

Emily Hanna

Dr. Jones

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“A Pretty American Flirt”: Intentions in “Daisy Miller”

In his essay “A Plea for Romantic Fiction,” theorist Frank Norris claims that realism

“notes only the surface of things” and “goes no further than the Realist himself can actually see,

or actually hear” (914). He views the realist tradition as superficial and stiff when compared

with the romantic tradition where the intrigues and secrets of human life come to light (915).

Mr. Norris’s perspective, while rational, is partially incorrect. He fails to recognize the

conventions of realism as a different approach to many of the topics found in romantic literature.

The realist tradition requires authors to remain in the realm of what is plausible when depicting

their impressions of life and society (Howells, “Impersonal Explanation” 906). However, this is

not an expectation of superficiality. Rather, this convention indicates that a good story’s deeper

meaning is alive within the characters and the form, and readers must find and interpret those

meanings in accordance with their experiences. Misconceptions about realism might lead some

to believe that realistic stories are vague and incomplete when they are actually overflowing with

keen observations and significant truths. Henry James’s “Daisy Miller” addresses issues about

social constraints, gender inequality, and rebellion while requiring the audience to draw

individual conclusions about the characters and events.

“Daisy Miller” is a traditional realistic story in that James provides the audience with

enough details about the characters’ actions and experiences to allow the audience to make

inferences about any corresponding thoughts and motivations. This is not to say that there is

nothing below the surface of the story, as Norris might argue, but that the actions of Daisy, Winterbourne, and Mrs. Walker reveal something about the environment, social hierarchy, and human psyche that is not explicitly stated. In his article “Henry James Jr.,” William Dean

Howells argues that “[realism] studies human nature much more in its wonted aspects, and finds

its ethical and dramatic examples in the operation of lighter but not really less vital motives”



(905). The extraordinary is often imbedded in the ordinary. For example, James portrays Daisy

Miller as a common American girl who exhibits unconventional behavior from time to time.

Daisy does not appear to be exceptional, but Winterbourne and the other ex-patriots talk about her as if she is an unforeseen specimen of humanity. Society’s reaction to Daisy Miller indicates the existence of deeper issues that fester out of sight, issues such as social control, male supremacy, sexism, and resistance to change.

In “Daisy Miller,” society has the final word on matters of behavior. James indicates that the elite “cease to invite” Daisy to their homes and parties because they disapprove of her activities, especially her interactions with young men (454). This reaction to Daisy on the part of the gentry points to a certain level of fear that members of the upper class have: the fear of losing their elevated status. They dislike Daisy because of the possible repercussions her actions might have on them and their position in European culture. In another passage, Winterbourne’s aunt, Mrs. Costello, surmises, “‘Whether or no being hopelessly vulgar is being ‘bad’ is a question for the metaphysicians. They are bad enough to dislike, at any rate; and for this short life that is quite enough’” (James 439). Mrs. Costello’s concept of “bad enough to dislike” represents the underlying structure of social control in “Daisy Miller.” Those at the top of the pyramid realize that their fragile status depends on the affirmation of the rest of society; therefore, they must regulate the status quo. Daisy’s dissentious attitude is a threat to the norm that the upper class

wishes to maintain, and she must be reminded of her place. James does not come right out and say that social control is an underlying issue in “Daisy Miller,” and he does not comment on or critique the characters’ words or actions. Instead, James clearly depicts the situation and allows the audience to interpret the words and actions of Mrs. Walker, Mrs. Costello, and the others as is appropriate in the context of the story.



James also portrays male dominance as a social issue “Daisy Miller.” James approaches the male perspective mainly through the thoughts and actions of Winterbourne as Winterbourne meets and pursues Daisy Miller. Winterbourne views Daisy’s manner as “defiant” and “reckless” rather than a positive expression of intelligence and individuality in a woman (James 454). He is fascinated by her outrageousness, but he is also determined to check her independence and bring her into submission because he sees her behavior as the result of naiveté. However, as their acquaintance progresses, Winterbourne finds his belief hard to maintain, and he concludes that Daisy is rather stubborn and unfeminine. Winterbourne confirms his position on the inferiority of women by musing, “American women—the pretty ones, and this gave a largeness to the axiom—were at once the most exacting in the world and the least endowed with a sense of indebtedness” (441). Winterbourne’s tone indicates that this lack of “indebtedness” is not a positive thing. He does not come right out and say that he is superior to Daisy because he is a man, but his words and actions imply that he feels that way. Other characters confirm the second-class status of women in “Daisy Miller.” Upon hearing of Miss Miller, Mrs. Costello remarks to Winterbourne, “If...you desire to keep up the acquaintance, you are very welcome. Of course a man may know every one. Men are welcome to the privilege!” (439). This statement reveals the hypocrisy behind the social expectations that work in favor of men. Winterbourne’s reputation is not at risk if he is associated with Daisy Miller because he is male. Winterbourne’s

thoughts about Daisy and the female characters' thoughts about men bring up issues of male superiority in society that James does not overtly address.

Stemming from his perceived superiority, Winterbourne views Daisy as childlike and vulnerable. He supposes that “she [is] too light and childish, too uncultivated and unreasoning, too provincial” to understand the consequences of her actions (James 454). Winterbourne appears bothered when others, like Giovanelli, seem to take advantage of Daisy, but he frequently tries to do the same thing with the “pretty American flirt” (427). He treats her with less formality than he treats Mrs. Walker and the other ladies because Daisy does not belong to the same level of society. Of Winterbourne and Daisy’s first day of acquaintance, James writes, “[Winterbourne] wondered what were the regular conditions and limitations of one’s intercourse with a pretty American Flirt” (427). He supposes that Daisy has different boundaries than the other society ladies, less rigid boundaries. On a similar thread, James notes that “[Winterbourne] had a pleasant sense that [Daisy] would be very approachable for consolatory purposes” (432). And, on their unchaperoned excursion to Chillon, Winterbourne pays the custodian to “[leave] them quite to themselves” (437). Based on Winterbourne’s earlier formality about chaperones, his actions do not seem appropriate. Winterbourne likes Daisy, but he also objectifies her; he does not quite victimize her, but he does not treat her with respect. His actions indicate that he recognizes his social power over her, leading the audience to wonder why he feels this way. The answers are deeply psychological and social, well below the surface of the story.

If Winterbourne’s actions are somehow indicative of his personal prejudices and beliefs, then Daisy Miller also behaves in ways that have underlying significance. Winterbourne debates within himself about Daisy’s conduct and motives. Winterbourne has two theories about Daisy Miller. He believes she is either “a pretty girl from New York State” where “they are all like

that, the pretty girls who had a good deal of gentlemen's society," or she is "a designing, an audacious, an unscrupulous young person" (James 427). He cannot decide, but the two may not be mutually exclusive. Could Daisy be a little of each, or neither one? On her death bed, Daisy asks her mother to tell Winterbourne that "she was never engaged to that handsome Italian" (458). Daisy's words are significant to one or both of Winterbourne's theories, as evidence for or against, but ultimately, James does not answer that question outright; rather, he presents the Daisy as she is and then allows the audience to decide her position based on her behavior.

Social norms and gender relations are just a few of the complex issues that Henry James addresses in "Daisy Miller." He keeps his personal interpretations off the pages and allows the characters to tell their own story. In keeping with the realist tradition, James never answers all of

the questions about Daisy. His material is complex, and at times sad and disappointing, but he



maintains his objectivity in order to give the audience a deeper experience with the text. As

William Dean Howells says, "Evidently it is the character, not the fate, of his people which occupies him; when he has fully developed their character he leaves them to what destiny the reader pleases" (904). Although the two may be compared, realism and romanticism are different genres of fiction. They serve different functions and approach topics, even similar ones, from opposite angles. In a realistic context, "Daisy Miller" is not superficial but rather as deep and personal as the reader wishes the study to be.

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