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## THE PERFORMANCE ROLE OF READER'S THEATRE IN A LITERATURE CLASSROOM

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The traditional classroom role of oral interpretation of literature appears to view performance from rhetorical perspectives that reflect classical tenets of oral persuasion, public speaking and recitative reading. Although acknowledging the values of appreciation, recognition, and understanding a literary text's inherent "dramatic" qualities, there is less agreement on the classroom performance skills needed to give life and meaning to the feelings and thoughts of a literary character. For some, oral interpretation of literature in a classroom setting remains an informal act of vocal "re-creation," the performer's voice merely a convenient instrument to read aloud the author's printed words to an audience of listeners. Others view oral interpretation of literature as a formal classroom "performance" that shares a decidedly theatrical impulse with conventional acting theories like role-playing or character-building, and that emphasizes physical as well as vocal techniques to give more dimension to the interpretation of a literary character.

Today, however, the basic principles of Reader's Theatre have begun to translate the classroom oral interpretation of literature from obscure words on a printed page into an exciting performance laboratory. Whether constructed on the solid foundation of more traditional theories or inspired by experimental discoveries, today's Reader's Theatre cultivates the most imaginative instructional techniques available for students to see, hear, and feel literature in classroom performance. Although there is no prescribed formula needed to give vocal and physical shape or substance to a literary text, the theatrical impulse in Reader's Theatre is interested in pursuing the artistic and dramatic visualization of the actions, attitudes and emotions of literary characters in classroom performance. The Reader's Theatre theatrical impulse is also the same one shared with current theatre practice in terms of an interpretative focus on a written text; attention given to imagery, pictorial composition and theme; vocal and physical attributes that capture a three-dimensional character portrait; and an accurate, informed audience response to text and performance.

The primary pedagogical principle of Reader's Theatre is that it "dramatizes" literature to provide both a visual and an oral stimulus for students who may be unaccustomed to using their imagination to experience literary works like novels, poems, essays or short stories. Promoting a suggestive, "theatrical mind" approach to classroom performance of literature is an exciting discipline, relying as it does on the perspective that to "see"

literature is as stimulating as to read literature aloud. In addition, basic Reader's Theatre conventions at play in classroom performance give unexpected life and meaning to an oral interpretation of the literary experience described by the author's words. Reader's Theatre also stimulates student listeners to actively participate in the aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual content of a literary text when it is dramatized in a classroom performance.

### **Reader's Theatre Conventions**

There are a number of Reader's Theatre conventions that may emerge as subtle or frequently disguised clues and point the way to more theatrical classroom performances. For example, a single student may play a number of different roles in a text. Students may have individual lines of narration and dialogue, or they may share narration and dialogue with other performers. Sometimes the setting, mood or even other characters suggested in the text may be directed into the audience to promote listener identification; and at other times students may wear suggestive costumes or makeup to suggest a more physical presence for their literary character portraits.

#### **Scripts**

Students may either hold their scripts or place them on lecterns or music stands. Although the script is usually visible in a classroom performance, it should not indicate that the emphasis is merely on reading literature aloud. After all, it is a "performance"; and that suggests a memorized text, performers assuming clearly defined character roles and the theatrical reality of believable dramatic action. If the hand-held script is an essential element in the classroom performance, and cannot be used effectively as a character hand prop, then the use of chairs or stools may be more appropriate. Students may also be so familiar with the script that they grace down occasionally to voice parts of the text while delivering other parts from memory.

#### **Staging**

Classroom staging usually features students who stand in line facing the audience, sit on stools, combine sitting and standing or an occasional use of movement to suggest the pictorial composition of abstract images or character attitudes. Staging, however, may include an elevated platform framed by a miniature proscenium arch at one end of the classroom; a playing space arranged in-the-round, three-quarters round or in a semi-circle; or feature ramps, step-units, fabric panels, door frames, draperies and painted backdrops that depict the selected locales of a literary text. Theatrical elements like lighting, projections, music, sound or special effects may also be used to depict the locales indicated in a literary text.

The artistic line between staging that is "literal" or "localized" is a very thin one in classroom performance. A single white picket fence in a scripted adaptation of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* or a gnarled tree stump in Henry James' "The Beast in the Jungle" may, at first glance, represent a specific locale but does little to give substantial meaning to the complex issues of free will and fantasy addressed in these respective texts. It is important, therefore, that staging become an intrinsic aspect of the visual presentation of literary texts in classroom performance.

#### **Movement**

Movement is an essential ingredient in classroom performance of literature and is used whenever it adds a dramatic dimension to the scripted text. When used creatively, movement may crystallize an abstract or symbolic point of view expressed by the author. For example, in T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," having student performers stagger forward to announce themselves "leaning together" or swaying "like wind in dry grass" may be effective in conveying the arid sense of desolation and pessimism suggested by the text.

When clearly motivated, classroom movement can create a theatrical sense of motion that reinforces or redirects a listener's understanding of a literary text; and it can provide an energetic tempo for classroom performance of literature as well. Movement is also an invaluable tool to suggest changing character relationships or to externalize the storyline of a literary text. Regardless of the degree of movement suggested in the literature, however, there should always be a balance between movement that enhances the character experience

described by the author and movement that sets the literary scene in the viewer's imagination. Although the role of movement in classroom performance is always a relative one, when movement provides an accurate visual demonstration of the physical and psychological relationship of characters, it gives life and meaning to the author's narrative description of the relationship.

### Selecting Literature for Classroom Performance

The range of literature available in Reader's Theatre is dependent only on the dramatic imagination needed to visualize novels, poems, short stories, song lyrics, diaries, journal articles or other literary materials appropriate for classroom performance. The challenge of selecting Reader's Theatre classroom literature is to go beyond the choice of handy, traditional theatre scripts or monologues and to make any genre of literature more "dramatic" by looking for the basic ingredients usually associated with a theatrical performance: (1) inherent dramatic appeal; (2) degree of action; (3) quality of visual images; (4) catalogue of attitudes, actions or moods; (5) nature of the language; (6) sequence of events or incidents; and (7) three-dimensional character portrait.

#### Short Stories

The short story is the most popular genre to adapt for Reader's Theatre because of its brevity, descriptive narration and explicit characterization. There are, of course, inherent problems with narrative description and short exchanges of dialogue in short stories. A good classroom performance rule of thumb in Reader's Theatre is narrative description that reflects the author's point of view is best expressed by a narrator; and short character exchanges of dialogue, especially those introduced in the narration, are best expressed by the individual performing the literary character.

Narrator figures are also good choices to indicate multiple scene changes or to reveal a literary character's interior feelings or thoughts. The narrator may also voice the cut dialogue of minor characters or describe the deleted action. If a short story contains only occasional passages of character dialogue, two or more narrator figures may be used to share the narrative description. Short stories may also be adapted to provide more characters by having implied thoughts, recollections, or reflections voiced by individual students or by small groups. Short stories that share a close relationship between a narrator figure and other characters in the literary text, like Truman Capote's "A Christmas Memory" or Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P. O.," are especially good choices for Reader's Theatre classroom performance.

#### Poems

*Long* poems that tell a story with dialogue are easily adapted to Reader's Theatre using a narrator and a small group of performers, or they may be adapted for multiple performers to voice individual stanzas, lines of dialogue or narrative description. *Short* poems are well-suited for solo performance and provide inventive transitions to use when adapting short stories or novels for classroom performance. Short poems may also feature a favorite author in a classroom "Reading Hour" performance. For example, "An Afternoon with Robert Frost" may include a number of familiar poems like "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "Mending Wall" as well as less familiar poems like "The Pasture" and "Home Burial" to dramatize the author's rural New England poetic rhythms and ordinary speech patterns.

Short poems may also provide a thematic motif like "Voices of Freedom" or "What Price Glory?" in ten or fifteen-minute classroom performances. The performance potential for long and short poems presents an opportunity to suggest a theme and divide students into small group ensembles responsible for selecting literature that represents the theme and then adapting the literature for classroom performance. It is especially important in small group assignments that short poems provide dramatic solo performance opportunities and also serve as appropriate transitions to introduce longer poems.

#### Novels

The basic principles of adapting a novel are similar to those of the short story, but present special problems due

to length and number of characters. The novel may be adapted to include only representative episodes or to focus on the “thread of action” that suggests a sequence of incidents or events that give the story line its continuity. Student performers generally portray multiple roles in the adaptation of novels, and there are usually a series of individual narrators to provide the necessary transitions and descriptive narration. Of course, minor figures may be deleted and a chorus of voices be assigned to perform the deleted lines of dialogue or description.

An adaptation of John Steinbeck's novel *Travels with Charley*, for example, may dramatize only those adventures in which the title character actively participates, or those selected dramatic incidents or events that give additional meaning to the title character's intention and motivation. A narrator figure may be used to portray Charley, and a group of student performers may be used to portray individual characters involved in each dramatic episode. It is important to remember, however, than any adaptation of incidents, episodes, events or even dramatic “moments” should remain faithful to the author's point of view as it has been revealed in a detailed analysis of the entire novel.

Adapting the novel presents a number of imaginative classroom performance opportunities to feature a literary text. Narrative passages may be placed in the present tense to heighten the sense of urgency in the story line, and long, vivid passages of description may be assigned to a number of student performers who voice single lines of dialogue or narrative and occasionally speak in unison. Student performers may also vocalize sound effects implied in the text or sing lines of dialogue to establish character attitude or mood. There are a number of literary texts that may provide a creative stimulus for this classroom approach to adaptation. For example, consider the introspective language and awkward gawky action suggested in Richard Bach's narrative *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*; the self-revealing interior monologues of the title character in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*; or the “gathering the harvest” episodes sprinkled periodically throughout Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*.

### **Non-Dramatic Texts**

Although diaries, essays, letters, newspaper editorials, song lyrics, slogans, and historical documents are generally considered non-dramatic, they are an imaginative source of Reader's Theatre material for classroom performance when the selected texts exhibit a clearly defined point of view, suggest action or the potential for conflict, or suggest a skeleton outline of interesting characters and episodes that can be fleshed out in classroom rehearsal.

Historical letters and diaries arranged in chronological order to tell a story that depicts complex character relationships or that share intimate thoughts, like the letters of Edith and Osbert Sitwell, are interesting Reader's Theatre fare. Patriotic historical documents, like Davy Crockett's “Speech to the Congress” and Winston Churchill's “Address on Dunkirk,” or personal essays like Boris Pasternak's “Memories” and Dr. Martin Luther King's “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” are also representative examples of non-dramatic texts appropriate for classroom performance.

Adapting non-dramatic materials for Reader's Theatre involves careful editing to isolate potential theatrical moments in the lives of the characters and timely transitions between incidents that punctuate the dramatic action described. Classroom adaptations of non-dramatic materials should consider the potential for vocal and physical performance as well. For example, an adaptation of Helen Keller's autobiographical description of herself in selected diaries, journals or newspaper interviews should provide a compelling and historically informed classroom performance blueprint of the blind humanitarian in terms of vocal quality, physical stature, colorful language and vivid dramatic action.

### **Postscript**

Perhaps the most exciting instructional principle in a Reader's Theatre classroom performance is that it challenges students to make choices. Although the literary text provides numerous signal lights that direct

interpretation traffic through a detailed analysis of the literature, the signposts that lead students to an inspired classroom performance are often obscure and may not always reach the desired destination. It is important, therefore, to provide ample classroom performance opportunities for students to visualize the actions and incidents suggested in literary texts, and to encourage students to pay special attention to the subtle nuances of character intention or motivation suggested in a literary text in order to promote a more three-dimensional interpretation of the selected literature.

As critical as literary analysis may be in understanding a text, it is the inherent theatrical impulse Reader's Theatre brings to the selection, staging, and performance of classroom literature that is most likely to result in a student's active engagement in the interpretation of a text. It is important, therefore, to promote a risk-free classroom environment in which students can experiment with a literary text to more fully realize its performance potential. Reader's Theatre discoveries made in classroom performance activities should also help to cement the foundational building blocks needed to encourage students to pursue a theatrical as well as an analytical approach to visualizing literary texts.

### **Suggested Readings**

Gilbert, Carolyn. *Communicative Performance of Literature*. New York: Macmillan, 1997.

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Ratliff, Gerald Lee. *An Introduction to Reader's Theatre: A Guide to Classroom Performance*. Colorado Springs, CO: Meriwether Publishers, Ltd., 2004.

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