

## A Summary of T. S. Eliot's Ash-Wednesday

The following constitutes a very brief summary of the six sections of T. S. Eliot's long poem *Ash-Wednesday* (1930), which was the first major poem Eliot wrote after his conversion to Christianity in 1927. (That same year, he [wrote 'Journey of the Magi'](#), but *Ash-Wednesday* was a poem on an altogether larger scale – so the following brief summary may help to clarify the 'narrative' of the poem and how it charts the religious journey of the poet.

Part I introduces the speaker, who is a person without hope, for whom the world holds few pleasures. Life has lost its meaning and joy because the speaker has lost his faith. There are echoes here of 'The Hollow Men': the idea of a person in a sense cast out from the world of life and growth. The speaker renounces all earthly and temporal things, and acknowledges the emptiness of worldly aspirations and ambitions (see the image of his 'wings' as merely 'vans to beat the air', rather than to soar up into higher things).

Part II opens with the line, 'Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree' (the 'Lady' picking up on the female aspects to the previous section). The leopards might be read as images of death and destruction, but they show the speaker's desire for, rather than fear of, death. In a surreal image, the leopards feast upon the speaker's organs and flesh, destroying his sensual desire and leaving only his bones, which have been purified by the 'Lady' figure (i.e., by religion, associated here specifically with the Virgin Mary). The bones sing a 'song' in praise of their achieved purity.



Part III sees the speaker climbing a series of stairs – ascending to a higher plane, i.e. the world of God – and reviewing his past at each turn of the stair. This section derives from a section of Dante's *Purgatorio* (the middle part of *The Divine Comedy*). At the first turn of the second stair, he meets a shape grappling with the devil: this 'shape' is his past self. He has conquered doubt and despair, and can ascend. He passes on to the window, which looks out on a pastoral scene where a Pan-like figure (Pan was the pagan god of the pastoral world) is playing a flute and enchanting the world around him. This seems to suggest worldly pleasures (Pan was half-man, half-goat, with the goat half suggesting sexual lust), which the speaker must reject (just as he had to reject the devil and despair) and move beyond.

Part IV focuses on the Lady, that feminine symbol of spiritual and religious fulfilment. She is described as 'wearing / White light folded' (a symbol of her purity) and 'blue' (the colour of the Virgin Mary). Now 'the fiddles and the flutes' are borne away (that is, the flute being played by the figure at the end of the previous section?), suggesting that the temptation of earthly, temporal delights is being overcome. But death will also be vanquished: the yew tree, mentioned twice in this section, is a symbol of death (the trees are often found in churchyards).