

Poetry as Ceremony
Developed by Susanna Lang*
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This lesson focuses on poems that have the sound of ritual, often with an incantatory rhythm that can guide students in memorization and performance.

Periods

This lesson will require three 50-minute periods:

- Day 1: Model
- Day 2: Guided practice
- Day 3: Group performances and closure

If you ask your students to write as well as read and perform, they will need at least one additional class session.

NCTE Standards

While *Poetry Out Loud* fulfills NCTE Standards 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 (with writing extension), 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, this lesson focuses on Standards 2 and 4.

Common Core State Standards

While *Poetry Out Loud* can involve multiple Common Core State Standards, this lesson focuses on the following:

- 9-10.RL.4
- 11-12.RL.4
- 9-10.RL.5
- 11-12.RL.5
- 9-12.SL.6

Depending on which writing extension, if any, is chosen:

- 9-12.W. 4
- 9-12.W. 9

Introduction

As humans, we turn to rituals such as formal events, ceremonies and song forms when we need to reach beyond our limited selves, at moments of great change or great emotion. We turn to ritual when we want to celebrate the beauty of the world, or condemn its evil. Ritual is not always religious—graduations, weddings, the Pledge of Allegiance, and the traditional language of the courtroom are secular examples of ritual—poets have commonly used the ritual forms from music, oratory, and religious or secular texts. Poetry may have begun in ritual, and has often remained incantatory, no matter the occasion or our specific beliefs. The rhythm of incantation, prayer, poetic forms, or liturgy can make the task of memorization easier, and also guide students in how to deliver the lines with resonance.

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Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- analyze the poet's purpose for using ritual in each poem
- analyze the ritualistic elements in each poem
- adapt his/her speech to the task of performance

In addition, if you choose the literary writing extension, students will be able to:

- write their own effective poem of ritual.

If you choose the academic writing extension, students will be able to

- compare two poems, making a claim that is true of both poems and supporting that claim with textual evidence.

Materials and Resources

To teach this lesson you will need:

- A computer with speakers; if possible, a laptop cart with earphones
- Access to the Poetry Out Loud Audio Guide: the CD or <http://www.poetryoutloud.org/poems-and-performance/listen-to-poetry>
- Printed copies of the poems you select from the Poetry Out Loud Anthology (<http://www.poetryoutloud.org/poems-and-performance/find-poems>) and the Poetry Foundation archive (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/browse>).

Recommended selections:

- Sherman Alexie, "The Powwow at the End of the World" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55RRUbyVoLg>)
- Yehuda Amichai, "The Amen Stone"
- Lucille Clifton, "mulberry fields" (reading with animation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UnLStD-pYk>)
- Emily Dickinson, " 'Hope is the thing with feathers' or "I heard a Fly buzz— when I died" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6-xyuiaK_Q)
- John Donne, "A Hymn to God the Father" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trQKD9Je5Jo>)
- Kabir, "I won't come" or "Brother, I've seen some"
- Ilya Kaminsky, "Author's Prayer" (Kaminsky's own reading may be hard for students to follow http://www.obheal.ie/blog/?page_id=1992; student performance <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAUApqsM-L0>)
- Jane Kenyon, "Let Evening Come" (<https://audioboo.fm/boos/479986-let-evening-come-by-jane-kenyon>)
- Li-Young Lee, "Little Father" (student performance <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NY1EcJYwoeQ>)
- Galway Kinnell, "Saint Francis and the Sow" (http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/writingprog/archive/writers/kinnellg_alway/311001)
- Philip Levine, "They Feed They Lion" (http://www.ibiblio.org/ipa/audio/levine/they_feed_they_lion.mp3)
- W. S. Merwin, "To Luck"
- Stanley Moss, "You and I"

- Naomi Shihab Nye, “Truth Serum”
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2irhTjhXebo> starts at 2:12)
- Christopher Smart, “For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry”
(<http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2012/04/11> start at 2:26)
- Cathy Song, “Ikebana”
- Walt Whitman, “I Hear America Singing” (*POL Audio Guide*)
- Kevin Young, “Eddie Priest’s Barbershop & Notary”
- Saadi Youssef, *from* “America, America”
- Video or recording of a well-known hymn; there are many on YouTube, but here are a group of high school age students singing in a neutral setting:
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YxtomC-Sqg>)
- Chart paper and markers

Activity Description

Day 1: Model

1. Group students (in groups of two, three, or four) according to their learning needs and choose poems that are appropriate to each group of readers, based on reading level, students’ interests, their experiences with devotional language, and so on.
2. Model an approach to Walt Whitman’s poem, “I Hear America Singing:”
 - a. Distribute Whitman’s poem, “I Hear America Singing.” Ask students to read along while you play the audio of Whitman’s poem from the POL Audio Guide, and invite them to listen especially for the sound and form of the poem, as well as for the poem’s occasion.
 - b. After the students listen, ask them: What is the poem communicating? What did the students notice about the poem’s form and its sound? How does the poem benefit from this form and this sound? Listen to the conversations, coaching as needed so that students can see that:
 - i. Whitman is celebrating his country in lyrical language that they may recognize from other contexts;
 - ii. his “versets” or “long rhapsodic lines,” as the introduction to the recording describes them, draw out the breath like a long musical phrase;
 - iii. he uses repetition and cataloguing (or listing) in order to praise.
 Make a note of which groups should share in a brief whole class discussion to highlight these points. It will be useful to the students if you chart the points.
 - c. Explain that poetry has roots in ritual, and often uses rituals as much as any church, temple or mosque does (though not always for religious purposes, as we see in Whitman’s poem). A familiar example is the national anthem, which marks special occasions like a graduation or a baseball game. You may want to add that Whitman found his model in the Book of Psalms; you could provide copies of Psalm 98 (or another Psalm that you prefer) and invite students to compare the form of the religious text with the form of the secular poem. In fact, American poetry has used Whitman and—through Whitman, the Psalms—as a model for ritual.
 - d. If Whitman is the grandfather of American poetry, then our grandmother, Emily

Dickinson, drew on the church tradition of hymns to create a sort of underlying form and music to her poems. Play a video of a hymn being sung (such as “Amazing Grace”), and then play the video of “I heard a Fly buzz,” which includes the text of the poem so you do not need to hand out copies. Help students to see that the quatrains (four-line stanzas) alternate between tetrameter (four beat) lines and trimeter (three beat) lines, with rhyme (mostly slant or half rhyme) in the second and fourth lines. This is *not* a lesson on prosody, so you will not insist on these terms, but you can make the point that Dickinson is using a popular musical form of her time. Why is she singing a hymn to death? Because death is one of the moments when we turn to ritual, though Dickinson sang and ritualized every aspect of life. You can add “religious forms (hymn, prayer)” to the chart.

- e. Another model you can discuss is the poem “You and I” by Stanley Moss, which uses call and response. The students will easily see that the poem progresses by asking again and again, “Who...?” and answering, “You....”

Day 2: Guided practice

3. Guided practice:

- a. Assign each group another poem. Providing laptops and earphones so that students can listen to a performance; hearing the poem can enhance their experience, but it is not necessary to this lesson.
- b. Have students listen to the poem, if possible. Next, invite them to read the poem silently to themselves while jotting down their impressions. Once they have completed their own notes, they should discuss in their small groups: what is being celebrated or made sacred? Have them focus on the ceremony within the poem. The students should also analyze the techniques (repetition, rhythms, versets, call and response, familiar models, and so on) that the poet uses to ritualize his or her subject. They can use the previously charted points as a reference and should be able to identify the lines that led them to their understanding.
- c. Their discussion will allow each other to prepare to read the poem out loud, in whatever way they feel is most effective: one voice or several voices, together or sequentially, or in a pattern that moves between one and several voices. Remind them that “incantation” does not mean they should use a sing-song delivery.

Day 3: Group performances and closure

4. Invite groups to perform their poem to the class, and then ask them to explain why they chose to perform it as they did. Their explanation should include their understanding of ritual in the poem: why it was necessary to the poet, and how s/he conveyed the sense of ritual.
5. Closure: Lead students in a discussion of how the ritual forms in these poems could make them easier to memorize as well as perform, or ask that question for students to answer in an exit slip.

Day 4 (optional): Written extension

6. Try this optional literary writing extension: Invite students to write their own poem as

ritual, reminding them that the ritual does not have to be religious, but should use the tools that were discussed in class.

7. Here's an optional academic writing extension: Invite students to write a comparison of two poems that the students presented in class. They should read and annotate both poems, develop a claim that is true of both poems, and look for text evidence that supports their claim.

Assessment

- Group performances and introductions
- Optional exit slips
- Optional poem of ritual (rubric below)
- Optional written comparison (rubric below)
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Literary Writing: Rubric for poem as ceremony

	1 (Inadequate)	2 (Developing)	3 (Meets)	4 (Exceeds)
Purpose	Poem does not use ritual	Poem attempts to use ritual to celebrate or make sacred, though the subject may not be religious	Poem uses ritual to celebrate or to make sacred, though the subject may not be religious	Poem uses ritual effectively to celebrate or to make sacred, although the subject may not be religious
Form	The poem does not use any of the techniques discussed in the lesson	Poem attempts to use techniques discussed in the lesson: verset (long rhapsodic line), repetition, call and response, religious forms	Poem adequately uses techniques discussed in the lesson: verset (long rhapsodic line), repetition, call and response religious forms	Poem effectively uses one or more technique discussed in the lesson: verset (long rhapsodic line), repetition, call and response, religious forms
Language	No attempt to use specific or poetic language	Attempts to use specific language	Language is clear and precise	Poetic devices serve the poem's purpose

Analytic writing: Rubric for comparing two poems

	1 (Inadequate)	2 (Developing)	3 (Meets)	4 (Exceeds)
Claim	Claim only accounts for only one text, or does not demonstrate accurate understanding of texts	Claim uses commonalities and differences between poems to demonstrate partial understanding of both texts	Claim uses commonalities and differences between poems to demonstrate adequate understanding of both texts	Claim uses commonalities and differences between poems to demonstrate in-depth understanding of both texts
Ceremony	Does not correctly identify the poet's use of ritual in either text	Correctly identifies the poet's use of ritual in one text, or partially identifies the poet's use of ritual in both texts	Correctly describes the poet's use of ritual	Correctly describes and perceptively interprets the poet's use of ritual
Analysis	Does not support a claim with relevant textual evidence	Supports a claim with partial textual evidence	Supports a claim with relevant textual evidence	Supports a claim with the strongest textual evidence
Expression	Very difficult to read	Language may be difficult to follow in some places	Language is clear, and errors do not interfere with reading	Language is precise, with few or no errors

NCTE Standards

2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

Common Core State Standards

9-10.RL.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

11-12.RL.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

9-10.RL.5. Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

11-12.RL.5. Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

9-12.SL.6. Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

Depending on which writing extension, if any, is chosen:

9-12.W. 4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

9-12.W. 9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.