

The Metaphor of Roman Fever in "Daisy Miller"

Henry James' novella, "Daisy Miller," tells the story of a young American woman who visits Europe with her mother and younger brother. In Vevey, Switzerland, she meets the expatriate Frederick Winterbourne who quickly becomes infatuated with her beauty and her devil-may-care demeanor. He desires to introduce Daisy to his aunt, but she refuses, scandalized by Daisy's commonness and brazen behavior. Later, after Daisy and her family travel to Rome, Winterbourne meets up with her and learns from his aunt that Daisy has been going "about alone with her foreigners." Winterbourne continues to have conflicting emotions about Daisy. In the end, despite being warned, Daisy goes out to the Colosseum at night with her friend Giovanelli and contracts Roman Fever, which subsequently kills her. This motif of Roman Fever is referred to seven times throughout the narrative. It is symbolic in three ways: as punishment for Daisy's behavior, as a commentary on gossip, and as wages for the sin of going native.

Malaria, or Roman Fever, literally translates to "bad air." It is caused by the bite of a mosquito that has been infected with a malarial parasite. As the exact vector of the disease was not known in Henry James' time, it was believed that it was transmitted by a miasma that spread through the air in dank dark places. This fits with the depiction of the Colosseum in "Daisy Miller." It also corresponds with, and foreshadows, the interior of the Chateau de Chillon which Daisy and Winterbourne visited while in Vevey. Going out at night into the miasma was risky business, as Daisy's younger brother Randolph said, "It's going round at

night...that's what made her sick. She's always going around at midnight. I shouldn't think she'd want to—it's so plaguey dark."

Daisy's character, viewed through Winterbourne's lens, was that of a talkative, flirtatious, coquette. She did not hesitate to go with Winterbourne to the Chateau de Chillon, just as she went about Rome with Giovanelli later in the story. In both instances she was alone with these men, which, in the Europe of the time, was unthinkable. Respectable young ladies didn't do such things, didn't behave in such a fashion. Daisy balked at these constraints and continued to do as she pleased. This ultimately led to her being shunned by polite society in Rome. On the night when she is to go to the Colosseum with Giovanelli, Winterbourne tries to urge Daisy to get into Mrs. Walker's carriage to protect her already tarnished reputation. Daisy responded with, "Does Mr. Winterbourne think that to save my reputation I ought to get into the carriage?" She was mocking him and the notion of a restrictive European idea of how a woman should behave. Winterbourne wondered if she was unable or unwilling to adapt to the norms of the time, when it is more likely that Daisy didn't care about the norms of the time. Her insistence on going around freely with the insouciance of a man led to her death. When she went, late at night, to the Colosseum alone with Giovanelli, she stated, "I don't care whether I have Roman Fever or not." This flew in the face of convention. The poison and the bad air didn't frighten her, but she couldn't escape the punishment of it. She didn't conform, and Roman Fever exacted its due.

Gossip seeps through the air like malaria. The insidious whisperings about Daisy distorted and villainized her. The American expatriate matrons condemned her for not adhering to the social mores of European society or rather the society of Americans living in

Europe as the actual Europeans in the novella (Eugenio and Giovanelli) don't seem to have a problem with Daisy. Mrs. Walker tells Winterbourne, "Everyone is talking about her," and "It's a pity to let the girl ruin herself." Again, we see that Daisy was in violation of the strict moral code that applied to young ladies traveling abroad. As a result, she was shunned. No respectable people would have her in their homes. She told Mrs. Walker that if this (her behavior) is improper, then she is all improper and Mrs. Walker must give her up. Daisy was ignorant of the power of gossip and how its pervasiveness, like Roman Fever, could isolate her from the very society she claimed to enjoy.

The phrase "going native" refers to people living in a foreign country adopting the local habits and customs. In the case of Daisy Miller, it spoke to her descent into outrageous impropriety as it is symbolized in malaria. Roman Fever was not mentioned in the text until Daisy arrived in Rome. The closer she came to the Colosseum, the more references to "the fever." Daisy sunk further and further into it, innocent of the consequences. Mrs. Walker told Winterbourne that, "she has been going too far", as in succumbing to the bad air or going native. Daisy didn't seem to understand why she was being judged for behaving in a way that was completely natural to her. These judgments accelerated to the night in late winter/early spring when Giovanelli, an actual native, accompanied Daisy to the Roman Colosseum, a historical place of danger, where conflicts were worked out in a violent fashion. It was here, alone at night with a man and seated beneath a great cross as if in sacrifice, that Daisy contracted malaria, thereby sealing her fate.

The motifs of punishment, gossip, and going native permeate the novella "Daisy Miller." They speak to the vast differential in the appropriate and expected behavior for men and

women. If a man had acted as Daisy did, it would have gone unnoticed. In fact, if he'd had more than one admirer, he would likely have been praised for his virility. Daisy, however, was condemned for it. Both Giovanelli and Winterbourne were present at the Colosseum when Daisy was infected, but neither contracted the disease. It was for Daisy alone. She was held to an entirely different set of standards of which she was either blissfully unaware or deliberately disregarded. She was innocent or defiant, and by the end, she was punished, gossiped about, and left for dead in going native.