

## **Two Florally Named Women Challenge Gender Expectations in the Gilded Age and Find Death**

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The rise of a new aristocracy in America during the Gilded age, fed by the wealth created by industrialization and the speculation that accompanied it, corresponded with a new approach to literature focused on observation and criticism instead of entertainment. Both Henry James and Edith Wharton explored and exposed the world of the new elite by each telling the tale of beautiful young women who pushed against the expectations, rivalry, and jockeying for positions that young women faced in their privileged circles. James's "Daisy Miller: A Study" looks at a woman just entering the age of marriage as she travels Europe with her mother and rebels against expectations put upon her by her family's peers. Likewise, Wharton's "The House of Mirth" also tells the tale of a woman who does not follow the expected path to find a mate in society in and around New York City. Neither story is suspenseful nor dramatic. Instead, the authors use the actions of these two women to highlight and criticize the communities they lived in. Looking at the similarities and differences between the two women and the experiences that result sheds light on what aspects of those communities the authors wished to expose.

The strongest similarity between the two women is their beauty. Both named after flowers, they represent the freshness of youth. Like flowers, their beauty attracts and causes people to not look beneath their outside appearance. Both authors introduce the

primary focus of their stories through bachelors who are part of the same social circle. When Daisy appears, her admirer notes, “She was dressed in white muslin, with a hundred frills and flounces, and knots of pale-colored ribbon ... she was strikingly, admirably pretty” (James 13). Lilly is also described as exceptional when her admirer observes, “for Miss Bart was a figure to arrest even the suburban traveler rushing to his last train” (Wharton 4).

What sets them apart, however, is that Daisy is at the start of her youthful bloom, and Lilly is approaching the end of hers. James has Lilly’s admirer, Lawrence Selden, note “the girlish smoothness, the purity of tint, that she was beginning to lose after eleven years of late hours and indefatigable dancing” (Wharton 4). James never gives an exact age for Daisy, but always describes her as young, and because she does not speak of any previous paramours, the implication is that she has just “come out” and is sixteen or so.

Their beauty and freshness make them attractive to men and the envy of other women. Both are aware of this power. Daisy admits to Seldon early on, “with all her prettiness in her lively eyes and in her light, slightly monotonous smile. ‘I have always had,’ she said, ‘a great deal of gentlemen's society’” (James 23). Although Lilly never admits to using her looks as a tool, she shows how she does this when she meets Percy Gryce on the train and moves close to him. “The train swayed again, almost flinging Miss Bart into his arms. She steadied herself with a laugh and drew back; but he was enveloped in the scent of her dress, and his shoulder had felt her fugitive touch” (Wharton 27). Later in the novel, Lilly uses the staged tableau she poses in to appear

suggestively clad in front of her suitors. It is her most desperate attempt to attract a spouse. Wharton drives this home when she relates how the “background of foliage against which she stood, served only to relieve the long dryad-like curves that swept upward from her poised foot to her lifted arm” (Wharton 217).

The role of women in social circles of the wealthy elite, and young unmarried women in particular, is the strongest theme in both books. Both authors make it clear that these two women must marry to take a full role in their worlds. For Lilly, it becomes a necessity because she does not have any wealth of her own. Mrs. Fisher drives this home when she finally informs Lilly, after her relatives have disowned her of Lilly’s need to marry: “at the end of a confidential talk, she summed up to her friend in the succinct remark, “You must marry as soon as you can” (Walker 383).

Both women were courted by European elites in their youth. Lilly wonders, “Was it only ten years since she had wavered in imagination between the English earl and the Italian prince?” (Wharton 55). Daisy, in turn, dallies with Mr. Giovanelli. Lilly never went through with either of her overseas paramours. Daisy is also not serious about her Italian paramour. We learn through Winterbourne that “I don’t believe she thinks of marrying him,” said Winterbourne, “and I don’t believe he hopes to marry her” (James 96). These women are not giving in to the pressure of finding a spouse who brings generational aristocracy to their social circles. Instead, they resist marriage while befriending or flirting with men, leading to outrage and rumors. Because of Daisy’s untimely demise, we never see the full repercussions wrestling from her desire to do what

she wants. In contrast, what people say about Lilly leads to her downfall and death. After writing a check to pay off her debt to Trenor, showing to herself that contrary to the rumors, he did not buy her company, she concluded that “Sleep was what she wanted” (Walker 520), and she added too many drops of her sleeping drug.

Another interesting and important characteristic that both women shared was how t two bachelors who were attracted to them would have been a good love match for each. They kept these men at arm’s length, entertaining a relationship and hinting at wanting a love match after their deaths. When Winterbourne met Daisy, he became mesmerized by her and even followed her to Italy, where he tried to get her attention and keep her from disgracing herself. Lilly had a similar experience with Selden. Both men represented a love match that could have led to happiness but not status in their circles. Perhaps the authors seem to imply that if both women had been born into a middle-class existence, they would have found and married these reasonable and kind men and had enjoyable lives.

These post-mortem messages reveal the biggest difference between these two characters — how and when they died. Daisy, ignoring the advice of her would-be savior Winterbourne, contracts malaria during a romantic outing in the Roman Colosseum with her Italian gentleman. It is her defiance that kills her — her desire to live life to the fullest, regardless of what she is expected or advised to do. What we never learn is if she would have chosen to continue in this way and ten years later, ended up like Lilly — wondering why she made the decisions she made.

Lilly, in contrast, decides to accept the role society assigned her and lets Rosedale know that she was interested in marrying him. But, after he rejects her, she admits, “A year ago I should have been of use to you, and now I should be an encumbrance” (Wharton 413). Instead of leaving her predicament, circumstances worsen, and she ends up accidentally taking her own life trying to find sleep and escape from her guilt and misery.

This difference, when the two women die, leaves the reader of both novels with an important question to answer. Would Daisy have ended her days as Lilly did, or would her wealth have protected her from such a fate? Would she have continued her unconventional ways and gotten away with it because she had money? Daisy died young, beautiful, and happy. Lilly left life worn out, still beautiful but hopeless and sad. Winterbourne remembers how her beauty changed when Wharton has him note, “He saw too, under the loose lines of her dress, how the curves of her figure had shrunk to angularity; he remembered long afterward how the red play of the flame sharpened the depression of her nostrils, and intensified the blackness of the shadows which struck up from her cheekbones to her eyes” (Wharton 501).

When they passed may be the strongest lesson that both James and Wharton left their readers with. Beauty and youth in a woman in those circumstances can lead to power but also rumors and jealousy. However, it is money that determines the outcome. How, in the Gilded Age and even in our own times, beauty is only a tool in pursuing wealth and happiness. Daisy and Lilly show us that in the face of peer pressure and the

selfish struggles of the wealthy, non-conformance ends in tragedy.

### **Works Cited.**

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