

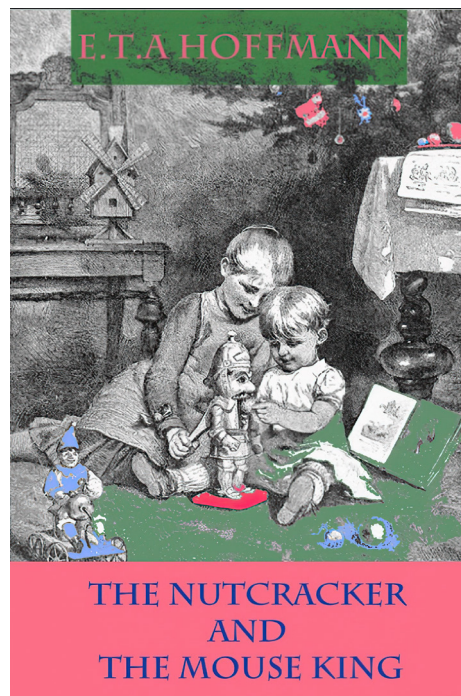
AMERICAN MIDWEST *Ballet* STUDY GUIDE TO



The Story Behind the Story

The Nutcracker is one of the most-loved ballets of all time. It has become a holiday tradition throughout much of the world. Many people grow up seeing it every year, and many young dance students dream of being part of a *Nutcracker* production (which is another word for “show”).

It’s no wonder the ballet is so popular — it has fun music, beautiful costumes, wonderful dancing, and a story that combines fantasy, sweets, a magical land, princes, fairies, and dreams. But did you know — it wasn’t always so popular? It actually started out looking much, much different.



The Nutcracker was created nearly two hundred years ago as a story called *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, written in 1816 by a German author named E.T.A. Hoffman. His *Nutcracker* story was darker and sadder than our current version.

In his story, there is a young girl named Clara who was a kind of “Cinderella” character—a neglected, unloved orphan who was forced to labor for her relatives. But just like Cinderella, Clara kept a cheerful attitude, and she was helped and watched over by her mysterious godfather, Dr. Drosselmeyer, who sent her gifts and warm clothing to brighten her life.

One Christmas, he gives Clara a Nutcracker doll. This Nutcracker

is really his beloved nephew, who is under an evil spell that only true love can break. Clara's love for her Nutcracker breaks the spell and turns him back into a young man, and the two marry.

In 1847, the French writer Alexandre Dumas retold Hoffman's story, removing some of its darker elements. In the 1890s, the director of the Russian Imperial Ballet decided to stage a ballet based on Dumas' *Nutcracker* story.

The Imperial Ballet's chief choreographer, Marius Petipa, asked the famous composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (chi-**kof**-ski) to write music for the scenes that he developed. As the ballet took shape, Petipa became ill, so his assistant, Lev Ivanov, ended up doing most of the actual choreography. The ballet premiered at St. Petersburg's Mariinsky Theater in 1892.

Some people considered the new production a failure – or at least not as good as *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty*, two other famous ballets Petipa created with Tchaikovsky. However, Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* music became popular on its own, with



Left to right: Lydia Rubtsova as Aunt Marianna (a character no longer included in most modern productions) with Stanislava Belinskaya as Clara and Vassily Stukolkin as Fritz, in the original production of *The Nutcracker* (Imperial Mariinsky Theatre, Saint Petersburg, 1892)

orchestras often performing it under the title *The Nutcracker Suite*.

Other ballet companies eventually began performing their own versions, usually shortened to fit on a program of other ballets. But *The Nutcracker* was not especially popular. It wasn't even particularly associated with Christmas!

That changed on Christmas Eve, 1944, when Willam Christensen, artistic director of the San Francisco Ballet, staged the first-ever full-length production of *The*

Nutcracker in the United States. This time, it was a huge success, and has been performed every holiday season since 1949 (although the 2020 performances had to be cancelled because of COVID-19).

Other ballet companies followed, and soon a holiday production of *The Nutcracker* became a worldwide tradition.

Because it has become so special to audiences, many choreographers and ballet companies now stage their own versions of the ballet.



Willam Christensen's 1944 *Nutcracker* for San Francisco Ballet included many features found in modern productions, such as this lively Russian dance. Christensen had never seen the full ballet when he created his version, but he knew parts of it and got advice from other dancers who knew other parts. Photo credit: San Francisco Ballet; reproduced under fair use for educational purposes.

American Midwest Ballet's "The Nutcracker"



Clara, Fritz, and their parents have invited all their friends to a spectacular Christmas Eve party at their home.

The time is long ago, but not *too* long ago, and the place is a town not so different from our own. It's Christmas Eve; Clara, Fritz, and their parents have invited all their friends to a festive party, and the streets are thronged with excited guests.

At the house, everybody is working hard to get ready - except for Fritz,

who catches a mouse and teases Clara with it.

Soon guests arrive and the party begins. One very special guest is Drosselmeyer, Clara's favorite uncle. He's famous throughout the town for his collection of amazing mechanical toys, and his entertainments for the guests astonish everyone.

Drosselmeyer has a special gift for Clara: a beautifully painted nutcracker, fashioned in the figure of a toy soldier. He tells her a fascinating story that goes with it, about a prince turned into a nutcracker by a spell cast by the evil Rat Queen.



Left: Everyone is dazzled by Uncle Drosselmeyer's collection of amazing mechanical toys that perform to entertain the guests. Right: Drosselmeyer has a special gift for Clara: a beautifully painted nutcracker figure that has a fascinating story to go with it.



Clara is enchanted by her gift and its story. Later, when the party is over and everyone has gone to bed, she tiptoes back downstairs to find her nutcracker.

As she dozes off, her memories of the evening turn to dreams: of teasing mice, a terrifying Rat Queen, and a nutcracker that comes to life.

Top: The mice tease Clara mercilessly, but are shocked when she stands up for herself. Left: The Rat Queen looks intimidating, but Clara overcomes her fear and saves the day.



Clara herself vanquishes the Rat Queen, breaking the spell and turning the nutcracker back into a prince.

To thank her for freeing him, the prince takes Clara on a magical journey. First they travel through a swirl of enchanted snowflakes, meeting their king and queen.

Then they come to the Land of Dreams, where they're greeted by Christmas angels and by the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier.

As a tribute to Clara, the Sugar Plum Fairy calls forth visions from many lands, who dance to entertain her. Finally everyone joins in one grand, beautiful dance.

And when Clara awakens, in her own house with her cherished nutcracker, she realizes that there are no limits on where your imagination can take you!



Among the characters Clara meets on her journey are the Sugar Plum Fairy and her Cavalier (top left); dancing snowflakes; a Chinese dragon princess; and classical dancers of India.

About the Music

How the Ballet Starts

If you watch the beginning of the ballet, you'll notice the curtain will not go up right away; instead, you'll hear music called the *overture*. It's a preview of the music that will be heard during the performance. It helps viewers forget about their outside distractions and get into the mood to enjoy the ballet.



Neville, our Nutcracker dog, enjoys going onstage to greet his human friends. Including a real dog in the ballet is a detail that helps make the story seem more real. Authors call this technique **verisimilitude**, meaning "similarity to the truth."

In our version of *The Nutcracker*, the guests who arrive for the party at Clara's house walk through the audience in the theater, that's why you might not see them right away. Imagine them walking by you one-by-one. One guest even brings their dog! His name is Neville, and he's a very good boy.

Do you Recognize the Music?

Did you recognize any of the songs? Pyotr Tchaikovsky's musical compositions for *The Nutcracker*, such as *The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy* and *The Waltz of the Flowers*, are classics, especially around the holidays. Think about your favorite song from the ballet: How do you feel when you listen to it? What does it make you think of?

Take A Bow

If you watch the end of the ballet, everyone gathers together and takes a final bow. This is a way to thank the audience for watching, and the audience thanks the dancers by clapping their hands. Another way to let the dancers know you liked the show is by shouting an Italian word that's been used since the beginning of ballet: *bravo!* Because we're all watching from different places, your teacher or parent might not like you shouting "bravo" at the screen. Instead, you can share which dance you liked the best by tagging us (with your parents' permission, of course!) on our Facebook or Instagram: @americanmidwestballet

Tchaikovsky's "Secret" Discovery

Pyotr Tchaikovsky used several unusual "instruments" in the music of *The Nutcracker*: children's noisemakers such as a rattle, bird calls, toy trumpets and miniature drums. He had purchased many of these instruments in Paris, the city where he also discovered the **celesta**, a keyboard instrument that produces a soft, bell-like sound. Auguste Mustel, a French instrument maker, had invented it just a few years earlier.



A modern celesta, seen from the front (left) and with the back removed. Inside the celesta is a row of tuned metal bars that produce a bell-like ring when struck. The keyboard controls hammers that tap the bars when the keys are pressed, and dampers that stop the sound when a key is released. [This video from the Schiedmayer company](#), a maker of celestas, shows how they are made and includes examples of celesta music. Photos: Schiedmayer Celesta GmbH

Tchaikovsky's "Secret" Discovery (continued)

Tchaikovsky found out about Mustel's new instrument almost by accident. He had received an invitation to conduct at the opening of the Andrew Carnegie Music Hall in New York. To get to New York, he traveled from Russia by way of Paris, and it was there that he heard the celesta. "I expect that this new instrument will produce a colossal sensation," he wrote to his music publisher.

News in the 1890s did not travel as fast as it does today,

and Tchaikovsky knew that almost nobody in Russia had heard of the celesta. He wanted to surprise his audiences with the beautiful sound of the new instrument, so he kept it a secret from other Russian composers until he finished his first music for it in 1891.

In 1892, *The Nutcracker* made its premiere – and when the Sugar Plum Fairy danced to the delicate chiming tones of the celesta, it marked the first time

many people in Russia had heard Mustel's new musical instrument. *The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy* is still perhaps the world's best-known piece of music for the celesta. It is also used in jazz, rock, and pop music; in movie music, including the first three Harry Potter films; and in the introduction to the theme song of the PBS television program *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.

[Listen to an NPR audio program about the celesta](#) to hear more about the instrument's history and examples of the music it can play.

Tchaikovsky: The Man Behind the Music

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky was born in Kamsko-Votinsk, Russia on May 7, 1840. He was a very bright child who learned to read Russian, French, and German by the time he was six years old. He was known for not liking to exercise or take baths, and he didn't really care about how he looked or what he wore.

But Pyotr loved music—so much that it worried his governess when he was little. It was his great passion in life. When he made up a new song, he had to try it on a piano right away. If there wasn't a piano around, he would tap out his song on the windowpanes in his house. Once he tapped so hard that he broke the glass and cut himself very badly!

Pyotr started piano lessons when he was only six years old. He went to school at a boarding school, and later he studied law and mathematics. He worked as a clerk for the Ministry of Justice. But



none of it gave him any happiness. He just wanted music. After only four years, he quit his job and became a full time student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He studied music theory, composition, flute, piano and organ.

Tchaikovsky was a nervous, unhappy man all his life, yet his beautiful music made him the most popular of all the Russian composers. He wrote the music for three of the most famous ballets

of all time: *The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, and *The Sleeping Beauty*.

In his lifetime he also wrote nine operas, six symphonies, four concertos, three string quartets, and numerous songs, suites, and overtures. One of his most famous pieces is the "1812" Overture, which uses cannons and church bells. Because it sounds so grand, it is often chosen to accompany fireworks at 4th of July celebrations.

Tchaikovsky was only 53 when he died in St. Petersburg in 1893. He had just completed his sixth symphony, which he felt was the greatest piece of music he ever created.

But it is the music that he wrote for *The Nutcracker* that people hear the most today. According to a survey by the Dance/USA organization, more than 500,000 people attend a *Nutcracker* performance in an average year and hear Tchaikovsky's music.

Do More with What You See

A Story Beyond Words

If you’ve never seen a ballet before, one thing you’ll notice is that the dancers almost never talk. Instead of using speech, a ballet tells its story through movements, gestures, and facial expressions. This is called *pantomime*. This may seem like an odd way of telling a story –but if you think about it, it’s perfectly natural. After all, you often watch your friends’ movements, gestures and facial expressions to help you understand what they are saying and how they feel (can you think of a few examples?) If you watch the performers carefully, you’ll find you have no trouble knowing exactly what’s going on in the ballet.

What is Drosselmeyer Saying Here?



“handsome”

“prince”

“but...”

“magic spell”

“soldier”

Put the gestures together to see the full message:

**see answer key at the bottom of the page*

“The Nutcracker was a _____, _____, _____ then a _____ turned him into a toy _____.”

Connect:

Think of a movement, gesture, or facial expression that helps you understand what your friends and family are saying. Use the table below to illustrate and describe your example.

Picture	Description

Drosselmeyer’s Message: This Nutcracker was a handsome prince, but then a magic spell turned him into a toy soldier.

Do More with What You See

Sketch It Out

As you learned in the beginning of this guide, every version of *The Nutcracker* is different. There are versions set in 1920s Hollywood, on a sailing ship, at the 1893 World's Fair, during the American Revolution, and across the continent of Africa. Imagine staging this ballet in a different time or place and describe how you'd change the costumes and set.



Sketches of Nutcracker costume ideas

The Nutcracker

Production concept by: (your name) _____

Setting

(the place or type of surroundings where something is positioned or where an event takes place)

Scene

(circle one)

Party scene

Battle scene

Snow scene

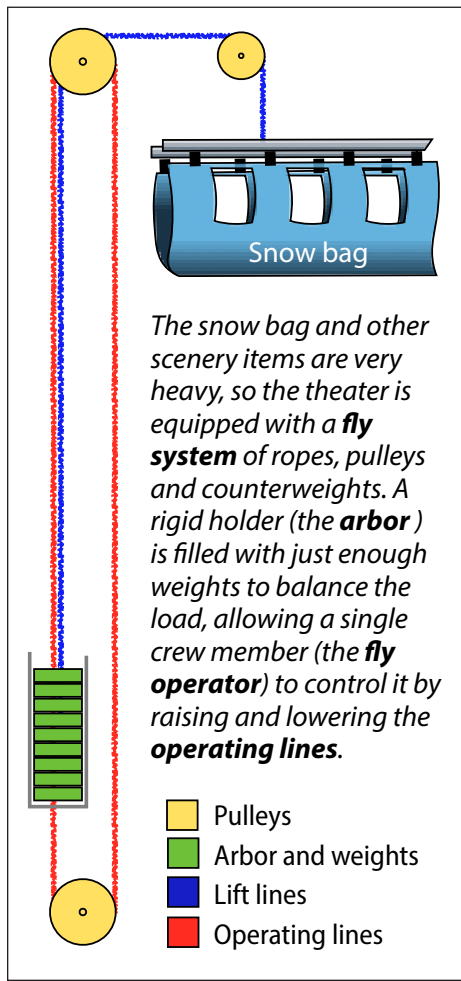
Act II land: _____

Draw

your scene here. What details in your costumes and set portray the setting?

Do More with What You See

Physics of the Snow Show



Technicians reload the snow bag after an Orpheum Theater performance. They spread the snowflakes by hand to make sure they will fall evenly. The bag runs the width of the stage and hangs from two pipes, controlled by the fly system shown at left. The snowflakes are swept up and reloaded after each show. The snow bag holds about 21 lbs (or 9.5 kilograms) of paper snowflakes, which cost about \$300 to buy – so it's smart to re-use them!

If you watch the end of Act I, you'll see it snow onstage. Real snow is *precipitation*, or crystals of water in the form of flakes. It's obviously not cold enough in the theater for real snow, and the melted water would make it dangerous to dance.

So instead, we use very lightweight paper squares, which float as they fall down.

The paper snowflakes are held high above the stage in a long canvas bag. The bag has holes, and when the bag is shaken, snowflakes drop through the holes.

The bag is moved using a pulley arrangement called the **fly system**, used for moving scenery items up and down during the show. A crew member stands backstage at the **fly rail**, pulling ropes that make snow fall from above the stage. If the crew member moves the pulley system slowly, then only a light snow falls. If the crew member moves the pulley system quickly, it's a blizzard!

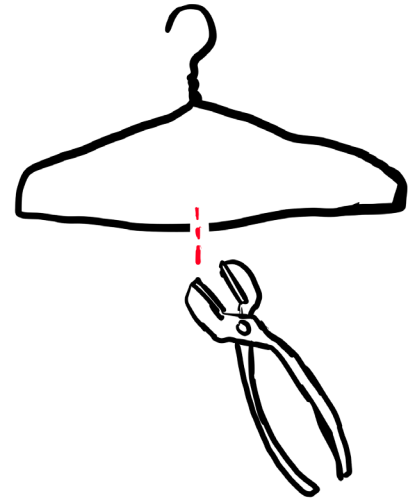
Do More with What You See

Try It Out

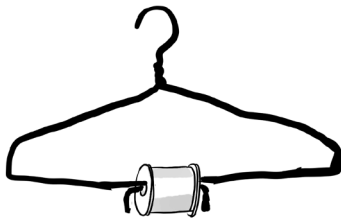
Use this pulley as a simple science experiment dealing with forces, or you can just build it to learn how a pulley works.

Things You'll Need: wire cutter, wire hanger, empty spool of thread, string, weight (such as a book or toy), spring scale (optional)

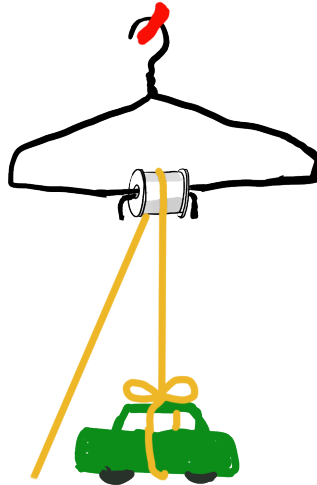
The severed ends of the wire can be sharp, so exercise caution when working with them, as well as with the wire cutter. Younger children should be closely supervised for this activity, and an adult may want to complete Step 1 for them.



Step 1: Cut the bottom of a wire hanger directly in the center, using a wire cutter.

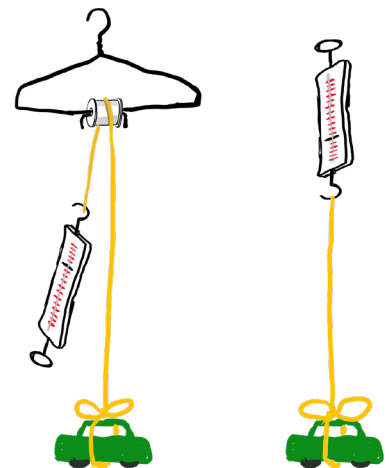


Step 2: Slide an empty thread spool onto one of the severed ends of the wire. Then slide the other severed end into the spool from the opposite direction. When the spool is secure on both sides of the wire hanger, bend the severed ends down so that the spool stays in place.



Step 3: Suspend the hanger from a coat rack, hook or other protrusion from the wall. Tie one end of a piece of string onto a small object you want to lift. Thread the other end of the string over the spool. The string should be around twice as long as the distance from the hanger to the floor.

Pull the loose end of the string to lift the weight.



Step 4 (optional): To demonstrate the pulley as an example of a simple machine, use a spring scale to measure the force needed to lift the object using the pulley. Note the reading on the spring scale. Then lift the object without using the pulley, with the scale attached directly to the string.

Compare the scale readings and discuss what they mean.

Do More with What You See

Artist and Athlete

Ballet is a beautiful art form and an incredible physical feat, and dancers must train and maintain their bodies like professional athletes.



Let’s Compare!

Do some research to fill out the table below. You may be surprised with what you discover!

Choose stats to compare. Some examples include: calories burned per hour, hours of practice per day, percentage of injuries per year, types of injuries, average retirement age, apparel for practice, audience sizes, etc.

Statistical measure	Athlete of your choice (examples: football player, swimmer, runner)	Ballet dancer

What did you learn? Did anything surprise you?
