

DAISY MILLER: A WOMAN INNOCENTLY OBLIVIOUS TO SOCIETY

by Dale Neumann

English 6  
Mr. Jones  
Apr. 22, 1983  
Period 1

This may be hard to prove!!

DAISY MILLER: A WOMAN INNOCENTLY OBLIVIOUS TO SOCIETY

Henry James's probing of the controversy between individuality and social restriction often centers on the way society shapes the behavior of women. Many of James's heroines are forced to sacrifice some of their personal liberty and happiness and yield to the terms of society. However, "only in Daisy Miller does James portray a woman whose innocent devotion to her own natural behavior causes her to flout society wilfully and persistantly."<sup>1</sup>

HOW MANY HAVE YOU EXAMINED. SOURCE?

Daisy's experiences exhibit the wish of society to restrict women. Those women who submit to society suffer from a lack of emotion and satisfaction which in some cases is aggravated by illness. The woman who ignores the laws of society is punished by ostracism and death.

??  
In what time + culture?

Despite the fact that the women of the novella (all except for Daisy) support the system which restricts them, the chief arbiter of society for Daisy is a man, the aply-named Winterbourne: "As a definer and enforcer of the bourne or boundary of social propriety, whose verdict has the life-denying implications of winter, Winterbourne represents the masculine world which has ultimate control over the

<sup>1</sup>Louise Barnett, "Jamesian Feminism: Women in 'Daisy Miller'," Studies in Short Fiction, Vol. 16, pp. 281.

lives of women."<sup>2</sup>

How does the text support this suggestion.

The implications of Daisy Miller's European adventure depend in part on how one regards Daisy--as the typical American girl or as "common." The popular critical position normally holds that Daisy is a true innocent wrongly judged by society. Then the essential question is not whether Daisy is "common" in terms of social behavior, but of what her admitted "commonness" indicates about her and the society which judges and condemns her.

This is INTERESTING.

Is this your thesis??

Daisy Miller's actions in the novella may not be considered improper today, here in America, but according to the reactions other characters of the novella they definitely were improper in Vevey and Geneva when the story presumably takes place. William E. Grant states the following comparison between Daisy's personality and that of the other women of the story:

Pin down the ERA!

Actually, Daisy is no more the typical American ingenue than Mrs. Miller is a typical mother, or the insipid Randolph a typical American boy. The obvious difference between Daisy and her contemporaries is nowhere more clearly stated than in Winterbourne's direct comparison of Daisy and Mrs. Costello's granddaughters: "This seemed to throw some light on the matter, for Winterbourne remembered to have heard that his cousins cousins in New York were 'tremendous flirts.' If, therefore, Miss Daisy Miller exceeded the liberal margin allowed to these young ladies, it was probable that anything might be expected of her."<sup>3</sup>

If Winterbourne can accept this comparison as just, which he apparently does, we have reason to believe that James is making a clear point that Daisy does exceed even the relaxed social standards of New York, no matter how much less stuffy than Europe's standards are. Thus, it

SPACING.

<sup>2</sup>Barnett, "Feminism," pp. 281

<sup>3</sup>Henry James, "Daisy Miller: A Study," Anthology of American Literature, Vol. 2, 2d. ed. gen. ed. George McMichael (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 614-615.

is not enough to say that she simply represents the new world freedom in the conflict with the restrictions of European society, because her freedom in New York is equally at variance with the conduct expected of a young lady of good taste and breeding.<sup>4</sup>

Daisy's "commonness" is initially noticed by her dialogue in conversation. She speaks freely and commandingly regardless whether she is talking to a man or a woman. Upon his first encounter with Daisy, Winterbourne realizes from her straight-forwardness that she is no ordinarily behaved woman.

Single  
9-marks.

"I have always had," she said, "a great deal of gentlemen's society." Poor Winterbourne was amused, perplexed, and decidedly charmed. He had never yet heard a young girl express herself in just such this fashion--never, at least, save cases where to say such things seemed a kind of demonstrative evidence of a certain laxity of deportment.<sup>5</sup>

Upon hearing such a remark Winterbourne wonders if he must accuse her of "actual or potential inconduite, as they said at Geneva."<sup>6</sup> He decides to categorize her as "a pretty American flirt."<sup>7</sup>

It is Daisy's natural, and ultimately amoral innocence which blinds her from the necessities of proper social behavior. Her name, "Daisy", is purposely chosen by James to accurately describe her character. Grant expounds on the characteristics implied by "Daisy.":

Sonnet (?)

o.k.

Daisy combines all those things we commonly associate with the daisy: white as a daisy; but, alas common as a daisy. Yet, while we recall all of these qualities of the

<sup>4</sup>William E. Grant, " 'Daisy Miller': A Study of a Study," Studies in Short Fiction, Vol. 11, p. 18-19.

<sup>5</sup>James, "Daisy Miller," p. 610.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid

<sup>7</sup>Ibid

daisy, we must not forget that, at the heart of the daisy lies its golden eye, and at the heart of James's Daisy lies a rare soul of untarnished gold, more valuable and more meaningful than either the simple white of unsullied innocence or the commonness of the wildflower.<sup>8</sup>

The innocent Daisy is puzzled that she cannot live as she pleases without other people suggesting what she should or should not be doing. She does not see anything improper about doing things that, to her, do not appear to be out of the ordinary or to be harmful, at least physically, to the society around her. She sees no reason why she should change her ways and sacrifice her present unrestricted lifestyle. Consequently, she refuses to conform with society. Daisy's innocent but socially unacceptable actions offend the proper people of the society in which she resides. Winterbourne realizes that she is uncultivated, but for most of the novella, he excuses Daisy's actions because he believes that she is nice innocent girl. The women of the society, however, are more concerned about Daisy's manners.

USE THE  
TEXT  
HERE.

"In Vevey, social decorum is embodied in Winterbourne's aunt. Mrs. Costello occupies herself mostly with the occupation of social exclusiveness. She has devoted herself to oppressing others."<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Costello's exclusiveness prevents her from censuring Daisy in person, but she warns Winterbourne of Daisy's commonness throughout the story. After Winterbourne mentions his encounter with Daisy Miller to his aunt, Mrs. Costello impresses upon the young man that she does not wish to acknowledge the Miller's

AWK.

<sup>8</sup>Grant, "A Study of a Study," p. 19.

<sup>9</sup>Barnett, "Feminism," pp. 282-283.

social existence:

"They are very common," Mrs. Costello declared. "They are the sort of Americans that one does one's duty by not--not accepting."

"Ah, you don't accept them?" said the young man.

"I can't my dear Fredrick, I would if I could, but I can't"<sup>10</sup>

Single  
9-mks.

COMMENT & DEVELOP

Winterbourne, however, seems inclined to allow Daisy to bend the social laws which, ironically, the highly-cultivated women of the novella spend a substantial amount of time enforcing. He believes there is hope that Daisy may become refined:

"She is completely uncultivated," Winterbourne went on. "But she is wonderfully pretty, and, in short, she is very nice. To prove that I believe it, I am going to take her to the Chateau de Chillon."<sup>11</sup>

Partially because she is an American mother, Mrs. Miller is not as determined as the rest of society to restrict Daisy's whereabouts. Mrs. Miller does very little to control her daughter. Winterbourne observes Mrs. Miller's lax attitude when she begrudgingly yields to her daughter's wish to go alone with him to the castle of Chillon:

"Well, he [Randolph] wouldn't go to that castle," said the young girl. "Im going there with Mr. Winterbourne." To this announcement, very placidly made, Daisy's mamma offered no response. Winterbourne took for granted that she deeply disapproved of the projected excursion;.....

"Well if Daisy feels up to it--" said Mrs. Miller, in a tone impregnated with a sense of the magnitude of the enterprise. "It seems as if there was nothing she wouldn't undertake."<sup>12</sup>

Mrs. Miller seems to already realize that it is impossible to influence Daisy's decisions. According to Barnett, "Mostly,

<sup>10</sup>James, "Daisy Miller," p. 613.

<sup>11</sup>James, "Daisy Miller," p. 614.

<sup>12</sup>James, "Daisy Miller," p. 617.

CHECK  
QUOTING  
FORMS  
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Mrs. Miller fails to see social infractions because she has a decidedly practical bent."<sup>13</sup>

Of the women of society, Mrs. Walker is the most actively concerned about Daisy's reputation. A direct contrast between Mrs. Walker and Mrs. Miller's concern for Daisy is seen when Daisy informs them that she is going to the Pincio:

"I am going to the Pincio," said Daisy, smiling.  
 "Alone, my dear--at this hour?" Mrs. Walker asked. The afternoon was drawing to a close--it was the hour for the throng of carriages and of contemplative pedestrians. "I don't think it's safe, my dear," said Mrs. Walker.

"Neither do I," subjoined Mrs. Miller. "You'll get the fever, as sure as you live. Remember what Dr. Davis told you!"<sup>14</sup>

Blend!

"When Mrs. Walker warns Daisy that her contemplated walk on the Pincio is not safe, Mrs. Miller immediately thinks of the danger to her daughters health rather than her reputation."<sup>15</sup> Mrs. Walker is, of course, thinking of Daisy's reputation. In response to Mrs. Walker and Mrs. Miller's warnings Daisy facetiously responds: "Gracious me! I don't want to do anything improper."<sup>16</sup>

In the conversation that immediately follows between Daisy and Winterbourne, Daisy states directly that she will not yield to the will of others:

The young girl looked at him more gravely, but with eyes that were prettier than ever. "I have never allowed a gentleman to dictate to me, or to interfere with anything I do."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Barnett, "Feminism," p. 284.

<sup>14</sup>James, "Daisy Miller," p. 626.

<sup>15</sup>Barnett, "Feminism," p. 284.

<sup>16</sup>James, "Daisy Miller," p. 626.

<sup>17</sup>James, "Daisy Miller," p. 627.

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REALLY? DOESN'T SHE SENSE IT?

Uninformed of Daisy's stubbornness, Mrs. Walker makes  
Daisy aware of societies disapproval of her actions by  
attempting "to enclose her both within her carriage and  
within her social code."<sup>18</sup> It is during this scene that  
Daisy "expresses a desire to alter society rather than her  
own behavior"<sup>19</sup>:

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Asmin

"Do get in and drive with me!" said Mrs Walker.  
"That would be charming, but it's so enchanting just  
as I am!" and Daisy gave a brilliant glance at the  
gentlemen on either side of her.

"It may be enchanting, dear child, but it is not the  
custom here," urged Mrs. Walker, leaning forward with her  
hands devoutly clasped.

"Well, it ought to be then! said Daisy. "If I didn't  
walk I should expire."<sup>20</sup>

When Daisy then asks Winterbourne if he agrees with  
Mrs. Walker's advise, Winterbourne is forced to make an  
important choice. Up to this point he has compromised  
between Daisy and society. But circumstances force him to  
make a hurried decision:

He looked at her exquisite prettiness, and then said,  
very gently, "I think you should get into the carriage."

Daisy gave a violent laugh. "I never heard anything  
so stiff! If this is improper, Mrs. Walker," she  
persued, "then I am all improper, and you must give me  
up. Goodbye; I hope you have a lovely ride!" and, with  
Mr. Giovanelli, who made a triumphantly obsequious  
salute, she turned away.

Mrs. Walker sat looking after her, and there were  
tears in her eyes. "Get in here, sir," she said to  
Winterbourne, indicating the place beside her. The  
young man answered that he felt bound to accompany Miss  
Miller; whereupon Mrs. Walker declared that if he refused  
her this favor she would never speak to him again. She  
was evidently in earnest. Winterbourne overtook Daisy and  
her companion, and, offering the young girl his hand,  
told her that Mrs. Walker had made an imperious claim  
upon his society.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Barnett, "Feminism," p.285.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>James, "Daisy Miller," p.629.

<sup>21</sup>James, "Daisy Miller," p.630.



Winterbourne's decision reveals that "his personal feelings for Daisy have gradually been overwhelmed by his intellectual involvement in the problem of Daisy."<sup>22</sup> Social decorum beckons him to obey the lady's request to join her in the carriage. Daisy realizes from his decision that "men are the final arbiters and wielders of power."<sup>23</sup>

When Winterbourne leaves the carriage, he walks towards the residence of his aunt. Barnett interprets this in the following manner:

In asserting that there will be "nothing scandalous" in his attentions to Daisy, Winterbourne still imagines that he can have both Daisy and society, but in walking towards his aunt's residence and away from Daisy, he shows his most deeply felt commitment.<sup>24</sup>

Daisy's determination to live freely and naturally results in her destruction: she dies from the Roman fever, which she contracts at the Colosseum at night escorted by Giovanelli. It is because she has lost Winterbourne that she does not care whether or not she gets the fever. Winterbourne returns to Geneva to lead a life filled with extremely predictable behavior. Only Daisy is free from the bonds of society.

Your own interpretation is occasionally, lacking, but this is generally a reasonable job.

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<sup>22</sup>Barnett, "Feminism," p. 285.

<sup>23</sup>Barnett, "Feminism," p. 286.

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