

Obsessions and the
unsatisfied life: a
comparison of daisy
miller and the beast
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In the works of *Daisy Miller* and *The Beast in the Jungle*, author Henry James provides readers with multiple explanations as to why it is important for one to live a full life. These two novellas share many broad similarities, including central thematic focuses, a flawed main character, and a hamartia that makes the stories truly tragic. Both stories warn of the dangers of distraction from enjoying one's life. However, while general traits are shared, certain topics sharply contrast one another, specifically the role of love in life, as well as the role of a supporting female character in the protagonist's downfall. Though some drastically opposing elements exist between the two stories, the central story of a man's downfall into an unfulfilled life remains constant. Both *Daisy Miller* and *The Beast in the Jungle* share strikingly similar protagonists. In *Daisy Miller*, Winterbourne is a man living abroad who makes the acquaintance of young Daisy Miller. Immediately intrigued, Winterbourne becomes obsessive about Daisy, both in infatuation and in judgment. As Daisy goes on to galavant around Rome, Winterbourne judges her every carefree decision, all the while seeking her love. By entangling himself in this ultimately futile drama and unsuccessfully trying to define Daisy, he has wasted his precious time with obsession. Quite similar is the character of John Marcher in *The Beast in the Jungle*. Marcher is a man living with a lingering fear of a "beast in the jungle", that is, a future event that will likely traumatize him but ultimately give his life meaning. As his life progresses without facing the beast, Marcher's fear grows to consume his mind. He becomes so obsessed that even when he grows old, he still has nothing to show for himself. Ultimately, the obsessive perspectives of both characters cause their downfalls. From these shared protagonists comes the mutual theme of the undeniable sadness of life not properly lived. In *Daisy*

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Miller, Winterbourne develops an obsession with interpreting the ambiguous character of Daisy. He continually tries to define her and place her into his preconceived structure of different classes of women. However, Daisy is unique and hard to pin down. As she continues to live her life exactly as she pleases, Winterbourne sacrifices his own life for his love of Daisy. After the two reunite in Rome, there is a melancholic tone, as Winterbourne must come to terms with Daisy enjoying the company of numerous men other than himself. With love unreciprocated, Winterbourne has nothing to show for his obsession but the sadness of a life distracted. The Beast in the Jungle also explores this theme in the life of John Marcher. Marcher is fixated on the lingering beast that could forever change him, so much so that it inhibits him from living a normal life. For example, Marcher never marries lifelong companion May Bartram. Though she loves him with the utmost loyalty, he is too focused on looming doom for love. As he reaches the end of his life and the perceived beast has yet to strike, Marcher acknowledges that he truly has accomplished nothing in his life. Distraction has vacuumed the enjoyment from Marcher's life, leaving nothing but regret. A secondary theme that can be identified in both texts is fate exacerbating failure. James seems to explore the maxim, "When it rains, it pours," creating even more disappointing lives than those created by the protagonists themselves. The conclusion of Daisy Miller finds Winterbourne not only remorseful of his time trying to define Daisy, but also mourning the death of his love. Before Daisy died, she wrote Winterbourne to tell him that his opinion of her did matter, opening the vague possibility of reciprocated love. However, with her passing, the futility of Winterbourne's obsession truly reared its ugly head.

Not only did she never return his love, but his efforts to tame her reckless
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behavior proved ineffectual: she died of malaria contracted during a late-night outing at the Coliseum. The fate of Daisy's death transformed Winterbourne's waste of time into a complete failure in his life. Likewise, *The Beast in the Jungle* concludes with an anagnorisis for Marcher. As Marcher grows old, he begins to recognize the lack of meaning in his life, primarily due to his fixation on the beast. This realization comes from May stating that his beast has already come and gone; though Marcher cannot identify the beast, he has suffered its terror nonetheless. This growing awareness finally climaxes with May's death, when Marcher finally understands why his life lacked meaning. Marcher realizes that his lack of love, specifically with May, deprived him of fulfillment. His preoccupation with the beast actually created the beast, that is, the failure to recognize and reciprocate love. The fate of May's death intensifies the failure and worthlessness that Marcher feels, finally grasping his wasted life and the true beast. While these broader concepts connect these novellas, their approaches to love are vastly different. Daisy Miller proves just how detrimental infatuation can become in a man's life. With Daisy passing and nothing to show for himself, Winterbourne has fallen victim to his all-consuming love. This emotion creates an obsession that leads him astray from a life of enjoyment. However, in *The Beast in the Jungle*, the protagonist's downfall lies in a lack of love. His failure to express love and enjoy the company of May deprived his life of meaning. Marcher grows old, lonely, and unfulfilled, until he finally comprehends his state is the result of a lack of love. In one text, James shows how love can destroy life, while in the other, he proves that love is necessary for fulfillment. A similar contrasting element in these stories is the role of the female supporting character. In *Daisy Miller*, Winterbourne

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becomes mentally tethered to Daisy. Wherever she moves about, Winterbourne follows to love and observe her. Daisy is the fatal distraction that keeps Winterbourne from enjoying his life. This supporting character serves to generate the downfall of the protagonist. In contrast is *The Beast in the Jungle*, where May is the only part of Marcher's life that does not consume him with thoughts of the beast. May is wiser than Marcher, and essentially his only hope for being saved. Unfortunately, Marcher's inner demons prove stronger than May's will, and he cannot be saved from his preoccupation with the beast. Though unsuccessful, May serves as a beacon of normalcy in Marcher's paranoid world. This is far different from the mental disaster-generating character of Daisy. In both novellas, James raises existential questions about life and love. Both works argue for the importance of a life of fulfillment, telling cautionary tales of those with wasted opportunities and nothing but sadness. However, the works provide opposing arguments for the role of love and companionship in life's fulfillment. While *Daisy Miller* proves love to be the demise of Winterbourne in the form of Daisy, *The Beast in the Jungle* uses May to exemplify how vital love is to an accomplished life. Despite these differences in his works, James clearly identifies the troubled fate of those who obsess with everything but life itself.