

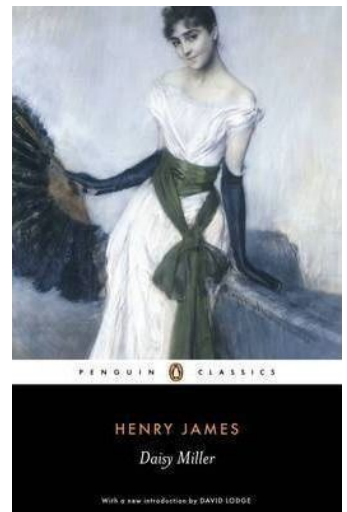
Daisy Miller

Henry James

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In the autumn of 1877, Henry James heard a piece of gossip from a friend in Rome about a young American girl traveling with her wealthy but unsophisticated mother in Europe. The girl had met a handsome Italian of “vague identity” and no particular social standing and attempted to introduce him into the exclusive society of expatriate Americans in Rome. The incident had ended in a snub of some sort, a “small social check . . . of no great gravity,” the exact nature of which James promptly forgot. Nevertheless, in the margin of the notebook where he recorded the anecdote, he wrote “Dramatise, dramatise!” He never knew the young lady in question or heard mention of her again, but he proceeded to immortalize the idea of her in *Daisy Miller*.

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Henry James: a brief biography



Henry James has been called the first of the great psychological realists in our time. Honored as one of the greatest artists of the novel, he is also regarded as one of America's most influential critics and literary theorists. During the fifty years of his literary career, which spanned the period from the end of the American Civil War to the beginning of World War I, James produced a body of tales and novels that fills thirty-six volumes and an almost equal number of

volumes of non-fiction prose, including travel books, autobiography, books of criticism, letters, and literary notebooks.

Henry James was born in New York City on April 15, 1843, into an affluent and socially prominent family. His father, Henry James, Sr., moved among a wide circle of intellectual leaders of the time and exposed his children to the cultural advantages of New England and, more especially, Europe; before he reached his

eighteenth birthday, the younger James had lived abroad for extended periods on three separate occasions.

An "obscure hurt" suffered in 1861, an injury to his spine, kept James from service in the Civil War; for reasons perhaps related to this injury, James never married. At the age of thirty-three, he took up residence in Europe, living first for a year in Paris and then permanently in England. He became a British subject in 1915, a year before his death.

The influence of James' European experience and, ultimately, the "idea" of Europe as it relates to his work are central to an understanding of James' fiction. As a young man, James sensed the freedom of Americans to "deal freely with forms of civilization not our own . . . and assimilate"; in 1869, at the age of twenty-six, he traveled again to Europe, entered the mainstream of London intellectual life, and formed friendships with leading literary figures of the time. He returned to America in 1870, went abroad again in 1872 for two more years, spent the winter of 1874-75 in New York, and finally left America in 1875, this time for good. In Europe, James could best deal with his dominant theme: the illumination of the present by "the sense of the past," the American present illuminated by the sense of the European past. James saw, in his own words, the manifest "possibility of contrast in the human lot . . . encountered as we turn back and forth between the distinctively American and the distinctively European outlook." This contrast forms the basis of

the Jamesian "international theme."

James' literary career has been divided into three stages or "periods": the early period, the middle years, and the "later manner" or, more popularly, the major phase.

The period of James' apprenticeship and first success — the early period of his career — is characterized by his discovery and development of the "international" theme: the study of the American abroad, the juxtaposition of New World innocence and Old World experience, American freedom and European convention, and an examination of the conflicting values of the two societies. Works of this period include **Roderick Hudson** (1875); **The American** (1877), James' first really successful novel; **Daisy Miller** (1879); **The Europeans** (1878); and the triumphant novel which ends this period, **The Portrait of a Lady** (1881).

James' second period, the middle phase of his career, has also been labeled the period of his "social" novels, involving a turning from the international theme to complex social and political issues set against both New England and European backdrops. These novels include **The Princess Casamassima** (1886) and **The Bostonians** (1886). These books were not well received by his public. By 1889, James' income from his writings had dropped considerably. He abandoned fiction for the next five years in an unsuccessful attempt to write

for the stage. He wrote seven plays, of which only two were produced: one of them, a dramatization of **The American**, was moderately successful; the other, **Guy Domville**, proved a distinct and, for James, humiliating failure. He left London, moving to Rye, Sussex, a picturesque coastal town. There he returned to the writing of fiction and produced a series of tales (the best known of which is **The Turn of the Screw**) and the novels **The Spoils of Poynton** (1897), **What Maisie Knew** (1897), and **The Awkward Age** (1899).

The final period of James' career — the major phase — produced the novels that are today regarded as the peak of his achievement: **The Wings of the Dove** (1902), **The Ambassadors** (1903), and **The Golden Bowl** (1904). In these three novels, James returned to his "international" theme, but with a more subtle, mature, and deeper exploration of its implications. **The Ambassadors** is perhaps the most widely admired of James' novels and is an excellent introduction to his work, for it embodies his most significant themes and the best of his style and technique. **The Ambassadors** presents Henry James at the peak of his literary career.

[<https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/a/the-ambassadors/henry-james-biography>]

Themes, motifs and symbols in *Daisy Miller*

THEMES

[Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.]

Americans Abroad

Daisy Miller was one of James's earliest treatments of one of the themes for which he became best known: the expatriate or footloose American abroad. Americans abroad was a subject very much of the moment in the years after the Civil War. The postwar boom, the so-called Gilded Age, had given rise to a new class of American businessman, whose stylish families were eager to make "the grand tour" and expose themselves to the art and culture of the Old World. Americans were visiting Europe for the first time in record numbers, and the clash between the two cultures was a novel and widespread phenomenon.

James was of two minds about the American character. By temperament, he was more sympathetic with the European way of life, with its emphasis on culture, education, and the art of conversation. Like most Europeans, he saw his compatriots as boorish, undereducated, and absurdly provincial, unaware of a vast and centuries-old world outside their own new and expanding dominions. However, he was also fascinated by the poignant innocence of the American national character, with its emphasis on earnestness rather than artifice. In later novels, such as *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The American*, James would continue to explore the moral implications of an

artlessness that, like Daisy's, cannot defend itself against the worldliness and cynicism of a decadent society based, necessarily, on hypocrisy.

The Sadness and Safety of the Unlived Life

If the American abroad was James's signature theme, that of the unlived life was his almost perpetual subtext. Repeatedly in James's novels and stories, characters focus their attention on an abstraction, an ideal or idea they feel they could figure out or achieve if only they could devote their spirit or intellectual faculties to it with sufficient understanding or patience. Again and again, they realize too late that whatever it was they sought to understand or achieve, whatever they waited for, has passed them by and that they have wasted their whole life—or, like Winterbourne, they never fully arrive at that realization. One way of looking at *Daisy Miller* is to conclude that the whole issue of Daisy's character is beside the point, a red herring that distracts Winterbourne from the business of living. In that case, the heart of the novel would be Winterbourne's character, and the fear or lack of passion that causes him to hide from life behind the ultimately unimportant conundrum of Daisy's innocence, or lack thereof.

MOTIFS

[Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.]

Gossip

Daisy Miller is a story about gossip couched as a piece of gossip, an anecdote told by a narrator who not only was not involved in the events described but who doesn't really care very much about them. The narrator sees the whole incident with detached amusement, as a pleasant way of diverting his listeners. *Daisy Miller* originated with a piece of gossip James had heard from a friend while visiting Rome, but the story had a nonending—someone got snubbed, that was all. James has been criticized for adding the melodramatic element of Daisy's death. In a sense, though, by underselling the story as a piece of inconsequential gossip, James heightens the poignancy of Daisy's fate. The fact that Daisy dies and no one seems to care much makes her death all the more sad.

Innocence

Throughout *Daisy Miller*, Winterbourne is preoccupied with the question of whether Daisy is innocent. The word innocent appears repeatedly, always with a different shade of meaning. Innocent had three meanings in James's day. First, it could have meant "ignorant" or "uninstructed." Daisy is "innocent" of the art of conversation, for example. It could also have meant "naïve," as it does today. Mrs. Costello uses the word in this sense when she calls Winterbourne "too innocent" in Chapter 2. Finally, when Winterbourne protests, twirling his moustache in a sinister fashion, he invokes the

third meaning, “not having done harm or wrong.”

This third sense is the one that preoccupies Winterbourne as he tries to come to a decision about Daisy. He initially judges the Millers to be merely “very ignorant” and “very innocent,” and he assesses Daisy as a “harmless” flirt. As the novel progresses, he becomes increasingly absorbed in the question of her culpability. He fears she is guilty not of any particular sex act per se but merely of a vulgar mindset, a lack of concern for modesty and decency, which would put her beyond his interest or concern. One could argue that it is the way in which Daisy embodies all the different meanings of “innocence” that is her downfall.

SYMBOLS

[Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.]

Daisy and Randolph

The most frequently noted symbols in *Daisy Miller* are Daisy herself and her younger brother, Randolph. Daisy is often seen as representing America: she is young, fresh, ingenuous, clueless, naïve, innocent, well meaning, self-centered, untaught, scornful of convention, unaware of social distinctions, utterly lacking in any sense of propriety, and unwilling to adapt to the mores and standards of others. These traits have no fixed moral content, and nearly all of them can be regarded as either virtues or faults. However, Randolph is a different matter. He is a thinly veiled comment on the type of the “ugly American” tourist:

boorish, boastful, and stridently nationalistic.

The Coliseum

The Coliseum is where Daisy’s final encounter with Winterbourne takes place and where she contracts the fever that will kill her. It is a vast arena, famous as a site of gladiatorial games and where centuries of Christian martyrdoms took place. As such, it is a symbol of sacrificed innocence. When Daisy first sees Winterbourne in the moonlight, he overhears her telling Giovanelli that “he looks at us as one of the old lions or tigers may have looked at the Christian martyrs!” In fact, the Coliseum is, in a sense, where Winterbourne throws Daisy to the lions and where he decides she has indeed sacrificed her innocence. It is where he decides to wash his hands of her because she is not worth saving or even worrying about.

Rome and Geneva

Daisy Miller’s setting in the capitals of Italy and Switzerland is significant on a number of levels. Both countries had strong associations with the Romantic poets, whom Winterbourne greatly admires. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* takes place largely in Switzerland, and Mary Shelley wrote it during the time that she, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron sojourned at Lake Geneva. Mary Shelley and John Keats are both buried in the Protestant Cemetery, which becomes Daisy’s own final resting place. For the purposes of *Daisy*

Miller, the two countries represent opposing values embodied by their capital cities, Rome and Geneva. Geneva was the birthplace of Calvinism, the fanatical protestant sect that influenced so much of American culture, New England in particular. Geneva is referred to as “the dark old city at the other end of the lake.” It is also Winterbourne’s chosen place of residence.

Rome had many associations for cultivated people like Winterbourne and Mrs. Costello. It was a city of contrasts. As a cradle of ancient civilization and the birthplace of the Renaissance, it represented both glory and corruption, a society whose greatness had brought about its own destruction. Rome is a city of ruins, which suggest death and decay. Rome is also a city of sophistication, the Machiavellian mind-set. In a sense, Rome represents the antithesis of everything Daisy stands for—freshness, youth, ingenuousness, candor, innocence, and naïveté.

[<https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/daisy/symbols/>]

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Els dilluns, de 15.30 a 21 h
De dimarts a divendres, de 9 a 21 h
Els dissabtes, d'10 a 14 h i de 15 a 20 h
Setmana Santa, Nadal i estiu: horaris especials

barcelonabookclub.wordpress.com

Notes

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