

# Symbolism

## By Unknown

The subject of Symbolism is a peculiarly difficult and immense topic. In the usual amount of space devoted to our lectures it is impossible to more than touch upon a very few general points. Many books, articles, lectures and even the ritual of the lodge itself contain a very large and comprehensive instruction on the symbols and emblems of Freemasonry. The presentation here, therefore, can only be an attempt to interest you in a further study of the theme. Freemasonry has been defined as a beautiful system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols. The first three degrees of our system are called symbolic degrees, wherein both by symbols and lectures; and allegories, the Freemason is admonished to study and acquire learning, and is actually taught a complete system of organized knowledge.

The word "Symbol" is derived from the Greek, meaning "To Compare." A symbol is the expression of an idea by comparison. Symbolism is the science of symbols, or signs; the art of representing abstract truths and ideas by concrete things. An allegory is a story told to illustrate or convey some truth. Some of the most important truths have been handed down to us through allegories, that being one of the favorite methods the Master used to convey His teachings. It is one of the peculiarities of an allegory that its message may not be understood by all men. One must be prepared within his own mind and heart to receive the truth or else he sees it not. It is only a few of all those who hear, who perceives the lesson designed to be taught by the allegory. The great majority, having ears to hear, hear not; having eyes to see, see not the beautiful lesson, but hear only a pretty story that interests them for a short while and then is lost. But the earnest seeker for truth, he who is duly and truly prepared for its reception, sees beyond the veil of the allegory and perceives the beautiful, simple truth which it conceals from the multitude but reveals to the chosen few.

The origin of the symbol is Divinity itself, for when at the beginning of recorded time, Jehovah made a covenant with man, promising that never again would He send the waters to cover the face of the earth and destroy all flesh, He set the first symbol the multi-hued arch of the rainbow – in the clouds as an emblem of security and an assurance to all future generations of His watchful care.

Symbolical instruction is recommended by the constant and uniform usage of antiquity; and it has retained its influence throughout all ages, as a system of mysterious communication.

Christ taught by symbols and parables. The mysterious knowledge of the Druids was embodied in signs and symbols. The Mysteries were a series of symbols; and what was spoken there consisted wholly of accessory explanations of the act or image; sacred allegories explanatory of established symbols.

The picturesque and variegated maze of the early symbolism of the human race we cannot study in detail, tempting as it is.

Indeed, so luxuriant was that old picture language that we may easily miss our way and get lost in the labyrinth, unless we keep to the right path. First of all, let us keep ever in mind, a very simple and obvious fact, although not less wonderful because it is obvious. Socrates made the discovery – perhaps the greatest ever made – that human nature is universal. Whether we study the earliest groupings of the human mind, or set the teachings of the sages side by side, we find, after comparison, that the final conclusions of the wisest minds as to the meaning of life and the world are harmonious, if not identical.

Thus we begin to understand why the same signs, symbols and emblems were used by all peoples to express their earliest aspirations and thoughts. We need not infer that one people learned them from another, or that there existed a mystic, universal Order which had them in keeping. They simply betray the unity of the human mind, and show how and why, at the same stage and culture, races far removed from each other came to the same conclusions and used much the same symbols to body forth their thought. Illustrations are innumerable of this unity both of idea and of emblem, and also as confirming the insight of the great Greek, that, however shallow minds may differ, in the end all seekers after truth follow a common path, comrades in one great quest.

Symbols and symbolism are as old as man. It is the primeval, yet universal language of the world. Symbols and symbolism are not peculiar to any nation, peoples, secret societies or brotherhoods; whether primitive, medieval or modern.

Symbols and symbolism are not bound down by rules; hence a man with a symbol can have the satisfaction that, as a free moral agent, he can see in it, and through it, more things in Heaven and earth than are dreamed by common mortals.

When the savage began to emerge from his isolation and took his first steps toward becoming a social creature, profiting by association and cooperation with fellow human beings, one of the first needs was a sign or symbol whereby he could distinguish, during primitive battles, between creatures of his own tribe or family and those of the enemy tribes. A peculiar type of club, a splotch of colored clay on the body of the warrior, and later some rude device on his clumsy shield served for a time the purpose of insignia. Eventually these bits of wood, bodily ornamentation and shield signs were replaced by the skins of animals attached to poles so that they might be held high in the air and recognized at a distance. From such crude beginnings it is easy to trace the evolution of the flags of civilized man.

Today these emblems of armies and navies have a deep and noble significance far removed from their use in leading men to battle. In reality, flags are the symbols of idealism.

The first learning in the world consisted chiefly of symbols. The wisdom of all the ancients that has come to our hand is symbolic. It was the mode of the ancient philosophers to represent truth by certain symbols and hidden images. These ancient symbols and allegories always had more than one interpretation. They always had a double meaning, and sometimes more than two, one serving as the envelope of the other.

The human mind speculates upon the great mysteries of Nature and finds its ideas anticipated by the ancients, whose profoundest thoughts are to be looked for, not in their philosophies, but in their symbols, by which they endeavored to express the great ideas that vainly struggled for utterance in words, as they viewed the great circles of phenomena – Birth, Life, Death and New Life out of Death – to them the greatest of mysteries. Remember, while you study their symbols, that they had a profounder sense of these wonders than we have.

To them the transformation of the worm to the butterfly were a greater wonder than the stars; and hence the poor, dumb scarabs, or beetle, was sacred to them. Thus their faiths are condensed into symbols or expanded into allegories, which they understood, but were not always able to explain in language; for there are thoughts and ideas which no language ever spoken by man has words to express. The Zodiac was known in India and Egypt for incalculable ages. Ancient temples were often marked with a carved zodiac, by which the date of the building could be determined by reckoning the difference between the position of the signs of the zodiac as depicted somewhere in the temple, often in the ceiling, and their actual position in the Heavens, at any given time of observation. We moderns use a cornerstone for the same purpose.

The wise men of ancient time, who knew the secret wisdom religion, monumented in the stupendous conception of the zodiac, which was a pictorial design for the common people, the ideas comprehended under the term "Evolution," to which they were able to give a much wider interpretation than modern science has yet been willing to accord to the wisdom of the ancients. Originally only ten of the signs were of a meaning generally known to the uninitiated public; two were secret.

The two most famous divisions of the Heavens, by seven, which is that of the planets, and by twelve, which is that of the zodiacal signs, are found on the religious monuments of all people of the ancient world. In many other ways the system of numbers was closely connected with ancient forms of worship, and has come down to us in Freemasonry; though the secret meaning with which the numbers used by us are filled, is unknown to the vast majority of those who use them.

The three sacred numbers; three, five and seven, consecrated in Freemasonry, always appear together in the stars of the Heavens; in the three "Kings of Orio," near the five stars of the

Hyades, and close by the seven of the Pleiades. The veneration paid to these numbers had its source in the stars, where the ancient astronomers saw all the symbols of Freemasonry.

A language of hieroglyphics was adapted to the celebrations of the Sacred Mysteries of ancient Egypt, unknown to any but those who had received the Highest Degree. And to them ultimately were confined the learning, the morality and the political power of every people among which the mysteries were practiced. So effectually was the knowledge of the hieroglyphics of the highest degrees hidden from all but a favored few, that in process of the time their meaning was entirely lost, and none could interpret them.

In this long ago, before the age of books, man also expressed himself in architecture through the use of various symbols; such as the Swastika of the Chaldees, the Triangle of the Egyptians, the Triple Tau of the Hebrews, the Cross of the Christians, the Square, Compasses, Plumb, Level and Circle of the Architects; blood brothers of the Accepted Masons.

The knowledge now imparted by books and letters was of old conveyed by symbols; and the priests invented or perpetuated a display of rites and exhibitions which were not only more attractive to the eye than words, but often more suggestive and richer with meaning to the mind.

Freemasonry, successor of the Mysteries, still follows the ancient manner of teachings. Her ceremonies are like the ancient mystic shows – not the reading of an essay, but the opening of a problem requiring research and explanation. Her symbols are the instructions she gives. The Lectures are endeavors, often partial and one-sided, to interpret these symbols. He who would become an accomplished Freemason must not be content merely to hear, to even to understand the lectures; he must, aided by them and having as it were, the way marked out for him; study, interpret and develop these symbols for himself.

The more important Masonic symbols are very ancient, and their true meanings can only be found by tracing them back into the past. This will be found to be particularly the case with the Third degree; its true meaning can only be realized by the study of similar rites which appear to go far back into the history of our race.

When the great obelisk called Cleopatra's Needle was lifted from its resting place in Alexandria, Egypt, for the purpose of moving it to the United States; many Masonic symbols were found.

These included a rough ashlar, a perfect ashlar, a square, a trowel, a plummet and a white stone. When the Obelisk was placed in position in Central park, New York City, where it now stands, the emblems were replaced exactly as they had been found at Alexandria. In a brief lecture like this one it is hopeless to attempt to deal at all adequately with such deficiencies as there may be in our knowledge of the Masonic system to which we belong. The most we can hope to do is to offer a few hints or clues, which those who do so desire, may develop for themselves in the privacy of their own thoughts.

For, in the last resource no one can communicate the deeper things in Freemasonry to another. Every man must discover and learn for himself; although, a friend or brother may be able to conduct him a certain distance on the path of understanding.

We know that even the elementary and superficial secrets of our Order must not be communicated to unqualified persons, and the reason for this injunction is not so much because those secrets have any special value, but because that silence is intended to be symbolical of that which applies to the greater, deeper secrets, some of which, for appropriate reasons, must not be communicated, and some of which, indeed, are not communicable at all because they transcend the power of communication.

So my Brethren, Freemasonry teaches by allegory and symbol, and it is your part to extract from them the truths that will be of service to you in the building of an upright Masonic character. If you see only the stories that Freemasonry presents, and do not perceive what they are designed to teach, you are missing the best part of Freemasonry, yet you may comfort yourself with the thought that by far the greater majority of Freemasons are no wiser than yourself.

A single example of the symbolism of words will indicate to you one branch of Masonic study. We find at one point a certain phrase "I will always hail, ever conceal, and never reveal," and in the catechism, these:

Q. "I Hail," A. "I conceal,"

and ignorance, misunderstanding the word "Hail," considers it as "From whence do you Hail?"

But the word is really "hele" from the Anglo-Saxon verb "helan," to cover, hide, or conceal.

Wherefore to "hele" means the same thing as "Tile" – itself symbolic, as meaning primarily to cover a house with tiles. Thus language itself is symbolism, and words are as much misunderstood and misused as more material symbols are.

One of the greatest emblems of our Order is the Bible, which is used among Freemasons as the symbol of the Will of God, however it may be expressed. And therefore whatever, to any people, expresses that Will may be used as a substitute for the Bible in an American Masonic Lodge. Thus in a body consisting entirely of Jews the Old Testament alone may be placed upon the Altar; and Turkish Freemasons may make use of the Koran. Whether it be the Gospels to the Christian, the Pentateuch to the Israelite, the Koran to the Muslim, or the Vedas to the Brahman; it everywhere Masonically conveys the same idea – that of symbolism of the Divine Will revealed to man. The Square is a right angle, and belongs only to geometry – earth-measurements – that trigonometry, which deals only with planes and with the earth, which the ancients supposed to be a plane.

The compass describes circles, and deals with spherical trigonometry, the science of the spheres and heavens. The square therefore is a symbol of what concerns the earth and the body; the compass of what concerns the heavens and the soul. Upon the Altar you see these tools and you

remember how they were arranged in each degree. For the Apprentice, the points of the compass are beneath the square. For the Fellowcraft, one is above and one beneath. For the Master, both are dominant and have the rule, control and empire over the symbol of the earthly and the material. Thus, as the heavens are higher than the earth, so should the spiritual in man rise above the material and dominate all his thoughts and actions.

Our own bodies are but symbols of the Soul within, and as each spirit has in it the more of heavenly light, so it is reflected in a fairer body symbol. Here we find ourselves in a Holy place, as we stand before the Secret of the World, where Being passes into Appearance.

The sun is the ancient symbol of the life-giving and generative power of the Deity. The Moon was the symbol of the passive capacity of nature to produce - the female, of which the life-giving power was the male.

The "Master of Life" was the supreme Deity, above both. The "Master of Life," the Sun and Moon, are symbolized in every Lodge by the Master and Wardens.

The Cross has been a sacred symbol from earliest antiquity.. It is found upon all the enduring monuments of the world; in Egypt, Assyria, India, Persia and on the Buddhist Towers of Ireland. Pointing to the four quarters of the world it was the symbol of universal Nature.

The Perfect Ashlar is a symbol of faith and permanency in the Lodge. Stone, the material of which it is made, was considered of great importance in many of the ancient religions, and in some was worshipped.

The Temple of Solomon presented a symbolic image of the Universe; and resembled in its arrangements and furniture, all the temples of the ancient nations that practiced the Mysteries.

The Cosmos is a beautiful flower without much fragrance. Its eight petals are mostly pink and white. In the heart of the flower we find clustered pistils and five pointed stamens which are its male and female reproductive organs. The name of the flower – Cosmos – is significant and signifies law, order, harmony and truth combined within the Universe.

Thousands of year ago the spiritual leaders of the Chaldeans studied the Universe and symbolized their findings in hieroglyphics which are as full of meaning for us as they were to them. Thus we find that long before the time of Moses they represented the name of Jehovah by the eight-pointed star – because to them, as to us, He is ever the same. Let us fix this symbol in our minds. Take the calendar pad of any month in which the first day falls on any one of the first five days of the week draw a line through 1, 9 and 17. Do the same through 2,9 and 16; 3,8 and 15; and 8, 9 and 10. The sum of each line is 27.

The resulting eight-pointed figure is a mathematical demonstration of the meaning of this age-old symbol of Jehovah; for, take it in any direction, and we find that, like Him, it represents, it is ever the same.

The five-pointed star – point up – is a very ancient symbol of man, and was used by the old sages to designate the absolute sign of human intelligence. It refers to the spiritual element

predominant in man, while the same figure with two points up refers to the Goat of Mendes – or that the beast is in the ascendant.

If we apply this symbolism to our Cosmos blossom we may draw near to God as did those reverent and understanding men of old.

The petals of the flower are in the exact form of the figure you have drawn on your calendar pad, and in the heart of the flower is the ancient symbol of man – "male and female created He them. Square, triangle, cross, circle – oldest symbols of humanity, all of them eloquent, each of them pointing beyond itself, as symbols always do, while giving form to the invisible truth which they invoke and seek to embody. They are beautiful if we have eyes to see, serving not merely as chance figures of fancy, but as forms of reality as it revealed itself to the mind of man.

Sometimes we find them united, the Square within the Circle, and within that the Triangle, and at the center the Cross. Earliest of emblems, as they show us hints and foregleams of the highest faith and philosophy, betraying not only the unity of the human mind but its kinship with the Eternal – the fact which lies at the root of every religion, and is the basis of each.

Freemasonry conceals its secrets from all except the Adept and Sages, or the Elect, and uses false explanations and misinterpretations of its symbols to mislead those who deserve only to be misled; to conceal the truth from them, and to draw them away from it. Truth is not for those who are unworthy or unable to receive it, or would pervert it. So God Himself incapacitates many men, by color-blindness, to distinguish colors, and leads masses away from the highest Truth, giving them the power to attain only so much of it as is profitable to them to know.

So Freemasonry jealously conceals its secrets, and intentionally leads conceited interpreters astray.

Albert Pike, one of the deepest students of the symbols of Freemasonry, has this to say of one of the well-known hieroglyphics: "To the circle enclosing the central point and itself traced between two parallel lines, a figure purely Kabalistic, have been added the superimposed Bible, and reared on that the ladder with three or nine rounds, a vapid interpretation then being given of the whole so profoundly absurd as actually to excite admiration."

It may be asserted in the broadest terms that the Freemason who knows nothing of our symbolism knows little of Freemasonry. He may be able to repeat every line of the ritual without an error, and yet, if he does not understand the meaning of the ceremonies, the signs, the words, the emblems and the figures he is a Masonic ignoramus. It is distressing to notice how much time and labor is spent in memorizing "the work" and how little in ascertaining what it all means. Thousands of Freemasons hear the beautiful truths concealed in the symbolism of our ritual but in the language of the Bible "They have eyes and they see not; they have ears and they hear not."

In the ceremonies of making a Freemason, we do not attempt to do more than to indicate the pathway to Masonic Knowledge, to lay the foundation for the Masonic edifice; the brother must pursue the journey or complete the structure for himself by reading and reflection. Our symbolism is as flexible as it is suggestive, and may be interpreted in many ways by each initiate or student according to his light, "Each sees what he carries in his heart" we read in the Prologue of Faust.

The blossom in your hand – that grasspear nodding at your feet – those mysterious trees which fling their posturing arms to every wind that blows – all are symbolic of an unseen power.

That water lily yonder, which bends to see its reflected image, the bee that dives into its chalice, the waves that lap against the lily-fronds – these too point to an invisible thinker.

The broad-bosomed sea with its lurking depths and myriad life-forms, speaks eloquently of a Master Craftsman. And that purple mountain yonder holds Divine Revelation in its clasp of snow. Behold the scripture of stars – Mars, blinking redly in the southern heavens – Jupiter, trailing like a silver scarab toward the peaks which claimed the setting sun. The Milky way, with its sweep of fiery worlds – that shooting star – our glorious sun – all creation points with an unerring finger to the stupendous Mathematician concealed eternally behind the drapes of Nature.

Mouse and elephant, wren and eagle, minnow and whale – MAN – all carry mutely, surely, a message couched in terms of universal understanding.

God reveals himself today, as in the beginning, through the visible universe around us – His only written word. He speaks to us today as in the far past, through the unchanging language of Nature. His diary is written in the gnawed-out hills, in the Eternal Truths "which lie undiscovered around us."

The Trestleboard of Nature shows  
A vast array of symbols rare,  
While all her elements disclose  
Unchanging truths designed with care,  
Impressed more deeply in the heart  
While craftsmen diligently strive  
To gather from symbolic art  
The truth that through its power survive.

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