

THE TEACHERS & WRITERS

HANDBOOK

of

POETIC FORMS



Ritual Poem

People have always needed to feel that they had *some* control over the powerful forces that shaped their *lives* — particularly the forces of nature. One way they tried to assert *this* control was by performing rituals.

Rituals are ceremonies enacted for the spirits or gods who, it was and is believed, direct man's fate. The ceremonies were meant to persuade the spirits to turn fate in one direction or the other: to bring rain or sun, to stop storms, to provide protection from fire and flood, to bring healthy babies. Before hunting, rituals were performed to lure forth whatever animal was being hunted. Before battle, they were performed to insure victory. Often the rituals included singing, dancing, and eating.

The person who decided what each ritual should be was called a *shaman*. The shaman was the spiritual leader of the community. The first poets are thought to have been shamans, so ritual poems are among the oldest forms of poetry. There are many types of ritual poems and there is no single set of rules for all of them. One type includes a series of directions for doing something to get the attention of the spirits. For example, in "Storm Ritual," Alaskan Eskimos were trying to persuade the spirits to make a storm subside — and to persuade themselves that they could overcome it.

Storm Ritual

1. Build a snowman with a big head.
2. Give the snowman's head a large mouth.
3. Catch salmon, skin the carcasses, freeze them.
4. Hack away at the frozen fish and push the pieces into the snowman's mouth.
5. Afterward, have a big feast in which all the pieces of fish are eaten.

A more contemporary ritual poem comes from the Kwakiutl Indians, who live in northwestern Canada. The ritual poem was

thought to bestow good luck on a newborn child.

Gift Ritual

1. Start by giving away different glass bowls.
2. Have everyone give everyone else a glass bowl.
3. Give away handkerchiefs and soap.
4. Give away a sack of clams.
5. Give away pigs and geese and chickens, or pretend to do so.
6. Pretend to talk Chinese and give away something.
7. Make a narrow place at the entrance of a house and put a line across it that you have to stoop under to get in.
8. Hang the line with all sorts of pots and pans that make a big noise.
9. Give away these pans while saying things like "Here is a pan worth \$100, and here's one worth \$200."
10. Give everyone a new name.
11. Give the newborn child a name.

Inspired by a recent eclipse, a student wrote this ritual poem:

Eclipse Ritual

1. Turn off the lights and give paper moons to everyone.
2. Pretend your face is the sun and put the moon in front of it.
3. Say DARK DARK DARK DARK and close your eyes.
4. Say ECLIPSE ECLIPSE ECLIPSE ECLIPSE.
5. Then become one by wearing dark clothes.

Here are some things to remember when writing this type of ritual poem:

1. Decide what you would like to have occur.
2. Examine all aspects of the subject.
3. Think of actions to illustrate some of these aspects.
4. Write each action down as a command.
5. Number the commands.
6. Let yourself go.

Another type of ritual poem mentions sacred places and objects in a way that confirms the tribe's belief in the rightness of everything, as in this ritual poem for girls' puberty rites that help the girls "[stand] up for their dance in the way of life":

Songs of the Masked Dancers

1

When the earth was made
when the sky was made
when my songs were first heard
the holy mountain was standing toward me with life.

At the center of the sky, the holy boy walks four ways with life.
My mountain became my own: standing toward me with life.
The dancers became: standing toward me with life.

When the sun goes down to the earth
where Mescal Mountain lies with its head toward the sunrise
black spruce became: standing up with me.

2

Right at the center of the sky the holy boy with life walks in
four directions.

Lightning with life in four colors comes down four times.

The place called black spot with life,
the place called blue spot with life,
the place called yellow spot with life,
they have heard about me
the black dancers dance in four places.
The sun starts down toward the earth.

3

The living sky black-spotted
The living sky blue-spotted
The living sky yellow-spotted
The living sky white-spotted
The young spruce as girls stood up for their dance in the way
of life.

When my songs first were, they made my songs with words of
jet.

Earth when it was made
Sky when it was made
Earth to the end
Sky to the end

Black dancer, black thunder, when they came toward each other

All the bad things that used to be vanished.
The bad wishes that were in the world all vanished.
The lightning, the black thunder struck four times for them.
It struck four times for me.

4

When my songs first became
when the sky was made
when the earth was made
the breath of the dancers against me made only of down:
when they heard about my life
where they got their life
when they heard about me:
it stands.

— *Traditional*

On a more everyday level, we all follow our own little rituals, in the particular way we brush our teeth, visit our grandparents, say goodbye, and so on, and there is no reason why good poems can't be written about these rituals as well.

See also: CHANT, EVENT POEM.