



Paper

The Symbolic Penalties

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The symbolic penalties of each degree.

Summary

An exploration of the Masonic symbolism behind the penalties of each of the three degree.

Keywords

First-Degree, Second-Degree, Third-Degree, Penalties

The Penalties - do they get worse by degrees?

Let us make it quite clear that the penalties are simply symbolic, and have never been inflicted, despite what the uninstructed and popular world who are not Freemasons may wish to think! Even so, the penalties have a long history and even in a symbolic form they contain teachings and ideas which are worth examining, especially if we see them as being a progressive series.

So, let's begin with the First-Degree symbolic penalty, which is that of *'having the throat cut across and the tongue torn out by the root and buried in the sands of the sea (some Lodges say 'rough sands of the sea') at low water mark or a cable's length from the shore where the tide regularly ebbs and flows twice in twenty-four hours'* (again some Lodges say 'twice in a natural day'). This is a most melodramatic passage and it conjures up visions of men going out across the salt marshes to carry out the ghoulish task of burying a dismembered tongue. But while the penalty would certainly entail the death of the perjured individual, the deeper meaning is that what is being taken away is the power of speech. The Freemason who betrays his trust, in speech or writing, is symbolically deprived of the means whereby he has broken his word; the tongue is symbolic of the power of speech, and therefore it is cut out. Nowadays we interpret this in the context that a Freemason undertakes obligations when he joins the order not to reveal the methods of identification and authentication, save in very limited and clearly defined circumstances. Those obligations are to be regarded as binding for life and the Freemason who breaks them makes himself unworthy to be a member of the Craft.

It is possible for such an unworthy Freemason to be expelled from the order. Likewise, Freemasons may face expulsion because of criminal, sexual or financial misconduct. Such expulsion harks back to the burial of the tongue at low water mark—a very special place in our nation's law and history. The foreshore in English law, that is the area between high and low water marks, belongs to the Crown. Hence if the tongue is buried at low water mark it is an indication that the item is being placed beyond the protection of our laws; into a form of exile. Thus, expulsion from the Craft is to be seen in the same light, with the unworthy mason being exiled from the friendship and fellowship of the order because of his bad behaviour.

Moving on to the Second Degree, the traditional penalty in full was that of *'having the left-breast laid open, the heart torn therefrom and given to the ravening birds of the air and devouring beasts of the fields as prey.'* In Freemasonry, as in other human analogies, the heart is considered the repository of 'secrets' as well as being the essential organ which pumps blood around the human body. We speak of the 'heart of the matter' when we refer to the crucial nub of an issue, or maybe we say *'this goes to the heart of things'*. Then we may say that someone is devoted to another 'heart and soul'. The heart is the symbol of love, affection and devotion and from ancient times it has been considered the source of all human emotions, good and bad, for we can also talk about someone having evil in his heart. Also, in Masonic terms, the heart is more than just the body's pump, it is symbolic of our emotional life and the source of all good and worthy thoughts and actions. Remember too, that in the initiation ceremony Charity is said to be the distinguishing feature of a Freemason's heart.

The Freemason who is deprived of his heart is thus a being who has lost that centre of goodness and wholeness and is of no more moral worth than the brute beasts and birds who consume the physical organ. Further, the Freemason who betrays the trust reposed in him is likened to one who has lost his emotional centre and is thus effectively de-humanised. This chilling argument once again points out to us the need to maintain our Masonic ideals in their purest form.

The penalties in the two former Degrees are, however, as nothing compared to that in the Third Degree. This entails the unworthy Freemason being severed in two and his body being burnt to ashes *“on the centre” and those ashes being scattered over the face of earth and water by the four cardinal winds of heaven, so that no trace of so vile a wretch might any longer be found.* Thus, this penalty involves the complete eradication of all trace of an individual’s existence, but this is no mere act of cremation. The body is to be burned ‘on the centre’ and we know from other parts of the Third=Degree ritual that ‘the centre’ is *‘a point from which a Master Mason cannot err’*. That expression refers to our requirement that all Freemasons must subscribe to a belief in a supreme being, though the requirement is no more specific than that. Even so, every Freemason must have his individual belief constantly before him to ensure that his does not err and fall into bad ways. Thus, if a man’s body were to be burnt to ashes on ‘the centre’ it would mean not only the destruction of his body, but also the negation of his beliefs and his submission to the divine power which he has stated throughout his Masonic life to be the base of his trust and actions.

Thus, the penalty does not simply symbolise earthly dissolution and destruction, but also the destruction of belief and faith. It is a penalty which goes beyond the merely temporal and physical, but has implications for the wrongdoer’s relationship with his conception of the Divine. This is an issue where Freemasonry has clearly been influenced by very ancient beliefs systems which taught that the possibility of life beyond the human phase was dependent in some way on the preservation after death of the corporeal remains of the deceased. This is very clear from the burial practices of the ancient Egyptians who practiced mummification, but other cultures have had similar beliefs and cultures. The ‘old’ body must, to such a way of thinking, be preserved in some form for a ‘new’ life to be commenced. We may not accept such arguments today, but they still have a symbolic significance for us. We are told in our ritual that we should so live our lives that we *‘live respected and die regretted’*. Which one of us would want to feel that we might lose those highly prized attributes by wrongdoing and the betrayal of our Masonic values? Who would want to be written out of the annals of Freemasonry as a transgressor, a *‘perjured and unworthy individual’* whose very name and memory is abhorrent to men of good will and upright intentions.

So, although the traditional penalties used in our rituals are symbolic and never to be employed, we should still prize the truths they symbolise. Charity, integrity, honesty, fidelity, loyalty are all virtues we should aspire to possess and practice, and it may be no bad thing if we stress our commitment by reference to the ancient and rather dramatic language of the traditional penalties.

##END##

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- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
 - Followed by ‘any questions’
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If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his "serving men", as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*.
Rudyard Kipling

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