

In this paper I'm going to discuss the question as to what extent it is possible to gain a detailed picture of Daisy and her character in Henry James' novel "Daisy Miller"¹

I will argue that through careful examination of the given excerpt the picture of Daisy's personality can in fact be discerned much more clearly than the seemingly superficial and "enigmatic" impression that we get of her through Winterbourne's eyes might suggest.

A first and very important aspect to this question of Daisy's character is to determine how much significance we can attribute to elements of the given excerpt, especially as far as Daisy's behaviour is concerned. Under this aspect it is crucial to see that there is in fact a fundamental matter that very clearly separates this scene from all the earlier scenes describing Daisy: namely the fact that the situation actually is distinctly dramatic and serious, even so much so, that its inherent danger leads, as we get to know near the end of the story to Daisy's unfortunate decease.

In general one might say that extreme situations like this are more likely to expose important traits of someone's character, since superficial habits and less deeply ingrained ways of behaviour are most probably going to lose importance in such a situation, thereby more clearly exposing fundamental aspects of the personality. Thus Daisy's behaviour appears in a different light than it did in the scenes before, and her apparent lack of awareness for the danger of the situation she has wilfully brought herself in, shows what we might perceive to be an indication that she is not as "enigmatic" as one might think, but rather a very simple and even naive character.

Having outlined the basic line of thought this paper tries to elaborate on, I will now try to analyse the given excerpt itself more closely in order to illustrate and underpin the above arguments:

The excerpt starts with Winterbourne's description of the Colosseum which he is visiting at night, but which he is just about to leave again, since he remembers that nightly visits to this place are "deprecated by the doctors" (We get to know the reason for this deprecation, the risk to become infected with Malaria, the so called "Roman Fever, a bit later when Winterbourne starts talking to Daisy to reproach her for her imprudence.).

Just in the moment Winterbourne wants to take a last look until making a "hasty retreat", he suddenly notices Daisy with her Italian companion Giovanelli. She is talking to him, presumably about some statute of a wild animal and likens their situation to that of Christian martyrs being looked at by an old lion or tiger

This utterance is interesting, since it already gives us some insight into Daisy's state of mind: She seems to be totally unaware of the real danger she faces, since otherwise she would not make fun of their situation, being as "dangerous" as that of the Christian martyrs. The picture of Christian martyrs about to be devoured by some wild animal might be taken as a metaphor for the danger to Daisy's own life and precarious situation, to which she is apparently completely oblivious and which she even seems to make fun of with her statements.

The end of Giovanelli's humorous response, "Let us hope, he is not very hungry, he will have to take me first; you will serve for dessert" (p.1422), at least slightly carries the notion of a woman as something sweet that is "taken for dessert". It is probably not too farfetched an interpretation to say that Giovanelli likes to imagine himself as being the lion and "devouring" Daisy. It is a difficult question as to what extent Daisy is aware of this interpretation, but one might take the fact that she seems not in the least disturbed about the appearance of Winterbourne as an indication that her relationship with Giovanelli is not really an intimate one, and accordingly, she probably does not really notice or care for this sexual aspect in Giovanelli's allusion, or at least not as much as he would most probably like her to.

What is being described in the next paragraph is of utmost importance to the interpretation of all former impressions and descriptions we have gotten of Daisy through Winterbourne's eyes. I even venture to say that it represents some kind of turning point in the whole novel, because Winterbourne's sudden flash of realisation, evoked by the fact that he is suddenly more or less forced to realise how simple-minded Daisy must be in order to do something as scary and dangerous as she does, solves the riddle of Daisy's ambiguity not only to Winterbourne, but even more to the reader. We are now able to interpret many of Winterbourne's rather "enigmatic" impressions and descriptions of Daisy as being largely a

in order to do something as scary and dangerous as she does, solves the riddle of Daisy's ambiguity not only to Winterbourne, but even more to the reader. We are now able to interpret many of Winterbourne's rather "enigmatic" impressions and descriptions of Daisy as being largely a product of a male person being attracted by a pretty female, rather than as a sign of the "unknowable nature of human character and the slipperiness of all forms of human judgement" as suggested by Kenneth Graham in his article "Daisy Miller: Dynamics of an Enigma". I maintain that applied only to the beginning of the novel the basic idea of the "unknowableness of Daisy" as put forward by Kenneth is in fact applicable, but that, as the novel progresses and we get more hints and information, this unknowableness can, through careful analysis, be turned more and more into a rather detailed picture of Daisy's character.

The argument that Daisy's character is characterised by a certain kind of simple-mindedness is further supported by the way she reacts to Winterbourne's criticism. She takes an outright stubborn and child-like stance, ("I never was sick and I don't meant to be" and "I don't care whether I have Roman fever or not"), and obviously does not even understand Winterbourne's dismay and his concerns, which turn out be sadly well-founded, by her ensuing decease.

Works Cited:

Graham, Kenneth. *Daisy Miller: Dynamics of an Enigma*

James, Henry (1878). *Daisy Miller: A Study*

Assesment:

You give an excellent analysis of the excerpt -

I particularly like the way in which you dismantle a gendered (masculinist) pattern in the novel's seemingly unresolvable epistemological indeterminacies!

(grade: 1.0)

¹James, Henry (1878). *Daisy Miller: A Study*, McMichael (ed.), *The Anthology of American Literature*, volume II: Realisms to the present, forth edition (1985) (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company ,1974) 1387-1425. All subsequent references are to this edition.