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The NUTCRACKER

NOV. 28-DEC. 27, 2026

MACKENZIE DESSENS STUDINSKI & CHRISTOPHER MITCHELL BY RACHEL NEVILLE

Supplemental Guide

Created By:



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Ever Larson by Andrew Fassbender

How long will it be?

Act 1 - 45 min **Intermission** - 20 min **Act 2** - 45 min **Total Run Time** - 1 hour 50 min*

*Times are approximate

Synopsis of the Ballet

The curtain rises to reveal Herr Drosselmeyer in his workshop preparing for the party at the home of Dr. and Frau Stahlbaum. It's their annual Christmas Eve Party. The magical and eccentric Herr Drosselmeyer has planned a special surprise for his beloved godchild, Clara Stahlbaum. He presents her with a wonderfully mysterious wooden Nutcracker.

Clara is immediately taken with the gift. Clara's brother Fritz is jealous and steals the Nutcracker from Clara. In the chaos of his teasing, Fritz accidentally breaks the Nutcracker. Herr Drosselmeyer comes to the rescue and assures Clara that all will be well.



Leah McFadden by Andrew Fassbender

The party ends and Clara, just before the stroke of midnight, returns to the darkened living room to check on her Nutcracker. She is frightened by large mice, but suddenly, Herr Drosselmeyer appears, and the mice flee. Much to Clara's amazement, Herr Drosselmeyer commands the Christmas tree to grow to such an enormous size that it pushes away the entire room. Next, he changes her little wooden toy into a life-size Nutcracker. The Nutcracker introduces himself and his soldiers to Clara.

The mice suddenly reappear, and a vicious battle ensues. The soldiers seem to be winning, but the great Mouse King appears, and the tide turns. The Nutcracker and the Mouse King fight, and just as the Mouse King is about to overpower the Nutcracker, Clara distracts him, giving the Nutcracker the chance to overcome the Mouse King.

To Clara's delight and surprise, the Nutcracker is transformed into a handsome young prince, who takes her off on an enchanted journey. He takes her to the Land of the Snow, and then to the beautiful Kingdom of the Sugar Plum Fairy, where Clara is entertained by dances from many lands.

Clara and the Prince dance together surrounded by radiant flowers. The Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier then dance for Clara and the Prince. The Prince carries a sleeping Clara back to her home, where she awakens uncertain if her magical journey was a dream or reality.

Behind the Ballet

E.T.A. Hoffmann wrote the story “The Nutcracker and the Mouse King” in 1816. Alexandre Dumas translated the story into Russian (changing much of the original) and it became a beloved Christmas tale in the country. The ballet was commissioned by the director of Moscow’s Imperial Theatres, Ivan Vsevolozhsky, in 1891, and premiered a week before Christmas 1892. It was set to music by Tchaikovsky and originally choreographed by Marius Petipa.

The first performance of the Christmas ballet was held as a double premiere together with Tchaikovsky’s last opera, *Iolanta*, at the Imperial Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, Russia. It is generally agreed that Lev Ivanov, Second Balletmaster to the St. Petersburg Imperial Theatres, worked closely with Marius Petipa to create much of the choreography as Petipa fell ill during rehearsals. The composer made a selection of eight of the more popular pieces before the ballet’s December 1892 premiere, forming what is currently known as the *Nutcracker Suite, Op. 71a*, as is heard in Moscow Ballet productions. The suite became instantly popular; however the complete ballet did not achieve its great popularity as a Christmas performance event until almost 100 years later.

The Christmas ballet was first performed outside Russia in England in 1934. Its first United States performance was in 1944 by the San Francisco Ballet, staged by its artistic director and Balanchine student Willam Christensen, but the holiday ballet did not begin to achieve its great popularity until after the George Balanchine staging became a hit in New York City in 1954. Seeing the show is now a holiday tradition for families all around the world!



Artists of Colorado Ballet by Andrew Fassbender

Choreographer



Marius Petipa

What is a Choreographer?

A person who creates the sequence and movements for a dance performance.

Widely considered to be the “Father of Classical Ballet,” Marius Petipa is perhaps the most influential Ballet Master and choreographer of classical ballets of all time. His works remain influential today, cited as inspiration to dancers and choreographers such as George Balanchine.

Born in 1818 into a family of artists, Petipa was destined to perform. He began his ballet training under his father at the age of seven. Reluctant at first, he grew to enjoy performing, and displayed natural talent. At age twenty, Marius was appointed Premier Danseur for Ballet de Nantes in France.

After achieving critical success by choreographing *The Pharaoh's Daughter*, Petipa became Ballet Master of the Imperial Ballet Theatre in St. Petersburg. He worked to produce spectacularly lavish ballets with Ivan Vsevolzhsky who also commissioned him for *The Nutcracker*. Petipa allowed his associate, Lev Ivanov, to choreograph much of the action, as it is said that Petipa was ill at this time. It is also suggested that he anticipated the work would not be well received and wanted to separate himself from it. He continued to work until his death at age 92.



Artists of Colorado Ballet feat. Kenny Allen by Amanda Tipton

Composer

Tchaikovsky was born on May 7, 1840, in Russia. His musical background began when he was five years old as he began to take piano lessons. As he grew, his parents hoped he would leave his music behind and work in the civil service. He worked with the Ministry of Justice for four years, but his interest in music only grew during this time.

At the age of twenty-one he started lessons at the Russian Musical Society and then shortly after enrolled at the St. Petersburg Conservatory.

Tchaikovsky's work was first publicly performed in 1865. His first symphony was well-received after it was performed in Moscow. He established himself with his many symphonies, operas, and ballets. *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker* are classic ballet all composed by Tchaikovsky.

Ironically, Tchaikovsky considered *The Nutcracker* among his least favorite works. Commissioned by Ivan Vsevolohsky, Director of the Imperial Theatres of St. Petersburg, *The Nutcracker* was composed in response to the success of *Sleeping Beauty*.



Pyotr Tchaikovsky



Colorado Ballet Orchestra by Amanda Tipton

What is a Composer?

A person who writes music, especially as a job.





New Instrument: Celesta

In 2019, Colorado Ballet gained a new instrument in our orchestra: the celesta! While the orchestra has performed the score for *The Nutcracker* beautifully for many years, it is quite exciting to be able to perform the score with an instrument for which it was originally written by Tchaikovsky. The celesta has a high, bell-like sound and was named after the French word *céleste* which means “heavenly.”

At the time when Tchaikovsky wrote the score for *The Nutcracker*, it was a relatively new instrument. Created in 1886 (six years before *The Nutcracker* had its premier), the celesta is a struck idiophone that is operated by a keyboard. It looks quite similar to an upright piano, but has smaller keys and a much smaller cabinet. The keys connect to hammers that strike a graduated set of metal plates or bars suspended over wooden resonators. One of the best known works that uses the celesta is in *The Nutcracker*! Listen closely in the second act during “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy” by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky to see if you can hear its delicate sound.

General Activities

LISTEN AND LEARN: Listen to music. Close your eyes, if you need to. Now, answer the following questions: If this piece of music were a shape, what shape would it be? A color? An animal? A season? A place? Why? Is it fast, slow, or varied? What is the mood of the piece, or what emotions do you feel when you listen to it? Think of three more adjectives that you believe describe the music. Compare your answers with other students' answers. Are any of your answers the same? Why do you think you came up with similar or different answers?

MOVE TO THE MUSIC: Now, divide into groups and create movements that go with your team's answers from the listening activity. Try to incorporate some of everyone's answers. How do the animals move? How would you move in winter that's different from how you move in summer? How would blue move, as opposed to orange? Some movements should be high; others should be low. Some should be fast; others could be slow. Be mindful of using all of your body, not just your feet. Link your movements together into a dance and perform it for the class.

POETRY IN MOTION: After seeing the production, write a poem inspired by the performance. Now, try reversing that process! Get into groups, find a poem that you really like, and create a dance to go along with it! Identify powerful words and themes within the poem, and associate movements with them. Link the movements together to create a dance to perform for your peers. If you were to make an entire production out of your dance, what kind of sets and costumes would be fitting? Draw or make a collage of pictures representing how you would set the scene.

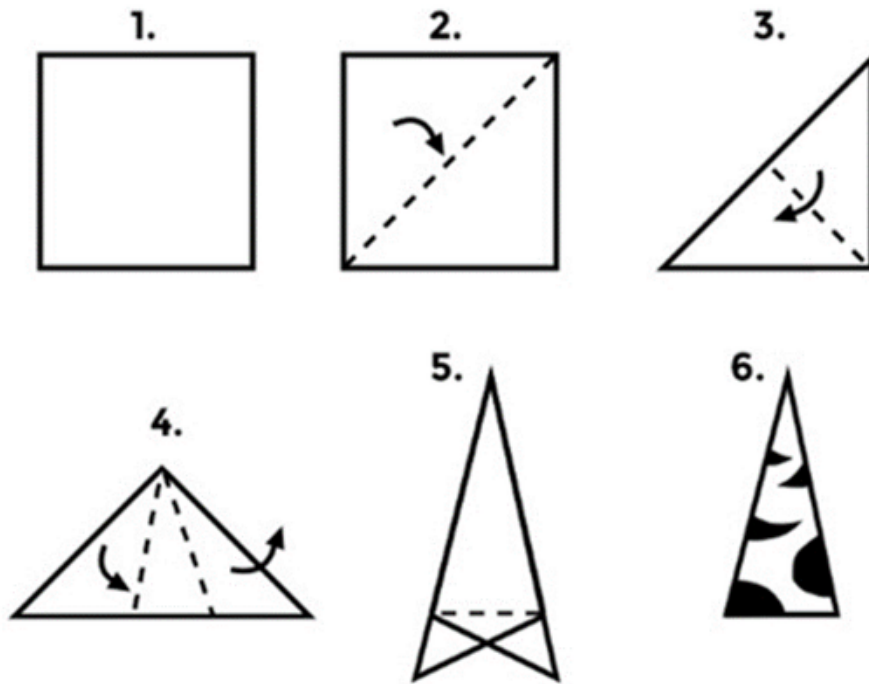
STORYTELLING THROUGH DANCE: Dance is an art form that tells a story through movement. Using a story or text your class is studying, you can recreate scenes from the story using dance. Put the students in small groups and assign different scenes from the story. Instruct the students to reinterpret the story using only movement. Invite the students to be creative in their reinterpretations, allow abstract or literal movement.



Artists of Colorado Ballet by Amanda Tipton

Elementary School Activities

Make Your Own Snowflake



Directions:

1. Get a square piece of paper or trim a piece of paper so that it is square
2. Fold your square in half diagonally (Image 2).
3. Fold your triangle in half – again diagonally (Image 3).
4. Fold paper in thirds ... one side to the front, the other to the back (Image 4).
5. Trim the extra piece of paper off the end of your small triangle.
6. Around the outside of your triangle, cut some fun designs – circles, squares, triangles, squiggles – anything goes.
7. Unfold your paper and look at your masterpiece.
8. Voila! A snowflake to hang in your window.





Imagine That!

Clara's nutcracker toy comes to life and takes her on beautiful, exciting adventures! What if your favorite toy came to life? What would you do together and where would you go? Write a story or draw a picture below!

Chocolate Marshmallow Peppermint Sticks

You will need:

- 12 candy canes
- 12 large marshmallows
- 1 cup of semi-sweet chocolate chips
- 1 teaspoon of coconut oil

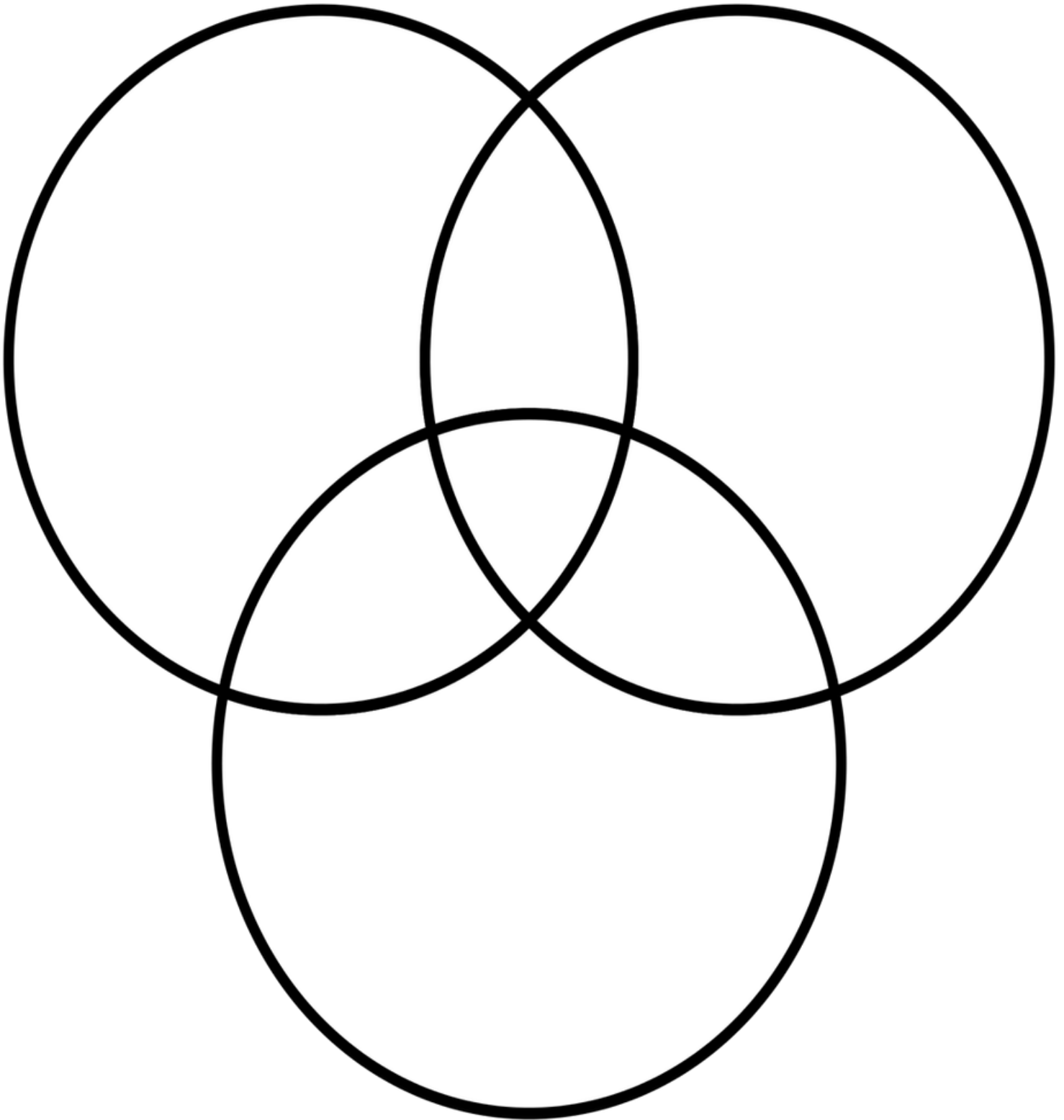


Directions:

1. Break off curved tops of the candy canes so you are left with 12 sticks. Place curved tops in plastic bag and smash them. Pour crumbs into bowl.
2. Put chocolate chips and oil in bowl and melt in 30 second increments. Repeat until melted.
3. Line a cookie sheet with wax paper.
4. Dip the broken end of a peppermint stick in the chocolate (about ½-inch) and then press it into marshmallow. Place marshmallow side. Repeat with the remaining sticks and marshmallows.
5. Put the marshmallows in the refrigerator for 15 minutes or freezer for 5 minutes. The chocolate will keep the marshmallows from sliding off the sticks!
6. Dunk the marshmallows in the chocolate. Let any excess chocolate drip off and then roll in the candy cane crumbs. Set it marshmallow side down. Repeat with the remaining marshmallow sticks.
7. Wait for chocolate to set and enjoy!

Middle & High School Activities

COMPARE AND CONTRAST: Utilize the Venn diagram as a way to compare and contrast three different media mediums for storytelling. Try comparing the ballet to two other stories – one in literature and one in film.

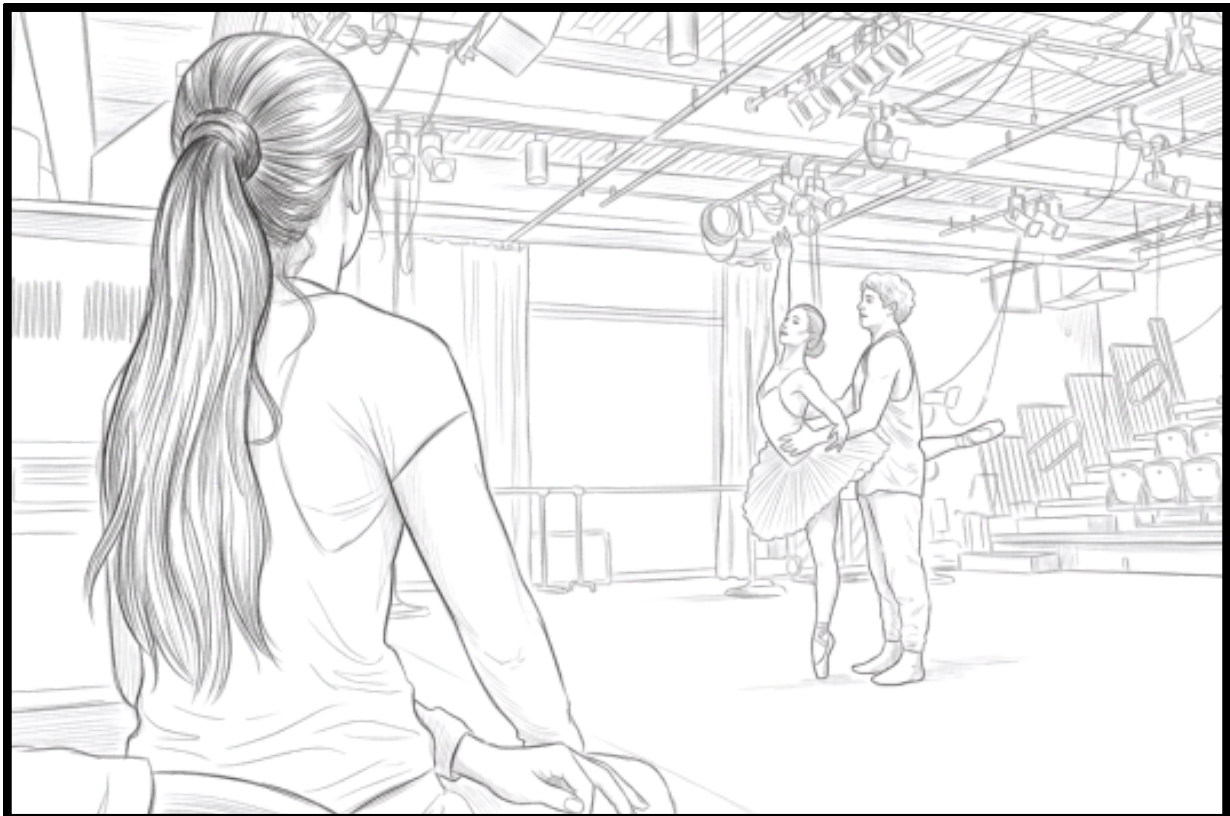


Group Activity

Nutcracker Movement Stations

Set up different stations around the room, each representing a character or scene.

1. Clara's Dance Station: Students practice gentle, flowing movements like those in Clara's scenes.
2. Mouse King's Challenge: Students perform quick, sharp movements to mimic the Mouse King's energy.
3. Sugar Plum Fairy's Twirls: Students focus on graceful spins and twirls.
4. Divide the students into small groups and have them rotate through each station, spending a few minutes at each one. Encourage them to interpret the character's movements creatively and expressively. Ask the students for suggestions to add more stations.



The Power of Music

This activity is geared towards middle and high school students to understand and reflect on the impact of music in storytelling, specifically within Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*.

Materials Needed:

- Audio clips from Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* (e.g., "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy," "Waltz of the Flowers," "The March")
- Speakers or headphones
- Paper and pens/pencils
- A whiteboard or large paper for group discussion

1. **Introduction:** Briefly introduce Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* and its significance in classical music and ballet. Explain that the music plays a crucial role in setting the mood, enhancing the story, and bringing characters to life.

2. Listening Exercise

- Divide the students into small groups.
- Assign each group a different piece of music from *The Nutcracker*.
- Ask each group to pay attention to how the music makes them feel, what images or scenes it brings to mind, and how it might convey the emotions or actions of the story.

3. **Reflective Writing:** Each group writes a brief reflection on their assigned piece.

4. **Group Discussion:** Have each group share their reflections with the class. Highlight how music is a powerful tool in both narrative and emotional expression. Show a short video clip to illustrate how music and dance work together to tell a story.



Artist of Colorado Ballet by Amanda Tipton

Creative Writing Prompts

Pick a character from *The Nutcracker*.

Write a letter from their perspective. Reflect on their feelings, motivations, and experiences during a key moment in the story.

What are their hopes, fears, or dreams?

Take a serious scene and reimagine it with humorous elements. For example, what if the Nutcracker was a clumsy hero who kept tripping over his own feet?

Place the characters in a contemporary or unusual setting. What if the Land of Sweets was a high school cafeteria or a quirky coffee shop?

Surveys

Teacher/Facilitator Survey

CLICK HERE

or scan QR code below



Student/Viewer Survey

CLICK HERE

or scan QR code below

