

The verdict on winterbourne in daisy miller



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Many have written about the guilt or innocence of Henry James' heroine, Daisy Miller. In her story, James tells of a young American girl in Europe who ignores Old World conventions and goes about, unchaperoned, with two gentlemen: one, an American ex-patriot whom she loves and the other, a fortune-hunting foreigner whom she uses to get back at the man she loves. Some posit that Daisy Miller is a reckless flirt, totally aware, but heedless, of what her actions mean to her reputation. Others find her heedlessness innocent and forthright. But Daisy does not act in a vacuum. As critic Samuels notes, Daisy "is less culpable than those who persecute her. Her story is really about them" (174). The character who straddles the gulf between persecution and understanding of the essence of Daisy is the ex-patriot, Frederick Winterbourne. He has an awareness, that the other characters do not, of his own influence over Daisy, as well as of her resolve to follow her heart. Winterbourne's words and actions lead Daisy, first to a series of assumptions about social behavior in Europe, then to some about the state of his feelings, and then to a reckless defiance of convention when those assumptions prove false. In their first meeting, Winterbourne sets up the chain of events that will lead Daisy to misbehave and later to rebel. He does this by giving her a skewed view of the manners of European society concerning social introductions. At first he only looks, though he dwells on her looks so long it is possible he is staring-rudely. He speaks to her when only little Randolph has very roughly introduced them. It is Winterbourne who discards convention first, then presses his advantage when she does not reproach him: "he decided he must advance farther, rather than retreat" (James 602). He continues to speak to her, and when he observes that she appears unembarrassed and seems to take little interest in him, he assumes,

because of her spirit, that she might be a “coquette” (James 602). Given the fact that he improperly initiated a conversation with an unchaperoned, unmarried woman, it is hypocritical of him to judge Daisy based on her reception of his address. But he does. The result of his indiscreet behavior is Daisy’s natural assumption that things are done this way in Europe, that compatriots can speak openly to one another as they do in her part of America—an assumption that couldn’t be further from the truth. In a later conversation with his aunt, Winterbourne allows the blame to shift to Daisy. He compares her behavior to that of his aunt’s daughters and what is considered proper for them. Since he has never met Daisy in American society and since she is a newcomer to European society, this is most unfair. Fresh from America, Daisy is more handicapped in her social skills than they. Winterbourne himself is rusty about the customs of a culture of which he used to be a part; Daisy, on the other hand, has never been to Europe and can’t be expected to know anything, first-hand, of the customs. What she does know about Europe has come to her through her friends. Winterbourne fails to see that his cues have led Daisy to think European society more lax in the conventions than she is used to. These cues bring Daisy to speak to him (after obvious hesitation), to form plans with him, and to behave toward him, and toward Giovanelli, in the way that she does. Once she begins this mistaken course of behavior, the acquaintance continues along disastrous lines. Through the further words and actions of Winterbourne, Daisy is led to believe he cares for her. This growing attraction might be another explanation for her relaxing of conventional manners in his company. He is obviously attracted to her when they are introduced, and we later learn that the attraction is mutual. It could be the rashness of young love, of Daisy’s

reliance on her heart, that makes her forgive Winterbourne's early forwardness, and perhaps makes her adopt his relaxed attitude toward social customs. For the entire stay at Vevay, Winterbourne gives Daisy reason to believe he is genuinely interested in her, concerned for her welfare. When they go off together to the Castle of Chillon, he tells her how happy he is. She in turn asks him "about himself—his family, his previous history, his tastes, his habits, his intentions (emphasis added)—and for supplying information upon corresponding points in her own personality" (James 614). When she learns that Winterbourne is to return to Geneva the next day, she calls him "horrid" and appears very upset. This is the behavior of a young woman whose feelings are engaged, not one who believes she is the victim of a light flirtation. Winterbourne's own feelings are evident in the fact that he does not change his plans to return to his mistress in Geneva. His departure drives Daisy to take up with the foreigner, Giovanelli. When Winterbourne catches up to Daisy again in Rome, he tries to pick up where they had left off months before. She does not make it easy for him, and intimates that she is about to go to meet another man. His pique is, under the circumstances, extraordinary. Here again Winterbourne behaves as though he cares about Daisy. He accepts her request to accompany her to the Pincio to see the gentleman friend, and, when he sees the foreigner, he refuses to leave her alone with him. That he uses the pretext of protecting her does not lessen the significance of his insistence. Daisy is pleased; we can assume this is because she has seen proof that Winterbourne still cares for her, despite all the evidence to the contrary. But all these events, especially Winterbourne's warm behavior after the long absence, have only lulled Daisy into a false sense of security. The assumptions to which her

acquaintance with the young man have led her are shattered soon after his arrival in Rome. First, his “imperious” disapproval of her behavior sets her off, probably in part because of his long absence. She declares she will stay with Giovanelli, though one senses that she might be merely baiting Winterbourne. Then their American “friend,” Mrs. Walker, arrives in her carriage to “rescue” Daisy from the company of the two gentlemen. When Winterbourne sides with Mrs. Walker and suggests Daisy get into the carriage, Daisy questions his reasoning with a look. After all, he is suggesting that Daisy must get away from his own company to save her reputation. If he is a gentleman, and in love with her, this should seem absurd; he should never have endangered her reputation in the first place. She laughs defiantly and walks away with Giovanelli, which causes Mrs. Walker to turn on her, and Winterbourne to leave her. However, perhaps Winterbourne’s rejection has less to do with Daisy’s attitude toward her reputation than with her wounding wish to stay with the other man (Hoffman 22). The truth is, Winterbourne is annoyed with Daisy because her flirtation with Giovanelli keeps her from appreciating the lengths he has gone to, in his mind, at least, to see her sooner. He has; after all, cut short his plans (for Bologna and France) just to travel with “haste” to her side (Samuels 175). So once Mrs. Walker arrives, the “sentimental impatience” he feels to be with Daisy is “weaker than Winterbourne’s anxiety for his own reputation” (Samuels 175). Suddenly, “...the freedom of social behavior and the flirtatious innocence he finds so charming at Vevay, he condemns as dangerously coquettish in Rome” (Hoffman 20). This is what makes Daisy angry enough to refuse Mrs. Walker’s carriage—this, and jealousy about Mrs. Walker’s influence over Winterbourne. Mrs. Walker throws a party three days later, to which

Winterbourne and the Millers are invited. The party begins a string of revelations for Daisy, through which more fuel is added to her rebellious fire. Winterbourne's stiffness toward her begins to convince Daisy that he doesn't care for her, at least not enough to treat her with interest and respect. His attitude drives her to defend Giovanelli. When she does, Winterbourne assumes aloud that she is in love with the foreigner. Daisy is offended and upset at his words, which prove to her that Winterbourne has misunderstood her actions and is casting them in a less innocent light. In shock and anger she goes into another room with Giovanelli, which further compromises her reputation. When she leaves, Mrs. Walker slights her, and Daisy learns further how far Winterbourne has misled her. In doubt of Winterbourne's feelings for her and despair over the scandal his cues have led her to dismiss, Daisy clings more than ever to Giovanelli. Winterbourne and Daisy meet on Palatine Hill, where she is walking alone with Giovanelli. He lectures her again about her reputation. Encouraged by this, she all but admits that she only cares for his, Winterbourne's, opinion, and asks him to help her. He declines such responsibility. Here again, Winterbourne's lectures only lead Daisy to further defiance. She claims to be engaged: "' Since you have mentioned it," she said, " I am engaged"' (James 631). Daisy is saying that she will claim to be engaged because Winterbourne is blind enough to believe it. She then tells him that she is only engaged if he believes her to be; she is dependent on his views for her actions and reality. The final confrontation between the ill-fated lovers shows clearly how dependent Daisy is on Winterbourne's reactions as proof of his love and belief in her innocence. One moonlit night, while passing the Colosseum, Winterbourne sees two figures and recognizes their voices as those of Daisy and Giovanelli.

He starts to walk on, prepared to wash his hands of her. She calls out to him, surprised that he would see her and “cut” her (James 633). Daisy asks him if he had really believed her engaged when they had spoken previously. In anger and disgust, Winterbourne declares that it doesn’t matter whether she is engaged or not. Daisy’s reaction is a revelation. Winterbourne has declared that neither her reputation nor the placement of her affections means anything to him. In “...a strange little tone,” she says she doesn’t care if she has Roman fever or not (James 634). She gives herself up, with those words, to the world’s belief in her guilt and to the Roman fever, which critic Kraft calls “evil”: “The ‘Roman fever’ she catches is worldly evil, whether she knows it or not...She is not destroyed by this ‘evil’ alone, but also by the indifference of Winterbourne...” (Kraft 91). If Winterbourne no longer believes in her or cares for her, she no longer cares for herself (Samuels 176). Daisy dies within a few weeks. Her death is the ultimate proof of the fact that her actions depended on Winterbourne’s faith in her, since, had she cared for herself, she wouldn’t have endangered her health, fallen ill and died. As critic Auchincloss asserts, “What Daisy dies of is not the disapproval of society, about which she cares not a hoot, but the disapproval of the priggish Winterbourne, whom she loves” (Auchincloss 62). Whether Winterbourne has earned the love of such a creature as Daisy is not certain. The textual evidence casts doubt on the depth of his feeling for her. Winterbourne, the following summer, wonders to his aunt whether “he had done her an injustice: (James 635). Yet, after deciding he has made a mistake with Daisy, he returns straightaway to his mistress in Geneva. He does not back up his assertion that he has “lived too long in foreign parts” by returning to America (James 635). He does not show his faith in Daisy

even after all that has transpired. However, it is too late for him to hurt her anymore. Works Cited Auchincloss, Louis. Reading Henry James. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1975. Hoffman, Charles G. The Short Novels of Henry James. New York: Bookman Assoc., 1957. James, Henry. "Daisy Miller," Anthology of American Literature: Realism to the Present. 3rd. ed. Vol. II. Ed. George L. McMichael. New York: MacMillan, 1985. Kraft, James. The Early Tales of Henry James. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1969. Samuels, Charles Thomas. The Ambiguity of Henry James. Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1971.