

Symbolism of the three beasts



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Symbolism in literary works is used when one thing is meant to represent something else, in order to create meaning and emotion. In the first part of Dante Alighieri's three-part epic poem entitled *Divine Comedy*, there are many symbols the author uses to effectively convey his message to the readers, particularly the symbol of the three beasts the persona first encounters in Canto I. *Inferno*, meaning 'hell' in Italian, details the journey of the persona as he ventures through Hell. Before he enters the gates, however, he encounters three beasts, which are used by the author as a symbol of the three major divisions in Hell the persona will soon witness.

To begin with, the poem begins shortly before the dawn of Good Friday in a dark forest. The persona finds himself lost in the "dark wood", astray from the straight path, or the path of truth. Allegorically, this could mean that the persona has committed great sins in his life, but now he wants to repent and find the path back to salvation and truth. However, before this can happen, his path is blocked by three beasts, which are thought to represent the three kinds of sin that bring the unrepentant soul into Hell. These three animals are actually taken from Jeremiah 5: 6 in the bible, which says "Wherefore a lion out of the forest shall slay them, and a wolf of the evenings shall spoil them, a leopard shall watch over their cities: every one that goeth out thence shall be torn in pieces: because their transgressions are many, and their backslidings are increased." Therefore, because the persona has committed many sins and has turned his back on God, the three beasts have come to take him to Hell.

Although it is clear that the beasts represent sins, much critical analysis has gone into identifying these sins. Traditional interpretations think that the

beasts represent lust, pride and greed, while others say they represent the sins of youth, middle-age and old-age. However, the physical descriptions, as well as evidence from the poem, suggests that the beasts represent the three major divisions of hell. The three divisions, which coincides with the seven deadly sins, are incontinence, which includes lust, gluttony, avarice and anger; the sins of violence; and malice, which includes the sins fraud and treachery. The leopard is symbolic of malice, the lion is symbolic of violence and the she-wolf represents incontinence. Many critics assigns the leopard to incontinence and the she-wolf to malice, though, to correspond the order the beasts arrive with the order of the gates of Hell. However, critic Aldo S. Bernardo explains that, from Lucifer's view at the bottom, which he says is the " basic perspective from which the entire poem should be viewed," malice would be the first division, therefore the leopard would be a symbol of this division, as it appears first, and the she-wolf would be a symbol of the last division, incontinence, as it appears last.

The first beast the persona encounters is the leopard, which, as previously stated, is symbolic of the division in Hell entitled malice. Upon seeing this beast, the persona describes it as being " covered with a spotted hide." Critic Melanie Barker explains that the spotted hide would help the leopard to " disguise himself from a potential creature of prey," which is the ultimate act of fraud and treachery, because the leopard can hide itself, and then strike at its prey when the time is right. Additionally, in Canto XX, the persona's guide, Virgil, explains that fortune-tellers and soothsayers must walk with their heads on backwards, unable to see what is ahead, because of the fraud they committed in their life, " they had their faces twisted toward

their haunches, and found it necessary to walk backward, because they could not see ahead of them." When the persona first sees the leopard, a similar situation occurred, where the leopard "impeded [his] ascent" so he had to walk backward, unable to see what lay beyond the dark wood. Also, the persona says, "and the gentle season, gave me good cause for hopefulness on seeing, that beast before me with his speckled skin; but hope was hardly able to prevent, the fear I felt when I beheld a lion." The persona gets a false sense of hopefulness when he encounters the leopard that soon turns to fear upon witnessing the lion, which is what the leopard represents; fraud and treachery.

Furthermore, after the leopard, the persona then encounters a lion, which represents the second division of Hell; violence. When the persona first witnesses the lion, he says that it had its "head held high and ravenous with hunger." This suggests that the lion is extremely hungry, wanting to devour, or kill, the persona. This violent act is exactly what the lion represents, and the persona even says that "the air around him seemed to shudder," meaning that even the air around him was afraid of the violence the lion could exhibit. However, many critics suggest that the lion represents pride, as it is described with its "head held high." They argue that lions are naturally prideful and rarely ever violent towards humans, however, the lion is also described as being "ravenous with hunger." If a human is around a lion when it is hungry, many sources say that the lion would kill the human. The lion in this poem seems to be voracious, which would mean that it's more violent than prideful in this poem. Also, lions ensure they remain at the top of the food chain by using "whatever violent means necessary [and] use

of brute force,” according to critic Melanie Barker, therefore the association of the lion with violence is a rightful one. Additionally, in the bible verse these beasts are taken from, the lion is described to be slaughtering the people of the cities.

Lastly, the third beast that the persona sees is the she-wolf, which is representative of the division called incontinence. Incontinence, as described by critic David Bruce, “ is not being able to control yourself.” The she-wolf is described as carrying “ every craving in her leanness.” To crave something means to desire intensely, therefore the she-wolf carries everyone’s desires in her, and these desires, presumably bad desires, such as sexual desires, or lust, causes people to turn away from the right path and commit sins. The persona says that she “ had already brought despair to many,” meaning she has caused so many people to sin and to wound up in Hell, suffering for the rest of their lives. Also, the wolf is the beast that finally causes the persona to retreat and lose hope, therefore she must represent the division that causes people to retreat and not be able to control their sinful desires.

Moreover, in the bible’s description, the wolf does not have a gender, but in Dante’s poem, he specifically states the sex of the wolf as female. It is said that women are “ infamous for [their] sexual treachery throughout ancient culture,” as suggested by critic Melanie Barker, therefore it makes sense that this wolf would be female or would appear female to the male persona, to try to make the persona indulge in his sinful desires.

Although many critics have tried to decipher the symbolic meaning behind the beasts presented to the persona in *Inferno* by Dante, it is clear that these beasts are representative of the three major divisions of Hell in the poem.

The physical descriptions, as well as other evidence in the poem, suggests that the leopard is symbolic of malice, the lion represents violence and the she-wolf represents incontinence.