

Delivery vs. Invention: Which Canon Is Most Important in Performance Poetry (Spoken Word)?

Aristotle's five canons are the five stages in which a persuasive speech is divided into during the speech preparation process. These five canons are invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery (Bizzell & Herzberg 3). Some theorists have argued that memory and delivery aren't as important as arrangement, style, and invention. Classical rhetoric believes there are three forms of persuasive appeal: to reason (logos), to emotion (pathos), and to the speaker's authority (ethos). In the classical system, invention (first stage of composing) is the most important because logical appeals are considered most important, and rational arguments (appeals to logos) are developed during invention (Bizzell & Herzberg 4). Delivery is said to deal more with the emotional appeal (pathos) and therefore isn't as important as invention. Memory and delivery have been deemed as more effective in public speaking. In disagreement with the classical system/rhetoricians, I believe that the rhetorical situation determines which canons are more important at a given time. The most important canons in performance poetry are invention and delivery. When orally presenting poetry to a live audience, delivery plays a larger role in persuasion than invention.

As the crowd gathered and neo-soul music seeped from the speakers of the stereo in the corner, I sat impatiently in my seat, ready to share my new poems. It was another Friday night at Medium's Art Gallery, and I had old thoughts to express through new poems. While waiting for my time to come, I contemplated how I would read my poems to make the crowd feel whatever emotions that seized my body and controlled my pen at the time of poetic conception.

Between contemplation, I listened to the poets who performed before me and noticed how they recited from memory or read their poems. I noticed how it seemed that the individuals who recited from memory “stirred the crowd” more. In other words, the crowd seemed to relate more or so it appeared from the crowd’s response during and after the performance. A person who doesn’t have to hold a paper in his/her hand can use his/her body to help emphasize his/her words. This person can use gestures and profound facial expressions to enhance getting the point(s) across. When a performer has to read, there are restrictions on the amount and extent of hand gestures because of one or no hands being free. It is harder to show a variety of facial expressions because of having to keep eyes on the paper to read while trying to make some eye contact with the audience. It requires more concentration.

I witnessed performers who wrote well (had something worthwhile to say and said it intellectually) and read well and saw them receive the same enthusiasm or almost the same enthusiasm from the crowd as the individuals who recited from memory. Then again, I witnessed some who wrote amateurishly but recited it from memory or read it like it was the greatest words every written or said and received the same enthusiasm. On another hand, I witnessed individuals who would write well but wouldn’t connect with the audience while reading or reciting from memory. Their words would have no effect or would even appear as almost not heard. As I analyzed what my eyes and ears witnessed, questions unfolded “right before my eyes:”

- What makes some poets better performers than others during spoken word or poetry performance?

- Which canon out of invention and delivery plays the larger role in how well a poet persuades an audience/crowd during spoken word?
- What factors enhance poetry performance (spoken word)?

Performance poetry is an art form that has been in existence since the 1990's. It is considered a descendent of oral poetry because of it not being fully considered poetry by poets who create poetry for print. This is because a lot of performance poets invent prose and perform it instead of what academic poets call poetry. Outside of what academic poets think, spoken word or performance poetry is considered an "in-your-face style" of contemporary poetry. With spoken word, there is an emphasis on performance where the poems are usually confessionals and stream-of-consciousness style poems (Miazgama 1-2).

Invention is "the search for persuasive ways to present information and formulate arguments" (Bizzell & Herzberg 3). Invention deals with the methods of an argument's discovery more so than the argument itself. When a poet is discovering what material to invent, the poet considers the rhetorical situation: text (written, oral, or visual), the author of the text (speaker, writer, or etc.), and the audience (intended audience or actual audience), and context in which the text was created (Kinney 1). Delivery is the last of the five canons and involves the "use of effective gestures and vocal modulation to present the speech" (Bizzell & Herzberg 3). Delivery is based on how something is said instead of what is said. In ancient times, an important factor of a speech's meaning or effect lied on how the speech was delivered (Burton 1). This is still true today based on where the speech is delivered and to whom it is delivered to. The meaning or effect of a speech isn't

truly relayed or received to/by a listener if not delivered in a way to indicate how the creator meant for it to be received.

In "Communicating in Classical Contexts: The Centrality of Delivery," Christopher Johnstone questions why delivery is overlooked in contemporary rhetorical studies and public address when delivery is actually *key* in public address. As a professor of Speech Communication, Johnstone taught a course in speech criticism and was surprised that none of the authors they (he and his students) read considered the role of oral delivery in explaining the rhetorical impact of speech. He couldn't help but notice the importance of delivery as a factor in communication effectiveness when he and his class watched and discussed Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech. "One cannot adequately account for the emotional power and persuasiveness of this speech except by considering how King used his voice to express the rhythms of the language he chose and to carry the audience through a series of emotional crescendos..." (Johnstone 121). Professors of Speech Communication study and teach public speaking and public address. Their interest is largely in the spoken word. They are fascinated with how humans speak and listen to each other. The speaking and listening process involves the speaker and listener, which are the two factors necessary for delivery. Delivery has long been considered as one of the most important elements of public speech. According to Aristotle, the role of delivery is "of the greatest importance" in speech (Johnstone 122). Performance poetry is poetry that is presented orally to a live audience and is an act of speech communication. The audience is a public audience; therefore, the speaker participates in public speaking practices to orally present the material. If

delivery is “of the greatest importance” in speech, then delivery is “of the greatest importance” in performance poetry.

Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and the writer of *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* observe that delivery is the most important element in speech or oratory and is strongly connected to emotional appeal (pathos). In *Rhetoric*, there is emphasis on the audience’s emotions as well as the speaker’s character being affected by the speech. Even though Aristotle does not think it is ethical to manipulate the audience, he does recognize that speaking affects its hearers and knowing how to deliver speeches that will affect hearers is a part of rhetoric (Nehamas 261). In Aristotle’s *The “Art” of Rhetoric*, he explains that there are three things that are important in speech: sources of proof, style, and arrangement of the parts of the speech. He goes on to say that it is important to know what to say (invention) and also how to say it (delivery). The arrangement by style and delivery, “which is of the greatest importance” give speeches their persuasiveness (Freese 345).

In addition to Aristotle, Cicero provides the means of securing favor of the audience in *De Oratore*. Feelings are won over by a man’s character, but this character is demonstrated through his delivery of speech:

More over so much is done by good taste and style in speaking, that the speech seems to depict the speaker’s character. For by means of particular types of thought and diction, and the employment besides of a delivery that is unruffled and eloquent of good-nature, the speakers are made to appear upright, well-bred and virtuous men (Cicero 329).

Johnstone quotes Cicero and the author of *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* on stating that delivery is the most important element in eloquence. Johnstone also quotes Quintilian from Book XI of *Institutio Oratorica*, stating that a mediocre speech delivered well will be more impressive than the best speech not delivered well. He insinuates that delivery is very powerful in oratory in so much that the invention is not as important as the delivery since the emotions of each person in the audience is governed by their impression of hearing the speech (Johnstone 124). Quintilian's definition of rhetoric as the "art of speaking well" portrays his thoughts on the importance of delivery in oratory.

During the delivery stage, expressive intonation and the use of gestures are the main factors that make some poets better performers than others during performance poetry. Bakhtin defines intonation as "one of the means of expressing the speaker's emotionally evaluative attitude toward the subject of his speech" (Bakhtin 1242). It is a stylistic factor, the essential aspect of an utterance. Expressive intonation is the utterance because the utterance is the way you say words to indicate meaning. A word is only a word without meaning until it is pronounced with expressive intonation. Once a word is pronounced with expressive intonation, "it is no longer a word but a completed utterance expressed by one word" (Bakhtin 1243). In agreement, Aristotle and Cicero stress the importance of expressive intonation in speech deliverance and how it is a means of the speaker showing and evoking emotions. Aristotle explains that delivery is a matter of how voice is used for each individual emotion: when it should be loud, low, or in-between and when the tones should be deep, shrill, or in-between. The qualities are considered: volume, harmony, and rhythm (Freese 347). Cicero also believes that

the audience's impression of the speaker and speech is shaped by how the speaker stirs the emotion of his/her listeners. The inflexion of the voice is what assists in the stirring of the emotions (Johnstone 124).

When poets select words for a poem during invention, they are selected from a planned idea of how the poet desires to say something and planned meanings that the poet wants the words to convey. The words are chosen from what they could possibly mean during invention but are given the specific meaning that the poet wants it to have through expressive intonation during delivery (Bakhtin 1243). For example, the word *yeah* can carry three separate meanings, depending on how the speaker says it. Enthusiastically said, it carries a meaning of happiness and excitement. Sadly said, it carries a meaning of sadness and disappointment. Sarcastically stated, it carries a meaning of disbelief like "yeah right."

Gestures fall under the physical aspects of delivery. Dwight Gardner explains how a speaker's physical appearance and mannerisms affect his/her ethos: Listeners see the speaker before they hear the speaker and watch the speaker during the speech and as he/she takes a seat after the speech. If the speaker appears unsure of him/herself, the audience members won't trust the speaker and won't give the speaker their respect. There are three common physical movements that form gestures: hand gestures, facial expressions, and body attitudes with hand gestures being the most common (Gardner 94) "The beginning speaker frequently asks, "What shall I do with my hands" (Gardner 95). Primarily, a speaker uses hands in two different types of gestures: gestures of description and gestures of emphasis. The descriptive gesture is used to suggest an object's size or form, and a speaker can present a picture to an audience. Hands gestures also help emphasize

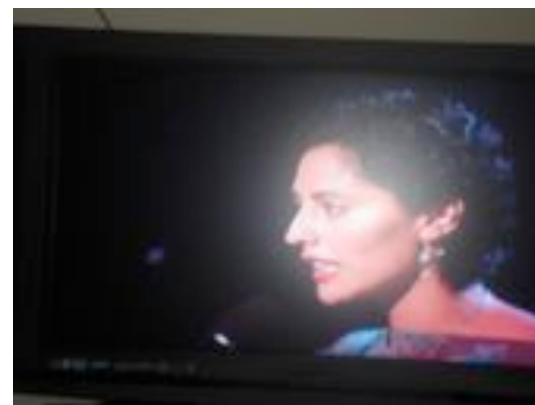
ideas. For example, pointing the index finger helps the speaker stress a certain point. Clenched fists allude to anger and determination, whereas an open palm upward indicates willingness to reason or supplication. The head movement (body movement) as the speaker stresses a point is a telling gesture. The eyes and facial expressions can portray thoughts and attitudes to the audience, also. For example, a beginning speaker usually has little expression in the face and eyes because the speaker's nervousness causes a lack of warmth to the audience (Gardner 95-96).

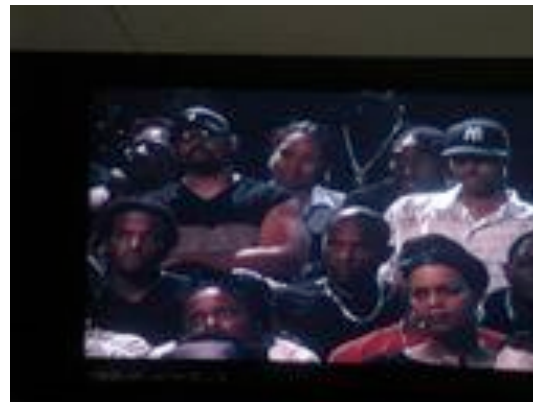
The pictures below are pictures from "Def Poetry, Season 2" and "Def Poetry, Season 1" dvds. The two poets received two different audience responses during their performances even though their topics and points were similar. The first poet, the Asian poet, used expressive intonation and gestures to accentuate his words and topic. His poem was about how Asian people are treated like they are inadequate, underrepresented, and stereotyped, like they are only good for certain things in America. He expressed his anger about how they contribute so much to the American society but are overlooked and are fine as long as they stay in their place.





In the first picture (number count is from left to right), the poet was emphasizing points about Asian contributions and how the Asian invasion will get bigger. In the second picture, he was ranting. The third picture shows the poet stressing a point, and the fourth picture is a picture of him moving his head back and forth in a “telling” gesture. His fist is raised in the fifth picture to indicate his anger and non-tolerance. The audience was responsive during the entire performance. They laughed and clapped the entire time and clapped louder with “oohs” to enhance their satisfaction. The other pictures after the fifth picture show the audience’s response. There are shadows in the seventh and ninth pictures. The shadows indicate movements: individuals clapping.





The second poet, the Middle Eastern female, used hardly any gestures and hands were restricted by her having to hold her paper as she read. Use of one of her hands was restricted, but she still could've used the free hand. The first picture shows minimal usage of her hands and arms. She could've used her voice and facial expressions to emphasize her points, also. Her face remained the same the entire time. No emotion showed, like the pictures indicate, and they were taken at different intervals during the performance. Her voice remained monotone the entire time. It didn't rise or fall, like the Asian poet. Her poem was also a poem that expressed her anger or irritation with Americans as well as sadness at the thought of her brothers serving in the American army and having to go to their country of origin to fight with their people. She expressed how Americans act like they are the only ones hurting from the war that stemmed from 9/11. The audience was quiet during most of her performance, and there were only a few moments where people clapped during the performance. The pictures after the pictures of her are of the audience during the performance.



At the end of both poets' performances, some people stood up and clapped. The first picture is the ending response of the female's performance, and the second picture is the ending response of the male's performance. The Middle Eastern

female's poem was on a touching topic to a lot of people, 9/11 incident. I believe that her topic and her points in the poem caused people to stand whereas the Asian male poet's delivery and points caused people to stand at the end of his performance.

Poetry is an art of expression and persuasion that has become a vital part of my reality. I escape mentally, express what I can't express aloud at a certain moment, persuade others to think or feel a certain way, and reveal myself to others through poetry. During poetry performance, I always read because of being in graduate school and having little time to memorize my poems. When I read, I rely mostly on expressive intonation, and a limited use of facial expressions and gestures help with how I convey my poetic messages because of having to hold a paper in one hand.

Before poetry can do anything for a listener, it has to do something for the writer/poet. I've written many poems. Some were forced poems, and some were created because I was inspired from an experience or emotions. I would force myself to write a poem outside of what I would be going through at a given moment or outside of my inspired times, and the poem wouldn't seem as good to me as a poem written while inspired. I would even perform it and would feel that its lack of enthusiasm during invention was obvious; therefore, I would perform the poem without feeling. Of course, the crowd wouldn't respond with much enthusiasm. This is because the poem lacked my soul and therefore lacked the souls of the listeners. It was written without spirit, delivered with no spirit, and resulted in "stirring up" zero spirits. I began to change my thinking and decided to perform all my poems as if they are good poems. Even though I felt that some of my poems weren't good poems, I felt that speaking them well or delivering them

like they were the best things ever written would make the difference in how the audience received them. I've provided two of my poems below. The first poem was written out of inspiration and emotions from an unhappy experience. The second poem was a forced poem in which my goal was to write "outside of the box" of what normally inspires me to write a poem (a male/female relationship scenario). The individuals of the crowd that would gather at the Open Mic Night would fall between the ages of 21-37. The majority of the time, they respond more to poems dealing with men and women relationships. For them to receive the "Heat" poem with the same enthusiasm as "The Language You Speak," I had to make them want to hear the poem and relate to it. I had to deliver "Heat" with utterances that gave my words the meanings that I wanted to convey to the audience and had to pronounce the words as though I was reliving the day without air all over again.

The Language You Speak

Through your confusion, I try to keep my sanity.
 The effect ricochets from you to me.
 It's apropos that if you're confused,
 Then I would be to.
 What do you expect?
 Your confusion stems from the language you speak.
 I don't speak your language,
 So I can't relate to you, and this inability to relate
 Causes me to analyze and reflect to keep my mind right.
 This complicated language you speak
 Is even hard for you to decipher because
 You are an amateur and it's reflective in your confusion.
 It's hard to keep the facts straight.
 And you're wondering why your shit don't fly!
 It's cause you're speaking this language called Lie,
 And it's a language that I don't understand.
 That's why I have to constantly ask questions
 Of who, what, when, where, why!
 That's what we women do and sometimes men
 Because when you're speaking this language Lie,
 You have to forever speak it and
 Never again return back to the language of Truth.

If you slip up and change your language, you expose the real you.
 Your words contradicting your phrases;
 Your phrases contradicting your sentences;
 Your sentences contradicting your paragraphs;
 Your paragraphs contradicting your story,
 Any you wonder how I know you're fake!
 You start to make no sense;
 Therefore, becoming senseless.
 I feel for you in your distress
 Because this language you're trying to master
 Has you caught up in a mess:
 This mess is your life.

Heat

My air conditioner went out one day last week.
 I have a small fan,
 But it can't do half of what the air can.
 As I laid in the the room filled with 90 degree heat,
 I began feeling like a cooked piece of meat.
 Too hot to stay awake and too hot to sleep,
 So I remained into the in-between phase:
 I think it's called a daze.
 I started looking at the wall and became delirious;
 I started to see things on the wall
 And knew that this wasn't right at all!
 I got up and called the office about air
 And prayed to God that someone was there.
 I was so relieved to hear a voice,
 And that person oblige me on my preferred choice!
 Someone came and gave me relief,
 But when he said the compressor was too hot,
 I was in disbelief!
 This meant I had to wait another day,
 And there was nothing at all I could say.
 So, I had to lay there that night in the heat
 And hoped I wouldn't die in my sleep.

Although I felt that the first poem was the better invention because I poured my soul into the invention and delivery, the second poem received as much enthusiasm as the first because I performed the second poem like it was the best thing ever written and like I was convinced that it was just as good as the first. I wanted the crowd to applaud my attempt of "stepping outside of my box" and relate to more than the drama that I would "bring to the table." I had to make the crowd feel the

heat that I spoke about as well as emotionally move the individuals who had actually been in the same situation of not having a working air conditioner as I.

Invention is an important factor in performance poetry, but delivery is the most important stage because the art itself is all about the convincing the audience to feel or think a certain way through oral depiction. The speaker connects with the audience by appealing to emotions. To appeal to the emotions of the individual listeners, the speaker has to provide meaning to the words used to convey a message through expressive intonation and make those words "live" or enhance the words through the use of gestures.

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