

WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE TO BRING WAR HOME? DOES HOME START to seem like a battlefield of its own? And do enemy combatants begin to resemble, from a distance, your own friends and family? These are all questions explored by *Grounded*, a new opera by two-time Tony Award-winning composer Jeanine Tesori, with a libretto by playwright George Brant. Commissioned by the Met, developed by the Metropolitan Opera / Lincoln Center Theater New Works Program, and adapted from Brant's eponymous play, *Grounded* follows Jess, a hotshot fighter pilot whose unplanned pregnancy takes her out of the cockpit and lands her in Las Vegas, operating a Reaper drone halfway around the world.

The opera arrives at the Met in a bold staging by acclaimed director Michael Mayer that evokes the technological and military apparatuses in which Jess finds herself trapped. Using a vast array of LED screens that present a variety of perspectives on the action, including the drone's predatory view from high above, the production chronicles how Jess, portrayed by mezzo-soprano Emily D'Angelo, struggles to adjust to this new, 21st-century way of doing battle as she fights to maintain her sanity—and her soul—when ordered to rain down death by remote control.

This guide approaches *Grounded* as a work that wrestles with the ethical quandaries and psychological toll of modern warfare, especially as they intersect with questions of gender and family. It will enable students and educators to gain deeper knowledge of the history and politics of military drone technology, struggles for women's inclusion in the armed forces, the consequences of high-stakes decision making, and Tesori's kaleidoscopic musical world, ranging from jazz and pop to Broadway and opera. In so doing, the information on the following pages will equip readers to consider how our collective reliance on technology can distort—and even detach us from—the world around us.



D'ANGELO

MACKINNON

BLISS

MILLER

GRIMSLEY

THE WORK

An opera in two acts, sung in English
Music by Jeanine Tesori
Libretto by George Brant
Based on *Grounded* by George Brant
First performed October 28, 2023, at Washington National Opera

PRODUCTION

Michael Mayer Production
Mimi Lien Set Designer
Tom Broecker Costume Designer
Kevin Adams Lighting Designer
Jason H. Thompson and Kaitlyn Pietras Co-Projection Designers
Palmer Hefferan Sound Designer
David Neumann Choreographer
Paul Cremo Dramaturg

PERFORMANCE

The Met: Live in HD
October 19, 2024
Encore October 23, 2024
Emily D'Angelo Jess
Kirsten MacKinnon Also Jess
Ben Bliss Eric
Kyle Miller Sensor
Greer Grimsley Commander
Yannick Nézet-Séguin Conductor

Production a gift of Andrew J. Martin-Weber and Lynne and Richard Pasculano

Additional support from the Laidlaw Foundation and The H.M. Agnes Hsu-Tang, Ph.D. and Oscar Tang Endowment Fund

Grounded is part of the Neubauer Family Foundation New Works Initiative

Commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera

Developed by the Metropolitan Opera / Lincoln Center Theater New Works Program

A co-production of the Metropolitan Opera and Washington National Opera

Grounded 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 *Grounded* 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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DEEP DIVES: Interdisciplinary essays providing additional insights

FUN FACTS: Informative tidbits about *Grounded*

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

WHO'S WHO IN GROUNDED

CHARACTER	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Jess A fighter pilot	mezzo-soprano	A hotshot Air Force F-16 pilot, Jess finds her purpose in flight. When she becomes unexpectedly pregnant and gets reassigned to operate a Reaper drone from a Las Vegas trailer, her home and military worlds start to collide.
Also Jess Jess's alter ego	soprano	An embodiment of Jess's splintered psyche, Also Jess comments on the action and, at times, hovers above Jess as if she is having an out-of-body experience.
Eric A cattle rancher	tenor	An unassuming rancher, Eric meets Jess in a Wyoming bar, and they have a daughter, Sam. He tries to provide a sense of normalcy when Jess's military work begins to take a toll on her psyche.
Sensor A drone operator	baritone	A 19-year-old video game junkie, the Sensor is responsible for helping Jess operate the Reaper drone and perform surveillance for their missions.
Commander Jess's superior	bass	An experienced combat veteran, the Commander encourages Jess to terminate her pregnancy and later assures her that she is most useful to the war effort as a drone operator.

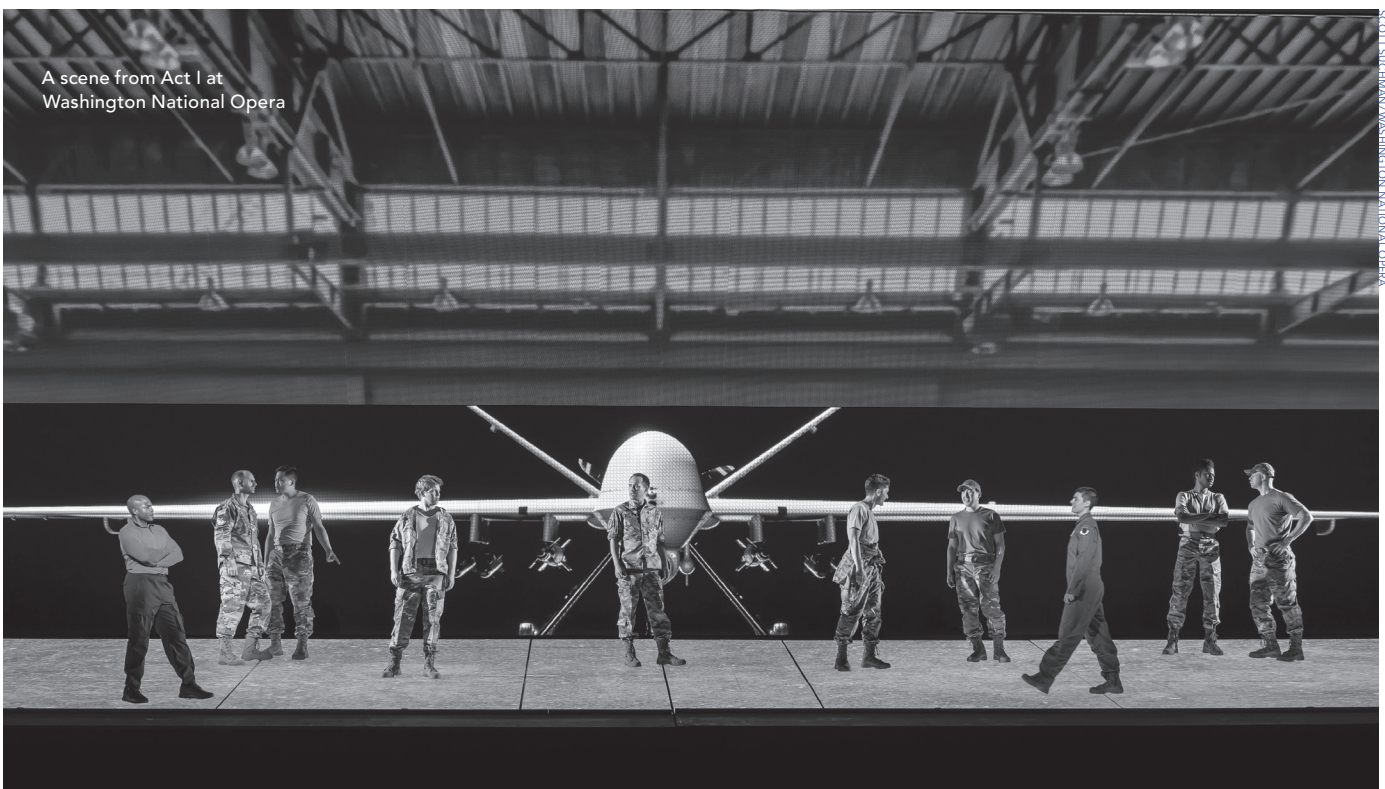
Synopsis

ACT I: Jess appears, led by a prison guard while a fighter squadron chants. An accomplished F-16 fighter pilot, she has waged war in Iraq, finding freedom in the skies. While on leave, she frequents a local bar near Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming. There she meets Eric, a cattle rancher, who nearly gets himself into trouble with the airmen at the bar. He and Jess make an unexpected connection, and she spends the night at his cabin.

Back in the cockpit, Jess becomes distracted during a flight mission as her thoughts wander back to Eric. She is also nauseated. Jess realizes that she is pregnant and informs the Commander, who encourages her to have an abortion. Jess refuses and returns to Eric's cabin to deliver the unexpected news.

Five years pass. Eric reflects on the birth of their daughter, Sam. Jess, meanwhile, yearns to return to combat. She seeks out the Commander, who offers her the opportunity to operate a missile-carrying Reaper drone, requiring her to work from a remote base outside Las Vegas. She and Eric decide to make the move. She takes her place in an air-conditioned trailer next to the Sensor—a boyish 19-year-old gamer—who operates the drone's multiple cameras and introduces her to the Kill Chain, a group of off-site strategic advisors who direct Jess's actions through her headset.

At their home, Eric—who has taken a new job as a blackjack dealer at a local casino—sings Sam to sleep. Jess and the Sensor complete their second mission.





ACT II: Jess takes Sam to the mall to purchase a new dress for school picture day. Besieged by salespeople, she becomes increasingly paranoid, suspecting that she and Sam are being followed by security cameras. As the mall fades away, Jess finds herself back in the trailer with the Kill Chain. They pursue a suspected enemy combatant, and Jess is disappointed when another team reaches the target first. She then realizes that the casualties are in fact American troops and swears to avenge their deaths. She begins to dissociate, her psyche splitting into an alternate self called Also Jess.

Back at home, Eric tries to joke with Jess, but she remains cold and distant—unable to “clap off the game.” Jess and the Sensor meet with the Commander, who gives them their new assignment: They are ordered to track and eliminate a notorious enemy target known as the Serpent. Jess soon becomes obsessed with her prey, a mysterious figure who drives incessantly through the desert, never leaving his car and preventing himself from being positively identified and eliminated. As she pursues the Serpent, Jess begins to imagine herself as the target. One night, driving alone, Jess nearly collides with an oncoming car; she crashes, exits the vehicle, and wanders into the desert. There, she comes upon a bizarre and haunting site: a huge field of unmarked white crosses hammered in the sand.

When she finally arrives home, Jess fears that something has happened to Sam. Angry and concerned, Eric notices that Jess is distant and asks her to go to couples counseling with him. He also asks her to take off her flight suit. Once he falls asleep, she puts it back on and imagines her life as if from above.

Once again in the trailer, Jess is determined to be the one to annihilate her nemesis. She successfully tracks the Serpent to his home, and, when he finally reveals himself, a victorious Jess prepares to take the long-awaited shot. Just then, she sees him wave his daughter away from the car. Jess focuses on the young girl, who is near Sam's age.

Defiantly ignoring the outraged voices on her headset, Jess steers the drone off course, crashing it. But her victory is short-lived, as she discovers another drone has been shadowing her, and she can only watch in horror as its Hellfire missiles obliterate the Serpent and his daughter.

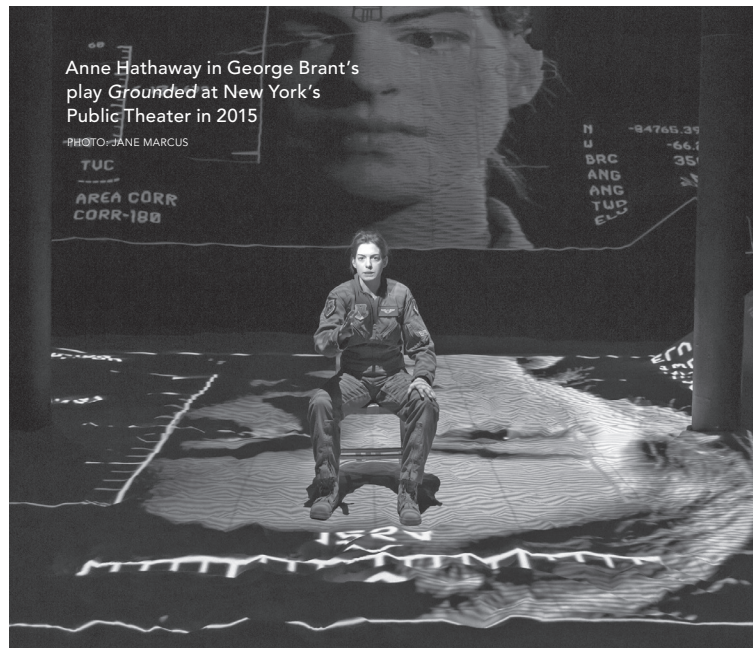
Following her failed mission, Jess has been court-martialed. Alone in a prison cell, she finally achieves peace.

The Play *Grounded* by George Brant

Jeanine Tesori's opera is closely based on George Brant's eponymous play, which premiered in 2012 and eventually opened at the Public Theater in New York City in a production directed by Julie Taymor and starring Anne Hathaway. But there are several differences between Brant's original play and his libretto for the opera. Most obviously, *Grounded* was written as a one-woman play—that is, no other characters appear in the action of the work. Some are mentioned and ventriloquized by the protagonist, like her husband Eric, the Commander, and the Sensor, but none speak themselves. The main character also remains unnamed in Brant's play; whereas she is identified as Jess in the opera, she is only the Pilot in the play.

In addition to including Eric, the Commander, and the Sensor as fully fledged characters, some even with their own arias, the opera deviates from its source text in the creation of Also Jess, who embodies Jess's split psyche. Further, in the play, the Pilot and Eric spend three days together at his cabin after meeting at a bar, rather than just one night; Eric works at a hardware store and not as a cattle rancher; and the Pilot stays in touch with Eric while away on a mission via webcam, and even informs him of her pregnancy while she is still abroad. Other aspects of the play remain—for example, a mall scene, Eric's attempts to teach his wife to "clap off" her workday, and the vision of American soldiers dying that drives Jess to single-mindedly focus on her mission to eliminate the Serpent (called Number Two in the play).

The play *Grounded* also incorporates a number of scenes that did not find their way into the opera. In one instance, the Pilot goes through an extended training process in which she first learns to operate the Reaper drone she has been assigned to fly. In another, she and Eric attend a couples counseling session—an event merely suggested in the opera. The opera also puts dramatic emphasis on Jess's car crash, after which she wanders into the desert at night and encounters a chilling scene of white crosses buried in the sand. In the play, the Pilot never crashes her car but instead drives directly into the desert—almost as a routine—to visit these unmarked graves, a clear symptom of her ongoing dissociation.



Anne Hathaway in George Brant's play *Grounded* at New York's Public Theater in 2015

PHOTO: JANE MARCUS

The Creation of *Grounded*

1961 Jeanine Tesori is born in Port Washington, New York.

1969 George Brant is born in Park Ridge, Illinois.

1983 Tesori graduates from Barnard College with a degree in music.

1991 Brant graduates from Northwestern University with a degree in acting.

1995 Tesori makes her Broadway debut as the dance-music arranger for a revival of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*.

1997 Tesori composes the score for *Violet*, an Off-Broadway musical. She wins an Obie Award for the work, which also garners a New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Musical and Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Musical.

1999 Tesori contributes incidental music to a production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* at Lincoln Center Theater, directed by Nicholas Hytner. She wins the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Music in a Play and receives her first Tony Award nomination for Best Original Score.

2000 Tesori composes the score for the musical theater adaptation of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. The show transfers to Broadway in 2002, and Tesori earns her second Tony Award nomination for Best Original Score.

2004 Tesori composes the score for the musical *Caroline, or Change*, with a book by playwright Tony Kushner. She receives her third Tony Award nomination for Best Original Score.

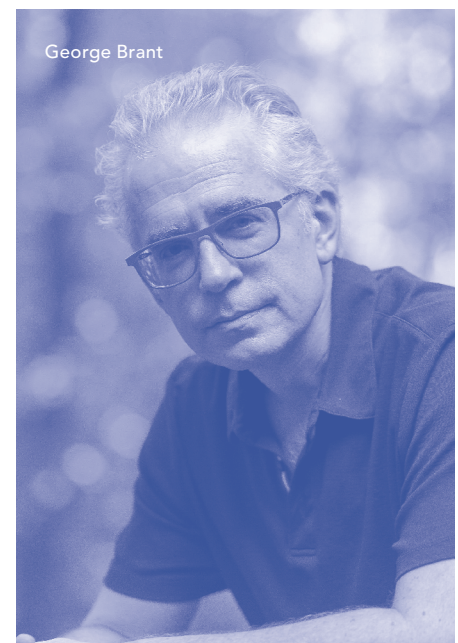
2006 Tesori contributes incidental music to a production of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*, in a new translation by Kushner.

2008 Brant graduates with an M.F.A. in Writing from the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas at Austin.

Shrek the Musical opens on Broadway with music by Tesori, earning her a third Tony Award nomination for Best Original Score.

2011 Tesori's one-act opera *A Blizzard on Marblehead*, with a libretto by Kushner, premieres at the Glimmerglass Festival.

2012 Brant's one-woman play *Grounded* wins the National New Play Network's Smith Prize and is produced at the San Francisco Playhouse and the Borderlands Theater in Tucson.



2013 *Fun Home*, a musical based on illustrator Alison Bechdel's eponymous memoir with music by Tesori, premieres at the Off-Broadway Public Theater. The following year, the work is named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. In 2015, *Fun Home* opens on Broadway, ultimately winning Tony Awards for Best Musical and Best Original Score.

The Lion, the Unicorn, and Me, a family opera by Tesori with a libretto by J. D. McClatchy, premieres at Washington National Opera.

Brant's play *Grounded* wins the Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and is produced at the Gate Theatre in London. The play subsequently receives over 175 productions in 24 different countries and is translated into 16 languages.

2015 *Grounded* opens at the Public Theater in a production directed by Julie Taymor and starring Anne Hathaway.



2019 Tesori's opera *Blue*, with a libretto by Tazewell Thompson, premieres at the Glimmerglass Festival, followed by productions at Dutch National Opera and English National Opera.

2021 The musical *Kimberly Akimbo*, with a score by Tesori, opens Off Broadway. It wins the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Musical, Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Musical, and New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Musical. In 2022, the production transfers to the Booth Theatre on Broadway and garners Tony Awards for Best Musical and Best Original Score, marking Tesori's sixth nomination and second win.

2023 The opera *Grounded*, commissioned by the Met and developed by the Metropolitan Opera / Lincoln Center Theater New Works Program, premieres at Washington National Opera.

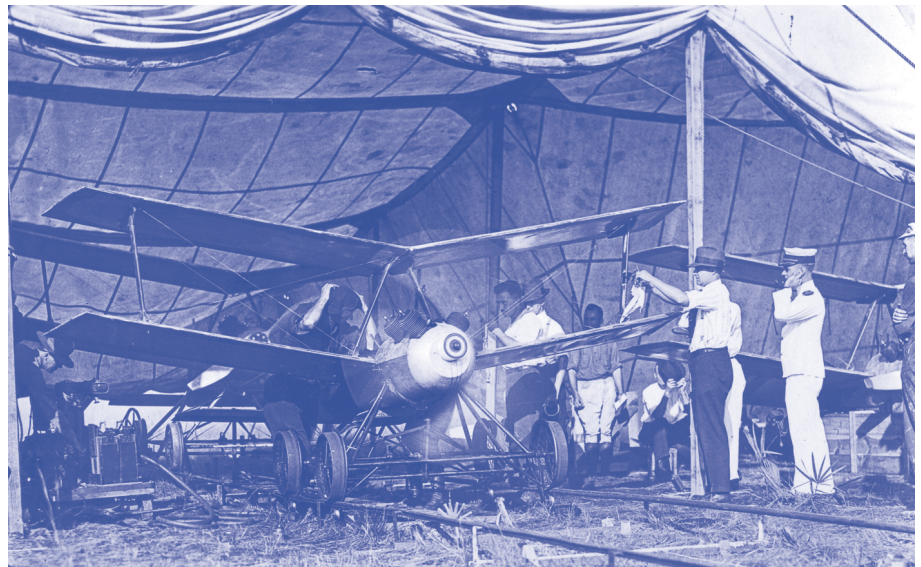
2024 *Grounded* premieres at the Met, opening the company's 2024–25 season.

The Grim Reaper

Jeanine Tesori's opera *Grounded*, based on George Brant's award-winning play of the same title, tackles a phenomenon that has become pervasive but is rarely discussed: drone technology. "Drone" is shorthand for a device more formally designated as an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV), or remotely piloted vehicle (RPV). In simplest terms, drones are aircraft operated without any onboard crew or passengers. They can be employed in a variety of settings beyond warfare—for example, taking aerial photography, tracking storms and weather systems, searching for missing persons, delivering goods, and even providing entertainment through colorful light shows.

Drone technology was initially used during the First World War. American forces developed an aerial torpedo called the *Kettering Bug*, while the British worked on a small radio-controlled vehicle called the *Aerial Target*. Both were tested, but neither

The Kettering Bug
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was used in combat. In the 1930s, a biplane nicknamed the *Queen Bee* was used by the Royal Navy for anti-aircraft target practice. The radio-controlled aircraft could fly as high as 17,000 feet and travel a maximum distance of 300 miles at more than 100 miles per hour.

Drones were not widely used in active combat until the Vietnam War, although they were less frequently deployed as weapons. During the 20-year conflict, UAVs were used by the U.S. military for decoy missions, surveillance and reconnaissance, psychological warfare like dropping leaflets, and intercepting signals, among others. In more recent military conflicts—especially the American War on Terror following September 11, 2001; the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine; and in the cycles of violence among various militaries and militias in the Middle East and Africa—the use

of UAVs has expanded exponentially, including widespread use for targeted attacks and battlefield reconnaissance and targeting. In the United States, the MQ-1 Predator, the first widely used member of the modern generation of large, sophisticated, and tremendously lethal drones, was developed in the 1990s for precision strikes using Hellfire missiles.

In this capacity, drone technology has two crucial advantages: first, it eliminates the threat of danger for the pilot and crew since they are removed from the actual scene of battle; and second, these vehicles can operate for up to 42 hours consecutively, allowing missions to continue unabated while different teams take turns operating the device. (In 2022, the U.S. Army tested a solar-powered, ultra-long endurance drone, the Airbus Zephyr 8, that remained in flight for 64 consecutive days before crashing.)

In the 21st century, drones have increasingly been used for targeted attacks—including in countries where the United States is not officially militarily involved, and their use expanded drastically as the War on Terror dragged on. President Barack Obama ordered ten times more counter-terror drone strikes than the Bush administration, including hundreds in Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia—often resulting in civilian deaths. From 2004 to 2013, the U.S. carried out approximately 455 drone strikes in these three countries, resulting in an estimated 4,061 combatant and civilian deaths. (You can watch an interactive graphic detailing every drone strike in Pakistan between 2004 and 2015 at drones.pitchinteractive.com.) The number of drone strikes continued to increase and peaked during the Trump administration before falling drastically after the election of Joe Biden and his withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan.

The U.S. military currently uses more than 8,000 UAVs, some of which can take up to 170 people to operate and maintain. In the U.S. alone, more than 5,000 public safety agencies use drones for various purposes, and the Federal Aviation Administration reported in 2023 that it had registered 871,000 drones and 307,000 certified remote pilots. Drone warfare also comes with a hefty price tag: One Global Hawk Drone costs about \$103 million, while a Reaper drone of the type operated by the Kill Chain in *Grounded* costs roughly \$30 million.

Women at War

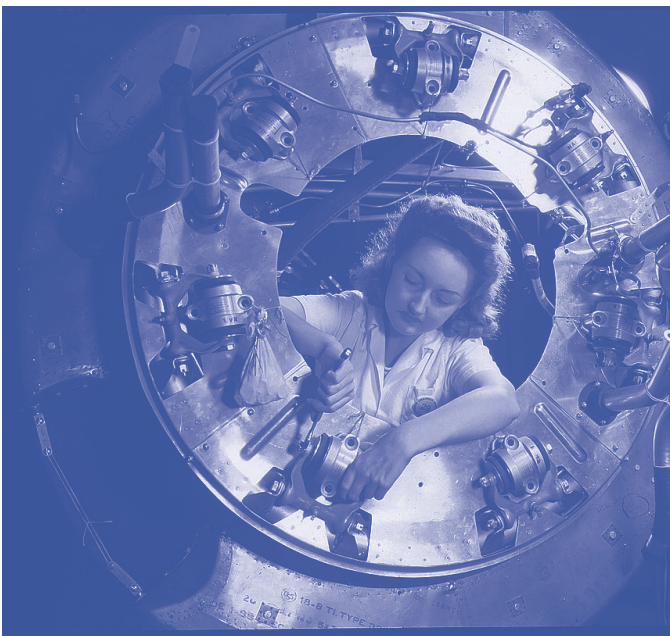
Although only recently permitted to participate in active combat, women have made significant contributions to the U.S. military since its inception. Even during the American Revolution, women joined the effort alongside the Continental Army, accompanying soldiers and helping to mend clothing, nurse the wounded, and prepare weapons. The Civil War led even greater numbers of women to contribute to the Union cause, with about 3,000 serving as nurses during the conflict. In addition, it has been estimated that approximately 1,000 women, disguised as men, fought for both the Union and the Confederacy.

Technological advances of the 20th century, as well as the increased scale of overseas military combat, required more women than ever to fulfill administrative duties. While more than 3,000 American nurses were deployed to British-operated hospitals in France during World War I, World War II saw women serving in a wide range of roles, including as telephone, radio, and switchboard operators and translators, in addition to other clerical jobs. The U.S. Navy especially was able to exploit a loophole that enabled women to take on noncommissioned officer and noncombat roles; as a result, approximately 12,000 women served as “yeomanettes.”

It was during this period that all branches of the U.S. military enlisted women for the first time through the newly created Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps and Women Airforce Service Pilots (Army), Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (Navy), Marine Corps Women’s Reserve (Marines), and Women’s Reserve (Coast Guard). In total, nearly 350,000 American women served in uniform during World War II, while 432 were killed in the line of service and 88 were taken as prisoners of war (POWs).

Following the end of the Second World War, President Harry S. Truman signed the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act of 1948. This law finally made it possible for women to enlist as full, permanent members of all military branches. It was not, however, without its limitations. It limited the number of women who could serve to just 2% of each branch, as well as the number of women who could become officers. The law further stipulated that pregnant women would be involuntarily discharged from service. The Army established an extension of this regulation in 1949 forbidding women with dependents from service and discharging enlisted women with children under 18. Crucially, the

act applied exclusively to white women. President Truman thus issued the Integration of the Armed Forces executive order just a month later, allowing Black men and women to serve alongside their compatriots in all military branches.



Above and right: Women working for defense contractor North American Aviation’s plant during World War II

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Women continued to serve in Korea and Vietnam. During the three years of the Korean War, 120,000 women took up active-duty positions both abroad and at home, and in the Vietnam War era, the number of women serving in military and civilian roles around the world swelled to more than 265,000. Just two years after the end of the 20-year Vietnam War, pregnant women were allowed to remain in the military. It was not until 1994, under President Bill Clinton, that women were finally permitted to serve in all positions, with the exception of direct ground combat roles. In 2013, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta announced that this exception would be lifted and, as of 2015, women are now able to serve in direct ground combat.

As of 2022, women make up 17.5% of all active-duty members (228,996 total), 17.1% of all active-duty enlisted (182,388 total), and 19.7% of all active-duty officers (46,578 total). They constitute 20.7% of the Navy, 15.6% of the Army, 9.4% of the Marine Corps, and 21.4% of the Air Force. In 2017, technical sergeant Courtney Farley became the first woman enlisted with the Air Force as a Global Hawk drone pilot.

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

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 several of the themes present in *Grounded*—including the morality of warfare, the politics of gender, the psychology of combat, and the relationship between humanity and technology. 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 *Grounded*, 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 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.)

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.

CRITICAL INQUIRY

Grounded tackles the omnipresence of surveillance technology in our personal and professional lives, especially as the opera’s scenic design comprises several expansive LED screens used as a floor, a wall, and a ceiling. What is it like to experience an opera that examines how our growing reliance on technology gradually disintegrates our privacy? Does *Grounded* make you think differently about your own devices—whether a phone, tablet, computer, or TV—and even your use of websites and social-media apps, and how they may be invading your personal privacy? Do you have ways to protect yourself from potentially malicious technologies?

The Universe of Obligation

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

English/language arts, philosophy, ethics, psychology, human rights, creative writing

MATERIALS

Handouts

Synopsis

COMMON CORE

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.11-12.3

Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9

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

CORE ARTS

TH:Cn10.1.6.a

Explain how the actions and motivations of characters in a drama/theatre work impact perspectives of a community or culture.

TH:Re7.1.7.a

Compare recorded personal and peer reactions to artistic choices in a drama/theatre work.

TH:Re8.1.HSII.c

Debate and distinguish multiple aesthetics, preferences, and beliefs through participation in and observation of drama/theatre work.

Grounded is an opera that deals with many complexities of modern warfare, including the use of drones. The deeper conflicts in this opera, however, extend far beyond the battlefield and encompass a wide range of personal and professional relationships. How relationships are formed, how we become connected (or disconnected) from one another and ourselves, and how those relationships impact our decision making—all these questions become immediately relevant in the psychologically charged world of Jeanine Tesori's opera.

In this activity, students will explore the concept of the universe of obligation to help them understand how Jess, the opera's protagonist, determines what or whom she cares for most and why. They will also gain familiarity with the opera's plot, engage with in-depth character analysis, and reflect on how individuals decide whose rights are worthy of respect and protection.

STEP 1. REVIEW

A basic understanding of the opera's plot is vital to this activity. Distribute the synopsis included with this guide and invite students to read it silently or aloud in groups. You may also wish to have students act out scenes in short improvisatory skits, or you may wish to list the major plot points on the board to ensure students understand the story's structure and themes.



Check for understanding:

- Focus on Jess as the protagonist/main character. List the relationships that shape her experience over the course of the opera. Remember that characters can have relationships not only with other characters but also with ideas, institutions, and themselves. Consider, for example, Jess's relationship with being a pilot, the military, her gender identity as the sole woman in her squad, her commander, Eric, her child, and her target.
- What are some of the key decisions she makes over the course of the opera, and how do her relationships impact those choices?

Before moving on:

- Explain that the relationships we form have an impact on the choices we make: We can see how those relationships play into Jess's decision-making process—and even her relationship with herself/Also Jess. Tell your students that during this lesson they will have a chance to explore how our individual universes of obligation help us prioritize whom we care about and whom we choose to protect and respect.

STEP 2. EXPLORE

Once students have a basic understanding of the opera's plot and have discussed how the various relationships in Jess's life shape her choices, introduce the concept of the universe of obligation.

Sociologist Helen Fein formulated this term to describe how individuals and groups determine "toward whom obligations are owed, to whom rules apply, and whose injuries call for amends." Use the turn-and-talk or fishbowl strategies to ask students to consider what factors influence the extent to which we feel an obligation to help other people.

- What sorts of things make us feel a responsibility toward others? Generate a list on chart paper or on a board.
- You may choose to offer examples from your own experiences. As a teacher, for example, you are obligated to help and support your students, but you feel a stronger obligation to your own children than you do to other people's children in your classroom.
- Some ideas that students might share could include things such as shared interests (cat people vs. dog people), geographic regions (New Englanders vs. Southerners), in-groups and out-groups (political parties, sports rivalries, different faith traditions, racial or ethnic groups, etc.).

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

I Am, and I Can

An F-16 fighter pilot, Jess finds great joy and freedom in flying. As she expresses in her opening aria, "The Blue," her self-identity is tied directly to her combat skills. When Jess is reassigned to operate a drone from a trailer in Las Vegas, she begins to question her identity, worth, and purpose.

It can be easy to equate our personal value with the value we bring to the world through our actions. That is, we can begin to see ourselves in terms of what we "do" (how we present ourselves, our goals, our work, our external value) rather than who we "are" (our identities, feelings, and beliefs). Ask students to complete the "I am, and I can" worksheet, then have them reflect on their answers and discuss with their peers.

Check for understanding:

- Students should recognize that an individual's or group's universe of obligation may expand or contract as experiences or circumstances change. When students leave high school to attend college or join the military, for example, their universe of obligation may expand to include affinities to different groups of people, places, sports teams, etc. Ultimately, one's universe of obligation is never static.
- If you or your students want to learn more about this concept, visit facinghistory.org/resource-library/universe-obligation for some additional background and explanation. Snigdha Banda's TEDx talk, "Stories That Matter: Collapsing Human Barriers," may also be helpful.

Before moving on, ensure that students can define the universe of obligation, perhaps using an exit-ticket strategy. It is essential that students have a grasp of this concept.

STEP 3. LISTEN

Distribute the handouts included with this guide. As a class, listen to the first aria, "The Blue," from *Grounded*. You can watch a performance of the aria by mezzo-soprano Emily D'Angelo, accompanied by Tesori on piano, on YouTube (youtube.com/watch?v=WVFbk4z4nBI). (Note that in the previous version of the work, premiered at Washington National Opera in 2023, this piece was titled "All for the Blue.") Below are the lyrics to this aria:

Blue
The Blue
I am the Blue.
I am alone in the vastness, and I am the Blue.
High on the sky,
On the solitude,
The freedom,
The peace.
Blue saturates me,
Fills ev'ry cell.
The Blue is my reward,
I earned it.
I earned it through sweat and brains and guts.
It is mine.
All of it.
My suit: My second skin
My passport to the sky
My ride: My Tiger
My gal who cradles me, who lifts me up
Into the Blue
The Blue

After students have listened to the aria, ask them to complete the included “Organizer” handout. If needed, revisit the plot synopsis from step 1 to help students identify and prioritize other relationships.

Once they have finished this handout, ask them to complete the second—a graphic chart of Jess’s universe of obligation. Ask students to consider how Jess’s universe of obligation shifts and changes over the course of the opera as she becomes involved with her partner, becomes a mother, and finds connections with her target.

STEP 4. REFLECT

At the conclusion of this activity, ask students to revisit Jess’s passion for “the Blue,” as expressed in the aria. How do her relationships shift her priorities as the opera progresses?

Finally, ask students to consider Jess’s most important relationship or obligation at the conclusion of the opera—that is, the relationship and/or obligation that determines her last-minute decision while targeting the Serpent. Using “The Blue” as a model, students can try writing a six-word story identifying that relationship.

People often say that Ernest Hemingway pioneered the six-word story with this famous line: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” You can also visit sixwordmemoirs.com for more inspiration. Students can also use construction or poster paper, found materials, or design tools to illustrate their six-word stories about Jess. Once they have all been completed, students can share their responses to the conclusion of the opera, or you can assemble a pamphlet with six-word stories from the entire class.

DIVING DEEPER: As an additional exercise or homework assignment, ask students to complete the third page of the handout included with this guide, which prompts them to articulate their own universe of obligation. They can also write a short essay describing how their universe obligation is similar to or different from what they glean from the opera.

FUN FACT

Historians suggest that the first-ever instance of drone warfare occurred in 1849, when the Austrian army sought to recapture the city of Venice, Italy, by sending a swarm of unpiloted hot-air balloons equipped with explosives over the city.

Jeanine Tesori’s Musical World

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

Popular music, English/language arts, theater, public speaking

MATERIALS

Handout

YouTube, Spotify, or other streaming service

Computer, laptop, tablet, or smartphone (optional)

COMMON CORE

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9

Compare and contrast texts in different forms or genres (e.g., stories and poems; historical novels and fantasy stories) in terms of their approaches to similar themes and topics.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1.C

Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion.

CORE ARTS

MU:Re7.1.6.a

Select or choose music to listen to and explain the connections to specific interests or experiences for a specific purpose.

MU:Re8.1.7.a

Describe a personal interpretation of contrasting works and explain how creators’ and performers’ application of the elements of music and expressive qualities, within genres, cultures, and historical periods, convey expressive intent.

TH:Cn10.1.6.a

Explain how the actions and motivations of characters in a drama/theatre work impact perspectives of a community or culture.

Grounded composer Jeanine Tesori is a two-time Tony Award winner whose compositional catalog includes works for both operatic and Broadway stages, as well as film scores, incidental music, and more. Blurring the lines between musical theater and opera, Tesori’s works in both forms celebrate the inseparable relationship between a show’s music and its text.

In this activity, students will explore Tesori’s varied musical output spanning jazz, folk, blues, classical, musical theater, and church music. After examining selections from the composer’s musical theater corpus through an “I am / I want” listening exercise, they will create a playlist of their own reflecting the depth and diversity of Tesori’s musical stylings.

STEP 1. WARM UP

Begin the activity with a three-minute stretching session while listening to the first aria, “The Blue,” from *Grounded*. You can watch a performance of the aria by mezzo-soprano Emily D’Angelo, accompanied by Tesori on piano, on YouTube (youtu.be/WVFbk4z4nBI). (Note that in the previous version of the work, premiered at Washington National Opera in 2023, this aria was titled “All for the Blue.”) This video will give students an idea of the musical language they will encounter in *Grounded* and introduce them to Tesori’s compositional style. Follow the steps below to warm up. As you listen to “The Blue,” do the following:

- Gather in a circle.
- Select one person to start with a stretch of their own choosing. They will silently demonstrate their stretch for the circle. Then, all members of the circle will join, holding the stretch for approximately 20 seconds. Allow a change in the music (textual or instrumental) to dictate when it is time to change to a new stretch.
- Move to the next person in the circle and repeat the process, continuing until the aria concludes.

As students return to their seats, ask them to consider:

- What do you think this piece is about?
- What do you learn about the character who is singing it?
- Does this song easily lend itself to movement? Why or why not?
- What do you like or dislike about the piece?

STEP 2. LISTEN

Tesori has cited Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, her Italian heritage, and television commercial jingles, as well as a wide array of popular songwriters and performers, among her compositional inspirations. To become more familiar with Tesori’s musical style, students will listen to some of these influences before examining some of the composer’s own words about the creative process.



Tesori in the Metropolitan Opera auditorium during technical rehearsals

First, divide the class into pairs or groups of three. Assign each group one song from “Tesori’s Playlist” below. (If you have a smaller class, you can assign more than one song for each group.)

Bob Dylan, “Positively 4th Street”

Billy Preston, “I Wrote a Simple Song”

Michael Friedman, “Gone Missing”

Samuel Barber, *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*

Carole King, “You’ve Got a Friend”

Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*

Edie Brickell & New Bohemians, “What I Am”

Kurt Weill, “Lonely House” from *Street Scene*

Chrissie Hynde, “Don’t Get Me Wrong”

Indigo Girls, “Closer to Fine”

Groups will have 15–20 minutes to complete the following:

- Listen to their assigned piece on a computer, tablet, or phone
- Read each of the quotations excerpted on the “Tesori’s Words” handout included with this guide
- Select one or two quotes that complement or reflect their assigned piece
- Select one 30-second clip of the piece to share with the class

As they listen and read, groups should discuss the following prompts:

- What is the genre/style of this piece?
- What is the voicing and/or instrumentation for the piece?
- What specific aspects of the quotation(s) you chose connect to the song?
- What do you think Tesori liked about this song?

CRITICAL INQUIRY

George Brant’s play *Grounded* was written as a one-woman show for an unnamed character simply called the Pilot. In Jeanine Tesori’s opera, the cast has been expanded to include Eric, the Commander, the Sensor, Also Jess, and a Fighter Squadron comprising a men’s chorus. Can you imagine an operatic version of *Grounded* that retains the play’s original form as a one-woman piece? What would an opera with only one character look like? What would it sound like? How would that version of the opera differ from this production of *Grounded*?

Once the 15–20 minutes have passed, each group should play their chosen 30-second clip for the class and share their answers to the above prompts.

STEP 3. REFLECT

Once every group has shared, play “The Blue” from *Grounded* once again. Ask students to reexamine the “Tesori’s Words” handout as they listen. Discuss as a class:

- What is the genre/style of this piece?
- What is the voicing and/or instrumentation for the piece?
- What specific aspects of the quotation(s) you chose connect to the song?
- Are there any songs from “Tesori’s Playlist” that sound like this one? If so, which song(s)? How are they alike?

STEP 4. EXPLORE

The song “The Blue” uses a specific kind of theatrical device. Sometimes called an “I am / I want” song, it introduces us to our main character, the fighter pilot Jess. As with many such songs, this aria is sung by a character who uses it to share her motivations, hopes, and desires with the audience. These songs are often used to flesh out characters before the audience has had much time to interact with them.

Here are some important qualities of an “I am / I want” song:

- Reveals the basic identity of the protagonist
- Establishes the protagonist’s main motivation (or objective) for the show
- Usually takes place in the first 30 minutes of the show
- Often returns later in the work as a reprise
- Sometimes uses the lyrics “I want,” “I wish,” or “I am”

Once you have reviewed these aspects of the form, ask students to consider how many of them apply to “The Blue.” Ask them to be specific.

Next, have students listen to several “I am / I want” songs written by Tesori:

- “Gimme, Gimme” from *Thoroughly Modern Millie*
- “Make a Wish” from *Kimberly Akimbo*
- “This Is What I Have of You ...” from *Fun Home*
- “I Know It’s Today” from *Shrek the Musical*
- “I Hate the Bus” from *Caroline, or Change*
- “The Blue” from *Grounded*

Students should return to their groups, each of which will be assigned one of the above “I am / I want” songs. Set a timer for ten minutes. During this time, each group must do the following:

- Listen to their assigned “I am / I want” song
- Select a 30-second clip to share with the class
- Prepare to share what the main character “wants” with the class, along with the selected clip

Once each group has presented, discuss:

- What are the most important components of the “I am / I want” song?
- How are these songs similar? How do they differ?
- Can you think of any examples of “I am / I want” songs from Broadway, opera, TV, or film?

DIVING DEEPER: As an additional activity or homework assignment, ask students to compile their own “I am / I want” playlist from musical theater, opera, or popular music. They can write a short paragraph about each selection, analyzing the music and lyrics as they did with their groups in class. If you have time, you can give students the opportunity to share their playlists with each other or compile a class-wide playlist of “I am / I want” songs across genres.

FUN FACT

Director Michael Mayer has had a fruitful career at the Met, producing new stagings of Verdi’s *Rigoletto* (2012) and *La Traviata* (2018) and Nico Muhly’s *Marnie* (2018), which premiered the year prior at English National Opera. This season, in addition to the new production of *Grounded*, Mayer also oversees a new production of Verdi’s *Aida*, the opera’s first new staging at the Met in 35 years.

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

- War is always justified.
- War is a game.
- War is the same today as it was yesterday.
- Soldiers are pawns.
- Drone warfare completely removes the operators from war.
- Drone warfare is convenient.
- Drone warfare is risk-free.
- Drone warfare makes waging war easy.
- Drone warfare minimizes peace efforts.
- Drone warfare is the future of war.
- Moral obligations and ethical standards must be set aside to gain and retain military advantage.
- AI-enabled targeting and decision making will soon remove humans from warfare.
- Guilt can be shaken.
- It is simple to leave work at work.
- War changes who you are.
- Nothing can skew your sense of right and wrong.
- Humankind will never live in peace.

Social-Emotional Learning | I Am, and I Can

I CAN



The Universe of Obligation | Organizer

Consider the following questions to identify Jess's universe of obligation.

Relationships

Which relationships are most important in Jess's life? How do you know?

Priorities

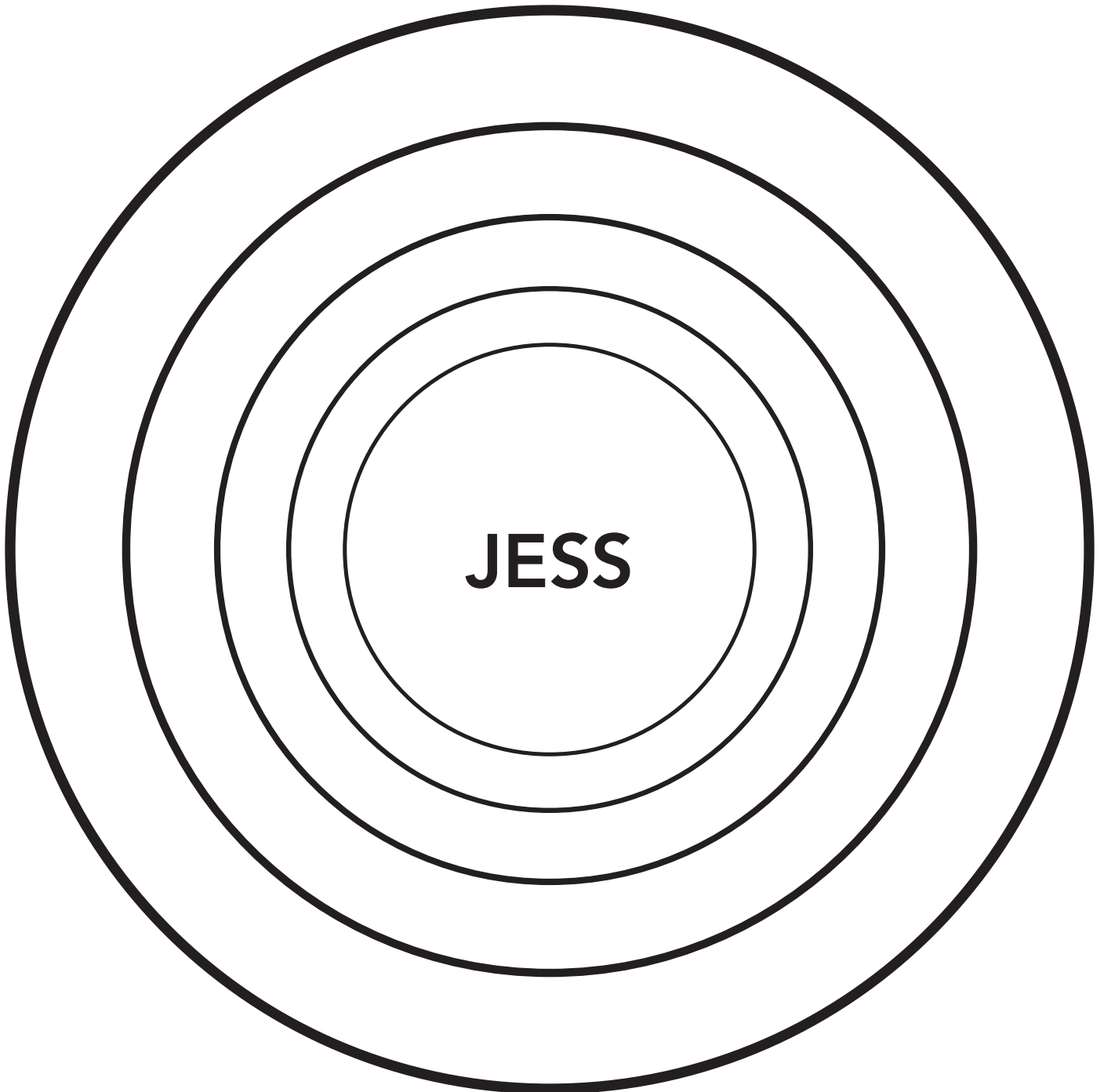
Of the relationships you listed, which are more important, and which are less important?
How do you know?

Obligations

Whom or what does Jess feel responsible for? Where do her obligations lie? To what extent do her obligations align with her relationships and priorities?

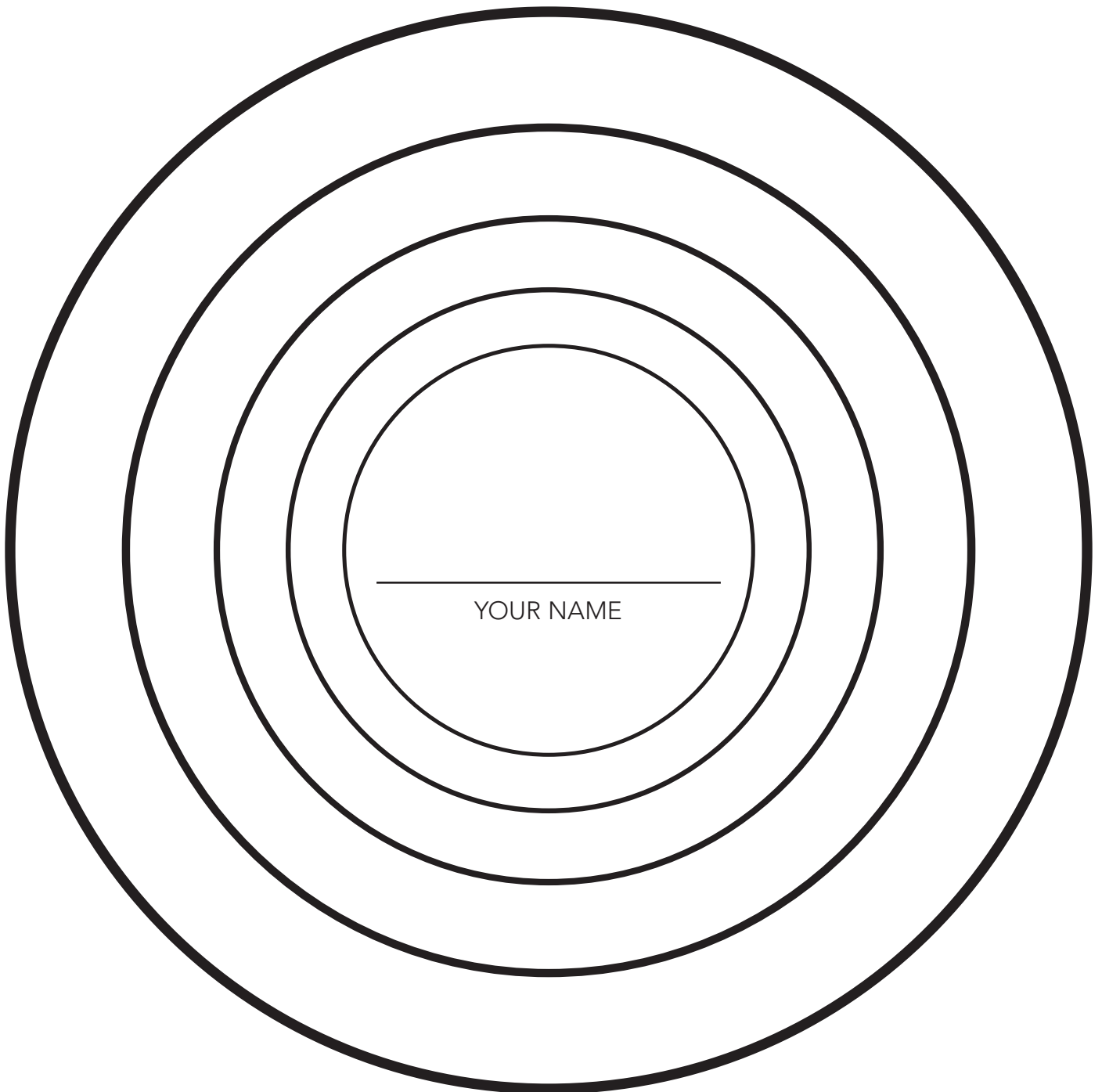
The Universe of Obligation | Chart

Using your responses to the previous questions, complete the chart below such that the most important relationships, priorities, and obligations are closer to the innermost circle.



The Universe of Obligation | Chart (CONTINUED)

After exploring Jess's universe of obligation, consider your own. Complete the chart below such that the most important relationships, priorities, and obligations are closer to the innermost circle.



Jeanine Tesori's Musical World | Tesori's Words

"I knew that I was writing it for a 47-piece orchestra. I wanted it to have some new music, but some of the style of—not a folk opera, exactly, but of real people, of what they sound like to me. What do men sound like in a sports bar? The world is operatic to me, in the way that you can hear counterpoint, and you can hear when something soars above it. Maybe it's the Sicilian roots—I feel like it's in my blood, my grandfather being a composer."

"I am a melodist, and I also really love dissonance in terms of the tension and relief, so you understand the consonance, the foil, and the release of it. In terms of the choral work, I didn't want to write for a Baptist choir. I wanted to write true choral music."

"Buryl Red was one of my mentors. He wrote for gospel choir, but also, he and I did so much choral work together. Buryl was a student of Elliott Carter, but his openness to all music—still to this day, he is the youngest musician I've ever known. He did not judge, did not compete, was not interested in the bullshit of who gets what and the gold shiny things. It did not interest him. He wanted to know what people were writing and why they were writing it."

"I'm trying to think about the characters and what I think they sound like. I think about and live with these characters to a certain extent. It isn't through a determined filter; I try to write the heartache as I can experience it myself, the way I hear it, and trying to translate it through this character. I am a visitor in the story. I am a listener in the story."

"The first teacher I had really unlocked a pivotal moment for me about not judging the music. It's music first, as opposed to the source, in terms of judging it. So, we played TV themes at the same time as Beethoven and Kabalevsky and analyzed them."

"I've always had a real love of percussion, which I studied in my 20s, especially drums and the djembe. There are all different ways that cultures keep a beat. And it's just unbelievably fascinating, and you just listen, and you go across cultures, and you realize how much we share. Though we don't acknowledge it, we do."

"I started playing when I was three, and I played all rhythm stuff. I played everything that I could get my hands on, from Carole King to Stevie Wonder to Billy Preston. But I also listened to Shostakovich and Kabalevsky, and I had this amazing teacher who said, you can get to know people through music. That is the portal. That is the key. Do not judge it, because if you judge it, you stop listening. And if you stop listening as a musician, you're sunk. I'm seven, so I'm thinking, what the hell is he talking about? The piano was the way in for storytelling to me and through theater. I didn't even really see a musical until I was 18."

Opera Review: *Grounded*

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

As you watch *Grounded*, 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 would 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
Jess appears, led by a prison guard, while a fighter squadron chants. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Jess muses on the freedom of flight. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
At a bar near Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming, Jess meets Eric, a cattle rancher. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Jess spends the night at Eric's cabin. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Back in the cockpit, Jess becomes distracted by thoughts of Eric—and nausea. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Jess informs the Commander that she is pregnant. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Jess visits Eric to tell him the news. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Five years later, Eric reflects on the unexpected birth of their daughter Sam. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
Jess expresses her desire to return to combat. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
The Commander reassigns Jess to operate a Reaper drone from Las Vegas. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
In a trailer with the Sensor, Jess joins the Kill Chain. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Back at home, Eric sings Sam to sleep. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Jess and the Sensor complete their second mission. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Jess takes Sam to the mall to purchase a new dress. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
As the mall fades away, Jess vows to avenge the deaths of American soldiers. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Eric tries to joke with Jess, but she is cold and distant. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
The Commander orders Jess and the Sensor to target the Serpent. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Jess, Eric, and Also Jess go about their daily routines. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆

THE SHOW, SCENE BY SCENE	ACTION	MUSIC	SET DESIGN / STAGING
As she pursues the Serpent, Jess begins to imagine herself as the target. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Driving alone, Jess crashes her car and walks alone into the desert night. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Jess returns home and fears that something has happened to Sam. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Eric tries to comfort Jess. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Exhausted, Jess begins to view her life as if from above. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Back in the trailer, Jess is determined to complete her mission. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
When she spots the Serpent's daughter, Jess makes a radical decision. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆
Alone in a prison cell, Jess finds peace. MY OPINION OF THIS SCENE:	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆	☆☆☆☆☆