

THE TRANSATLANTIC FAILURE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM: CULTURAL LIMITS AND FATAL INNOCENCE IN HENRY JAMES' S *DAISY MILLER*

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ABSTRACT

In *Daisy Miller* (1878), Henry James exposes the 19th century ideals of the American Dream and the uncompromising social codes of Europe. Through the character of Daisy, James has demonstrated that how ideals like democratic openness, merit earned wealth and redemptive innocence that are admired in homeland are quickly redefined as vulgar, improper and dangerously naïve in abroad. This study suggests that Daisy's social excommunication and subsequent demise is not due to her own moral shortcomings, but simply because she is culturally incompatible. The American Dream, as it is meant to be, is misunderstood across the Atlantic. The article, based on close textual analysis and historical-cultural criticism, shows how James, through dialogue, symbolic settings (Vevey, Chillon, Rome), and the condemnation of all members of the Miller family who live in Europe (including their courier), exposes the geographical and social boundaries of the Dream. In America, the very essence of freedom and goodness is what brings about ruin in Europe. The story cautions that the best American values can ruin their owners if they are brought to a different world without any effort or the intention of changing them.

Key words: American Dream; Daisy Miller; cultural, geographical and social boundaries; ruin

INTRODUCTION

The American Dream became clearly defined in the 18th and 19th centuries, the time period in which Henry James wrote *Daisy Miller*. It was not yet known as such, but its substance was already prevailing as the national story. In 1931, James Truslow Adams has formally defined it as that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each to ability or achievement [...] a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.(Adams 404-405)

Although he coined this term, but at the time the ideals had already been around for more than a century (Cullen 5–6; Samuel 7–15; Trachtenberg 70–78). So the concept of American Dream existed even before it was officially entitled with this phrase. The 19th century version of the American Dream, which was built on the Declaration of Independence's "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (1776), expanded by the promise of the western frontier, and sanctified by John Winthrop's 1630 vision of America as a redemptive "city upon a hill" (Winthrop 33-48), it celebrated democratic egalitarianism, merit-based mobility, and an optimistic individualism that regarded innocence not as naïveté but as moral capital (Cullen 37-59; Jillson 45-67). This was the cultural air James and his first readers breathed, and witnessed an America that established itself in proud opposition to European hierarchy and ritual.

In Henry James's *Daisy Miller*, Daisy herself becomes the personification of these 18th and 19th century ideals, which were extolled at that time as “the best” (James 6). But the very trip that is supposed to bring her glory reveals the lethal fragility of those same principles: what thrives in free America is the subject of ostracism and eventual assassination across the Atlantic. The shocking judgment of Winterbourne, that “a young lady whom a gentleman need no longer be at pains to respect” (James 60) clearly shows the moment when the promise of the Dream gets crushed down under the weight of Old World scrutiny. Through this meeting, James has shown the difference between the young, democratic, informal vitality of American culture and the old, hierarchical, ritualized refinement of European culture, thereby demonstrating that the Dream which is all powerful at home is in fact not universal but highly conditional.

This conditional nature of the Dream is the most significant theme of the tragedy that occurs in this novella, and becomes the explanation for Daisy's story being so powerfully relatable to many readers even today. The same principles existed in 2025 too, and they still continue to encourage and reinforce digital entrepreneurship, global migration (with more than one million U.S. visas issued each year [U.S. DHS]), and the belief that self-confidence and hard work leads to success (which is still a strong sentiment among 53 % of Americans [Borelli]). However, as evident in the novella also, these ideals often lose their value when they come into contact with the rigid cultural constraints. It may occur in the form of cancel culture, fixed social or economic status, or the conflicting global norms. For instance, social media can spread negative opinions quite easily and may stain the reputations thereby reflecting a twenty-first-century version of Mrs. Walker (i.e, her snubbing Daisy in front of everyone for her travelling in Giovanelli's carriage). In today's time, there also still exist the geopolitical hierarchies that punish those who arrive with unadapted American optimism (Hochschild 18–25; Putnam 34–36) just like Daisy's belief in personal freedom and her casual behavior is judged negatively by the conservative European society and thus, she is considered as a woman of loose morals by the Europeans. Thus Daisy's transatlantic ruin symbolizes countless contemporary stories of the failure of American Dream ideals on foreign lands.

Under James's critical lens, what starts as a seemingly minor story of a flirtatious American girl's visit to a foreign country turns into a deep critique of the geographical and cultural limits of the American Dream. While the evolution of the Dream from the 18th and 19th centuries and its continued relevance in the present day are important to consider, yet the main concern of the study is the embodiment of the very principles of the American Dream (that were central to the era in which James himself wrote) that defined Daisy as an ideal American, and ultimately their betrayal that led her to lose her reputation and even the trust of a good friend (Winterbourne).

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on close textual analysis and historical-cultural criticism, which are informed by the international theme of this study, namely the theme of recurring confrontation between American and European values (as it was understood in the 19th century) as developed by Henry James (Habegger 3–12; Tintner 17–25; Rowe 44–62), and by the theory of American exceptionalism as it was understood in the 19th century (Madsen 1–25; Murrin 31–40; Cullen 37–59). The Penguin Classics edition (2007) of the novella has been analyzed with a focus on dialogue, narrative commentary, and symbolically charged settings. The textual moments are studied besides the historical frameworks of the American Dream (Cullen, Samuel, Trachtenberg, Weiss, Adams) and the scholarship on James's transatlantic project (Habegger, Fussell, Rowe). A comparative analysis of the behaviour of the different members of Miller's family has been carried out to show that the failure of the

Dream is cultural and not gendered. A few parallels have been made to the present, but the 19th century historical and literary cultural context (the time period in which this novella was written and published) remains the focus of analysis. It was the time when the American Dream was understood as a universal, genderless promise, but a promise that ceases to exist in a rigid cultural context if carried out without revision.

THE REALIZATION OF CORE TENETS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN DAISY MILLER.

The American Dream of James' time consisted of six interlocking elements: personal liberty, self-determination, egalitarian opportunity, upward mobility based on merit instead of birth, optimistic individualism, and redemptive innocence (Cullen 5-6; Samuel 12-15; Adams 214-19; Hochschild 11-14). These ideals combined into a notion that America provided a clean slate, free from the feudalism of Europe (Cullen 37-59; Trachtenberg 145; Weiss 45; Jillson 45-67; Adams 404-05; Murrin 31-40). These are all embodied in Daisy Miller. Her "deucedly sociable" (James 12) nature as "she 'picked up' acquaintances" (James 15) expresses egalitarian openness, her family's Schenectady fortune as described in Randolph's information "My father... He's got a big business" (James 9) reflects her merit-based ascent, her fearless declarations "I have always had... a great deal of gentlemen's society" (James 11) and her being "quite 'audacious'" (James 12) are optimistic individualism, and "her habitual sense of freedom" (James 27) treats Europe itself as a new frontier for self-invention (Cullen 59). Even her casual dismissal of European history as reflected through Winterbourne's observation at Chillon that "she cared very little for feudal antiquities, and that the dusky traditions of Chillon made but a slight impression upon her" (James 28-29), reflects the 19th century American thought that the past is worthless to be preserved in any manner. It is a belief that is rooted in the nation's self-image representing a new beginning that is not influenced by feudal inheritance or any sort of historical guilt (Turner 1-2; Cullen 59-60; Trachtenberg 145). The image of Europe for an American (and for Henry James as well) in the 19th century was of an Old World tied up to the centuries of tradition, and America- as a new beginning, a place where history was being made anew with every immigrant and every generation. Daisy's lack of interest in castles and cathedrals is not just a lack of knowledge about the buildings built in the past, but a proud assertion of the Dream's fundamental promise: the right to begin again, the right to re-start, the right to be free of any burden of the past.

Three of these principles, however, are particularly important to Daisy's personality and, unfortunately, turn out to be extremely fragile when she crosses the Atlantic. These principles are redemptive innocence, new-money mobility, and the frontier metaphor. Redemptive innocence may be seen as the most sacred belief of the 19th century American imagination. It is the conviction that moral purity is something obvious which does not require any outside confirmation (Madsen 14-19; Weiss 67-72; Cullen 59-62). In European cultural context, Daisy's refusal to hide her social life as she was "very fond of society, and...always had a great deal of it" (James 11), and her declaration "I'm a fearful, frightful flirt! (Daisy 112) are all fitting of the character of a flirt. However, in American cultural context, these proclamations are actually the expressions of innocence and virtue that are made to be known, not hidden. Here, the visibility equals transparency; transparency equals innocence. In contrast, Europe has a completely other moral grammar in which visibility equals advertisement and advertisement equals provocation. When Daisy is walking in public with Giovanelli on the Pincio, or sitting with him in the moonlit Colosseum, she is really acting out what she thinks is innocent self-expression. The expatriate colony, however, is steeped in

Old World codes, and reads the same actions as deliberate sexual signalling. The Dream's strongest asset, i.e. innocence, becomes its biggest weakness.

The second important principle of the new-money mobility, that money acquired through business is not only legitimate but morally superior than that acquired through inheritance, is an integral part of the Millers' identity (Trachtenberg 82-89; Jillson 112-118). Their loud luggage, having a courier who is like a maître d'hôtel, hiring other people (such as a private tutor), their disregard for European etiquettes, all this makes it clear that they have risen by their own effort. In America this is cause for celebration but in European culture, it is the ultimate vulgarity and ostentatiousness. Mrs. Costello's sneer that the Millers are "very common" (James 17), and Mrs. Walker's public humiliation of Daisy in third chapter of the novella, are not just personal snubs, but are rather the ritual enactments of a class system that refuses to recognise the legitimacy of American meritocracy. This is how the Dream's greatest economic benefit turns into social poison.

Third, the frontier metaphor, which dominated 19th-century American thought, is represented through Daisy's constant and restless movement, from Vevey to Chillon to Rome, like a pioneer pushing ever westward in search of open space (Turner 1-38; Cullen 133-35). For Daisy, Europe is simply the next frontier that can be regarded as another territory to be claimed by personality and fearless individualism. Yet the Old World does not offer even a little space to her or her ideals. Every square metre is already occupied by centuries old traditions, rituals, and surveillance. When she declares at the Colosseum, "I was bound to see the Colosseum by moonlight; I shouldn't have wanted to go home without that" (James 60-61), she is in reality considering the ruins as a romantic playground. However, for Rome, the ruins are not less than the living assets. The very air is saturated with history that is impossible to be bent or modified in any manner (even though it has turned into big danger, as symbolized by Colosseum that was actually a place to catch Roman Fever). The frontier, which in America not just accommodates but accepts wholeheartedly the dreamer, in Europe, it bluntly rejects and suffocates her.

These three tenets namely redemptive innocence, new-money mobility, and the frontier metaphor, are not peripheral but are rather the core ideals of the American Dream as it existed in 19th century. In *Daisy Miller* and Daisy's persona, they are fully realised, clearly displayed, and (across the Atlantic) swiftly condemned and destroyed.

From Perfect Embodiment to Fatal Destruction

Daisy thus arrives in Europe carrying the full, undiluted promise of the American Dream, but she only has to witness its disintegration. The tenets that define her success at home become the very instruments of her destruction abroad. Liberty is conceived as impropriety which becomes apparent in the episode when Mrs. Walker warns, "You are old enough to be talked about" (James 43), and further asks her if she would "prefer being thought a very reckless girl?" (James 43). To this question, Daisy laughingly retorts, "If this is improper, Mrs. Walker, then I am all improper, and you must give me up" (James 44). Innocence is translated as scandal which is observed when Daisy is perceived as "naturally indelicate", "uncultivated" (James 45), and belonging to the category of "a flirt" (James 49) which according to Winterbourne was "a purely American custom", that didn't exist there (James 50). Merit-based choice of company invites social ruin in Europe that can be understood from her Colosseum outing with Giovanelli about whom Daisy feels "Well, he is not a gentleman", but "he is a music master" with highly attractive "good looks!" (James 40). Her choosing friends as per her own wish (which actually represents the American ideal of choosing someone according to one's merit rather than one's birth), is read as final proof of her moral

depravity that completely ruins her reputation and makes her look “abnormal” among her compatriots (James 56). Her death from Roman fever after her strong assertion “I never was sick, and I don’t mean to be” (James 60), expresses the ultimate irony in the novella, that the Dream that actually promised health, happiness, and success instead brought sickness and death (to Daisy as well as her entire character and reputation) in the cage of European civilisation (Fussell 45; Madsen 201). She herself says, “I, thank goodness, am not a young lady of this country. The young ladies of this country have a dreadfully poky time of it...I don’t see why I should change my habits for them.” (James 49)

This collapse is a collective collapse, not just at an individual level. The whole Miller family – the parents, the brother, the daughter – are assessed and condemned by the same rigid European standard. Mrs. Miller is regarded as “just as bad!” who “treats the courier as a family friend- like a gentleman” (James 17) by Mrs. Costello, and an “imbecile” (James 42) by Mrs. Walker for not even trying to stop Daisy from roaming about openly with men. This lax supervision of the mother would be interpreted in the American sense as democratic parenting and trust in the freedom of the individual, and in the European sense as a lack of proper hierarchical control and neglect of the child.

The most striking inversion of the European hierarchy is Eugenio's casual authority, and the clearest proof of the Millers' cultural alienation. In Old World terms, a courier is a servant who should remain invisible and deferential (as evident from the comments of Mrs. Costello in Chapter II of the novella). But in the Miller home, Eugenio wears “fine clothes, so like a gentleman”, “sits with them in the garden, in the evening”, (James 17) lounges in the public rooms, pours coffee for guests, corrects Ms. Miller as well as Mrs. Miller in front of strangers, and even gives mild reprimands to Daisy. This is a finest example of American meritocracy in action that states that money buys service and competence, not subservience. A servant who thinks he is one of the principal members of the house is an outrage to the Europeanised eye. It is therefore the last proof that the Millers know nothing of rank, tradition or decorum.

So, the expatriate community does not only denounce Daisy, but also the entire American culture and its ideals (such as new money, democratic manners, and unapologetic innocence) as absolutely vulgar. Winterbourne’s belated recognition when he told his aunt that “he had done her injustice” (James 64), comes too late and changes nothing; as by then, the cultural verdict has already been passed on the entire family. The Dream’s tenets (perfectly realised in Daisy and her kin) thus prove fatal for any bearer of uncompromised American identity in a country having rigid or completely different culture.

James’s Perception of American vs. European Culture

James always presents American culture as young, democratic, and full of innocence and naivety, whereas European culture is old, rich, and sophisticated, but ritualistic and confining (Habegger 89). The Millers prove to be uncompromising Americans from the beginning, when Randolph is seen demanding American candy and asserting that Europe is inferior (James 6–8), to the end, when they are buried in the Protestant Cemetery. Europeanised expatriates and continental society react in uniform horror and label them “very common” (James 17) and having abnormal behaviour (James 56). The city of Rome itself is built on the foundations of the old traditions that acts as a court in which American innocence is put to the test and executed.

Between the two worlds, Winterbourne is fascinated by Daisy, but is unable to protect her from European categories (“very charming; but how deuced sociable!”) [James 12]). He therefore serves as James’s tool to represent his own experience and feelings through

Winterbourne's eyes, as the whole novella is narrated through Winterbourne only. Throughout the book, Winterbourne is trying (and failing) to determine if Daisy is "innocent" or "coquette" (James 12). It is in the last part of the novella that he realises his mistake when he confesses that he has done injustice to her (James 65). So, James has attempted to make the readers feel the same cultural misreading that undermines the American Dream overseas as he felt. The conflict between the New World ideals and the Old World pressure is evident when liberty is regarded as vulgar, openness as danger, and innocence as moral laxity in the latter. The Miller family (representing Randolph's brashness, Mrs. Miller's helplessness, and Daisy's independence) is vividly condemned by the same inflexible code, thus proving that the Dream's failure is cultural, not gendered.

CONCLUSION

Daisy Miller embodies all the key elements of the 18th and 19th century American Dream, but these same attributes lead to her isolation and death in Europe. James sets a stark contrast between the vitality of democracy in America and that of hierarchy in European culture, making the point that the potential of the Dream tenets is geographically limited. What is regarded and encouraged as freedom at home, is condemned as impropriety and misconduct abroad. Daisy's tragedy which is also reflected in her brother's impudence, and her mother's "very different type of maternity from that of vigilant matrons" (James 24) is not personal or individual, but collective. It is also clear that the Dream which is exported to another place without any compromise cannot survive the century old rituals, judgments, monitoring and scrutiny. This proves that acculturation is necessary to survive in a new culture. James's novella is thus an unmistakable warning that even the strongest traits that can be found in an American can transform into their weakest traits on a foreign land.

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