

## Symbolism 101

You have probably all heard this quote “*Freemasonry is a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.*” So symbols and symbolism is obviously a large and important part of Masonry. Before we talk about Masonic symbolism in particular, let’s establish a basic understanding of symbols and how we deal with them.

Let’s start with a couple of definitions from an on-line dictionary:

### **Symbol:** . .noun

1. something used for or regarded as representing something else; a material object representing something, often something immaterial; emblem, token, or sign.
2. a letter, figure, or other character or mark or a combination of letters or the like used to designate something: the algebraic symbol  $x$ ; the chemical symbol Au.
3. (especially in semiotics) a word, phrase, image, or the like having a complex of associated meanings .....

### **Symbolism:** . .noun

1. the practice of representing things by symbols, or of investing things with a symbolic meaning or character.
2. a set or system of symbols.

Show of hands here, in the usual Masonic manor, right-hand upraised; thinking of your lives outside of Masonry, how many of you normally use symbols throughout the day? *[short pause to look around the room]* This had better be all of you as our entire interaction with each other and the world is with symbols. From the first definition of Symbol, “*something used for or regarded as representing something else*”, we use words to represent physical items or abstract ideas. These words can be spoken, a group of sounds becomes a word, or written, a group of characters becomes a word. We use words, just as I am doing now, to communicate with each other – each word is a symbol for something, I can use the word **apple** and you will think of a particular reddish fruit, I don’t have to show you the actual fruit every time I want to invoke that image in your mind.

It can be as simple as a single sound or character – take the letter **C** for example. It is one of the 26 standard symbols used in our English alphabet, in chemistry, it is a symbol for the element carbon, in Roman numerals it is the symbol for the value 100. It can also be combined with other letters to create more complex symbols having many different meanings.

How about the sound when I say **C**? You might think of the third letter of our alphabet, or you might think of a large body of water. Take the word **Crane**: as in, that bird is a **crane**, or, they had to use a **crane** to lift the heavy object, or she had to **crane** her neck to see the movie. How do you know which meaning the sound or word is meant to symbolize? One of the keys to understanding a symbol’s intended meaning is the context in which it is used.

Have a look at this symbol *[the 6/9]* what does it represent? A value of 6, *[turn it upside down]* how about now? A value of 9. **[if available: Brother Leavitt, what is the basic geometric shape used in Alchemy to represent fire? .... In the same context, what is the shape used to symbolize water? ....]** In Alchemy, the symbol for fire is a triangle with the point up, and the symbol for water is the same triangle, but with it’s point down. Here is another of the keys to understanding symbols, not just it’s shape, but also it’s orientation is important.

We think using symbols, in fact, scientists claim that this is one of the defining characteristics of a highly intelligent species, the ability for abstract thought, that is, the use of symbols to represent physical items and ideas. We all communicate using symbols, but that only works as long as we all agree on the meaning of those symbols. We have all encountered the difficulty of trying to communicate with people of other languages and cultures where we haven't grown up with the same interpretation of our symbols.

We have all come to the learning of symbols in Masonry as any person learning a second language. This language of Masonic symbols comes to us from a variety of sources, including, ancient Egypt, Alchemy, Hebrew Kabbalists, Arabian Sufi mystics, and the Gnostic Mystery Schools, just to name a few. It is through exposure, continual repetition, studying it's roots, and questioning that we will eventually acquire an understanding of their meanings. Just like any language, the basic symbols can be combined to form new ones with more complex meanings. Let's have a quick look at a few of the basics ....

**Level:** This item can have several meanings (remember, context is important). One meaning is fairness and honesty. We've probably all heard the expression "*being on a level playing field*", meaning equal and fair for everyone. It is also the symbol of the Senior Warden, so when seen on a person, it represents that officer of the Lodge.

**Square:** It's primary interpretation is that it represents morality, truthfulness and honesty. But when worn by an officer of the Lodge, it represents the Worshipful Master and when combined with the 47<sup>th</sup> problem of Euclid, it represents a Past Master. In the Egyptian era, it represented the physical world of material things.

**Compasses:** This implement is symbolic of that even tenor of deportment, that true standard of rectitude which alone can bestow happiness here and felicity hereafter (that's a quote from [masonicdictionary.com](http://masonicdictionary.com)). We think of it as being used to draw a circle around ourselves, within which boundary we are taught to restrain our actions and subdue our passions, another words, it is a symbol that reminds us to behave ourselves. In the Egyptian era, it represented the heavens and things spiritual.

**Square & Compasses for the 3 Degrees:** [for MM Lodge only?] There is also symbolic meaning to the position of the Compasses' points when opening on the different degrees. Entered Apprentice: both points covered – the material (square) is superior to/covering the spiritual aspects of the newly admitted Brother. Fellowcraft: one point covered, one point exposed – the spiritual is starting to overcome the material desires due to the enlightenment gained from Masonry. Master Mason: both points on top of the square – the Master Mason has learned to subdue and control his material passions, the victory of spiritual enlightenment over base materialism.

The **letter G:** This symbol is typically given two meanings; Geometry, the most important of the seven liberal arts and sciences to a Mason, and God, or more correctly, the Great Architect of the Universe.

**Plum Rule:** The plum rule is actually a two part device, consisting of a narrow, straight-edged board with a plum line attached and suspended in front of it. Let's take the first part, a narrow, straight-edged board – for a symbolic meaning, think about the expression "*on the straight and narrow*" implying honesty and directness of purpose. The second part, the plum line, is always vertical, which would imply upright behaviour. When combined to form the Plum Rule one of it's symbolic meanings is moral rectitude and uprightness of character. In another context, as

when worn by a Brother in the Lodge, it symbolizes the office of the Junior Warden.

**The Square, Compasses, and G combined:** This combination is pretty much the universal symbol for Freemasonry. By combining the three individual symbols we can combine their meanings and read the definition of Masonry – taking the moral and honest character of a good man (the Square) and making him a better person by applying the spiritual teachings (the Compasses) of the seven liberal arts and sciences, especially Geometry, and the Great Architect of the Universe (the G). Also, note that the compasses are above the square, so from the ancient Egyptian symbolism we are showing that the spiritual aspects are superior to the material passions.

As an Entered Apprentice will learn, as he progresses through the degrees and lessons of Masonry, each of the tools has both an Operative function as well as a Speculative, or symbolic meaning. For example, the 24 Inch Gauge is a tool for measuring to the working mason, but to a Freemason it symbolizes the 24 hours of the day and how they should be divided to best serve his god, his fellow man, and himself. The Common Gavel is just a type of hammer to a stone worker, but to a Freemason, it symbolizes the need to work on, and shape himself into a more perfect person. And so on, as the tools are introduced and exemplified with each degree the Entered Apprentice becomes a Fellowcraft, and then a Master Mason, learning more of the symbols in the language of Masonry.

One of the advantages of using symbols to communicate is that they can convey multiple messages at the same time and in more depth than just using words. Also, they are not restricted to a single, strict definition – they are open to personal interpretation and let each of us attach our own meanings to enhance the message that they communicate to us. As in all things involving symbols, there are levels of interpretations, meanings within meanings, the symbols can be a guide to self-enlightenment at many levels for a Mason. Let's look at one example of this multi-level, multi-meaning concept.

Here is an excerpt from the Explanatory of the First Degree: “... *and since their time, there has been represented, in every regular and well-furnished Lodge, a certain point within a circle, embroidered by two perpendicular parallel lines, representing St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist. On the top of the circle rests the Book of Holy Scripture; ...*”. We are told that this piece of symbolism represents the individual Brother and the boundary of his duty. But this is just one meaning of that symbol, there can be more for those who wish to look deeper. The circle with dot is also the symbol for the sun and, according to ancient wisdom, the sun is a symbol for deity. For those with a Gnostic bent, man must approach deity on a personal level, through knowledge, learning, and experience. So this symbol can be read on multiple levels simultaneously. We have man at the centre of the sun slash deity, bounded by learning and passion (the two Saints John) and topped by the Book of Holy Scripture which can also be taken to mean, that by regulating our emotions and intellectual pursuits, and by learning about our god, source book provided, we have a path to our goal of making ourselves better men.

The same is true with the ritual for each of the three degrees. Each one contains and describes many symbols with important meanings to a Mason. It is only over time, and with many repetitions that we begin to see the deeper meanings of the symbols within the lessons that we are presented with at each level.

Symbols are an integral part of our existence from birth to grave. We have already mastered at least one language and set of symbols needed to live in our current society, Masonic symbolism is just another language that we need to learn if we wish to communicate and discuss the deeper meanings of the lessons of our Fraternity with our fellow Brothers.