

# Daisy's ghost: a feminist reading of "daisy miller"



## Daisy's Ghost: A Feminist Reading of Daisy Miller

The novel *Daisy Miller* is set in the late 18th century, within high class European society. In that time period, feminism was misunderstood and even unrecognized by both genders and varying classes. Often, a female feminist, such as a writer, would be accused of plagiarism for her work, critics assuming no woman could create such original ideas. In other cases female authors would use pen names to disguise their identity and so avoid such dilemmas. Women were deemed void of independent ideals and originality in general. They were assumed to be subservient to the both their husbands and the traditions and values of that time. This is how the women in *Daisy Miller* are portrayed, and who directly contrast Daisy herself. Shortly after *Daisy Miller* was written, several literary magazines offered their criticisms on Daisy. In 1879, one in particular responded in a way typical and expected of that time period, and reflected exactly the characters in *Daisy Miller* who participate in the chastisement of her actions. *Lipponcott's Magazine* wrote, "Miss Daisy Miller, in almost any circle of society in any city here, would be looked upon with a pity akin to contempt" (What's in a Name? James' "Daisy Miller, Monteiro 252). Throughout the plot, Daisy is constantly reprimanded for her rebellious actions by those who neither understand nor recognize her progressiveness. In the the novel *Daisy Miller*, Daisy's death acts as an example of societies inability to recognize and understand feminism, and is made evident through character development, symbolism, and the conflict throughout.

*Daisy Miller* is told almost exclusively through the perspective of Winterbourne, a young American gentleman who has lived most of his life in

the city of Geneva. Calculating and observant, Winterbourne spends the majority of the novel analyzing Daisy and her movements. Although the focus of the novel is on Daisy, Winterbourne is the consciousness through which we perceive Daisy, and therefore the conflict. It is significant that the character through which we perceive Daisy is one struggling to understand her. Winterbourne often notes Daisy's beauty, her graceful movements, and dress-" He had great relish for feminine beauty; he was addicted to observing and analyzing it; and as regards to this young lady's face he made several observations"- yet he fails to comprehend her motives behind the socially erratic behavior consistently displayed (James 16). He seeks a formula, a way to categorize Daisy into an understandable item. She does not however, fit in, and so Winterbourne is left assuming it is her own wrongdoing and inherent fault of Daisy that has made her thus so. " Winterbourne has allowed himself only two possible views of Daisy, good or bad, which does not suggest that he has learned to make discriminations in the " immense sensibility" of human experience" (Daisy Miller and the Metaphysician, Wilson and Westbrook 270). When Daisy dies, Winterbourne is sad, yet almost relieved to be free of the confusion she has proffered him." She was a young lady whom a gentleman need no longer be at pains to respect.... He felt angry with himself that he had bothered so much about the right way of regarding Miss Daisy Miller" ( James 141). With the occurrence of Daisy's death Winterbourne can go back to his " studying" and normal way of life, the normalcy being a life coinciding with society and its traditions and values, without the stress and distraction of Daisy's behavior. He realizes however, and too late, that he misjudged Daisy- yet he does not change. "...He knows he has wronged Daisy because he has stayed too long

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abroad, has become too rigid in his values. Yet his knowledge does not change him. The authorial voice concludes the tale by mocking Winterbourne's return" (Daisy Miller: A Study of Changing Intentions, Ohmann 6). As Winterbourne represents the assimilation to European customs, his tardy revelation represents society's failure and disregard of Daisy's independent, progressive actions.

The other man in Daisy's life is captured in the charming and practiced Italian, Giovanelli. Somewhat of a vague persona, he comes from unknown origins and is properly characterized as acting as such: "Giovanelli chattered and jested and made himself wonderfully agreeable. It was true, that, if he was an imitation, the imitation was brilliant" (James 96). Playing the role of Daisy's casual love interest, Giovanelli represents the flirtatious native, and acts as a symbol of Daisy's rebellion. "Daisy was willing to rely on her own judgment and so befriended Giovanelli in defiance of society..." (Daisy Miller, Western Hero, Coffin 273). It's also significant to note the similarities between Daisy and Giovanelli. Both natural flirts, they're not afraid to do as they wish, and yet hold themselves in high regard. Which is what perhaps draws them together. "It is only the fortune hunter Giovanelli who, observing society with some objectivity, is able to sense that Daisy is 'the most innocent' of creatures who simply does what she likes" (Coffin 273).

Giovanelli certainly seems more aware of the implications of his behavior, for his actions are practiced and made "agreeable." "He must have known, without needing any information from Mrs. Walker, that Daisy's reputation would be injured if she strolled with him on the Pincio" (Wilson and Westbrook 273). However, Giovanelli is simply distrusted, while Daisy is

consistently chastened and persuaded to change her behavior. As a female, her actions are not marginally humored by her society. Giovanelli on the other hand, is at least understood. "It is not the familiar foreign body, however, that threatens American integrity; Giovanelli, as Mrs. Walker proves, is easily studied" (Reassembling Daisy Miller, Wardley 246). He has a place in society, albeit not a wholly respectable one. He simply continues on his life, like Winterbourne, while Daisy dies "...the victim of rigid social conventions" (The Revision of Daisy Miller, Dunbar 311). An example to societies incapability to understand and accept her actions.

Another, smaller man in Daisy's life is her younger brother, Randolph. Winterbourne's first impression of this young American is one capturing the boisterousness and boldness of the stereotypical American male. "'Will you give me a lump of sugar?' he asked in a sharp, hard little voice- a voice immature and yet, somehow, not young" (James 8). Some of Winterbourne's first comments involve Randolph's schooling, for his behavior and knowledge appears to Winterbourne erratic. Randolph acts as an opening for Daisy, and his persona is mirrored in that of Daisy's. "Both are in a primal state of development. Both follow their inclinations. For his role as the one who introduces Daisy to Winterbourne, Randolph is specifically appropriate" (Wilson and Westbrook 276). Another significance of Winterbourne meeting Daisy's younger brother first is that Winterbourne is now expecting Daisy to be "an American girl" (James 9). His view is already biased; before he meets Daisy Winterbourne has already formed an opinion.

In addition to symbolic men in Daisy Miller, the women, excluding Daisy herself, act as supporting characters in the novel's conflict and development.

Beginning with Daisy's mother, Mrs. Miller, a vague, somewhat weak and ineffectual mother, her presence isn't often physically noted. This lack of motherly voice contributes to the notion of Daisy's death being one of inevitability. With no strong motherly figure, Daisy's symbolism of innocence is exemplified. " Mrs. Miller's happy indifference to her daughter's position provides a clue to Daisy's classic nonchalance" (Archetypes of American Innocence: Lydia Blood and Daisy Miller. Kar 33). Even her mother fails to understand her, from lack of trying or from lack of general ability, the conclusion remains the same- Daisy's death occurs while her mother is represented by a somewhat silly, sidelined, and idle figure. Mrs. Walker, a strict European woman, chastises Mrs. Miller, saying " Did you ever see anything so imbecile as her mother?" (James 98). Daisy's mother does not reprimand her daughter, because she sees no fault in her actions, she is not aware of the social blasphemy Daisy is committing and the ostracism she is receiving.

In contrast, Daisy is hounded for her actions by the other two women present in the novel, Mrs. Costello and Mrs. Walker. Mrs. Costello is Winterbourne's aunt and represents the ideal and respectable woman of late 1800's Europe. She is refined, proper, and properly opposite all that Daisy embodies. " Her principles of value have long been set-she need only apply them" (Ohmann 5). Mrs. Costello is constantly engaging in the severe criticism of Daisy's behavior, she is baffled that anyone could behave so vulgarly. She states, " I am an old woman, but I am not too old- thank Heaven- to be shocked!" (James 40). Society accepts and even reveres Mrs. Costello, while ostracizing Daisy. Mrs. Costello is right, and so as her opposite, Daisy is wrong. It's made

inevitable that Daisy dies, because Mrs. Costello, representing society, lives on. " In the social evaluation with which we are concerned here, the urge towards death appears motivated by the exigencies of the victim's relation to society: society requires the sacrifice of its opponents" (Daisy Miller, Tradition, and the European Heroine, Deakin 46). Daisy's behavior is condemned without a trial, and is met with death.

The other woman in Daisy's life is Mrs. Walker, who differs from Mrs. Costello in the way that she appears moderately concerned for Daisy's well being. Although she is strict in her ways and does chastise her, it's not with the same vehement energy as Mrs. Costello. It is notable also that Mrs. Walker is a widow, an independent woman living away from her home country in Europe. She is strong and voices her opinion, yet her opinion is parallel to the rigidity of European customs. This does not bode well for Daisy, as she is alone in her rebellious actions. Mrs. Walker is well-aware of the social customs, as an assimilated American, and tries time and again to dissuade Daisy of these actions. Some comments include: " I don't think it's safe, my dear," " It is really too dreadful...that girl must not do this sort of thing. She must not walk here with you two men. Fifty people have noticed her" (James 86, 98). She too is convinced Daisy's actions are horribly vulgar, and although she attempts to right Daisy's way with scoldings, she eventually condemns Daisy to her fate.

Daisy Miller is fraught with symbolism, from the characters listed previously to the setting and various landmarks. Foremost, there is the symbolism of Daisy, in both her name and demeanor. Daisy is a common flower that grows wildly, often in the bright colors yellow or white and associated with

cheerfulness and joy. The surname Miller is also extremely common. " And in the choice of the name, Daisy, he may have suggested her simplicity and her spontaneous beauty" (Ohmann 9). And so Daisy, by name alone, is symbolic of commonality, cheerfulness, and a sort of wildness. These characteristics are reflective of her naive and rebellious personality, and supports her as a symbol of innocence and as a character who demonstrates an unwillingness to assimilate to the high values and expectations of European society. "' I don't think I want to know what you mean. ... I don't think I should like it'" (James 102).

Furthermore, " Daisy comprehends only dimly the ideal of freedom which she symbolizes" (Deakon 56). Because of her neglect to conform," society must punish her; it must, one could even say if he sees her death as something more than accident, claim her as a victim" (Deakon 56). In contrast, the name Winterbourne, with the root winter, connotes coldness and frigidness. This juxtaposition of simply the names of Daisy and Winterbourne symbolize the stark differences present in their characters. Namely the differences in how they conduct themselves, with Winterbourne willfully assimilating to European customs and Daisy blatantly disregarding them. Winterbourne embodies society, and its inability to recognize and understand feminism, which is Daisy Miller. " Daisy baffles Winterbourne... with her lack of complexity and the openness of her motives. He, like other sophisticates, cannot read simplicity. This same inability, of course, also causes Roman society to reject Daisy" (Coffin 273). Daisy is certainly not the perfect feminist, but whether she is fully aware of her actions or is blatantly



unaware and innocent, is irrelevant to the ultimate effect of her being different, and societies inability to accept or even understand her.

Another symbols of Daisy's death as a loose martyr for feminism is the Colosseum. In ancient Rome this monumental piece of architecture was often used to entertain the masses through gladiator fights, where thousands of individuals, against their will, were murdered for the sake of entertainment. It embodies a place of sacrificed innocence. Daisy's reasoning to attend the Colosseum is that of simplicity and innocence, stating, " I was bound to see the Colosseum by moonlight- I wouldn't have wanted to go home without that..."(James 144). On these deceptive grounds is where Daisy catches malaria, or as it's referred to in the novel, " roman fever". " But the Colosseum is dangerous too, because here lurks malaria, a malignancy mysterious and inseparable from the beauty and charm of its environment" (Deakon 54). Daisy's end is both symbolized and foreshadowed in her visit to this monument of sacrifice and death.

The setting of Daisy Miller also contributes to Daisy's death being that of an example. Overall, the setting is in Europe, already foreshadowing the ostracism of Daisy. For she and her family are not in their home environment, it is foreign to them, just as their actions, specifically Daisy's, are foreign to those Americans assimilated to the European customs." To place Daisy Miller in this European tradition is to shift the interpretation of Daisy's character from the conventional emphasis on her innocence to her equally significant rebellious independence. Her social ostracism and death become the pattern one would expect from the champion of and martyr to freedom" (Deakon 45). More specifically, there is Rome, where Daisy finds <https://assignbuster.com/daisys-ghost-a-feminist-reading-of-daisy-miller/>

herself in the later half of the novel. Rome, as the birthplace of a great and glorious civilization, was also one of great loss and decay. This contrast is mirrored in Daisy's behavior, compared to that of high society European traditions. Furthermore, Daisy is the epitome of youth and innocence, while Rome is a sophisticated and refined place. Daisy stands out like a sore thumb, and is duly condemned from the moment she stepped into the place.

Daisy Miller is a novel that was monumental at its time, and still has an impact on readers today. Feminism is now alive and well, yet evidence of its first beginnings can be found in the life and death of Daisy Miller. Her death symbolizes societies unwillingness to see and to accept feminism. Her example is rightfully summarized as, " James thus ended Daisy Miller, but her ghost lived on." The implications of her actions, all her blatant rebellions, innocent disregard for social customs, and " vulgar" flirtations, are met with contempt and disapproval, and yet she is recognized now, finally having her place in society, as a young feminist.

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