

## The Heroine of *The Wings of the Dove*

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As a writer Henry James is said to have reached his full prime in the first decade of the present century. The series of novels in this period of his richest self-expression, which it is generally accepted are rather difficult reading for the average novel reader, are represented by *The Wings of the Dove*, *the Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*. The first of these is a novel of great length, though there appear in it only nine characters in all. The protagonist is of course Milly Theale, with both Kate Croy and Merton Densher for deuteragonists. There are also Susan Shepherd Stringham, Kate's aunt Maude Lowder, Lord Mark and Sir Luke Strett, who are no less important in their own way, serving as they do for the natural course of the development of the plot. The remaining three are Kate's sister Mrs. Marian Condrip, the two sister's father Lionel Croy and Milly's major-domo Eugenio, but these characters are rather of minor importance, except for the fact that they have some part of their own to play in the consciousness of the principal characters.

In his preface to the *New York Edition* of this novel, James says:

*The Wings of the Dove*, published in 1902, represents to my memory a very old—if I shouldn't perhaps rather say a very young—motive; I can scarce remember the time when the situation on which this long-drawn fiction rests was not vividly present to me.<sup>1)</sup>

This is a somewhat mystifying statement without any further concrete explanation, but the truth is that Milly Theale, the heroine of *The Wings of the Dove*, was based on his dear cousin Minny Temple,

1) *New York Edition*, Vol. XIX, p.v, l. I. *The Art of the Novel*, p. 288.

who at the age of twenty-four died of tuberculosis in 1817. The fact that Milly Theale is surely his tribute to his cousin is revealed in the latter pages of his *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), in which, although her name and kinship are withheld, he recalls her memory with the warmest affection. He recounts in this book her 'free spirit,' her 'sense of verity of character and play of life in others,' her 'lack of fear and restless impatience' and lastly her 'clinging to consciousness'<sup>1)</sup> to the very last minute with a will to live and achieve the sense of having lived. Her death or to be more exact, the news of her death—for he was staying abroad at the time—was so painful to him that he further writes in this book :

The image of this, which was to remain with me, appeared so of the essence of the tragedy that I was in the far-off aftertime to seek to lay the ghost by wrapping it, a particular occasion aiding, in the beauty and dignity of art.<sup>2)</sup>

It leaves little room for doubt, therefore, that behind the creation of Milly Theale, there had been clearly and constantly at work a dedicative and commemorative intention on his part. However, it is hard to approve too readily the wisdom of regarding both Milly Theale and Minny Temple as one and the same in his mind. Some of his critics, especially those who took too frequent recourse to his biographical data, went the whole length in this connection, but this, in my opinion, is going too far. An artist's creation, needless to say, is and ought to be no mere portraiture. Although very similar in her physical plight and in her desire to live, Milly Theale is a separate creation after all. For that matter, it is also said that James had previously used Minny Temple for Isabel Archer of *The Portrait of a Lady*, one of the loveliest American women ever created. In his letter to Grace Norton, however, James, denying the intention to draw a mere portrait, wrote thus :

Poor Minny was essentially incomplete—and I have attempted

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1) 2) *Notes of a Son and Brother*, pp. 453~515.

to make my young woman more rounded, more finished. In truth, everyone in life is incomplete, and it is the mark of art that in producing them one feels the desire to fill them out, to justify them, as it were.<sup>1)</sup>

Admittedly the tragic death of Minny Temple, stricken and doomed and yet with so passionate eagerness for life was surely a motivating idea for his creation of Milly Theale but we must know at the same time that for his first idea of *The Wings of the Dove* to materialize, he spent eight long years, 'turning it over, standing off from it, yet coming back to it,'<sup>2)</sup> as he says in his preface. Therefore, it was thus with much invention and in a long period of time that he finally decided as its heroine upon 'the fabulously rich American heiress of all the ages blessed with 'liberty of action, of choice, of appreciation and of contact',<sup>3)</sup> yet combatting secretly and with a strong will to live the inexorable fate and the uncontrollable force of illness that threatened her with death as well as upon the cast of all the necessary by-players in the story.

## II

*The Wings of the Dove* consists of ten books in all. The first two books deal with Kate Croy and Merton Densher, who are in love with each other. There is no presentation here of Milly Theale, the heroine of the story, but the particular situation of human relations in which she has to find herself later is described in detail. It is in the third book that we are first told of Milly's background and her trip to Europe with Susan Shepherd Stringham, her loyal friend and a lady writer from Boston. In the next book Milly is brought to England to be introduced to Kate's aunt Maud Lowder and her circle of friends by the intermediacy of Susan who formerly used to know Mrs. Lowder in their respective maidenhood. The fifth book describes Milly's swift

1) Re-quoted from F. O. Matthiessen's *Henry James*, p. 49.

2) *New York Edition*, vol. XIX, p.v. *The Art of the Novel*, p. 288.

3) *ibid.*, p. ix. *ibid.*, p. 292.

conquest of London society with the full splendor of life. In the sixth book Kate Croy with her evil design tries to persuade Densher to pretend love for Milly Theale. In the seventh book Milly, out of her own will to survive at any cost and also Susan's eager wish to see her installed as a genuine princess, moves on to Venice, and in a palace she leased and with a retinue she employed, she lavishly entertains her English friends. The eighth book depicts her final public appearance at an evening party for her friends, where dressed in white with a heavy priceless chain of pearls around her neck and against the gorgeous background, she gives both Kate Croy and Merton Densher an impression of being a dove, though in a different sense in their respective case. In the last two we see her only once more when she and Densher have a private talk and she passionately declares she does want to live. Soon after this Lord Mark's brutal disclosure to Milly of Densher and Kate's true relationship destroys her will to live, smashing her delicate hold on life. But neither her talk with Lord Mark nor her final interview with Densher in which the intercession of Sir Luke Strett and Susan Stringham makes it possible for him to be received and forgiven by her is given at first hand. This Jamesian technique to find out direction by indirection makes us feel her tragic death doubly impressive, leading us to deep reflection.

### III

Milly Theale, the heroine, according to the author, is 'a young person conscious of a great capacity for life, but early stricken and doomed, condemned to die under short respite, while enamored of the world, aware moreover of the condemnation and passionately desiring to put in before extinction as many of the finer vibrations as possible, and so achieve, however briefly and brokenly, the sense of having lived.'<sup>1)</sup> In other words, the central theme of the story is Milly's will to live, strengthened by her secret love for Densher but finally destroyed by

1) *New York Edition*, Vol. XIX, p. v, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 288.

Lord Mark's exposure of the plot against her. The prime mover of the plot is Kate Croy but with the exception of Susan Shepherd Stringham and Sir Luke Strett, the rest of the principal characters are also more or less plotters, each in his or her own position and in his or her own way. For that matter, even Susan Stringham and Sir Luke Strett are in a sense involved in the deception of Milly with this difference that these two always have in mind Milly's happiness from first to last.

Hence arises the question of whether Milly is intelligent enough or not. It can't be said, of course, that she is nothing but a silly dove with just 'tender tints and soft sounds'. Brought into contact with the 'English gang' by Susan, who is infatuated with her and proud of her for a purpose of display, Milly, nevertheless, is aware of what is going on around her. For one thing, the 'English gang' consists of people who are mutually incompatible in their interests. In this respect, Henry James is very astute in bringing the contrast between his characters. Lord Mark, for instance, is working Mrs. Lowder's Lancaster Gate and is being worked by Mrs. Lowder at the same time. Mrs. Lowder takes Kate up for her own selfish end to add to her social prestige. Kate, on the other hand, takes the line of passive resistance to her aunt. Even between Kate and Densher the contrast is very sharp. They have little in common between them except for their affection and lack of resources. The former is active as a fighter for life, so to speak, while the latter is passive with a propensity to reflection. Although faulty sometimes in her observation or merely simulating ignorance, Milly, who, as a doomed invalid, is highly self-conscious and self-analytical, knows all this either through her direct impression or through the warnings given her by some of these people not purely for her own sake but out of some designs of their own. Only it seems that once she has entered this circle of complications of the 'English gang', she has to keep company with them for better or worse as the only group that interests her.

As a matter of fact, we know, too, that fabulously rich as she was,

she had no living relative of hers and no friends willing enough to take her abroad except Susan Stringham. And what she wanted of Europe is, after all, neither scenery nor museums but people, most of them being seekers for a civilized and beautiful way of life. On the other hand, her new-found 'English friends', whether good or evil, are those who regard themselves or are regarded in the world as civilized and far above the common run of people. In Kate's words, "the worker in one connection is the worked in another.....with the wheels of the system wonderfully oiled." On their social level they can ostensibly like each other in a way in spite of any clash of interests there may be. It is true that Mrs. Lowder is a vulgar woman, living in a mansion of sumptuous bad taste and with neither social nor esthetic grace but admittedly she has unchallenged social force. Lord Mark, in his attempt to expose to Milly the true relationship between Kate and Densher, betrays himself in the end as devoid of sense and sensibility but in his usual behavior he is undoubtedly a man of taste and intelligence as well as a man of social tact and pliancy. As for Kate she, too, is a lady of fine taste and sensibility, although she conceives an evil design upon Milly's wealth quite like Lionel Croy's daughter. Enmeshed thus in the web spun by the 'English gang', Milly herself is now complacent in a considerable degree with the fullness of life she finds in this new environment. Milly, the wealthy American heiress, therefore, is and must be a princess to Susan Stringham who has at long last succeeded in re-establishing her social status with the girl as her prize and is now trying hard to discover in her young companion the richest potential possibilities of romance. To the rest of the 'English gang', she is a dove with 'wide wings' and capable of 'wondrous flights' only because of her exploitability, that is, because her power of wealth is great.

What strikes us most with a sense of oddity in this connection is Milly's willingness to be exploited by these new-found friends of hers. It is true that she may be ignorant of the new complexity in which she has found herself and also may trustingly not suspect Mrs.

Lowder and Kate of their evil designs upon her, but as has already been pointed out, she is not so simple and innocent as she really deserves to be called a dove, whatever it means. When requested by Mrs. Lowder to find out for her whether Densher is back from America and then left alone in a room with Kate, she out of her consideration alone for her exasperated young friend tells Mrs. Lowder later that he isn't, although she knows well that she is telling a lie. Such is an example of her make-believe dove-like acquiescence.

Escorted by Lord Mark, she goes to see the Bronzino in the great house, which everybody agrees looks quite like her. Faced with 'a sort of magnificent maximum, a pink dawn of an apotheosis,' she at the same moment foresees that hers will be a short-lived happiness, and as she looks, the joyless lady on the canvas begins to appear to her 'dead, dead, dead.' She, then, has a spell of faintness. After her second visit to Sir Luke Strett, she, who has perhaps confirmed surmises about her serious physical infirmity, happens to walk through London slums, and coming out into Regent's Park, sees there hundreds of anxious and tired wanderers. It is then that a desire possesses her to share more than ever before in the common lot of human sufferers. Again, in the National Gallery where just before she encounters Kate Groy and Merton Densher having a clandestine meeting soon after his return from America, she in the midst of the deep emotion the place has kindled in her, becomes suddenly conscious of the stream of American tourists going past. There are none of them who know her or even notice her,—her with so much glamor attached now as a society queen in an alien land. An unspeakable loneliness, then, comes upon her. Such are moments when she sobers up to her reality.

Yet, in spite of all this and also because of all this, she has to continue to play her make-believe role of princess at any cost. Of course, on the other side of the picture, there are always her inner struggles to live and her secret, subdued passion for Merton Densher. But her illness and her love for Densher are alike muffled as much as possible, in the sense that we learn little directly from Milly

herself. It is from the 'refractors' that surround Milly or what James calls 'windows' opening upon her in his preface to this novel that we are made to know how hopelessly ill she is and how strong is her passion for Densher, who alone of all the characters, regards her in a true light all the time she is fussed about throughout one scene after another, that is, as 'littie Miss Theale' remembered through her kindness to him during his assignment as a journalist in America. The name of the disease she is suffering from is given by none of the characters, though talked about by surmise, and not until 'she turns her face to the wall' upon hearing from Lord Mark about Densher's commitment to Kate Croy and is perhaps quite undeceived for the first time of Kate's queer reticence about Densher in the past is the intensity of her love for him made really evident.

All this may perhaps be attributed to James's method as a novelist, which many critics in his favor extoll to the skies, saying that this kind of treatment of Milly is highly effective to make her most impressive. In this particular case, however, we might say that the more impressive she is, the more isolated from, and the less real to, the reader she seems to be, though his method undeniably adds to her impressiveness as a 'dove' or a 'princess'. On the whole, Milly seems too much idealized, and her part too much sentimentalized, by the author, even aside from the question whether it had anything to do with his dedicative or commemorative intention to wrap the image of Minny Temple in the beauty and dignity of art. She is kept from us at too respectful a distance, which admittedly helps create a fairy-like mood of a princess, not to our satisfaction but only to that of Susan Stringham and to the admiration of Aunt Maud, Kate Croy and Lord Mark. This is more so after her removal to the Venetian palace in which she is to live out her short life. Except twice when she appears publicly at a dinner party to entertain her English friends and completely outshines Kate Croy and when she has a private talk with Densher on the latter's visit and tells him of her passionate desire to live, every circumstance of her life in the dim splendor of



the palace is given to us by Susan and Densher, especially through the report the latter makes after his return to London. We are informed that Lord Mark's proposal and brutal disclosure of the true relationship between Densher and Kate made on Kate's instigation robs her of her will to live and makes her turn her face to the wall from that time on, that Sir Luke Strett's subsequent intercession leads her to see Densher once more to forgive him his deception and that she, the dove, at last folds her wonderful wings or, to borrow Aunt Maud's image of her, spreads them the wider, in the sense that they cover both Densher and Kate in the form of a large legacy. In spite of her unrealized love and her death in physical disunion and defeat, the story ends thus with the greatest conceivable generosity on her part, so far as she is directly concerned. The ending of the *Wings of the Dove* may be said to be the kind of ending that shows the author's moral idealism in its consummate form.

#### IV

James's method of presenting the heroine indirectly by making use of what he calls 'windows' has had its pros and cons. In this connection, Pelham Edgar refers to *The Wings of the Dove* as follows:

Only twice in the book.....at Mrs. Lowder's first dinner party, and after the second visit to Sir Luke Strett—are we permitted to participate at any length in the operations in Milly's consciousness, and our participations even in her conversations are sparsely conceded..... "Successive windows" are all very well, but we feel ourselves somehow cheated of the great scene when Densher visits the dying girl, and we are granted only the pallid after-report of the interview. Of all the Jamesian innovations this is the most questionable.<sup>1)</sup>

According to Oscar Cargill, James's supposed solicitude for his heroines and especially for Milly Theale is also resented by some

1) *The Art of the Novel : From 1700 to the Present* (New York, 1933), p. 183.

critics. For instance, Professor Régis Michaud writes in his *The American Novel Today* (Boston, 1928), thus :

Had James been a woman, he would have made an ideal chaperon. How deftly and delicately he took his angels abroad to comfort them and guide them in their exile! How he grilled them, coaxed them into a sort of psychological trance! There was something mesmeric and Palladian in his approach to women. In his books women are more ghostly than real. Has any one of them ever had a real body of her own? They are all so pre-Raphaelite! In place of a body they have a soul. Like Fra Angelico's seraphs they are encumbered with wings, "wings of the dove," a poetic but a most inefficient apparel for globe-trotters. James's heroines could not flap their wings in their crude utilitarian country..... And neither can they adapt themselves to the Old World. Their transcendental ethics is so out of keeping with real life that it unfits them for existence.<sup>1)</sup>

This may be a little too severe, though written wittily. Another criticism comes from F.R. Leavis, who regards *The Wings of the Dove* as an unsuccessful work.

The great, the disabling failure is in the presentment of the Dove, Milly Theale..... A vivid, particularly realized Milly might for him [James] stand in the midst of his indirections, but what for the reader these skirt round is too much like emptiness; she isn't there, and the fuss the other characters make about her as the 'Dove' has the effect of an irritating sentimentality.<sup>2)</sup>

He further writes elsewhere.

An American heiress, merely because she is an American heiress, is a Princess, and such a princess as, just for being one,

1) *The American Novel Today* (Boston, 1928), pp. 157~158.

2) Re-quoted from Osear Cargill's *The Novel of Henry James*, p. 351.

is to be conceived as a supreme value: that is what it amounts to.<sup>1)</sup>

Nevertheless, even those who would like to dismiss Milly as other-worldly, aethereal and unreal find it impossible to deny that James is a story-teller of the first order. "The subtle dramatic tensions, the proliferation of poetic imagery, the iteration of symbols, the rich interweaving of themes and the control of elements,"<sup>2)</sup> which many critics favorably take up for lengthy discussion are all found in *The Wings of the Dove* and the rest of his later works. There can be no doubt, therefore, that the story, written in a peculiar style of his own, has an irresistible appeal for a particular set of Jamesians.

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1) Re-quoted from J.W. Beach's *The Method of Henry James* ··Introduction, p. xlv.

2) Oscar Cargill's *The Novels of Henry James*, p. 375.