

MAINTAINING INTEGRITY IN FORENSICS INTERPRETATION: ARGUMENTS AGAINST ORIGINAL LITERATURE

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The most recent and critical issue facing the discussion of Oral Interpretation is the issue of using original material in competition. As Green & Ford (1987) note, the issue has been debated informally for years. In the past year, the topic has received more formal attention at national organization meetings, at conventions, and in professional literature (e.g. the Editor's Forum, *National Forensic Journal*, Spring, 1988). At this time, the use of original literature in competition may be relatively rare (Green and Ford's 1987 survey reported less than 3% use in interpretation events), but it does occur. In order to offset potential harms created by the use of original literature, the issue must be fully examined at this time, rather than left unchecked and uncontrolled.

The focus of this study is to argue against student use of original literature because of the impact that it makes on the integrity of the competitor and on the forensics experience as a whole. While this author is not entirely against its usage, pitfalls outweigh the advantages. Following a brief operational definition of original literature, this impact on integrity will be discussed as it relates to the essence of interpretation, the forensics environment, and the ethical concerns that this issue raises.

While both the National Forensic Association and the American Forensic Association have deemed original literature acceptable for competition, neither organization has offered a concrete definition of such materials. In this essay, one or more of the following conditions must be present for a selection to be defined as original literature:

- 1) material is written by the competitor,
- 2) material is written by someone other than the competitor for the primary purpose of forensics competition, or
- 3) material has not undergone traditional literary scrutiny (i.e., has not been published or received recognition and acclaim).

Of course, more gray areas exist (e.g., viability of student publications, competitors who publish materials). These questions need to be addressed at the individual case level. The definition

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provided here establishes a baseline against which to judge those cases and assess their impact on the integrity of forensics. The analysis that follows is to provide coaches with further insight to allow them to make such decisions. Primary emphasis in this study is on the student author, though the commentary throughout is relevant to all components of the definition.

ESSENCE OF INTERPRETATION

One of the primary concerns that must be addressed in the use of original student material is its potential to contradict the very core of Oral Interpretation—namely, the analysis of literature. As Yordon (1982) states, "Interpretation is an artistic process of studying literature through performance and sharing that study with an audience (p. 12)." As various oral interpretation textbooks imply, this includes an ability to study both the intrinsic factors of a selection (e.g., plotline, personae, mood, rhythm) and the extrinsic factors (e.g., historical-biographical information, culture, the writer's life). When students write a selection of prose, poetry, or drama for themselves (or have someone else write it for them), they deprive themselves of the opportunity truly to analyze the literature.

Lee and Gura (1982) define interpretation as "the art of communicating to an audience a work of literary art in its intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic entirety (p. 3)." The only way to understand that complex entirety is through an appropriate analysis of the literature in question. One might argue that, when a student writes his/her own literature, he/she analyzes and creates at the same time. These appear to be two distinct processes, and the "analysis" stage would merely be an extension of the original creation; there would be limited opportunity for true insight.

Yordon (1982) summarizes the process when she states, "The more time you spend with a piece of literature, the more you learn about it. One performance of a literary work might be completely different from both someone else's and from subsequent ones you do of the same text. It's a matter of interpretation (p. 13)!" Hence, the core of interpretation begins with the study of literature, not the creation of it. Though there is a degree of complement between writing literature and the analysis and interpretation of it, they are inherently different processes. As Lee and Gura (1982) explain:

The writer of a literary selection is a creative artist who orders ideas, words, sounds, and rhythms into a particular form, putting them into written symbols. The interpreter,

in turn, takes these symbols printed on a page and brings personal experience and insight to bear on the clues the author has given. He or she then submits subjective experience and responses to the order imposed by the creative artist and assumes the responsibility of re-creating the literary entity (p. 3).

When the student interpreter ignores this distinction by presenting original works, the value of both the literature and its interpretation may suffer as a result.

The integrity of the process of interpretation is undermined when a student attempts to shortcut the pedagogical experience. When a student bypasses the essential "study" phase of oral interpretation, he limits his own ability to develop what Long and Hopkins (1982) call "literary competence," which is the improvement in the ability to read new texts. As they state, "Acts of performance not only help you to realize more fully whatever text you are performing, but also foster competence in dealing with other texts encountered (p. 356)." If a student does not study the intrinsic and extrinsic elements of literature from the beginning, he will not develop the skills to continue doing so in the future.

The integrity of interpretation was upheld at the Second National Developmental Conference in Forensics in 1974. Their report states that, in addition to providing effective vocal and physical expressions, the "oral performance of literature requires that students understand literary analysis, history, the emotional and intellectual aspects of literature." The report also indicates that students "must acquire knowledge of literary form and style." The end product of this rationale is for complete literary understanding, a level transcending that achievable by the student who writes or interprets original pieces.

FORENSICS ENVIRONMENT

Regardless of whether or not original literature violates the essence of interpretation (some would say literary analysis is moot; students do not do it anyway), writing one's own selections becomes problematic because it is an inappropriate genre to bring into the forensics environment. To expand on this notion, two questions must be addressed. First, what is the purpose of oral interpretation in forensics, and second, why do students write their own literature?

The answer to the first question is that oral interpretation promotes oral communication skills relative to conveying imagery and tone of literary genres. The emphasis is on the efficacy of the per-

formance. While the quality of the literature itself is a consideration, the primary focus is not on "what the literature is," but rather, "how well is that literature conveyed." With that in mind, let us move to why students write their own pieces. There seem to be two primary reasons.

First, students write "pieces for interpretation" as compared to writing "pieces of literature." That is, rather than writing to promote an art form and/or for publication, they write for the sake of competition. In this case, the student not only confuses the writer/interpreter dichotomy stressed in the previous section, but the student is potentially engaging in unethical competitive behavior.

The second reason students write their own literature is because they are trying to create literary works worthy of public distribution. Perhaps they wish to become a playwright, or hope to publish a book of poems. These are definitely admirable goals, but the forensics environment is not the appropriate testing ground for their work. Since the emphasis is on performance more than on the literature, the feedback they receive will be skewed at best and irrelevant at worst. The student's judging pool may not have the competence or skills necessary to provide the type of literary critique needed. Even if the judges are qualified to evaluate the merit of an original piece, they are not going to do so under tournament conditions where they are expected to critique performance. Beyond that, the students' ulterior motive of literary critique for their work continues to impinge upon the integrity of the event as a whole. Literature is being presented for self-gain rather than self-enlightenment and growth.

Another issue relative to the forensics environment concerns norms governing the quality of literature presented. While "literary merit" is an ambiguous term, the implication is that the selections have an innate quality. Of course, as Gottlieb (1980) points out, "Just because a story or poem is printed in an anthology does not ensure that it is a 'good' piece of literature (p. 28)." He clarifies his statement, however, when he adds that "you are in a better position if your selections have been judged worthy by others in the literary world. Selections from the works of well-known authors or from anthologies where judgments other than your own were made about the selection are your best choices (Gottlieb, 1980, p. 28)." This idea is reiterated by Skinner (1986), who maintains that, "literature that is not college anthology quality is inappropriate for collegiate competition (p. 56)."

This argument is not meant to indict the writing abilities of some of our college competitors. No doubt some of them have the

skills needed to become proficient authors. The catch is that their proficiency level has not been validated by the literary community. Without such rigorous testing, there is a good chance that original literature will be of substandard quality. The result is despondent students and wearied judges. And again, the student who uses the forensics audience to provide literary recognition has targeted the wrong audience.

Finally, the integrity level within the forensics community is endangered when students present original literature because of the stress it adds to the competitor/judge relationship. Already the joke is circulating about the student who had written his own literature selection and received a ballot which read, "You haven't captured the intent of the author." Depending upon the teller of the joke, the student is either viewed as a no-talent interpreter, or the judge is viewed as an incompetent. Neither of these perspectives deviates far from the potential conflict that could arise when students present original literature. If a student writes a piece for himself and a judge feels that it was not interpreted correctly, who is right? This is truly a no-win situation which can result in a decrease in respect between the judge and the competitor.

A related issue concerns whether or not the competitor should identify himself as the author. This is a Catch-22 situation. If he identifies the work as his own, the judge is placed in an uncomfortable position as he or she critiques the literature. Whether the selection is quality material or not, the judge will no doubt feel uneasy expressing much criticism about the literature, knowing that the student is ego-involved with it. This author experienced a round in which a female competitor identified the author as her father, pointing out that presenting this selection was one way of showing him praise. I felt greatly hindered in terms of what I could and could not write about this selection. How could I criticize the piece without criticizing her father? The same holds true when the student is the author. Criticism will probably be viewed as personal attack; yet it is unfair to make judges feel that they should limit their comments for the sake of the student's ego.

One response to these concerns is to tell students who write original literature to use pseudonyms. This way, the judge is not placed in that uncomfortable position. This solution is hardly a panacea. First, because the judge is not pressured to water down his or her commentary, the student (who remains ego-involved with the selection) may be truly offended by the critique. Second, the behavior itself is deceptive and contradicts the ethical standards outlined within the forensic community.

ETHICAL CONCERNS

There are a number of ethical issues that must be considered before a student can be allowed to perform original works in oral interp. Most deal with the fact that the behaviors, or motivations behind the behaviors, are inappropriate when viewed by ethical forensics guidelines. These guidelines are identified in the brochure, "The Ethics of Forensics," produced from the Second National Developmental Conference on Forensics in 1974. If the behaviors of competitors and their coaching staffs are unethical in nature, the integrity of the forensics experience is diminished substantially.

Returning to the issue of students using pseudonyms, we can see that this simple behavior violates ethical standards on several counts. While the reasons for using a pen-name in the literary world may be varied, the intent in forensics seems to be related to the judging concerns listed above: the student wants to hide the fact that he/she is the author from the judge. "The Ethics of Forensics" handout states that, "it is the duty of each student to participate honestly, fairly, and in such a way as to avoid communication behaviors that are deceptive, misleading, or dishonest." When students consciously attempts to mask authorship, they are engaging in unethical conduct.

In addition to being deceptive at a general level, the behavior of clouding sources is specifically addressed in the ethics guidelines:

Advocates should clearly identify, during their speeches, the sources of all evidence they use. Such identification should include information relevant to the credibility of the author, if available, the source of publication and the date. Omitting the source of evidence denies the audience the opportunity to evaluate the quality of the information.

While the definitions above apply primarily to original events, the essence of the decree is easily applied to oral interpretation. If we expect to know the sources of evidence from our public address speakers so that we can most sufficiently judge the material, should we not expect similar types of source verification from our oral interpreters?

The ethical concerns go beyond the problem of the use of pseudonyms. This returns us to the question of why students write their own literature. As mentioned previously, some may wish to use forensics as the testing ground for their literary endeavors. Others may merely be writing literature for the sake of competi-

tion. If this latter purpose is their motivation, it could be construed as unethical behavior because the focus is on success rather than education. Simply put, the students who write a selection write to the norms and conventions of the circuit in which they compete. The goal is not to produce "literature" per se, but to produce a winning piece. The student has bypassed the intellectual endeavor for the sake of the end result.

According to the Second National Developmental Conference, limiting these unethical behaviors is the responsibility of the coaching staff. As the ethics handout indicates, "Because forensics is primarily an educational activity, educators in their capacities as coaches should emphasize learning before competitive success, and should teach this view to their students." A coach would be hard-pressed to argue adequately that writing a personal selection for the sake of gathering trophies is a commendable option over literary analysis and legitimate interpretation. The ethics handout discusses further the duties of the coaching staff when it states that it "is the primary responsibility of the educator as coach, rather than as judge, to regulate the content of student speeches." If the system were operating correctly, the potential judge/competitor relational stress discussed in the previous section would not occur; the coaching staff would eliminate the problem before it began.

In addition to placing success before learning, the idea of creating "winning forensics pieces" poses an additional moral dilemma. After receiving feedback from a pool of judges regarding a selection, what does a student work on to improve the selection? Does the student merely practice the performance, or does the student rewrite the material to suit the desires of the judges? While nothing in the Conference's guidelines specifically addresses this issue, the following criterion can be used at this point in the argument:

Student interpreters should maintain a respect for the integrity of literature. Because a piece of work represents the personal expression of an author, students should not rewrite portions of an author's work and represent those alterations as if they were the product of the author.

At face value, the statement above does not preclude the use of original literature, but it does raise several interesting points. Primarily, it implies that a piece of literature is a stable entity. Interpretations may vary, but the text was written as an end product; it was not meant to be revamped and manipulated.

When a student writes a selection for competition purposes only, and continues to rewrite it, he or she is not "adapting to the audience," as some advocates might claim. Rather, the student is not adapting to the audience as one expects an oral interpreter to do, e.g., through voice, timing, and minor physicalizations. The student is manipulating the allegedly stable text in order to make improvements. This is particularly inappropriate and detrimental when you consider that fellow competitors who are using established and published literature are limited by their ethical constraints and their abilities as interpreters. Thus, the student author has an unfair advantage in the way he or she is able to work on and rewrite the "literature." Not only has the student been allowed to bypass true literary criticism and write selections for a specific audience, but is now allowed to "improve" those selections in a manner inconsistent with the spirit of the event.

As mentioned previously, the original literature in interpretation controversy is a two-sided coin. No doubt, several reasons exist for allowing students to write their own pieces, to promote student creativity, create intrinsic interest, to provide therapeutic self-discovery, and even to bring some fresh new pieces to the forensics scene. However, the disadvantages appear to outweigh the advantages. Not only does the concept impede the essence of literary analysis in interpretation, but it also places stress on the forensics environment in terms of ulterior motives and competitor/judge relationships and raises ethical questions regarding pseudonyms, success, coaching responsibilities, and rewrites. This subject will not be without its own slew of heated discussions over the next several years, but one can hardly overlook its potential detrimental consequences to the integrity of oral interpretation in forensics competition.

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