written response to the exercise.

Philosophical Chairs

Active listening, critical thinking, and respectful dialogue (even when we disagree about something) are learned skills. Everyone can learn them, and no one can perfect them without practice. Philosophical Chairs is designed to help us develop these skills while also learning about the opera.

You might find these statements challenging—and you might find it challenging to talk with someone who has a different answer from your own. That’s okay! Take your time with each statement, embrace uncertainty, and know that changing your mind when you learn new information is a sign of strength, not weakness. Before you begin your discussion, take some time to review the rules of engagement:

Be sure you understand the statement. If something is unclear, ask!

Face each other. Body language helps show that you’re listening carefully and respectfully.

Only one speaker at a time. Everyone will get their turn to speak.

Think before you speak. Be sure that what you’re going to say is what you really mean.

Summarize the previous person’s comments before adding your own.

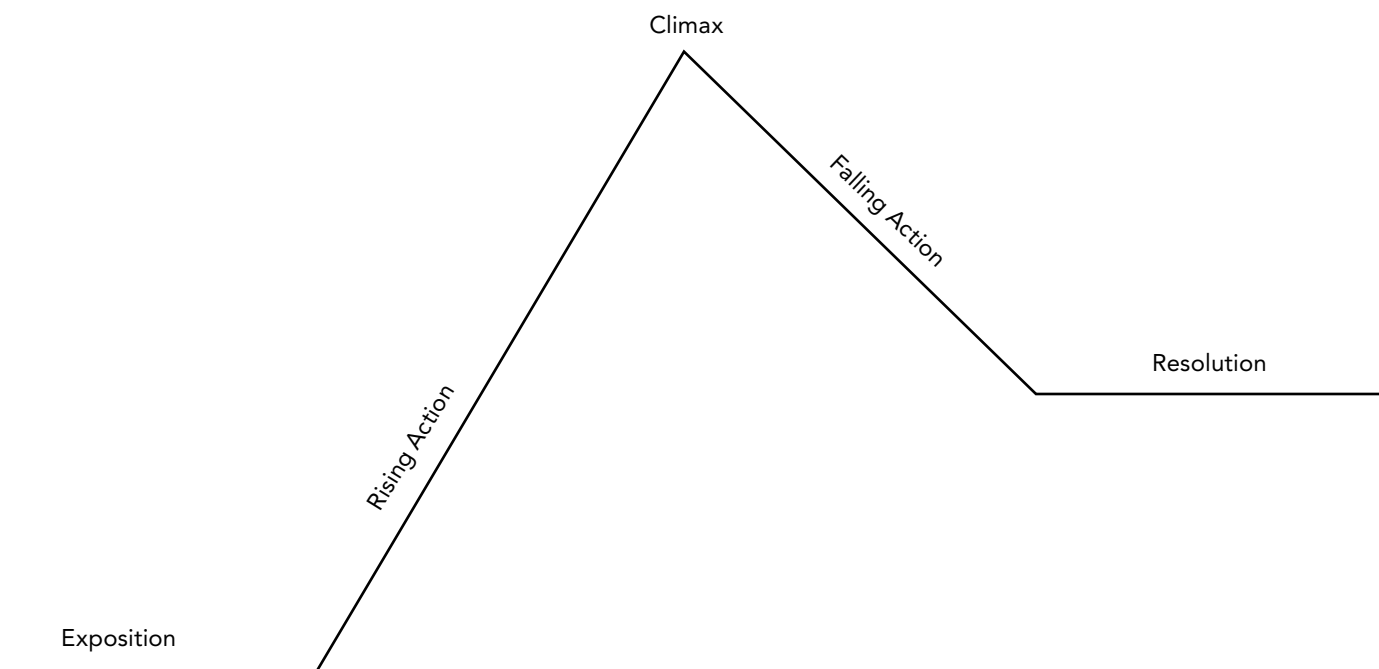
Address ideas, not the person. Challenging ideas or statements is good only if we respect the individuality and inherent value of the person who expressed them.

Three before me. To make sure everyone’s voice is heard, you may not make another comment until three others have shared their thoughts.

The Statements

- Punishment must fit the crime.
- Everyone is innocent until proven guilty.
- The death penalty is a morally justifiable response to voluntary criminal conduct.
- A death sentence provides justice.
- A death sentence provides vengeance.
- The death penalty is a cruel and unusual punishment.
- The death penalty creates a safer society.
- An execution is a violent public spectacle of official homicide.
- Society has a moral obligation to protect human life.
- Retribution is always justified.
- Anything and anyone can be redeemed.
- It is never too late to turn your life around.
- No one is ever beyond help.
- Fear is a sign of weakness.
- You can walk this life alone.
- Everyone is worthy of forgiveness.
- There is good in everyone.
- Grief will subside.
- Hope can always be found.
- Justice is always served.

Dead Reckoning: Charting Plot



Dead Reckoning: Charting Grief

Denial
Anger
Bargaining
Depression
Acceptance

Elements of Style

Composer/Performer: _____

Title: _____

ELEMENT	SIGNIFICANCE	DESCRIPTION
Strings		
Woodwinds		
Percussion		
Piano		
Brass		
Voice		
Other		

Elements of Style (CONTINUED)

ELEMENT	SIGNIFICANCE	DESCRIPTION
Melodic Line		
Treatment of Text		
Use of Dynamics		
Rhythmic Complexity		
Musical Form		

Dead Man Thinking: Text Excerpts

Passage 1

My hope for the Harveys is that eventually they will be able to overcome their terrible grief and once again live positive lives. How I can help them I am not sure, but I want to try. And Robert Willie? What can I possibly do for him? I will do what Millard Farmer asked me to do—accompany him, treat him with dignity—but I will also challenge him to take responsibility for his crime and to ask forgiveness of the Harveys.

Emotionally it's confusing to think of the Harveys and their needs alongside Robert Willie and his. Hearing the details of Faith's vicious murder, I find myself sucked into the Harveys rage. But then I think of the death the state has in store for Robert Willie.

A few days after visiting the Harveys I visit Robert for the second time.... Robert comes into the visiting room. He is wearing a black knitted hat. He walks with a little bounce, poising momentarily on the balls of his feet. I dispense with preliminaries.

"I went to visit the Harveys," I say. "They told me about Faith's death. Robert, you raped and stabbed that girl and left her to rot in the woods. Why?"

"All right," he says, and he lights a cigarette. "I'm telling you what, ma'am, I'm real, real sorry that girl got killed, but like I told the police when they was questioning me, I didn't stab and kill that girl. Joe went crazy and started stabbin' her. I told them that when I gave my statement, and I offered to take a lie detector test then and there on the spot, but they wouldn't let me. I told them I don't kill women. I don't. But when Joe started stabbin' her, her hands went up and he told me to hold her hands and I did. But it was more instinct than anything, and with him slashing with that knife, there was blood everywhere, I was scared. I just did what he said, and afterwards we was runnin' around in those woods lost, goin' through brambles and mud and couldn't find the truck and I was some scared."

I groan inside. The truth. What's the truth? Not another one of those situations where two perpetrators each accuse the other and it's so difficult to ferret out the facts. He admits that he held Faith's hands. He did not come to her

defense. Even if he's telling the truth and did not stab her himself, he is responsible for her death. Does he know what he did? And if he does, how can he live with himself?

"Robert," I say, "Vernon Harvey tells me that you taunted him in the courtroom. You said you'd never fry. Is that true?"

"He said he'd see me fry and I said, 'The hell you will,'" Robert says. "I'd never show my inner feelin's out there in the courtroom, in public like that. Ever since I was a little boy I ain't ever showed my real feelin's. See, my daddy went to Angola when I was a baby. People would point to me and say, 'That's John Willie's kid,' and wham, there I am in a fight. My mama had her hands full in her own life, much less trying to take care of me. I don't blame her none for what's happened. She separated from my daddy when I was real young and married again, and me and my stepfather never got on too good. I'd stay with my grandmother sometime, my aunt and uncle sometime, my mother and stepfather sometime. By the time I was in seventh grade I was sniffin' glue, paint, gasoline, you name it. Me and Joe were loaded on Valium, acid, and booze when this happened with Faith Hathaway. I had this light airy feelin' inside. I hadn't slept in two nights."

I say, "Robert, drugs don't explain violence like this. Thousands of people take drugs and don't slash and rape and kill people. The Harveys told me about that young boy, Mark Brewster, and his girlfriend whom you and Joe kidnapped after you killed Faith. They say you raped the girl and stabbed the boy and shot him and tied him to a tree and left him to die. The boy's paralyzed now for the rest of his life and God knows about the emotional scars on the girl. Did you do that?"

I am keeping my voice low, but it's an effort. I am quivering inside.

He pauses. He always speaks in a measured way and softly. "Yeah," he says, "I let Joe Vaccaro call all the shots and I went along. I wasn't thinkin' straight.

"The only other time I was involved in hurting somebody bad, where they died, was when me and my cousin struggled in the woods with this drug dealer for a big hunk of

Dead Man Thinking: Text Excerpts

Passage 1 (CONTINUED)

money - \$10,000. We was all three fighting in the river and me and my cousin held his head under the water and then dragged him out and left him on the bank. We thought he was just unconscious, but he ended up dead.

"But with that couple we kidnapped, Vaccaro told me to kill the boy and I took out my knife, which was pretty dull, and I cut him across the neck and punched it into his side, but not hard or deep 'cause I really didn't want to kill him, and I said to Joe, 'He won't die,' and then Joe came up and shot him in the head."

He shakes his head. "I was stupid to let myself get messed up with Joe Vaccaro. He was supposed to be such a tough dude. He had been to Angola and so I was saying, 'Hey, man, he's been to Angola.' All that week when we were doin' all this, I knew it was wrong. This voice kept going off in my head, 'This is wrong. This is wrong.' I was a damn fool."

"Have you ever told the Harveys that you're sorry?" I ask him.

"Well, ma'am that's hard to do because Vernon Harvey keeps holding these press conferences, mouthin' off about how he can't wait to see me fry. Personally, I think the guy is his own worst enemy. He just needs to let it go, man. The

girl's dead now, and there's nothin' he can do to bring her back. Even watchin' me fry ain't gonna bring her back, but he won't let it go and he's just makin' himself miserable, in my opinion."

"Robert," I say, "you understand, don't you, that you are the last person in the world with the right to say that to Vernon Harvey?"

"I guess you're right," he says, but he doesn't seem terribly convinced.

"Hell," Robery says, "it's hard, ma'am, to be having much sympathy for them when here, they're tryin' to kill me. When somebody's after your hide, it kind of tends to occupy your mind, if you know what I mean."

"But look at what those parents are going through," I say. "Their daughter raped and stabbed and left to die in the woods. What if someone did that to your mother? What would you want to do to them?"

"Kill 'em," he says. "I sure as hell would want to kill 'em." I'm quiet then for a while.

I'm hoping he can take in his own words so he can feel the Harveys' pain.

Dead Man Thinking: Text Excerpts

Passage Two

I tell Robert I've been talking to his mother on the telephone and he says that now she's his biggest worry. He can do it, he's "ready to go," but he doesn't know what he'll do if she starts "crying and breaking down" in the death house.

That was what Pat Sonnier had feared most, his mother breaking down and causing him to lose emotional control.

"You don't always have to be this tough Marlboro Man," I say to him. "Real men cry, you know."

He gives a little laugh, a nervous laugh, and I know he's listening.

"There's another mother who's suffering, Robert," I say. "Elizabeth Harvey. She and Faith were very close. They used to talk to each other almost every night on the phone. They used to go shopping together. She had her brother come to dig her daughter's jaw out of a body bag to do a dental check before she could accept that this daughter, whom she loved so much, was really dead. And she will live every day of her life knowing that her daughter died a terrible death—and alone. And Faith—have you ever really faced her pain, felt it, taken it inside yourself? I'm saying all this to you because I'm your friend and I care about you and I just can't see you going to your death and not owning up to the part you played in Faith's death."

"I am sorry, I really am sorry about Faith," he says, "I hope my death gives the Harveys some peace. I really do. Maybe my death will help them get some relief, some peace."

His head is down and his voice is soft, and when he says this I say to him, just as I said to Pat Sonnier, that his last words can be words either of hate or of love and maybe that's the best thing he can offer the Harveys, a wish for their peace.

Dead Man Thinking: Active Listening

As you listen to each of the eight excerpts from the opera, pay close attention to how Joseph De Rocher’s character is described and who is describing him. Chart your findings in one of the four categories.

TRACK 4: “Heavens! Look at the time”	
Others’ perceptions of him:	His perception of himself:
Character traits revealed:	Evidence of grief of catharsis*

TRACK 5: “I don’t like that man”	
Others’ perceptions of him:	His perception of himself:
Character traits revealed:	Evidence of grief of catharsis

TRACK 6: “Thank you”	
Others’ perceptions of him:	His perception of himself:
Character traits revealed:	Evidence of grief of catharsis

TRACK 7: “The defendant’s mother, Mrs. Patrick De Rocher”	
Others’ perceptions of him:	His perception of himself:
Character traits revealed:	Evidence of grief of catharsis

*Catharsis refers to an emotional release which allows an individual to achieve a state of spiritual renewal, free from stress or anxiety.

Dead Man Thinking: Active Listening

TRACK 8: "I believe in the here and now"	
Others' perceptions of him:	His perception of himself:
Character traits revealed:	Evidence of grief of catharsis

TRACK 9: "I'm scared, OK?"	
Others' perceptions of him:	His perception of himself:
Character traits revealed:	Evidence of grief of catharsis

TRACK 10: "I killed her"	
Others' perceptions of him:	His perception of himself:
Character traits revealed:	Evidence of grief of catharsis

TRACK 11: "Dead man walking!"	
Others' perceptions of him:	His perception of himself:
Character traits revealed:	Evidence of grief of catharsis

Dead Man Thinking: Open-Mind Portrait

EXTERNAL PERCEPTION

SELF-PERCEPTION



PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY

Opera Review: *Dead Man Walking*

Have you ever wanted to be a music and theater critic? Now's your chance!

As you watch *Dead Man Walking*, use the space below to keep track of your thoughts and opinions. What did you like about the performance? What didn't you like? If you were in charge, what might you have done differently? Think carefully about the action, music, and stage design. Then, after the opera, share your opinions with your friends, classmates, and anyone else who wants to learn more about the opera and this performance at the Met!

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
Two teenagers go skinny-dipping. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Sister Helen and Sister Rose teach children a hymn. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Helen arrives at the prison and is greeted by Father Grenville. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Helen and Father Grenville talk in his office about Joseph De Rocher. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
The Warden confronts Helen about being Joseph's spiritual advisor. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
As the Warden and Helen walk through death row, she is taunted by the inmates. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Helen meets Joseph in the death-row visiting room. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Joseph's mother, Mrs. Patrick De Rocher, pleads before the Pardon Commission. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
The victims' parents confront Helen in the parking lot outside the courtroom.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Helen and Joseph discuss the denial of his appeal for a pardon.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
In the death-row visiting room, Helen begins to hear voices and collapses.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Joseph exercises in his prison cell and learns of his execution date.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Helen awakes from a nightmare and is comforted by Rose.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Helen and Joseph talk in his cell.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Joseph sees his mother and younger brothers for the last time.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Outside the death house, the victims' parents confront Helen again.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Prison guards prepare Joseph for his execution.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
Helen pleads with Joseph until he confesses to the murder.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			
The Warden leads Joseph to his execution.	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:			