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Henry James' *Daisy Miller*: Film Adaptation

by Matt Horan

(English 2224)

Rationale

The subjectivity of reality is the over-arching theme in Henry James' *Daisy Miller*. Through the use of rich character development, James weaves a story in which each character holds very definite opinions regarding proper social conduct. These opinions, James shows us, are largely determined by each character's own position in the European or American social strata. James further complicates his character's perspectives by including American ex-patriots; this community has internalized both American and European values, much to its own confusion. The resulting novella is essentially a study of the human psyche and human behavior. My film will be driven by two themes that emerge from James' study. A description of both themes follows:

Societal Expectations

In depicting the elite social circles of American ex-patriots, James illustrates a sort of caste system in which people must conform to rigid "types." Upon meeting Daisy, Frederick Winterbourne expects her demeanor to be shy and formal. Daisy, however, defies his expectations: "[Winterbourne] was inclined to think that Miss Daisy Miller was a flirt – a pretty American flirt. He had never, as yet, had any relations with young ladies of this category" (James 10). At this point, Winterbourne is not yet judgmental. He does not indict Daisy for her loose behavior - speaking freely and not playing coy. Rather, Winterbourne is genuinely baffled by Daisy's atypical behavior. He does know a few European women, "persons older than Miss Daisy Miller...who were great coquettes – dangerous, terrible women" (10). Winterbourne rejects placing Daisy in this category because she does not have the insidious guile of a great coquette. She is too unsophisticated; "she was only a pretty American flirt" (10). After reaching this conclusion, "Winterbourne was almost grateful for having found the formula that [applies] to Miss Daisy Miller" (10). He is now confident in how to proceed in his future interactions with Daisy.

James' treatment of Winterbourne's initial meeting with Daisy is brilliant because it works on two levels. First, he provides insight into the way that upper crust social circles work. People, women especially, are categorized. They are then expected to act in accordance with the rules of their category. This allows for a certain moral leeway, provided that a person acts within the boundaries of his/her category. For example, wily European women may be coquettes. Certainly, these women are dangerous and can ruin a man's reputation. Yet they remain an accepted category in social circles. Winterbourne, in fact, is currently engaged in a discrete relationship with a Swiss coquette. It is plain, then, that he accepts the existence of coquettes and is well aware of how to carry out a discrete relationship with one. Daisy does not baffle Winterbourne because she acts coquettish. She baffles Winterbourne because she does not meet criteria to be a coquette.

In my film, I will show how James goes beyond revealing how social categories operate. The power and depth of *Daisy Miller* derives from the fact that everyone categorizes new acquaintances to some degree. At first thought, it is easy to indict Winterbourne for laboring on his definition of Daisy. The film viewer will wonder why Winterbourne is so thrown by Daisy's confident forthrightness. At the same time, I will convey how categorization is a natural, and maybe even necessary, process. In modern terms this process might be called stereotyping, though this term has a

stigma. It is natural to expect certain behaviors of people. For example, one might forgive a young child for making a rude remark due to his/her underdeveloped internal filter. An adult with a more developed sense of social convention would not be forgiven for the same remark. I want my film viewers to question the utility and fairness of categorizing in *Daisy Miller*.

Daisy's Character – Inspid Chatterbox or Trailblazer?

During my first reading of *Daisy Miller*, I quickly grew disgusted with Daisy. James skewers Daisy with delicate prose: “It might have been said of this unknown young lady, who had come and sat down beside him upon a bench, that she chattered” (8). Daisy’s penchant for chattering is not counterbalanced by a stunning personality. She feels perfectly at home in Europe since “ever so many of her intimate friends had been there ever so many times” (9). Furthermore, “she had had ever so many dresses and things from Paris. Whenever she put on a Paris dress she felt as if she were in Europe” (James 9). James uses deliberate language to guide the reader’s impression of Daisy. By repeating the phrase “ever so many,” the reader hears a lyrical and bratty description of a rich girl. A rich girl who has not actually *been* to Europe but feels she understands the continent. Daisy is a young woman possessing an abundance of form and a paucity of substance. Furthermore, she’s oblivious to her own ignorance. James drives his point home by declaring that Daisy feels like she’s been to Paris simply from wearing a piece of fabric that was stitched together in that city.

I softened my initially harsh indictment of Daisy after a classmate’s passionate defense. James does imbue her with positive qualities. For one, she is self-confident and blunt. Shortly after meeting Daisy, Winterbourne learns “that with Daisy Miller there was no great need of walking on tiptoe” (16). She says what is on her mind without putting on airs, speaking freely about her brother Randolph’s difficult temperament. Displaying keen insight, Daisy reads Winterbourne’s evasive replies to her desire to meet Mrs. Costello: “She doesn’t want to know me!... Why don’t you say so? You needn’t be afraid. I’m not afraid!” (17). Winterbourne is taken aback by Daisy’s forwardness. Mrs. Costello and Mrs. Walker hold similarly severe opinions of Daisy. Yet Mrs. Walker and Mrs. Costello’s opinions are bound by their perspectives. They base their opinions of Daisy upon the aforementioned social expectations of elite ex-patriot social circles. An American with a different perspective might applaud Daisy’s strong will. Though James skewers her, Mark Twain might compliment Daisy for embodying the American spirit.

Ultimately, a defense of Daisy does not hold up. She makes a final thrust at convention by passing an evening in the Coliseum, a “nest of malaria,” with Mr. Giovanelli (55). Daisy is clearly aware of the potentially fatal effects of her defiance, saying “I never was sick, and I don’t mean to be!” (55). She acts like the petulant child who deliberately takes off his knit hat to spite his mother. Mrs. Costello, despite her elitist attitude, delivers the most accurate description of Daisy. In response to Winterbourne’s defense, Mrs. Costello opines “of course she’s pretty. But she is very common” (13).

Cast

I have chosen the following actors and actresses because they will best convey each character’s personality.

- Annie P. Miller (Miss Daisy Miller) - Heather Graham

Heather Graham has classic American features. (She has already portrayed this role in *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*). She is certainly pretty, but not overwhelmingly beautiful. She does *not* carry herself with an over-abundance of elegance and grace. Also, I find that Heather Graham wears a perpetually vacant expression. Her high-pitched voice and bubbly demeanor suite her well to portray Daisy, who’s mouth is in perpetual motion. While Daisy is often mildly irritating, she is not entirely unsympathetic. I want my viewers to admire her individualism but eventually

conclude that it is misplaced.

- Frederick Winterbourne - Jake Gyllenhaal

Jake Gyllenhaal's demeanor is a fine mixture of boyish charm and sophistication. Winterbourne is a relatively young man at 27. He maintains a relationship with a Swiss Coquette. James uses this relationship to place Winterbourne at the threshold of entering respectable society as an adult. During the late 19th century, it was common practice for men in Winterbourne's position to maintain a relationship with a coquette. In a sense, it was thought that these relationships season the young man. Generally, the story is told from the Coquette's point of view, as in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, and Zola's *Nana*.

- Eugenio – Alan Rickman

I have chosen Alan Rickman to portray Eugenio for his rich voice and severity of manner. Eugenio is staid, if not a little condescending. This character is rich in irony. As a native European, he is thoroughly indoctrinated to abide by the social conventions of elite circles. He balks at his role as Randolph's caretaker. Social conventions dictate that a nanny be hired for this purpose. Eugenio's role is to escort Daisy and Mrs. Miller about, solemnly catering to their every whim. He seems to resent being taken into the Miller's confidences, often insisting on a more formal relationship. The courier looks down on his masters for not looking down upon him.

I will also employ Eugenio as a narrator in order to preserve the structure of James' narrative frame; James provides many useful descriptions in the narrative frame. Eugenio fits the role of narrator because, as courier, he is on the periphery of all the action that takes place. He is intimately acquainted with the Millers and the nuances of high society.

- Mr. Giovanelli – Freddy Rodríguez

Mr. Giovanelli is handsome and relentlessly conniving. His perpetual grin and indomitable good humor belie his "far-stretching intentions" (36). Freddy Rodríguez will play Mr. Giovanelli because he fits the physical description. Though of Puerto Rican descent, the 5'6" Rodríguez could easily pass for a darkly handsome Italian.

- Mrs. Walker – Joan Allen

Representing the generally held opinions of socialite women in the American ex-patriot circle, Mrs. Walker is "a very accomplished woman" (29). Joan Allen will portray her with a nearly regal air. Allen's slender figure, tall neck, and fine features are ideal for this role. Mrs. Walker is the sort of woman who pronounces every syllable of every word deliberately. She is keenly aware of her position as social arbitrator.

Key Scenes

This film will be shot conventionally with very few special effects. As *Daisy Miller* is a character study, cinematography will be designed to emphasize the actor's emotions and reactions to each other. I have deliberately preserved the time period and setting as these two elements are critical to an understanding of James' work. This is not a "period piece," per se; the themes that James develops are certainly still relevant. However, I find James' treatment of the interaction between Americans, ex-patriots, and Europeans to be particularly engaging. The novella is set during a fascinating time in world history when the United States – and Americans by extension – was emerging as an international power capable of mixing with and challenging the centuries-old European traditions.

- Opening Scene in Winterbourne's Club

The initial scene establishes Winterbourne as a fashionable man of his time. While Daisy is the title character, Winterbourne drives the story. He is central to the theme of compartmentalization and we see Daisy's behavior, most often, filtered through his consciousness. Therefore, it is essential to understand the perspective from which we see the action.

The film opens in Winterbourne's club in Geneva, Switzerland. The room is bathed in a subdued, amber light, which picks up a dense layer of cigar smoke that hangs at eye level. The camera navigates the club but maintains a wide angle to avoid a first-person perspective. This movement gives an overall impression of the club's atmosphere without lingering on any individuals. Men puff intensely at cigars and frequently slap each other on the back. There is an overall mood of joviality.

After roughly thirty seconds, the camera focuses on Winterbourne. He wears a formal dress coat with a high, starched collar. As the camera focuses on Winterbourne, Eugenio's narration begins:

He was some seven-and-twenty years of age... Winterbourne had an old attachment for the little metropolis of Calvinism; he had been put to school there as a boy, and he had afterwards gone to college there – circumstances which had led to his forming a great many youthful friendships. Many of these he had kept, and they were a source of great satisfaction to him. (2)

As the narration continues, the camera fades out, then fades into a new setting. We are in a sumptuously decorated apartment. The camera's angle is low; it looks over the side contours of a middle-aged woman, lying on a divan with her elbow propped on a pillow and attired in a seductive dressing gown. Eugenio continues:

When his friends spoke of him, they usually said that he was 'studying'; when his enemies spoke of him, they said – but, after all, he had no enemies; he was an extremely amiable fellow, and universally liked. What I should say is, simply, that when certain persons spoke of him they affirmed that the reason of his spending so much time at Geneva was that he was extremely devoted to a lady who lived there – a foreign lady – a person older than himself. (2)

As Eugenio completes the final line, Winterbourne enters the apartment wearing a confident half-smirk, half-smile. He holds two glasses of champagne.

- At the Pinicio with Mr. Giovanelli

This scene focuses on Daisy and Mr. Giovanelli and develops the film's two main themes. It establishes the societal expectation, through Mrs. Walker's entreaties, that an eligible young lady such as Daisy not walk alone in the park with a young man. This scene also reveals Daisy's character. Daisy attempts to act boldly. Initially insisting on walking to the Pinicio alone, she consents to allow Winterbourne to accompany her to her rendezvous with Mr. Winterbourne in order to demonstrate her dominance. James says that Daisy "[presents] herself as an inscrutable combination of audacity and innocence;" I want the viewer to lean more heavily towards an audacious interpretation, mocking Daisy's innocence, feigned or genuine (37).

The scene opens in the Pinicio gardens, in full bloom. The camera pans in a sweeping circle, taking in well-appointed carriages winding their way slowly around the gardens. The camera briefly focuses on Mr. Giovanelli who leans against a tree with one leg crossed over the other. He absently twirls his thick mustache, affecting a pose of reverie. Daisy and Winterbourne enter the park walking arm-in-arm. Winterbourne is stiff and uncomfortable; his glance shifts continually. As the camera locks in on the couple, we hear Daisy's chattering voice before we understand what she says.

As the couple draws near, Mr. Giovanelli closes the distance between them "with obsequious rapidity" (36). This action reveals that he is less laid back than he conveys. Daisy performs the introductions – Mr. Giovanelli is comically gracious – and the three begin to stroll through the park. They are apparently oblivious to the spectacle they cause. Mr. Giovanelli launches into a number of stories, making witty remarks which Daisy praises enthusiastically. After a two minute montage that fades in and out of these remarks, the scene closes as Daisy, Mr. Giovanelli, and Winterbourne walk past Mrs. Walker's carriage. As they pass beyond the window of her carriage, the camera quits

following the group and closes in on Mrs. Walker; she regards the group severely from beneath an ornate hat.

- Daisy at the Coliseum with Mr. Giovanelli

This scene will show that Daisy believes that her actions – defying convention by allowing Mr. Giovanelli to become familiar - are righteous. Ultimately, the viewer will conclude that Daisy is, as Mrs. Costello observes, “very common” (13). It may be argued that Daisy’s actions assert a woman’s right to live as she pleases. It is clear that her indictments have been served by people with subjective viewpoints. Nevertheless, the viewer will determine that while Daisy might be correct in decrying the categorization of women, her attempts to break up these categories are misguided. Also, from a cinematographic perspective, I will preserve the strong imagery that James uses in *Daisy Miller*.

The scene opens with Daisy sitting at the base of a cross in the Coliseum. She wriggles with delight at a witty comment that Mr. Giovanelli has apparently made. The scene is bathed in clear moonlight, but many dark, irregular shadows dot the set. The camera shoots a wide angle to show Winterbourne’s approach. Daisy comments: “Well, he looks at us as one of the old lions or tigers may have looked at the Christian martyrs” (54). Winterbourne continues to approach. When he sees Daisy and Mr. Giovanelli, his posture, which had been slack, stiffens and he quickens his pace. Winterbourne points an accusatory finger at the couple and asks, “How long have you been here?” (55). During the ensuing conversation, Winterbourne scornfully reproaches Mr. Giovanelli for his recklessness with Daisy’s health. Mr. Giovanelli offers little protests, maintaining his good humor and making it abundantly clear that he is only concerned with himself. Daisy, for her part, deliberately affects a haughty and confident air.

Overall Impression

Henry James’ *Daisy Miller* is powerful because it operates on multiple levels. I will achieve this layered effect with my film adaptation. My viewers will wonder at the nature of social expectations. They will debate the merits and deficits of the principle characters, especially Daisy. Viewers will also question the intersection of the two dominant themes (societal expectations and the nature of Daisy’s character): how do relationships play out when the contrasting values of Europeans, Americans, and American ex-patriots interact?

Works Cited

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