

Individuality: The Struggle of Women in the Late Nineteenth Century

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Individuality is a term unlikely to be associated with women in the nineteenth century as they were only expected to be obedient wives and mothers. Cultivating and maintaining one's own sense of originality was frowned upon, but Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Henry James were determined to challenge this stereotype by asserting the importance of defying patriarchal and societal conventions, redefining titles and labels, and retaining one's uniqueness at all costs through their female protagonists in "A New England Nun" and *Daisy Miller: A Study*, respectively, and to provide explanation for what happens when individuality is not maintained.

In "A New England Nun," individuality is essentially all that Louisa Ellis has. Granted, she owns material possessions such as her flower distillery, her dainty linens, and the meticulous organization of her home but "coarse masculine belongings strewn about in endless litter" would disrupt all of the "delicate harmony" in which she resides (Freeman 443). In the fifteen years that she and Joe Dagget have spent apart, Louisa has discovered and defined herself, and she is comfortable not only with who she is but the environment in which she hopes to continue to express her individuality. As

criticism, Pryse argues: “she has no doubt that she will lose, not gain, in marrying Joe Dagget,” because her impending marriage undoubtedly threatens the ownership and control of her life (291). It is important to note here that Freeman emphasizes the significance of Louisa’s carving out her own identity independent from the one that Joe will presumably provide for her in marriage. Pryse further claims that Freeman blatantly dismisses the conventions of acceptable female behavior in the nineteenth century in that “Louisa Ellis rejects the concept of manifest destiny and her own mission within it; she establishes her own home as the limits of her world, embracing rather than fleeing domesticity, discovering in the process that she can retain her autonomy” (289). Ultimately, Louisa enjoys her hermitic, spinster lifestyle, and when she overhears Joe and Lily Dyer professing their love for one another, she realizes that she has stumbled upon a prime opportunity for keeping her tranquil way of life perfectly intact.

Nunnery, for Louisa, is not accompanied with such extreme religious ideals as abiding by vows of poverty and chastity. Though the order and purity of her home is of great concern to her and Joe’s being “an innocent and perfectly well-intentioned bear [in] a china shop” inadvertently compromises that, Louisa does not fear for her own virginity (Freeman 441). Instead, Pryse asserts that Louisa’s unease stems from “Joe’s dominance rather than her own sexuality” (293). With the narrator’s (and, ostensibly, Freeman’s) nun ascription, Louisa is presented as living a life dedicated to her domesticity much as a religiously devoted nun would to God. Louisa, then, has fundamentally redefined the word nun to apply to herself, which is individuality in its most basic form. By likening Louisa’s lifestyle to that of “an uncloistered nun,” Freeman affirms that she has been assigned this label but that Louisa is free to function without its restrictions (446). Louisa does not reject this title

nor does she embrace it; she simply *accepts* it of her own accord, which is crucial to the preservation and significance of her originality.

In the closing statement of her article, Pryse declares that “the ‘New England nun’... establishes a paradigm for American experience which makes the lives of nineteenth-century women finally just as manifest as those of the men whose conquests fill the pages of our literary history” (295). In essence, Louisa’s grand rejection of patriarchal and societal expectations of women is a story with as much worth and value as that of any man. It not only emphasizes the struggle and difficulties of being a woman in the nineteenth century, but it also highlights the feat and importance of being an individual, of being a human free of convention and anticipation. To reiterate her conclusion, Pryse states in the opening paragraphs of her piece that “the reader discovers that within the world Louisa inhabits, she becomes heroic, active, wise, ambitious, and even transcendent” (289). Freeman designs Louisa as a beacon of feminism. She molds her into a character with goals in life that were stark opposites of becoming a wife and a mother, as society demanded.

Much like her late nineteenth century counterpart in New England, Daisy Miller is the American embodiment of the polar opposite of European societal expectation. As Louise K. Barnett claims in her article, “[Henry] James portray[s] a woman whose innocent devotion to her own natural behavior causes her to flout society wilfully and persistently” (sic) (281). Daisy confirms Barnett’s assertion in her second meeting with Winterbourne when Daisy’s mother shows apprehension in approaching her daughter and the gentleman accompanying her:

"[...] She won't come here, because she sees you."

"Ah, then," said Winterbourne. "I had better leave you."

"Oh, no; come on!" urged Miss Daisy Miller.

"I'm afraid your mother doesn't approve of my walking with you."

Miss Miller gave him a serious glance. "[...] But mother doesn't like any of my gentlemen friends... She makes a fuss if I introduce a gentleman. But I *do* introduce them – almost always. If I didn't introduce my gentlemen friends to mother," the young girl added, in her little soft, flat monotone, "I shouldn't think it was natural." (James 339)

Daisy's individuality is rooted in the simple fact that she views the introduction of every male friend to her mother as natural and normal. She blatantly rejects the European stigma of men as only beaus and considers them, instead, as friends. She adheres to her true nature and continues to exhibit her own inherent behavior regardless of judgment and gossip. Therefore, it is James' argument that the importance of Daisy Miller's individuality is in casting off societal expectations of women just as Louisa Ellis has done.

Like Louisa, Daisy Miller has been stamped with a label as well. She is alternatively referred to as common by Mrs. Costello who "has internalized the rules of society and devoted herself to oppressing others in its name" (Barnett 283). Common is a word with strictly negative connotations, as assigned by Mrs. Costello herself:

"[Daisy Miller and her family] are very common," Mrs. Costello declared. "They are the sort of Americans that one does one's duty by not – not accepting."

"Ah, you don't accept them?" said the young man.

"I can't, my dear. Frederick. I would if I could, but I can't."

"The young girl is very pretty," said Winterbourne, in a moment.

"Of course she's pretty. But she is very common."

(James 336)

Common, in this context, means that Daisy's choices and subsequent actions assign her a connotatively negative reputation. By defining Daisy as common, Mrs. Costello is asserting that the young girl is ostentatiously flagrant and promiscuous, which entirely discounts Daisy's individuality as an American in a foreign country without regard to local custom, but Daisy is not stirred by her criticism:

"She doesn't want to know me!" she said suddenly.

"Why don't you say so? You needn't be afraid. I'm not afraid!" And she gave a little laugh. (James 338)

Initially, Mrs. Costello's judgment of Daisy's behavior has no effect on her originality, and James highlights her persistence as being a significant trait of maintaining one's identity when faced with the oppression and conformity of the unfamiliar.

The premise of *Daisy Miller: A Study* is that Winterbourne must follow Daisy throughout her transient lifestyle in order to observe her odd behavior, but the nature of her life is what makes Daisy unique. Her environment is constantly changing, but her

individuality, her brazen behavior remains intact despite the landscape and people. Barnett alleges that “Daisy remains the most uncompromising and uninhibited of James’s many freedom-seeking heroines... She breaks rather than bending to social demands” (287). Daisy will not allow the current foreign country in which she resides to shape her character. She clings to the only solid aspect of her life that remains: her individuality, and she refuses to let go, even though it leads to her death.

In conclusion, one final question must be answered: what happens when one fails to maintain individuality? For Louisa Ellis, it is a rampage – a deadly breaking of the chains that bind only to end in absolute madness and destruction everywhere. It is the loss of self-control and autonomy. For Daisy Miller, it is death. It is the lack of necessary attributes and characteristics needed to survive in such a demanding foreign culture. But Freeman and James remain resolute: preserving individuality is the only key to a fulfilled and successful life, even if it is a great one.

References

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