Oral Interpretation Events and Argument:
Forensic Discourse or Aesthetic Entertainment?

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Whenever we start to explain oral interpretation to our beginning students, the inevitable query is, "What's the difference between this and acting?" Our response generally entails discussions of "the fine line" and "suspension of disbelief" and the "removal of the fourth wall," etc. Somewhat mollified with this response, students then ask, "Well, then, what does this have to do with debate and persuasion and impromptu? Why are they all called forensics?" Frankly, given the trends we have seen in the oral interpretation arena of forensics competition, this is a very good question.

Forensics is defined by the National Developmental Conference on Forensics as "an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people" (McBath, 1975, p. 11). Unfortunately, current practices in oral interpretation events seem to be lacking this argumentative perspective established by the forensic community two decades ago. Often we see an increased emphasis on the aesthetic components associated with the performance of literature and little attention paid to the argumentative and communicative elements of the event. Of particular concern is the introduction, where rarely do we see students making clear and cogent arguments to establish their programs. Instead, students seem to be primarily relying on the performance or aesthetic aspects of the event. Why is it that introductions have seemingly taken a less than important role in the preparation of the selections our students have chosen for performance? Many students do not seem to understand and/or even care about the process of creating an introduction, much less care about what their introduction really says about their literature selection and its meaning. Often the introduction includes mere references to the author and title of the literature while the selection is left to speak for itself as to its thesis and argument, without any input from the speaker.

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The purpose of this paper is to provide justification for argumentative oral interpretation. In this endeavor, we shall first discuss the negative outcomes of the lack of an argumentative component in the introduction to an oral interpretation program. We shall then provide theoretical justification for viewing oral interpretation as argument by discussing the rhetorical functions of literature, oral interpretation and the performer. Finally, we shall discuss the various benefits of viewing oral interpretation from an argumentative perspective.

"Often times in our society...": Introductions That Say Nothing

A major problem many forensic competitors face with their interpretation scenes is that they do not allow the introduction of their literature to do its job. True argumentative introductions are replaced by meaningless phatic introductory talk. "Death is a twisted reality we all must face—To Kill A Mockingbird." "There is a fine line between love and hate, and when that line is crossed, anything can happen—Lion In The Winter" And our favorite, "Life-Death-Rats—Ben." The problem is that these introductions, and those like them, do absolutely nothing for the audience, the judge, the performer, or least of all, the literature.

As Lee and Gura (1987) explain, an introduction should prepare the audience for "the intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic entirety... (of a) work of literary art" (p. 3). In other words, the introduction should get the audience ready for the totality of what they are about to experience. Additionally, Swarts (1988) argues "an introduction serves informational and rhetorical functions, in addition to the obvious aesthetic roles it plays" (p. 36). In order to accomplish this rhetorical function, the introduction must establish the argument the student will be supporting with the literature from the scene. Without this type of orientation from the speaker, a series of problems is created for the audience and the student performer, problems which then negatively impact the remainder of the presentation.

First, the audience receives no orientation about the scene. They have no idea what to expect, listen for, anticipate, or even care about. Like a speech without a signposting section, the scene wanders aimlessly without a stated purpose, direction or thesis. Second, without a strong introduction, the audience has less motivation to listen to the scene and/or participate in the interpretation. One function of an effective introduction is to provide a reason for the audience to listen to the scene, to motivate the audience to become part of the event. Without a clearly stated thesis, the audience has less reason to become involved. Third, from a pragmatic standpoint, when students do not properly introduce their literature, critics have less evaluative criteria to use in their critique of the performance. Many critics of interpretation com-
plain that they do not have enough criteria as it is. They tend to vote for "what I liked best," instead of basing their decision on how well a student performed emotionally—balanced with the arguments crafted and supported throughout the scene.

Fourth, a poorly constructed introduction is a red flag that the student has not taken the time to do a thorough literary analysis of the scene. This is reflected in a lack of understanding about the scene, its depth or even its purpose. The student is doing nothing more than following the rules which mandate some type of introduction. Students include introductions simply because they have to, not because they want to, nor because they understand what the introduction's true purpose really is.

Finally, without an effective introduction, the audience hears no justification as to why the student chose the piece of literature in the first place, or why the scene is being interpreted in the way presented. The question and concept of intent is never addressed, neither from the author's point of view or the student's. As Geisler (1984) suggests, the question is not "what did the author mean when he wrote this poem/story/play? The question is, more properly, what does this poem/story/play say, and what can it mean?" (p. 8). What is the intent of the student in performing this scene? What does the student believe is the intent of the author in creating this literature? And most important, what does the student want it to mean? Without a clear sense of intent, crafted in the introduction and supported by the performance, the audience and the critic are left only to wonder "why" and ask themselves, "What was all that screaming and crying about? What's your point?"

Basically, to achieve the argumentative perspective in the oral interpretation events, we must begin to look at oral interpretation as a rhetorical transaction—a sender delivering a message to a receiver with the purpose of having some effect. To understand this concept more clearly, we shall next address the rhetorical functions inherent in literature, oral interpretation and the performer.

**Rhetorical Function of Literature**

In order to determine why oral interpretation can be viewed as argument, we should first examine the materials that a performer uses: the literature. The text, as argument, has been a subject of much discussion. Fisher and Filloy (1982) argue that argument may be found in fictive forms of communication. They found that, like other forms of argument, facets such as claim, reasons and evidence can be found in literature. Other scholars have identified the rhetorical elements of literature as well. Literature is viewed not only in terms of the pleasure one can gain from reading, but also the ideas that are put forth.
The greatness of any work of art depends not upon the images it arouses, nor even, at least solely, upon the emotions it stimulates, **but rather upon what it has to say, its meaning, its ideational content** [emphasis added] (Parrish, 1936, p. 374).

If, indeed, the ideas are the most important aspect of a work, then the responsibility of the performer is to emphasize the ideas rather than other "artistic" aspects of the performance. In many ways these "ideas" can be viewed as the communicative or rhetorical feature of the literature.

Molette (1968) also makes this connection between rhetoric and literature when he claims that a similarity exists between Aristotle's argument by example and dramatic poetry. He explains that there are two types of argument by example: 1) the mention of actual past facts, and 2) the invention of facts by the speaker. It is the second type of argument that is associated with literature. Through writing the author or poet or playwright attempts to persuade an audience (reader) through argument by example. As Molette explains,

> The assumption is that the characters in the story provide examples of behavior of characters in real life ... Depending on the treatment of the story, the behavior of the characters may be designed to inspire people to emulate or reject behavior patterns they see and hear acted out (p. 49).

Poetry and prose are obvious forms of argument. Parrish (1936) argues that the poet's purpose is to communicate ideas, and he likens the poet to the orator when he says, "Certainly it is true that the best poets have written to communicate. The desire to reach an audience has often been as strong and as clearly revealed as in the orator" (p. 375). While not specific to prose literature, we maintain that Parrish's characterization is germane to this genre as well. The idea of poet as orator is not a new one. Scanlan (1936) reiterates Plato's suggestion from the Gorgias when Socrates says, "... suppose we strip all poetry of song and rhythm and metre, there will remain speech... And this speech is addressed to a crowd of people... The poetry is a sort of rhetoric ... and do not the poets in the theatres seem to be rhetoricians?" (p. 636)

It is dramatic literature that can be most clearly characterized as rhetoric since dramatic works are intended to be performed (or delivered). In fact, many writers have used drama specifically as a vehicle for expressing dissatisfaction with life and as a means for providing solutions for the problems they present (Speer, 1972). Notable playwrights of this type include Moliere, Clifford Odets and Henrik Ibsen. More contemporary examples can be found in television and movie scripts. The recent trend toward network "movies of the week" tackling social
issues such as date rape, child molestation and homelessness is a case in point. However, rhetoric is not limited to those authors who write expressly to voice their opinions. In general, dramatists may utilize the agents of the play to persuade one another as well as persuade the audience, which results in a much broader external scope to the operation of rhetorical principles (Scanlan, 1936). In a rhetorical drama, the dramatist guides the audience through conflict to a predetermined resolution with which they must either acquiesce or reject the value system of the author (Speer, 1972).

Persuasion through drama [as well as poetry and prose] is also accomplished through the use of Aristotle's modes of persuasion: ethos, pathos and logos. Ethos is used when the playwright chooses to focus on the personal character of each persona as a means of persuasion. A dramatist, for example, may portray the protagonist as admirable and the opponent as unsympathetic and evil. Dramatic literature also makes use of pathos when attempting to stir an audience's emotions. While ethos and pathos can be utilized in implicit ways such as staging and characterization, logos is more explicitly accomplished through the actual words spoken by the characters (Smiley, 1971). Utilizing any or all of these modes of persuasion enables an author to present arguments to his or her audience.

Thus, we can see that regardless of the method chosen to accomplish the goal, persuasion can be found as an important component of literature. However, the rhetorical aspects of a work are not necessarily obvious to all who may hear it. Therefore, in oral interpretation, the performer and the argumentative perspective presented in the introduction are key factors in the creation of the communication.

**Rhetorical Function of Oral Interpretation**

Before we can discuss the rhetorical function of oral interpretation, we must first understand the function of oral interpretation itself. According to Macksoud (1968), "... the ultimate point of oral interpretation is the structuring of the listener's experience in such ways that the thesis which the interpretation seeks to call to the attention of an audience shall emerge as dominant over stylistic and aesthetic features per se" (p. 70). In other words, oral interpretation's purpose is the transmission of some kind of message. It is then the duty of the performer to "exploit what is essentially rhetorical power to channel listeners' responses toward his [or her] thesis, with proper subordination of all that is not relevant to that thesis" (p. 71). It is in this regard that oral interpretation can be viewed as a rhetorical transaction.

Sharpham, Matter and Brockreide (1971) define a rhetorical transaction as "an interpersonal and intrapersonal experience of people who
share meanings symbolically in a particular situation" (p. 143). While this definition is somewhat broad, the authors further characterize the interpretive rhetorical transaction as a situation in which the three elements of interpretation, the work, the interpreter, and the audience, are all actively present. In a rhetorical transaction, these elements work together to create the communication. Unlike an actor in a play, the oral interpreter takes an active role in the formation of the argument itself. The performer is the communicator. It is the responsibility of the performer to make critical choices to determine the best way to communicate the message. The performance of the literature is the means by which the message is conveyed. The message is not inherent in the literature itself, but rather the result of the critical choices the performer has made. The audience is, of course, the receiver. However, unlike a mere recipient of a message, the auditor in the interpretation transaction has an active role in the creation of the communication. Together, the performer and the audience members work toward the co-creation of the rhetorical exchange.

With these three interdependent facets of the interpretative transaction present, the communication is completed. As we can see, the oral interpretation experience can be justifiably considered rhetorical in nature. It is with this understanding of the transaction itself that we now turn to a more specific discussion of the role of the performer.

**Performer as Creator**

Part of the justification for viewing the performer as creator lies in the character of the oral interpretation activity. By its very nature, oral interpretation is subjective. Different performers may have different conceptions of character, attitude, internal relationships and perhaps most important, significance of various aspects (Geiger, 1954). As audience members, we see the re-created literary experience through the eyes of the performer. "It can be plausibly argued that just as the poet writes his [or her] poem, so the interpreter can find it only in his life history, and he can give to his audience only what he finds there" (Parrish, 1936). In other words, there is no absolute, inherent, "real" meaning to the literature, but rather the performance is based on what the interpreter has experienced and is able to communicate through the introduction. Based on this background the interpreter should make critical choices which are used to re-create the experience for the audience. Unfortunately, while this maybe the intent of the oral interpretation activity, it is all too often forgotten in actual practice.

At this point we must clarify that it is not our intent to disregard the concept of author's intent. Of course, the author's ultimate intent should be preserved. This concept, however, should be treated as a
guideline as opposed to a restriction. To think for a moment that anyone fully understands the absolute intent of an author's every thought is ludicrous. Indeed, many authors are unable to pinpoint precise origins of thought or intent in their own work. The need to make interpretive choices regarding what to emphasize or de-emphasize is intrinsic to the activity and a choice that must be made by the speaker.

A literary work does not exist in a vacuum. Its existence is based on what the performer brings to it; if his or her life experience changes, so too, does the conception of the work (Sharpham, et al., 1971). This constant change of experience and conception seems problematic, but it need not. Unlike the actor in a theatre presentation, the interpreter has greater control over the creation of the argument. Instead of merely performing a role, the performer is free to offer introductory, as well as transitional, commentary from the platform (Macksoud, 1968). These opening remarks, based on literary analysis, should serve not only as a description of what is to come, but also establish the claim the performance will attempt to make. As an argumentative event, oral interpretation can be viewed as analogous to a debate or a persuasive speech in which a speaker makes a claim and then supports that claim with evidence or example. In this case, the example is the literary work. The use of the literature to support an argument is the most important component of the oral interpretation event.

Based on what we now understand about argument in literature, the rhetorical function of oral interpretation, and the role of the interpreter as creator, we can see the justification for argumentative oral interpretation. The oral interpretation of literature must be approached from an argumentative standpoint. The piece of literature is a representation of experience from which arguments may be drawn, but which is not in itself an argument (Geiger, 1952). Together, the performer, literature, and audience create the argumentative transaction.

**Implementation**

We are certainly not the first to write about the importance of argument in oral interpretation. Both Jay VerLinden (1987) and Valerie Swarts (1988) provide insightful and compelling justification for this very issue. Why then, as critics, do we find ourselves repeatedly writing the same types of comments when judging oral interpretation: "You need to make more of an argument in your introduction." "What point are you trying to make with this literature?" "This event is inherently rhetorical."

Clearly, the voices calling for change have not yet been heard and further discussion is warranted. Steps need to be taken if we want to change the direction of oral interpretation in intercollegiate forensics.
There are those who feel that the answer lies in the creation of new events, while others would have us decrease the number of oral interpretation events. We do not believe the answers to the problems lie in the creation of new events but rather in modification of the conception of existing events.

Changes can be made in two ways. First, as coaches and educators, we need to reevaluate how we teach oral interpretation to our students. We should not focus solely on the performance and aesthetic components of the event. Instead, we must direct the focus of the event toward rhetorical discourse through the use of argument. In this way we shall maintain the integrity and legitimacy of oral interpretation as a communication activity.

A second, and perhaps more influential direction we can take is through our roles as critics. We agree with VerLinden's (1987) assessment of the role the judge has in the success or failure of proposed changes. He argues that because forensic practices are a response to what competitors and coaches perceive will win, the best place for change to take place is at the tip of the judge's pen.

VerLinden argues for similar changes in the way we perceive, and accordingly, judge the oral interpretation events. His metacritical model for judging oral interpretation events encompasses many of the issues we support. He argues for these changes based on two problems: 1) the use of inferior literature, and 2) performances which lack the integrity of the literature. The metacritical model involves making decisions based on assessments of the interpreter's critical thinking. "First," he claims, "the forensic interpretation may be conceived as an argument" (p. 59). According to the model, the critics then base their decisions on issues such as whether 1) the literature supports the claim, 2) the performance supports the claim, and 3) the literature supports the performance. Benefits to using these judging criteria are articulated only in terms of ease for the judges. VerLinden argues that in utilizing this model, judges do not need to be experts in all forms of literature, but instead can rely on their ability to listen to claims and support.

Although VerLinden's method is impressive, his justification is less persuasive. He makes no mention of why this conception of interpretation as argument is beneficial to anyone other than the critic. He merely asserts that the event should be conceived of in this way. Far more justification for the metacritical model can be found in the arguments presented in this paper. We propose an expansion of the justification for the use of VerLinden's model to include not only his ideas, but the theoretical issues addressed here as well. The current practice in intercollegiate oral interpretation has swung too far in the direction of
performance. While noble in intent, we believe that VerLinden has swung too far in the other direction. It seems as if he would eliminate the performance aspects of the activity from the judge's decision-making process. Our proposal seeks to strike a balance between the two extremes.

We believe that the aesthetic components associated with the performance are important to the overall program presented. However, just as important are the rhetorical components of the literature. The development of a cogent argument in the introduction of a program is crucial to the perpetuation of the argumentative perspective that the forensic activity seeks to promote. The answer to the question of oral interpretation as forensic discourse versus aesthetic entertainment should not be an "either-or" but rather a "both." Students should not choose one or the other, but should be encouraged to incorporate elements of both argument and entertainment in their performances. These elements need not be mutually exclusive. With this combination, we will have critical as well as disciplinary justification for argumentative oral interpretation and provide the following benefits.

The Benefits of Linking Argument With Oral Interpretation

As we see it, there are three major benefits resulting from incorporating both argument and entertainment in the interpretation events. When this relationship is crafted into the student's entire performance, we believe it will strengthen the educational, communicative, and competitive aspects of these events.

Education. The first major benefit of using argument in oral interpretation is the strengthening of the educational value of these events. By encouraging students to make arguments in their interpretation events, forensic educators can teach them the basics of argumentation, how to conduct a thorough literary analysis of their material, and enable them to use critical thinking throughout their preparation and performance. Unlike debaters, many "interpers" are not entrenched in argument theory. Many do not come from communication backgrounds or departments. Therefore, encouraging these students to make arguments with their cuttings opens up this "new" area for them. It forces them to think as much about what arguments their scenes support as well as how to perform it. If properly applied, the use of argument will solve the problem of students performing literature they simply do not understand and will create the necessary balance between argument and performance. "If students can be convinced that the text is participating directly in the discourse, while they are basically a channel, perhaps an awareness of the importance of text can then ensue" (Geisler 1985, p. 78).
Also, as mentioned above, the use of argument will integrate critical thinking skills into the oral interpretation events. If we can get our students to really think about what they are interpreting, to understand the subtext, the persona, the intent of the author, and the argument they are crafting, in short, the rhetorical transaction, we believe the events will be stronger and more educational. Of course, these interpretation events are entertaining, as well they should be. After rounds of communication analysis and extemp, many times a prose or drama round is a nice change of pace. But we get frustrated when we hear judges say things like, "Oh, good. I've got duo; I won't have to think for a change." The concept that the interp events are mindless, aesthetic entertainment is damaging, not just to those particular events, but to the educational value of forensics as a whole. When we encourage argument through literary analysis, we develop the analytical and critical thinking skills so valued in our discipline. Several goals can be achieved at once when we focus on the educational value of teaching argument and critical thinking skills to our students.

Communication. The focus on argument also increases the communicative value of the oral interpretation events. With a focus on argument comes a focus on what is being communicated to the audience through literature. "The interpreter develops and uses technique as a means of communicating the material; the material is not used as a means for displaying technique" (Lee and Gura 1987, p. 3). The first step begins in the introduction, where the student defines the argument being made. As the performance unfolds, the audience can focus on what is being communicated through the performance and what message is being sent via the literature. Good communication is the goal of forensics. Therefore, we feel the focus on argument is an important concept in keeping the focus away from sensationalism and overboard emotion. Douglas Leland (1984) addresses this issue when he says, "The philosophy of 'If it makes me cry, I'll give it a first' is an example of that which helps to perpetuate this problem. This emphasis on presenting literature merely to achieve a singular extreme audience response may be leading us away from the intent of artistic oral interpretation" (p. 6). He cites the example of the movie Friday the 13th and its strong emotional impact. Yet, who would claim this to be film making at its best? "This focus on extremism detracts from those elements which are intellectual and aesthetic" (p. 6). Emotion is one element, but we all know emotion with an argument behind it has a more powerful effect. Emphasizing communication also provides a stronger judging criteria. A judge can evaluate another aspect of the performance that does not include who made them cry or laugh. A performance
based in argument can be evaluated from the criteria of BOTH emotion and logic.

Finally, a focus on communication will better defend the place of the interpretation events in forensics. Clearly, we believe that literature can and does argue. If argument is used within these events, it will better enhance their rhetorical/forensic nature. We are not advocating that poetry be treated as persuasive speaking in rhyme, but we do suggest that the use of argument strengthens the association between the interpretation events and the other more overtly forensic events.

Competition. The final benefit is the enhancement of the competitive aspect of the interpretation events. The concept that literature can, and does argue, should help to "match" students with scenes that are right for them. Consequently, students will have a stronger understanding of the scene and how to perform it. Clarity, understanding, personal links to the speaker, and more passion for the literature, all should combine to create stronger and more believable performances.

Not only will the student be better oriented to the literature, but also the audience will be better prepared for what to expect. The focus on argument forces students to explain their points and work to support them through their literature and performance. We also believe the focus on argument will realign the interpretation events with the directives of the First and Second National Developmental Conferences on Forensics. The first conference in 1974 addresses our thesis by claiming that "A performance-centered approach ignores the argumentative perspective that underlies the foundation of forensic activities" (McBath 1975, p. 12). Richardson (1990) further explains "When method supplants message, the argument is no longer the crucial issue; the manner of argument dominates" (p. 7). The second conference on forensics established five general guidelines for the evaluation of oral interpretation events, of which only one mentions performance skills, explaining they should "enhance and not detract from the literature" (Parson 1984, p. 90). Again, Richardson (1990) notes, "Even according to criteria established by the forensic community, forensic competitors in oral interpretation are emphasizing the wrong artistic aspects" (p. 8). Focusing on argument will help to pull the interpretation events back into the established definitional criteria of forensics, enhancing their competitive nature.

Finally, argument allows students to justify the choices they have made in crafting their literature into the performance. At the 1990 AFA-NIET, we overheard a coach talking about a Program Oral Interp round he had just finished judging. His main complaint was that none of the students justified the choices they had made in building their programs. Focusing on argument allows students to explain, rationalize,
and justify the strategic choices they have made in their scenes. It allows the audience and critic a glimpse at the critical thinking processes of the student which should increase the strength of the performance and the audience's acceptance of it.

**Conclusion**

In order for oral interpretation legitimately to remain a communication activity in intercollegiate forensics, we must strengthen the focus of the event. We propose a movement toward a more argumentative form of oral interpretation. Both students and coaches will be rewarded for taking the time to make their programs argumentative in nature. "Literature is the result of someone (the author) creating a voice (the persona) to share something (the text) with someone (the listener)" (Valentine and Valentine 1981, p. 9). The goal is to find the best way for this to occur. We believe emphasizing the argumentative nature of literature within the interpretation events is the best way to achieve this important objective. In order to justify this position, we presented arguments based on three theoretical issues: argument in literature, oral interpretation as a rhetorical transaction, and the role of interpreter as creator. Finally, we presented ways in which we as educators can enhance the oral interpretation events by creating a balance between performance and argument. Through achieving this goal, it is our hope that the integrity of the interpretation events, as well as their legitimate place in forensics, will be fully justified.

**References**


