

Daisy miller as the subject of a study, and the object of a narrative



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“ Daisy Miller: A Study” by Henry James, a story about an American girl in Europe named Daisy Miller, is told by an unknown narrator who only has access to the main character Winterbourne’s thoughts. The story is framed around Daisy Miller and her “ abnormal behavior” as the subject of Winterbourne’s study. The third person limited omniscient narration of the story and the way Daisy Miller is portrayed in Winterbourne’s thoughts makes her character not only the subject of Winterbourne’s study in the story, but also an object in the overall narrative. In the story, Winterbourne makes a hobby of studying women. Towards the beginning of the narrative, it is said that he went to Geneva to “ study” and implied that he was also there to be with an older foreign lady (1502). When Winterbourne first meets Daisy Miller, he picks up numerous details about her and immediately tries to analyze her: If she looked another way when he spoke to her, and seemed not particularly to hear him, this was simply her habit, her manner . . . He had a great relish for feminine beauty; he was addicted to observing and analyzing it; and as regards this young lady’s face he made several observations. It was not at all insipid, but it was not exactly expressive; and though it was eminently delicate, Winterbourne mentally accused it - very forgivingly - of a want of finish. (1504)In this paragraph, Winterbourne describes Daisy as an object. He analyzes every aspect of her face and tries to analyze her character by her looks and expressions, like one would do when studying something not human. He decides for himself that he doesn’t offend her, and that if she seems indifferent to him, it’s due to her mannerisms. This foreshadows the way Daisy is portrayed throughout the rest of the story. She is constantly analyzed and judged through the lens of Winterbourne’s judgments based on her looks, mannerisms, and behaviors.

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He also decides that her face has a “want of finish”: this kind of judgment objectifies her as something that doesn’t quite live up to his ideal of perfection in regards to feminine beauty. Throughout the narrative, she is judged through someone else’s perspective. Winterbourne constantly works to grasp an understanding of Daisy throughout the story as new events unfold. When Daisy begins to flirt with Giovanelli, Winterbourne makes his attempt again: And then he came back to the question whether this was in fact a nice girl. Would a nice girl – even allowing for her being a little American flirt – make a rendezvous with a presumably low-lived foreigner? ... It was impossible to regard her as a perfectly well conducted young lady; she was wanting in a certain indispensable delicacy. It would therefore simplify matters greatly to be able to treat her as the object of one of those sentiments, which are called by romancers “lawless passions”. (1524) Again, Winterbourne analyzes Daisy with the hopes of being able to classify her with a certain label. So far he has decided that she is a “little American flirt” and is grappling with whether or not she is a “nice girl.” He uses a set of social norms to reach the conclusion that she is not a “well-conducted young lady” because she is not delicate. He also directly states that it would simplify his analysis to just be able to view her as an “object of lawless passion.” Winterbourne wants to view her as an object for simplicity’s sake: she is still given no voice and we have no access to her thoughts, which deprives us of her rebuttal to Winterbourne’s claims that she is a flirty, indelicate “object of lawless passion”. Winterbourne is also puzzled by Daisy many times in the text: “Winterbourne was bewildered; he stood staring . . . Daisy turned to Winterbourne, beginning to smile again. He was still more perplexed, for this inconsequent smile made nothing clear...” (1530). To him,

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Daisy is unintelligible most of the time. The fact that he has such difficulty figuring her out presents her as unknown and inhuman to him, as if she was impossible to understand, and need be studied and classified like an animal in the wild. The only way he understands her is through his own perceptions of the indications of her behavior. Just as the readers have no access to her thoughts through the narrative structure, Winterbourne has no access to her thoughts in the story and instead makes up his own definitions and labels for Daisy. Finally, Winterbourne decides that he's figured Daisy out and that he shouldn't have bothered with her all along: Winterbourne stopped, with a sort of horror; and, it must be added, with a sort of relief. It was as if a sudden illumination had been flashed upon the ambiguity of Daisy's behavior and the riddle had become easy to read. 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." (1536) He decides to classify her as someone no longer worthy of respect or even of the effort of his study. In this way, it becomes official that she is worthless: there is no gain for him in studying her. She isn't even worthy of being the sub-human object of a study. Daisy Miller is the subject of Henry James' text even though Winterbourne is the main character. The narration, in which Winterbourne's thoughts are the only ones we have access to, help to keep Daisy Miller objectified: even though she is the object of study in the text, she has no voice other than her ambiguously flirtatious behaviors throughout the story with which to defend herself against the labels and definitions of her that Winterbourne keeps insisting upon "figuring out." In this way, she remains an object of the story. Works

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