

ANALYSIS BY CHAPTER

Daisy Miller (1878)



Henry James

(1843-1916)

INTRODUCTION

Daisy Miller brought him fame—"the most prosperous child of my invention"--due to the scandal caused by his appearing to satirize the American girl. An editor and historian at Lippincott's from 1870 to 1886 rejected the story as an "outrage" on American girlhood. It was first published in England, then pirated. William Dean Howells, the champion of Realism, defended James against the criticism that he had slandered American womanhood: "so far as the average American girl was studied at all in *Daisy Miller*, her indestructible innocence, her invulnerable new-worldliness, had never been so delicately appreciated."

This novella displays characteristics typical of James: (1) the "international theme" contrasting American and European cultures; as usual by (2) sending an innocent American abroad; (3) wealthy or affluent characters who have moral freedom, unlike characters in the Naturalist novels of the period; and (4) "the Method": the restricted point of view that dramatizes either increasing awareness and enlarging consciousness or failure of perception by a limited "central intelligence." *Daisy Miller* is a good introduction to James because it is more economical, vivid and simple in style than many of his fictions. Economy makes the Impressionism more evident, concentrates the drama and increases the intensity and emotional impact of the ending.

NAMES

The story was suggested to James by a friend who told him about the misadventures of an independent American girl, "a child of nature and of freedom," who innocently violated the rigid social decorum prevailing in Rome. James takes a balanced view. Daisy is the name of a common flower--simple, uncultivated, openfaced, pretty, unchanging, spontaneous, popping up anywhere, freely available and associated with sunshine. Miller also is a common name and the name of a common moth attracted to bright lights, sometimes with fatal consequences, but a miller also refers to someone who turns grain into flour for bread, a common sustenance. In contrast, Winterbourne is a cold name evoking dormancy, decay and death. He is an American who has lived too long as an expatriate, cut off from his roots and too out of touch with Americans by now to understand Daisy, who epitomizes common American traits. He is Winter to her Spring. He has lived much in Geneva and "had an old attachment for the little metropolis of Calvinism," a reference that identifies him with harsh judgment and determinism.

I

The first half of the narrative is set in Vevey, Switzerland, an elevated garden spot in a neutral country, a pastoral tolerant place where Daisy thrives among other tourists. The second half is set in the eternal city of Rome, where society is puritanical and Daisy dies. Winterbourne meets Daisy's little brother Randolph in a hotel garden—"an urchin of nine or ten"--a little chauvinist who promptly identifies himself as "an American boy" and boasts that "American girls are the best"--except for his sister. "My father ain't in Europe; my father's in a better place than Europe." Winterbourne infers that Mr. Miller must have been "removed to the sphere of celestial rewards," whereas he is only in Schenectady, to the American boy a place superior to all of Europe. "My father's rich, you bet"—wealth is the equivalent of Heaven to new rich Americans. Little Randolph shares the values of Tom Sawyer. In *Daisy Miller* James contrasts his own cosmopolitan vision to the provinciality of Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* (1869).

Daisy enters the garden and the heart of Winterbourne carrying a large parasol, her innocence imaged in a white muslin dress with "a hundred frills and flounces." Winterbourne is attracted, but in Geneva, "a young man was not at liberty to speak to a young unmarried lady except under certain rarely-occurring conditions." However, this is Vevey, a less conventional place, and when he speaks to her, the American girl was "evidently neither offended nor fluttered." From here on, the story consists mainly of Winterbourne's changing perceptions of Daisy. Her eyes "were singularly honest and fresh. They were wonderfully pretty eyes." She has a "want of finish" and a "bright, sweet, superficial little" face. Her own limitations are suggested when she tells him she is from New York State—"if you know where that is"--and that "Europe was perfectly sweet.... The only thing I don't like," she proceeded, "is the society. There isn't any society; or, if there is, I don't know where it keeps itself. Do you? I suppose there is some society somewhere, but I haven't seen anything of it. I'm very fond of society, and I have always had a great deal of it." She is charming, but she chatters and her smile is "slightly monotonous."

She looks innocent and Winterbourne has been told that "American girls were exceedingly innocent." However, he is inclined to think "she was only a pretty American flirt. Winterbourne was almost grateful for having found the formula that applied to Miss Daisy Miller." Of course, no one can be reduced to a formula. His tendency to stereotype continues, though his formula keeps changing with his perceptions. Daisy declares her desire to go and see the romantic Castle of Chillon across Lake Geneva from Vevey, made famous by the Romantic poet Lord Byron. She is virtually asking him for a date. Winterbourne is delighted and agrees to accompany her.

II

Winterbourne consults with his aunt, Mrs. Costello, who represents the society Daisy has decided must not exist in Europe—"she was very exclusive" and informs him that the Millers are "very common.... They are the sort of Americans that one does one's duty by not....accepting.... They treat the courier like a familiar friend... He sits with them in the garden"... Winterbourne accepts the prejudices of his aunt and concludes that Daisy is "rather wild." Further subverting his reliability as narrator, when he describes his pleasant encounter with Daisy, his aunt accuses *him* of being too innocent.

When he meets her again in the garden, Daisy says of his aunt, "I like a lady to be exclusive; I'm dying to be exclusive myself." When she realizes that Mrs. Costello does not want to meet her, she is hurt, in a moment that prefigures the rest of her story. Winterbourne sympathizes with her enough to admit that his aunt is "a proud, rude woman, and to declare that they needn't mind her." But of course they do. When introduced to Mrs. Miller, Winterbourne is surprised to find that "with her commonness, she had a singularly delicate grace." Defying convention, he promises Daisy he will row her over to the castle in the starlight. When he offers her his arm, she says innocently, "I like a gentleman to be formal!" In another irony, Mrs. Miller asks the courier to tell her she can't go, then Daisy loses interest when the courier does not make a fuss.

Later they go over by steamer instead. Winterbourne worries that she might "talk loud, laugh overmuch, and even, perhaps, desire to move about the boat a good deal." She chatters and people look at her a lot, but "it was the most charming garrulity he had ever heard. He had assented to the idea that she was 'common'; but was she so, after all, or was he simply getting used to her commonness?" When she

says, "You're a queer mixture!" he feels the same about her. His allegiances are shifting. Yet he tells her that he must return to Geneva. "And for the next ten minutes she did nothing but call him horrid. Poor Winterbourne was fairly bewildered." He wonders how Daisy knew "there was a charmer in Geneva?" Out of touch with nature, he does not realize how readily a woman can tell such things. The two charmers now in his life represent the cultural poles of Europe and America. Of course, he lies politely like a European. Then he rephrases his formula to define Daisy: "She seemed to him, in all this, an extraordinary mixture of innocence and crudity." She makes him promise to come down to Rome to see her. "After this Daisy stopped teasing." It is clear that she has a serious interest in him, but his prejudices and formulas warp his perceptions.

III

Winterbourne goes to Rome in the Winter. His aunt has written him saying Daisy is "very intimate with some third-rate Italians.... The girl goes about alone with her foreigners." When she calls the Millers "very dreadful people," Winterbourne defends them: "They are very ignorant--very innocent only." Visiting the Millers, he finds the vulgar but perfectly decent Mrs. Miller complaining about her bodily ailments. The vulgar Little Randolph boasts, "We've got a bigger place than this.... It's all gold on the walls." The boy hates Europe. Winterbourne replies, "You are like the infant Hannibal." His reference to the barbarian invader of Rome is also a reference by James to the home town of Mark Twain. Mrs. Miller mentions the ship they crossed in and, sounding ever more like Twain, the little boy says, "It's the best place I've seen.... Only it was turned the wrong way."

Daisy confuses Winterbourne by calling him mean because he returned to Geneva rather than staying with her in Vevey. He has been told that American women "were at once the most exacting in the world and the least endowed with a sense of indebtedness." Daisy invites herself to a party to be given by Mrs. Walker and announces to her mother that she intends to go out to the Pincio, a conspicuous viewpoint in a public garden overlooking the city, where people go to walk and be seen. Her mother warns her twice that she will get the fever. Of course the American girl goes anyway, inviting Winterbourne to accompany her.

Her fate is prefigured again when she says, "We are going to stay all winter, if we don't die of the fever." The Millers have looked at some "pictures and things. But we only had about a week of that, and now I'm enjoying myself." At the Pincio she sees her friend Giovanelli staring at women in the carriages and says, "did you ever see anything so cool?" Then Winterbourne sees her as a "cool one," whereas in fact, both Giovanelli and Daisy are warm. *Winter*-bourne is the cool one. He cautions her about consorting with such a man and she replies, "I have never allowed a gentleman to dictate to me, or to interfere with anything I do." Winterbourne sees his handsome rival as a "spurious gentleman" now approaching Daisy with "obsequious rapidity." He insulates himself with another formula: "Would a nice girl--even allowing for her being a little American flirt--make a rendezvous with a presumably low-lived foreigner?" Now he sees her as "an inscrutable combination of audacity and innocence."

The widow Mrs. Walker, his proper lady friend from Geneva, arrives in a carriage. Her name identifies her with walking. Perhaps she would prefer to walk around like Daisy and be more independent, but she adapts to her environment, as in the old adage: When in Rome, do as the Romans do. The carriage is a metaphor of social convention, which reduces independence and restricts movement but conveys you where you want to go much faster. Mrs. Walker warns Daisy and urges her to get into the carriage. Daisy says, "Talked about? What do you mean?" Mrs. Walker: "Come into my carriage and I will tell you." Giovanelli "was bowing to and fro, rubbing down his gloves and laughing agreeably." Daisy closes her mind rather than conform to custom: "I don't think I want to know what you mean.... I don't think I should like it." Winterbourne angers her by agreeing with Mrs. Walker and she walks off with the urbane Italian.

Winterbourne suspects that he and Mrs. Walker have lived "too long at Geneva," confessing that he likes Daisy "extremely." He gets out of the carriage as if to choose the girl over Mrs. Walker, but when he sees Daisy and Giovanelli looking intimate behind a parasol--"both of their heads were hidden from Winterbourne"--without knowing what is in their heads or their hearts, he judges by the appearance, just as Mrs. Walker says people will judge Daisy who do not know her at all. He chooses to go see his aunt, Mrs. Costello, in a pattern that continues to the end of the story.

Though from Geneva, Mrs. Walker is sincerely concerned about Daisy's welfare and is proven correct in the end of the story: "Mrs. Walker sat looking after her, and there were tears in Mrs. Walker's eyes." She summarizes Daisy's social crimes: "Flirting with any man she could pick up; sitting in corners with mysterious Italians; dancing all the evening with the same partners; receiving visits at eleven o'clock at night. Her mother goes away when visitors come."

IV

Daisy comes very late to Mrs. Walker's party--an insult--chattering with Giovanelli, saying to her hostess, "we had the greatest time at the hotel." She might as well have said the motel. Mrs. Walker responds, "I think everyone here knows you!"--as if in the carnal sense. Oblivious and rude, the American girl chatters on while Giovanelli plays the piano and sings. She wants to dance, but Winterbourne is no dancer. She twice calls him "too stiff" and criticizes her hostess for wanting her to get into the carriage, calling her cool, when in truth, as indicated by her tears on that occasion, Mrs. Walker was being warmhearted. "I'm afraid your habits are those of a flirt," says Winterbourne. "When you deal with natives you must go by the custom of the place. Flirting is a purely American custom, it doesn't exist here." When she replies that she is not flirting with Giovanelli, that he is an "intimate" friend, Winterbourne suggests that she is in love with the Italian--upsetting her. She blushes and accuses him of being disagreeable, which leaves him more perplexed than ever. His mental set has dissociated him from Nature so much he cannot see that she is in love with *him*, not Giovanelli, that she is trying to make him jealous. When she approaches Mrs. Walker to take her leave of the party, the hostess turns her back on her. Daisy is shocked and obviously hurt. Winterbourne is "greatly touched" and accuses Mrs. Walker of cruelty, seeming finally to come over to Daisy's side.

However, on his visits to Daisy at her hotel, he finds his rival always present and still judges her reductively, as an "odd mixture of audacity and puerility." And for guidance, he turns back again to his aunt, the bigoted Mrs. Costello, who says, "You may be sure she thinks of nothing. She goes on...as they did in the Golden Age." Daisy is an American Eve, who falls to her death. Winterbourne has made inquiries about Giovanelli and learned that, contrary to his own stiff prejudice and misperceptions, the Italian is "perfectly respectable." Now he feels sorry for Daisy, seeing her as "undefended, and natural." Also as "too light and childish, too uncultivated and unreasoning, too provincial, to have reflected upon her ostracism, or even to have perceived it. Then at other moments he believed that she carried about in her elegant and irresponsible little organism a defiant, passionate, perfectly observant consciousness of the impression she produced.... He was angry at finding himself reduced to chopping logic about this young lady; he was vexed at his want of instinctive certitude as to how far her eccentricities were generic, national, and how far they were personal." Dissociated from instinct, or Nature, he relies on chopped logic in his head instead of following his heart.

When he encounters Daisy and Giovanelli at the Palace of the Caesars, it is Spring. Winterbourne has thawed in his feelings toward the Italian, who "carried himself in no degree like a jealous wooer" and now seems to the reader the more admirable gentleman. Daisy, however, remains obtuse, believing that people "are only pretending to be shocked. They don't really care a straw what I do. Besides, I don't go round so much." Actually, the American colony in Rome cares very much what a visiting American does because it reflects upon them. Americans in James display their limitations or their capacity for spiritual growth by their responses to Europe. Daisy is one of those on whom everything is lost. Yet, in his relation to her, so is Winterbourne.

In her frustration with him, Daisy goes further than ever in her attempts to make him jealous, resorting to shock, declaring that she is engaged to Giovanelli. As soon as he says he believes it, she denies it. Their next encounter occurs appropriately in the dark, in the ruin of the Colosseum—"a nest of malaria." The moon is waning. The great cross in the center of the arena, a memorial to Christian martyrs, is covered with shadow. When he sees Daisy there in the dark with Giovanelli, he martyrs her in his heart: "She was a young lady whom a gentleman need no longer be at pains to respect." He hesitates to approach her "not from the fear that he was doing her an injustice," but from concern about how he will look. Then she notices him. "What a clever little reprobate she was, and how smartly she played at injured innocence!"

He reproaches Giovanelli: "that you, a native Roman, should countenance such a terrible indiscretion." The Italian replies, "When was the signorina ever prudent?" Daisy feels in no danger: "I never was sick, and I don't mean to be." When she tries still again to draw him out by asking whether he believes she is engaged, he laughs and says it makes no difference to him. Consequently, continuing the pattern, she leaves with Giovanelli, declaring in her disappointment that it makes no difference to her whether she has Roman fever or not. At this point, in his own way just as obtuse as she is, with less excuse, he reduces her to a "little American flirt."

But then, hearing she has fallen gravely ill, he goes to her hotel "for more news." Mrs. Miller tells him Daisy is not engaged and that she asked three times that he be informed of her condition, referring to their visit to the romantic Castle of Chillon. He now sees Mrs. Miller performing as "a most efficient and judicious nurse"--not "such a monstrous goose" after all. Sounding like Huck Finn, Little Randolph declares, "it's going round at night... That's what made her sick.... It's so plaguey dark. You can't see anything here at night, except when there's a moon! In America there's always a moon!" Even the ignorant little boy is more perceptive than his sister, as through the least likely source James evokes the moral darkness of Old Europe, the blindness of Winterbourne, and the innocent chauvinism, immaturity and romanticism characteristic of Americans.

Daisy is buried in the Protestant cemetery in Rome. At her grave, the warmhearted Giovanelli is very pale, with no flower in his button-hole. He tells Winterbourne that, "If she had lived, I should have got nothing. She would never have married me, I am sure." He was proud to be seen with her, as symbolized by the flower he always wore in his button-hole. Winterbourne stares at her grave among the April daisies, still unaware of how unjust he was to her. His conscience troubles him some, but it takes him a year before he realizes, "She would have appreciated one's esteem." Cold fish. As if esteem is all he could have given her. Only when speaking later to his aunt Mrs. Costello does he conclude that he has lived too long abroad. Nevertheless, in the end, choosing Europe over America, he returns to Geneva, the city associated with Calvinism, harsh judgment and determinism. There, ironically, he is said to be studying hard, and to be "much interested in a very clever foreign lady."

Daisy is buried in an angle of the ancient wall of imperial Rome, beneath tall old cypresses. Two famous Romantic poets are buried close by, Shelley under the tallest cypresses and Keats near another angle in the wall. There is a peep hole in the wall focused on the grave of young Keats, so when the cemetery is closed, tourists can look through and read the inscription on his tombstone: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water," which applies to the longterm impression of Daisy upon Winterbourne. Keats is believed to have been so hurt by unjust criticism, he fell ill and died at about the same age as Daisy. Keats is immortal, whereas poor Daisy will be forgotten.

Winterbourne is comparable to John Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle" (1903), a conventional man who likewise fails to appreciate and is unjust to his lady friend--May--until it is too late. Then he throws himself upon her grave in horror when the beast of realization pounces on him from the unexplored jungle of his unconscious. In the end, Marcher has perception and passion, both of which Winterbourne lacks. Marcher is tragic, whereas Winterbourne is pathetic.

Michael Hollister (2015)