

Describe and explain the religious symbolism in ONE different piece of art, music or literature – “The Adoration of the Kings” by Jan Gossaert

‘The Adoration of the Kings’ by Jan Gossaert was painted in the early part of the 16th century and is the perfect example of how religion and art can be incorporated with one another to create a popular image. The scene present is that of the visit from the three wise men soon after the birth of baby Jesus.

The whole event is centred around a ruinous edifice, which appropriately symbolises the old order in which things were. For example, the Jews had suffered a wave of malice in which they had succumbed to a role of subservience. However, the presence of the new Christ signifies a new start. As stated in Matthew 2:1-12 of the Bible, the painting also displays the three wise men, Casper, Balthasar and Melchior, and the star that they had followed from the east in order to reach the ‘King of the Jews’ (Matthew 2:1-12) in Bethlehem. With them, the three kings are pictured to have brought the traditional gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, each in their individual golden chalices. The gold, which is being presented by Casper, is a symbol of the Christ’s kingship, the frankincense represents his divinity and the myrrh is present to foreshadow his selfless sacrifice to his followers. Similarly, a carving on a column above Casper also predicts his death.

The star directly above Mary and Jesus symbolises God the Father and the Dove beneath it is representative of the Holy Spirit. In addition to this, with Jesus directly under both, the Holy Trinity is created. Also present in the sky is the celestial order of nine angels, each dressed in clothes reminiscent of those worn during Mass. Joseph, the aged old man in red behind Mary, is shown to be the only person gazing as if into Heaven or at the star or the spectacle of the arriving angels. This is suggestive of the fact that despite his absence from the main part of the painting, his role and position within the story is still important. All the figures present in the image are dressed in extremely lavish fabrics, identifying the importance of the occasion as they have all come to adorn this one child, the ‘Son of God’ (Luke 1:35). Additionally, behind Mary under the archway is a donkey with its head lowered. Subtly, this is once again a reminder to the old order of things as the sunken head represents the solemnity of it all. Another figure that elicits remembrance to another story is the image of a dog gnawing on a bone in the foreground of the painting. The bone is redolent of the story of Adam and Eve. The fact that Mary has been dressed in blue is also worth noticing. This is because at the time, ultramarine, the pigment that made up the colour blue, was extremely rare and had to be imported all the way from Afghanistan. Therefore it was only used to signify the value of important patrons, in this case, Mary. Moreover, the way in which baby Jesus is sitting on his mother’s lap reminds us of a king sitting on his throne, which once again reinforces his kingship. Also, both Mother and baby have been orientated in the centre of the painting, which draws our attention directly to them, once again suggesting their significance with the occurring scene.

Concluding, Gossaert has successfully represented the Epiphany and has included an immense amount of detail where symbolism is concerned.