

## ANALYSIS

“The Beast in the Jungle” (1903)



Henry James

(1843-1916)

## INTRODUCTION

This is the most frequently reprinted of James's stories and is typical of his style in his later "major phase." It is of particular interest also because its general theme is the same as that of his long complex novel *The Ambassadors* (also 1903), which he considered his major achievement: the traditional theme of seize the day, or *carpe diem*--gather ye rosebuds while ye may. At the same time the protagonists of each work are opposites: Lambert Strether eventually seizes the day whereas John Marcher lurches onto the grave of his last chance--too late.

The love story has been the main form of fiction since the sentimental romances of ancient Greece. As a Realist, trying to render what is socially representative and generally true, James writes a failed-love story--an anti-romance about the man who will not commit. Many are the Marchers in the modern world, and many are the Mays. James wrote a book on Hawthorne and his John Marcher is comparable to Hawthorne's Coverdale in *The Blithedale Romance*, published half a century before. T. S. Eliot studied both Hawthorne and James and his J. Alfred Prufrock is another non-committal modern man. The refinement of the prose style and the timidity of Marcher make the title "The Beast in the Jungle" ironic, yet also apt, conveying how far out of touch he is with his unconscious and with Nature. Marcher illustrates Eliot's concept "dissociation of sensibility."

### I

James requires his readers to live by his motto, "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost." He forces you to concentrate. Most of the potential drama in James derives from how much you and his characters are able to notice. From the start, Marcher misses everything. The story begins in the midst of the action--in *medias res*--with nothing established for the reader to grasp. The effect is like walking through a crowded drawing room past somebody out of your sight somewhere nearby explaining something to somebody about something involving somebody.

The challenging first sentence, typical of the later James, is long, abstract, cerebral and vague, with unidentified subjects, complicated details and no concrete reality--no "solidity of specification," to use his

own phrase from "The Art of Fiction." In this one sentence there are 3 different time frames to recognize--distant past, recent past and present. There are also 3 negatives to understand—"scarcely matters"; "but some words"; "without intention." And there are at least 9 additional concepts: speech, him, encounter, words spoken by himself, they, lingered, slowly moved together, renewal of their acquaintance.

The reader may be further discouraged by the tenor of the sentence, which is that its meaning "scarcely matters"--many readers have quickly come to that conclusion about James—"being probably but some words spoken by himself quite without intention." If we resist impatience, concentrate and read our way on through the jungle to the end of the trail, then return to this opening sentence, we can see pertinence and irony we could not have seen without the whole story. Our vision has become holistic, like the work of art. Literary structures such as this, conceived as patterned wholes, as unified gestalts, would later become a characteristic of the Modernists. Wharton's complex masterpiece *The House of Mirth* (1905) is another such precursor of Modernism.

The second word of the story, "determined," introduces the Naturalistic theme of *determinism*, which explains the ironic plot: Because he believed his life was determined, Marcher predetermined his own fate. Affirming free will and holding people morally responsible, James condemns Naturalism for self-fulfilling prophecy and destroying initiative. If you reread the story, the opening statement that what Marcher said to May Bartram years ago "scarcely matters" strikes a loud gong of irony. Though it scarcely matters to the obtuse Marcher, the attitude behind what he said that day ruins his life and *determines* his fate.

At least the second sentence of the story establishes, by conventional expectation, that this is to be a love story: "He" and "she" are about to have lunch. James continues to establish the illusion of reality not by concreteness as is customary in fiction, but by explaining circumstances and relations in detail while withholding information important to orienting the reader, such as who these people are and where and when. Indirection immerses the reader in a situation gradually revealed. The second sentence continues to tease, as "He" is said to be staying at a house among a party of visitors "thanks to whom it was his theory, as always, that he was lost in the crowd." He is so ordinary that he is nobody—"as always"--which is certainly the feeling induced by the indefiniteness of his introduction. So far he is merely a pronoun with a lunch date.

Finally in the third sentence we are given something concrete under our feet, a place to stand, a lavish estate called Weatherend, "almost famous" for its many treasures. Visitors come here with dreams "of acquisition." May Bartram is a greater treasure, of course--and within reach, if Marcher only had the heart to extend his hand. The name Weatherend calls attention to the weather, seasons and months--Marcher and May. Marching straight ahead to his destiny, the wintery Marcher has surrendered his free will, forsaking spontaneity and romance, arresting his development short of all that is represented by May: possibility, the awakening of Nature and new life. May is always there, waiting for him to awaken—a Christ-evoking figure. Throughout the story he *may*, but he never does. Her warmth might have brought him to life like a plant in the Spring, but instead, his weather ends.

May does her best to bring him to life without scaring him off. In the third paragraph is another example--like the first sentence--of *synecdoche*, a part standing for the whole, or an encapsulation of the whole story: Marcher can never have all that is represented by May "without some putting forth of his hand for it." All along he dooms himself with his determinism, his attitude that "one could but take things as they came." Modern life, it seems, has induced passivity and fatalism. Now "they looked at each other as with the feeling of an occasion missed." As they talk, in his recollection of their first meeting he "got most things rather wrong." From the first, May is right: "and it hadn't been eight years before--it had been more nearly ten." It is later than he thinks.

May reminds him that they first—"anciently"--met at Pompeii, "on an occasion when they had been present there at an important find." That they first met "anciently" makes them representative of social types common to humanity throughout history, more universal than modern. This illustrates the tendency to allegory in James when general ideas are embodied in character types--the influence of Hawthorne. May is the equivalent of one of Hawthorne's angels, who represent salvation. James disparaged allegory because he wrote psychological dramas of sensibility according to the priorities of Realism, whereas allegory is a

structure of ideas. As T. S. Eliot remarked, "James had a mind so fine, no idea could violate it." Yet as E. M. Forster pointed out, James developed a theory of the "patterned" novel just as "rigid" as allegory.

At Pompeii, May is the "important find" in the life of Marcher, but he is too self-absorbed to recognize the value of what he found. He suppresses his feelings as always and buries the potentiality of romance and happiness with her that could have been the great destiny he anticipates all his life. Instead, he is like one of the souls buried at Pompeii, hardened in a cowering posture. When they meet again at Weatherend, they are aware of "small possible germs, but too deeply buried...to sprout after so many years." After all, "how little they knew of each other. There came in fact a moment when Marcher felt a positive pang." This line prefigures the powerful climax of the story when he feels the beast of realization pounce upon him with more than a pang.

They first met at Sorrento, one of the most romantic places in the world, villas hugging steep high cliffs, balconies festooned with flowers, overlooking the dazzle of the Mediterranean Sea. "He would have liked to invent something, get her to make believe with him that some passage of a romantic or critical kind had originally occurred." When a young man feels no romantic inclination toward an attractive young girl in Sorrento, we require the evidence provided in the story that he is heterosexual. Whatever happened in the past, he is free *now* to make something romantic occur, but he is just as inhibited as he was ten years before. As if merely acting polite, he apologizes for not being romantic: "I was of course an ass." The question in the plot is whether he will remain one.

Marcher is inhibited by fragile self-esteem: "What he had asked of her had been simply at first not to laugh at him." She reminds him of what he told her in Sorrento, that he anticipated something "possibly prodigious and terrible" that would overwhelm him. Marcher suspects that he may still be an ass after all and even that the "beast" will overwhelm him in the end. He does not expect to be admired for anything: "I'm not such an ass as *that*. It would be better, no doubt if I were." May asks if he is not afraid of falling in love. He reveals that he does not know what love is and replies, "God knows I don't want anything." Yet with May, all he does is *take*. He asks her with a blithe egocentricity to "watch" and stay with him as he awaits his momentous destiny.

## II

Their relationship "sprung into being," evoking the spring that May represents and the spring of the beast at the end. Marcher values her for "the buried treasure of her knowledge"--of him. As the story develops, May learns that she must keep her knowledge of him buried or she will lose him. They establish a "goodly bond" and begin seeing each other, feeling "their boat pushed sharply off and down the current." As he steers their relationship, "he was careful to remember that she had also a life of her own, with things that might happen to *her*, things that in friendship one should likewise take account of." This polite concern makes his selfishness more insidious as he strings her along for years--as no true friend would--while regarding himself as "a little sublimely--unselfish... All this naturally was a sign of how much he took the intercourse itself for granted." The diction here—"intercourse" and "penetrating question"--exemplifies the sublimation of sex in language common to male writers under Victorianism--as in Poe, Melville and Whitman. May's increasing knowledge of Marcher, who is conditioned to inhibition by Victorianism, imprisons her in the gender role of passive acceptance.

That he knows they are more than friends "stood out large"--the question "of their marrying. But the devil in this was that the very basis itself put marrying out of the question." He tells himself that he cannot ask a woman to share his "tiger-hunt," his destiny "like a crouching beast in the jungle." Compensating for his low self-esteem, he envisions himself as special, as a tiger hunter with a momentous destiny, which is comical for a petty bureaucrat with "a little office under Government." The "devil in this" is allegorical again in the manner of Hawthorne, affirming love and marriage and implying that Marcher's selfish obsession is evil, particularly in its effect on May. She grows older, "beautifully believing in him" while he rationalizes that he is taking advantage of her for her own good, protecting her from the danger of his momentous destiny. "What it had come to was that he wore a mask painted with a social simper." Thinking himself generous, he buys her a "small trinket" for her birthday as a proof to himself "that he hadn't sunk into real selfishness." Yet he knows it isn't fair to keep her interested and hopeful: "I almost feel as if you hadn't really had time to do anything else."

Marcher uses belief in determinism to rationalize his selfishness, like Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter* and Ahab in *Moby-Dick*: "It's in the lap of the gods. One's in the hands of one's law." By the end of Chapter II, May knows him well enough to predict that he will never learn the nature of the beast in his jungle. She knows that he will never marry her, yet she is willing to go on seeing him because she loves him, enough to encourage the little wimp to consider himself "heroic."

### III

Marcher warns himself against "egotism" and "the importance of not being selfish." He "had never sinned in that direction without promptly enough trying to press the scales the other way. He often repaired his fault, the season permitting, by inviting his friend to accompany him to the opera." That is, he is "often" selfish and does penance for his sin by doing something with her pleasurable to himself that he might have done anyway--but only in fair weather. The comedy here depends on having a moral sense and the irony upon an understanding that Marcher is egocentric and selfish all along. Yet he thinks May--who is loving and self-sacrificial--is "no better than himself."

May has suffered social indignity for his sake, as their relationship has "made me a good deal talked about." She proves her love by accepting Marcher as he is and by trying to help him escape the beast in his jungle: "It's all that concerns me--to help you to pass for a man like another." Marcher is less than a man, less than a gentleman, in his treatment of May. All she asks is that he go on like he is--oblivious and safe in her company. His unconscious is a terrifying jungle because he dissociates from it, suppressing emotions that take the form of his beast, an archetypal monster: "It was characteristic of the inner detachment he had hitherto so successfully cultivated and to which our whole account of him is a reference." What James calls "inner detachment" resembles what T. S. Eliot called "dissociation of sensibility"--a separation of thought from feeling. Marcher rationalizes that he is being decent to May, but he is deficient in his heart, in empathy, moral feelings and conscience. He is so egocentric that when he gets an intimation of the beast within, he thinks it might pounce on May--that she could miss his great destiny: "What if she should have to die before knowing, before seeing--?"

When she declines in health, Marcher has paid so little attention to her, "he had just simply and suddenly noticed. She looked older because inevitably, after so many years, she was old, or almost." He panics, fearing that his life could "become the most grotesque of failures." He wonders, "What did everything mean--what, that is, did *she* mean, she and her vain waiting and her probable death and the soundless admonition of it all--unless...it was overwhelmingly too late?" Since May is still alive, it is not too late for him to propose marriage or even merely to express love, but he has not learned, even after all these years, what May means and should mean to him. He copes with the possibility of losing her by resorting again to determinism, absolving himself of any blame and thereby paralyzing himself until indeed it is too late. "He had but one desire left," that he should not have been a fool. Too late, John.

### IV

Whereas before "he found her always seated by her fire," now May sits "without a fire." She is "almost as white as wax," her green scarf has faded, she has so repressed her natural feelings all these years that by now she resembles an artificial lily--the flower of death in this context--"under some clear glass bell." This bell jar metaphor of stultifying containment was later used by Sylvia Plath in *The Bell Jar* (1971) and exemplifies the feminist sensitivity of James.

To Marcher, May remains a riddle beyond his understanding: "She was a sphinx." Irony and pathos increase as he begs her to solve his mystery: "Then tell me if I shall consciously suffer." If he is to suffer, he does not want to be conscious of it. Marcher is addicted to the drug of his dream that he is not just a timid nobody living a meaningless life--that he has a momentous destiny! May assures him that he will never suffer, believing that he will never realize what he has missed--that his beast will never pounce. First she thought he was afraid of falling in love. By now she has learned that he is afraid of life. "'The door's open,' said May Bartram... 'It's never too late'." She stands close to him, opening herself to him one last time, but he does not advance, he waits as he always has for his momentous destiny--in this case potentially May--"to come to him."

After he fails to move toward her, May shudders and returns to her chair, “strangely pale.” He has made her sick. The beast motif sustains the irony: “It sprang up sharp to him, and almost to his lips, the fear that she might die without giving him light.” The beast is not yet revealed, as he is not yet aware how much more than light May could have given him. At the end of the chapter he is still in the dark: “What then has happened?” By now, having seen him fail in their last opportunity, May has resigned herself to his determinism: “‘What was to,’ she said.” As a Victorian male, Marcher has been conditioned to see a woman as a medium of moral truth and spiritual light, which disposes gentlemen to feminine receptivity that may inhibit their masculine initiative.

## V

Marcher now thinks his beast is her death, not because he loves her but because of his consequent solitude, its effect on himself. He will be left alone with himself--the *horror!* He is disappointed that the experience is so “common” after all, and not momentous. But “he would bend his pride to accept it.” In their last conversation, the reader infers from her hints--all missed by Marcher as always--that May is relieved to have learned that he was not afraid of falling in love with her, but afraid of life itself. Marcher continues to look to May for meaning without seeing it right before his eyes--in her--thinking that “It was all beyond him, and that she was too.” May knows his beast is realizing that he missed living his life and that now it is too late: “A woman might have been, as it were, everything to him.” After she dies, at first he thinks “the Beast has stolen away.” His jungle--his deeper nature or unconscious--is the archetypal Wilderness, now a wasteland without May. Marcher the urbanite has always dissociated from Nature--in fear, arresting his psychological development and precluding love. Now he makes a pilgrimage to May’s grave through “the grim suburban metropolis” and into a “wilderness of tombs.” He kneels at her grave as if to pray, “but no palest light broke.”

## VI

John Marcher escapes all his life, now by travel, only to find that for him “the world was vulgar and vain”--much like himself, actually. “He had lived, in spite of himself... and in wandering over the earth had wandered...from the circumference to the centre of the desert.” The metaphor of circularity, also pervasive in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, shows the influence of Emerson, especially his essay “Circles.” The metaphor of the desert expresses the feelings and spiritual condition of one man, whereas T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (1922) expands its application to modern consciousness in general.

Individuation in the case of Marcher is a “wandering” to the “centre.” He has accepted his own death--his “extinction”--and the world is dead to him now because May in her grave is “the part of himself that alone he now valued.” May is his heart. He is spiritually dead and susceptible now to rebirth, or at least to increased awareness. Visiting her grave again in the “wilderness of tombs,” he passes another mourner with a face “deeply stricken” and the “raw glare of his grief” moves Marcher to realize “something he had utterly, insanely missed,” feeling “envy” because “no passion had ever touched him.”

In a sudden “illumination” he stood gazing at the “void of his life”—“*she* was what he had missed.” It turns out that his momentous destiny is to be the man “to whom nothing on earth was to have happened.” Now he sees that his escape from the beast would have been to love May: “She had loved him for himself; whereas he had never thought of her (ah how it hugely glared at him!) [the beast] but in the chill of his egotism and the light of her use.” The Beast has been springing at him ever since that cold April day when, seriously ill, she rose from her chair and stood close and he failed to see. Now that he sees it rising “huge and hideous,” he turns away “to avoid it” and flings himself face down on her tomb. In the archetypal confrontation with ultimate truth in the form of a wild animal--the Beast--he averts his eyes. To the end he avoids facing his deepest nature, which causes his spiritual death, symbolized by falling on her tomb.

James rejects the Naturalism prevailing among novelists in his day by dramatizing the consequences of a deterministic philosophy in a type of man becoming common in the modern world. Marcher had free will and is a fool for refusing to use it, for evading moral responsibility and risk, for protecting himself from suffering and from life itself through a selfish escapism--afraid of getting laughed at! He resembles Postmodernist novelists with a “fear of being human,” as characterized by the disillusioned Postmodernist David Foster Wallace, who hanged himself in 2008.

Michael Hollister (2015)