

# In Quest of "A Shy Incongruous Charm" of Daisy Miller

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James's story, "Daisy Miller," which deals with the American girl encountering Europe, seems to have provoked a hot dispute among his contemporary readers as to whether it is a tribute to the American girl or an outrage on American girlhood,<sup>1</sup> or whether such a contradictory character as Daisy is actually possible or not.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, the story, from the very start, confronted the ambivalent attitude of the publishers. When James, having written the story, sent it to *Lippincott's Magazine* in Philadelphia in the spring of 1878, it was promptly rejected by the editor, John Foster Kirk as an outrage on American girlhood. Accordingly, the story first appeared in England, in the *Cornhill Magazine* through the help of James's English friend Leslie Stephen, from which, ironically enough, the story was promptly pirated by two American periodicals, *Littel's Living Age* in Boston and the *Home Journal* in New York.<sup>3</sup>

On its publication, naturally enough, a lot of controversy arose in the papers. The review that appeared in the *New York Times*, November 10, 1878 declared that "the tragical sketch of a young girl from Schenectady" cannot be recognized as a portrait of any girl of that old Dutch town. The review continued as follows:

It is not likely that Schenectady, or any other town of Middle States, would produce just such a compound as the pretty, independent, but very ill-advised damsel whose name is Daisy Miller. But take her as a type that embraces the characteristics of various young women from America now journeying about Europe.... The new story, which appeared, inappropriately enough, in an English magazine, shows that he is possessed by a sincere patriotism, since he consecrates his talents to the enlightening of his country-women in the view which cynical Europe takes of the performance of the American girl abroad.<sup>4</sup>

The tone of the view expressed in this passage is an accusation of the cynicism of the Europeans about the performance of the American girl, along with the rejection of such a character as Daisy as a prototype of the American girls.

William Dean Howells, on the other hand, admits the character as a true sketch of a Schenectadian girl. He contributed to the *Atlantic Monthly* in March

of 1879:

To read the silly criticisms which have been printed and the far sillier ones which are every day uttered in regard to Mr. James's Daisy Miller would almost convince us that we are as provincial as ever in our sensitiveness to foreign opinion.... Only the most shiveringly sensitive of our shoddy population are bold enough to deny the truth of this wonderful little sketch.... All poor Daisy's crimes are purely conventional.... In short, the things she does with such dire effect at Vevay and at Rome would never for an instant be remarked or criticised in the rural American standard, and she knows no other. It is the merest ignorance or affectation, on the part of the Anglicized Americans of Boston or New York, to deny this.... The lesson is taught in Mr. James's story, — and never was necessary medicine administered in a form more delightful and unobtrusive.<sup>5</sup>

To James's contemporary, Daisy at first may have been either wholly innocent or guilty; James, either all for her or against her. But today, the early extreme black or white reactions to Daisy seem to have been overcome by the accepting attitude toward James's creation, and Daisy is considered as a prototype. Leslie A. Fiedler wrote in 1960:

In serious literature and the popular paperback alike, the Good Bad Girl, with her heart of truest gold beneath the roughest of exteriors, survives to become a stock character of the movies, a living embodiment of the American faith that evil is appearance only.<sup>6</sup>

Daisy has become a prototype of the American girls, innocent in heart but baffling in appearance.

Wayne C. Booth, however, points out in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* written in 1961 that Winterbourne's recognition of Daisy's innocence comes too late and that it is rather droll. He writes:

Our interest is consequently centered on his (Winterbourne's) belated recognition of her true quality, a recognition that is poignant enough, but "droll" as well.<sup>7</sup>

According to Booth, there is in the story a touch of ironic play with the international theme.

What intentions, then, did James himself have for the characterization of Daisy? Mrs. Lynn Linton, a minor but prolific English novelist, asked James in 1880 to give an explication of Daisy Miller since she disagreed with her acquaintance over how to interpret Daisy's action. In reply to her question, James wrote:

Poor little Daisy Miller was, as I understand her, above all things *innocent*....the whole idea of the story is the little tragedy of a light, thin, natural, unsuspecting creature being sacrificed as it were to a social rumpus that went on quite over her head and to which she stood in no measurable relation.<sup>8</sup>

According to James, Daisy is "innocent," but she is "too ignorant," "too irreflective," and "too little versed in the proportions of things"<sup>9</sup> as well. What is significant in connection with the term innocence here is that it is not the innocence in the technical sense.

Twenty-nine years later, in 1909, in a Preface to "Daisy Miller," James disclosed the fact that the story was suggested from an incident which a friend of his happened to experience in Rome during the autumn of 1877. The friend mentioned a simple and uninformed American lady, whose young daughter, a child of nature and of freedom, had "picked up" by the wayside a good-looking Roman of vague identity, till social check occurred.<sup>10</sup> In the same preface James suggested his intention in creating "Daisy Miller." He said:

It provided for mere concentration, and on an object scant and superficially vulgar — from which, however, a sufficiently brooding tenderness might eventually extract *a shy incongruous charm*....my supposedly typical little figure was of course *pure poetry*.<sup>11</sup>

Despite James's verbal intention of making "pure poetry," the reader can never fail to notice James's subtle realistic judgment on Daisy's action, admitting critical and ironic overtones as well as lyric, which eventually clarifies the meaning of "a shy incongruous charm."

In the opening passage of the story, James sets in contrast the American visitors and Europeans:

In this region, through the month of June, American travellers are extremely numerous; it may be said indeed that Vevey assumes at that time some of the characteristics of an American watering-place. There are sights and sounds that evoke a vision, an echo, of Newport and Saratoga. There is a flitting hither and thither of "stylish" young girls, a rustling of muslin flounces, a rattle of dance-music in the morning hours, a sound of high-pitched voices at all times. You receive an impression of these things at the excellent inn of the "Trois Couronnes," and are transported in fancy to the Ocean House or to Congress Hall. But at the "Trois Couronnes," it must be added, there are other features much at variance with these suggestions: neat German waiters who look like secretaries of legation; Russian princesses sitting in the garden; little Polish boys walking about, held by the hand, with their governors....<sup>12</sup>

The carefree and aggressive American visitors are set against the formal and restrained Europeans. The reader notices an ironic tone which James gives to the behaviour of the American tourists.

James repeats his opening contrast in the dialogues that follow. While Winterbourne is an American by birth, he has lived "a long time"<sup>13</sup> in Geneva, the "little metropolis of Calvinism,"<sup>14</sup> the "dark old city at the other end of the lake."<sup>15</sup> And Winterbourne's way of speech suggests the extent to which he has become Europeanized. In Vevey, he finds himself "at liberty,"<sup>16</sup> on a little holiday from Geneva. With no more than a very casual introduction from her little brother Randolph he speaks to Daisy Miller. His formal and conventional language becomes ironic in conjunction with his feelings of "liberty" and of "risk." In opposition to Winterbourne, Daisy often speaks in the language of extravagant enthusiasm. In her opinion, Europe is "perfectly entrancing.... She had ever so many intimate friends who had been there ever so many times... she had had ever so many dresses and things from Paris."<sup>17</sup> Daisy speaks in an idiom that is homely and matter-of-fact. Ironically enough, she is little interested in the European historic remains, while Winterbourne is most charmed by Daisy's unrefined manners.

Toward the end of Part I, Daisy teases Winterbourne out of his formality and makes him, for a moment, speak her language—"Do, then, let me give you a row," he says. Daisy replies, "It's quite lovely, the way you say that!"<sup>19</sup> In his "adventure" to the Castle of Chillon in a boat with her, "he quite forgot his fears" and came to think that her loud talking and laughing was "the most charming prattle he had ever heard,"<sup>20</sup> while Daisy "cared very little for mediaeval history and that the grim ghosts of Chillon loomed but faintly before her."<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to Winterbourne, who is comparatively flexible in attitude, Mrs. Costello, his aunt, shows a perfect inflexibility in response to the new social manners that the American visitors show. When Winterbourne asks her, in Vevey, if she has observed Mrs. Miller, Daisy, and Randolph, she says: "Oh, yes, I have observed them — seen them — and kept out of their way."<sup>22</sup> Her principles of value have long been set; she needs only to apply them. As a spokesman of the American colonists in Europe she guards a style of life and reveals its limit of emotion, exclaiming, "I am an old woman, but I am not too old — thank heaven — to be shocked!"<sup>23</sup>

Winterbourne's feeling for Daisy, however, turns into a kind of accusation in his conventional view. He first gets alarmed by the fact that Daisy is "extraordinarily communicative"<sup>24</sup> and "tremendously easy."<sup>25</sup> Daisy is pretty but "very forgivingly — of a want of finish."<sup>26</sup> When Daisy announces that she has always had "a great deal of gentlemen's society,"<sup>27</sup> Winterbourne is more alarmed. He wonders if he must accuse her of "actual or potential *arrièrepensée*, as they said

at Geneva."<sup>28</sup> In Rome, although Winterbourne defends Daisy to the American colony publicly, he is privately increasingly shocked by her friendship with the "third-rate"<sup>29</sup> Italian Giovanelli.

Daisy is recklessly persistent about her own way. When Mrs. Walker, a friend of Winterbourne's, at the sight of Daisy walking with two men, urges, "It may be fascinating, dear child, but it is not the custom here," Daisy replies, "well, it ought to be, then!"<sup>30</sup> Winterbourne gets to imitate Mrs. Walker in scolding her. He warns her to behave like "a young lady of this country." But she retorts, "I besides, thank goodness, am not a young lady of this country... I don't see why I should change my habits for *such* stupid." On seeing Daisy and Giovanelli strolling about Saint Peter's, Mrs. Costello even calls the sight "Miss Miller's intrigue."<sup>32</sup>

And so Winterbourne removes himself farther and farther from Daisy. He, finally finding her alone with Giovanelli in the Colosseum at night, thinks that he has at last understood her. He is relieved and "exhilarated"<sup>33</sup> that the "riddle" has suddenly become "easy to read."<sup>34</sup> He, just as Mrs. Costello and Mrs. Walker have already done, condemns her. "What a clever little reprobate she was," he thinks, "and how smartly she played at injured innocence!"<sup>35</sup> Winterbourne's imagination cannot stretch to include the notion of unsophisticated innocence. But neither can Daisy's imagination stretch to include the idea that manners really matter to those who practice them.

As to James's deliberation for "pure poetry," he is using a symbolic imagery for that effect. In Rome Winterbourne observes Daisy with Giovanelli in the Pincian Garden, and then on the Palatine Hill.

A few days after his brief interview with her mother he came across her at that supreme seat of flowering desolation known as the Palace of the Caesars. The early Roman spring had filled the air with bloom and perfume, and the rugged surface of the Palatine was muffled with tender verdure. Daisy moved at her ease over the great mounds of ruin that are embanked with mossy marble and paved with monumental inscriptions. It seemed to him he had never known Rome so lovely as just then. He looked off at the enchanting harmony of line and colour that remotely encircles the city — he inhaled the softly humid odours and felt the freshness of the year and the antiquity of the place reaffirm themselves in deep interfusion. It struck him also that Daisy had never showed to the eye for so utterly charming; but this had been his conviction on every occasion of their meeting. Giovanelli was of course at her side, and Giovanelli too glowed as never before with something of the glory of his race.<sup>36</sup>

Daisy is identified simply and wholly with the natural world, which has its own eternal and beautiful rhythms. And the beauty of the natural world to which she

belongs is supreme. But the reader, nevertheless, cannot avoid associating the scene with "such extraordinary rashness" on the part of Daisy, and with the danger of "a nest of malaria."<sup>37</sup> Therefore, to the reader, it seems inevitable that Daisy, on going back to her hotel, suffers from malaria and dies. Winterbourne, standing "in the little Protestant cemetery, by an angle of the wall of imperial Rome, beneath the cypresses and the thick spring-flowers," learns from Giovanelli's lips that Daisy was "most innocent."<sup>38</sup> Yet, isn't his action mocking after his recognition? He "soon" goes back to live at Geneva, from which "the most contradictory accounts of his motives of sojourn" come: "a report that he's studying hard—an intimation that he's much interested in a very clever foreign lady."<sup>39</sup>

As James writes in his letter to Mrs. Lynn Linton, Daisy is "above all things innocent," but when it comes to his comment that she is "not defiant,"<sup>40</sup> it is doubtful whether she really is not from the European standard. For Winterbourne's warning to Daisy remains impressive to the reader:

When you deal with natives you must go by the custom of the country. American flirting is a purely American silliness; it has — in its ineptitude of innocence — no place in *this* system. So when you show yourself in public with Mr. Giovanelli and without your mother—<sup>41</sup>

As Dupee also admits, Daisy, defiantly enough, has "no sense of the inevitable." Her ways are "deceptively free and flirtatious." She runs about Rome with dubious native "in defiance of the system of curfews and chaperons."<sup>42</sup>

So, to James, to whom traditions, conventions, and manners, presumably, were significant, may have wished the Americans to have a lesson. He may have wanted them to learn that without this feeling for the limits of life they could scarcely survive in Europe. Dupee may be right in saying:

... Daisy herself clearly suffers as a person from the absence in her life of those very traditions for which she cares so little and of which the American colony undoubtedly makes too much. She fails to "compose," as James would say, because as a social being she is without a form and a frame.<sup>43</sup>

But to the present writer, it seems that Daisy has an insistent form, which one might as well call "a formless form": the doctrine of doing "what she likes."<sup>44</sup> She does in Rome what she would do in America. Besides, she does not comprehend, or even try to comprehend why her behavior should cause so much social anxiety. She lacks in the recognition that her "formless form" could be destructive of another form.

In an earlier preface to *The Reverberator*, James points out that the Americans are almost incredibly unaware of life and that they are "conscious of so few things in the world," least of all, "of deficiencies and dangers; so that, the grace of youth and innocence, which might be their negatives were converted to positives and values."<sup>45</sup> James seems to have tried to give expression to his criticism on the state of innocence that the Americans take as a positive value, in creating the story, "Daisy Miller." Obviously, despite James's intention to make Daisy "pure poetry," irony gleams all over. Indeed, Daisy's charm is "shy" and "incongruous."

#### NOTES

1. See William Dean Howells, "The Contributor's Club," *Atlantic Monthly*, XLIII (February, 1879), 252-262, rpt. in William T. Stafford, ed., *James's "Daisy Miller"* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p. 110. He writes: ... I am shocked to find that what I gratefully accepted as an exquisitely loyal service to American girlhood abroad (in *Daisy Miller*) is regarded by some critical experts as "servilely snobbish" and "brutally unpatriotic."
2. See *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, LVIII (December, 1878), 310, rpt. in Stafford, ed., p.105. A review reads: ... we should affirm that they have not enough of general or special resemblance to any really existent class to lend probability to caricature. ... The elder lady is an impossible mother... and Daisy herself is an equally impossible daughter... is an inscrutable combination of audacity and innocence, elegance and vulgarity, refinement and cool disregard of essential conventionalities... this contradictory creature....
3. Stafford, ed., p.2.
4. *New York Times*, November 10, 1878, p. 10, rpt. in Stafford, p.103.
5. Howells, "The Contributor's Club," *Atlantic Monthly*, XLIII (March, 1879), 399-400, rpt. in Stafford, p.110.
6. Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), p.300.
7. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p.283.
8. Henry James, "A Letter to Lynn Linton, ca. 1880," *Mrs. Lynn* by George Somes Layard (London: Methuen & Co., 1901), pp. 233-234.
9. *ibid.*, p.233.
10. James, "Preface to *Daisy Miller*," *The Novels and Tales of Henry James* (New York: Charles & Scribner's Sons, 1909) XVIII, v-iii.
11. *ibid.* The italics by the present writer.
12. Leon Edel, ed., *Henry James: Selected Fiction* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1953), pp.1-2,—hereafter cited as *Selected Fiction*.
13. *ibid.*, p.2.
14. *ibid.*
15. *ibid.*, p.26.

16. *ibid.*, p.2.
17. *ibid.*, p.11.
18. *ibid.*, p.13.
19. *ibid.*, p.28.
20. *ibid.*, p.30.
21. *ibid.*, p.31. This part of expression differs in the early edition. In "Daisy Miller: a Study," *Cornhill Magazine*, XXXVIII (June, 1878), 678-698, rpt. in Stafford, p. 21, the quotation is as follows: "Daisy cared very little for feudal antiquities and that the dusky traditions of Chillon made but a slight impression upon her." This expression is more explicit on Daisy's indifference to the European antiquities.
22. *ibid.*, p.16.
23. *ibid.*, p.19.
24. *ibid.*, p.12.
25. *ibid.*
26. *ibid.*, p.8.
27. *ibid.*, p.11.
28. *ibid.* Here the word in the early edition, "inconduite," meaning misconduct is replaced with "arrière-pensée," meaning mental reservation. In the late edition, the expression is more subtle.
29. *ibid.*, p.35.
30. *ibid.*, p.48.
31. *ibid.*, p.56.
32. *ibid.*, p.60.
33. *ibid.*, p.68.
34. *ibid.*
35. *ibid.*, p.69.
36. *ibid.*, p.64.
37. *ibid.*, p.69.
38. *ibid.*, p.72.
39. *ibid.*, p.74.
40. Layard, *Mrs. Lynn*, p.233.
41. *Selected Fiction*, pp.56-57.
42. F. W. Dupee, *Henry James*, rev. ed. (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1956), p.93.
43. *ibid.*, p.43.
44. *Selected Fiction*, p.73.
45. Leon Edel, *Henry James* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), p.20.



## A LIST OF WORKS REFERRED

### I. TEXT

- James, Henry. "Daisy Miller." *Henry James: Selected Fiction*. ed. Leon Edel. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1953.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Daisy Miller: a Study." *Cornhill Magazine*, XXXVII (June, 1878), 678-698; XXXVIII(July), 44-67, rpt. in William T. Stafford, ed. *James's Daisy Miller*. New York; Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963.

### II. BOOKS AND ARTICLES

- Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.
- Dupee, F. W. *Henry James*, rev. ed. Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1956.
- Edel, Leon. *Henry James*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963.
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- Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, LVIII December 1878, p.310, rpt. in William T. Stafford, ed. *James's Daisy Miller*. New York; Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963, p.105.
- Howells, William Dean. "The Contributor's Club." *Atlantic Monthly*, XLIII March 1879, pp.399-400, rpt. in William T. Stafford, ed. *James's Daisy Miller*, p.110.
- James, Henry. "Letter to Mrs. Lynn Linton, ca. 1880." *Mrs. Lynn* by George Somes Layard. London: Methuen & Co., 1901, pp.233-234.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Preface to *Daisy Miller*." *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*. New York: Charles & Scribner's Sons, 1909, XVIII, v-iii.
- New York Times*, November 10, 1878, p.10, rpt. in William T. Stafford, ed. *James's Daisy Miller*.
- Stafford, William T. *James's Daisy Miller*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963.