

Masks in the Moonlight

by

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Question #1: Write an essay giving your interpretation of what the night, the moon, and the masks might symbolize in relation to the teaching of this Degree.

In my opinion, the main teaching of this degree is to be fair and impartial—what might be termed “disinterested”—in our judgments of others. “Disinterested,” of course, does not mean *uninterested*, in the sense of not finding something worthy of attention. Rather, it means *without an interest*, in the sense of not letting a personal stake in a matter interfere with the facts and ethics of a situation—be it financial, emotional, or otherwise. For this reason, for example, a judge might remove himself from a case because he owns stock in a particular company involved in the matter before his court. This interest would prevent him from deciding impartially. On the one hand, he might find in favor of the company, even if they were in the wrong, because it would benefit him financially. On the other, he might err on the side of caution and rule against the company, even if they were innocent, simply to prove that he was not influenced or motivated by greed. Either way, his judgment would have been influenced by his interest. It is better, in such a case, to remove oneself from this type of “conflict of interest.”

I will not spend my time or the reader’s recapping the drama of this degree; anyone who has the opportunity to read this short essay is already well aware of what happens at the meeting of the *Vehmgericht*. While most of the action centers on the protagonist, Adolf, and the antagonist, Reinfred, the real heroes of the degree—and those whom the candidate ought to strive to emulate—are the other members of the *Vehm*. Unlike the hypothetical judge above, they cannot simply remove themselves from this case. One of their number—a colleague, a peer, and possibly, a friend—stands accused of defrauding a man out of his land, and they need to find out the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it may be for them.

How much easier it would be for the other members of the *Vehm* to simply look at the title deed Reinfred presents, take it at face value because of his nobility, wealth, status, and reputation, and rule against the lowly Adolf! How much more comfortable to take the path of least resistance and rule against a mere soldier, justifying their decision by agreeing that the “have-nots” are always trying to mooch off of the “haves,” instead of working hard to get ahead! Especially when the Duke’s co-conspirator is a Bishop. Adolf is going up against some

heady power, indeed.

Instead of blindly siding with power, however, the judges decide to seek for the truth of the situation, first by the Trial by Oath (during which Reinfred blatantly lies), and next by the Trial by Ordeal. Although the latter all go Adolf's way, it isn't until the Recorder steps up with new information about the paper on which the deed is printed, that the *Vehm* finally condemns Reinfred. Interestingly, the Lieutenant Commander comes uncomfortably close to siding with the Duke and Bishop when he fawningly compliments them on their tasteful choice of paper (Degree Script, p. 22). The temptation to suck up to power is strong!

The point, however, is that the *Vehm* ultimately acts in a way that is disinterested, impartial, and fair. Despite Adolf's station in life, as compared with Reinfred's, they seek the light of truth. This they do in the dead of night, with only the moon to light their proceedings, and while wearing masks. Let us, then, explore how these symbols—night, the moon, and masks—relate to the lesson of the degree.

We are told in the First Degree that the black and white mosaic pavement on the ground floor of King Solomon's Temple represents life, checkered with good and evil. Good times give way to bad; bad times give way to good—and life goes on. Every day this is symbolized by the turning of the earth. Day gives way to night; night gives way to day. Even in the darkest hours we can be confident that the light will come back, dispelling the shadows and easing our sorrows and fears.

That the tribunal takes place at night is symbolic of this process. The very *Raison d'être* of the *Vehmgericht* is to pass judgment on crimes and see that justice is served. If they are meeting, it is because a crime has been committed, symbolized by darkness. The process of finding the truth and arriving at a judgment that is fair and impartial is symbolized by the coming of the day. As the deliberations go on, night moves on toward day. The *Vehm* both literally and figuratively moves from darkness to light. The Lieutenant Commander says, "Be not impatient when God, for a time, lets falsehood and the wrong prosper and overcome; for their day shall never be long, however they may think themselves out of the reach of the hand of God" (Degree Script, p. 30).

As the tribunal met, the light of the moon was the only light allowed. “It was the night of the full moon of the month of March, when the Lord brought the miracle of confusion of tongues. And it is in memory of that, that the Noahchite Knights hold their grand assembly every year at the full moon in March. Their meetings for instruction are held every month, at the full of the moon, and by its light; for the Lodge must be lighted by the moon alone” (*Formulas and Rituals*, p. 446). Thus, the *Vehmgericht* could only gather once a month, during the full moon. Of course, the moon—which governs the night—does not shed its own light, but reflects that of the sun. Hence, this is symbolic of the idea that the light of reason and truth is arrived at only by reflection. That is, facts and knowledge do not equal wisdom. You can gather a lifetime of knowledge, but unless you reflect on it, and how best to apply it to the business of living, you will never achieve wisdom. (A great saying goes: “Knowledge is being aware that a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.”) In order to arrive at an impartial and fair decision, the members of the tribunal need to reflect on what they hear.

During the drama, the presiding officer sits facing the moonlight, in much the same way that the Worshipful Master of the Symbolic Lodge sits facing the Great Lights, that he may derive guidance from them. The blinding and dazzling light of the sun is softened and made visible (insofar as you can actually look directly at it) by reflection from the moon. This is the light by which the head of the tribunal operates. This is further symbolized by the jewel of this degree, which takes the form of a silver moon with a Latin inscription meaning, “Let justice be done, though the heavens fall.”

Again, for justice to truly be done, it must be “impartial between the high and the low, cautious and slow to determine” (Degree Script, p. 28). All who appear before a court seeking justice must be respected by virtue of the fact that they *are*, not because of a position or title they hold. This notion is often symbolized by the figure of a woman, representing Justice, with a blindfold over her eyes, so that she won’t know whom she judges, but will hear the facts only. The symbolism of this degree, however, turns this image on its head. Here it is not the various parties who are unknown to Justice, but the judges themselves are unknown, for they wear masks.

Thus, the mask is symbolic that we do not know the real character of those who may sit in judgment of us. Although the case in the drama ended up in Adolf's favor, it nearly didn't. Only some obscure knowledge on the part of the Recorder saved the day for Adolf. And let us not forget that Reinfred—a despicable character who not only forged a document in order to steal land, but lied under oath about it—was a member of the *Vehmgericht* himself! How many poor souls had appeared before him and were made to submit to his moral sense before he was found out? (Not to mention the poor flock who were shepherded by the treacherous Bishop!) The lesson here is that even as we strive to be impartial in our judgments of others, we must be aware that others, though they may have the appearance of impartiality, might have hidden agendas of their own. On those occasions when we act as judge, let us be sure that no mask hides our own biases and prejudices. Ultimately, we can hide our intentions from others, with a mask, but not from God.

In conclusion, as Freemasons, we ought always to strive to be impartial in our judgments of others. Not only in cases where we may be called upon to actually decide the merits of a dispute between two parties, but in millions of small ways throughout our lives. How easy it is to make judgments about someone based on their clothes, their car, their job, their political party—even their grammar! And yet, even as we judge others, we smile at them, hiding behind our friendly-looking masks. How often have we dismissed the poorly-dressed man outside the grocery store without even a glance, when just a moment before we gave a friendly “hello” to a man in a suit? There are as many circumstances as there are people, so we ought to be wary of judging others without reflecting that we just don't know all the facts. As Masons, it is easy for us to be self-congratulatory, happy in the knowledge that we are honorable men. But let us always be willing to take our masks off, and look at ourselves by the light of the moon to discover our own biases. Only by doing this can we truly become impartial in our judgments of others and earn the title of Noahchite or Prussian Knight.

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