



Internet Lodge 9659
United Grand Lodge of England
Province of East Lancashire
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Short Papers Competition 2007

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Title **Chamber of Refection**
Author **Bro Jelle Spijker - Canada**

Joseph Campbell writes in his book 'The Hero with a Thousand Faces'¹ about the monomyth. He borrowed the term from James Joyce but, in essence, the monomyth describes a hero's journey as it can be found in many narratives and myths around the world. In his book Campbell writes about the formula of the monomyth, which can be broken down in three parts:

1. The retreat
2. The initiation
3. The return

The monomyth can be applied to the three degrees of Freemasonry, the initiation and return as a Mason can easily be recognized. However, the retreat from life as a profane is missing in our degrees, the retreat where the initiate dies as a profane and makes way for a rebirth, or return as a Master Mason after his initiation.

Introduction

The Chamber of Reflection is used in the EA degree in the French Rite, the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, the Rectified Scottish Rite, The Rite of Memphis - Mizraim and derivatives of those. It can be explained as a room in the Lodge building where the candidate will reflect upon himself as well as attributes and symbols found in the chamber, before being initiated in the EA degree. During his stay the candidate will be confronted with a series of thought provoking symbols, which we will examine further in this paper.

Alchemy

A basic understanding of Alchemy is helpful in order to put most of the chamber's symbolism in context. Although most people think of Alchemy as creating gold out of base metals, this is only an aspect of this ancient tradition. Alchemy is a spiritual or sacred art in a similar way to Freemasonry. It provides tools that can lead to the realization of a higher state of consciousness and both arts depend on an initiation. Permission to study these sacred arts closer requires initiation for which permission should be obtained from a Master.²

Solve et Coagula

The Alchemist's motto is '*solve et coagula*' which roughly translates to braking down and restructuring elements of matter. When applying this process to gold, the resulting alchemical gold will appear in a purified state, absent of all impure components. In regards to Freemasonry we need to see this in light of

¹ 'The Hero with a Thousand Faces' Page 34

Joseph Campbell
ISBN: 978-0691017846

² 'Alchemy' Page 32

Titus Burckhardt
ISBN 1-887752-11-0

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spiritual Alchemy. The terms operative and speculative can be applied to Freemasonry as well as Alchemy and it is the latter that is important when studying the chamber of reflection.

Just as alchemy restructures elements in order to achieve a pure form of gold it is the purpose of Freemasonry to restructure the elements of the candidate to achieve a purer, complete man. This becomes clear when one considers that the alchemical symbol for gold is a point within a circle. Later on we will learn what the three elements are of man.

The Rite of Memphis

Before the candidate is initiated into the Rite of Memphis he is lead into the Chamber of Reflection by a Lodge officer who gives him the following instructions:

Sir, alone, left to yourself, before an image of termination of terrestrial Life, I invite you to write your Philosophical Testament. The Ceremony, which you are about to undergo, will, through its esoteric symbolism, bring to life the process, following death, of separation of the constitutive elements of Being. So that you will truly absorb the real purpose of Masonic Initiation, we ask you to meditate upon three metaphysical terms, which dominate the entire question of human existence. This is why I invite you, in this place and at this time, to set down your conception of the main elements of the duties of Man towards God, the World, and himself. When you are alone, with this door once more closed, then only are you permitted to remove your blindfold.

When the Candidate has removed his blindfold he finds a piece of paper with three questions upon the table, which he must answer in writing. The first question asks the candidate what his duty is to his creator, the second question deals with his duty towards the universe and lastly he has to answer what his duty is towards himself as well as humanity.

The candidate is left alone to contemplate the symbols in the chamber and to write his answers to the questions. Once he has indicated he is finished his philosophical testament is presented in Lodge and when found favourable the candidate is prepared in the usual manner and led to the door of the Lodge.

In three short rites the candidate is purified when entering the Lodge by the elements water, air and fire. The Chamber of Reflection represents the fourth, namely earth. Water purifies the candidates' body, the spirit is purified by air and the soul by fire. These three facets collectively represent the three-fold unity addressed in the 14th century by Jan van Ruysbroek in his book 'On the Adornment of Spiritual Marriage': *'These three unities which are in man by nature constitute a single life and a single realm. In its lowest unity this life is sensory and animal; in the middle unity it is rational and spiritual; and in the highest unity it is contained in its own essence. This belongs to all men by nature...'*³

The notion that Man consists of the three key elements body, spirit and soul is supported by Alchemy: *'...each metal consists of three components, namely, sulphur, quicksilver and salt. "Where ever there is metal", says Basilus Valentinus, "there are Sulphur, Quicksilver and Salt ... spirit, soul and body.' Thus these three powers or principles together constitute the nature of metal – or of man.'*⁴

³ 'On the Adornment of Spiritual Marriage' Jan van Ruysbroek, Book II, Chapter 2

⁴ 'Alchemy' Titus Burckhardt, Page 147

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Only when the three components are present in man, may a higher state be reached and the gold formed, the point within a circle.

When raised to the sublime degree of a Master Mason the third component of soul is added to the two components of body and spirit, attained in the EA and FC degree. The building of this three-fold unity was started in the chamber of reflection.

Contents of the Chamber of Reflection

The hourglass of course symbolizes time and makes us aware of our mortality, but can be explained further to connect with the notion of the eternal life cycle that can be found all around us since it needs to be turned over continuously. The Dictionary of Symbolism adds: *'In other traditions it urges mortals to live in moderation and virtue, lest their allotted time be arbitrarily curtailed as the result of intemperance.'*⁵

Although different items may be found in the chamber in different rites, a certain set of items can be found in all. First I will describe the settings of the chamber and then we will examine them closer: Upon entering the sparsely lit chamber, the first things that stand out are a table and a stool without a backrest. On the table are a lit candle, a pitcher or cup of water next to a piece of bread, an hourglass and two wood or clay cups, one with sea salt and one with sulphur. Next to a piece of paper containing three questions lays a goose quill and jar of black china ink. A human skull and crossed thighbones complete the setting. On the wall hangs a covered mirror and in the corner of the chamber stands a human skeleton, or an image hereof hangs on the wall.

The skeleton represents rebirth in Alchemy and the skull refers to 'Caput Mortuum' which means 'death's head' in Latin and alludes to the residue of an alchemical operation after all valuable elements have been removed. In combination with the cross bones the skull symbolizes mortality and death.

The scythe makes us aware of the universal justice that *'as we sow, so shall we reap.'* meaning that we will not be judged by our past, we will be judged by the present. Often our biggest enemy can be found within ourselves, the mirror on the wall exemplifies this.

Water and bread are the quintessential symbols for sustaining human life. Additionally the creation of bread, human work in its basic form, demonstrates the use of God's creations to better ourselves. Water on the other hand is the prime material from which all life comes and symbolizes fertility.

The rooster is associated with the God Mercury and represents this alchemical element, also known as quicksilver and it delineates the soul. The salt and the sulphur present on the table respectively denote the body and spirit, completing the three fold unity.

⁵ 'Dictionary of Symbolism - Cultural Icons and the Meanings Behind Them' Page 178 - 179

Hans Biedermann, translated by James Hulbert

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Daniel Béresniak

ISBN: 2-84323-033-0

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Bro. Giovanni Lombardo

Lodge Room International Magazine, issue June 2006

*'Freemasonry in Olden Times - Ceremonies and Rituals from the Rites of
Mizraim and Memphis'*

Robert Ambelain, translated by Piers A. Vaughan

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