

The Presentation of Self in Henry James's "Daisy Miller"

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Abstract—Henry James's novella "Daisy Miller" was traditionally regarded as an international and cultural story and the common criticism was on its cultural theme. In this article, I have employed the theory of self-presentation to re-consider the self-hood of its characters and its influences on the interpersonal and intercultural relations.

Keywords—Henry James; Daisy Miller; self-presentation

I. INTRODUCTION

Henry James (1843-1916) is generally acknowledged to be one of America's greatest novelists and critics. He is the author of some of the best-known fictions of the later nineteenth century — stories like "Daisy Miller" (1876), novels like *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), tales like *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). According to Linda Simon's research, from the 1980s to 2007, we can see a flourishing James industry as scholars have brought new critical perspectives to bear on James's work by examining them in the light of New Historicism, feminist and queer theory, cultural studies, and both psychological and philosophical studies of consciousness [1]. "Daisy Miller," first published in the June and July 1878 issues of the British magazine *Cornhill*, transformed James into an author of international standing. The novella's popularity aroused a great deal of criticism on its theme and the author. Critics were universally concerned about its international theme and the cultural conflicts. However, "Daisy Miller" as a dramatic and interesting story receives no study about self-presentation in the cultural context. In this article, I would like to employ the theory of self-presentation to re-consider the self-hood of the characters in James' novella, particularly *Winterbourne* and *Daisy*, and its influences on the interpersonal and intercultural relations.

II. SELF AND SELF-PRESENTATION

A. Self

Before the adaptation of the theory of self-presentation, I would like to clarify the self and the theory framework I am going to use. The study of self has many sides and subtopics: self-awareness, self-monitoring, self-esteem, self-enhancement, self-presentation, and more. In fact the term "self" was commonly used by everyone with ease and familiarity. This suggests that the concept of selfhood is rooted in some simple and universal human experience. The human selfhood depends

on the capacity for reflexive consciousness, which means the human mind is able to turn attention toward itself and construct extensive knowledge of itself. As times went by, Baumeister indicated that the psychology of self has expanded and flourished over decades while the concept of selfhood is changed "from the straightforward and untroubled to the complex and conflicted" [2]. Though self-knowledge remains incomplete and depends on inference, the topic of self-awareness is generally popular. As the study of self develops, psychologists found that people change their behavior when others are watching, in order to make an impression on those others. Self-presentation, like most forms of social interaction, becomes an important step in the process of building the inner self and continues to be critical in the study of self.

B. Self-presentation

The term "self-presentation" was first introduced by Erving Goffman in 1959 as part of a broader depiction of human social life as theatre: people play roles, follow scripts, tailor their performances to the audience, and change their behavior "backstage" [3]. The self presents itself differently according to the context. The inner self is well shaped by social communication and social interaction. Goffman's outstanding contribution to the theory of self-rests upon his approach to the core of individual identity is from the everyday-life situations of face-to-face encounters. The self is far from a passive acceptor of feedback. Instead, the self actively processes and selects and sometimes distorts information from the social world. Goffman's notion of self, as Srinivasan named it, has been the subject of intense debate primarily because of the "perspective of incongruity" that he introduced as the hallmark of the "Goffmanesque touch" [4]. As Goffman's concern is restricted into the domain of Anglo-American society, whether we can use his framework to unfold the analysis of "Daisy Miller", a novel about "international theme," becomes a question. The questions of cross-cultural interaction and relation are beyond Goffman. By recognizing such limitations in his theory, the concept of self-presentation I would like to use here points to the presentation of selfhood with a clear idea about what people know and believe about themselves. Meanwhile, Goffman's theory of self-presentation is universalized into a cross-cultural scope with the aid of cross-cultural references.

III. WINTERBOURNE'S SELF-PRESENTATION

"Daisy Miller" has been regarded as an "international novel," but it is also a theme that absorbs James throughout his career: the phenomenon of understanding oneself and others. "Daisy Miller" is, as many critics observed, the adventure and the failure of Winterbourne's attempt to figure out Daisy Miller. In a sense, "Daisy Miller" is a fiction of manners. Throughout the whole novella, the characters, Winterbourne and Daisy in particular, are presenting their selves according to the circumstances and contexts, though both of whom fail to "embrace" the roles and lead to undesirable consequences.

It has been argued that "Daisy Miller" is really more about Winterbourne than Daisy herself. In many ways, Winterbourne is as central as Daisy and may very well be the story's true protagonist. It is a story presenting Winterbourne's presentation of his roles in the theatre of life. An American who has lived most of his life in Europe, Winterbourne is the type of Europeanized expatriate. He is closely associated with Calvinism in Geneva, "the dark old city at the other end of the lake". He has an aunt, Mrs. Costello, from a high society knowing "many of the secrets of that social sway".

In the novella, Winterbourne in general plays the roles as a stranger, a nephew, and a friend in different encounters and contexts.

A. As a Stranger

As Goffman assumes, one has to take on the whole array of action encompassed by the roles, which imply "a social determinism and a doctrine about socialization" [5]. Therefore, Winterbourne follows different "scripts" when playing various roles, as Goffman calls it, "discrepant roles" through and by which one is socialized. Meeting strangers for the first time is the key context for self-presentation. At the first meeting with Daisy, Winterbourne's performances are well depicted by James. Obviously Winterbourne is obsessed with Daisy's beauty. With intense impulses to know her, he even cares not the social custom in Geneva to speak to a young unmarried lady without being presented. However, he is very prudential, trying to follow the rules to perform so to maintain the propriety. He checks "whether he had gone too far" every time he makes further inquiry. He is very observant and perceives the reaction — her underlying words beyond words. Therefore, he can tailor his performances and practice the art of impression management according to the non-verbal expression observed, like facial expression, gestures and etc. However, at the same time his observation is rather rude from the perspective of European culture because Winterbourne scans Daisy's face from her complexion, her nose, and her ears to her teeth. Attracted by Daisy's beauty and prompted by Daisy, Winterbourne escorts her, unchaperoned, on a boat trip along the lake to visit the Castle of Chillon in Vevay, which breaks the European convention and evokes glances and discussion in the hotel. Daisy's willingness to go on this excursion reveals her charming naïve as well as her mother's foolishness and damages her reputation while their reactions bewilder Winterbourne, making him to break rules as well as evoking his interest in Daisy and her real self.

B. As a Nephew

As a nephew, Winterbourne spends time with his aunt Mrs. Costello. He respects her not because of affection, but rather because he has "imbibed at Geneva the idea that one must always be attentive to one's aunt". He does as what he has been taught to do. Meanwhile, Winterbourne holds in high regard what Mrs. Costello tells him, about the Millers as much as anything else. However, with the awareness about cultural differences, Winterbourne does not accept all the things his aunt tells him. His aunt, a typical Europeanized American with respectful social status, presents no respect to the Millers. Her treatment to them — disacceptance of them and their cultural manners — is unjust. She requires them to follow the social norms and conventions and manners cultivated by European civilization without considering their cultural background. While participating in one system of roles, as a nephew or a European-like American, Winterbourne will hold in abeyance his involvement in other patterns, thus sustaining his performance before his aunt, which Goffman calls "the dormant roles that are enacted roles on other occasions" [5].

C. As a Friend

To his friends, Winterbourne also presents his self according to the circumstances. As a friend of Mrs. Walker, he gives suggestions to her treatments about Daisy. He reminds her that he and she may "have lived too long at Geneva", understanding that there must be a gap between them and the new sojourner Daisy, a particular figure careless about the social rules in the host country. As a friend of Daisy, he is preoccupied by analyzing Daisy. He wants to be able to define and categorize her, to which class of woman that he understands, but in nature Daisy is novelty to him. Her candor and spontaneity make him puzzled with her lack of concern for the social niceties and the rules of propriety that have been adopted by the American community in Rome. He befriends Daisy and attempts to save her from the embarrassment and exclusion that the fellow Americans give her. No matter how far Winterbourne can release himself from the cultural atmosphere that teaching him how to behave, back to Rome, a more restrictive city, he cannot change his perception about Daisy from the perspective of his European perception. He feels released to define Daisy as "an American flirt" and excludes her by not caring her explanation.

IV. DAISY'S SELF-PRESENTATION

Daisy, on the other hand, plays her own roles in the theatre as well. However, for the reason that the story develops from Winterbourne's perspective, it is not easy to detect Daisy's understanding of self and others in her presentation. With such an understanding, I will study her performances with hint from Winterbourne's observation. On her trip to Europe with her mother and brother, Daisy comes from Schenectady, New York, whose father gets a big business. However, Winterbourne perceived from his aunt's tone that "Miss Daisy Miller's place in the social scale is low" in New York, where has a picture of "the minutely hierarchical constitution". Daisy represents the class who knows little about the old European continent and develops its own system of behavior patterns. As

a result, Daisy is not sophisticated as Winterbourne in playing the roles in a European cultural environment.

A. As a Performer

First of all, as the performer on the context of meeting Winterbourne for the first time, Daisy is also playing her role as a young lady. Her response to Winterbourne's inquiry is determined not only by her personality but also by her understanding of meeting a stranger. At the first beginning, she seems to be ignorant to Winterbourne. Asked by Winterbourne, she glances at him and says nothing more. Gradually, she gives him more of the benefit of her glance. By understanding this, Winterbourne thinks Daisy is a coquette and has "a spirit of her own". As their conversation develops, Daisy shows her self-centered perception. She thinks that every lady she knows must be known to Winterbourne and doubts that whether there is good teacher in Italy. She sits in a charming, tranquil attitude, but she talks a lot, even revealing "the affairs of her family". Daisy comes to Europe with perception which is built by her friends' comments and impression. It is also the stereotypical understanding of the European society that makes Daisy an intrusive and discussed topic.

B. As a Friend

Daisy's identity as friends of Giovanelli is fully presented in a way of naturalness and straightness, which is considered to be improper by the American resident in Rome presented by Mrs. Walker and Mrs. Costello. More attention is laid on the role of Daisy as a young lady. The people around have social expectation and desirability to her role. For example, Mrs. Walker regards Daisy as a "much uncultivated" and "naturally indelicate" girl and Mrs. Costello condemns her behaviors as "nothing more vulgar". Like his fellows, Winterbourne hopes Daisy would be more careful with her presentation of self in public.

Among their roles, Winterbourne's presentation does not receive criticism except that defending Daisy out loud before Mrs. Walker. However, the problem lays on the presentation of Daisy and the reactions to the people around. Therefore the cultural clashes mainly happen on the disagreements of Daisy's intimate relationship with the Italian servant Eugenio, of Mrs. Miller's carelessness in fulfilling her role as a mother, and the most importantly, of Daisy's engagement with different foreign young gentlemen, Giovanelli in particular. As an American girl with innocence and spontaneity, Daisy immerses in an environment of mores and codes of European propriety and customs. The characters of the novella, nurtured by their own cultures, choose their own behavioral patterns to interact while facing the inevitable confrontations. Except Winterbourne, no one compromises and stops to think about the differences, neither does Daisy. Though with cultural awareness, Winterbourne at the end comments that "Daisy and her Mamma haven't yet risen to that stage of — what shall I call it — of culture". As James confessed in his letter:

Poor little Daisy Miller was, as I understand her, above all things innocent. It was not to make a scandal, or because she took pleasure in a scandal, that she "went on" with Giovanelli. She never took the measure really of the scandal she produced, and had no means of doing so: she was too ignorant, too

irreflective, too little versed in the proportions of things. She intended infinitely less with G. than what she appeared to intend—and he himself was quite at sea as to how far she was going. She was a flirt, a perfectly superficial and unmalicious one, and she was very fond, as she announced at the outset, of "gentlemen's society." [6]

The lack of cultural awareness leads to cultural clashes and communication misunderstandings which undesirable consequences follow. Daisy died of Roman fever literally but analogically was tracked by foreign culture. Winterbourne regrets that he has done Daisy injustice. And behind that, there is the ethnocentrism that makes more problem because no one from a self-claimed more superior culture will debase his/her position to understand the other culture which one thinks inferior. What Winterbourne says in persuading Daisy not to show herself in public with Giovanelli without her mother, "when you deal with natives you must go by the custom of the place", definitely implies the ethnocentric perceptions about the native culture. Winterbourne's wonder about "how far Daisy's [her] eccentricities were generic, national, and how far were personal" indicates that the center and the normal behaviors should be the European customs, or namely, European culture.

C. As a Woman

In addition, Winterbourne's question about whether Daisy's behavior is national or personal hints at the personal aspects in cross-culture clashes. Edward C. Stewart and Milton J. Bennett suggest that "the evaluation of behavior as desirable or taboo pursues the elusive goal of objectivity" [7]. Though one understands the culture of others very well and is willing to accept the differences, there are still problems. Behavior is concrete but ambiguous: the same action may have different meanings in different situations, so it is necessary to identify the context of behavior and the contingencies of action. Therefore, as scholars suggest, the most effective way to cross-cultural communication is to attain knowledge of the individual as well as to understand the roles of others in a social context in addition of playing the proper roles of self.

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, James was never a mindless, sentimental patriot for any country or cause, his loyalties were based on "human relationship and lived experience". "Daisy Miller" is, as I read it, James's attempt to present the reader the cross-cultural and interpersonal relation and the complexity within it. People's understanding of selfhood is shaped by, and in turn shapes, their understanding of others and their presentation of self. Though James did not give us an answer to solving the cultural and interpersonal clashes, "Daisy Miller" and its popularity evokes a new rise of cultural awareness and a new round of endeavor to reconsider the clashes and search a way out.

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