ESLJ
THE EDINBURGH STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL

Tensions in a Changing America: Conflicts Between Individual Desires and Social Authority in *Daisy Miller*, *Tracks*, and *The Age of Innocence*

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January 2025

"I have never allowed a gentleman to dictate anything to me or to interfere with anything I do"

(James 40)

In the new America, individualism, self-reliance, and national prosperity were all promised, but these ideals did not hold true, and the new America, as with many other places, still suffered from authorities of racial oppression, patriarchal standards, and class prejudice. This essay illustrates how Henry James' *Daisy Miller* (1878), Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1923), and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988) reflect this tension between individual desires and social authority in early America. It is evident from all three texts that patriarchy is powerful, as are class etiquette and manners in *Daisy Miller* and *The Age of Innocence*. Furthermore, *Tracks* portrays the conflict between white settlers' authority and native Ojibwe needs. All three texts offer protagonists who deal with this tension differently. Fleur, Ellen, and Daisy are intuitively driven by individual desire, but at a cost, while Winterbourne and Newland are on the brink of disillusionment with social authority but ultimately retreat to convention, arguably losing their sense of self forever. Moreover, in *Tracks*, we have Nanapush, who demonstrates the 'healthiest' balance between individual desire and social authority, and Pauline, who imposes white religious authority on herself to eliminate indigenous elements of her identity that she overtly opposes.

In *Daisy Miller*, James shows how social authority operates through patriarchy and class hierarchy. Social authority is represented by the characters Mrs. Walker and Winterbourne, who attempt to suppress Daisy's individual desires for flirtation and dalliance by labelling her as "common" (17) and "naturally indelicate" (45) (James & Lodge, 2007). Daisy represents the new modern American woman at odds with old European values and social hierarchies, as we see her embodying the new American ideals of self-determination while simultaneously being incessantly constrained by society.

Throughout James' novel, Winterbourne struggles to figure out how the enigmatic Daisy can be both innocently girlish and a seductive coquette. As a result, he feels compelled to analyse

every aspect of her behaviour to categorise her into rigid categories he can easily comprehend. Upon first introduction to Daisy, we are told that Winterbourne “had a great relish for feminine beauty” and “was addicted to observing and analysing it” (8). Having a “relish” for “analysing" the female body implies a kind of fetishization of confining women to certain categories, a kind of power struggle where he can assert authority over a woman by anticipating her intentions. However, where flirting is based on codified language and symbolic gestures, male dominance is rendered impossible as a sense of distance is maintained and intimacy is avoided.

The novel's third-person narrative is centred on Winterbourne's perspective, meaning readers subconsciously participate in Winterbourne's attempt to decipher Daisy. This layering of perspectives, where the narrator sometimes slips into the first-person pronoun "I," is reminiscent of gossip, which is simultaneously happening between the narrator and reader, as well as Daisy and her society. Winterbourne invests time deliberating on Daisy's behaviour, but she nevertheless continues “to present herself as an inscrutable combination of audacity and innocence” (41). Daisy's modern approach to noncommittal dating cannot be accepted by old European patriarchal authorities incapable of comprehending flirtation's surface-level characteristics, as demonstrated by Winterbourne's presentation of "audacity" and "innocence" as mutually exclusive categories. This is why, for Weisbuch, “Winterbourne’s obsessive categorizing, his classificatory zeal, is another function of his hand-me-down mentality” (75). However, in the face of these attempts to categorise her, Daisy asserts, “I have never allowed a gentleman to dictate anything to me or to interfere with anything I do” (40). This moment is significant as Daisy's flirting and ambiguity appear to confer her with power over men, linking to Simmel's claim that flirtation was linked to “dramatically changing positions of women and men in society” (Kaye 28). As a result, Daisy's perplexing juxtaposition of "audacity and innocence"

grants her power in the battle between her flirtatious individual desires and Winterbourne's patriarchal mentality.

While Winterbourne symbolises patriarchal authority, Mrs. Walker symbolises matriarchal authority. This is particularly illuminated one evening as Daisy walks with Winterbourne and Giovanelli, and Mrs. Walker desperately tries to conceal her within the carriage. Daisy's apparent carelessness frustrates Mrs. Walker, who explains to Winterbourne: "She must not walk here with you two men. Fifty people have noticed her" (41). At a time when the country was still young and building its reputation, these American characters seem concerned with the opinions of Europeans, but Daisy is not concerned with reputation. When Mrs. Walker follows her in the carriage, she says, “You are old enough to be more reasonable. You are old enough, dear Miss Miller, to be talked about," in response to which Daisy, "smiling intensely,” asks, “talked about? What do you mean?” (43). Daisy's implied mockery as she is "smiling intensely" illustrates her refusal to be forcefully removed from the freedom of the exterior and confined to the interior space of the carriage. Therefore, Daisy represents the emerging modern woman's individual desires and self-reliance, while Mrs. Walker represents traditional notions of courtly patriarchy.

This disregard for societal gossip continues when Daisy and Giovanelli visit the Colosseum late one night. Winterbourne tells Daisy, "You will not think Roman fever very pretty" (60), to which she defiantly responds, “I don’t care...whether I have Roman fever or not!”, an exclamatory phrase that reflects an exhausted frustration with fending off voices of social authority that have persisted throughout. Sadly, we learn that “a week after this, the poor girl died” (63), and Fryer asserts that Daisy didn’t just die from Roman fever but that “it is the Old World with its customs and judges that has killed her” (100). Considering Roman fever is a

form of malaria transmitted from person to person via a deadly parasite, I certainly consider this argument viable, for it mirrors the 'deadly gossip' that circulated from person to person surrounding Daisy's behaviour, which led to her act of defiance that proved fatal. Characters of social authority tried to silence Daisy throughout the novel, and when she refused, she received death as society's ultimate silencing. This argument is further supported by Winterbourne and Giovanelli's apparent immunity to Roman fever. Our heroine of individual desire dies in this novel, but I contend that social authority actually loses this battle since the new self-reliant woman survived in modern American society. In contrast, archaic figures like Winterbourne became an extinct antiquity in a movement to redefine masculinity.

In Wharton's *The Age of Innocence,* we see social authority take the form of New York's high society. As the novel opens at the opera house, where all the elite members of society are gathered together, the codified nature of New York society, which is based on unspoken customs, is revealed. For example, Newland is running slightly late to the opera, but he and New York are both "perfectly aware that in metropolises it was not "the thing" to arrive early at the opera" (Wharton & Wyndham 8). Despite their unofficiality, New York society authorities are as unyielding as aristocratic authorities, as seen in Wharton's description: "What was or was not "the thing" played a part as important in Newland Archer's New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago" (8). In the opening chapter, we meet examples of those "inscrutable totem terrors" in Lawrence Lefferts, who was "the foremost authority on "form" in New York" (11), and Mr. Jackson, who was an acclaimed "authority on "family"" (12). It is evident when Ellen arrives and threatens this established order that Wharton's quotation marks around "form" and "family" indicate these concepts and their specialists are not only artificial but also fragile.

A key catalyst in bringing the tension between desire and social authority into focus is Ellen's desire to divorce her repressive husband, a desire that New York society quickly extinguishes. Mr. Letterblair tells Newland that “the whole family are against a divorce. And I think rightly” (81). Here, Letterblair is described as “the Pharisaic voice of a society wholly absorbed in barricading itself against the unpleasant,” and the religious adjective "Pharisaic" links back to the idea that this high society mimics old world hierarchical institutions that Americans proudly claimed to be free of. Ellen does not understand the problems associated with her divorce and asks, “What harm could such accusations, even if made publicly, do me here?” (91). However, the answer to this question elucidates that the traditional hierarchical style of this society is too intransigent to empathise with individual circumstances: “New York society is a very small world compared with the one you’ve lived in. And it's ruled, in spite of appearances, by a few people with—well, rather old-fashioned ideas” (91). These conflicting opinions demonstrate Ellen's inability to integrate into an obscure, arbitrary society. I contend, however, that Ellen could never fully assimilate into this culture due to its model of old-world hierarchies that require a hand-me-down mentality that, like aristocracy, involves inherited positions, preventing any outsiders from infiltrating it. Consequently, in disguise as May's dinner party, Ellen is furtively banished from the tribe. Ellen's ostracization and eventual banishment were, like Daisy's death, the ultimate silencing by social authority.

Throughout the novel, we see two modes of femininity at odds: one of self-expression (Ellen) and one of submission to authority (May). Ellen’s promiscuous desire for divorce and the sexuality she exudes (“it was a part of her... something inherently dramatic, passionate, and unusual in herself” (94)) are juxtaposed with May’s explicitly virginal descriptions (“her dress of white and silver, with a wreath of silver blossoms in her hair, the tall girl looked like a Diana just

alight from the chase" (55)). However, Ammons states that Wharton "argues against the sentimentality of idealising an "innocent" American woman," (149) and this can be seen as Archer becomes increasingly disillusioned by May's seemingly angelic presence to see a woman who is simply hollow and void. Despite this disillusionment, however, Newland stays in his marriage out of convenience and recognises that "there was no use in trying to emancipate a wife who has not the dimmest notion that she was not free" (156). In this way, May is like Mrs. Walker, as both women are trapped in tyrannical systems of social authority but are blind to their oppressive nature. Thus, May is a kind of literary foil for Ellen, lacking all of her complications and creativity. May remains with Newland due to social authority demands and loses her soul to achieve social mobility, in marked contrast to Ellen, who seeks individual freedom.

Caught between the social authority of May and the instinctive individual desires of Ellen, Newland embodies the tension between individualistic freedom and conformity. Newland initially praises May's straightforwardness and the fact that "she had a sense of humour (chiefly proved by her laughing at *his* jokes)" (39), showing parallels with Winterbourne, who longed for an easily interpretable Daisy. Wharton perhaps italicises "his" here to criticise Newland's shallow, insubstantial thinking about May, which he has not yet seen as problematic since he is still passively accepting social authority. This underlying criticism foreshadows Newland's impending disenchantment as he later observes, "She was nearing her twenty-second birthday, and he wondered at what age "nice" women began to speak for themselves." (68). While Newland appears to be torn between social authority and individual freedom, he ultimately retreats to the tribe for safety, marrying May. Singley states that Archer's elite group membership "implicitly forbids his departure from it in quest of goals of his own choosing" (26). This is why, in the novel's conclusion, when Newland visits Ellen, he once more cannot allow himself to be

led by individual desire and realises that "the cultural stuff out of which he was fashioned and which continues to inform his desires, norms, and tastes belongs wholly to the past" (Evron 39). In this realist and anti-romantic moment, Wharton shows that Newland's love for Ellen could only thrive in the climate that gave birth to it. As Winterbourne lost Daisy through spending too much time decoding her with patriarchal tools, Newland lost his desire for individuality forever because he stayed with May and chose social authority at a young age.

Like Winterbourne and Newland, we also see Nanapush as a male protagonist in Erdrich's *Tracks* who embodies the tension between individual desire and social authority. Throughout the novel, Nanapush fights against the faceless symbol of bureaucratic social authority known simply as the "Agent" (179). Kurup states that Nanapush acts as a protector for the Ojibwe, which is "jeopardized by the infusion of white culture in the form of legal documents, paper money, and government—in sum, capitalism" (38). Throughout, Nanapush opposes the written tradition symbolic of Western authority, asserting that “as soon as the bureaucrats sink their barbed pens into the lives of Indians, the paper starts flying," accompanied by "a blizzard of legal forms" (225). He refuses to sign documents using his name, saying that each time he uses it, it loses power, knowing that the more he reveals his identity to white authorities, the more control they will have over him. Ultimately, however, Nanapush realises that in order to survive, he must find a compromise between his individual desire to maintain the oral tradition and bureaucratic authority. As Nanapush becomes a bureaucrat to get custody of Lulu, this compromise is evident: “To become a bureaucrat myself was the only way that I could wade through the letters, the reports, the only place where I could find a ledge to kneel on, to reach through the loophole and draw you home” (225). His values and identification with nature, however, do not deteriorate, as he concludes the book optimistically, saying, “We gave against

your rush like creaking oaks, held on, braced ourselves together in the fierce dry wind" (226). Nanapush, therefore, is perhaps a rare, healthy example of balancing social authority and individual desire.

This tension between individual desire and social authority is not limited to Nanapush, as Pauline attempts to abandon her native heritage, adopt a colonising mentality, and even impose a kind of religious authority that involves degradation and self-harm upon herself. Nanapush's and Fleur's unabashed self-identification with the tribe and the natural world is the opposite of Pauline's, who states that "I wanted to be like my mother, who showed her half-white...because even as a child I saw that to hang back was to perish" (14). To create a new white identity, she embraces Catholicism. For reasons like this, Kurup argues that "through the character of Pauline, Erdrich symbolizes the significant spiritual and cultural rift manifest in so many of the Ojibwe as a result of colonization and assimilation practices" (41). Therefore, Pauline's rejection of the oral directly opposes what Nanapush fights to preserve. Furthermore, the fact that Pauline's narrative is not addressed to anyone contrasts Nanapush's narrative as a story being told to Lulu and suggests Pauline's narrative should be read rather than heard, just as documents of authority should be read and not heard.

As mentioned, the white identity Pauline pursues is backboned by Catholicism, and we see her adopt a kind of self-imposed religious authority that restricts her individual desires and even basic human needs. Pauline begins by denying herself basic hygiene, describing how "Fleur washed me, but I warned myself not to experience any pleasure" (154), but this soon turns to severe self-harm when "she prayed loudly in Catholic Latin, then plunged her hands, unprepared by the crushed roots and marrows of plants, into the boiling water" (190). Because she lacks influence from the other nuns in her convent and feels she "had to hide these marks" from them,

this is why I call this religious authority imagined or self-imposed (146). Pauline needs some kind of authority suppressing her desires in order to acquire a white identity, and when no one offers this, she becomes it herself.

This imposed authority is exemplified when Pauline goes out into the lake that is inhabited by the sea monster Misshepshu to suffer for "forty days, forty nights, or as long as the patches lasted on this boat" (200). In this way, she attempts to embody the highest religious authority there is, Christ himself. However, rather than achieve enlightenment through this, Pauline returns to shore and kills Napoleon, leaving Fleur to blame. As Pauline's final attempt to embody social authority in the novel, she becomes a nun, teaches maths at a Catholic school, and fully transitions into her new white identity as Sister Leopolda. This offers a very interesting contrast between our two narrators: Nanapush refuses to give his name to the agent because it loses its power each time the government uses it, whereas Pauline not only gives her name to white authorities but allows this authority to create a completely new identity for her. Therefore, one narrator, Nanapush, trusts his individual desire to preserve his tribal identity, while another, Pauline, suppresses all individual interest for a self-imposed, sometimes tortuous form of religious authority.

In summary, James' *Daisy Miller*, Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, and Erdrich's *Tracks* all depict tensions between social authority and individual desire within and across different characters and societies, as well as questioning what constitutes social authority. One of the first republics in history, America, aimed to flourish without monarchical authority. However, the old-world ideals of hierarchy and 'proper' behaviour persisted in society, just in a more unauthentic form, and this is why we see voices of social authority, such as Mrs. Walker and elite members of New York high society, who mimic these values in conflict with the emerging

American ideals of self-determination and self-reliance. Furthermore, James and Wharton's narrative techniques provide us insight into the traditional patriarchal mindset of Newland and Winterbourne, who figured themselves differently from old-world mentalities yet contributed significantly to them. Finally, *Tracks* is a complex depiction of social authority since it shows through Pauline's character that it can come from within and be self-imposed to suppress aspects of her identity she loathes. Additionally, Erdrich uses the narrator of Nanapush as a symbol for the tension between the colonising authority and the individual needs of Ojibwe members, a story that has been underrepresented throughout history.

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