

***Pursuing Desire: A Comparative Study of “La Peau de Chagrin” and “The Lotus Eater”  
and Their Relevance to Modern Life***

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**Abstract**

This study presents a comparison of Honoré de Balzac’s *La Peau de Chagrin* and W. Somerset Maugham’s *The Lotus Eater*, focusing on the theme of pursuing desire and its consequences. By examining the protagonists’ motivations, life purposes, and the outcomes of their actions, the analysis reveals how each story critiques the pursuit of desires in distinct yet complementary ways. Balzac’s narrative employs a supernatural element to illustrate the existential cost of unbridled ambition, while Maugham’s tale portrays the gradual decline resulting from a life dedicated solely to pleasure. The study highlights the enduring relevance of these themes to modern life, particularly in a world increasingly dominated by instant gratification and escapism. These stories offer valuable insights into the potential pitfalls of a desire-driven existence, urging a reflection on the balance between ambition, pleasure, and responsibility in contemporary society.

Keywords: Desire and Fulfillment, Existential Cost, Instant Gratification, Hedonism

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## Introduction

The pursuit of desires and the consequences of their fulfillment are central themes in many literary works, reflecting timeless human concerns. Honoré de Balzac's *La Peau de Chagrin* and W. Somerset Maugham's *The Lotus Eater* are two such stories that explore these themes through the lives of their protagonists. Though written in different periods and contexts, both stories offer a deep exploration of human desire, ambition, and the pursuit of pleasure, each with its unique approach and moral implications. This manuscript undertakes a comparative analysis of these two narratives, focusing on how they critique the pursuit of desires and what they reveal about modern literature and contemporary lifestyles.

Published in 1831, *La Peau de Chagrin* (The Magic Skin) is a seminal work by Balzac, one of the most influential figures in French literature. The novel is part of his monumental series *La Comédie Humaine*, an ambitious collection of interlinked stories aimed at providing a panoramic depiction of French society during the 19th century. Drawing inspiration from the Faustian legend and the burgeoning Romantic and Realist movements of his time, Balzac masterfully blends philosophical inquiry with social critique in this profound tale. The novel was well-received at the time of its release, with critics lauding its originality and intellectual scope. Today, *La Peau de Chagrin* continues to be studied for its innovative narrative structure (Cohen-Vrignaud, 2015; Dickson, 2017) and its exploration of themes that remain timeless, including the corrupting allure of power (Knapp, 1998), the fleeting nature of youth (Cohen-Vrignaud, 2015; Sprenger, 2008), and the global context (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Published in 1935, Maugham's *The Lotus Eater* is a short story that masterfully explores themes of hedonism, choice, and the human condition. Set on the idyllic island of Capri, the story encapsulates Maugham's talent for portraying psychological depth and his keen observation of human nature. The title references the Lotus-Eaters from Homer's *Odyssey*, individuals who live in blissful detachment after consuming the narcotic lotus plant (Dubos, 1963). Maugham's writing reflects the ethos of the interwar period, a time when the rigid societal structures of Victorian England were giving way to a more existential questioning of purpose (de Onzoño, 2016). His exploration of Wilson's rejection of societal expectations aligns with contemporaneous works by authors such as Aldous Huxley, who also grappled with the pursuit of personal happiness in the face of societal judgment (Chakraborty & Islam, 2021). Critics have often highlighted *The Lotus Eater* as a quintessential example of Maugham's ability to blend irony and pathos, as Wilson embodies the tension between the yearning for liberation and the consequences of rejecting social norms (Calder, 1990).

The literary works *La Peau de Chagrin* and *The Lotus Eater* delve into the existential questions of human desire, fulfillment, and the price one pays for indulgence. While separated by time, geography, and cultural context, both texts provide timeless reflections on the human condition, particularly in relation to the pursuit of pleasure and the concept of a life well-lived. As we transition into an era where artificial intelligence increasingly influences human choices and behavior, these philosophical reflections become even more pertinent. This paper examines the central themes of these works, drawing parallels and contrasts, and explores their implications for contemporary life in the AI age.

## Methodology

This study employs a comparative literary analysis methodology. The analysis focuses on thematic, philosophical, and narrative dimensions to explore how each text addresses the

pursuit of desires and their consequences. Each work was analyzed in detail, focusing on the portrayal of the protagonists, their desires, life choices, and the outcomes of their actions. Themes such as ambition, hedonism, existentialism, and the moral consequences of unrestrained desires were identified and examined in the context of each narrative. Special attention was given to the use of narrative devices, such as the supernatural element in *La Peau de Chagrin* and the realistic introspection in *The Lotus Eater*.

A framework was used to compare key aspects of the works, including their cultural and historical contexts, philosophical underpinnings, narrative structure, and character development. This framework was used to highlight similarities and differences in how the two authors critique the pursuit of desires. The study situates the texts within their respective historical and cultural contexts. This contextual analysis helps illuminate the societal pressures and philosophical movements that influenced the authors' depictions of ambition and escapism. The findings were synthesized to identify overarching themes and their implications.

### Overview of Key Features

Table 1 provides a comparative analysis of *La Peau de Chagrin* and *The Lotus Eater*, highlighting differences and similarities across various aspects. While *La Peau de Chagrin* features Balzac's detailed Realist prose, *The Lotus Eater* is a concise story with Maugham's straightforward and introspective style. Written in French and English, respectively, the two works reflect different cultural and historical contexts: Balzac's novel emerges from the Restoration era, addressing the ambitions and societal critiques of post-Napoleonic France, whereas Maugham's story captures interwar concerns about pleasure and escapism. Both works pick on existential themes and the consequences of personal choices, with *La Peau de Chagrin* employing a supernatural element to explore the impact of unchecked desires, while *The Lotus Eater* adopts a realistic approach to portray the moral and psychological cost of hedonism. Each work influenced its genre, with Balzac shaping the development of Realism and philosophical fiction, and Maugham advancing modern short story techniques and psychological fiction. Despite their differences in length, style, and context, both offer profound reflections on human ambition, the pursuit of happiness, and the consequences of life choices.

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Key Features

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>La Peau de Chagrin</i>	<i>The Lotus Eater</i>
Length	~ 350 pages (novel)	~ 60 pages (short story)
Writing Style	Detailed, descriptive, and elaborate prose typical of Balzac's Realist style. Emphasizes psychological depth and social critique.	Concise, straightforward, and introspective prose characteristic of Maugham's style. Focuses on character development and moral implications.
Language	French	English
Publication	1831	1935
Career Timing	Early in Balzac's career; part of his larger series <i>La Comédie Humaine</i> . Represents his developing Realist approach.	Mid-career for Maugham; reflects his mature style and thematic preoccupations with pleasure and existential themes.

Narrative Focus	Explores the psychological and existential impact of unchecked desires through a supernatural element.	Examines the consequences of a life devoted to pleasure and escapism through a realistic portrayal of character's life.
Cultural Context	Written during the Restoration era in France, reflecting the social and political changes of the time.	Written during the interwar period, reflecting contemporary concerns about pleasure, escapism, and societal expectations.
Genre	Realism / Philosophical Fiction	Short Story/ Psychological Fiction
Subgenre	Part of <i>La Comédie Humaine</i> (a series of interconnected novels and stories exploring various aspects of French society). Combines elements of philosophical and social commentary with supernatural themes.	Focuses on individual psychological and moral dilemmas, reflecting themes of hedonism and existential reflection. Often considered a key example of Maugham's exploration of modern moral questions.
Themes	Ambition, existentialism, the cost of desires, and the intersection of personal choices with societal expectations. The supernatural element (the chagrin) symbolizes the existential trade-offs involved in the pursuit of desires.	Hedonism, escapism, the consequences of living solely for pleasure, and existential reflections on the value of a life lived in indulgence. The protagonist's life of ease ultimately leads to a dramatic realization of the cost of his choices.
Characterization	Features a complex protagonist whose psychological development and interactions with other characters reveal societal critiques and personal struggles. The supernatural chagrin serves as a key plot device influencing his fate.	Centers on a single protagonist whose internal conflicts and personal choices drive the narrative. The story delves into his psychological state and moral dilemmas, with a focus on individual introspection and consequence.
Literary Influence	Influenced the development of Realist literature and philosophical fiction. Balzac's use of detailed social observation and moral commentary helped shape the genre and offer insights into the human condition.	Contributed to the genre of psychological fiction and modern short stories. Maugham's exploration of moral and existential questions through concise narrative forms influenced subsequent writers and readers' understanding of hedonism and its effects.

### Comparison of Philosophies

*La Peau de Chagrin* is a novel that masterfully blends realism with fantasy, focusing on the life of its protagonist, Raphaël de Valentin. The central element of the story is a magical piece

of chagrin that shrinks with every wish Raphaël makes, symbolizing the direct correlation between the fulfillment of desires and the diminution of life itself. Balzac's work is a commentary on the human pursuit of power, wealth, and pleasure, and the existential cost that such pursuits entail. The novel delves into the concept of finite life energy and the consequences of unrestrained desires. The more Raphaël indulges his desires, the more the chagrin shrinks, leading to his eventual demise. This serves as a metaphor for the consumption of one's vitality through the relentless pursuit of material and sensual gratification. Balzac thus critiques the hedonistic and materialistic tendencies of his time, suggesting that unchecked desires can lead to self-destruction.

In contrast, *The Lotus Eater* presents a different perspective on the pursuit of pleasure. The story follows the life of Thomas Wilson, who decides to retire early and spend the rest of his life in idyllic Capri, living off his savings without the burden of work or responsibilities. Wilson's philosophy is one of deliberate, prolonged indulgence, avoiding the typical societal pressures to accumulate wealth or achieve success. However, his plan goes awry when his money runs out, leading to a tragic end. Maugham's story is a meditation on the dangers of living for pleasure alone, without consideration for the future or the complexities of human existence. Wilson's choice to live a life free from the anxieties of modern life ultimately leads to his downfall, highlighting the risks of a life centered solely around self-indulgence and the pursuit of an easy existence.

Both *La Peau de Chagrin* and *The Lotus Eater* present characters who pursue desires that ultimately lead to their ruin, but the philosophies underlying these pursuits differ significantly. Balzac's work emphasizes the intrinsic link between desire and life's finite resources, suggesting that every fulfilled wish comes at a cost. Maugham, on the other hand, explores the consequences of a life spent in pursuit of continuous pleasure, warning against the dangers of escapism and the neglect of life's inherent challenges. While Raphaël's desires are intense and immediate, leading to rapid depletion of his life force, Wilson's desires are moderate yet sustained, leading to a slow but inevitable decline. Both authors seem to agree on the peril of indulgence, but Balzac focuses on the existential cost of desires, while Maugham highlights the futility of a life dedicated solely to pleasure.

Table 2 compares the plots of *La Peau de Chagrin* and *The Lotus Eater*, illustrating distinct yet thematically aligned narratives. Set in Paris during the 1830s Bourbon Restoration, *La Peau de Chagrin* unfolds against a backdrop of economic instability and rising bourgeois power. In contrast, *The Lotus Eater* takes place on the idyllic island of Capri during the economically prosperous but politically charged interwar period under Mussolini's rule. Both stories center on male protagonists, Raphaël de Valentin and Thomas Wilson, whose life choices lead to tragic downfalls. Raphaël's acquisition of a magical talisman that shrinks with each wish symbolizes the existential cost of unrestrained desires, resulting in his rapid demise. Wilson's pursuit of a hedonistic retirement is devoid of supernatural elements but equally tragic, as his financial unpreparedness leads to his gradual decline. While Balzac's tale incorporates dark existential tones and a supernatural allegory, Maugham's reflective and tragic realism cautions against the unsustainability of a pleasure-driven life. Both works offer moral lessons: excessive desires and escapism ultimately lead to self-destruction, albeit through different narrative approaches and philosophical focuses.

Table 2: Comparing the Plots Across Various Aspects

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>La Peau de Chagrin</i>	<i>The Lotus Eater</i>
Place	Paris, France	Capri, Italy
Year	1830s	1920s-1930s
Political Situation	Post-Napoleonic France, Bourbon Restoration	Interwar period, Italy under Mussolini's rule
Economic Situation	Economic instability, rise of bourgeoisie, debt crisis	Economic prosperity in Europe, but financial uncertainty for individuals
Protagonist	Raphaël de Valentin	Thomas Wilson
Plot Summary	Raphaël acquires a magical skin that grants his wishes but shrinks with each desire, leading to his eventual demise.	Wilson retires early to Capri to live a life of pleasure, but his savings eventually run out, leading to his downfall.
Theme	The cost of unrestrained desires and the finite nature of life	The risks of a life devoted solely to pleasure and escapism
Philosophical Focus	Existentialism, the relationship between desire and life force	Hedonism, the consequences of a pleasure-driven life
Supernatural Element	Magical shrinking leather (chagrin) representing life's vitality	None (realistic fiction)
Tone	Dark, cautionary, existential	Reflective, tragic, cautionary
Outcome for Protagonist	Rapid decline and death due to his relentless pursuit of desires	Gradual decline and tragic end due to unpreparedness for life's realities
Moral Lesson	Excessive desires lead to self-destruction	A life focused only on pleasure is unsustainable

### Comparative Analysis of Protagonists

Table 3 provides a comparative analysis of the protagonists, highlighting their similarities and differences across various aspects. Both male protagonists share a tragic arc but differ significantly in their age, circumstances, and outlook on life. Raphaël, in his early 20s, is an ambitious but despair-prone aspiring writer with noble ancestry, though financially ruined. In contrast, Wilson, a middle-aged former bank manager, is a laid-back and idealistic individual who chooses to retire early to live a life of pleasure on Capri.

The characters' financial trajectories are starkly different: Raphaël begins destitute but inherits a fortune, only to lose everything due to the curse of the magical *chagrin*. Wilson, initially secure due to his savings, becomes impoverished after failing to plan for the future. While Raphaël's noble background and existential ambition drive him to overreach, Wilson's simplicity and naivety lead to his unpreparedness for life's realities. Health and fate similarly

diverge: Raphaël’s rapid physical decline is caused by the supernatural talisman, symbolizing the toll of unrestrained desires, while Wilson’s deterioration results from poverty and psychological despair. Both characters meet tragic ends, underscoring the themes of excess and escapism. Ultimately, Raphaël embodies a passionate but doomed pursuit of life’s fullest pleasures, while Wilson represents the risks of a hedonistic philosophy that neglects the future. Together, their stories caution against extremes in ambition and lifestyle.

Table 3: Comparative Analysis of Protagonists

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Raphaël de Valentin</i>	<i>Thomas Wilson</i>
Gender	Male	Male
Age	Early 20s	Middle-aged (mid-40s)
Family Status	Unmarried, no children	Unmarried, has a daughter from a previous relationship, but estranged
Job	Initially unemployed, aspiring writer, later inherits wealth	Former bank manager, retired early
Income	Initially poor, later inherits a fortune	Initially secure due to savings, but eventually runs out
Property	Inherits a substantial estate but loses it all due to the chagrin’s curse	Owens a small house in Capri
Family History	Noble ancestry, but fallen into financial ruin	No notable family background mentioned
Health	Deteriorates rapidly due to the curse of the chagrin, dies young	Initially healthy, but deteriorates due to poverty and depression
Personality Traits	Ambitious, passionate, prone to despair, driven by desires	Content, laid-back, idealistic, but ultimately naive and unprepared
Philosophy of Life	Desires to live life to the fullest, but is consumed by his wishes	Believes in living a life of continuous pleasure without concern for the future
Outcome	Dies young as his life force is drained by the shrinking chagrin	Dies impoverished and in despair after his savings run out and he faces harsh realities

Table 4 presents a detailed comparison of the protagonists’ desires, philosophies, and outcomes in two stories. Raphaël is characterized by his intense and ambitious pursuit of wealth, power, and pleasures, driven by a magical talisman that grants his desires at the cost of his life force. In contrast, Wilson adopts a hedonistic approach, seeking a tranquil, carefree existence on Capri, free from societal pressures and work. While Raphaël grapples with existential dilemmas and the paradox of fulfillment leading to destruction, Wilson naively embraces the present, neglecting the future. Both protagonists face conflicts as their desires clash with reality—Raphaël confronts the shrinking of his life force, while Wilson's financial unpreparedness leads to poverty and despair. Ultimately, both stories serve as cautionary tales: Raphaël’s narrative warns against unchecked ambition, and Wilson’s highlights the perils of escapism and a pleasure-centric philosophy.

Table 4: Comparative Analysis of Desires, Philosophies

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Raphaël de Valentin</i>	<i>Thomas Wilson</i>
Primary Desires	Raphaël desires wealth, power, knowledge, and sensual pleasures. He seeks to fulfill every wish and ambition he has, using the chagrin to achieve these ends.	Wilson desires a life of ease and continuous pleasure. His primary goal is to live without the pressures of work or societal obligations, enjoying a peaceful, idyllic existence in Capri.
Purpose in Life	Initially, Raphaël's purpose is driven by ambition and the pursuit of worldly success. After acquiring the chagrin, his purpose shifts to seeking as much pleasure and fulfillment as possible before his life force is entirely consumed.	Wilson's purpose is to escape the demands of modern life and live a life dedicated to personal pleasure and tranquility. He aims to enjoy a carefree existence without long-term planning or concerns about the future.
Approach to Desires	Raphaël approaches his desires with intensity and urgency. The magical chagrin allows him to achieve his goals quickly, but with the knowledge that each fulfillment costs him a portion of his life. He is aware of the consequences but is often driven by desperation and a need to experience life fully before it's too late.	Wilson takes a more passive and laid-back approach to his desires. He believes that by withdrawing from the pressures of society, he can enjoy a peaceful life. He deliberately chooses a path of ease and comfort, without considering the long-term consequences of his decisions.
Philosophical Outlook	Existential; he grapples with the meaning of life and the cost of his desires. His interaction with the chagrin forces him to confront the finite nature of life and the paradox of seeking fulfillment while hastening his own demise.	Hedonistic and somewhat naive. He believes in the value of living for the moment and enjoying life's pleasures without worrying about the future. His philosophy is centered on the idea that life should be enjoyed rather than endured.
Consequences of Desires	Rapid decline. Each fulfilled wish diminishes his life force, leading to a sense of existential despair as he realizes that his pursuit of desires is directly linked to his impending death.	Gradual decline. By choosing a life of continuous pleasure without consideration for future needs, he eventually faces poverty and despair, realizing too late that his chosen path was unsustainable.



Conflict Between Desires and Reality	Raphaël's conflict lies in the realization that every wish he fulfills brings him closer to death. His desires, while intense and passionate, are ultimately self-destructive, leading to a tragic end.	Wilson's conflict arises when his money runs out, and he is forced to confront the harsh realities of life that he had hoped to avoid. His desire for a carefree life ultimately leads to his downfall as he is unprepared to face the consequences of his choices.
Legacy and Moral Lesson	A cautionary tale about the dangers of unrestrained desires and the existential cost of pursuing life's pleasures without regard for the future. The moral is that unchecked ambition and desire can lead to self-destruction.	A cautionary tale about the risks of escapism and the folly of believing that one can live a life of continuous pleasure without facing the consequences. The moral is that a life focused solely on pleasure is ultimately empty and unsustainable.

This manuscript provides a comparative analysis of two works, focusing on the theme of desires and their consequences. However, it is limited by its reliance on textual analysis and the absence of interdisciplinary perspectives. The psychological dimensions of the characters' decisions could benefit from insights drawn from behavioral economics or modern psychological theories. Additionally, the study did not explore non-Western perspectives, such as Buddhist ideas on desire and detachment. Future research could address these gaps by integrating interdisciplinary approaches. Comparative studies involving other works from different cultural and temporal contexts could also provide more nuance. Further exploring the modern relevance in the age of artificial intelligence, could offer new perspectives.

## Conclusion

*La Peau de Chagrin* and *The Lotus Eater* provide compelling explorations of the human condition, each offering a different perspective on the pursuit of desires and their consequences. Through the comparative analysis of these two stories, this manuscript highlights the enduring relevance of their themes to modern literature and contemporary lifestyles. As society continues to grapple with the challenges of balancing ambition, pleasure, and responsibility, the cautionary tales of Raphaël de Valentin and Thomas Wilson offer lessons on the importance of considering the long-term consequences of our desires. In a world increasingly focused on instant gratification, these stories remind us of the value of restraint, foresight, and the pursuit of a meaningful life.

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