

# Cultural collision in the movie “Daisy Miller” - differences in social behavior

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**Abstract:** Under the exchange and collision of world cultures, communicative behavior has become an important component of social interaction. The movie “Daisy Miller” is adapted from Henry James’ novel “Daisy Miller” and tells the tragic love story between two young people with different social and cultural backgrounds. The differences in their social and cultural behaviors are also one of the reasons that cannot be ignored for this tragedy. In order to analyze the characteristics, cultural origins, and related inspirations of communication behavior in different cultures of Europe and America, this article combines the movie “Daisy Miller” and starts from the perspective of communication behavior, focusing on the “rationality” of communication. Using Habermas’ communication theory, it analyzes the characteristics, reasons, and influences of cross-cultural communication, and obtains the enlightenment that cross-cultural communication behavior should conform to “rationality”. “Rationality” is the core of communication behavior, otherwise, communication behavior cannot be established without “rationality”.

**Keywords:** Daisy Miller; Social behavior; Rational communication behavior; Habermas’ theory of communicative action

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction to Habermas

Jürgen Habermas was born in Germany in 1929 and is a renowned German philosopher known as one of the most influential thinkers. Habermas was born during wartime and developed his universalist ideas. Later, he established a theoretical system for communicative behavior from a materialist perspective. Habermas’ theory of communication has characteristics such as universalism, which deserves our in-depth analysis.

### 1.2 Habermas’ theory of communicative behavior

Habermas divides social communicative behavior into four types: purposive behavior, normative behavior, dramatic behavior, and communicative behavior.

Firstly, purposeful behavior is also known as non social behavior. Simply put, it is an action taken by a person to achieve a certain goal. For example, the purpose of doing business is to make money, so doing business is a purposeful behavior. Secondly, regulating sexual behavior, just as different groups have different value orientations, when an actor wants to integrate into a new group, he needs to make normative adjustments and adopt behaviors that conform to the value orientation of that group. Thirdly, dramatic behavior refers to the conscious expression of an actor’s inner world or personal emotions. Fourthly, communicative behavior, which Habermas believed to be the core of behavior. Communicative behavior refers to the act of two or more individuals communicating through a certain medium and reaching a consensus. Habermas believed that in every successful communication act, various relationships must be coordinated and universal consensus reached among the subjects. This consensus does not require people to act according to a fixed and consistent worldview. On the contrary, interlocutors should coordinate their definitions of the situation in an “ideal context” to achieve mutual understanding and exchange of ideas.

### 1.3 Introduction to the movie Daisy Miller

The movie Daisy Miller is adapted from Henry James’ novel of the same name and tells the tragic story of love between two young people. The protagonist Miller is a typical American girl. She traveled to Europe with her family. Miller met the male protagonist Winterbourne in the hotel garden and they hit it off immediately. Subsequently, Winterburn visited his aunt Mrs. Costello with the intention of introducing Miller to her. However, Mrs. Costello felt disgusted with Miller and her family, believing that they were uneducated, knowledgeable, and had poor taste. Winterburn was very sad, but he didn’t want to leave Miller because he believed Miller was innocent and kind. As time passed, the relationship between the two became increasingly intimate. However, later on, Winterburn discovered that Miller’s level of openness was to play alone with other opposite sex friends. Although Miller stated that he only regarded the other person as good friends, Winterburn and his two aunts believed that Miller’s relationship with his opposite sex friend Giovanni was too intimate and violated the etiquette norms of European women. Even more deadly, Winterburn firmly believed in all the rude remarks about Miller and was influenced by them. In the end, Miller fell seriously ill and passed away. At Miller’s funeral, Giovanni also told Winterbourne that Miller was truly an innocent girl, and even if Miller were alive, he would not be able to get her. Winterbourne regretted knowing the truth, but it was too late.

### 1.4 Introduction to Henry James, Author of Daisy Miller

Henry James is an American novelist, playwright, and essayist. James was born on April 15, 1843, into a wealthy family in New York City. He grew up in the United States since childhood. Except for occasionally returning to the United States, he spent the rest of his adult life wandering in Europe. James has a unique perspective on European and American society, and he has always wanted to compare

European civilization with American civilization. This article selects his classic work “Daisy Miller” published in 1879 and widely acclaimed. This work perfectly embodies the conflict between the male and female protagonists in European and American culture.

## 2. Differences in Social Behavior in the Movie Daisy Miller

### 2.1 Daisy Miller’s Interpersonal Behavior and Its Causes

The female protagonist Daisy Miller is a typical American woman. She grew up in the United States, and she is passionate, equal, and unconstrained. But in the eyes of conservative Europeans, especially Mrs. Costello and Mrs. Walker, the two aunts of Winterbourne, Miller was seen as frivolous and uncultured. Once Winterbourne had a conversation with Mrs. Costello:

Mrs. Costello: “All kinds of Americans are like this, ignore them

Winterbourne: “So you’re just ignoring them

Mrs. Costello: “I can’t get along with them

Winterbourne: “This little girl is very beautiful

Mrs. Costello: “Of course she’s beautiful, but she’s a bit rough

According to the definition of communicative rationality, any communicative behavior should be based on understanding and respecting the cultural background of the other party. Through this conversation, we can see that Mrs. Costello is full of contempt for Miller, simply because Miller is American. In addition, Mrs. Costello’s description of Miller is also full of contempt and dissatisfaction. Communicative rationality requires both parties to use appropriate language in communication with mutual understanding (Mabovula, 2010). However, Costello’s subjective evaluation of Miller without truly understanding her does not meet the requirements of communicative rationality.

### 2.2 The Social Behavior of Winterbourne and Its Causes

The protagonist Winterbourne is a person deeply influenced by European culture. Gentlemanly demeanor is a basic etiquette standard advocated by the male public in European countries. European gentlemen are generally conservative, reserved, and have strong self-esteem, which can be reflected in Winterbourne. Winterbourne is always polite to Miller; He is not as talkative as Miller; He is very conservative and cannot accept Miller taking a walk in the park with Giovanni, nor can he accept Miller going to the Colosseum in Rome at night. Although he really likes Miller, his self-esteem cannot tolerate Miller being looked down upon. Finally, Winterbourne, who believed in others, lost Miller forever. Obviously, his personality contrasts sharply with Miller’s, one being open and informal, and the other being conservative and polite. The collision of European and American cultures is one of the biggest highlights of the film, while also foreshadowing the twists and turns of American history.

## 3. Differences in Social Behavior and the Formation of Daisy Miller’s Tragedy

Habermas divides social behavior into four categories based on the content of behavior in his theory of the life world: purposive behavior, regulated behavior, dramatic behavior, and communicative behavior. In the movie Daisy Miller, Miller travels to the European city of Rome, where an American girl who knows nothing about European culture meets a very traditional European family - Winterbourne, who studies in Geneva, and his two aunts living in Europe. According to Habermas’ theory of behavior, when dealing with people living in different cultural environments, both parties should respect each other, understand each other’s culture, and achieve similar or consistent moral concepts, so that communication behavior in different cultures can proceed smoothly. However, in one scene of the movie, Mrs. Walker, Winterburn’s aunt, saw Miller walking in the park with Winterburn and Giovanni at the same time. She had to stop Miller’s debauchery and decided to invite him to ride in her carriage.

Mrs. Walker: “You must get in the car and drive around with me

Miller: “That would be fascinating, but taking a walk is even more fascinating

Mrs. Walker: “But it may not be appropriate to take a walk here

Miller: “I really enjoy walking

Mrs. Walker: “You should go with your mother

From this conversation, it can be seen that Mrs. Walker and Miller have different views on social etiquette. Europeans need to maintain a dignified and elegant demeanor while sitting or walking in public places, and maintain appropriate social distance when interacting with the opposite sex. On the other hand, Americans are very open. Young ladies have the freedom of action. This means that they have not reached a consensus on objective things, and without rational communication, it is difficult for communication to proceed smoothly, even forming communication barriers between them. But no criticism from anyone is enough to defeat Miller, as he only cares about Winterbourne’s ideas. Unfortunately, between Miller and Mrs. Walker, Winterburn chose to side with Mrs. Walker.

Habermas believed that in every successful communication, their relationship must be harmonious, they can understand and trust each other, exchange ideas, and all kinds of communication barriers can be broken by reason. This is what Habermas called the realization of communicative rationality. In the love between Miller and Winterbourne, the barriers of feudal system, traditional ethics and other concepts between them were not broken by reason. At least, Winterbourne was deeply influenced by his two aunts and did not objectively and rationally view Miller, always listening to others’ opinions, which laid the groundwork for Miller’s tragedy.

#### 4. Inspiration from the ending of the movie “Daisy Miller”

Reasonable communication behavior should be based on mutual equality. Respecting and understanding the diversity of world cultures is a prerequisite for establishing equal relationships between people in cross-cultural communication. Different countries and groups have formed different cultural norms due to different development histories, geographical environments, and other factors, and people living in different cultural environments also have different characteristics. As social interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds continue to expand, cultural conflicts are inevitable in cross-cultural communication. Understanding foreign cultures, respecting the diversity of world cultures, and establishing equal relationships for all are basic requirements of communicative rationality. The movie Daisy Miller also tells us that we should treat others objectively. Miller may have a free spirited and carefree personality, but she also has a kind and sincere side. Mrs. Costello directly denied Miller before she had any contact with him, which violated the requirements of communicative rationality and damaged the interpersonal relationship between the two. Therefore, in cross-cultural communication, we need to respect and understand cultural diversity, let go of personal biases, and establish equal relationships.

#### 5. Conclusion

At present, scholars at home and abroad have conducted extensive research on cultural conflicts in cross-cultural communication, but there are not many studies on differences in communicative behavior from the perspective of Habermas’ theory of communicative behavior. The perspective chosen in this article is relatively new and has certain research significance. This article takes the movie Daisy Miller as the research object and explores the difference between communicative behavior and communicative rationality based on Habermas’ theory of communicative behavior. According to Habermas’ theory of communicative behavior, the rationality of communicative behavior is the core content of communication, which requires us to maintain equal relationships in interpersonal communication, based on objective facts, in order to promote mutual understanding and reach consensus. However, due to the limited literature I have collected, this paper lacks comprehensiveness to some extent. I will continue to pay attention to this and collect literature and books on communication behavior theory in the future for more comprehensive research in this area.

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