

A DISCUSSION ON MASONIC SYMBOLISM

Part One, Overview

INTRODUCTION:

Masonry, it is said, is a system of myths, symbols, and allegories, through which life lessons are taught which, when fully understood, allow us to take good men and make them better. This article, or paper, is the beginning in a series of articles designed to not only help us understand the use and importance of symbolism in Masonry, but to encourage further study toward the obtaining of further light.

Why does Masonry depend so heavily on the use of symbols throughout the Three Degrees of Craft Masonry? To answer this question, it will be beneficial to examine symbolism and its use in general. Webster defines symbolism as “*the art or practice of using symbols (graphic representations, i.e., pictures) esp. by investing things with a symbolic meaning or by expressing the invisible or intangible by means of visible ... representation: as an artistic imitation or invention that is a method of revealing or suggesting immaterial, ideal, or otherwise intangible truths.*” As an interesting side note, the word, symbolism, first became common usage in the English language circa 1654 at a time when some historians believe the movement from the operative to the speculative form of Masonry began.

At this time in history, the use of symbols was already wide spread throughout the known world. For example, in Christendom, the Cross as a symbol was used to convey the entire story of the death and resurrection of Christ, up to and including the message of salvation for those who believed – and more; the entire philosophy of Christian faith bound up in one simple icon, a true example of the idea that a picture is worth a thousand words!

At the simplest level symbols could be used to relate a story, a parable, an event by grouping, in sequence, a number of symbols. At the most complex level a Cathedral (itself a Christian symbol) contains thousands of individual symbols which, in combination, present a vast range of parables, theological concepts and even debates. Its use, then, was used to teach and convey an entire philosophy to the masses of converts and faithful who were, by and large, unable to read and understand the thousands of volumes of information available to the educated few.

The same can be assumed for those early Masons, both operative and speculative. While, undoubtedly, there were some who were literate, these early Masons were faced with the problem of conveying much information to those who could not read. Hence, they began using symbols to convey hard information as well as ideals, thoughts, and philosophies. It was only natural that they would turn to the use of symbols as a means of teaching – and of preserving – information that was of supreme importance to them.

THE INTRODUCTION OF SYMBOLS

From the very start of a Candidate's progression through the Three Degrees of Masonry, he reports to a Lodge, commonly referred to as a Craft Lodge, a Blue Lodge, or, more importantly, a Symbolic Lodge of Freemasons, and is presented with his first step in a symbolic journey. He finds himself wearing, strangely, only one shoe. That

single shoe, in and of itself, is a symbolic gesture meant, over time, to convey to him several important lessons. First, and most important, is that he is repeating an ancient Israeltish custom of removing one shoe and giving it to a neighbor as a symbol of binding himself to an agreement. He is, in effect, saying that with the removal of this shoe, I promise to abide with all the terms of our agreement for as long as you have this shoe. Beyond that, as he goes forward, walking neither barefoot nor shod, he will be forever reminded of this vow and of the trust that the vow entails. All those who see him cannot help but notice, too, that he is dressed in such a manner and be aware of the fact that he is a man who can be trusted to keep his promise – and that he is a man who is not afraid to advertise that fact by continuing to be neither barefoot nor shod.

So, the symbol of the single shoe is, of itself, a declaration of trust and all that trust entails. It is a statement about the moral value of the man who wears it as well as a statement of the expectations of the men who view him thus dressed. And, yet, there is more as this strange mode of dress is tied inexorably to additional philosophies, expectations, and tenets of this organization in which he is seeking membership, all of which are tied together with the cabletow of a successive progression of symbols.

And, at this point, the Candidate has not even left the preparation room where he stands, under the watchful eyes of the Masters of Ceremony, awaiting the unknown. In the next section of this article, we'll explore the rest of the symbols in his current situation as he waits to approach the door to Masonry for the first time.

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