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### The Beast of James

"In the case of Henry James there should not be much dispute about the exactness and completeness of the representation; no man ever strove more studiously or on the whole more successfully to reproduce the shape and color and movement of his aesthetic experience." These are the remarks of Stuart P. Sherman from his article entitled "The Aesthetic Idealism of Henry James," from *The Nation*, p. 397, April 5, 1917. Now, some seventy-two years later critical readers are still coming to terms with James' aesthetic vision. As we have discussed in class, James aestheticizes everything. Sexual intercourse, carnal knowledge, painful self-discovery, human mortality, etc., are often figuratively and metaphorically veiled so as not to disturb or repulse the reader. Taking a closer look at this, one might say that James did this so that he himself would not be repulsed. Perhaps James wasn't thinking so much of the reader as he was thinking of himself.

In "The Beast in the Jungle" James has aesthetically hidden the reality of Marcher's destiny by treating it as a symbolic crouching beast waiting to spring. The reader will ask why James has done this? Wouldn't it be more effective to speak plainly of Marcher's and Bartram's relationship? The author could tell us exactly why John Marcher does not marry May Bartram. The narrator tells us that Marcher's situation "was not a condition he could invite a woman to share" and "that a man of feeling didn't cause himself to be accompanied by a lady on a tiger hunt" (p. 417). This is nonsense. Marcher won't marry May because he doesn't want to inconvenience her with his condition or endanger her life on a tiger hunt? First of all, he inconveniences her right up to the day of her death with his condition, and as for the metaphorical tiger hunt, what exactly does that refer to? What is it here that James will not speak of in plain language? Simply what is the meaning of this; what is the author's intent?

One might speculate that this story is somewhat autobiographical in that James himself never married and often carried on close personal relationships with a very select few. The various biographers of his life have brought to light a number of respectable ladies and men with whom James was personally and privately acquainted. There is also the belief that everything an author produces is autobiographical to a certain extent. And supposing "The Beast in the Jungle" is largely autobiographical, once again I ask what was James' intention? Is the story so autobiographical that James felt it necessary to create an elaborate smoke-screen to elude the critics of its true meaning in view of his personal life? Was the aesthetic curtain drawn to protect his privacy? I believe this to be the case, yet it seems to me that "The Beast in the Jungle" might also be read as a warning to people who behave much like Marcher. Perhaps James is saying one should not be foolish with the precious time of one's life. I believe Krishna Vaid would agree with me; Vaid states: "The wider thematic context of 'The Beast' is perhaps too obvious to merit more than a bare mention: it is a 'fantastic' embodiment of the central Jamesian theme of the un-lived life" (Vaid p. 224). Readings and interpretations on James' intent vary widely.

For this brief examination I have acquired around ten different sources. There was also an exchange of ideas in our February 28th class on other critical works which I will attempt to deal with. In some ways the criticism I have found is rather uniform, but on some points it differs considerably. I shall start with the common parts of the criticism. Because "The Beast in the Jungle" is a rather short work, the majority of these critics tend to summarize the entire story instead of concentrating on one or two significant aspects. I have found they are in general agreement that May Bartram is the figurative "Beast." Allen Tate says "As May

Bartram stands before [Marcher], 'all soft,' it is marcher's Beast which has leaped at him from his jungle" (Tate p. 77). Walter Wright comments "[Marcher] sees the beast in not one but two symbolic images. Thinking again of the last parting, he sees the beast as having then sprung: 'it had sprung in that cold April when...she had risen from her chair' "(italics mine) (Wright p. 199). Donna Przybylowicz explains that "The pursuit of [Marcher's] beast reveals a void... for, although he first sees in it, and in May as well, a reflection of his own desires and hopes, later it mirrors not only her demise but his inevitable death as well," and also "Marcher feels that May's dying...was what he had figured as the beast in the jungle" (Przybylowicz pp. 96 & 97). I admit that I have loosely construed the notion of May as the beast in the latter two critics, but if the springing of the beast is equated with any movement on the part of May, I ultimately feel compelled to note the two springing motions as the acts of one body.

A number of the critics I have read mention Marcher's waiting, his anticipating of his big moment, the realization of the Beast of his destiny. Charles Hoffman explains "John Marcher is singularly dedicated to waiting for the worst of all imaginable things to happen to him" (Hoffman p. 99). Edward Stone dwells on this same point but with more emphasis on the story's structure and symbolism; he refers " to the obvious key [of] the hero's monotonously methodical progress toward his unwitting doom as it immediately appears to us in his name, Marcher " (Stone p. 122). As what I see in direct antithesis to Stone, Przybylowicz states that "Marcher lives passively in expectation of an ... unknown destiny and expresses neither a desire to direct his own life nor any interest in any genuine futural possibilities" and also "He allows experience to act upon him and sits passively, awaiting the spring of the formidable beast" (Przybylowicz pp. 93 & 109). How is it that Stone sees the hero as a progressing methodical march-er towards destiny, when to march implies that the marcher has a sense of the location of his march? Whereas Przybylowicz explains John Marcher as passive and having no "desire to direct his own life." And in opposition to Przybylowicz, Edward Wagenknecht calls Marcher blind in regard to his wait and maintains "Life offers its best to him, and he passes it by, not because he does not value or desire it but simply because he does not recognize it" (Wagenknecht p. 148). Somehow Wagenknecht finds that Marcher does indeed value things while Przybylowicz says he does not. How can I, now a student of criticism, resolve these opposing stances? I find that these opposing positions represent an immense problem in the study of Marcher's character. By believing that Marcher does or does not desire life's best the critical reader can come away from the story with one of two entirely different interpretations. If I believe that Marcher involves himself in life, I will feel sympathetic towards him at the end of the story. If I believe Marcher is in fact passive, then I can say he gets everything he deserves at the conclusion. To further complicate this issue, Wright says "[Marcher] has already become so immersed in his pursuit of his special fate that he no longer believes he is seeking it" (Wright p. 194). I believe Wright would side with Wagenknecht against Przybylowicz on this point. I have to side with Przybylowicz because if Marcher had actually pursued life he would have found his destiny. Instead Marcher's fate is only revealed to him at the conclusion of the story. It all kind of gets back to the proverb " seek and ye shall find." I think Marcher neither values his life or seeks his destiny.

Practically all ten or so of my critics deal with the image of the springing beast. Yet as not to bore my reader with the tediousness of exploring all of the critics' rather redundant passages, I will dwell on just a few of what I find the more interesting explanations. Immediately I find that Richard Hocks views the beast unlike the rest of my critics in that he says "the beast that springs in the tale is not so much any particular point in the story as it is a kind of slow motion springing that begins with the first line and completes itself with the last" (Hocks p. 184). Wright, with May in mind, claims that "Unlike Marcher, who can see his fate only as a beast which will sometime jump, [May] sees it as something always at work" (Wright p. 196). This point is very much in line with Hocks statement. With these two views in mind, we can envision the beast in the

action of a slow motion springing, constant throughout the story. Yet Wright also goes on to say that when Marcher "senses ... that [May] is dying, he feels that his own life will end, indeed that her death represents, after all, the leap of the beast" (Wright p. 198). Wright presents two entirely different views of the beast, which is surprisingly something that our class has not hit on yet. Marcher and May each have their own view of the beast. I ask, whose view do we follow? Can we accept both characters' views? I think we can. May is Marcher's beast in that she possesses the knowledge of his fate, and Marcher, I think, can be deemed May's beast, after all, he pounces or springs upon her as she rests in her grave at the end of the story. To embellish my perception, Wagenknecht states "The Beast had sprung at last, and we leave Marcher, in his awakened anguish, flung face downward, upon May's grave. Knowledge has come at last" (Wagenknecht pp. 149-150). Although Wagenknecht evades giving us his interpretation of what the beast is, he at least implies that May having passed on, has also passed on to Marcher the knowledge he believed her to possess.

In all of this criticism I did not find any mention of Marcher experiencing homosexual panic. There is some talk about Marcher finding his identity through May and how his egotism is the center of his private universe, but I do not find the majority of these works to be on the cutting edge of criticism. I have not found any inferences of homosexuality or discussions considering the springing beast as the aggressivity of the erecting phallus. Donna Przybylowicz is the only who stands apart from all the critics I've read in that she makes mention of May's subjugation: "the woman's needs are completely subordinated to those of the self-centered male. As his alter ego, May does not live her own life but exists vicariously through Marcher's limited experience of the world" (pp. 94-5). While I am not sure of Krishna Vaid's gender, Donna Przybylowicz would appear to be the only woman in the group of critics that I have assembled, and it would appear a feminist as well.

Now I shall try to tie this all together in a DeManian knot. First of all, it is my understanding that critics attain their insight by being blind to certain things. This blindness to aspects of the work causes the critic to unconsciously discover the form and unity of the text in their interpretations. There is also the idea that the natural form of the work can not be found by exploring the rhetorical form of the text, because everything that the words figuratively represent actually mean something else. Mine is a very basic and loose understanding of course. What I want to know is how do we decide if something stated by a critic is valid? For example, Przybylowicz is blind to some things, but she has insight to the notion that May's "needs are completely subordinated." And likewise Vaid must be blind to some things as well, but makes a point of stating that James' theme in "The Beast in the Jungle" is that of "the un-lived life." I could go on with this redundancy but that would be quite pointless. What I'm trying to get at is this, are the critics' individual blindnesses the insights of others and versa vice? I have a lot of trouble understanding the concept of the correct misreading. It seems to me that according to de Man's thoughts there is absolutely no way of truly correctly reading the text. I am completely stumped and mystified. F.W. Dupee says "The Beast of Marcher's fate is a figurative beast; Marcher's search for his past is a figurative search" (Dupee p. 158). Again, my understanding is cloudy at best: the critic is allowed to interpret the figurative usage of the author in a way that only he is individually capable of? Perhaps the way to judge the overall interpretation of a text is by seeing how many critics come up with the same reading? Or, with this question, have I unwittingly fallen into the trap of majority rule?

I would now like to offer my view of the story as I close my examination. I find my view of the story grounded largely in what I consider biographical evidence. I believe that James' intent is one of warning the readers not to waste their lives as Marcher has. James never married, had a relationship with Ms. Woolson, (which I can't help but think of as the source for his Bartram-Marcher relationship) and wrote this story some twenty-odd years after his brother William married. Richard Hall explains that it wasn't until the early 1900s that Henry was

able to deal with the inferiority complex that he felt in regard to his older brother (Hall, part II, p. 26). Henry James must have sensed himself on a Marcher-like path and caught himself just in time, otherwise he would not have been able to write the story; he would have died before having the proper knowledge. Actually, I could spend ten pages defending my view that this story is autobiographical. But in so many words that is my understanding of this material. Unfortunately, I feel that at the present time I can not fully exhibit everything I've learned. I see my experience of this course emerging more with the passing of time as I apply it to future coursework.