



*Francis W. Shepardson, Chicago #13-'08  
National President, 1910-1914*

## THE RITUAL

By Francis W. Shepardson, Chicago #13-'08

*Dr. Shepardson, a former national president, A.R. Keith, Cornell, Albert K. Wilson, Kansas, and Stanley Coulter, Purdue, revised and rewrote the Acacia ritual in 1910, only minor changes have been made since that time.*

**What is a ritual in a college fraternity? It is the text of an initiatory ceremonial in which an individual, whose membership is expected to be life-long, participates as a candidate but once.**

The ritual is important and significant. Important, because it marks the student's first introduction to an organization to whose membership he has look forward with eagerness, and not doubt, with some degree of natural curiosity. Important, because the manner in which the ritual is interpreted for him and to him may determine his own attitude toward his chapter and his fraternity in days and years ahead.

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It is significant because the ritual is supposed to explain into the novitiate the ideals of society into whose membership he is being received. If properly exemplified, the ceremonial is likely to be remembered for years, and it equally likely to make upon the and plastic mind of youth definite and distinct impressions which may stimulate his thought and direct his actions.

It hardly needs to be suggested that the atmosphere of such an important and significant ceremonial should be fitting to the occasion upon whose inspirations the future of a chapter may depend. While not a religious rite in the commonly accepted meaning of that phrase, the initiation ceremonial is highly religious if the root-meaning of "religion" as "a binding fast" is recalled; or if the import of the correct interpretation of the ideal of a fraternity is kept in mind. The spirit of all present, whether candidates or observers, should be a right spirit; minds should be opened to receive impressions; the thought of all should center around the solemn service. (It should not be overlooked that many a long-initiated member is born again during a well-rendered ceremony.) Smoking in the hall or whispering or any form of disturbance should not be tolerated for a moment, in case

some thoughtless member should forget himself and his whereabouts. The more dignified the speakers, the more respectful the hearers, the more effective the ritual always.

The garb of the participants undoubtedly affects the ceremonial. The candidates, if clothed in white according to the classical meaning of *candidates*, are readily distinguished as they are led through the hall; their height seems increased; they are properly differentiated from all the others in the room. If officers have robes with distinctive colors and insignia, there is an added tone of dignity and a



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psychological effect upon the individual who is to have a part. If all other members and visitors are clad in black robes, as is usually the case, they too, add their part thus to the ceremonial atmosphere and to the effect produced upon the candidate after he is brought to light.

A well-written ritual is dramatic in character. Carefully phrased speeches, long or short, make up its subject matter. Often these speeches have significant or suggestive words or expressions to be emphasized. Correct dramatic interpretation is required to bring out these sometimes partly hidden meanings.

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Where the whole ritual is studied and exemplified as a single and dramatic performance, the impression upon novitiates and upon attending members is certain to be marked.

Too often the unity of the ritual is overlooked, and its histrionic possibilities ignored. To not read a part which was designed to be spoken with earnestness and with clear enunciation, is a serious bit of blundering; the one who reads usually acknowledges thus that he has not taken time to commit his lines to memory, and, quite likely too, reads hesitatingly and without

understanding. To stammer and stutter and to bungle a passage, every word in which has been chosen with care, is little short of tragedy. The sort of thing which would bring sharp and sarcastic criticism if perpetrated by a candidate in the Masquers, and would bar him from the sock and buskin, is not at all infrequent in fraternity initiations when someone butchers his part. On the other hand, the testimony seems to be universal that, where a ritual is exemplified in a manner approaching perfection of interpretation, both candidate and initiated attendant are deeply immersed.

Even the lines which seem least important may, if rightly spoken, linger long in the memory. It is difficult, therefore, to select certain actors in the drama as of more importance than others. But the success of an initiatory ceremonial depends, in large measure, upon the conductor, or guide, who has charge of the candidates. If he knows his part; if he speaks his line clearly and correctly at every station, he stimulates every possible halting participant to do his best in interpretation. If, on the other hand, the conductor has not familiarized himself with the directions and, along with that, has not memorized his part, the entire ceremony is likely to drag and be an entire failure.

In his alertness, the clear-cut rendition of his speeches, his general bearing, the conductor or guide has a great opportunity as an actor. He is the key man.

The president's part, too, should be studied with exceptional care. In a true sense the familiar expression is pertinent to him, *Noblesse oblige* (with power & prestige come responsibilities). The president is the chapter's chosen head; he is the accepted leader; upon his shoulders rests the success or failure of a chapter's year. He voices the welcome of the chapter to the candidates; he may interpret to the idealism of the fraternity through a most thoughtful and carefully considered speech of the authorized ritual; he gives them the charge.

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If through laziness or lack of ambition or failure to appreciate the significance of his part in the ceremonial, he does a botch job, the chances are many that his selection as chapter leader was a sad mistake, one which under ordinary conditions,

had to be tolerated during an entire college year. If with proper interpretation and with the seriousness which should attend such an occasion, he makes his ritualistic appeals with fervor and force, he may stamp himself as a leader upon those who are before him as candidates, eager to hear his words, and at the same time may strengthen the hold upon the hearts and the affection of those who look to him for guidance.

Music adds much to a ritual. Every fraternity has songs which are appropriate to a ceremonial, if not indeed primarily written for the purpose. A quartette which has practiced its part may lend great power and dignity to an initiation, and may be used most effectively where conditions permit, if hidden from the eyes of the listeners or placed at some distance from the candidates. On the other hand, a murderous assault on harmony by the untrained voices of an unguided group may ruin the entire rite. In the singing as in the speaking, distinct enunciation is essential.

The assumption thus far made that all rituals are alike is not an undue one. All are cast in a common mold. It must be so because there are certain essentials to any initiatory ceremonial, no

matter what the name or the object of the secret society. Preliminary questions before admittance; a pledge to respect the objects and ideals of the organization; a challenge at the door; a formal admission; the interpretation of ideals and the explanation of name, symbolism, badge; the solemn vows of the novitiate; the signing of the membership roll - these are neither secrets nor exclusive rites.

They are common to all. There is no harm in the thought that a given ritual is finer in spirit and better written than any other; that the ideals of one fraternity are loftier and better exemplified than those of any similar society - such thoughts are desirable and strengthen the ties of membership even if the individual's range of knowledge of such esoteric matters be limited.

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The main thing in the ceremonial, after all, is the interpretation. A good well-rendered ritual will make a good impression, even if the language may be faulty.

A college fraternity ritual, resultant of much study, of much care in the selection of words and phrases, perhaps of the combined care and thought of years, has great possibilities of influence, even if bungled in rendition. Properly interpreted it may be - it has been - a powerful factor in human life.