

Review

A Deconstructive Glance at *Daisy Miller*

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The present study reflected a deconstructive reading of *Daisy Miller* by Henry James. In doing so, first deconstruction theory was discussed briefly, then a close deconstructive reading of *Daisy Miller* was done to focus on the function of binary oppositions such as America/Europe, new/old, honesty/hypocrisy in the story, but the major attempt concentrated on the binary opposition of innocent/guilty which was pivotal in the text. In spite of different viewpoints about Daisy's character and the question of being innocent or guilty, the study showed that in fact Daisy acted as a signifier who didn't settle in neither side of the innocent/guilty opposition and thus never found its transcendental signified.

Keywords: Daisy Miller, Deconstruction, Henry James, Jacques Derrida

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INTRODUCTION

The famous American short story writer and novelist Henry James is one of the figures in American literature whose works are still widely read. His delicate diction and his famous *international theme* attract many readers. One of his best works depicting his international theme is *Daisy Miller*. The story is a good example of the contradictions between American and European cultures, and it provides a good idea to be challenged by deconstruction theory pioneered by Jacques Derrida the famous French philosopher.

In the realm of criticism of literature, deconstruction is a theory and practice of reading that questions and claims

to subvert or undermine the assumption that the system of language provides adequate grounds to establish the boundaries, the coherence or unity, and the determinate meanings of a literary text.

Derrida's seminal text *Of Grammatology* (1976) explores the main themes of deconstruction. This text is concerned with logocentrism and its impact on the western philosophical canon. In particular, *Of Grammatology* is an exposition on metaphysics, especially the impact of metaphysics of presence (Norris, 2002, p.28). Sean Burke claims, "the principle contention of *Of Grammatology* is that the repression of writing is the

universally prior condition of the logocentric episteme" (Burke, 1992, p.134).

Metaphysics is defined as an attempt to characterize existence or reality as a whole, usually through rational argument (Bunnin and Yu, 2004, p.429). It involves a fundamental quest for knowledge about the existence of non-physical entities, such as God. According to Nietzsche, all metaphysical systems start with the theological question, that is, a concern with the existence and qualities of God (Papadelos, 2010, p.78). However and perhaps more controversially, the study of metaphysics also questions the scientific assumption that physical objects actually exist. The primary component of metaphysics is ontology (the study of existence itself). Empiricists such as David Hume claim that metaphysics is merely Sophism and have long contested its connection to philosophy. Interestingly, what is commonly referred to as Continental philosophy is largely preoccupied with the study of metaphysics. Deconstruction is most often situated within this philosophical framework. As Derrida says, deconstruction is also a symptom. It's a symptom that takes a philosophical form most often philosophical and literary (Wood and Bernasconi, 1988, p.1-5). Indeed, Derrida looks to both philosophy and literature to demonstrate the pervasiveness of metaphysics of presence.

Derrida claims that philosophy, as a discipline, has a vested interest in seeing itself unaffected by language, independent of its own history, textuality and materiality. In addition, philosophy regards itself as working with 'pure' concepts, unhampered by the linguistic tools upon which it must rely. Somewhat ironically, Derrida uses the language of philosophy (Being, Truth, Reason) against itself, in order to uncover philosophy's dependence on the transcendental signified or the pure presence of meaning (Papadelos, 2010, p.78).

In order to find the pure presence of meaning of a text, one suitable option is to look at binary oppositions. A binary opposition is a pair of related terms or concepts that are opposite in meaning. They are essential elements in logocentric languages. In structuralism, a binary opposition is seen as a fundamental organizer of human philosophy, culture, and language. Derrida claims that there is a tacit hierarchy in a binary pair in which one term is considered privileged or superior and the other inferior (Abrams and Harpham, 2009, p.71-2)

However, the task of a deconstructor is not only to find binary oppositions. He/she should try to show the unstable ground on which those binaries and their dominating concepts are constructed. Sometimes a term or concept can have more than one opposite. Sometimes there is no obvious opposition between binaries but by close analysis the false presupposed opposition is revealed. Those supposed binary oppositions, held true and stable by structuralist will be challenged by breaking the hierarchy between them.

DISCUSSION

In this research Daisy Miller is re-read using deconstructive strategy first introduced by French philosopher Jacques Derrida. This approach will show the instability of those bases on which the text is constructed. When the novella is analyzed closely, it becomes obvious that Daisy's life is full of oppositions, either good or bad. She is being "pushed and pulled," resulting in mental confusion, and leading to a rupture in her identity. She is pressured by both societies and by the people in her life. All these aspects have an effect on her behavior. Whether this was Henry James's intention, the reader does not know. Nevertheless, in this section the writer of these lines will shortly examine the contemporary European and American societies described in the novella, and link the remaining characters with these opposing cultures. Beside the cultures, the characters are also opposed, creating such categories as the upper class "Europeanized" Americans, Mr. Winterbourne and Mrs. Walker, and the "lower class", Mr. Giovanelli and Mrs. Miller. The opposition can be seen in relation to the class they represent or their gender. First, "Europeanized" characters of the novella would be examined and then "lower class" ones. Nevertheless, it will be described how they all individually show; these characters seem to be polar opposites because of their values, manners, and social class. By examining both cultures and their characters, it will be cleared how their values and particularly gender roles contribute to Daisy's mental confusion.

One can find a neat list of binary oppositions in the text. For example the Daisy/Winterbourne, Winterbourne/Giovanelli, America/Europe or symbolic binary pairs like spring/winter which are all operating in the text. It will be a good idea to have a deconstructive reading of these opposition pairs. Just remember that it is not the critic who deconstructs a text but the text has already deconstructed itself. As Derrida says "deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject, or even of modernity. It deconstructs itself". (Wood and Bernasconi, 1988, p.4)

One of the main questions that engross Winterbourne's and Giovanelli's minds as well as the reader's mind is that whether Daisy is innocent or not? In fact this question and the binary opposition of innocent/guilty are pivotal in the text.

To deal with this issue, a broader scope should be considered. Indeed this question is closely related to James' international theme, in which American characters are situated in a European country with high social and cultural standards. In Jamesian outlook America is the new world versus Europe as the old world. The Europeans are considered as experienced whereas Americans are regarded as innocent. Here other binary

oppositions related to the differences of American and European society and culture such as America/Europe, new/old, equality/class hierarchy, honesty/hypocrisy arise.

Regarding the character of Daisy Miller, she is a young American girl seemingly innocent and novice in getting in touch with others especially young male mates. The important point here is that James does not give us background information about Daisy's past in America. Also the readers will not get sufficient information about her father. Why Henry James remains silent about Daisy's past? Was she an innocent girl during his growing up in America? Didn't she have any relations or liaisons with young men there? James' silence here intensifies the ambiguity about Daisy's character.

After his first encounter of Daisy Miller, Winterbourne's mind is occupied with many different questions. In fact he tries to define her character within his logic and eventually he defines her as a flirt but in a different sense:

Poor Winterbourne was amused, perplexed, and decidedly charmed. He had never yet heard a young girl express herself in just this fashion; never, at least, save in cases where to say such things seemed a kind of demonstrative evidence of a certain laxity of deportment. And yet was he to accuse Miss Daisy Miller of actual or potential *inconduite*, as they said at Geneva? He felt that he had lived at Geneva so long that he had lost a good deal; he had become dishabituated to the American tone. Never, indeed, since he had grown old enough to appreciate things, had he encountered a young American girl of so pronounced a type as this. Certainly she was very charming, but how deucedly sociable! Was she simply a pretty girl from New York State? Were they all like that, the pretty girls who had a good deal of gentlemen's society? Or was she also a designing, an audacious, an unscrupulous young person? Winterbourne had lost his instinct in this matter, and his reason could not help him. Miss Daisy Miller looked extremely innocent. Some people had told him that, after all, American girls were exceedingly innocent; and others had told him that, after all, they were not. He was inclined to think Miss Daisy Miller was a flirt--a pretty American flirt. He had never, as yet, had any relations with young ladies of this category. He had known, here in Europe, two or three women--persons older than Miss Daisy Miller, and provided, for respectability's sake, with husbands--who were great coquettes--dangerous, terrible women, with whom one's relations were liable to take a serious turn. But this young girl was not a coquette in that sense;

she was very unsophisticated; she was only a pretty American flirt. Winterbourne was almost grateful for having found the formula that applied to Miss Daisy Miller. He leaned back in his seat; he remarked to himself that she had the most charming nose he had ever seen; he wondered what were the regular conditions and limitations of one's intercourse with a pretty American flirt. It presently became apparent that he was on the way to learn (p.12-13).

Winterbourne is temporarily happy to find a formula in which Daisy is definable. He says she is a flirt but a different flirt. The word flirt is almost synonymous with coquette as Winterbourne refers. Coquette is a flirtatious woman or more precisely as it is stated in Merriam-Webster Dictionary, woman who likes to win the attention or admiration of men but does not have serious feelings for them. Winterbourne already knows that at least in Europe flirts or coquettes are dangerous and not innocent. But "Miss Daisy Miller looked extremely innocent", "Some people had told him that, after all, American girls were exceedingly innocent; and others had told him that, after all, they were not"(p.15). So in a new and contradictory way he defines her as an innocent flirt. There is a regular binary opposition: Innocent/Flirt but Winterbourne presents a new pair: Innocent flirt/Dangerous flirt.

How can a girl be an innocent girl and a flirt at the same time? It seems that the problem is with the word flirt. The word flirt connotes being coquette and not innocent. These concepts are in the heart of it but at the same time it its rather descriptive definition a flirt is not serious in his flirtatious behavior. So the world flirt has the seed of its opposite that is innocence in its heart. In this way it is obvious that the hierarchy and seemingly opposition established in Innocent/Flirt pair breaks down.

Daisy displays the logic of the supplement too. She suggests to the reader that innocence always already contains in it the seed of its opposite, experience, and that innocence can be defined only by its opposition with experience. This dynamic of innocence and experience is seen in Winterbourne himself, of whom his aunt says, "You are too innocent," then, "You are guilty too" (p.21).

Besides, if a reader accepts Daisy's character as an innocent girl, her death at the end of the story would be a tragic scene, making the whole story a tragic sad one. But if a reader recognizes her as a flirt in its usual meaning, then her death at the end is a kind of punishment she deserved it related to the notion of poetic justice. So here, at least two different and opposing interpretations can be attributed to this story.

Another interesting point is about the word innocent itself. By checking a dictionary, it is seen that it has at least three different meaning: ignorant or uneducated, naïve or gullible and not guilty, harmless and or, not

having done harm or wrong. It is more interesting to know that Henry James masterfully uses the word innocent in all of the three mentioned meanings. Mrs. Costello calls Winterbourne "too innocent". It can be meant too naïve, but thereafter she calls him "guilty" too (p.21). Here Mrs. Costello indicates two meanings of innocent respectively: not guilty and naïve. However this interpretation is unstable because the meaning of the word innocent here can be three-dimensional and this is where the concept of *différance* is perceived. While one tries to define a signifier like innocent here the meaning of it is postponed or differed in terms of Derrida. Thereafter Winterbourne tells of Daisy's mother and Americans to his aunt that "They are very ignorant—very innocent only" (p.37). Here the word innocent stands for ignorant. The more exciting matter is that Daisy embodies all of the above mentioned different meanings of innocent at the same time. She is an American ignorant or uneducated girl, a harmless flirt and a naïve and simple girl in a sense as well.

Another binary opposition working in the text is generally Daisy/Winterbourne pair. The story mainly revolves around the interaction of these two characters. It would be interesting to do a closer analysis of this pair. These two characters seem in opposition to each other in many aspects even in their names. Henry James masterfully uses the words and names in a metaphorical sense in this story. Daisy is the name of a flower usually white colored, blooming in spring. Daisy Miller comes from America, the new world. Spring is a symbol of being new and rebirth. America is the spring of the globe in this sense. Moreover, the daisy as a flower has important symbolic meanings too. The flower symbolism associated with the daisy is purity, innocence, loyal love, beauty, patience and simplicity (Hall, 1994, p.145 and Ferber, 2007, p.50). Daisy Miller seems innocent too. The flower is white and in the story daisy is dressed in white as well. All of these cues seem to be intentionally put together by Henry James to convince the reader that she is innocent.

On the other side, there is Winterbourne. Bourne means destination or goal. It can be a variation of born (past participle bear) too. His residency is Geneva, a wintery and cold city with high European social standards. Geneva is a city with a long history in Europe. It can be a symbol of old world that is Europe. Europe or Europeans are representatives of experience in contrast with America and American that stand for innocence.

All of the above descriptions apparently place the spring above winter in the binary pair of Spring/Winter. But again this binary pair and the hierarchy between its two sides is challenged. The above mentioned pair can be reversed too. Despite being described as wintery and experienced or not innocent, Winterbourne shows warm and sincere affection toward Daisy. He also seems novice and innocent in his date with her. On the other side, Daisy who apparently symbolizes spring, warm and

sincere feelings, innocence and purity treats Winterbourne in a way that does not seem sincere. Her fondness toward Winterbourne seems also cold and impure. If she was truly in love with him, she would never go out with Giovanelli a young Italian beau from unknown family and background. Then when Winterbourne sees the couple, Daisy behaves her coldly. In Winterbourne's mind, at least for a short time before her death, Daisy's date with Giovanelli intensifies the idea that she is not that much innocent.

Another pivotal theme in the works of Henry James is the differences of America and Europe or in the other word, American culture and society versus European culture and society. It has been told in previous sections that America is regarded as the new world and Europe as the old world. The people of the new world are mainly considered innocent and frank whereas European are regarded as experienced and hypocrites. In this view, Europe and Europeans embrace high cultural and social standards. They are cultivated and civilized men while Americans are regarded as coarse and uncultured men. The high culture and social standards of Europe is represented by Mrs. Walker and Mrs. Costello in the story. However, these two are American expatriates and not originally European. Mrs. Costello, as Winterbourne's aunt warns him about his relationship with Daisy Miller. She describes Daisy as common, "she is very common". Even Winterbourne affirms that "She is completely uncultivated" (p.17). Winterbourne is very much influenced by his aunt and indeed he's been grown up with those high social standards of Europe but after meeting Daisy he's become a bit skeptical or careless of it. This issue is evident in his argument about Daisy with his aunt. While Winterbourne accepts his aunt's view that Daisy is common or uncultivated, he insists that "she is wonderfully pretty, and, in short, she is very nice. To prove that I believe it, I am going to take her to the Chateau de Chillon." (p.17). This implies his love for Daisy despite her low level of social and cultural statue. It seems that the binary pair of European/American in which European people and customs are highly privileged to American ones is automatically and eventually breaking down in Winterbourne's mind.

Moreover, the only European main character in the text is Giovanelli. He is described as "beautiful" by Daisy. It seems that she is attracted to him only for his beauty. She doesn't know anything about his background and attitudes. The narrator again is silent here about Giovanelli's background. Though Italian, he speaks "English very cleverly". Winterbourne tell daisy about Giovanelli that "He is not a gentleman", he is only a clever imitation of one." Here Winterbourne refers to Giovanelli's social rank, describing him as a "low-lived foreigner" (p.46). It was told that Europeans are considered cultivated and civilized despite the boorish Americans. But here the hierarchy between America and

Europe breaks down because the main Italian or European character of story is not a cultivated and civilized person though he pretends to be so.

Another point about Americans and Europeans and the hierarchy between them is that despite being considered as cultivated they're also considered hypocrites. This is another paradox. Usually the term cultivated is associated with virtues and morality but hypocrisy one the main opposites of integrity and the state of being cultured. So again here another binary opposition breaks down: state of being cultured /state of being hypocrite. Perhaps it can be said, at least in some cases, those who pretend to be cultured are skilled hypocrites. When Winterbourne meets Giovanelli, he cannot deny his beauty. Winterbourne says "Damn his good looks!" It can be a sign of jealousy. He is jealous of Giovanelli's attractiveness. He's also angry about daisy's inclination toward Giovanelli:

Mr. Giovanelli had certainly a very pretty face; but Winterbourne felt a superior indignation at his own lovely fellow countrywoman's not knowing the difference between a spurious gentleman and a real one (p.45).

Winterbourne calls Giovanelli a false gentleman. He regards himself in a higher position than Giovanelli. Again another negative trait for a cultivated man is arrogance which is evident here in Winterbourne characters. It is interesting that despite being said that Giovanelli is from a low class background, there is no evidence in the text to support this idea.

Throughout the story, Daisy spends times with Winterbourne and Giovanelli respectively. Winterbourne is an American expatriate, almost fully accustomed to high European moral and cultural codes.

On the other hand stand Giovanelli, a young Italian beau of presumably lower class background. His beauty is emphasized in the story especially in the eyes of Daisy. She describes him as an "intimate friend of mine" who is the "the handsomest man in the world". (p.41) Daisy has spent a short period of time with him but she describes him as her intimate friend. She mentions that

He knows plenty of Italians, but he wants to know some Americans. He thinks ever so much of Americans. He's tremendously clever. He's perfectly lovely! (p.41)

Here she indicates that Giovanelli has met many Italians before. It seems that the verb know here means to be familiar with or to be friends with Italians. It is almost obvious that by the word Italians, she means Italian girls. So she knows that Giovanelli's affection for her cannot be honest and pure. Despite this fact she describes him as her great and intimate friend. Here the idea of

considering Daisy as a coquette is reinforced. It seems that her main intention is only to flirt with different young men.

Daisy also says that Giovanelli "wants to know some Americans". Somewhere else she tells Winterbourne that Giovanelli "spoke English very cleverly" (p.45). Here the opposition of the two men becomes lucid eventually. On one side stand Winterbourne, an expatriate American accustomed to high moral and cultural codes of Europe who probably have learned to speak French or Italian too. Winterbourne is interested to communicate with Americans especially American girls. On the other hand stands Giovanelli who is the opposite of Winterbourne in many respects. He is an Italian presumably from a lower class family. He speaks English well and is very much interested to get familiar with American girls too. Unlike Winterbourne who seems to like Daisy sincerely, Giovanelli only wants to befriend her and enjoy her temporarily.

The above account was from a structuralist viewpoint in which the two male characters were defined based on binary oppositions. But by close analysis of the two, once again the hierarchy between the two sides of the binary opposition breaks down.

In European culture represented by Eugenio, Mrs. Walker and Mrs. Costello in the text, it is not appropriate for a gentleman to talk to or spend time with a young single lady. But regardless of this fact, Winterbourne cannot hide her desire and is drawn toward her. So here Winterbourne is not only the opposite of Giovanelli but also they both share the same desire and behave in a similar manner. Moreover, like Giovanelli, Winterbourne doesn't seem to think of marrying Daisy. He rather tries to define Daisy within his mind. Another shared characteristic of the two men is that both want to experience something new. Winterbourne wants to experience the state of being with an American girl and Giovanelli wants it too. So it is evident that the superficial opposition between Winterbourne and Giovanelli is not reliable, they share many attitudes and features.

CONCLUSION

The above analysis was only the result of a close reading of Daisy Miller using a deconstructive strategy. It showed that how the text deconstructs itself and paves the way for its own collapse. The concept of undecidability was vividly seen in Winterbourne's inability to define Daisy's character. Also the notion of supplement was made clear in Daisy's character and her innocence. Unsteady binary oppositions and the hierarchy between their elements were challenged and broken down too. As the pivotal character, Daisy's character showed the unavailability of a transcendental signified and meaning.

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