Ignorance and Beauty in *Gigi*, *Daniel Deronda*, and *Emma*

In nineteenth and twentieth century literature, female characters were often depicted as being childlike, and were then looked down upon for their childlike characteristics. This essay will explore the treatment of childlike characteristics specifically in *Gigi* by Collette, while using the childlike characteristics in *Daniel Deronda* by George Eliot and *Emma* by Jane Austen for comparison. In *Gigi*, Colette presents a coming-of-age story about a young woman and her journey of becoming a courtesan. While being advised by her Grandmamma, Gigi is constantly undermined and corrected because of her tendency to act childish, like when she initially fails to properly prepare for seeing her Aunt Alicia. Similarly, in *Emma* by Jane Austen, Harriet Smith, Emma’s friend, is coached by Emma on how she should and should not act. In *Daniel Deronda* by George Eliot, Mirah Lapodith’s childlike qualities are what first draws Daniel to her, and are something that she never grows out of. Qualities that are typically associated with being childlike, such as ignorance and a cherubesque appearance, are looked down upon within both of the societies presented in *Gigi* and *Emma*, however is viewed as being appealing in *Daniel Deronda*. Both Harriet and Gigi are looked down upon because of their physical appearance and childish personalities; however, Gigi tries to fight against the childlike stigma put on her, whereas Harriet welcomes it. The qualities of these women that are seen as primarily childish contribute to them being treated negatively. The negative attitude towards childlike characteristics in these works provide a commentary on the assumed frailty of women.

In *Gigi*, the title character’s primary characteristics are that she’s young, innocent, and in the process of being taught how to become a proper courtesan. The greater part of the novella serves as a way to convey Gigi’s loss of childlike innocence. Gigi’s introduction into the novella places Gigi as someone who is helplessly innocent: “Gilberte’s every posture was still governed by the unconcern of childish innocence. At times she looked like...a carved angel, or again like a boy in skirts; but she seldom resembled a nearly grown-up girl” (Colette 6). Unlike her older, courtesan family members, the way Gigi presents herself is synonymous with her innocence. The novella’s other female characters are described in a more harsh and sexualized manner, like Madame Alvarez’s “heavy Spanish face” (5) and “creamy complexion… ample bust” (6) and Aunt Alicia having a “young voice, a touch of pink on her amiable wrinkles, and lace on her white hair, Aunt Alicia was the perfect stage marquise” (36). Though Aunt Alicia’s appearance isn’t as sexualized as Madame Alvarez’s and is arguably softer, her appearance represents the high quality elegance that a courtesan was also expected to take have. Since having a mistress was seen as being less of a taboo in this society, courtesans were expected to maintain a level of elegance in case they were to be taken out. Because being a courtesan is oftentimes reflected in what one looks like, the way Gigi presents herself should ideally be representative of her career path. Because she “seldom resemble[s] a grown-up girl”, Gigi’s outward air of innocence is looked down upon by the people who are trying to teach her how to be a courtesan: her family. Physical appearance is the first indicator of who someone is, which, when trying to get into this specific career, can make the difference between becoming a mistress or not.

Harriet Smith of *Emma*, like Gigi, is described in a way that makes her seem ethereal or cherubesque. However, looking somewhat like a child has a different effect for Harriet. For Harriet, her less-mature exterior is what initially draws Emma to her, “She was a very pretty girl, and her beauty happened to be a sort which Emma particularly admired. She was short, plump and fair, with a fine bloom, blue eyes, light hair, regular features, and a look of great sweetness” (Austen 19). Harriet is unthreatening; she looks like someone that Emma can groom and teach into being a more impressive and appeasing person. By describing Harriet as being “pretty” with “regular features”, the narrator is positioning her as a subordinate, pliable character. Perceived subordination is what allows characters like Emma or Madame Alvarez to take control of the situations that would have otherwise been in the hands of Harriet or Gigi.

Unlike the Gigi and Harriet, Mirah’s childlike beauty is seen as a positive attribute. When she’s first introduced in the novel, Daniel Deronda describes Mirah as having “Delicate, childlike beauty” (Eliot 157) and a “little woman’s figure” (159). The way Mirah’s beauty is treated is a direct contrast to Gigi and Harriet. Rather than other characters thinking less of her because she’s smaller and more childish, Mirah’s appearance is what provokes Daniel to want to protect her (159).

Both Gigi and Harriet exhibit a push-and-pull with their childlike qualities and how they’re perceived by others. In *Gigi*, Gigi, Tonton, and Gigi’s family all perceive her in different ways than the others do. This is evident when they discuss the possibility of Tonton taking Gigi out for tea, “‘Our Gilberte has not got the gumption to make her own way in the world, like so many. She is just a child.’ ‘Of sixteen,’ said Lachaille. ‘Of nearly sixteen,’ consented Madame Alvarez” (Colette 48). Tonton is advocating that Gigi is more mature than Madame Alvarez assumes her to be. Madame Alvarez, while trying to use Gigi’s age as a way of protecting her reputation from being questioned by her going out with Tonton, also undermines Gigi’s ability to make her own decisions. Alvarez claims that Gigi doesn’t have the gumption to make her own way in the world, but it’s clear by the end of the novella, when Gigi initially rejects Tonton (57), that she was mistaken.

In *Emma*, Emma manipulates Harriet into letting her take charge of Harriet’s love life. Emma sees Harriet’s naivete as something she can take advantage of and use to her advantage by allowing her to mold Harriet into the person that Emma wants her to be. When she initially gets the letter from Mr. Martin, Harriet shows it to Emma. Though Emma swears that she won’t make her opinion on the situation known, she ends up voicing her opinion to Harriet- resulting in Harriet not accepting Mr. Martin’s proposal (Austen 42). Though Emma never blatantly says that Harriet is too childish to make her own decisions, Emma’s actions make it apparent that she believes she makes better decisions regarding Harriet’s life than Harriet does. This inability to properly make decisions is never realized by Harriet herself; Harriet merely thinks that she is seeking the advice of others.

Innocence, while mental, can also be found in other facets of a character. For Gigi, her innocence is culminated in her appearance and her lack of understanding. Though the novella positions Gigi as a fully innocent character, her innocence is almost entirely dependent on her to her having physical attributes of innocence and her lack of education when it comes to being a courtesan. Gigi looks like a child, but has the mental determination of someone older. Though Madame Alvarez sees her as being mentally childish as well, Gigi’s own inability to fully grasp the job she’s destined to do allows her to see beyond the surface of being a courtesan, “They’ve drummed into my ears that I am backward for my age, but all the same I know the meaning of words. ‘Make me my fortune,’ that means I should go away from here with you, and that I should sleep in your bed” (Colette 57). Though Gigi may not know exactly what “make me my fortune” means, she knows what the phrase generally entails. Gigi is being groomed to go into an adult profession and is being taught how to act more mature, but her intelligence mixed with her naivete enables her to be upfront about what she is knowledgeable about, and to call out situations where she may be being taken advantage of.

Opposite to Gigi’s approach to being innocent, Harriet either welcomes her own innocence or doesn’t acknowledge that a bias based around innocence exists. In *Emma*, Harriet is constantly referred to by Emma as “my dear Harriet” (Austen 41, 59, 63). Though this title is used when Emma is trying to correct Harriet, she never makes a show of acknowledging that Emma is in any way demeaning her by talking down to her. Similarly, when it comes to mental innocence, Harriet is described being somewhat mentally innocent, “Harriet was puzzling over the the paper in all the hope of confusion and dullness” (58). Harriet is described as being confused and dull, two words that would never be used to describe Gigi. This is one of the primary differences between how Harriet and Gigi react to being treated like a child; Gigi, while still ignorant to how her future profession works, is able to use her ignorance to her advantage, whereas Harriet gets trapped by Emma because of her ignorance.

Unlike both Gigi and Harriet, Mirah is trapped in her innocence by her own past experiences. This self-imposed form of innocence contributes to Mirah’s naivete and need for Daniel’s guidance. Because Mirah was forced to take on a more adult role as a child once her father took her from her mother, though she is nineteen during *Daniel Deronda*, she still clings to some of the tendencies she had when she was younger:

Her theatrical training had left no recognizable trace; probably her manners had not much changed since she played the forsaken child at nine years of age; and she had grown up in her simplicity and truthfulness like a little flower-seed that absorbs the chance confusion of its surroundings into its own definite mould of beauty. (Eliot 188)

Mirah’s traumatic past has essentially kept her in the mental space of a nine year-old. Though she’s obviously had to grow up and face harsher realities than both Gigi and Harriet, her experience also stunts her ability to properly grow up. Mirah’s inability to fully accept her own reality- ten years after she has been stolen away- is what causes her to be the “seed that absorbs the chance confusion of its surroundings”. She has absorbed everything that she’s been through and has been left jaded and immensely depressed because she’s unable to reconcile her past, youthful self with her present, depressed self. Mirah being childlike is fully due to her inability to move beyond her past.

One of the primary differences between the women presented in these works is there ability to be aware of their own childlike tendencies and their own power. Throughout the course of the novella, Gigi’s relatives are trying to teach her how to be a more appealing courtesan. These lessons are, in essence, ways to work out the childlike tendencies that Gigi is prone to. Though it is clear later in the novella that Gigi is more mature than is originally let on, she finds the mundanities of ‘proper’ manners pointless and questions Madame Alvarez when she attempts to correct Gigi’s behavior, “Have my skirts made a little longer, so I don’t have to fold myself up in a Z every time I sit down. You see, Grandmamma, with my skirts too short, I have to keep thinking of my you-know-what” (Colette 5). Rather than sit properly, Gigi wants her skirts made longer so she doesn’t have to think about accidentally showing her genitalia. Gigi’s disregard for how to act ‘proper’ further establishes her own cluelessness when dealing with how to act like a lady; she fails to understand the amount of work and training that is required to be a courtesan (since courtesans were expected to be both polite and well-rounded women). Gigi resists the idea of conforming to more adult behavior more so than Harriet Smith in *Emma*.

Similar to how Madame Alvarez advised Gigi on the way she must act, Emma frequently gave advice to Harriet regarding how she should approach dealing with men, “You must not refine too much upon this charade. You will betray your feelings improperly, if you are too conscious and too quick, and appear to affix more meaning, or even quite all the meaning which may be affixed to it. Do not be over-powered by such a little tribute of admiration” (Austen 63). This not only reinforces the subordination of Harriet in regards to Emma, but also reinforces the relationship between them as a mentorship, rather than a friendship. Like Madame Alvarez advising Gigi, Emma’s focus on Harriet ‘appearing to affix more meaning’ points to Emma giving Harriet this advice because she doesn’t want Harriet to do something wrong that would hurt her reputation later on.

Though needing advice or guidance is less of a factor when dealing with Mirah; she is still seen as a character who needs help. Almost directly after Daniel meets her, he pinpoints Mirah as someone who, “needed shelter and protection in the fullest sense” (Eliot 173). Daniel has a less direct effect on changing Mirah’s actual way of being- which is something that both Gigi’s family and Emma strive to do. When this sense of protection over childlike characters occurs in the other novels, it doesn’t happen as protection over the actual character (like Mirah), it occurs with protection over reputation. The focus that *Daniel Deronda* puts on protecting the character rather than the reputation is telling of the differences between Mirah’s frail-like attributes and the clueless ones of Gigi and Harriet.

In both *Gigi* and *Emma*, characters are presented as being childlike- innocent and ignorant both in regards to their beauty and in regards to their ability to make wise decisions. This is somewhat seen in with Mirah in *Daniel Deronda*, but her innocence is less to do with her own shortcomings and more to do with the repercussions of her past. Throughout the novels, both Gigi and Harriet are taught to be more mature, in order to preserve their eventual reputations. In contrast to the teaching and manipulation that they face, Mirah’s innocence provokes concern from Daniel Deronda, rather than a need to change her. In these three novels, childlike qualities such as innocence, ignorance, and specific kinds of beauty are treated as catalysts in the female characters being treated differently.

Works Cited

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