

Portrayed in daisy
miller and the house
of mirth essay sample



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In the natural world posturing is an essential ingredient in a variety of mating rituals. Humans, although self-consciously assuming themselves a species above and beyond the bluster and affectation needed by lesser creatures to attract a mate, nevertheless can and do resort to any manner of subterfuge and deception as a means to an immediate or lifelong goal. Whether or not this sort of behavior is morally acceptable is not necessarily the issue. Such manners and conduct, on one level, seem almost expected and essentially benign: all of the characters within the little drama accept the pretext, and may be expected to respond with a ruse of their own. The line will be crossed, so to speak, when desperate characters become so fixated on their goal they have little regard, or even plan for the damage resulting from their malicious deception—damage to self as well as to others. Henry James' *Daisy Miller* and *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton provide wonderful glimpses of the role and necessity for deception in that most complex of human endeavors: sexual attraction. Their setting was high society of the late Victorian Era, and the characters were both "insiders" and "outsiders" to high society, but their metaphors and characterizations still exist.

Both works begin with the presence and narration of an un-described male soon preoccupied by the appearance of a very attractive woman. For Lawrence Selden in *The House of Mirth* the woman is known, for Frederick Winterbourne in *Daisy Miller*, it is a case of first impression. Both soon make very interesting observations and conjecture about the women. After a brief conversation, wherein the young woman unabashedly describes her position in New York Society, Winterbourne is left to speculate:

Were they all like that, the pretty girls who had a good deal of gentlemen's society? Or was she also a designing, an audacious, an unscrupulous young person?... Winterbourne had lost his instinct in this matter, and his reason could not help him. Miss Daisy Miller looked extremely innocent. Some people had told him that, after all, American girls were exceedingly innocent; and others had told him that, after all, they were not. He was inclined to think Miss Daisy Miller was a flirt—a pretty American flirt. (James, 6-7)

Selden has the advantage of knowing the young woman of interest. Seeing Lily Bart at Grand Central Station, he devises an experiment:

An impulse of curiosity made him turn out of his direct line to the door, and stroll past her. He knew that if she did not wish to be seen she would contrive to elude him; and it amused him to think of putting her skill to the test. (Wharton, 3)

Thus, within the opening pages, we have men of unknown character who immediately use the words “ unscrupulous” and “ contrive” to describe women. Both men are clearly attracted to the women: Selden “ had never seen her more radiant...a figure to arrest even the suburban traveler to his last train” (Wharton, 4). “ Winterbourne had not seen for a long time anything prettier than his fair countrywoman's various features—her complexion, her nose, her ears, her teeth. He had a great relish for feminine beauty...” (James, 4). Yet both men seem to automatically assume these beautiful women will somehow deceive them in some manner.

For Winterbourne, dealing with Daisy Miller is anything but easy. James uses dialog between Daisy, her mother, her courier, and Winterbourne to perfectly

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illustrate the manipulations. Daisy asks Winterbourne to take her out in a boat, late at night, and of course he agrees “ for he had never yet enjoyed the sensation of guiding through the summer starlight a skiff freighted with a fresh and beautiful young girl” (James, 15). Her proposition creates a great deal of debate and apprehension with her mother and courier. The courier acquiesces, leading to Daisy’s flippant reversal:

“ Oh, I hoped you would make a fuss!” said Daisy. “ I don’t care to go now.”

“ I myself shall make a fuss if you don’t go,” said Winterbourne.

“ That’s all I want—a little fuss!” And the young girl began to laugh again.

“ Mr. Randolph has gone to bed!” the courier announced frigidly.

“ Oh, Daisy; now we can go!” said Mrs. Miller.

Daisy turned away from Winterbourne, looking at him, smiling and fanning herself. “ Good night,” she said; “ I hope you are disappointed, or disgusted, or something!” (James, 17)

Lily Bart was unfortunate to see her father’s fortune evaporate, and after his death her mother considered Lily’s beauty to be “ the last asset in their fortunes”. To Lily and her mother, Lily’s beauty would be the ticket back to wealth and society by attracting the right man. More than pure beauty was necessary: “ Lily understood that beauty is only the raw material of conquest, and that to convert it into success, other arts are required” (Wharton, 34). For Lily, deception and subterfuge seemed natural. While staying with society friends, she attempts to transform herself into what she

believes a certain rich gentleman would find agreeable in a wife. She had planned to go to church with him and the guests, where “ the sight of her in a grey gown of devotional cut, with her famous lashes drooped above a prayer book, would put the finishing touch to Mr. Gryce’s subjugation...” (Wharton, 53). Instead, she stays, preoccupied with the visit of Selden.

Lily Bart and Daisy Miller are presented as young women (although Daisy is apparently considerably younger than twenty-nine year old Lily) who are in the enviable position of being pursued by numerous men. Interestingly, in both situations the authors present the women as being “ outsiders” to high society. Winterbourne’s aunt, Mrs. Costello, the visit to whom was the cause for meeting Daisy, adamantly refuses to be introduced to her. Daisy’s family is apparently vulgar “ new money” to Mrs. Costello, who has of course made inquiries regarding these upstarts. Of particular note to her is their familiarity with their “ courier”; proper people in her world do not socialize with the help. Lily had the advantage of being born into the social set, but with her father’s financial ruin she had to scramble to stay afloat in the social stream. She had no place of her own, and grudgingly resided with an aunt with tight purse strings when she was not temporarily a fixture at the home of her rich friends. Despite these differences, the inference is made that deception and manipulation is somehow more expected of women on the periphery of exclusive society. While the extent of their deceptions is vastly different, the impact upon the women becomes equally significant.

Daisy and her family left for Rome; she asked Winterbourne to visit. As his aunt will be there, he makes the trip and hastens to see her, only to be berated for leaving her earlier when they were in Switzerland, and not <https://assignbuster.com/portrayed-in-daisy-miller-and-the-house-of-mirth-essay-sample/>

coming to see her sooner. He finds she is creating a scandal with her association with local men, and the large amount of time spent with one gentleman in particular. Daisy is intent upon infuriating Winterbourne with her dalliance with her dashing Italian, and seems to relish instilling in Winterbourne as much jealousy as possible:

“ I am afraid your habits are those of a flirt,” said Winterbourne gravely.

“ Of course they are,” she cried, giving him her little smiling stare again. “ I’m a fearful, frightful flirt! Did you ever hear of a nice girl that was not? But I suppose you will tell me now that I am not a nice girl.”

“ You’re a very nice girl; but I wish you would flirt with me, and me only,” said Winterbourne.

“ Ah! Thank you—thank you very much; you are the last man I should think of flirting with. As I have had the pleasure of informing you, you are too stiff.”

“ You say that too often,” said Winterbourne.

Daisy gave a delighted laugh. “ If I could have the sweet hope of making you angry, I should say it again.”

Later he is lead to believe she is engaged to her “ intimate friend”, and when queried by Winterbourne, she plays games with him, first stating she is engaged, then stating she is not. However, her duplicity is obviously a concern to her. In their last meeting, Winterbourne finds them at the Colosseum late at night, a place he considers a “ nest of malaria” (James, 38) After castigating them for being in such an unhealthy place, they hurry

to leave. Daisy asks if Winterbourne believed she was engaged. Laughing, Winterbourne tells her that what he believed doesn't matter; when pressed, "I believe it makes very little difference whether you are engaged or not!" (James, 38-39). Dramatically, her answer never came as her suitor led her away. She is soon stricken with disease. Her mother tells Winterbourne "(s)he told me to tell you that she never was engaged to that handsome Italian" (James, 40).

If Daisy's "mystifying manners" could be dismissed as the playfulness of a coquettish young girl, the deceptions of Lily Bart were of a much higher, and more desperate dimension. There were several single men in her immediate circle, and she appraised each one as a potential husband. Despite his obvious affection for her, and her attraction towards him, she leads on, then abandons Lawrence Selden, certainly earning a good living as a lawyer, but not the millionaire she is seeking. Others in her sights include Percy Gryce, wealthy well beyond needs, but quiet, bookish, and certainly not physically attractive. Mr. Rosedale, considered by the society brokers to soon eclipse them all in wealth, is repugnant to her, despite his advances, perhaps because he is Jewish, perhaps because of his business-like proposition of marriage. Her rapacious need for money eventually causes her to manipulate the husband of a friend, a stockbroker, tugging on his heartstrings for financial advice. In a sense she meets her match: at first she believes the thousands of dollars she receives from him is a return on his investment of her money. Later, in a brutish confrontation, she learns the cash was nothing but a gift, and in return he expected a sexual relationship (Wharton, 148-150).

Ultimately, her dishonesty turns them all away. With Rosedale, it happens early on; upon meeting him unexpectedly after leaving Selden's apartment, she explains she was visiting her dressmaker, apparently unaware Rosedale owned the building and obviously knew his tenants. Her ruse was not lost on Gryce, who soon turned his attention away from her. Selden, while a true friend, considered her quite the actress; at one confrontation that left her in tears, " he said to himself, somewhat cruelly, that even her weeping was an art" (Wharton, 72).). Her subterfuge is natural: "(h)er personal fastidiousness had a moral equivalent, and when she made a tour of inspection in her own mind there were certain doors she did not open" (Wharton, 82).

What is truth and what is its significance? For Lily the answer is simple. " What is truth?" she asks. " Where a woman is concerned, it's the story that's easiest to believe" (226). Winterbourne reached the point when truth and what he believed " didn't matter" and probably for Selden the same is true. Both men were capable, and obviously willing, to look beyond the lies and machinations that can be a shield to the unwary. Both saw or anticipated something deeper of interest compelling them to look beyond the obvious. A lie or half-truth can certainly help define a person, but not until the reason for the deception is clear can an accurate judgment be made. To some extent, the authors seem to offer a Victorian form of " situation ethics": deception for innocent purposes (avoiding Selner at the train station or innocuous flirting with a virtually unknown man) is far different than a deliberate deception sure to cause unexpected and unwelcome results (Lily's " return on investment").

While both authors chose elite society for their setting, they also indicate class distinctions may make a difference. For James, it is Daisy's Italian suitor who tells Winterbourne " I should have got nothing. She would never have married me, I am sure" (40). The message clearly is he understood her subterfuge, and it did not dissuade him from having a good time with her. But he was a realist, and knew " his place" perhaps, knew the reality of life better than a rich young American girl. For Wharton, the answer is similar; Lily is comforted by a young working-class mother with a checkered past she had once met while helping out at a friend's mission for the downtrodden:

And then, when I got back home, George came round and asked me to marry him. At first I thought I couldn't, because we'd been brought up together, and I knew he knew about me. But after a while I began to see that that made it easier. I never could have told another man, and I'd never have married without telling; but if George cared for me enough to have me as I was, I didn't see why I shouldn't begin over again—and I did. (Wharton, 315)

This was not lost on Lily; she considered the woman's situation in comparison to her own, and it was not pleasant:

Her husband's faith in her had made her renewal possible—it is so easy for a woman to become what the man she loves believes her to be! Well—Selden had twice been ready to stake his faith on Lily Bart; but the third trial had been too severe for his endurance. (Wharton, 320)

It is often said that the only thing we leave behind is our reputation; that all we owe anyone is honesty. Perhaps the value of truth is inversely

proportional to wealth. Perhaps wealth jaundices its owner, and truth
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becomes just another commodity to be used at will, ignored if necessary, kept from the unworthy and only savored with friends. The question remains whether deception was necessary to either Daisy Miller or Lily Burt.

Certainly they felt the need for it, a method of gaining what they sought most, the attentions of a young man or the wealth of a fooled husband. In both cases the truth came out as a balm to the giver: we can imagine the weight lifted from Daisy Miller on her deathbed, regretting her misrepresentation of engagement to Winterbourne. For Lily Burt, she died knowing she finally resolved the greatest cause of her deceptions—indebtedness—even if it left her impoverished. Both authors have conveyed a timeless message, a message used frequently today; substituting the mild expletive, life is truly too short for deception.