

# O · R · A · L INTERPRETATION

Seventh Edition



Lee/Gura

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# Oral Interpretation

## SEVENTH EDITION

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# To the Student

At first this book — and the course of study it suggests — may strike you as difficult and indeed perhaps strange. For most of our lives we have been taught to read silently, not to move our lips, and to get through the material as rapidly as possible. Moreover, we have been asked to look at poems, plays, or stories much as we look at rocks in the geology laboratory or dissect frogs in biology. We are frequently encouraged to point out metaphors, tragic flaws, or third-person narrators, as if literature were aggregates of those items. Too often this approach leads to study *around* the work. When finished, we are left with masses of facts about the text but not much of the excitement or delight we felt when we enjoyed the reading itself.

Interpretation, on the other hand, asks you to speak up, move your lips, respond to the fullness of the story, and take time to experience what the characters are undergoing. All of the “facts” you have discovered about literature in other courses can be used here to refine and clarify your own performance, because interpretation goes several steps beyond the mere vocalization of silent reading. It requires a full appreciation of your material as a work of literary art, and it demands that you communicate that work of art through your voice and body. You will be asked to respond fully — intellectually and emotionally — and to control and channel your understanding and emotion to elicit the appropriate response from your audience. Interpretation is built on scholarship, technical know-how, sensitivity, and the desire to share. It demands total synthesis of all of these.

Like any other art, interpretation requires practice and study. Just as a musician translates written notes into sounds and thus conveys the achievement of the composer to the listener, so you, the interpreter, bring to life the printed words that preserve the ideas and experiences of humankind. Your instruments are your voice and your body; as is true for musicians, using these instruments requires skill developed by rehearsal. Success is rarely immediate; learning to read aloud requires care and effort.

Oral interpretation enhances any kind of vocational training. Many people, as we all know, spend their most prized hours outside of their jobs. Even the most ambitious of us is unlikely to spend more than a third of a week pursuing commercial success. On the weekends, on vacations, during free evenings, many people feel a desire for something more out of life and themselves than another beer and a rented movie on television. They want something that enhances their sense of being human. Studying literature accomplishes this; and the oral interpretation of literature is not only the fullest way to enjoy stories and poems and plays: it also allows us to share our experiences and our pleasures with people who care about literature as we do.

The opening chapters of the book suggest a method of detailed analysis that will help you to develop your own responses to the literature you have chosen and provide the foundation upon which you can build your performance. Part II applies these principles to prose and contains additional clues to what to look for. Part III is concerned with drama and offers suggestions about character and scene analysis as well as helpful tips about the techniques for creating those characters and scenes vividly in the minds of your audience. Part IV deals with poetry, although numerous poems appear earlier in the book. Group performance is discussed last because it includes poetry, prose, and drama and because the success of any group depends upon the preparation and technical skill of every individual involved in it.

If you are already a performer, you will find that the literary analysis we encourage gives you greater confidence and increases your flexibility in handling various moods or kinds of material. As it has been said, "Chance favors the prepared mind." If you are new to performing or if you have spent most of your time studying literature by other methods, you will find that performance before an intelligent audience is a valuable test of your thoroughness and accuracy. You will also discover why others find performing so enjoyable. Whatever your previous experience in performance, you will find this book full of what we hope are intriguing questions. In Chapters 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 11 you will find a series of questions that will help you to analyze your performance and will assist you in discussing the performances of your classmates. These questions are not rules or recipes; they are ways to help you think carefully and precisely about all the choices that made your performance uniquely yours. And each of the selections is followed by a question or two which asks you to consider a central performance problem in that text. Thus *Oral Interpretation* offers both practical suggestions for solving specific

problems and a wide choice of literary selections at various levels of sophistication and degrees of difficulty.

One final word about the selections at the ends of the chapters: each is substantial and challenging and each contains clear clues to help you embody that special experience. Some may even “remind you of something you did not know you knew,” as Robert Frost has put it. But if one selection seems difficult, don’t give up on it right away: walk around a bit in its shoes before dismissing it. You may be surprised at how much you discover about yourself as you reach out to understand the literature. Like what you get out of any other book (or any other course), what you derive from *Oral Interpretation* will depend on how much of yourself you are willing to invest.

Much has changed in the field of oral interpretation since the first edition of this book appeared in 1952. Frequently, as we re-examined that book and its five descendants, we remembered the axiom that change does not necessarily imply progress. Scrutiny of this seventh edition of *Oral Interpretation* will show a number of similarities to those predecessors as well as some substantial innovations.

The fundamental theory of the book remains the same: only when a student fully understands a literary selection can any reliable performance preparation begin. Thus we have continued our emphasis on the analysis of literary selections as a guide to their appreciation and, more immediately, as the indispensable first step of any rehearsal. The process of analysis described here emphasizes the writer's relationship with the reader and thus the position the interpreter takes in re-creating the experience, whether that experience is an author's personal discovery or the sensibilities of a created character. In addition to an awareness of the work's complexities, oral performance demands a flexible voice and body able to suggest all the subtleties discovered through close analysis. Throughout the process, the only reliable yardstick of the success of performance remains the text itself. Thus, interpreters and critics have as their ultimate recourse that with which they began: the literature being performed.

These principles, of course, have characterized the previous editions of this book. The most immediately apparent difference in this edition is the inclusion of six sections called "Analyzing the Performance," which appear in Chapters 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 11. Each of the sections contains practical hints for describing and evaluating student performances and concludes with several general questions we have found useful in guiding students to analyze both their own performances and those of classmates. These questions are not check lists, rating sheets, or score cards. Rather, they are suggestions that probe

the concerns raised in the preceding pages. Furthermore, in addition to the headnotes, which provide sound performance advice, each selection for oral interpretation is now followed by specific questions that address problems most often encountered by performers of the work. We hope that these new features of the text will help focus students' attention on what we believe to be the most important post-performance question: *How fully did this reader communicate this selection to this audience?*

Also new to this edition is a reorganization and revision of the section on the performance of prose, with particular attention to narration and character. Problems in the creation of character are also discussed in the chapters on the solo performance of drama, as are the technical difficulties that surround the single performer's attempt to suggest simultaneity and spectacle in drama. A chapter on the group performance of literature concludes the book, buttressed by three appendices: a section entirely devoted to practical suggestions for beginning directors of group performances, a discussion of program building for individuals and groups, and a brief review of the history of interpretation. Chapter bibliographies have been significantly updated and modified by John M. Allison, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

These changes mean that there may be more material here than can be covered comfortably in a single term, but the general format of this edition will be familiar to readers of earlier editions. We suggest beginning study with the introductory material of Part I. Here we examine the fundamental principles of analysis, selection, and evaluation of literature and apply these principles to a brief story and a poem. We then look at the ways interpreters can use their bodies and their voices. The early chapters establish the basic principles common to all kinds of literature and complement the modal, rhetorical, or dramatistic approaches. Then the course may either concentrate on one or two areas or briefly survey all genres in the parts that follow. Part II, devoted to the interpretation of prose, pays particular attention both to the embodiment and evocation of prose style and to the problems inherent in narration. Part III deals with drama, with specific attention given to the structure of a play, character analysis, and style in dialogue, in addition to practical advice about technique. Although many poems appear in earlier parts of the book, as well as some selections from verse drama and epic poetry, the interpretation of poetry *per se* is not discussed until Part IV, where the analysis is as detailed as befits the condensation and complexity of a successful poem, no matter how brief. Part V concerns group interpretation and makes a basic distinction between Readers Theatre



and Chamber Theatre as a guide to preparation of scripts and the implementation of production and performance.

The literary selections included in this edition encompass a broad range of interests, topics, and levels of sophistication. Among the new selections in this edition are excerpts from Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon Days*, William Least Heat Moon's *Blue Highways*, and Studs Terkel's *Working*; poems by Corinne Hales, Alice Walker, Sharon Olds, and Roger McGough; and drama by Harold Pinter, Stephen Sondheim, and Bertolt Brecht. Performing any of the selections is richly rewarding — in different ways with different students, of course. None of the selections is simple, because we are convinced of the superior educational benefit of the gallant struggle over the easy victory. We encourage you to use the selections in the text whenever possible, since it is important that students have a copy of the literature to consult *after* — not during — the reading as a guide to their criticism. We have found it valuable — and expeditious — to hold all critiques until the performers scheduled for a given day have finished. There are usually some common problems, and students find it agonizing to analyze others' readings when they are still concentrating on their own. Criticism of material about which we know nothing tends to focus on technical proficiencies that can obscure or even obliterate the very work we seek to enjoy.

The success of this edition will depend in large measure on those two intangibles that improved the earlier editions: the interest and enthusiasm of the individual student and the spark that only a dedicated teacher can give any body of knowledge. We have tried to create a book that can guide, encourage, and challenge its readers in the hope that if our suggestions seem inadequate, students and teacher together will discover a fuller, richer response. All disciplines require such discoveries in order to grow. In them we see most clearly the difference between change and progress.

By their questions and responses to previous editions, our colleagues throughout the country — and their students — have substantially improved this edition. Lee Beltzer and Leland Croghan were particularly helpful in discovering new ways to solve old performance problems. Many will find in these pages theories or practices we discovered together. In their admirable refusal to accept easy answers, students across the country helped us to refine our thinking on the practical application of several theories. We are grateful to the following colleagues who agreed to review the book and recommend improvements: William Alfred Boyce, Wayne State University; Earline G. Grizzle, Victoria College; William B. Kennedy, John Carroll University; Christie Logan, California State University,

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