A Study of the Reason of Failure in Resolving Cultural Conflicts in *Daisy Miller*

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*Daisy Miller*, written by esteemed novelist Henry James, focuses on typical theme—culture conflicts between American and European. There are three types of people in this novel representing three parties, which involves cultural conflicts: Daisy as American culture representative, Winterbourne as mediator, Mrs. Costello and Mrs. Walker as European cultural representatives. The analysis of these three types of characters in the novel will enable us to find the reason why dealing with the cultural clashes an inevitable failure.

*Keywords: Daisy Miller, Henry James, cultural conflicts*

**Introduction**

Henry James is a famous American novelist who is known as a significant role in the transatlantic culture. According to Professor Dai Xianmei, in his early novels, Henry James tries to provide an ideal mode for American culture and European culture communications. But due to huge diversity between these two cultures, the conflict could not be avoided. This paper attempts to analyze inevitability of the failure of dealing with the conflict in *Daisy Miller*. After reading this novel, we could find there are three kinds of people: people who ignore European tradition and follow their own instincts like Daisy; people who are born in American and emigrate to European but partly accept European custom like Winterbourne; people who totally lead their life according to European custom and push others to follow the custom like Mrs. Costello and Mrs. Walker. Through careful analysis of these three types of characters, we find that it is an inevitable failure to deal with the cultural clash between American and European.

**American Culture Representatives Like Daisy**

In *Daisy Miller*, Daisy is an unmarried American lady, to keep a habit of flirting with gentleman since it is a custom in America. But Daisy keeps this habit and ignores native custom during her traveling in Europe because American custom is familiar to her and could meet her instinctual desire. She feels upset when she finds that “There isn’t any society” (James, 1994, p. 14, ch. 1) in Europe. Once she knows that Winterbourne would like to be her guide to Chateau de Chillon, she determines to visit the old castle with Winterbourne. Even without her mother’s agreement, she is still subject to her habitual sense of freedom and insists to hang out with her friends in boat. Regardless of Mrs. Walker’s opinion that unmarried lady should go out with her mother’s company, Daisy adheres to her own decision and said “I am more than five years old” (James, 1994, p. 39, ch. 3). After arriving at Rome where there are splendid societies, she soon goes round every place with her
acquaintances. Even though her frequent going-out with an Italian gentleman Mr. Giovanelli brings her bad reputation, she treats the suggestions from Mrs. Walker and Winterbourne as nothing but interference. She says to Mrs. Walker: “If this is improper, Mrs. Walker, then I am all improper, and you must give me up” (James, 1994, p. 40, ch. 3). In the novel, Daisy could be suppressed but would never change for anything. Just she declares “I don’t see why I should change my habits for them” (James, 1994, p. 44, ch. 3).

It seems that conversation is also a method of releasing desire for Daisy. Yet she never tries to think twice before talking. She talks too much with Winterbourne whom she just knows half an hour as if they have known each other for a long time. She even talks freely about her great deal of gentlemen’s society, being careless with the image of a coquette which might be left to others. During her talking, she does not hide her emotion. When encountering with something unhappy, Daisy would react directly with its pursuit of pleasure by releasing its instinctual desire which makes sense of Daisy’s sudden caprices when she is informed that Winterbourne would go back to Geneva, as illustrated by the sentences she voices such as “I have half a mind to leave you here and go straight back to the hotel alone” (James, 1994, p. 29, ch. 2).

Daisy’s desire for immediate satisfaction blinds her good sense so much that she goes her own way with unconcern for consequences. She dabbles to historic atmosphere to see more pretty things in spite of threat of getting fever. She even said to Winterbourne that “for myself, I am not afraid” (James, 1994, p. 53, ch. 4). “I don’t care whether I have Roman fever or not” (James, 1994, p. 54, ch. 4).

To some extent, her irrational act causes her death. Nevertheless, Henry James shows us not just an innocent girl who is guided by pleasure principle, but also a representative of the spirit of freedom in American culture. But it is pity that Daisy is stubborn to her own American custom and refuses any chance to communicate with European culture, which intensifies the conflict.

Mediator Representatives Like Winterbourne

Winterbourne in *Daisy Miller* is an American who moves in Europe when he was young, so he is more or less influenced by European tradition and custom. He knows what kind of behavior is decent in Europe. For example, due to his long time stay in Geneva, he knows clearly that “a young man was not at liberty to speak to a young unmarried lady except under certain rarely occurring conditions” (James, 1994, p. 10, ch. 1). But he does not obey this rule strictly. Instead, he makes a good excuse that his talk with a pretty American girl Daisy is a good condition. When Daisy expresses her passion on gentlemen’s society with great eloquence, though Winterbourne feel that “he had become dishabituated to the American tone” (James, 1994, p. 14, ch. 1), he deem it pleasant to talk with Daisy. On the other hand, Winterbourne likes to talk with Daisy due to the fact that “there was no great need of walking on tiptoe” (James, 1994, p. 20, ch. 2). Even though he does not present Daisy to his aunt as he announced, he could talk with her honestly since Daisy does not take offence and says “You needn’t be afraid. I’m afraid” (James, 1994, p. 21, ch. 2).

On the other hand, once Daisy goes out of Winterbourne, he starts his plans to rule Daisy according to European tradition. Before Daisy flirts with others and always hangs out with gentlemen, Winterbourne often appreciates Daisy’s beauty and tries to persuade his aunt that Daisy is a good girl. Shortly after having found that Daisy is an American flirt who breaks European custom seriously, Winterbourne seeks to bring the influence of the European custom to bear upon Daisy. He imperiously tells Daisy that he would remain with her. Meanwhile, he attempts to control Daisy by saying that “You should sometimes listen to a gentleman—the right one” (James, 1994, p. 37, ch. 3). Later, when Winterbourne thinks that Daisy goes too far, Winterbourne
strives to win his authority before Daisy. He dictates Daisy to release her instinctual desire in some nondestructive ways such as flirts with him only, which not only gets her rid of bad comments from natives but could also protect Daisy. Moreover, he wants to raise Daisy’s awareness of native custom through the words “Flirting is a purely American custom; it doesn’t exist here” (James, 1994, p. 45, ch. 3), hoping that Daisy could stop her ridiculous conduction.

More often than not, when Winterbourne could not mediate conflicts between Daisy and the demands of social pressure issued by European customs, he prefers to listen to latter’s order. While Daisy simply pursues what she likes and gives a cold shoulder to European tradition, those people such as Mrs. Walker are eager to change this uncultivated American girl. A conflict thus happens. Encountered with the clash between Daisy’s instinctual desires and social pressure from those sophisticated people, Winterbourne tends to suppress Daisy’s desire by asking her get into Mrs. Walker’s carriage. For him, “The finest gallantry, here, is simply to tell her the truth... was that Daisy Miller should take Mrs. Walker’s advice” (James, 1994, p. 40, ch. 3). It could also free Daisy from being thought as a reckless girl. However, the fact that Daisy’s power of desire and pressure from European society are both so strong that Winterbourne could not handle, which results in his failure of bridging the gap between two kinds of cultures.

**European Cultural Representatives Like Mrs. Costello and Mrs. Walker**

In *Daisy Miller*, Mrs. Costello stands for European social rules and custom in a way. In the beginning, she refuses to make acquaintance with Daisy because she thinks Daisy and her family’s behavior is out of custom. She could not accept that Mrs. Miller and Daisy should have intimacy with a courier and treats him as a gentleman. Once she gets the idea that Daisy will go to Chateau de Chillon with a man whom she just knows half an hour, she judges Daisy: “What a dreadful girl!” (James, 1994, p. 19, ch. 2) Given Daisy’s loose conduct, she insists that she would not know this common girl.

Mrs. Walker behaves more likely censor who causes Winterbourne to make moral judge on the basis of social pressure. She is an American lady who emigrates Europe and studies the European society. Being restrained for a long time, she is accustomed to live under the strict European custom. Thus, she could promptly take measures to suppress Daisy’s desire once she finds Daisy violates the custom. After knowing Daisy’s plan to go to Pincio alone, she tries to discourage Daisy not to go at that time by saying that “My dear young friend don’t walk off to the Pincio at this hour to meet a beautiful Italian” (James, 1994, p. 35, ch. 3). From her perspective, it is a crazy idea for a girl to walk with two gentlemen on the street. So she tries to stop Daisy again and again. After declined by Daisy, she orders a carriage and puts on her bonnet to catch up with Daisy as quickly as possible. In mean time, she asks Winterbourne’s help even if she knows that they might be declined.

What’s next, Mrs. Walker demands Daisy to get into her carriage and says to Daisy “It may be enchanting, dear child, but it is not the custom there” (James, 1994, p. 39, ch. 3). When Mrs. Walker is declined by Daisy one more time, she puts pressure on Winterbourne by threatening Winterbourne to sit beside her; otherwise, she will no longer be a friend of him. During talking with Winterbourne, she lists a lot of Daisy’s wrong behavior that is not in accordance with gallantry and says “She is naturally indelicate” (James, 1994, p. 41, ch. 3) in attempts that Winterbourne could stay away from Daisy. In this case, Mrs. Costello and Mrs. Walker are too stiff and strict to make any change during suppressing Daisy. What’s worse, they forces Daisy to yield, instead of making some compromise, which plays a role in failure of dealing with cultural conflict between America and Europe.
Conclusion

Through the analysis of these three types of people in *Daisy Miller*, the reason why the conflict between American culture and European culture could not be dealt effectively could be found. In the novel, Daisy stands for American which supports the spirit of freedom and rejects any change during communication; Winterbourne stands for mediators who fail to resolve the conflicts between Daisy and sophisticated European; Mrs. Costello and Mrs. Walker stand for European who are imperious and always make judge on those who disobey traditions, neglecting the chance to communicate. In the end, this war is ended by the death of Daisy. In other words, the failure of dealing with the conflict between American and European culture is destined. The new perspective this paper might give when interpreting *Daisy Miller* hopes to give any inspiration for latter research on Henry James.

References

