

2022 Classical Literature Scholarship—2nd Place

Cooper Skousen

The Animal Within Me

I have an animal within me. It prowls my ribcage—slithers around my spine—hunkers in the cavities of my heart—swims in the blood beneath my skin. I feel the rumble of its hunger and the ache of its thirst. I feel it gnash and tear at the walls of my soul. It gets especially nasty when it's provoked. Let me tell you of a time when its claws came out.

I had just woken up on a Monday morning. Having completed my scripture study and prayers, I skipped up the stairs with my animal snoozing between my shoulder blades. I entered the kitchen and was greeted with the sight akin to that of a zoologist on an African Safari. Every member of my family was growling or hissing at one another in a dramatic pack-fight. This seemed like a drastic juxtaposition from my goodness-centered morning. It appeared to me that my father was the primal predator of the group. He was barking at my siblings about their inability to clean up after themselves. Because I felt so spiritually uplifted, I felt I had the responsibility to wrangle the situation. I got out my whip and whistle and began to make comments to my dad about how he wasn't handling the situation kindly. He only snarled back at me. I continued to intervene in the struggle but it only seemed to pit me against him. By this time, the animal within me was fully awake and pacing its cage between my ribs. I attempted to restrain its aggression but as the fight continued to escalate, it was ready to pounce. Before I knew it, it burst forth out of its cage, tore my lungs, ripped my throat, and roared. My opposition responded the same. At that moment we were both hurled into the basest human condition of vile nature competing against vile nature. The goodness within me fled, weeping.

Later, as that moment receded, I began to realize the deep, soul-deflating significance of my encounter with animals within *me*. This experience became so telling because previously, I had begun to read and discuss the book, *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel in my Socratic Class. In this book, the protagonist, Pi, is stranded on a lifeboat with a tiger and his survival is dependent on his ability to tame it. While the literal story has great significance, the true meaning of the book came to me at the conclusion when he links the story of the tiger with the animalistic natures *within human beings*. The tiger on the boat with Pi became, in actuality, a representation of the animal within Pi and how he had to tame his own nature to become something greater. He describes moments of his survival where, “the darkness would stir and eventually go away, and God would remain, a shining point of light in my heart” (225). The only way Pi was able to tame his nature was through undeterred attention on God.

As I contemplated this book and the experience I had just had, I came to the full realization that I too had a tiger living within me. I had just witnessed how merciless I could truly become because of it. This changed my view on life drastically— it gave me a clearer analogy of my purpose. It seems that all human beings are born with an animal inside them. This animal is savage, unholy, and unrefined; it is all the bad of mankind. *But*, we are not meant to stay that way. The book began to help me see that because I could recognize the evil within my nature, I could effectively work to tame it. The only true answer—the only true being that could help me refine my dimmed soul, was God. I needed to let God and his goodness define my life. That morning with my dad, I needed to let God into my heart, rather than just my mind. After I made this realization, I returned to my dad and sought to heal the wounds caused by my claws.

So yes, I have an animal within me. He still gets aggressive but because of my growing relationship with God, he is easier to control. At times I can convince him to play fetch, and he

occasionally takes naps in the shade of my sternum. I know the process will be long, but I'm grateful that together my animal and I can grow closer to, and become more like, God.