

ANALYSIS

The Wings of the Dove (1902)

Henry James

(1843-1916)

“James, somewhat hampered by the prudery imposed on him by English social conventions, devised a complicated and rather bizarre plot. Kate Croy is in love with a journalist, Merton Densher, but will not marry him until he is financially secure. She becomes acquainted with Milly Theale, an American heiress, and learns that an ailment from which Milly is suffering dooms her to an early death. Kate concocts a fantastic scheme; without revealing her motive she tells Densher to take an interest in Milly, who promptly falls in love with him and makes a will leaving him all her money. But an English lord, who himself had the notion of marrying Milly and inheriting her wealth, learns of the scheme and reveals it to Milly. She dies soon after and Densher receives a large check for his legacy. He offers to marry Kate if she will consent to let him destroy the check, but she demands a recompense: he must swear he is not in love with Milly’s memory. This he refuses to do; and the deal is off. The book is regarded as a culmination of James’s final style, along with *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*; for many readers its difficulties are redeemed by Milly’s charm and fortitude. An opera based on the novel was produced in New York (1961).”

Max J. Herzberg & staff

The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“Kate Croy, daughter of an impoverished English social adventurer, is in love with Merton Densher, a London journalist, and they become secretly engaged, although she will not marry him while he is without wealth. While Densher is in America on business, Kate’s shrewd, worldly aunt Mrs. Lowder has as guests the Americans Mrs. Stringham and her wealthy protegee, Milly Theale. The latter, an unselfish, poetically lovely girl suffering from a mysterious illness, confides in Kate, who in turn tells everything of herself except her affair with Densher, who has previously been acquainted with Milly, deeply attracted by her charm and honesty. Sir Luke Srett, a celebrated surgeon, reveals to Mrs. Stringham that Milly’s only possibility of postponing her approaching death is to be as happy and cheerful as possible. Kate, learning of this, devises a scheme that she thinks will solve the problems of all.

Densher returns to London, and Kate encourages Milly’s interest in him, believing that her marriage to the journalist will contribute to her happiness, while, following the girl’s imminent death, Densher will inherit her fortune and be able to marry Kate. She simply tells him to be kind to Milly, and, carried away by his love and faith in her ability to manage affairs, he obeys. Milly, who thinks that Densher has been rejected by Kate, is ecstatically happy for a time. In the autumn they all meet at Venice, where Milly arouses the resentment of Lord Mark, a British fortune-seeker, by refusing his proposal of marriage. Kate exposes her entire scheme to her lover, who weakly consents to go through with it if she will give herself to him at once. She fulfills her part of the bargain and returns to London. Lord Mark, who knows the relations of Kate and Densher, vents his spite by divulging the plot to Milly, and the dying girl, deprived of hope, quickly declines. Mrs. Stringham asks Densher to save Milly by telling her he is not engaged to Kate, but this he will not do. He returns to London, and after Milly’s death receives a large legacy. He offers to marry Kate if she will consent to destroy the check, and she replies that she will if he can swear that he is ‘not in love with her memory.’ He cannot, for, as Kate realizes, they are now separated by the barriers of Densher’s conscience and their tragic memories.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“It is a great book,” wrote Howells in the *North American Review* in 1903, and time has confirmed the praise. Among those who admire the late novels, *The Wings of the Dove* has always held a special place. It

is not so perfect in form as *The Ambassadors*. The preliminaries are overdone, and the chief masculine figure, depressingly named Merton Densher, is unequal to his ambitious role. But the two girls, Milly Theale and Kate Croy, are magnificent; and at its greatest the writing reaches some kind of high-water mark in English prose. *The Wings of the Dove* is uneven but, as the editors of the notebooks remark, it is James's 'principal tragedy.' It is also a very Jamesian tragedy, for the horror grows out of the most casual circumstances, and the full weight of it is felt in the color of a girl's dress, the look of a room, the turn of a sentence, the impact of a glance.... As Milly is mortally ill, so Kate is mortally poor. Meanwhile the plot, by setting them at odds and bringing out the best in one, the worst in the other, serves the lifelike end of masking communities with differences. And then there are the international variations in tone and manners, for one girl is a Londoner, the other a New Yorker....

Even in crime [Kate] remains a romantic, resolved to walk as straight as the crooked road of her choice permits her. And it is her desperate honesty in so bluntly refusing Lord Mark that precipitates the tragedy.... Kate too dreams of having love and glory both; and, because she does not love him, she discourages Lord Mark much as Isabel does Warburton [in *The Portrait of a Lady*].... The tragedy, insofar as it is Kate's, is one of mixed motives. Impelled to treachery by her very feeling for fortune, honor, and love, she is absorbed at last into the dreaded configuration of her unhappy father....

Kate has been pleased to liken Milly to a dove; and now, as it turns out after her death, Milly has forgiven them and left Densher money after all. 'She has stretched her wings,' says Kate, 'and it was to us that they reached. They cover us.' But Densher, horrified at his falsity, cannot forgive Kate; and when she suggests that he has fallen in love with Milly's memory he does not deny it. He will marry Kate without the money or he will make it over to her and remain single, but he will not touch it himself. 'I'll marry you, mind you, in an hour.' 'As we were?' But she turned to the door, and her handshake was now the end. 'We shall never be again as we were.' By leaving the money to Densher [Milly] makes clear that her love for him has survived her knowledge of the plot, that she respects the mutual passion of Kate and Densher, and that in these generousities she has had at last her own experience of love. But the transfiguration is not entirely the work of Milly. Kate and Densher also contribute to the occasion by rising to it with so much feeling and awareness. Their falling apart constitutes their recognition of the power of love, which in their treachery they have debased."

F. W. Dupee
Henry James
(William Morrow 1974) 215-22

"It is startling to realize that the subject of *The Wings of the Dove* is precisely what Poe formulated as the greatest possible subject for poetry, the death of a beautiful woman. For Poe's kind of Romanticism, to be sure, James had little taste... James, who tended to discuss his finished works solely in terms of their realized form, was not satisfied with this book. He wrote to Howells that it was 'too long-winded'; to another friend, that its center wasn't 'in the middle'... He believed that he had fallen into too great amplitude in his opening treatment of Kate Croy against her family background.... He had devoted so much initial space to Kate and Densher that when he had come to his main theme he had had to foreshorten mercilessly, and was afraid that in the last half in particular he had been too crowded, and had produced 'the illusion of mass without the illusion of extent'...

The first two [books] are given over entirely to Kate and Merton Densher. Milly is not even mentioned, but the London world and the particular situation into which she is to be projected are presented with impressive solidness. The short third book tells us what we need of Milly's background, and brings her to Europe with Susan Shepherd Stringham, a lady writer from Boston who plays the role of the Jamesian confidante. The next book introduces them to England, and, through Susan's having formerly known Kate's Aund Maud Lowder, directly into the circle of their complications. The fifth book, which, without the restrictions of the serial [publication in a magazine], can become much longer, embraces the whole swift course of Milly's social triumph in London; and though James thought that his foreshortening here had still made his action pivot too rapidly, no passage in all his work gives us more of the felt splendor of life. The sixth book sets in motion Kate's scheme of Densher's being 'kind' to Milly; and the seventh, where the scene changes to Venice, is the last to center around the heroine. In the eighth she makes her

final public appearance, at an evening party for her friends, where her frail form is silhouetted against the glamorous setting she is so soon to lose.

Thereafter we see her only once more, in a conversation with Densher, in which she voices her last passionate declaration of wanting so much to live, just before Lord Mark turns up with his brutal news that Kate and Densher have been engaged all the time. This news smashes her delicate hold on life, and it was James' instinct that the way to handle such a denouement was entirely without big scenes. The reader of other fiction may feel cheated that he gets at first hand neither her talk with Lord Mark nor her final interview with Densher, in which she forgives him. But James' device of having his heroine not appear during the last fifth of the novel--just as she had not in the opening sections--and of having the final book in London record her death far away in Venice, succeeds extraordinarily in making us feel as though Milly has been wrapped around and isolated by sinister forces, almost as though she has been literally smothered off stage by Kate's terrifying will....

James makes an incisive contrast between Kate and Densher. He specifies that they have little in common except their affection, that Densher tends to be as passive as Kate is active, that her talent is all for life and his for thought. Indeed, James had created here, somewhat more affectingly than in Strether [in *The Ambassadors*], the kind of hero which our age has associated with the sensibility of the metaphysical poets... The contrast which James develops between Kate and Milly is one of quantity against quality... It may be an accidental residue of romanticism that, as was the usual practice of Hawthorne and Melville, the innocent heroine is fair, and the dangerous worldly girl is dark.

But the more one scrutinizes the technique of this novel, the more one perceives that, despite James' past-masterly command over the details of realistic presentation, he is evoking essentially the mood of a fairy tale. He wanted to raise his international theme to its ultimate potentiality. He was no longer satisfied to endow an Isabel Archer with a legacy sufficient to allow her to confront Europe independently. He was bent on extending the sources of his splendor to the farthest conceivable degree. Milly was to be a fabulous millionairess....

A frequency of images of floating might be noted in *The Wings of the Dove*, where the serene 'high-water mark' of Milly's London success must be contrasted with her view of 'the troubled sea' that looms ahead, with the shipwreck that may lie in store for 'the ark of her deluge.' Since the recurrent pattern of an artist's imagery is the most telling evidence of how he envisages the qualities of life, another odd variant of James' water-images is worth citing. In all three of his great final novels he conceives on occasion his social group as being 'like fishes in a crystal pool,' held together in 'a fathomless medium.' What James seems to want most to suggest through such an image is the denseness of experience, the way in which the Jamesian individual feels that he is held into close contact with his special group...

The chief source of Densher's attraction for Kate...lies in the greater range of his intellectual experience, which James expresses by Densher's 'having tasted of the tree and being thereby prepared to assist her to eat.' All that James wants to suggest is the tree of knowledge; he seems to have forgotten that such an image is inescapably one of temptation, since it is certainly not Kate who is led into evil by Densher. Such carelessness or obliviousness on James' part shows how far he had drifted from the firm Christian knowledge that Hawthorne possessed.... In several of his earliest stories...he had depended on allegory in the manner of Hawthorne; and if we look closely at *Roderick Hudson*, we realize that that novel is still essentially an allegory of the life of the artist. As he went on to master all the skills of Realism, he grew dissatisfied with allegory's obvious devices; and yet, particularly towards the end of his career, realistic details had become merely the covering for a content that was far from realistic....

His leading symbols are all literary and pictorial. The four that furnished titles for his books are biblical allusions, to which he proceeded to give concrete embodiment with little reference to the *Bible*.... He did not...start with his symbol. He reached it only with the final development of his theme, and then used it essentially in the older tradition of the poetic metaphor... And though he came to work essentially in the genre of the fairy tale, he had not become conscious of the possibilities of dealing explicitly with myth. That consciousness, in its modern form, was the product of a somewhat later period... He sought for his universals in the well-lighted drawing rooms of his time. When he groped his way back to 'the sense of the

past,' it was only to the dawn of the nineteenth century, for the sake of a contrast with later social manners. He was not to become aware of the obsessive presence of all times, of the repetition of primitive patterns in civilized life, as Eliot tried to express it through his anthropological symbol of 'the waste land.' When James did make a thematic use of symbols, it tended to be in the fashion of earlier poetic drama. He had declared in his 'summing up' that the 'dramatic poem' seemed to him 'the most beautiful thing possible,' and in a work like *The Wings of the Dove* he was finally producing his equivalent for it. He even made a Shakespearean use of storm and calm...

Densher is the chief means by which James keeps his romance from becoming dis severed from reality, his tale of enchantment from becoming a tale of escape. If James created the spell of a fairy tale, he did it, as the great fabulists have always done, for the sake of evoking universal truths. Densher is also an important factor in preventing Susan Stringham's intensely 'literary' version of Milly as a princess from becoming merely silly. He is in love with Kate, and Milly, to his eyes, is no princess; she is simply 'little Miss Theale,' the odd-looking American girl who had been so kind to him in New York. This wholly unglamorous view of her is also of the highest significance in the denouement, in the gradual, inescapable transformation of both Densher and Kate....

When he wants to break off the pretense, Kate says: 'Do you want to kill her? We've told too many lies.' So he weakly agrees to stay in Venice for Milly, but preserves his self-respect by insisting that he will do so only on the condition that Kate will pledge him her unchanging love by coming to him in his rooms for complete physical union. He clings also to the scruple that he will himself offer no proposal to Milly, but will simply wait for what she proposes. And though such a distinction may seem tenuously Jamesian, it serves to reveal the gulf that is already opening between him and Kate. For what she foresees as the result of her manipulations is, as she says, 'quite ideal'--a terrifying phrase by its utter obliviousness to any moral implications....

Densher has been transformed by the dead girl's hovering presence. Like the hero in any great tragedy he has arrived at the moral perception of the meaning of what has befallen him.... There is no remote possibility that Kate will marry Lord Mark. But the other alternative is still in the air. This is not due to careless ambiguity. James held that an artist could convey the real complexity of life only by suggesting, through such a device of multiple choice, a wider circle beyond the restricted one he had selected to illuminate.... As Milly behaves, she can hardly be dying of anything except tuberculosis, as Minny Temple died, at a period when no coherent cure had yet been devised."

F. O. Matthiessen
Henry James: The Major Phase
(Oxford 1944) 42-43, 50-52, 55-60, 62-80

"Thematically, *The Wings of the Dove* is a companion piece to *The Ambassadors*. In both novels the international contrast is an integral part of the theme of the lived life. Both show the exposure of American innocence to a knowing Europe, but with a different critical focus. While the Paris of the first represents the beautiful order which results from a continuity of social experience, the second is concerned with the corruption, the perversion of motives attendant upon the process of refinement when social organization becomes subservient to greed.... It is written from, fundamentally, two points of view--Milly's and Merton Densher's, the Englishman's. Milly's, though, is supplemented by that of her American companion, Susan Stringham, whose function as a 'choral' *ficelle* is to supply 'an animated reflection of Milly Theale's experience of English society,' to give what Milly herself would give if she were less purely spirit incarnate. *The Wings of the Dove*, then, just as much as *The Ambassadors*, avoids the 'platitude of statement' and instead gives two versions of the story which is its physical action....

Milly's striking curiosity about London society, about people she does not know and has no specific motive for wishing to know, is a symbolic manifestation of her eagerness for experience, a desire which her involvement with Kate and Densher more than fulfills.... In the final execution Densher is the pliable and for a long time blind instrument of a design of Kate's which is an ambiguous gesture of charity and greed. Since Milly is in love with Densher, thus Kate calculates, she will doubtless leave him her fortune and thus make possible his marriage to Kate, which 'poverty' so far prevents. Their engagement, Kate's and Densher's, therefore is to be kept secret. On this plan they proceed with success until Lord Mark, a

disappointed suitor for Kate's as well as Milly's favor, guesses their game and informs Milly. This is the essence of the experience which England supplies for Milly, and the shock of the discovered deception breaks her will to live--the will which alone has kept her from succumbing to her fatal illness....

The saving turn was to make the happiness, the snatched experience Milly longs for be 'some act of generosity, of passionate beneficence, of pure sacrifice, to the man she loves'... As far as *The Wings of the Dove* is Milly's story it is a peculiarly American tragedy, the ravishment of innocence, of moral beauty, by a worldliness so knowing that it has forgotten the knowledge of innocence.... *The Wings of the Dove* is no allegory on a biblical subject. It is a drama not of unambiguous conflict between heaven and hell, but of the contrast between two kinds of human ethics. What the biblical overtones and symbols suggest is the extreme to which the contrast between Milly's unencumbered spirit and Kate's 'talent for living' can be reduced philosophically--the contrast between the simplicity of American idealism and the complexity of English empiricism.... The high idealization of Milly is in large part Densher's doing, is part of his emotional response to the dramatic circumstances of his involvement in the conflict between the two civilizations. Densher's story can be summarized as the story of his conversion from the worship of Kate to the worship of Milly, based on a process of gradually deepening vision which is the counterpart of Strether's [in *The Ambassadors*]....

After Kate has sealed the bargain by spending a night with him, Densher is left alone with Milly in Venice and the book is from here on almost exclusively the story of the education of his conscience. What he is faced with is not a simple moral choice between good and bad, but a dual dilemma. Loyalty to Kate, which by her surrender to him has become a moral obligation in addition to being an inclination, is in conflict with his sense of decency. Even more problematic, honesty toward Milly is in conflict with kindness toward her, since what has kept her alive has been the will to live for his love. So that for the sake of kindness to Milly as well as of loyalty to Kate, Densher feels himself forced to play the thoroughly equivocal game. Yet he squirms under his sense of the falseness of his relation to Milly....

If Milly is in a sense typical, so is Kate. Both personify the moral bases of their native civilizations. For Kate this means a world in which conduct is governed not by objective principle but by subjective interest.... Kate has representative value because, as James shows with meticulous care, her character and conduct are determined largely by the circumstances of her life--the monstrous caddishness of her flashy father, the sordid squalor of her sister, the vulgar opulence of her aunt Maud, who frees her from poverty only to enslave her by the strong appeal of 'material things.' The unmitigated materialism of her environment is the ultimate cause of her disfigurement, the reason why her great gift, her splendid 'talent for life,' turns into the simple 'greatness of knowing' what she wants... Nothing makes the deep perversion of her sense of values more painfully clear than that she makes a virtue of subordinating her passion for Densher to her passion for wealth.... Her deep corruption lies in the use she makes of her own love and of her own great endowments, in her abuse of one sort of value for ends of quite another sort....

The difference between Kate and Milly is the difference between the civilizations which have molded them. Nothing, finally, strikes Densher more than the moral inadequacy of the civilization which has led him and Kate into the 'dreadful game' they have played for Milly's money with Milly's life.... And the lesson he finally draws is that for 'daily decency' the well-oiled social mechanism of which they have been part needs something 'beyond and above' itself. Even at best, it is a mere gray watery waste, in which the emergent rock of the spirit alone can give a sense of moral security. With this final image Densher's conversion from the cunning of the serpent to the wisdom of the dove is defined. Like *The Ambassadors*, then, *The Wings of the Dove* is a story of conversion. But the direction is reversed. Whereas the first dramatizes the values of empirically derived forms of conduct by contrast with the pitfalls of moral absolutism, the second dramatizes the insufficiency of any moral knowledge purely empirical, its liability to corruption, by contrast with an image of supreme spiritual beauty."

Christof Wegelin
"The Lesson of Spiritual Beauty"
The Image of Europe in Henry James
(SMU 1958) 106-09, 112-15, 117-21

“In his half-century as observer and historian of the western world, Henry James developed from a chronicler of national differences to a prophet of a social disintegration international in scope. James’s late novels reflect what his notebooks and letters often state--his vision of the impending collapse of western civilization, of ‘this overwhelming, self-defeating chaos or cataclysm toward which the whole thing is drifting.’ That James was unable to continue work on *The Ivory Tower* after the outbreak of World War I testifies not only to the dependence of his fiction on his day-to-day response to history, but also to his apprehension of what was actually taking place--the visible destruction of all that had meaning to the civilized consciousness.

James always remained faithful to the Balzacian concept of the novelist as cultural historian, but his method was increasingly to be through intensity rather than through expansiveness. Jamesian intensity involves metaphor, symbolism, and ambiguity, all realized through the scenic and pictorial methods. Through intensity, James, always the historian of fine consciences, became more and more acute in relating the individual intelligence to its historical context.

One way of defining James’s ideal of civilization is to say that not only should society offer the individual a contact with the aesthetic and social values of history--art and manners--but also that these values must be consistent with actual human behavior. In James’s works there are four major deviations from this ideal: in America there is no past, and thus none of its values informs the present; in the Europe of *The American*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, and the other international stories of the seventies and eighties, past and present are inseparable, but inherent in the beauty of age is the evil of age; London, the scene of James’s ‘middle period’ fiction, has renounced the past for the glaring vulgarities and immoralities of the present; finally, in the works of James’s ‘major phase,’ Americans and Europeans alike undermine and at the same time struggle to maintain the values of the past. In this last stage, forms, surfaces, and manners have become all but incompatible with the human standards they should ideally reflect....

Society and civilization collapse together when Strether sees the duplicity of Mme. de Vionnet and Chad, and when Lord Mark reveals Densher’s plot to Milly. *The Wings of the Dove* treats a later stage in the collapse of western civilization than *The Ambassadors*. *The Ambassadors* deals with the last gasping breath of the old order; by the time of *The Wings* the old order is dead, visible only in its decay. Strether is the last Jamesian pilgrim to gain a relationship with what James has termed the ‘visitable past,’ as Mme. de Vionnet is the last European whose beauty is not solely a pretense, a false allure. The scene of *The Wings of the Dove* is the western world: the New York home of Milly Theale and the London and Venice settings embrace the moral as well as the geographical limits of western culture.... Economic values subvert human values throughout, not just in Kate’s identification of Milly with her wealth, the easy assumption that leads to the central action of the novel, but in the systematic reduction of all quality to quantity. For example, Kate’s father and sister reject Kate’s offer of family loyalty in favor of her potential cash value as Aunt Maud’s ward....

The relationship between Kate and Densher gradually becomes corrupted through association with the acquisitive drive; the natural has been made unnatural, so much so that Kate’s visit to Densher’s rooms is thought of by both as a payment for services rendered.... Milly, though she is morally detached from her wealth and innocent in spite of her millions, dies a victim of economic competition. It is particularly significant that Milly’s great deed consists of a bestowal of her money. It is an act of love, an expression of forgiveness, and a transcendence of self. Nevertheless, since money is the destructive force in the novel, the nature of the act is tainted although its motive is not. Milly’s benevolence cannot purify her money. It is appropriate that the practical result of her gift is to sever Kate and Densher, for it was want of money that kept them from marrying in the beginning. Milly is not corrupted by her money; yet the possession of it causes her destruction. Money destroys those who are associated with it--those who have it, those who desire it, those who contend for it.

Thus one’s moral stature is determined by the degree to which he is free from money. Maud Lowder is surely damned from the beginning; and Kate demonstrates her own damnation at the end, when she rejects spirit for matter, when she burns the unread letter of grace but rips open the envelope containing the check. In giving her the money, Densher gives ‘poor Kate her freedom’: the ambiguity of her being poor spiritually when rich materially and enslaved morally when free economically points the hard lesson of

James's novel. Milly grows dependent on money only when social pressures compel her to buy the sanctuary of Palazzo Leporelli and the protection of Eugenio. She uses her wealth as 'a counter-move to fate.' Yet she gains her lasting salvation only when she renounces money utterly....

The Piazza San Marco, symbolic of European civilization as a whole, is darkened to blackness and overwhelmed by violence: 'the whole place, in its huge elegance, the grace of its conception and the beauty of detail, was more than ever like a great drawing-room, the drawing-room of Europe, profaned and bewildered by some reverse of fortune.' The effort of all to contain evil by appearances fails. Milly Theale's death is the death of a civilization: the gray of a London dominated by materialism and the black of a Venice traditionally malign combine to kill her....

Through Milly's developing awareness of the irrelevance of the art of the past to modern life, James dramatizes the disintegration of civilization. Throughout the novel he reveals the ever widening breach between individual needs and the social framework. One inevitably finds himself in a position where he must define himself through either his social position or his isolated self. Deprived of access to meaning through art or manners, Maud Lowder derives her motivations and morality from British culture in general. We find her in the beginning as we find her in the end--a loyal apostle to money. But Kate, Densher, and Milly are, in the beginning, undefined by status or creed. The novel records their efforts and decisions toward achieving identity....

In Kate's case the standard Jamesian ambiguity towards money has an added twist. The ordinary dilemma is there: to acquire money is ugly, but the possession of it is the *sine qua non* for the good life. In most of James's novels, however, the social scene itself remains aloof from the economic process: fortune hunter and businessman alike are anomalies, inconsistent with the placid solemnity of age and beauty. But the London world can be understood only in terms of money. To pursue magnificence Kate has no choice but to accept the code of Aunt Maud. Her effort to reconcile the human value of love and the barbaric value of money must fail. Therefore, when she seeks her own image in Densher's mirror in the novel's final scene, she signalizes her separation from her lover, whose own renunciation of money forces Kate to retreat to the damning security of wealth.... What we find in Kate is a great will who accepts and then uses society on its own terms. Her object is money and her method is manners. Once she initiates her plot, from the moment she decides not to tell Milly about her engagement to Densher, she remains inflexible....

Densher is a forerunner of a dominant character type of modern literature: he leads to Eliot's Prufrock, Conrad's Heyst, and Greene's Scobie. He is the non-heroic yet perceptive man, driven to self-understanding by his weakness of will and horror of ugliness. Like Kate and Milly, Densher plunges into the abyss, which for him as for the others is both internal and external--the private depths and the social depths. If Milly's descent to the abyss reveals spiritual love and Kate's reveals only will, Densher's reveals, not the will he had sought to find, but a capacity for sanctifying grace. For he remains weak always. His suffering is most acute when he is isolated--after his moral rejection of Kate, but before his acceptance of Milly's love.... Densher soars from the abyss, too late to save Milly, but not too late to be saved by her; he embraces spirit over flesh. To Kate, Milly is identified primarily with her fortune; to Densher she is the 'little American girl.' Milly's descent to the abyss precedes the apotheosis of the dove--her transfigured self."

J. A. Ward

"Social Disintegration in *The Wings of the Dove*"
Criticism 2 (Spring 1960) 190-95, 198-99, 200-01, 202-03

"What we perceive at once and with the least difficulty is that it is her American 'innocence' which in the first place lays Milly open to the rapacity and ruthlessness of her English friends. As in her predecessors among James's American Girls, this innocence in her springs from a fatal ignorance of the complex pressures operative in the complex world of Lancaster Gate--an ignorance due in the first instance, of course, to her American background.... The disabling effects upon the American mind of the simplicities and freedoms of American life, and their effect in particular of placing Americans at a severe disadvantage in their intercourse with the English and the Europeans. This precisely is what happens to Milly Theale when she is thrown among the English. Her disability is plainly that she has no experience of the pressures, in particular the economic, to which the individual in such a society is perpetually exposed....

The uneasy relation between an America growing steadily richer and a Britain growing steadily poorer which has become one of the commonplaces of Anglo-American relations since James's day was, it seems, already sufficiently apparent then, at any rate to his discerning eye; and it is this economic fact (with all its moral implications) that lies behind the long sigh of ecstasy and envy that is to be heard in Lancaster Gate every time Milly Theale's English friends touch upon the subject of what they call her good luck. Her 'good luck' is, simply, her money: which they desire, of course.... But Milly knows nothing of these material pressures that lie beneath the gracious surface, and therefore knows nothing of their demoralizing effects upon the human spirit, even the most intelligent, most cultivated, most imaginative of human spirits. Indeed particularly (this is James's grand point) upon the intelligent and imaginative--like Milly's dear friend Kate Croy, whose range of enjoyments so greatly exceeds that of the less intelligent and less imaginative, and whose appetite therefore for the power to procure these enjoyments exceeds correspondingly. Lacking such knowledge, Milly Theale is accordingly very slow to see herself, the fabulously rich American, as a proper object of exploitation....

Everybody in Lancaster Gate, in short, is as charming as possible to her; and here (James wishes us to understand) is another of the characteristic features of the English of that class, another aspect of 'the fathomless depths of English equivocation': that they can feel the most genuine, most sincere, most whole-hearted devotion for those who can serve their interests, and can as genuinely, as sincerely and whole-heartedly cast them off the moment they have ceased to serve their interests--or, alternatively, have begun to make demands that are inconvenient or irksome or just boring. Of all this Milly Theale has no inkling when she first arrives at Lancaster Gate. She learns most of it, very painfully and slowly, as the story advances, and the most devastating thing of all only at the point of death. She acquires her knowledge in the most incidental, or seemingly incidental, flashes; James's dramatic genius ensures that they shall appear as incidental as in life itself....

In a great scene at a critical point in the story, Kate 'lets herself go' (as Milly puts it to herself) 'in irony, in confidence, in extravagance' on those qualities of the American Mind, as represented in her friend Milly Theale, that she has come to find peculiarly exasperating--chiefly, its crude naive empiricism, its seemingly inexhaustible capacity for 'exaggerated ecstasy' and 'disproportionate shock,' and its consequent propensity to produce upon more developed minds the effects of boredom and irritation.... Kate by this time is already in the process of conceiving her diabolical design against Milly, and the rest of her 'speech,' from the most interesting mixture of motives, is intended also as a warning to Milly--to get out of Lancaster Gate before she is destroyed. Milly, of course, misses the warning, and is consequently doomed; and this submerged tragic irony does much to intensify the powerful dramatic impact of the whole scene....

What chiefly weakens her resistance in fact is her supreme Jamesian quality, her self-consciousness. For Milly Theale's passion for knowledge is principally a passion for self-knowledge; and it is for this, more than anything, that she is prepared to suffer pain, confusion and humiliation, and finally total deprivation and loss.... Having received from Kate Croy an unforgettable light on her disabilities as an American Girl, and presently also on her still graver disability, that of being a Dove ('*That* was what was the matter with her. She was a dove')... Such a saint, a dove, an exquisite thing'.... Her self-consciousness is her glory (James wishes us to understand): Milly is not merely the American Girl 'acting out' her nature unconsciously, like Daisy Miller and the other American girls in James's earlier stories. She is the American Girl grown conscious of herself as acting out the character of the American Girl; and it is this capacity at once for 'being' and 'seeing,' for at once suffering intensely and being intensely conscious of the suffering, that defines the kind and quality of her tragedy....

From this terror of Milly Theale's condition they all, like Kate Croy, withdraw. They are all prodigiously intelligent, but not intelligent enough to know what such a condition means; and they are all brave, but not so brave as to risk participation in the twilight life of a soul awaiting death. This, we are meant to see, is the last dreadful infirmity of the brave and beautiful souls that inhabit Lancaster Gate. A final incapacity for love is intimately linked with a final incapacity to confront the fact of death; and, conversely, the incapacity to confront death is the final measure of the coldness, ruthlessness and egotism of the worldly world figured here.

Milly Theale on her side responds to the indifference with her own last infirmity, which is the sin of pride. She refuses to speak of her illness; she is determined to die (as Kate puts it) 'without smelling of drugs or tasting of medicines.' It is of course a sublime virtue, this perfect exercise of fortitude in the face of death: but it is also the last temptation of the devil. For it isolates her more completely than ever from her fellow creatures, cutting her off from her last chance to draw some remnant of loving-kindness out of the cold heart of the world. If Milly Theale (like Maggie Verver in *The Golden Bowl*) had been humble enough, or fearless enough, to renounce her pride, a saving connection might have been established between herself and the enemy--enough at any rate to render impossible the diabolical design that finally kills her. But she does not renounce it, and thus deprives herself of the last possibility of being saved.... Her spiritual sickness is presently intensified by her experience of the world, and finally confirmed by the ultimate betrayal which causes her to turn her face to the wall and die.... Milly Theale is so constituted that she cannot wrest happiness out of a world by its nature implacably hostile to her very being....

If the principal interest of Book X is this gradual, painful disclosure of the differences between Kate Croy and Merton Densher who had seemed such a mutual pair, what makes it especially instructive and poignant is the further disclosure that the differences had been there from the beginning, had previously been obscured by their common participation in the life of the world, but had now been brought to light by the spiritual crisis created for Densher by Milly Theale's extraordinary act of loving kindness. And this (the religious would say) is the characteristic effect of the irruption of the divine order into the natural. It pierces through the appearances, exposing to view the reality that lies beneath."

Dorothea Krook
The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James
(Cambridge U 1962) 203-15, 221-29

"In the broadest sense the novel is an anatomy of guilt; of the causes, then the consequences, of deliberate, conscious violation of another human being's existence for the sake of personal gain. Each half the book deals in a general way with one of these two aspects of the subject, so that the major structural break that takes place at the end of Book V corresponds with the shift in thematic focus from the genesis of guilt to its consequences....

By various vague and nameless deeds Kate's father has brought the family, which includes the four small children of her widowed sister, into dishonor and financial collapse. Her wealthy aunt is willing to rescue Kate on the explicit condition that she renounce all contact with her father and on the unspoken condition that she marry a man of the aunt's choice. Kate herself is beautiful, proud, poor but covetous of wealth, and in love with a penniless man not of her aunt's choice. She is also painfully conscious of the responsibilities and obligations, the silken cords of familial relations.... She is the one piece of solid collateral the disgraced and distressed family possess, the one tangible asset whose worth to them is the price it will bring at barter. And she knows it....

So the theme of manipulation, of tampering, of regarding a fellow human being not as a person but as an object for use is present from the beginning of the novel, more horrifying perhaps because of its context within the family setting.... Some guilt by association does touch Kate: her sister is abject, her father is full of 'folly and cruelty and wickedness,' her aunt is 'unscrupulous and immoral.' It is sufficient for the evil of the day that Kate exists in contiguity with them, that she is the prime object of their various desires, and that she recognizes this and even partially acknowledges its justice. By doing so of course she accepts not only their right to use her but also, by extension, anyone's right to use anyone who might be in a position to be useful....

At the same time it is only she who can or cares to preserve their collective dignity. To preserve it means not to be abject, but not to be abject means in turn 'to prefer an ideal of behavior--than which nothing ever was more selfish--to the possibility of stray crumbs for the four small creatures.' So that any way she turns, something, and something important, stands to be lost. Her one attempt to maintain her spiritual freedom, her integrity, literally her wholeness, of self is her initial offer to her father to stick by him, with or without Densher, and renounce Aunt Maud. This is the first and last unequivocally moral gesture Kate makes in the course of the novel....

Given, then, the nature of her own character in the context of circumstances that surround it, there is no set of alternative actions that does not represent a dilemma for Kate. She does not want to give up Densher, yet she does not want to be poor, and she would be poor if she married him. She especially does not want, after the example of the Misses Condrips, who spend their days sniffing out dregs of gossip that might somehow be turned to their financial advantage, to be both poor and unmarried. She does not want to be dishonorable. She does not want to see her family's fortune and honor remain in the mud. She does not want to sacrifice her personal--and familial--dignity to regain that fortune, yet she does not want to have to maintain that dignity at the cost of taking crumbs away from babes. If she maintains her integrity she sacrifices her family to poverty and, equally to the point, herself as well. So that the choice of any one alternative means the surrender of other possibilities. And that in turn means the renunciation of her ideal self-image, because that image is precisely a composite of all the possibilities: it is Kate wealthy, dignified, of proud name, charitable in her munificence, and married to Merton Densher....

Her situation, that of a person whose longings will recognize no limits and yet who is caught up in circumstances that are unusually limiting, is a microcosm of the fundamental situation James deals with again and again.... For Kate, the pendulum has swung full swing: if initially she was willing to renounce everything to preserve her spiritual safety, she is now willing to surrender that safety to preserve everything else.... Kate's situation, as she sees it, is such that the price of absolute morality is absolute self-renunciation; the price of partial morality is partial self-renunciation; and finally, the reward of immorality is total self-gratification.... Milly has a fortune, Kate needs one; Milly is passive and gentle--a dove; Kate is restless and ruthless--a panther. In addition not only is Milly mortally ill while Kate is vibrantly alive, but also Milly's one English acquaintance happens to be Merton Densher, and she happens to be susceptible to his attractions. Thus every element in Milly's situation has its opposite correspondence in Kate's, and the predicament of the former is a function or extension of the predicament of the latter....

The way in which what Milly needs and what Milly has to offer so neatly dovetail with what Kate needs, and also has to offer, is almost too good to be true. Or too painful to be bearable, which is the effect James intended.... There is something reminiscent of a hellish chess game in the book's presentation of the mathematics of narrowing alternatives, in which the loser of the game not only does not know she is losing, she does not even know she is playing. James has an almost Satanic instinct for situation; indeed much of his power as a novelist lies in his remorselessness in this respect. Remorseless in his delineation of character too, he is one of the great pathologists of human nature we have in modern fiction. His ability to cast a cold eye on a whole spectrum of moral sickness and to present it without flinching is one of the paradoxes of a sensibility that in many respects evaded the direct confrontation of powerful emotion....

James's vision of human existence is first and last an ironic one... He was in one sense in search of an ideal society, and the search took place in the two countries of his imagination that in effect constituted a mythological setting: America, the Pale Lady, the boring paradise, and Europe, the Dark Lady, seductive, sensual, totally attractive, totally wicked, the enchanting hell. His novels are all legends of the failure of the quest, because in *his* vision truth and beauty are not one. His Holy Grail is the golden bowl with the imperceptible flaw....

Are we intended to make a split judgment, in which Merton is finally exonerated, but Kate is not?... The bravery of her risk coupled with her refusal to rationalize her behavior, while most of Merton's energy is devoted to rationalization, helps to account for our great sympathy for Kate. There is something much more unpalatable about immorality when it is in the mask of piety than when it is frank and open.... But James's preoccupation with the mathematics of situation badly weakens the ending. In a way, one could say that the two deepest artistic impulses--concern for shape, form, and aesthetic organization, and concern for truth--obtruded upon each other in this novel at its conclusion. Densher's actions and reactions toward Kate are both harsher and simpler than those of the total work, just as his reactions toward himself are kinder. But because this is the case, the novel can end 'neatly,' with Densher scarred but beautified and Kate plunged back into the original dilemma upon the altar of which she sacrificed her morality: Kate not spiritually transformed as Densher supposedly is but in fact (that is in *effect*) is not.

Kate is thus left formally, though once again this is not the emotional effect, bearing the brunt of the drama of pain that has been enacted. What the book makes so clear and the ending does not is that all three

of the principal agents played their role in the events that took place, and that all three are at one and the same time responsible and not responsible. It is this ambivalent sense of things, constantly articulated throughout the book, that the ending does not, or cannot, rise to meet. The ending therefore undermines both the complexity and the emotional intensity of the work as a whole. Densher's sudden access to piety is accomplished with too much ease; he does not suffer enough in the sense that he escapes the self-confrontation that would be the symbolic recognition of the penance for some of the pangs Milly has endured at his hands....

In spite of the ending, Densher's passive involvement has implicated him deeply indeed. This at least is the effect, and it is a good thing that it is. If it were not, the whole novel would suffer from a superficiality, even sentimentality, of vision. But James explicitly consigned even to Milly responsibility for the outcome of events, and it is difficult to believe he did not intend at least the same burden of blame for Merton, if not quite a lot more. It does not seem convincing, that is, that James's intention was different from the effect created by the events of the novel up until the end. It is the ending that is unpersuasive, even unreal. The novel itself survives, but certainly at a cost to its integrity of effect and full realization of its own order of spiritual reality. In that order Merton is exonerated, but in a very different sense from that in which he exonerates himself, just as Kate is condemned on quite another level from that on which he condemns her: one considerably less legalistic, literal, and petty. He has of course applied the letter of the law to himself, earlier, so perhaps it is not surprising that he does so to Kate at the end. But the burden of the book rests upon violation not of the word but of the spirit. Is not the whole point that no 'word' is spoken to Milly, that the crime and the woe are committed wordlessly but nevertheless absolutely? It is this central human fact of the novel that the ending betrays, and it is in spite of the betrayal that the novel survives."

Sally Sears

The Negative Imagination: Form and Perspective in the Novels of Henry James
(Cornell 1968) 63-74, 90-98

"In both *Portrait* and *Wings* the Minny Temple image points toward the same effect, and the sequence of events by which the two protagonists are led to their destiny is basically the same. Isabel and Milly are American girls, they are intelligent and sensitive, and they are equipped with wealth and personal charm. They are introduced into the great world of European society and there they enjoy a brilliant hour of triumph which includes the luxury of declining the 'ordinary' form of success, marriage to a member of the English nobility. However, after they form what they believe are attachments of their own free choice, they discover that they have been betrayed by persons interested chiefly in their wealth. The essential element in this common pattern is the ironic disparity between the great endowments of the heroine and the defeat she suffers, between the high hopes entertained for her and the dismal reality that overtakes her....

It is true that Kate perceives in Milly's situation a chance to have her cake and eat it too, to marry the man she loves and at the same time enjoy the fortune she covets. Then she will be free of her Aunt Maud who promises her the wealth she desires but only on condition that she reject Densher and marry Lord Mark. Ideally, of course, Kate should sacrifice to her love all prospects of material well-being. But it is characteristic of James's maturity in *Wings* to emphasize the complexity and the limitations of human behavior. James takes pains, for example, to dramatize Kate's economic responsibilities to others. If she married Densher in opposition to her aunt's will, Kate would, in effect, abandon to final poverty her widowed sister, Mrs. Condrip, with her brood of children, to say nothing of abandoning her father to the disreputable stratagems by which he manages to live on nothing a year. There are further considerations which weaken the case against Kate Croy.

There is, first, the indisputable fact of her nature that she finds her proper self only in a setting of opulence. When Densher meets her in the limited context of her sister's house, he recognizes incongruity which she poses against such a backdrop. Further, her love for Densher being sincere and deep, Kate's willingness to share him with another woman even temporarily exacts from her a genuine sacrifice. Finally, Kate believes as Susan Stringham does, that Densher's paying court to Milly will be of benefit to the dying girl. She is convinced that she can serve Milly's interests at the same time as she serves her own. James has placed Maud Lowder's large fortune in such a position as to shade Kate Croy from the glare of unambiguous, solitary guilt. The real contest, in fact, is between these two evenly matched adversaries, not

one between the worldly-wise English girl and the guileless American girl. Actually it is Mrs. Lowder who first sets in motion the scheme to mislead Milly Theale. Kate perceives at once how her aunt intends to make use of Milly in order to promote her own plans, i.e., to fob off on Milly the penniless, unpedigreed Densher so that the way will be clear for Kate to marry Lord Mark. Kate decides not to expose the scheme--though she is tempted to do so--but instead, with Densher's help, to encourage it and so finally beat Mrs. Lowder at her own game. In brief, Kate's primary objective is not to deceive her friend Milly, but to outwit her Aunt....

The real guilt of Densher and Kate is not excused, condoned or diminished, but their motives are made understandable and are shown to be not altogether evil. What is more, all of the other people, even the least selfish, are implicated in the attempt to delude the heroine. Milly herself is implicated in her delusion: she has the innocence of the dove but fails in the wisdom of the serpent.... The two figures, 'princess' and 'dove,' which are used to reveal the heroine and to emphasize the incongruity which is the essence of her tragedy, give to *Wings* a symbolic range which *Portrait* does not have. These pervasive images do not have the effect of reducing the story to abstract allegory but they do add to it certain common associations of thought and feeling which tend to universalize it. It is immediately apparent that the two figures are ordinary to the point of cliché. All who remember their childhood reading feel at once familiar with a heroine who is also a princess, and the dove is a commonly accepted symbol of innocence. James takes advantage of the wide currency which these simple figures have to ring his own changes upon them and to enrich them with his own ironic effects....

The other image under which Milly Theale appears, that of a dove, refers to the opposite pole of the axis around which her tragedy revolves. The figure suggests her innocence, her weakness, her capacity to be beguiled. It is therefore appropriate that this analogy should come from the realistic imagination of Kate Croy. Susan may see Milly in the light of gentle, triumphant power; Kate sees her as a potential victim.... The title of the novel indicates that this shift in focus from the dove to the wings of the dove is an important one. The wings image, insofar as it implies 'wondrous flights,' signifies effortless superiority to earthly forces, and can readily be associated with the picture of a fairy princess. But another meaning is brought out when the dove is seen to spread her wings, not for flight, but for the protection of others. Of course, this new value also merges easily into the image of the storybook heroine....

The Biblical allusion which Mrs. Lowder unknowingly introduces suggests how Milly during her last days might have seen herself in the figure of the soaring dove. After learning how she had been betrayed, after she had, in Susan's phrase, also Biblical, 'turned her face to the wall,' it is easy to imagine that she might have yearned for 'wings like a dove' in order to escape from the city of deceit and guile and to fly from those who pretended to be her friends--Mrs. Lowder herself, Merton Densher and Kate Croy.... It is Milly who has made the profound difference. Returning good for evil she has proved her superiority but she has also had her revenge: without intending it she has heaped coals of fire upon the heads of those who tried to wrong her. It has turned out that Susan Stringham was right and Kate Croy was mistaken; Milly Theale was not a helpless dove but a princess magnificent in power."

Ernest Sandeen

"The Wings of the Dove and The Portrait of a Lady"
PMLA 69 (December 1954) 1060-61, 1064-75

"Each of the previous novels [*The Sacred Fount*, *The American*, *The Princess Casamassima*] is flawed because James's commitment to the protagonist is compromised by admiration for the enemy. *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Spoils of Poynton* are damaged for nearly the obverse reason: in these book evil is persuasive, but virtue--inadvertently--is not. However, since both novels come at the height of James's career and since both are concerned with the central theme of renunciation, neither seems so vulnerable as *The American* or *The Princess Casamassima*. In particular, *The Wings of the Dove* is obviously brilliant, its portrait of corruption supreme. How could a novel fail with Kate Croy? Kate, the book's chief embodiment of evil, is one of James's major creations....

Though powerful in her own right, Kate has been twisted into the shape of evil by other hands. In a world whose only values are material, she belongs to a family that cannot gratify the acquisitive taste it fosters. Moreover, Kate is ashamed of what she is like.... Kate wants more from life than she can get. She

thinks she can possess through duplicity and still not lose her soul, but she is wrong; and James traces her error as movingly as the errors of those fastidious moralizers who stand closer to his heart. With Kate, the author neither blinks at nor misjudges sexual issues that are troublesome in more typically Jamesian characters. Kate's greatest sin is her use of Milly Theale, but to use Milly she must use her own passion for Merton Densher. At our first view of the lovers, Kate is counseling restraint so that they may ultimately possess each other and money. Throughout the book, what is most shocking about her, most indicative of increasing dehumanization, is this way she has of separating herself from her own feeling and of 'doling it out,' as Densher says, like a housewife dispensing sugar from her cupboard--or, as one might better say, like a trainer giving inducements to a prize horse.

Having misappropriated passion, Kate will suffer its degradation when she is taken by Densher not in healthy lust but in his need to restore the self-direction she had deprived him of. Finally, she will lose his love, not only, as she shallowly thinks, because he has fallen in love with Milly, but because she had for too long made his love her instrument. At the end, he is ready to marry her if she will take him for himself. In the end, however, Kate cannot respond to that self, for she has turned it into the means not of passion but of cash. Kate Croy represents the destructive power of egoism... Yet she is a tragic and not a melodramatic villainess, because the motive for her villainy is so sympathetic and she acts throughout in the belief that her machinations are expedient, but no worse. In this, she epitomizes a way of life, a kind of polite league of predators that has trained her to be a member of the society in which 'it would never occur [to the inner circle] that they were eating you up. They did that without tasting.'

Maud, the main lioness in that London zoo, is dreadful at bottom, but her surface is suavely considerate. Like Kate, she is convinced that her exploitation of Milly is acceptable because Milly herself will gain from it. The evil of the set is a banal evil, supported by a ghastly instrumentalism: the greatest good to the greatest number means that a dying girl requires a smaller share. When Milly's attendant, Susan Shepherd Stringham, sits anxiously amidst the inner circle, she looks 'very much as some spectator in an old time circus might have watched the oddity of a Christian maiden, in the arena, mildly, caressingly martyred.' The central emptiness in *The Wings of the Dove* is the dove herself.... James did not adequately face evil because he did not face an evil real enough to vanquish good. For a deeper sentimentality in James's devotion to virtue, Milly Theale is his definitive symbol...his mind associates Milly with Jesus Christ.

This connection is made when Milly and Susan are journeying through the Alps before they reach Lancaster Gate. Susan gets a glimpse of her companion 'looking down on the kingdoms of the earth,' and wonders 'was she choosing among them or did she want them all?' If one reads *The Wings of the Dove* allegorically, this allusion may seem inspirational, but if we recall that Milly isn't God but rather a fabulously rich girl avid for life, the implication is sinister. James, however, ignores the irony, and later falls into contradiction. He means Milly to be Christ-like in her mercy and selflessness (when she dies, she releases her fortune to the man who had betrayed her), but he also means for her to be a brave girl seizing life even at the moment that it is slipping away. Each of these qualities--selfless mercy and appetite for life--is admirable, but in quite incompatible ways. One is directed toward others; the other is self-serving. Though Milly's function in the plot emphasizes the former, her character displays principally the latter....

Because she is victimized by something recognizably wicked, we are quite prepared to pity her. Yet James is not satisfied that Milly win the sympathy reserved for victims; he wishes also to make her ordeal heroic because willed. Therefore, Milly connives in her own betrayal in much the same manner as James's major protagonist, Lambert Strether. She is given ample reason to suspect Kate Croy, but, like Strether, she ignores available evidence. However, Strether's ignorance celebrates the putative virtue of Chad and Mme. de Vionner whereas Milly's ignorance is self-interested. Because of her zeal for life, she wants Merton Densher; and if getting Merton Densher means pulling the wool over her own eyes, she is perfectly willing to do so. James tries to have it both ways, to make her a victim who is self-sacrificed, but her sacrifice looks suspiciously like a gambit lost....

I am not suggesting that Milly is any less pathetic for conniving in her own destruction. I am suggesting that she does connive. Since she loves Densher, we can forgive her credulity as a callow sign of her affection; but, in that case, Milly is pathetic, not godlike. However, James wants us to think Milly divinely unselfish, so at the end of Book Four she decides to leave London before Densher's return in order to avoid

a confrontation that would reveal their prior friendship and might cause Kate to suspect Densher of infidelity. By leaving London for such a reason, she is affirming to herself a liaison with Densher that never existed. In addition to being callow, the action contains a super subtle but readily identified sexual interest that is hardly Christ-like.... When we recall her desire for Densher, her credulity, and her vanity, we have cause to think her death not a Christ-like renunciation but the sentimental death in Venice of a young girl who couldn't get her man. One doesn't want to make too much of it, but we ought to remind ourselves that Milly's final generosity, whatever else it may produce, wrests Densher from her rival.

Densher's conversion seems proof of Milly's magnificence, just as Milly's magnificence seems the cause of his conversion. But the relationship between these two main facts in *The Wings of the Dove* is not so smoothly symbiotic. Though Densher's conversion is the surest sign we get of Milly's worth, bringing the two people together necessitates the prior existence of a sexual appetite in Milly that keeps her from being the complete antithesis of Kate Croy--reducing her instead to a rival whose illness is at least partly counter-balanced by her fabulous means. Moreover, Densher's conversion is itself implausible and no less unarguable a sign of Milly's greatness than her own behavior.

Bluntly stated, James wanted Densher to be morally imperceptive, since in proportion as his initial morality is lacking the morality he obtains from Milly is miraculous. But since he is so imperceptive and since James does not dramatize his conversion any more than Milly's martyrdom, the miracle is unconvincing. 'Imperceptive' is hardly the word though. In the early stages of Densher's reaction to Kate's plan, he is almost a moral moron.... Densher's stupidities and sophistries constitute a compelling portrayal of decorous evil. Like the characteristics of Kate and Aunt Maud, they comprise one of James's most convincing depictions of a brutality that thrives on ignorance. It is only when James tries to relate this evil to good, tries to prove that good can redeem evil, that the very richness of the depiction becomes an error. Not only is Milly's goodness meager; being meager, it cannot fill up so cavernous a moral vacuum as Densher. James seems almost to admit as much in his attempt to deny that Densher was evil and thus to make the conversion plausible....

James apparently wants us to think Densher less depraved because he does not share Kate's willingness to lie to Milly right up to the end.... But his comparative innocence is only impressive if we forget his easy sins of omission. Only his symbolic gesture of entering the church and his rather tardy comprehension of Kate declare Densher a new man. We do not see a change but only a long-delayed and undramatized recognition of what he has been. The novel's plot is as implausible as its heroine, for Milly's virtue and Densher's conversion are equally frail defenses against the solid Lowder world. Yet how can James have written a book so brilliant in conception and so flimsy in detail between a novel that is his masterpiece and one that, however flawed, breaks new ground? Of the last three books, *The Wings of the Dove* is neither a culmination nor a departure but a regression."

Charles Thomas Samuels
The Ambiguity of Henry James
(U Illinois 1971) 61-65, 66-68, 69-72

Michael Hollister (2015)