

# Individuality: A Blessing and Occasional Curse

*Peyton Ellis*

English

*Faculty advisor: Dr. Ruth Marotte*

In the nineteenth century, women were discouraged from developing a sense of individuality. However, many writers of the Victorian Age had different ideas. Henry James, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Kate Chopin write of the importance of female individuality in their respective short stories "Daisy Miller: A Study," "A White Heron," and "Désirée's Baby." Although these stories focus on individuality as a positive trait, the writers do not portray individuality as easily obtained. In their stories, James, Jewett, and Chopin assert that while individuality is imperative to happiness, it can also be dangerous, especially for women.

As the title character in "Daisy Miller: A Study," Daisy Miller is a young socialite. James portrays Daisy as confident, independent, and, unfortunately, "completely uncultivated" (337). She is an American in Europe, and she exemplifies "new money" with her fancy clothes, talks of travelling, flirtations with men, and limited social knowledge. While Daisy's behavior might be acceptable in America, by European social standards, she is "common" (James 336). Society's denouncement of her behavior can be explained by Judee K. Burgoon's "Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Applications of Expectancy Violations Theory," in which "Expectancies exert

---

significant influence on people's interaction patterns, on their impressions of one another, and on the outcomes of their interactions" (85). When a person—like Daisy—violates the expectations others have for them, more attention is shifted "to the violator and the meaning of the violation itself" (Burgoon 85). According to this theory, people do not understand Daisy because she acts in a way that is the opposite of what is expected of her; rather than following the rules of society, she does whatever she wants. People do not know how to process the idea of Daisy simply being different than other girls, so they choose to dislike her and give her the "cold shoulder" (James 361); they believe that since she is different, she must be wrong or there must be something wrong with her. It is hard to blame them for judging her; her behavior is beyond their realm of perception, so they cannot help but criticize what they do not understand. However, Daisy opts to disregard what others think of her, including her male friend, Frederick Winterbourne. Even though she looks the part of a loose woman, Daisy knows she does nothing wrong, and she makes no apologies. She is simply a girl who has many male friends, and in her mind, that is acceptable. When Daisy refuses to desert her friend, Mr. Giovanelli, on the streets of Rome, she cuts herself off socially (James 353). In order to preserve her individuality, she sacrifices her reputation. Her good behavior is later confirmed when Mr. Giovanelli admits Daisy was "the most innocent" (James 365) young lady he ever met.

While Daisy is, in reality, innocent, people like Winterbourne struggle to label her because she is so unlike other women in society. In Philip Page's "Daisy Miller's Parasol," Page writes that "Since Winterbourne relies too heavily on convention and conformity, his insistence on finding the right formula to explain Daisy serves

---

continually to distance her from him" (593-94). Daisy is exasperated and irritated with Winterbourne; she considers him to be her friend, but he constantly attempts to define her and fails to defend her actions (James 361). Winterbourne "treats her as an object in a class... not as an individual" (Page 594), and he ultimately decides trying to figure her out is a waste of his time. Fortunately, Daisy has a strong sense of her individuality—she even redefines the word "flirt" in an effort to explain her personality to Winterbourne (James 356)—but society wants her to fall under a specific category so she will be easier to understand.

Perhaps Daisy has trouble in society because she lives in an idealistic world in which everyone is just as inclusive as her. She is young and naïve, and her naivety is what allows her to stay true to herself: she does not realize just how much damage she does to herself by questioning culture. While Daisy embraces her individuality through adventure, she does not realize danger comes with breaking the rules. After she catches malaria from a night in the Coliseum with Mr. Giovanelli, Daisy dies (James 365). She "flirted" with disaster—she pushed the envelope a bit too far. Although society rejected her and her own decisions killed her, Daisy must die happy knowing she stayed true to herself until the very end. She chose to die with experience rather than live without it. Through Daisy's sense of individuality, James displays that the world will not always be accepting, but living life is more important than following the rules. However, not all those who embrace individuality are as flamboyant or daring as Daisy.

The opposite of Daisy is Sylvia, the little girl at the center of Jewett's "A White Heron." Sylvia's life begins in the city, where she

---

“had tried to grow” (Jewett 414) physically, mentally, and emotionally “for eight years” (414). When Sylvia moves to the country with her grandmother, her life changes—and she changes. Her type of metamorphosis is explained in Miri Rozmarin’s “Power, Freedom, and Individuality: Foucault and Sexual Difference” when Rozmarin writes “The individual is... an open and dynamic structure, shaped but not determined by social, historical and discursive conditions” (5). Sylvia realizes the city confined her—she “never had been alive at all” (Jewett 414) there. However, she is open to nature and allows it to shape her, and it is the perfect fit. As her name depicts, she is a creature of the forest, running freely with animals. Her individuality grows on her grandmother’s farm: she is independent, and she never gets homesick (Jewett 414). On the farm, Sylvia is in her natural element, and she is very happy. However, when a hunter interrupts Sylvia’s little world, she begins to question her sense of self. The hunter learns that Sylvia is knowledgeable of nature and hopes that she will help him find a white heron (Jewett 416). Of course, Sylvia knows where to find this bird, but she is torn over helping the hunter. The heron is part of the nature that shaped her identity. She is happy with her life as it is, but she also would not mind finding an actual human friend in the hunter. To make her decision more difficult, the hunter offers her ten dollars to help him (Jewett 416), and she and her grandmother need the money. In order to comply with the hunter, Sylvia must give away a part of herself—a piece of her natural habitat that saved her.

Ultimately, Sylvia finds the heron in a tree, and she looks across the “vast and awesome world” she has never seen before (Jewett 418). Her grandmother and most women in her area have never experienced this world, but Sylvia now has hope that she can

---

be part of it one day. From the treetop, she sees possibilities and opportunities. She shares this moving experience of watching “the sea and the morning” (Jewett 419) with the heron, so “she cannot tell the heron’s secret and give its life away” (Jewett 419). They feel a camaraderie, and she decides she cannot put a price on this experience. She remains loyal to the nature that restores and comforts her.

Rozmarin defines “openness” as “the mode of ethical being that ontologically defines the individual as shaped through day-to-day decisions and practices that involve others” (5), meaning individuality grows through what may seem like small, mundane decisions and acts—such as Sylvia’s decision to save the bird from the hunter. While this decision may appear unimportant to readers, it is huge for Sylvia, and it helps shape her as a person. Although she is confident in her decision to keep the heron from the hunter, she remains sad because she sacrifices her chance at friendship and money (Jewett 419). In Sylvia’s sense of loss, Jewett explains that staying true to one’s self is not always easy; sometimes a person cannot do what makes them happy because it conflicts with his or her sense of individuality. If Sylvia had given up the heron, she would have felt far more regret than she did in losing things she never actually had—friends and money. Jewett also wants to display that Sylvia takes a risk with the hunter; females, especially female children, are meant to submit to males. When she does not help the hunter, Sylvia violates his expectations (Burgoon 85) and puts herself in danger, but she knows protecting nature is more important than protecting herself. Sylvia’s sense of individuality is built around nature, so she cannot betray the one thing that makes her Sylvia.

---

However, not all writers create characters like Sylvia who know where they are meant to be.

While Sylvia feels she is one with nature, Désirée of Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" does not know where she belongs. She was an orphan, dropped off in "the shadow of the big stone pillar" (Chopin 421) where her mother, a barren but loving woman named Madame Valmondé, found her. She is a seemingly white, beautiful baby: "the idol of Valmondé" (Chopin 421). While she stands under the same stone pillar eighteen years later, Armand Aubigny rides by and immediately falls in love—or lust—with her (Chopin 421). It is obvious that Désirée is not independent; she is whatever the people around her want her to be. Madame Valmondé made her her child, and Armand made her his wife. It is easy for her to be manipulated because her background is mysterious: even she does not know who she is, so she allows other people to define her. In relation to the Expectancy Violations Theory, Désirée does exactly what is expected of her (Burgoon 85): she conforms to the rules of society and the people—Madame Valmondé and Armand—around her. She is simply a follower. Since names are so important in her society, she is more than willing to accept Armand's name, which is "one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana" (Chopin 422). However, this name, which was given to her, cannot save her when her child, fathered by Armand, has black skin. Armand accuses her of being black, and his accusation is essentially a charge of guilt (Chopin 424). She is a woman in a southern, racist society, so, naturally, she is in the wrong. Désirée does not know her own heritage—there could very well be black in her family. Her only defense against Armand is the color of her skin and that it is "whiter than yours, Armand" (Chopin 424). As a woman, she knows it is dangerous to argue with

---

Armand, so she does not go any further—he could seriously harm her, especially now that he has information against her. However, the color of her skin is not the information that matters. Only her background matters—her family history is more important to Armand, and society, than Désirée herself. Never mind that Désirée is Armand's wife, and he is supposed to love her; if she has so much as a drop of black blood in her veins, she is all black to him—a slave, a part of the economy. She is no longer a human being, so she chooses to disappear with her baby and presumably die (Chopin 424).

Whatever sense of individuality Désirée once had betrays her. She has lived her entire life as a privileged white woman, and there is no way she can lower her identity to that of a slave. Chopin later reveals that Armand is partly black (425), but Désirée's family tree is still a mystery. It is this lack of knowledge that sends Désirée off the deep end. Rozmarin describes "an individual's well being as a continual process of self-creation in relation to others" (5), but Désirée creates nothing for herself, so she is, ultimately, better off dead. She does not know who she is, and she never did, but she got through life by playing the role of someone's daughter, then someone's wife. In Louisiana, Désirée's, and everyone's, identity comes with a name, but Désirée's name is not hers. She feels she has no real identity, because her life is spent acting as a vehicle for others' desires. Through Désirée's devastating situation, Chopin explains that when people fail to develop a sense of individuality, they let others define them, just as Désirée allows her mother and Armand to define her. When she learns that she is not who they say she is, her life ends because she has nothing to fall back on. A sense of individuality would have given Désirée a reason to fight society.

---

While “Daisy Miller: A Study,” “A White Heron,” and “Désirée’s Baby” are very different stories, they all relate back to the importance of individuality. For Daisy and Sylvia, their individuality brings them happiness, often for a price: for Daisy, it is her life, and for Sylvia, it is friendship and money. Désirée’s lack of individuality ends up costing her much more: she loses all sense of self. James and Jewett portray that while individuality is not always easy to maintain, it is worth the struggle—the benefits outweigh the downfalls. A happy life is more valuable than a perfect life. For Chopin’s Désirée, her perfect life is a lie. She never knows her true identity, nor does she try to create one as Daisy and Sylvia do. Ultimately, these short stories reveal that a sense of individuality gives life meaning; without it, humans are just puppets played by other humans.

### References

- Burgoon, Judee K. “Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Applications of Expectancy Violations Theory.” *A First Look at Communication Theory*, ninth ed. Eds. Em Griffin, Andrew Ledbetter, and Glenn Sparks. New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2015. 85-86. Print.
- Chopin, Kate. “Désirée’s Baby.” *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, eighth ed., vol. 2. Ed. Nina Baym et al. New York: Norton, 2013. 421-425. Print.
- James, Henry. “Daisy Miller: A Study.” *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, eighth ed., vol. 2. Ed. Nina Baym et al. New York: Norton, 2013. 327-365. Print.
- Jewett, Sarah Orne. “A White Heron.” *The Norton Anthology of*



*American Literature*, eighth ed., vol. 2. Ed. Nina Baym et al.  
New York: Norton, 2013. 413-419. Print.

Page, Philip. "Daisy Miller's Parasol." *Stories in Short Fiction* 27.4  
(1990): 591-601. Print.

Rozmarin, Miri. "Power, Freedom, and Individuality: Foucault and  
Sexual Difference." *Human Studies: A Journal for Philosophy and  
the Social Sciences* 28.1 (2005): 1-14. Print.