Re-Defining Meaning in Henry James’s “The Beast in the Jungle”

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English

2003
Moreover, if we allow [the novel's] full ambiguity to the presence of both a traditional ground and a deconstructive abyss beyond its limits, we seem carried into further ambiguity over the possible meaning of their co-functioning. Does the novel intend to subject this traditional ground to a covert erosion, slyly destining it for the abyss below? Or does the novel mean to use the abyss in a cautionary way, offering its sublime, vertiginous prospect only to frighten us back from it - back to safer, beaten ground whose value is proportionately enhanced by the danger of having strayed?

D.A. Miller Narrative and its Discontents

D.A. Miller’s Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel breaks down the ways in which the three different narrative voices (characters, community and narrator) in George Eliot’s Middlemarch answer the question “with what representation of content and value does Middlemarch motivate its constructional categories (nonnarratability, narratability, closure)?” (Miller, 109) This was the very question that Henry James addressed when he once commented of Middlemarch that it “sets a limit to the development of the old-fashioned English novel” (Miller, 107). Indeed, James seemed to heed these words in his own work.

This limit is manifested in the ambiguity with which James presents meaning in his work; that is, he forces us to question our notion of meaning by presenting it in an altogether different way than the conventional means of reading and deriving at a meaning at the story’s conclusion. Meaning is found throughout the narrative, in all that transpires during the story. It cannot be arrived at singularly and solely at the story’s end.

Bell likens it to a road that is comprised of endless splits:

Such a way of taking James responds, I think, to the way he constructs his fictions, for he makes us read with a constant sense of different directions glimpsed alongside the forward path. His forward path itself is seldom so well marked as we expect. And his fictional design is, ultimately, a reflection of the way he sees life—as just such a ‘garden of forking paths’ (ix)
Of course there is a forward path; its purpose is to carry the narrative along. But a reader cannot help arriving at the conclusion of one of James’s stories without feeling that something has been missed. James’s unique voice obligates us to look at every possibility that lies along that long path of narration. Reading a Jamesean work is never cut-and-dry because of this fact. The impossibility of closure guarantees that we will perpetually question, wonder and explore what we have read far after the book has been closed and that sometimes, we will not find any meaning at all for this same reason.

J. Hillis Miller proposes that this mode of narrative is a response to critics and readers who have been conditioned to find one single, unified meaning in literary works:

Therefore all those critics who have presented ‘monological’ readings of it have fallen into a trap set not only by the story itself, in its presentation of an enigma that invites definitive clarification, but also by the critic’s false presupposition that each good work of literature should have a single, logically unified meaning (97)

James shatters this standard by creating a narrative where multiple meanings and methods of identifying them are expected. A paradigmatic example of the Jamesean tale exists in his short story, “The Beast in the Jungle;” it amply illustrates the way in which meaning is obstructed by the “deconstructive abyss” that was an integral part of the Jamesean narrative: “The situation undeveloped is, almost obsessively, the Jamesean subject” (Buelens, 110) By “[using] the abyss in a cautionary way, offering its sublime, vertiginous prospect only to frighten us back from it” James forces us to question the very essence of what meaning is: “[‘The Beast in the Jungle’] turn[s] on enigmatic oppositions: making, solving; hiding, revealing; female, male; united in ambiguous or androgynous figures ” (Miller, Ariadne’s Thread, 14). John Marcher, James’s tragic protagonist, is so propelled by a fear of that unknown abyss that he inadvertently allows his fear to deliver him to the very emptiness that he is trying to avoid. The void that has
defined his life manifests itself at the story’s conclusion in the form of May Bartram’s grave, a vast and impassable space that forever separates him from the thing that he himself has spent the latter part of his life evading: a woman whose life was spent waiting for her love for him to be reciprocated: “The story starts with the meeting of minds; it ends with separation: the woman stretched out beneath her slab, the man prone upon it, and between them an impassable wrong. Ironically, it is his wrong that proves to be his transforming experience -- a savage end to complacency, like the lunge of a beast” (Gordon, 325).

Like him, we fall into the trap of searching for something we expect to be concealed, thereby completely missing that which is almost too obvious, and what we eventually know to be his true beast in the jungle. Marcher becomes enmeshed in the idea that the culmination of his life’s waiting will be embodied in a single event that will give his existence a sense of purpose. Ironically, this mistake isn’t far from what we anticipate from reading; however, as Wolfgang Iser explains, “the lesson of James’s story is the fact that the ‘division between subject and object no longer applies, and it therefore follows that meaning is no longer an object to be defined but is an effect to be experienced’” (Bell, 354-55). Marcher has his answer by his side all along but is too obsessed with an end result to pay any mind to everything that transpires between what is happening now and what is to come.

Unfortunately, we have the same expectations; were we not so preoccupied with waiting until the end to find out what Marcher’s “beast” is, we might take notice of May’s significance in his adventure. Both the reader and Marcher ultimately fail. James’s greater purpose seems to be in opening our eyes to the fact that meaning, like life, is
never so one-dimensional. May Bartram’s ultimate significance in “The Beast in the Jungle” leads Buelens to propose what he calls the story’s “double narrative … [which] may be understood … as a primary but transgressive male plot, interconnected with a secondary plot of female desire … as much a creature of her story as an enactment of his history” (111). She holds the key to all the questions he doesn’t even know he wants the answers to: “May Bartram understands, as Marcher does not, that one’s life -- as lived -- is the only fate one has; no other life lies in reserve” (Bell, 286). The fact that a woman and temporality are inextricably linked to such a process of deriving meaning (or, more accurately, multiple meanings) might provide some solution to why John Marcher and we, the readers, become so entangled in the search for meaning, and for an answer to the question, “what does it all mean?” Sadly, finding the answer to this question is not as easy as it may appear, for while James provides closure to certain elements of the text, others remain a mystery.

Essentially, “The Beast in the Jungle” is comprised of two components, that which focuses on May Bartram’s secret (or, more specifically, her knowledge of the nature of Marcher’s “beast”) and that belonging to John Marcher’s narrative journey. The story’s conclusion provides an answer to the former. The enigma of May Bartram is solved when the “beast springs”; John finally comes to understand what she knew all along. We are left with something that Shoshana Feldman defined as

a radically new assumption ….that what can be read (and perhaps what should be read) is not just meaning but lack of meaning; that significance lies not just in consciousness but, specifically, in its disruption; that the signifier can be analyzed in its effects without its signifier being known; that the lack of meaning, the discontinuity in conscious understanding can and should be interpreted as such, without being transformed into meaning. (45)
The absence of meaning that Shoshana Felman describes is present throughout the entire text; it is evident in Marcher's anonymity, in his self-devouring egocentrism, in his obsessive search for an occurrence that will validate his existence and, most of all, in the loss of May Bartram. This "disruption of meaning" defines John Marcher's obsession with a "beast" and, more importantly, his inability to accept May's love for him. Ultimately, we are still left wondering why he withdraws from the "abyss" of May, who is his closest companion and the only person who ever understood and accepted him; therein lies the problem, the mystery, the abyss of "The Beast in the Jungle".

The story tells of a man, John Marcher, who spends the duration of his life in pursuit of what he calls "the beast in the jungle," a great occurrence that he anticipates will transpire in his life at some point in the future. All that we initially know about this is derived from the commentary May Bartram provides:

You said you had had from your earliest time, as the deepest thing within you, the sense of being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible, that was sooner or later to happen to you, that you have had in your bones the foreboding and the conviction of, and that would perhaps overwhelm you. (331)

His fixation on this "beast" whatever it might be, has presumably been dormant for some time, that is, until the story's opening, when his path crosses with that of May Bartram at a castle called Weatherend; this introductory scene gives the reader an inkling of the role temporality will play in the plot. Marcher and May are both the names of months, James insists on including both the month in which the two meet (it is in October) and the fact that Marcher is heading into "middle age" (and possibly a mid-life crisis) when we first meet him. Even the setting for this first encounter brings to mind the notion of seasonal change; it is called Weatherend, "a palace of the past with a mythical sounding name that suggests the end of time -- Weatherend (that is, the place where weather, or change, ends;
or 'whether [or not] end,' the end of their choices)" (Bell, 286). The locale is, in essence, demonstrating that in this, their first encounter in over ten years, time literally stops.

One of the most profound indications of the problem of time is felt by Marcher the moment he lays eyes upon her: “May Bartram[s] ...face ... had begun merely by troubling him rather pleasantly. It affected him as the sequel of something of which he had lost the beginning” (326). Even in this initial glance, Marcher does not know how to respond to May’s presence and is affected deep within by the inability to place her within a specific temporal frame. This uncertainty leads to an evident uneasiness between the two:

They looked at each other as with the feeling of an occasion missed; the present would have been so much better if the other, in the far distance, in the foreign land, hadn’t been so stupidly meagre ... Marcher could only feel he ought to have rendered her some service ... Then they would be in possession of the something or other that their actual show seemed to lack. (328)

His main setback, and a factor which will prove to be his ruin, is this inability to find a place in time: Pippin says that “the temporal frame for the story ... suggest[s] that [the] spring season of youth ... has, for him, become only a terribly ‘stalled’ time, all the more obvious and poignant as it now begins to pass him (them) by, as the end of the weather, of turbulence, or the end of life itself, is in sight.” (Pippin, 92-93). The awkwardness between them is explained thereafter; she admits that, ten years earlier, he had told her something which had left a lasting impression in her mind, namely, of his belief that sometime in his future, a crouching beast lay waiting to spring upon him, some tremendous occurrence that would forever change and profoundly impact his life. May cannot possibly realize that the only way in which to establish a connection to Marcher will also be that which prevents her from ever having more than a superficial relationship
to him. She sees his prior confession as a way to get into his life. Indeed it is; John is as much surprised by the fact that he confided this information to her (the only person whom he had ever told) as he is by the fact that he had forgotten having told her: “She was the only other person in the world then who would have it, and she had had it all these years, while the fact of his having so breathed his secret had unaccountably faded from him” (330). This kind of interaction will become commonplace: May trying to figure out a way to penetrate his stubborn self-importance; Marcher completely ignorant of her advances.

Quite contrary to his name, Marcher does anything but “march” towards what he wants or expects, opting instead to wait patiently for whatever is coming to him. He doesn’t seem to grasp that decisions made in the present will inevitably affect the future that he is anticipating. D.A. Miller reasons that a desire for a certain fate in fact changes it as the future imperceptibly becomes the present: “What is at first a desired future is subtly absorbed into the present. Time has collapsed under the urgency of desire .... What has begun as the project of transfiguration gets fatally mixed up with its imagined achievement” (Miller, 138) Marcher and May Bartram have no past, save the memories that May sustains of their meeting ten years earlier, and without a history or hope for the future (as Marcher already insists upon awaiting a pre-ordained destiny that he believes will one day spring upon him) the two are “unable to have a present” (Bell, 265).

That Marcher asserts repeatedly that it is just a matter of time before this “beast” will spring upon him seems a cruel and unusual irony; indeed a beast does leap upon him in time, but his beast is not what he expects it to be and it is the very inability to exist in a given time -- namely, the present, where May Bartram waits patiently for him to realize
that she does so not for the beast, but for him -- that results in his inevitable destiny. In his incessant anticipation of the future, Marcher successfully maps out the very fate that he simultaneously dreads and yearns for. His tragic end ensures that from then on, all he will have is time to come to terms fully with what he missed out on in his haste to grasp his fate; this is the ultimate regret. According to Pearson, “Inaccessibility of the past, mirrored by the inaccessibility of the future .... leads James to confront alternate histories that would have led to other presents. In this way, James transforms the coupling of the real and the intrinsic” (Pearson, 132). The conclusion finds him in the same condition as the beginning of the story: yearning to fill a void deep within him. There is one difference that makes the end hold a special value; Marcher is now aware of what his alternate history could have been. Like the man at the nearby gravesite lamenting the death of a loved one, Marcher could have had passion. Sadly, his life was not destined to feel such rapture; he is a product of his own flaw.

The what if’s of James’s works are not his only means of toying with the reader. He plays on our understood notions of temporality and narrativity to deter us from focusing on that which is right before our very eyes. As Ricouer explains, “to be historical, an event must be more than a singular occurrence, a unique happening. It receives its definition from its contribution to the development of the plot” (166). Of course we downplay May Bartram’s role in John’s life; nothing spectacular or out of the ordinary transpires between the two to suggest otherwise. In reality, her daily interactions with him do cause something magnificent to happen, only we are not aware of it because we are too busy anticipating what will happen for Marcher. The transformation lies within May alone. John expects something, and so it won’t happen for (or to) him. This,
of course, is yet another of James’s methods of deterring us from what is really going on.

The preoccupation with Marcher is necessary in order for the ultimate realization of May’s love to be effectively poignant and lamentable:

Yet the beauty of the present theme did not lie for James in the direct representation of the morbid consciousness of John Marcher, but in the indirect yet vivid revelation of May Bartram’s personality. When the bereft man realizes all too late that the Beast has made its fatal leap, it is the woman who lies beneath the dumb, cold slab that our sympathy goes out to. (Edgar, 152)

The irony here is obvious: we become interested in the role May plays in Marcher’s narrative once she dies, essentially concluding May’s narrative line almost as soon as it begins. Our fixation with Marcher lasts only as long as his obsession with the beast does. Once he discovers its identity, the story seems to end, but this is an incorrect assumption. In reality, this is when the real mystery begins.

Marcher’s stubborn mentality is illustrated early in their relationship. One day, she inquires, “Isn’t what you describe perhaps but the expectation- or at any rate the sense of danger, familiar to so many people- of falling in love?” (332) At the time, it doesn’t seem out of the ordinary because the question is a fairly common one. In fact, the two have a brief discussion about the matter in which Marcher conveys his beliefs that if it were so, he would know already. As Pippin observes

The secret is, as it so often is, hidden in plain sight … [love] wouldn’t have the temporal character that Marcher wants or demands; it would only begin something still messy and unfinishable, something still open and indefinite, rather than be an event that would decisively end his waiting … He wants something more; something like a revelation or especially an ending (98-9)

Whatever knowledge he has of love, it has never been “cataclysm[ic],” never “overwhelming.” One of many defeats to come, May replies “Then it hasn’t been love.” This obstinate ignorance contributes to Marcher’s downfall. He convinces himself that
this inevitable occurrence must be "cataclysm[ic]," or else his life wouldn't have the importance that he has made himself believe it possesses. It is this mentality that prevents him from acknowledging the sentiments May is obviously trying to subtly imply. Pippin continues

This all prefigures both his distinctness and pathos in the main narrative. He senses that ordinariness of his life would swallow him up were it not possible to hold on to some secret meaning or fate. This redemptive meaning must be temporal, not transcendent or stoic; it must be some real, coming event that can put the past in its right context, as preparation and setting for this moment. But it cannot be sought or worked for. That would require that we know what it is. We don't and cannot know such a thing; hence the unformed, indeterminate wait for some 'beast' (93)

Once again, this notion of emptiness manifests itself in a crucial aspect of the text. Marcher's unconscious fear of the void that consumes his life effectively prevents him from allowing the possibility of anything that does not fit into the temporal frame he has established. Edel points out that "The unlived life of so many of [James's] heroes is embodied in John Marcher, the great Anonymous Man, who in thinking of his fate blinds himself to his anonymity" (557). Marcher, like so many other tragic Jamesean characters, is doomed because he is obsessed with the idea of a magnificent discovery, but, in the end, this is what must need to happen for the greater truth to emerge; in Marcher's denial of May's love, the "abyss" of his being manifests itself. This love cannot be the answer we are looking for because it is too easy. What we and Marcher are ultimately faced with at the story's conclusion is the lack of meaning that Shoshana Felman suggests, the deconstructive abyss that envelops itself, leaving nothing. This is truly worthy of the title "beast," for it is the most horrifying thing Marcher could discover; not that there was something waiting for him all along, but that, completely contrary to his expectations, there was nothing waiting, only the unavoidable knowledge of his own fear and
emptiness, the realization that he shied away from the abyss’s “sublime, vertiginous prospect.”

Their initial meeting at Weatherend is a foreshadowing of what is to come, establishing both character’s motivations and the role they will play in each others lives. It is immediately obvious that May’s affections are stronger than John’s; although she seems familiar to him, the memory of her is vague at best. While he struggles to recall details, she is able to fill in the pieces at a moment’s notice. As we eventually observe, this is to become the typical relationship between the two; May is always going to be more invested in the relationship, hoping to spark whatever interest she can in John, while he is so wrapped up in his own world that he is completely oblivious to her efforts. The oblivion will, in time, prove to be Marcher’s downfall.

But we cannot blame Marcher for overlooking the very thing he is searching for; we, too, take May’s presence for granted, assuming that she exists in the capacity of aiding (or at least waiting alongside) Marcher in his quest. Like him, we become sucked in by the idea of some “magnificent discovery;” in reality, it transpires when he first sees her at Weatherend, but, even then, he is incapable of allowing something to happen in his life that doesn’t fit the “cataclysmic’ expectations he sets. It is impossible not to become wrapped up in this preoccupation with a “beast” simply because the narrative doesn’t allow for any other possibilities other than those concerning Marcher’s egocentrism. Almost paradoxically, Marcher unknowingly predicts the very future he is destined for: “He had thought himself, so long as nobody knew, the most disinterested person in the world, carrying his concentrated burden” (335-36). Indeed, what he is is exactly what he gets; Marcher’s burden is the absence of burden, the absence of any kind of significance.
He is the most disinterested person in the world precisely because he won’t allow himself to be otherwise. Along with the realization that he has lost May, and any hope of love, forever, Marcher also suffers the great burden of self-discovery; he truly was “the man of his time, the man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened. That was the rare stroke - that was his visitation” (366).

In “Narrative and Its Discontents,” D.A. Miller further discusses the problem that lies in the inability of characters to maintain a “double commitment,” that is, finding a balance between what he calls the “details of ‘everyday things’ and ‘daily work’” and sustaining the “transcendent significance” of both in one’s life. Accordingly, such characters can be placed into two groups:

On one side, there are those cases in which the mundane details of everyday life are elevated or overridden by a pretentious meaningfulness they cannot plausibly sustain ... At the other extreme, there are those cases in which attention to the mundane leads to a reduction of possibilities for meaning.” (133-34)

John Marcher, oddly enough, embodies both of these extremes. The banality of his life is both a cause and a result of his fixation on the “beast”. He sabotages any opportunity for change and shuns any semblance of what one might call a normal life. In fact, he relies on May not only to wait alongside him in his search, but also to aid him in keeping up the appearance of a normal relationship to the public:

[she was] against the rest of the world, his kind wise keeper ... in the secret of the difference between the forms he went through ... What it had come to was that he wore a mask painted with the social simper, out of the eye- holes of which there looked eyes of an expression not in the least matching the other features. This the stupid world, even after years, had never more than half-discovered. It was only May Bartram who had, and she achieved ... the feat at once ... meeting the eyes from in front and mingling her own vision, as part from over his shoulder, with their peep through apertures.
In reality, he anticipates that this great discovery will be the event in his life that makes its dullness worthwhile. What he doesn’t realize is that the power lies within him to make that great event happen; it has been handed to him in the form of May Bartram. Even the place of their encounter signals the wonderful things that could be; time literally stops (as its name suggests, Weatherend). But Marcher cannot, will not, see it, and thus invalidates the possible solution that May is offering. Unusual in its premise, what Marcher really desires is to desire. Like so many other characters, it is the mundane that alienates him from the world around him. May accepts him for what he is, and this only reiterates Marcher’s behavior; he still does not identify his obsession as such and so he has no reason to alternate his behavior or re-evaluate his life.

The ironies here are quite thick. Marcher has asked May to wait with him, has in effect made the arbiter of what The Real Truth is and what it will mean; he has actually asked her for more than a marriage. The pretense or fantasy is not that they are a couple but that they are not. They seem like an ordinary spinster-bachelor couple because that is what they are. May looks like she is living for him...
and his secret, because she is. Marcher appears deadly ordinary, because he is. Everything is again hidden in plain sight. (Pippin, 100)

Yet neither Marcher nor the readers realize how painfully obvious the banality of the situation is. We, too, cannot possibly believe that their lives are as monotonous as they appear; surely something more is there. Its name is May Bartram. Like prey being lured by bait, she drops numerous hints to both Marcher and the readers of what her true feelings are. But Marcher does not bite and neither do we. Her efforts are futile. Marcher is obviously intrigued by her hints, but they do not cause him to re-establish his relationship with her. Instead they make him try more fervently to find his beast before it finds him. That dogged determination shouldn’t seem foreign to us; we, too, are being led along by such hints. J Hillis Miller surmises

The text leads the reader to believe that he or she ought to be able to say what it means. This is the demand made on the reader by the act of reading. At the same time the text makes such a pronouncement impossible …to claim that one can, in so many words, say what [the purpose of the story is] is of course to succumb to the lure, to take the bait … (Miller, 98)

Despite such warnings, it is conditioned in the reader to always look for a comprehensive reading. It seems that James encourages us in our search, but for the explicit purpose of showing us, through Marcher’s mistake along with our own, that sometimes finding the answer to the question of “why” is only part of the solution. In the case of “The Beast in the Jungle,” learning of May’s love for Marcher is only a stepping stone in the process of identifying his tragic flaw as a character; the nothingness within him that he feeds and fears simultaneously is what Shoshana Felman refers to when she discusses “the radically new assumption that what can be read (and perhaps should be read) is …lack of meaning” (Felman). To put a name to it or try to explain it would ruin the absence of meaning that intentionally exists. This is as much for Marcher’s benefit as for our own.
The reader must come to the eventual realization that the process of reading can be paralleled to Marcher's journey. May is not unlike the words on a page; although she is right before his eyes along, she is never appreciated or understood or read on more than a superficial level. He will not know how much more there is to her until it is too late. No amount of subtle persuasion will dissuade John Marcher from the task at hand and the same applies for us. Not until the tomb separates them, and the end of the story has been reached, will anyone want to delve further.

The shift away from this monotony begins during a discussion when May states

What I see, as I make it out, is that you've achieved something almost unprecedented in the way of getting used to danger. Living with it so long and so closely you've lost your sense of it; you know it's there, but you're indifferent, and you cease even, as of old, to have to whistle in the dark. (342)

The significance of this passage isn't made apparent until the end, when Marcher realizes what he has lost. May presumably refers to herself and the way in which Marcher has become desensitized to her presence because it is such an established part of his life. This is the only reason she is able to speak with such certainty, and the same reason that Marcher mourns as he does when the "beast" finally attacks. It is evidently spoken with bitterness, as May already knows that she is dying, although Marcher does not. While he begins to acknowledge the vital role she plays in his life only after he is struck by the fear of losing her ("He felt in these days ... the growth of a dread of losing her ... partly because she had almost of a sudden begun to strike him as more useful to him than ever yet ..."), he still does not know what she knows; he isn't aware that what she wants, he can give, if only he could escape from his self-interest. But this won't happen ... his real worry is that she won't be there to witness the beast when it comes ("What if she should have to die before knowing, before seeing-?")
He has no need to worry, for May already knows much more than Marcher ever will. One of the most important scenes in the story takes place one April many years later. Both have grown considerably older and Marcher’s recognition that May is sick leads to the realization of what all their waiting finally means. Although he has glanced upon her many times before, this time is different somehow. She has grown considerably more ill and now has the semblance of a porcelain figure, pale and fragile. The enigma is that she simultaneously contains a strength and demeanor that John can only define as “impenetrable.” Edel observes

Marcher looks once more into her eyes and finds them ‘as beautiful as they had been in youth, only beautiful with a strange cold light.’ At this moment Marcher imagines her as ‘a serene and exquisite but impenetrable sphinx, whose head, or indeed all whose person, might have been powdered with silver.’ We are face to face with the supreme keeper of the Riddle, the possessor of ‘the figure in the carpet.’ May Bartram keeps the riddle of John Marcher’s life. She tells him that the beast has sprung, that his fate- or doom- has already occurred … Thus John Marcher’s dream of woman mingles with the eternal dream of Henry James; she is sphinx, matron, virgin, beast, all in one, artificial and safely preserved under glass, an artifact … (558)

Like the sphinx he likens her to during this, one of their final meetings, she holds the key to everything. And, like the sphinx, she gives him a chance to solve the riddle, but to no avail. His punishment comes to fruition in her death. It interesting that this event transpires in the month of April, the month that lies between March(er) and May. Like this divide, their interaction at this moment seals the destiny of John Marcher. He is the closest to her that he will ever be, and yet paradoxically is also farthest away from her. His commitment to knowing the beast, coupled with his belief that she does, in fact know what it is, compels him to yearn for her knowledge. That is not, much to the chagrin of May, to desire her heart, soul or being.
The significance of the sphinx metaphor extends beyond a physical likeness. Its allure lies in the impossibility of resolution; the magic of the riddle is that while it begs to be explored, analyzed, answered, no one can ever truly solve the puzzle. It is fascinating precisely because we never know if there really is an answer. Like D.A. Miller's abyss, the sphinx and its riddle are used in a cautionary way. It is a test and those unwilling to plunge into its black unknown fail. This argument brings us back to the Felman essay. Once again, we are staring into a void that we ignore because our inclination is to look for something. The possibility of nothing is not an option. But this is exactly what Marcher does not understand. May's love for him is easy, and in time he comes to understand it. But when he flings himself upon her grave, it is because the mystery of his obsession, that which makes him the great Anonymous Man, will never be answered.

May is placed in a position of power. She reveals that she knows the "beast" and the reader can't help getting the sense that this seems rather unusual; we might even go so far as to blame her for depriving us of that knowledge. In reality, though, she wishes that he never has to know what she knows or experience the "beast" she has spent much of her life experiencing. To know that his life is the emptiness which he fears would be too much for him. He is not aware that he is being offered a way out, that she is attempting to shield him from the horrible revelation that he will have to experience without her protection once she is gone. Instead of understanding what her motivation is, her declaration only propels him further; he just wants more direly to know what she already does. Their final interlude is the climactic point of the story: "I would live for you still, if I could ...But I can't;" her statement mirrors her wish for him. Should he start really
living (as opposed to just existing for the possibility of some day facing his beast) and reciprocating her affections, there might be hope for them:

in terms of plot dynamics, and hence of the play of power in the tale, there is a radical realignment of force: [May is] not [a] mere victim. Fictional representation in James is not a straightforward duplication of power relations: the ostensible centre of power is subordinated to a secondary narrative that controls the primary, in a relation that complicates any generalizations we might want to make about fictional representation and power. Put differently, the power of the beast is ultimately derived from the ‘small, scared starved subjective satisfaction of an unacknowledged romance. (Buelens, 124)

Just as it is Marcher’s destiny to suffer his fate, it is necessary that May should die. The inverse relationship between her mental and physical strength emphasizes the stagnant nature of Marcher’s quest. While he assuredly ages during his search for the beast, he never arrives any nearer at discovering its identity (or, more importantly, the nature of May’s motivations). May is the character who must learn it. The learning process is propelled by her love for him. The longer she is with him, the stronger her feelings for him become. The suffering of that unrequited love, she eventually realizes, is the torture Marcher will undoubtedly feel, should he ever realize the opportunity that he missed:

May had, as we have seen, become stronger in knowledge as she became physically weaker; it is then appropriate that after her death she should be strongest of all and, in forbidding him access to the knowledge she watched for with him, deny ‘the power in him to learn. (Buelens, 119)

As an accessory, May’s role in John’s search seems trivial. It is not until her true feelings surface that her presence is felt by both John and the readers. She is the enigmatic character who ultimately has the final say. While an initial reading of the text might present May in the light of a victim, suffering at the unrequited affections of the one man she loves, “ ‘The Beast in the Jungle’ enables us to see that the alternative,
‘female,’ narrative may be the privileged one, holding the key to the surface narrative” (Buelens, 121). We lament her death and the suffering she endured in life, but her pain is nothing compared to what is in store for Marcher; in life, May could take solace in the knowledge that he was simply too blind to notice her advances and evident love for him. He, on the other hand, is intended to endure the pain of knowing that his beast could have been avoided. He was “the man to whom nothing was to happen” precisely because he did not allow anything to happen.

And so we arrive again at an impenetrable wall between Marcher and May, except this time, the boundary is a grave as opposed to Marcher’s egocentrism and it is now he who wants to cross that threshold instead of May. But the two are the same in the respect that both hold an absence of life: the grave holds May’s dead body and John’s body holds the lifeless spirit that is about to most horrifying revelation of his life. He misses her, but cannot put an explanation to his sentiments. Instead of earnest anticipation, he now feels emptiness; for the first time in his existence, he can identify that his life is actually lacking something. And then a stranger appears. There is nothing particularly special or unique about this man, but in his eyes and demeanor, Marcher observes something foreign to him; it is true grief and agony over the loss of someone. When the man leaves, his impression remains in Marcher’s thoughts. At last, he knows what it is that he desires; essentially, it is loss. This is ironic, in that he has been bereft throughout the entire narrative. The shock comes with the realization. At this, the moment when he least expects the beast, it springs upon him. He understands now what he was missing all along, that very thing which kept May by his side all those years:

Insight comes at last ... ‘No passion had ever touched him, for this was what passion meant ... He had seen outside of his life, not learned within.’ The
expected climax in Marcher's life is an anti-climax ... Circling perpetually in his little private jungle— a hunter hunted— he had not recognized love when it had been offered to him ... Marcher has deciphered his riddle. What he had lost would have made him mortal; to be mortal— that is, to live one's life and to love— that is the real escape from anonymity. (Edel, 559)

The myth of the sphinx claims that it kills whoever incorrectly answers its riddle. Marcher learns the answer too late, and so while May does not literally kill him, she does cause something in him to die; he can no longer hide behind the guise of searching. With May all hope of finding a purpose dies forever. His opportunity to have a life is irretrievably lost and what is left is the grim understanding that he truly was "the great Anonymous Man". He hurl himself on her grave when the beast is in sight, because in reality, the beast is the mirror that shows him what and who he really is. Finally, he is willing to throw himself into the abyss but all in vain, for it is forever shut with the sphinx that is May Bartram. The tragedy is not that he has finally come face to face with the truth, but that it points him to his own flaw; his "beast", his fate, could have been avoided had he not worried so much about it. But this is the way it was to have gone; for Marcher to have accepted May's love would have precluded his acceptance of the nothing that awaited him: no woman, no passion, no beast, no meaning. Ultimately, all is not really lost because there was nothing there to lose. In Ariadne's Thread, J. Hillis Miller explains that even the process of writing and reading has embedded within it a certain structure than ensures that this retrospective process will transpire.

The chase has a beast in view. The end of the story is the retrospective revelation of the law of the whole. That law is an underlying 'truth' that ties all together in an inevitable sequence revealing a hitherto hidden figure in the carpet. The image of the line tends always to imply the norm of a single continuous unified structure determined by one external organizing principle. This principle holds the whole line together, gives it its law, controls its progressive extension, curving or