

# ROLES IN INTERPRETATION



FIFTH EDITION

JUDY E. YORDON

# **Roles in Interpretation**

**Fifth Edition**

**Judy E. Yordon**

**Ball State University**



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## ROLES IN INTERPRETATION

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# Preface

I think it was Ann Landers—or perhaps her sister—who penned that if something is not broken, it shouldn't be fixed. Keeping this in mind, we tried to maintain much of what wasn't "broken" in the fourth edition. Reviewers and adoptees of the book suggested some improvements that could enhance the usability and accessibility of the text, and we have taken their advice.

Experimentation in performance styles and formats is in vogue right now, so in this edition, we encourage you to do the same. If you examine recent productions, you will find that many of them defy classification because they shatter traditional conventions. How would you characterize Blue Man Group, for example, which is a contemporary art satire employing polyrhythmic percussion, food tricks, and crepe paper orgies? How do you categorize the work of Barry Humphries whose Dame Edna one-woman show opened on Broadway? Or an improvised performance like *Musical! The Musical* by Nancy Howland Walker?

There was controversy surrounding the four nominees in the "Best Musical" category during the 2000 Tony Award broadcast. The controversy involved the four nominated shows in the musical category that many believed did not fit the category as it had customarily been defined. Is a show that contains primarily or all dance, for example, a musical? The Tony-Award winning "musical" *Contact* that looks a lot like a ballet is a dance-driven one act with music by such artists as Squirrel Nut Zippers and Dion. James Joyce's *The Dead* is based on a story by the Irish author. *Swing!* is primarily a revue of dance and music that re-creates the excitement of the swing revival. *The Wild Party* is based on a book-length poem of the same title by Joseph Moncure March, a mid-twentieth-century writer and editor. Ultimately, though, we see this as a positive evolution of contemporary theatre. As Edgar Dobie, managing producer of the Tony Awards Productions, put it in his defense of the "imperfect process" of the Tony Awards, "One wonders how the Broadway musical landscape will look in five years and if the decision to take a chance in 2000 by allowing 'Contact' into the musical category was prescient . . . Things change in life . . . [and] being flexible is good for Broadway, because theater people continue to create new works that defy categorization."

## NEW TO THIS EDITION

We realize that some of the "rules" we have used to define genres and performance analogues for those genres might seem a bit prescriptive and limiting. We have

consequently added a section in Chapter 1 on metaphoric versus metonymic performances. The fourth edition of this text discussed metaphoric versus metonymic productions, but we have found that this information relates equally well to solo performance. We have thus given more attention to the idea of being more creative and personal when constructing an interpretation.

Included in Chapter 4 is improved and expanded material on vocal and physical responsiveness, some of which was formerly in Chapter 7. In addition, there is much more information on composing introductions, including more sample introductions. Chapter 4 also includes new information and practical guidelines on coping with performance anxiety or stage fright, including some suggestions from students themselves.

Many reviewers commented on the difficulty of understanding and applying the information on structural and transactional analysis in Chapter 7, so we eliminated this entire section and expanded the “why” section of this chapter to include information on characters’ goals, obstacles, and strategies to achieve those goals.

Included in Chapter 9 is information on using the Internet and on how to incorporate presentation software, particularly the use of PowerPoint™ slides, in the development of media performances.

In addition, the inside cover of the book displays a timeline that traces the historical evolution of this performance medium. It is our hope that this timeline will help to put this art form into historical perspective for the student.

There are also added anthology materials—including even more multicultural selections, particularly in Chapters 2 and 4—and an updated appendix, glossary, and bibliography.

There is now a website for this text, [www.mhhe.com/yordon](http://www.mhhe.com/yordon), with links to performance sites, the online Instructor’s Manual and Test Bank, and to the author. Should instructors or students have questions or issues about the text, please feel free to access this site.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people are responsible for the completion of this edition. Primary thanks go to my editor, Jennie Katsaros, whose compassion and understanding were greatly appreciated. I would like to thank colleague Michael O’Hara for help with the revisions in Chapter 9, Lysa Franklin for her able work on the historical timeline, and Gina Nicewonger, my secretary, for her valued assistance with the permissions. In addition, I owe a large debt of gratitude to the following individuals for their thoughtful and constructive comments on the fourth edition: Lisa Abramson, Western Oregon University; Shirley Basfield Dunlap, Iowa State University; Diana Enloe, Alton High School; Derek Goldman, University of North Carolina at Chapel

Hill; and Kelly S. Taylor, University of North Texas. I would also like to thank again all my previous reviewers, the students who posed for the photos used throughout this text, photographer Sam Clemmons who took most of the photos, and especially to my students who have taught me so much.

As always, it is my hope that this new edition will help to illuminate the world of literature through performance for all who delve with it.

Judy E. Yordon  
Distinguished Professor of Performance Studies

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# Initial Roles

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## Your Role in Interpretation

EMILY DICKINSON

### Because I Could Not Stop for Death

Because I could not stop for Death—  
He kindly stopped for me—  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—  
And Immortality.

We slowly drove—He knew no haste  
And I had put away  
My labor and my leisure too,  
For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove  
At Recess—in the Ring—  
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—  
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—He passed Us—  
The Dews drew quivering and chill—  
For only Gossamer,<sup>8</sup> my Gown—  
My Tippet<sup>9</sup>—only Tulle<sup>1</sup>—

We paused before a House that seemed  
A Swelling of the Ground—  
The Roof was scarcely visible—  
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet  
Feels shorter than the Day  
I first surmised the Horses' Heads  
Were toward Eternity—

ca. 1863

## INTRODUCING SOLO INTERPRETATION PERFORMANCE

### The Roles We Play

Interpretation is an artistic process of studying literature through performance and sharing that study with an audience. When we study interpretation, we are primarily interested in the relationship between you and a text, in this case, literary texts, through the medium of performance. But are texts only “literary,” and what do we mean by “performance”? The meanings of both these terms have greatly expanded since the discipline of interpretation was incorporated into an academic field entitled performance studies. Performance studies is an interdisciplinary field of knowledge that focuses on elements of texts, performers, and audiences, individually or in groups, to advance understanding of the aesthetic, historical, psychological, political, and sociocultural dimensions of performance and performative events.<sup>1</sup>

When we consider “text,” we include literary texts (prose, drama, poetry), as well as aesthetic objects (a quilt, for example, is a “text” of a particular family, time period, culture), oral texts (personal narratives, everyday conversations), and ethnographic studies of a particular culture or minority group, for example. Rituals are social or cultural texts; demonstrations, rallies, and sit-ins are political texts; drawings and dance are texts of self-expression. Text, then, is a metaphor for all kinds of experience, and we “read” texts, we understand them, through other texts that we have read, seen, experienced.

By “performing” we mean the traditional notion of performance as in theatrical productions, but we also include performances in a more general sense—including the roles you play on a daily basis. Performance is a human activity involving fixed texts such as literary texts and those used in stage, film, and television and more spontaneous texts, including everyday conversation, cultural rituals, and storytelling. Human beings always act or play roles—throughout childhood, for example, we often rehearse being adults. Your everyday behavior (actions), appearance (costume), and language (dialogue) alter depending on the situation you are in and the role you assume. For example, try starting a conversation about what you did last night with a close friend. Then discuss the same subject with a teacher, a boss, a grandparent. How did the conversation change? How did you adjust or modify your behavior, your language—your “performance”? How does your behavior differ at job interviews or formal dinners or holiday gatherings or religious services or political rallies or dances? How do you “act” with your friends as opposed to your mother, or your lover, or the president of a large corporation? Our daily lives are filled with performance events. Richard Schechner includes a wide spectrum of events in his discussion of performance, including “theatre, dance, music, sacred ritual, secular ritual, sports, social drama, . . . a bar mitzvah, . . . Hindu temple services, title boxing matches, TV soap operas, etc.”<sup>2</sup> Schechner

would also include such events as the 1991 Gulf War, the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court hearings, and the William Kennedy Smith and Mike Tyson rape trials. Everyday life and performance have intermingled.

The chef of a four-star restaurant in Mississippi, for example, acknowledged the metaphoric relationship between his restaurant and a theatrical production. He said that a restaurant is like theatre—it's show time every night. Your dining room is filled with an audience you are trying to please. The chef is the director, and the kitchen and the staff are role players. They all have a role and it all comes together. We create a show for our customers and hopefully at the end of the night, they will applaud and say it was a great show.

During the O. J. Simpson civil trial NBC news legal analyst Jay Monahan consistently used theatrical metaphors to describe the proceedings: "It sounded dramatic. . . . It was high theatre and he [attorney Daniel Petrocelli] performed it well." In *The Trial of O. J.*, Charles B. Rosenberg places the "trial of the century" in a theatrical context by entitling his chapters: "The Trial as a Story," "The Storytellers—the Lawyers," "The Story's Editor—the Judge," "The Story's Audience—the Jury," and so on.

After Bill Clinton and Bob Dole squared off during their second "town hall" debate during the 1996 campaign, CBS brought in none other than *The New York Times* theatre critic Frank Rich as political commentator. Dan Rather explained that the debate was really not about politics but about theatre, and he asked Rich to comment on the "subtext" of the exercise. In fact, Edmund Morris, Ronald Reagan's biographer, admitted outright that most good leaders are theatrical by nature.

Although we may assume that talk shows rely on spontaneous interaction, they are really tightly scripted theatrical events.

From these examples, it is easy to conclude that much of our daily life is involved in participating in and viewing performances—in playing roles. Thus, the title of this book.

While it is not possible in a beginning textbook to cover all of these text and performance possibilities, our focus on the analysis and performance of literary texts—on the diverse literary roles available for you to play—will provide you with experiences that will help enrich and inform the roles you play in daily life. While performance studies as a discipline has become more and more interested in the study and performance of nonliterary texts, we are of the opinion that the study of literature should not be jettisoned in this time of discipline reassessment, but recognized as a window on broader societal concerns. The study of literature is essential; it helps us understand more about ourselves and the world in which we live.

As you study and perform literature, see what connections you can make to the everyday events of your own life. As you perform dialogues created by another, what do you learn about your own communicative strategies? As you assume another's perspective, what do you learn about your own? In general, ask yourself, What do I learn about myself and others by studying and performing literary texts?



## Literature and Solo Interpretation Performance

In the following poem, the connection between life and literature is made manifest.

He ate and drank the precious Words—  
His spirit grew robust—  
He knew no more that he was poor,  
Nor that his frame was Dust—  
He danced along the dingy Days  
And this Bequest of wings  
Was but a Book—What Liberty  
A loosened spirit brings—

Emily Dickinson

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The study of literature has been and shall continue to be one of the most exciting endeavors we can undertake. The man in the poem above, for example, was able to exist on the love of “the precious Words” alone. Although you need not go to his extreme, the study of literature is often as stimulating, liberating, and rewarding for you as for the man in this poem. Literature expands your experiences, stimulates your imagination, and exposes you to different kinds of people and cultures. Literature allows you to experience the power of language. Literature persuades, moves, affects you—this is why you read it. Literature can offer you a fantasy world in which to escape, a realistic world to contemplate, or a surrealistic vision of the future. Writers of literature create characters with whom you cry, laugh, scream—characters who may be like you or unlike you, but who by their universality have something to say to us all. Through literature, you expand your knowledge of the world and consequently your knowledge of yourself and others.

Our focus in this text is on the study of literature—more specifically, the process of studying literature (prose fiction, drama, and poetry) through performance. (Chapter 9 discusses nonfiction, children’s literature, and postmodern literature as well as some experimental performance possibilities.) We are especially interested in bringing a literary text and a student closer together than is possible with silent reading alone. Performance encourages—even demands—this closeness.

Although interpretation may be new to you, perhaps two related fields are not. If you have ever been involved in acting or public speaking classes, you have been exposed to styles of presentation similar to those used in the interpretation classroom.