

## The Symbolism of The Candle in Freemasonry. Reflections on Light, The Four Elements and The Three Journeys of The Apprentice

Ferenc Sebök, Ph.D

Catholic University of Louvain – Ballsbridge University  
Email: f.sebok@hotmail.com



Copyright, Ferenc Sebök, *Semper Melior*, 30x40, 2008.  
R°L° Éperon d'Or, Orient de Namur, RGLB.

### 1. The Candle

From the Middle Ages, in the West, the candle competed with the oil lamp which had the disadvantage of being more dangerous, requiring more attention and required more handling for filling and changing the wick which quickly charred. The candle had a wick surrounded by beef or mutton tallow.

The word "candle" appeared in the French language in the 14th century. But it is to Michel-Eugène Chevreur, a French chemist, that we owe the invention of the first candle in the 1820s, following the discovery of saponification. He managed to extract animal stearin.

The word "candle" is therefore reserved for preparations made of tallow. The word candle has a Kabyle origin "Bgayet" or Bugaya in Arabic. Bgayet was a maritime city in Algeria, currently called Béjaïa. The city provided a large quantity of beeswax that was used instead of tallow in candles.

Already in Roman times, ceramic lamps contained tallow to burn.

The ancient Egyptians used beeswax candles to light their temples and homes. Thus, we can consider that the use of candles or oil lamps goes back more than 3000 years.

In ancient times, candles had a mystical, magical side, in the sense that they were often used during religious ceremonies in ancient times. According to popular belief, it was a way to communicate with the gods or to chase away evil spirits.

During the Middle Ages, candles were mainly used in churches and monasteries. Monks made them with beeswax to use them during their prayers and religious rituals.

During the Renaissance, candles became commonplace in families, but beeswax candles were a symbol of wealth and status, as beeswax candles were more expensive than tallow candles.

In the 19th century, the invention of the candle machine revolutionized the candle industry, as candles were mass-produced, making candles more affordable for people.

Paraffin, a petroleum derivative, was introduced, which further reduced production costs.

Candles were used to light homes, but also to heat homes in the winter. Candles could be placed in candle stoves to warm rooms.

On the physical level, if the flame of the candle moves, staggers, it is because of a variation in the atmosphere, generally, the wind, a movement impacting its flame which is always vertical, seeming to rise in a point towards the sky.

## **2. Candle, Light, The Three Journeys of The Apprentice and The Four Elements in Freemasonry**

On the spiritual level, the flame represents a principle of spiritual elevation.

We could see a similarity with the plumb line which invites introspection and to discover the depths in each one. The flame is alone, continuous, from its birth by the fire, until it is consumed, therefore its death.

In this sense, the candle recalls the cycle of life, the cycle of each of us, but also "V.I.T.R.I.O.L". In the Chamber of Reflection, the Profane is plunged into darkness in the French rite or the ancient and accepted Scottish rite.

Only one candle is lit, because he is asked to write his philosophical Testament.

The flame is also a sublimation; the attention of the Profane is turned towards the flame since it illuminates in the darkness. As such, it represents a path to follow, which is the search for light and self-improvement.

The candle therefore represents a possible light when it is lit. In Freemasonry, this light is transmitted from Brother to Brother in Lodge, in certain circumstances, which is a symbol of transmission of light, as well as a symbol of cohesion in a sacred space.

It is also through light that the Profane becomes an initiate, a brother of the Order.



**Copyright, Ferenc Sebök, 2017.  
Geometric Miniatures 300 Anno GLRB, 2017**

In the Masonic ritual, at the opening of the work, the Master of Ceremonies comes to fetch the flame from the East, which reminds us that light springs from the East to the West, from the Zenith to the Nadir.

The Emerald Tablet teaches us that what is Above is Below and what is Below is Above.

But the transmission of light by the Worshipful Master is also a gesture of love and a desire to seek Light.

The Light is mentioned in the Prologue of John who says that:

"The Light shines in the Darkness, but the Darkness has not received it"

Thus, being illuminated by a certain light is not self-evident and each person must constantly seek and maintain this light, otherwise it weakens and dies from lack of air.

This means that oxygen is its fuel as oxygen is for our brain. Fire, one of the four elements, has its life-giving partner, thanks to Air, symbolically representing the breath of life "Ruah" or Pnuma".

In the Lodge, the Worshipful Master transmits the flame to the 3 columns "WISDOM, STRENGTH, BEAUTY" with the participation of the two Wardens. The spark that springs forth can be interpreted as, symbolically, the links representing the brothers of the Lodge.

The lights that spring forth one by one, during the Opening of the Lodge is also a warning that after several stages of the ritual, we gradually move from the Profane to the Sacred. In the ancient and accepted Scottish rite, for example, the shift from the Profane to the Sacred occurs when the Worshipful Master is at the Altar, opens the Volume of the Sacred Law and places the Square on the Compass, at the Apprentice degree.

The candle recalls not only the Light, the link between the High and the Down, the Zenith and the Nadir, but also the fact that the brothers must sharpen their spirituality to make progress in Freemasonry. The flame suggests trust in the other through its transmission, but also the fact that between Brothers, blindness and passions must not dominate reason.

But the Flame also gives heat; as such the Flame symbolizes not only Knowledge, Wisdom, but also the Strength of Fire and its measured heat which give heat to the spirit of man, who must be charitable and have compassion.

This gentle heat can be called Beauty.

Wisdom, Strength, Beauty, the three are the name of the three Columns in rites such as the French rite or the modern Belgian rite, or the ancient and accepted Scottish rite.

The Flame symbolizes the divine mystery, because God often manifests himself through the symbol of Fire, thus showing his power, his glory, his anger.

Let us think of the biblical stories of Mount Sinai.

It is also the Fire that leads Israel to the heart of the desert and that ignites the will of the prophets. And it is also by the Fire descending from the sky that God concludes an alliance with the people of Israel. The Fire symbolizes God, but his active presence.

This fire illuminates, guides, is in constant movement, which purifies, but which can also punish because of the infidelity of his people.

Fire is thus the first principle of generation and life and according to astrophysicists the planets, the macrocosm are born from what we call fire. For example, without the fire that warms our planet, the earth would be lifeless.

During an initiation, we can read the following in the ritual, when the Worshipful Master asks:

"Brother Senior Warden, what do you ask for the Profane?"

Light!

Sir, what do you ask for?"

Light!

And the Worshipful Master says:

"Let there be light at my third blow of the mallet!"

In this way, each brother promises to make his particle of light shine, of which he is the depository.

On the esoteric level, the candle is also the link between the real world and the astral world. In the flame, all the forces of nature are active, said Novalis (from According to Georg Philipp Friedrich, Baron von Hardenberg-Germany (1772-1801), also called Novalis, "all the forces of nature are active in the flame").

The four elements are visible in the functioning of the candle: the candle produces fire, thanks to the air and the Earth (the wick) and the wax which under the effect of the fire becomes liquid. The candle therefore represents the link between spirit and matter.

The symbol of the candle also suggests that the flame is persevering, even if it flickers, and draws enough strength from the earth (wick) not to go out.

However, the flame of the candle reminds us of the fragility of life, because too much breath or a gust of wind can kill the flame.

The flame must therefore be maintained, like the love of the brothers or love in secular life, at the risk that the flame will die. The flickering can allude to the hazards of life. In Jewish tradition, the flickering of the flame is represented by the swaying of the Jews during prayer, notably at the Wailing Wall.

The flame of the candle therefore symbolizes the purification of the spirit and its light becomes a guide, an aspiration for more light.



**Copyright, Ferenc Sebök, 2017  
Geometric Miniature 300 Anno RGLB, 2017**

In the Masonic tradition, the brother does not blow on the candle to extinguish it, because the breath of life "Ruah" belongs to the Most High or Great Architect of the Universe. The Master of Ceremonies extinguishes the candle with the extinguisher. By this gesture, he pushes the flame from the top downwards (the light radiates from the Top downwards).

Thus, he retransmits the light received in the Lodge into the consciousness and hearts of the brothers. By extinguishing the candles at the three columns in the reverse order (Beauty - Strength - Wisdom during the Closing of the Lodge, the symbolism High-Low and Low- is still present, forming a loop around the 4 elements Earth - Air - Water - Fire.

Blowing on the flame of a candle in the Lodge would mean the dominance of the Air element over the Fire element, while air represents Disorder (symbolically linked to the second test) and Fire, light, Strength, heat the beneficial, reassuring calm (third and last test of the Profane, before he receives the Light).

By blowing on a flame, this makes the flame unhook from what feeds it; thus, symbolically we can understand that the Fire is torn from the Earth by the breath. In other words, the breath thus tears the spirit from matter and this represents death.

The Flame of the candle also symbolizes love, joy and endless sharing, without diminishing its intensity. It is like a candle that can transmit its flame without diminishing its own intensity.

In the Masonic tradition, white candles are used, because this colour is a symbol of divine light. Moreover, isn't the colour white the synthesis of all colours?

White is a sign of purity, truth, righteousness and morality, virtue, but also harmony.

The white colour of the candle letting its flame burn suggests to us that "Everything is in the One and that the One is in Everything". This is why the flame symbolizes "energy", the manifestation of the Divine through Light" and the link between the "Microcosm and the Macrocosm".

However, I have seen candles of different colours in some Lodges: Red and Black. Different colours are visible in the flame, suggesting the universality and synthesis of the Universe through the Flame "Life" that can exist thanks to the 4 elements I have already spoken about. In a flame, we can see yellow, almost white bright fire, blue, glowing colour and other shades.

During visits to a Lodge, it is possible to see a black candle, especially as a sign of mourning, at the death of a brother during a Funeral Service.

In some Lodges, there is a black candle lit when the Worshipful Master says a few words about the deceased Brothers, but symbolically, they are present.

The colour red, for example, symbolizes heat, life, the present, joy, but also blood, conflict, anger, destruction. It is also the colour of passions.

The colour black symbolizes the end of a cycle, death, nothingness, chaos. It also symbolizes the solemnity, austerity and rigour of the Law requiring respect and good moral conduct. Black also has an esoteric side, suggesting the mysterious and the contrast with white, symbolizing light. White and Black can allude to the Mosaic Pavement which can suggest the search for balance, temperance.

I spoke of "the spirit", but what are we talking about?

On the esoteric level, the spirit can be associated with the soul, as in many religions. For others, having a more rational or Cartesian conception, the spirit can have a link with imagination, conscience, reason.

In any case, the spirit is opposed to the matter exploitable by the spirit.

We can then think of a formless reality, difficult to grasp, having multiple facets that are essentially opposed to matter, to the body in relation to the spirit.

Judaism conceives the world in a concrete way, where the spirit is the breath, "Ruah" which is divine, but also the atmosphere, the wind, the breath or the respiration.

The word is manifested concretely by the breath. The spirit is therefore an external force, like an energy which produces the movement, represented by the Jews during the prayers. A bit like the wind which makes the leaves of the trees move, or like the respiration which makes the lungs inflate and which is a sign of life.

In other words, the matter exists inert or perhaps in mutation, but it is thanks to the breath that things move, making life possible. Therefore, the matter (human body for example) coexists with life thanks to the breath of life.

But matter is not inexhaustible and must be well managed in its functioning to avoid a break in balance. There is therefore a link between the body and the mind, homeostasis.

The mind is a breath that enters and comes out transformed by the lungs, feeding the brain, against the capacities of the mind, but acting on matter (body) by feeding it with oxygen thanks to the blood that circulates.

The deist Freemason will say that the human person receives breath because it was given to him by God, Great Architect of the Universe.

Thus, we can read in the Old Covenant:



"The Lord God formed man with dust taken from the ground. He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).

In the first degree of Apprentice, the white candle refers to the Moon, because the Apprentices:  
"Can only sustain a weak light" (AASR Ritual, Belgian Modern Ritual)

Indeed, the light of the Sun gives too much light for them. They will have to become Fellow craft, then Master Mason to discover the Blazing Star and so that they can sit in the South (also called South) in the Lodge. This is the reason why the apprentice is sitting on the North Column, where the valley of Gehenna is symbolically located, without an opening.

On the Tracing board at the Apprentice degree, we can see three windows: one near the East, where the Worshipful Master sits with the Brother Secretary and the Brother Orator. The Window towards the East is close to the Sun and reflects all the Light of the Sun.

The window to the South, is located at the South Column, where the Fellows and Master Masons can sit. This window will reflect more light than the one representing the Apprentices which is located to the West.

On most Tracing board, the three windows are represented on the right of the Lodge Table when looking at it; however, it could be considered more correct to place the window being to the West to the North, but there is symbolically the valley of Gehenna where there was no opening to Solomon's Temple, as a measure of protection.

The symbolism of the valley of Gehenna is powerful. In the New Testament, Gehenna is synonymous with curses. This Valley is often linked to the symbolism of hell. The sacrificial fire in this context is the symbol of the punishment of souls who refuse God's salvation.

It would therefore be impossible to place a window to the North, due to this lack of opening. Thus symbolically, the Apprentice Window letting in "very little light" is located at the bottom right of the Tracing board, below the window representing the Fellow craft.

But we should not minimize the pale reflection of the window placed in the West. Indeed, is it not under the light of the Moon that the Alchemists are accustomed to working among other things on the famous "white work" which allows the manufacture of the white stone, the one which will transmute vile materials into silver? Let us recall that for the alchemists, among the seven recognized metals two are perfect: Gold and Silver.



**Ferenc Sebök, 2017 Geometric Miniature 300 Anno RGLB, 2017**

The esoteric approach teaches us that the element Fire feeds on the elements Earth and Air. It lives from the death of the earth and air while water which includes combustion gases lives from the death of fire.

In Freemasonry, colours are codes, values and symbols.

Thus, the Moon will most often be represented by the colour silver and the Sun by the colour of gold. It will be the same for the East where the colour purple is often used, because it is in the East that the Chair of Solomon is located, but symbolically the Holy of Holies.

Thus, the Lodge can be divided into three parts:

"Ulam" - "Hekal" (the Saint) - "Débir" (the Holy of Holies or Most Holy)

According to the Scriptures, the two Saints "Hekal" and "Debir" were entirely decorated and covered in gold.

In Kings, I we can read that King Solomon built a temple to the glory of God on Mount Moriah.

The two Holy places are the Hekal, and finally the Debir. The Temple of Solomon was built in seven years around the 10th century BCE. The Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE.

In the ritual we can read the following:

The Master of Ceremonies, in white gloves, equipped with the extinguisher carried by the left hand goes to the "Wisdom" column, extinguishes the candle then will do the same successively to the "Strength" and "Beauty" columns.

Let us recall that the first journey of the Profane is made in the Cave or Chamber of reflection symbolizing the Earth.

The profane, arriving in the Lodge by the low door (ancient and accepted Scottish rite), will undergo the following 3 tests; First the test of Air: chaos is total with loud clicking and noises reminiscent of chaos.

After the test of the "Cavern" or Chamber of Reflection symbolically representing the nourishing Earth, the first journey in the Lodge is that of the test of air, symbolizing human life, passions and the clash of interests, the obstacles in the path of each person's life, hence the din that the layman hears.

Then comes the second test of Water. At this stage, the layman is still in chaos, but with a much less significant din. The first two tests symbolize the disorder that tends to diminish.

Water purifies as in the Catholic or Protestant evangelical or Baptist religion. At the Masonic level, it is a philosophical purification.

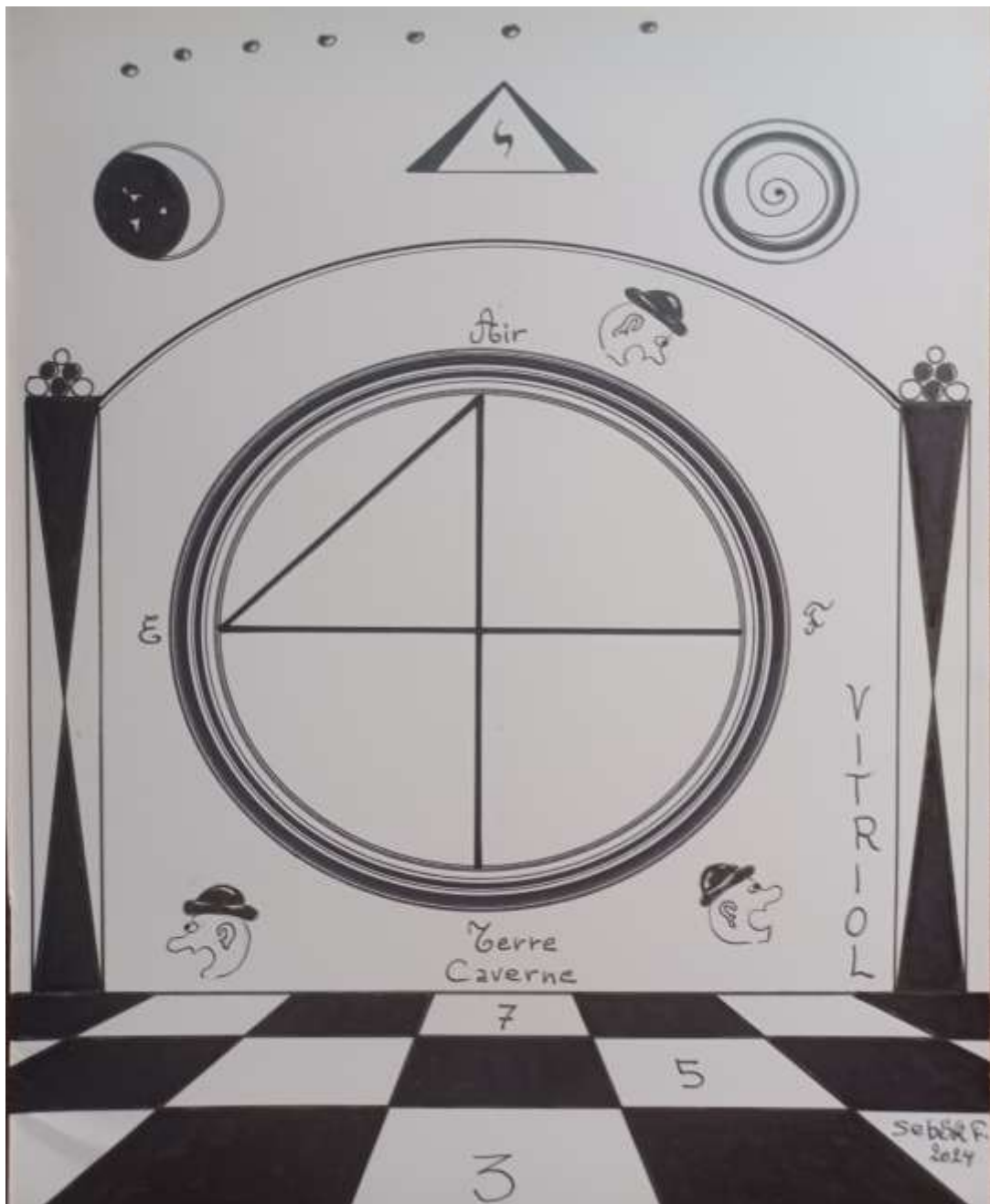
It is also a stage where humility is a path to follow, and through a progressive awakening, the Apprentice will make efforts on himself to make "Progress in Freemasonry" as the ritual says. Impulsiveness is mastered and progressive self-awareness makes the initiate-to-be progress towards spiritual maturation.

The Apprentice's Journeys are certainly to be linked to the 3 degrees of the Blue Lodge: Apprentice - Fellow craft - Master.

The third journey is symbolized by the Fire that the Profane must feel. This test symbolizes silence, serenity, but also mastery involving a part of wisdom.

Thus, the work to slowly achieve the mastery of the initiate has begun. This symbolism will be materialized when the Profane, having received the Light, will carry out his first work on himself, on the rough Stone, using the chisel and the Mallet, at the foot of the Orient (Ancient and accepted Scottish Rite).

**3. Below, Drawing Representing the Four Journeys of The Profane to Receive the Light and the 4 Elements**



**The Journeys of The Profane Before Receiving the Light**



Ferenc Sebök, Hope, 48x36, Acrylic, 2020.  
Tracing Board of The First Degree, Entered Apprentice.

## Bibliography

### Rituals

- R°L° les Vrais Amis, 51, Orient de Retinne, GLRB  
R°L° François-Charles de Velbrück, 16, Orient de Liège, GLRB  
R°L° Les Sept Piliers, 38, Orient de Liège, GLRB  
R°L° France, 9, Orient de Budapest, GLSH



### **Masonic works**

Archives de la R<sup>o</sup>L<sup>o</sup> France, 9, Orient de Budapest, GLSH  
Archives de la R<sup>o</sup>L<sup>o</sup> Les Sept Piliers, 38, Orient de Liège, GLRB  
Quatuor Coronati, Budapest.  
Archives de la R<sup>o</sup>L<sup>o</sup> Saint Charles de la Parfaite Harmonie, Orient de Bouillon.

### **Books**

Jean-Pierre Bayard, La spiritualité de la Franc-maçonnerie, éd. Dangles, 1982.  
Irène, Mainguy, La symbolique maçonnique du troisième millénaire, Éditions Dervy, Paris, 2006.  
Patrick, Négrier, Le Temple de Salomon, éd. Télètes, Paris, 1991.  
R.E.A.A., Rituel des trois premiers degrés selon les anciens cahiers 5829, transcrit et édité par Jacques Simon, préfacé par Jean-Pierre Lassalle, éd. De La Hutte, 2013.  
Ferenc, Sebök, Mode of transmission of tradition and knowledge in Freemasonry, Lambert Academic Publishing, 2024.  
Ernest de Toytot, Les Romains chez eux, scènes et mœurs de la vie romaine, Paris, éd. Albanel, 1868.  
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1069379/f90.image.r.langFR>

### **Websites**

<https://zougies.fr/lhistoire-des-bougies-a-travers-les-epoques/>  
<http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bougie>  
<http://www.ledifice.net/A121-1.html>  
<http://mon.astrocenter.fr/prediction/mag/E0074-bougies-signification>  
[http://www.interbible.org/interBible/ecritures/symboles/2003/sym\\_030923.htm](http://www.interbible.org/interBible/ecritures/symboles/2003/sym_030923.htm)  
[http://www.interbible.org/interBible/ecritures/symboles/2003/sym\\_031111.htm](http://www.interbible.org/interBible/ecritures/symboles/2003/sym_031111.htm)