

Lin-Manuel Miranda*

“The most important thing you can give your children is empathy.”¹



Pre-Reading Questions

1. Read the words below the title. *Empathy* is understanding and sharing another person’s feelings. Do you agree or disagree? Why? How can you teach children empathy?
2. Miranda also says that empathy is “the number one tool in your toolbox as an artist.” Why would empathy be important to a writer?

Reading Preview

Lin-Manuel Miranda is a successful writer, songwriter, and actor whose work reflects a bilingual and bicultural identity. He changed musical theater by blending hip-hop, Latin music, and traditional styles. His work has influenced and become a part of mainstream culture. His songs and stories connect with people around the world.

* In light of recent concerns regarding César Chávez, we have developed an alternative lesson featuring writer, songwriter, actor, and director Lin-Manuel Miranda.

Lin-Manuel Miranda

Lin-Manuel Miranda has been called a genius and a visionary. You may know his popular Broadway musicals *Hamilton* or *In the Heights*, or perhaps you have sung along to his songs from Disney movies *Moana*, *Encanto*, and *Mufasa: The Lion King*.

Born and raised in New York City to Puerto Rican parents in a Puerto Rican neighborhood, Miranda grew up speaking Spanish and English and spending his summers with his grandparents in Puerto Rico. His parents were both well-educated and active in politics. Though they were very busy, often working two jobs, they were always there for him and his sister for the important things. He credits them with giving him a strong work ethic and sense of pride in Puerto Rican culture. They also encouraged his love of music and storytelling from an early age and gave him the time and space for his imagination to play.

Miranda has said that he lived between cultures while growing up and sometimes felt like an outsider. He went to a prestigious New York City high school, where he was one of the few Puerto Rican students and felt different from his classmates. When he spent summers in Puerto Rico, kids his age thought he had a funny accent, and he found it hard to make friends there. As a result, he spent much of his time with his grandparents and their friends, writing songs and making short movies. These experiences helped him find his voice as a storyteller.

He began acting in school plays and found his love of theater early. Then, at 17, he saw the Broadway musical *Rent* by Jonathan Larson and was inspired by its contemporary music and the way it told a personal story. Miranda said *Rent* directly influenced the writing of his first full musical, *In the Heights*, based on his own life and neighborhood. He began writing it and first produced it as a college project when he was just 19. He continued working on it for several years and eventually it opened in a major theater on Broadway in New York City. Miranda played the main character, a young Latino man who runs a small neighborhood store. He works hard and cares about his neighbors, but he also dreams about a different life. *In the Heights* was a major success and won four Tony Awards and a Grammy Award. It was later adapted into a film.

“I wanted a future in theater, and I didn’t see a place for myself. So, I wrote one.”

—Lin-Manuel
Miranda²

After *In the Heights*, Miranda began working on his second major musical, *Hamilton*. Miranda said that the idea for *Hamilton* came when he read a biography of U.S. founding father Alexander Hamilton and began to see Hamilton’s life as a hip-hop story about an immigrant who took risks and succeeded through talent, writing, and ambition. Hamilton’s story also reminded him of his father, who came to New York from Puerto Rico as a young man and built a career in politics.

Miranda spent several years writing and revising the musical, sometimes doubting his idea of telling a historical story through hip-hop. But when *Hamilton* finally opened on Broadway, it was a hit. It won 11 Tony Awards and a Pulitzer Prize for Drama and reached a wide audience.

In addition to writing, Miranda also acts in films, on TV, and in many of his own productions. He has played the lead roles in both *In the Heights* and *Hamilton*. He says that writing makes him a better actor because it helps him understand characters more deeply, while acting helps him write more realistic and engaging roles.

Miranda has also written songs for major films, including *Moana*, *Encanto*, *Vivo*, *Mufasa: The Lion King*, and the live-action version of *The Little Mermaid*. His songs often begin with a rhythm or musical idea, and then the lyrics follow. He rewrites the lyrics many times, paying close attention to how words sound when performed aloud.

Miranda’s work has had an important cultural impact because it brings new voices, music, and stories to mainstream theater and film. In *In the Heights* and *Hamilton*, as well as in his songs for films, he tells stories about identity, immigration, and belonging. These stories help audiences understand people whose experiences may be different from their own. His work also shows that American history and culture can be told by a more diverse group of people. His success shows that these stories and musical styles can reach audiences around the world.

That success has enabled Miranda and his family to expand their lifelong charity work in support of Latino and immigrant families, community organizations, and the arts in Puerto Rico and across the U.S. After Hurricane Maria, the Miranda family helped raise tens of millions of dollars for Puerto Rico for food, shelter, health care, and rebuilding.

At home, Miranda is a typical husband and father. He tells bedtime stories, takes out the trash, makes breakfast with the kids, and walks the dog. But it is a musical household too, and his two sons are now learning from their father and making up songs of their own. He says his family both inspires him and keeps him grounded.

Today, Miranda continues to write songs for films and develop new musical projects. Recent work includes directing the film *Tick, Tick . . . Boom!* based on the musical by and about the young writer who inspired him, Jonathan Larson. He has also created a collection of songs based on the novel *Warriors*. He remains active in theater, film, and music, and he shares updates about his work on social media, where many fans follow his projects.

Comprehension

Complete the sentences. Use information from the reading.

1. Miranda's musical style is distinctive because it mixes _____
_____.
2. From his parents, Miranda learned _____
_____.
3. Growing up, Miranda sometimes felt like an outsider because _____
_____.
4. Miranda started writing his first full musical, *In the Heights*, when _____
_____.
5. *In the Heights* is about _____
_____.
6. Alexander Hamilton's life story made Miranda think of _____
_____.
7. Miranda's work is culturally important because _____
_____.
8. In addition to writing musicals, Miranda also _____
_____.

Sequence

Work with a partner. Number the events in the correct order.

- _____ Miranda reads a biography of Alexander Hamilton.
- _____ Miranda sees and is inspired by the musical *Rent*.
- _____ The musical *Hamilton* opens on Broadway.
- _____ Miranda begins acting in school plays.
- _____ Hamilton wins 11 Tony Awards and a Pulitzer Prize for Drama.
- _____ Miranda writes *In the Heights*.

Vocabulary

Look at these words from the reading. Put a check next to words that you know. Underline words that you don't know yet. Find the words in the reading. Try to guess their meanings.

ambition
audience

belonging
diverse

doubting
lyrics

prestigious
rhythm

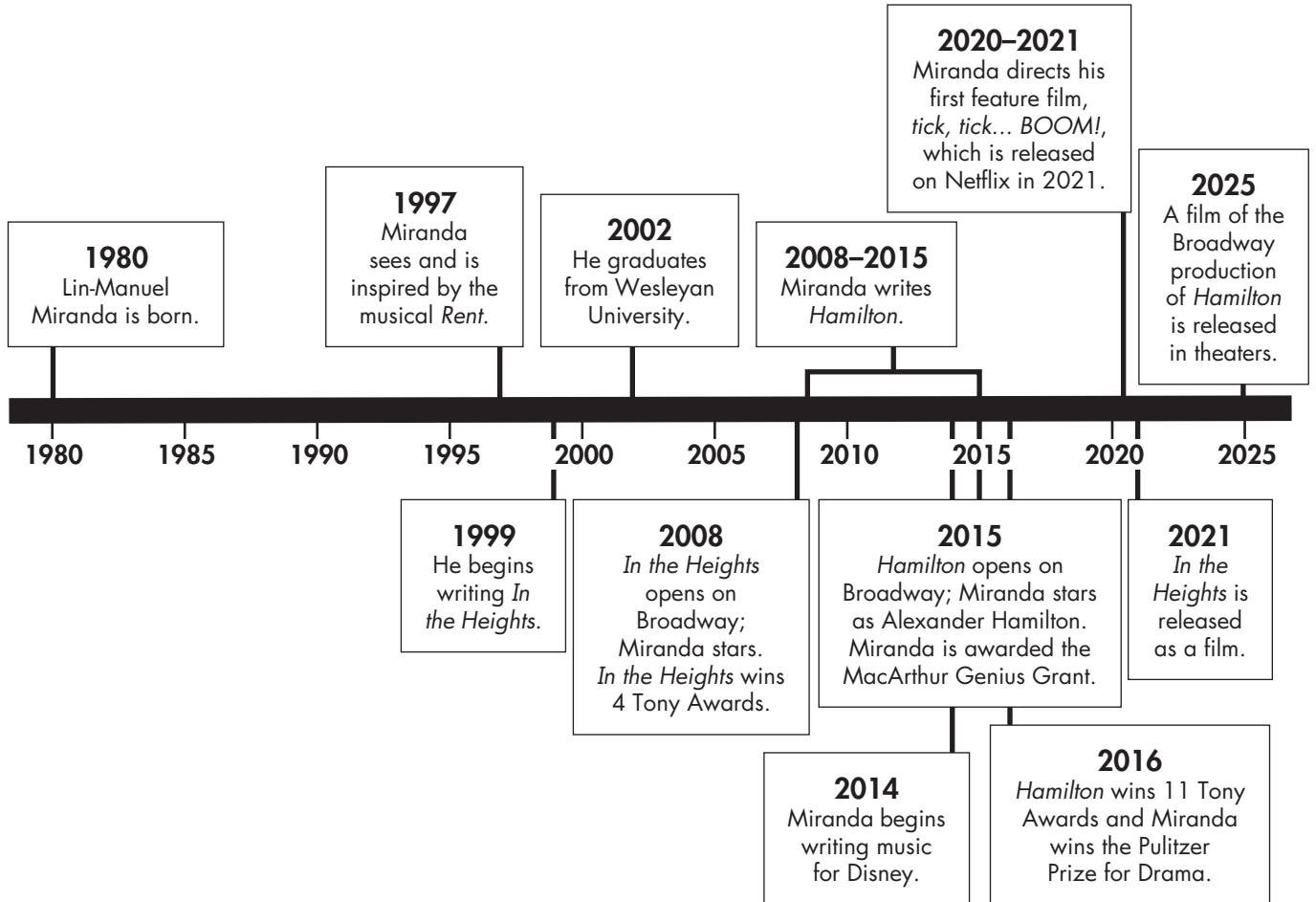
Check the correct meaning for each word.

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1. ambition | 5. doubting |
| _____ a. desire to be successful | _____ a. feeling excited |
| _____ b. fear of trying new things | _____ b. feeling very confident |
| _____ c. natural talent for learning | _____ c. feeling uncertain |
| 2. audience | 6. lyrics |
| _____ a. place where a concert happens | _____ a. person who sings |
| _____ b. people watching a show | _____ b. music without words |
| _____ c. actors in a play | _____ c. words to a song |
| 3. belonging | 7. prestigious |
| _____ a. feeling tired and stressed | _____ a. respected and important |
| _____ b. feeling you are part of a group | _____ b. very old and traditional |
| _____ c. feeling better than others | _____ c. easy to get into |
| 4. diverse | 8. rhythm |
| _____ a. many different kinds | _____ a. loud and sudden noise |
| _____ b. all the same | _____ b. repeated pattern of sounds |
| _____ c. very large | _____ c. meaning of a song |

Reading a Time Line

A time line shows dates and events in order on a line.

Life of Lin-Manuel Miranda



Answer the questions. Use information from the time line.

1. When did Miranda begin writing his musical *In the Heights*? _____
2. When did *In the Heights* start showing on Broadway? _____
3. How many years did Miranda spend writing *Hamilton*? _____
4. In what year did *Hamilton* win 11 Tony Awards? _____
5. In what year did Miranda begin writing songs for Disney movies? _____
6. How old was Miranda when he won the MacArthur Genius Grant? _____
7. What was the name of the first film Miranda directed?

“I try to let my decisions be guided not by what I think will succeed or fail, but what I’m going to learn from that process.”

—Lin-Manuel
Miranda³

Connecting Today and Yesterday

1. Alexander Hamilton was a U.S. founding father who fought in the Revolutionary War, helped write the U.S. Constitution, and wrote a newsletter to support the Constitution’s passage. He was orphaned as a young boy and grew up in the Caribbean islands of St. Kitts and Nevis. He moved to the U.S. in 1772. Why do you think his story inspired Miranda? Why do you think the musical *Hamilton* has been so popular?
2. What other historical figures do you know of who have interesting stories? How did you learn about their stories?

Group Activities

1. Watch the trailers for *In the Heights* and *Hamilton*. What do you see? What surprises you? Would you like to see these films?
2. Look for video interviews with Lin-Manuel Miranda. Then tell your group about what you learned.

Class Discussion

1. What challenges did Lin-Manuel Miranda face when he was growing up? Have you ever felt like an outsider?
2. What helped Miranda become successful? What qualities do you think are most important for success?
3. Miranda’s shows include actors from many backgrounds. Why is this important?
4. How can stories or movies help people understand each other?
5. Do you think art (music, books, movies) can change how people think? Why or why not?

Reflections

1. What was the most interesting thing that you read in this lesson?
2. Can you use anything from Lin-Manuel Miranda’s story in your life? Explain.
3. How can you learn more about Lin-Manuel Miranda or Puerto Ricans’ influence in U.S. culture?

Notes and References

Lin-Manuel Miranda

Notes

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Lesson Notes and Answers

Lin-Manuel Miranda (1980–)

Pre-Reading Questions

Read the quote together and check that students understand the meaning of *empathy*. Have students discuss the quote and whether or not they agree in pairs or small groups. Ask what other things they believe are important to teach children.

Reading Preview

Do a teacher read aloud (page 5). Have students repeat *bilingual* and *bicultural* and ask them what the words mean. Ask students if they know of any other artists, writers or musicians whose work shows two languages and cultures. Point out that the “tu” in *culture* sounds like a “ch” sound. Ask what *mainstream* culture means. Is it only popular among Latinos? What other things are part of mainstream culture?

The Reading

Follow procedures for a jigsaw reading (page 6). After learners have put together their puzzles, have each learner write a brief summary of his or her section. Compile the sections into new profiles of Miranda. Encourage learners to share them with other groups.

Sidebar

Talk about the quote. What do students think Miranda meant when he said he didn’t see a place in theater for himself? What personal quality or qualities does the quote show?

Comprehension

Answers will vary.

Sequence

4, 2, 5, 1, 6, 3

Vocabulary

- a
- b
- c
- a
- b
- c
- a
- b

Ask pairs of learners to write sentences using the vocabulary words. Then have pairs share sentences with another pair.

Reading a Time Line

- 1999
- 2008
- 7 years
- 2016
- 2014
- 35
- tick, tick . . . BOOM!*

Have small groups use their answers to write a summary paragraph. Have groups read their paragraphs chorally (page 6) to the class.

Expansion: Have learners research online to find out what Miranda is currently working on.

Remind learners to add to the classroom time line (page 8).

Connecting Today and Yesterday

Discuss the questions as a whole class. Make a list of the historical figures students mention on the board, and invite students to explain why they think their stories are interesting. Then ask students what they think these people would be doing now if they were alive today.

Expansion 1: Invite students to choose a figure from the list on the board and create modern-language social media posts in that figure’s voice about his or her life events and ideas. Post them around the room to share them and do a gallery walk. Have students vote on their favorite.

Expansion 2: Watch PBS Learning Media’s short video biography of Alexander Hamilton and have students note 4–5 interesting facts they learn from it.