

Daisy Miller: A Martyr for Selfhood

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Henry James has successfully portrayed many innocent American girls, who undergo a lot in the cultural shock between America and Europe. And Daisy Miller is the only one, whose innocence and natural behaviours make her defy the European society persistently. However, due to her sudden death in the end of the novel, she is viewed more as a victim of the conflict of culture. This thesis holds that Daisy Miller is a positive heroine, who always sticks to her selfhood. As an American, she has the spirit of freedom and equality, and as a woman, she plays the role of an advanced feminist, who pursues the gender equality in her relationship with men. Therefore, Daisy Miller can be considered as a martyr for selfhood rather than a tragical heroine.

Keywords: Daisy Miller, selfhood, death

Introduction

Daisy Miller is an experimental novel in narrative mode by Henry James, who indirectly presents the heroine Daisy Miller through the perspective of another character Winterbourne, but leaves Daisy, a permanent mystery to readers until the end. Therefore, the image of Daisy Miller, as well as her sudden death, has been under various discussions for a long time. The subtitle as “Daisy Miller: A Study” also echoes with Henry James’s intention to the innovative research, that’s to study his own characters together with readers. Another explanation toward the subtitle is from William E. Grant, who assumes it as Winterbourne’s study of Daisy (Grant, 1974, p. 17). Daisy Miller’s seemingly ostentatious behaviours outrage and insult readers in James’s day, but modern readers and critics are inclined to identify Winterbourne as the target of attack. Such shift is in line with James’s intention to appraise American innocence and audacity, while to deprecate European hypocrisy and sophistication (Kirk, 1980, p. 275). It is well known that Henry James is famous for the international theme in most of his novels, and under such a setting, Daisy Miller is more likely to be viewed as a victim of the culture clash. Although the idea of the women’s movement has been satirized by Henry James in *The Bostonians*, his constant exploration of the tension between individual self-realization and social restriction often concentrates on the way in which society shapes the behaviour of human (Barnett, 1979, p. 281). Daisy Miller has been portrayed as a woman whose innocence and natural behaviours cause her to defy the European society willfully and persistently. Therefore, Daisy Miller has been praised by many scholars for her pure innocence. Like her name, Daisy Miller is a daisy in full bloom, natural, and fresh, with the characteristics of persistence and boldness. Views about the image of Daisy Miller and her death vary, but are all in agreement about the tragical end of Daisy Miller. However, this thesis holds that Daisy Miller’s selfhood is incompatible with the hypocritical and sophisticated European society, and it is impossible for Daisy Miller to adapt and fit

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into such a society. Therefore, Daisy is more like a martyr who sacrifices her love and life for her own pursue of selfhood and her death is no longer a simple end of life, but a rejection of the European society and a defend of her own American nature.

Daisy Miller's Selfhood

Henry James is adept at depicting women characters and presenting the way in which the society shapes and restricts the behaviour of women. There are a number of heroines in James's novel giving up a certain degree of personal fulfillment and freedom due to the constraints of society (Barnett, 1979, p. 281). However, Daisy Miller is an exception. She has stayed true to her selfhood all the way, even though the cost is her lost of love and life. As an American girl, Daisy Miller's selfhood is analyzed from two perspectives, the identity of an American and the identity of a feminist in this thesis.

Miller's Identity of an American

The international theme is the thread that runs through Henry James's writing career, and Daisy Miller is one of the most popular one in his early works. William Dean Howells, a famous American critic, once remarked that this novel has been so widely discussed that there appear two camps in society, and one supports Miss Miller and the other is against Miss Miller (Howells, 1901). The cause under the seemingly split is the distinction between two nations, that is the new spirit of freedom in American and the ancient culture in European. Therefore, the two different forces lead to extremes toward Daisy Miller.

Miller is born into the city of Schenectady, eastern New York, and her family is an upstart in the emerging bourgeoisie. Naturally, she is inseparable from the influence of the history and culture of America. Most of the pioneers of America are Puritans, who start with nothing but their own strength and will. Therefore, they admire success achieved through hard work and struggle, and despise the European hereditary aristocrats and hierarchy. In the 19th century, the idea of equality permeates American life and thought, particularly the treatment of interpersonal relationship. There are few social etiquette for Americans to follow, and they are free and ease in social situations. Under such a historical context, the Miller family can treat Eugenio equally for he is an excellent courier. And Miller would date out with an Italian man Mr. Giovanelli frequently for his beauty, humor, and intelligence. However, in the end of the European society, there is a rigid hierarchy, social etiquette and code of conduct, in which people in different social status observe different life style, costume, and social entertainment. In this novel, Winterbourne, his aunt Mrs. Costello, and Mrs. Walker are all Americans who live in Europe, and have already been assimilated by the European society. Therefore, what they represent is the traditional European ideas. In her eyes, "they are very ignorant, very innocent only, and utterly uncivilized" (Perkins, 2009, p. 1110). Besides, Mrs. Costello cannot accept the fact that the Miller family should treat Eugenio, a courier, as a gentleman without taking his social class into consideration. Winterbourne also shows his prejudice to Mr. Giovanelli, who is a low citizen, and views Miller's dating with her as irrational. In their mind, the offence of hierarchy is the biggest taboo.

Contrasted sharply with them, Daisy Miller is a typical American, who defies the European social etiquette and hierarchy. In her eyes, Eugenio's excellent ability and Mr. Giovanelli's humor and intelligence are main traits rather than classes. Miller's American spirit of freedom is destined to fail to integrate into the European society.

Miller's Identity of a Feminist

According to Barnett, the contrast between what Daisy wants and what the other women have in this novel, and between the amount of freedom allowed by society to Daisy and Winterbourne, shows Henry James's distinct deprecation of the constraints society imposes on women. And what Daisy Miller explores is the options available to women. Winterbourne, as a definer and enforcer of the social propriety, represents the masculine world in the patriarchal society which has the absolute control over the lives of women. And in this novel, he is the observer and mediator between Miller and readers. Women in *Daisy Miller* can be generally divided into two groups. One accepts their circumscribed lives in a narrow and rigidly defined sphere, while the other is Miller, who ignores the social prescriptions on women and boldly breaks with convention even the cost is her reputation and life. Therefore, to some extent, Daisy Miller is a forerunner of feminism, who pursues equality between men and women.

In the end of the 19th century, the status of women is low in the European society. Society has lots of restrictions on women, particularly the unmarried girls, who are asked to be accompanied by their mothers or married women when they go out. As an American girl, Daisy advocates gender equality in moral concept, showing her advanced feminist consciousness. She holds that an unmarried girl has the right to choose her own husband, and can date out with gentleman before marriage without the company of the others. Besides, Miller's behaviour is far from "an American flirt", and her relationship with men is based on respect and equality, such as the courier, Eugenio and the Italian gentleman, Mr. Giovanelli, with innocence and sincerity. As a forerunner of feminist in the European society, it is impossible for her to achieve self-realization, and what brings to her is only insults and rumours.

Daisy Miller's Death

The most obvious conflict in this novel is the cultural conflict between the American innocence and the European sophistication. James creates the woman character of Daisy Miller. Different from Mrs. Costello and Mrs. Walker, she is the representative of Americans, who struggles in the cultural clash, but never has been assimilated into the European society. In the end of the novel, Daisy stays unduly with Mr. Giovanelli, and suddenly dies on account of Roman fever. Although the end has been widely interpreted as a tragedy, this thesis holds that for the author, what Miller's death conveys is Henry James's refuse to assimilate the American culture to the European, while to Miller herself, her death makes her a martyr for selfhood. According to Zable, James is obsessed with disaster, and he equates death with immortality (Zable, 1980, p. 26). Therefore, Daisy Miller's death in the end of the novel can be positively interpreted as a rebirth of her eternal vitality and innocence, and an affirmation of American culture.

Henry James is born into America, but he later naturalizes as a British citizen. He has been to many places in his life and has a deep perception of different culture. His explorations of the cultural effect on people are also presented in this novel. Taking Winterbourne for example, he is a production of cultural shock and obviously he is completely assimilated into the European culture. In the end, after his conversation with Mr. Giovanelli, Winterbourne shows deep regret to his prior misconception. That also indirectly reveals Henry James's silent defense to American culture through the death of Daisy Miller. On the other hand, to Daisy Miller, her biggest charm lies in her insistence on selfhood and challenge to the European conventions. She never changes her behaviours to meet the norms and expectations of society, even though she is insulted by others and lives in rumours. In some extent, death is a way arranged by Henry James to achieve her

self-realization and a resistance to reality. In general, Daisy Miller is more like a martyr for selfhood rather a tragic heroine.

Conclusion

Under the background of the cultural conflict between the American innocence and the European sophistication, Daisy Miller has always been interpreted as a victim of cultural shock, and her sudden death also helps set the tragic tone of her brief life. However, this thesis tries to prove that Daisy Miller's death has positive meaning, and she is a more like a martyr for selfhood rather than a tragical heroine. As an American girl, Daisy Miller's selfhood is analyzed from two aspects. One is her identity as an American, with the spirit of freedom and equality, and the other is her identity as a feminist, who pursues the gender equality in the relationship with men. Obviously, Daisy Miller's achievement of selfhood is doomed to fail in reality, but she refuses to make changes and assimilates into the hypocritical and sophisticated European society. Therefore, in the end of the novel, she becomes the martyr of her selfhood. Besides, Miller's death also represents James's approval of the American innocence and his unwilling to compromise with the European sophistication.

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