

INTERPRETATION OF POETRY

by Ruby C. Krider

"Just pick a good poem and read it to the judge." Those students are easily recognized, for that is just what they do: READ a poem. They do not INTERPRET it.

The most telling mark of a beginning interpreter is a singsong rhythmic, monotonous pattern -- de dum, de dum, de dum dum dum. To break that singsong pattern, an interpreter must always remember to keep the story line clear despite what might be a regular rhythm. To do that, an interpreter has only to mark the poem's phrases and to remember that a phrase is a group of words expressing one thought. The end of a phrase does not always come at a line's end. As an example:

Not what we have, but what we use
Not what we see, but what we choose
These are the things that mar or bless
The sum of human happiness.
The phrases (ideas) would be indicated like this:

Not what we have / but what we use /
Not what we see but what we can choose.

These are the things that mar / or bless
The sum of human happiness.

The pause should be after mar, remembering what is being marred or blessed is "The sum of human happiness." My experience has been that at least half the student readers pause after bless because the line ends there. This makes no sense to leave the verb "bless" hanging in midair with the listener having no idea what is being blessed.

As another example of phrasing, I use Milton Sill's poem "Opportunity."

That blue blade that the King's son bears but this

Blunt Thing! He snapt and flung it from his hand.

And lowering, crept away and left the field.

If one were to pause at the end of line one, leaving "but this" standing along, it would not make good sense. The thought needs to be carried over into the next line. Ezra Pound advised, "Don't make each line stop dead at the end, and then begin the next line with a heave. Let the beginning of the next line catch the rise of the rhythm wave, unless you want a definite longish pause." Interpreters of poetry need to take Pounds' advice. Far too often I hear readers breaking ideas, thinking it a must to pause

at a line's end.

In order to do justice to a poet, a reader must recognize the "phrasal pause." The pause is one of the most effective tools for the interpreter. Do not be afraid to hold the pause. Just be sure something is going on in your mind that has to do with the poem. I remember Alvina Kraus, the great Northwestern University drama professor, whose praises are often sung by Charlton Heston. Her admonition to us was, "Learn to use the pause: it is indispensable to artistic performance."

Different poems call for different rates of reading. For example, in Browning's "Pied Piper of Hamelin," when the persona reports:
"They fought the dogs and killed the cats/
bit the babies in their cradles/
and licked the soup from the cooks' own ladles,"
a rapid rate would be used.

But
"bowed with the weight of centuries/
He leans on his hoe and gazes at the ground/
The emptiness of the ages in his face"

in Edwin Markham's "The Man with the Hoe," would necessitate a slow rate.

Search the poem for information about the persona. Using that information, create the persona. Characterize the speaker in the poem only if it contains information to support that characterization. Know what motivates the persona's thinking.

As people interpret literature of all genre, I want to see their brain wheels go round. If they say, "I think," I want to believe they are really thinking. If they describe "a few white clouds all rushing eastward," as in Theodore Roethke's "Child on Top of a Greenhouse," I want to believe they SEE the clouds. If the child persona describes the "wind billowing out of the seat of my britches," as in the Roethke poem, I want to believe that the reader is mentally feeling the wind. Make your utterings believable! If you can make me feel with the persona in a poem that you are interpreting, you have hit the jackpot!

Interpreters of all literature need to be aware of images, and this is especially true of poetry reading. It may be a sound image, as Poe's use of the alliterative "s" to make us hear in our imaginations the rustle of the curtains. In "The silken, sad uncer-

tain rustling of each purple curtain," the poet is manipulating the sound, but the interpreter must utter that alliterative "s" so the listeners will hear the curtain in their imagination. Just as an artist paints scenes that he envisions, authors paint vivid pictures with words. These word pictures, these images are the very heart of literature.

Make all your descriptive passages so vivid that a member of your audience can hear, see, smell, taste, and feel all the word pictures the author has drawn. Interpreters of poetry, as well as prose, must remember that words have character and put real meaning into each word. If you are describing something that is smooth, stretch the "oo" sound to make the word convey something that is smooth as velvet. Remember there are words that lift, words that droop, words that bounce, and even words that sneak. These are words that flicker, prance, leap, and swing. Give them character! Utter words so that listeners who do not know the meaning of the word can fathom meaning. Words have color. Learn to portray the thought of a word with the sound of your voice.

Sensual images project emotional responses making the reader feel shivery or frightened, sad or light hearted. The oral interpreter must project these images of word pictures to the minds of his listeners (in many cases the judge). If I am that judge, I want to visualize your images. I want to feel the emotion in the pit of my stomach.

Remember that an image is a phrase that excites the senses. Just as an author manipulates vowels, consonants, words, and phrases to paint his verbal picture, the interpreter or reader should manipulate these same vowels, consonants, words, and phrases to paint a vocal picture in his own mind's eye and in the mind's eye of his listeners. Make me understand the thought carried in the poem. Make me visualize its imaging, and experience its emotion. That is what oral interpretation is all about. Charlotte Lee puts it this way, "Interpretation is the art of communicating to an audience a work of literary art in its intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic entirety." When we interpret poetry, we should do just that.

(The legendary "Miss Ruby" Krider, a member of the NFL Hall of Fame, authored the text Creative Drama.)