

Determinism, love and inspiration in 'the beast in the jungle'



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Henry James is considered the master of subtle psychological fiction, and in *The Beast in the Jungle* he demonstrates the powerful extent in which determinism can reach and bar an individual from any consideration of free will. This situation will be especially probable if such an individual were to be as self-absorbed as the protagonist, John Marcher.

Determinism is a doctrine by which philosophers imply that people are ultimately victims of fate. Something as powerful as life cannot be altered, and this is the philosophy which Marcher has adopted in correlation with the romanticized fate he has led himself to believe as a result of his egotism. Marcher places himself on a pedestal which his own conceited mind has built, believing that he stands out among other ordinary human beings as a heroic figure who is “destined” for “something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible”. He calls this self-made prophecy of his as the “crouching Beast in the jungle,” awaiting the moment to pounce on Marcher and “slay him or “be slain.”

Marcher believes that the Beast is something which will come to him in due time, and is not something which he should trigger to change his life in any way. The idea of fate causing a drastic turn in one's life carries a much more fairy-tale appeal rather than an individual prompting the change himself. Determinism therefore criticizes the American Dream: the notion that a person can achieve absolutely anything with passion and perseverance, fundamentally, at his own will.

With this belief, Marcher determinedly sets his life on the course of waiting for the Beast - relinquishing all ideas of actually initiating some kind of

action and excitement to his life on his own. This principle of endless waiting for fate and destiny to enforce some thrilling, irrevocable event has even induced May Bartram to wait and watch for the Beast by Marcher's side. Although Marcher tries his best to think for May's well-being, such as refusing to marry her on the basis that the Beast's imminent attack would be too great a burden for a lady to bear, he still continues to be self-centered.

It is Marcher's love for himself that has conjured up the idea of the Beast and therefore centering his whole life entirely upon its mystery. Even when May falls gravely ill and is near death, Marcher continues to put himself and his obsession with the Beast before May's well-being; asking May of what she supposed the Beast might be despite her weak health. Marcher also continues to form a conversation regarding the Beast and his personal welfare during this visit - showing vague interest in May's poor health.

On the other hand, May's love is the opposite of Marcher's. It is selfless, and with it, she has been able to study and observe Marcher's personality and countenance from a distance throughout the years of their friendship. She too, waits and does nothing to instigate any form of action into Marcher's life so that he may be satisfied with his Beast theory. By loving Marcher selflessly, May does not intervene in his mental adventure of waiting in any way. Therefore, she never confesses her feelings for him because in her perspective, the Beast has always been the love that could blossom between her and Marcher.

It appears that May understands Marcher's vain belief of the Beast very well - to the point that she would sacrifice her desire of forming a relationship

with him, for the sake of Marcher's revelation of what the Beast truly is: an intimate, loving relationship with May. May understands that the Beast, to Marcher, has always been a form of inspiration. Inspiration is not something one can grasp upon will. Artists, who are the primary seekers and wielders of inspiration, often wait for it to come, knowing that it is something that cannot be controlled or gained in spite of one's hard efforts. Some artists argue that inspiration is greater than anything else, even life itself, as it constitutes as a driving force for an artist to produce a piece of art that satisfies the soul. Similarly, Marcher's Beast is his inspiration to live through a tremendous sequence of waiting, and May, who understands this and believes that the Beast is their love for each other, chooses to remain silent regarding her opinion of what the Beast is simply because inspiration should be a knowledge acquired naturally rather than by force. May therefore avoids from inflicting any change to Marcher's waiting by keeping her feelings a secret. Marcher however, is unable to connect the Beast with love until after May's death: but clearly by then, the knowledge is futile.

With May's death, Marcher is overwhelmed with a great sense of abandonment. He has lost his inspiration but does not fully realize this or the fact that May had been something of far greater importance and influence on his life other than merely sharing and accepting his secret of the Beast. In the last paragraph, Marcher finally realizes that the Beast certainly had come, in the form of May Bartram approaching him despite being pale and ill, and urged him to "imaginably guess" what the Beast might be. He realizes, finally, that "the escape" from the endless waiting "would have been to love her; then, then he would have lived. She had lived - ... since

she had loved him for himself; whereas he had never thought of her...but in the chill of his egotism and the light of her use.”

Now, however, the Beast appears to him in the form of regret – the regret of having done nothing for himself, to have not acted upon his own life, and to have allowed love, life and opportunity to pass by. Marcher has failed to live his life, and believes that “ it wouldn’t have been failure to be bankrupt, dishonored, pillared, hanged; it was failure not to be anything” – and evidently, by following the path of determinism to such an extent, with self-love blinding him from seeing vital possibilities, Marcher has indeed been: “ nothing.”