

WHAT IS ORAL INTERPRETATION OF LITERATURE?

Clark S. Carlile and Dana Hensley define oral interpretation of literature, or interp, as "Reading aloud from the printed page with the purpose of interpreting what is read so that its meaning is conveyed to those who are listening and watching."¹ From this definition, it is clear that the oral interpreter has a number of responsibilities, including the analysis and performance of a piece of literature. Teri and Michael Gamble describe what should be the end result of this process. They say, "As an oral interpreter, your responsibility is to make the words of an author live; your task is to breathe energy into each page of a selected script."² Thus, interpretation is a means of performing literature, distinct from both public speaking and acting, in which performers demonstrate to the audience their analysis, or interpretation, of a selection of literature and bring that selection to life. Any type of literature, including works in poetic, prose, and dramatic form, can be performed.

The National Forensic League offers two types of interpretation: Dramatic and Humorous Interpretation. Other tournaments offer many different types of oral interpretation, including Poetic Interpretation (the performance of any type of poetry), Duet Interpretation (an interpretation done by two students working as a team), and Prose Interpretation (serious or comical literature written as prose). There are specific considerations for each type of interp which will be discussed later in this chapter, but the fundamentals remain the same for each event.

RULES AND GUIDELINES

Time

As in most individual events, ten minutes is usually the maximum time allowed for an interpretation, and is the maximum in National Forensic League competitions. Even if a competition

establishes no minimum time, you should still select literature that is at least seven or eight minutes in length, as shorter works prevent you from bringing as much meaning to your performance and will put you at a competitive disadvantage. Also, competitors in interpretation are required to present an introduction to their performance, which is included in the overall performance time.

Literature

Selections for interpretation contests may be any type of literature, including short stories, novels, plays, scenes, monologs, and poetry, but must be printed and published. No changes, except cuts for the purpose of continuity or brevity, may be made to the literature. Most contests forbid you from performing a selection from the same source used in a previous competition year, but you probably wouldn't want to do this anyway as you want to choose literature that allows you to develop and improve from year to year. Finally, many contests, including those sanctioned by the National Forensic League, ask that you bring the original source of your literary selection. This means that you must have the entire book or script from which you took your literature. Photocopies are usually not allowed. Therefore, it is a good idea to carry your original source with you whenever you compete to avoid any disputes or problems.

WHY INTERPRETATION?

Interpretation of literature, more than any other event, allows you to really show your expressiveness as a performer. No other type of forensic event allows you to take the type of risks or to step outside yourself when you perform as interp does. For this reason, it is fun and very challenging in a different way than most other events. Still, these are not the only advantages or benefits of participation in interpretation events.

1. *Oral interpretation helps you understand literature.* To effectively interpret a piece of literature, you must spend hours analyzing the characters, plot, theme, and symbolism. Further, through cutting, you must determine how these elements interact and which selections are most vivid and powerful. Oral interpretation events build an understanding of literature that will certainly benefit you in

English classes throughout your high school and college years and also develop an appreciation of literature that will deepen and enrich your enjoyment of reading throughout your life.

2. Oral interpretation allows you to express your feelings about literature as you suggest the range and scope of literature in your performance. Not only does interp help you to better understand literature, it also allows you to demonstrate that understanding to the audience. If you have a particular love for a certain piece of literature, you can communicate that love to the audience through your performance. Charlotte Lee and Timothy Gura, in their book *Oral Interpretation*, note that this aspect of interp makes it a creative act. They say, "You have the privilege of choosing a meaningful example of literary art and bringing it, with its aesthetic qualities intact, to an audience. The introduction, transitions, and program arrangement become part of a new artistic product, which, though it owes its first responsibility to the creative artist, in fact becomes a creative act of the interpreter."

3. Oral interpretation builds performance skills. The emphasis oral interpretation places upon your use of both voice and body in bringing life to literature helps to hone your skills in all types of performance situations, including oratory and acting. While other forensic events focus as much, or more, on content as delivery, the primary concern for an interpreter is the presentation. As you participate in oral interpretation, you will find that you are more confident, expressive, and natural as a speaker and performer.