

THE WINGS OF THE DOVE: A BRIEF STUDY

Dr. Randeep Singh
Assistant Professor of English
Govt. College Dubaldhan, Jhajjar

ABSTRACT:

The Wings of the Dove (1902) is the most personal of the famous three novels of Henry James' later phase. The image of the central character in the novel had been in the writer's mind for a long time based as it was on the fond memories of his beloved cousin, Minny Temple. In this' work, James has poured the deepest ideas and feelings of his past experience. James tells us in the Preface to the New York Edition, "The Wings of the Dove 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 mainly rests was not vividly present to me". The original idea in his mind was to create a character who passionately desires to live but who is destined to die an early death, - In the preface he has explained that his idea was to create "a young person conscious of a great capacity for life, but early stricken and doomed, condemned to die under short respite, while also enamoured of the world; aware moreover of the condemnation and passionately desiring to 'put it' before extinction as many brokenly, the sense of having live of the finer vibrations as possible, and so achieve, however briefly and brokenly, the sense of having live".

INTRODUCTION:

This young person as presented in the work is no other than the American girl, Milly Theale, heroine of the novel. As Milly Theale is modelled on the memory of James' cousin, by making her a character in the novel, he is

paying a glowing tribute to his cousin who remained vividly present in his mind long after her death. So great was his love and devotion for Minny Temple that he devoted the last chapter of his most personal book **Notes of a Son and Brother** to the memory of his cousin. His claim that Minny's death marked the end of his and his brother William's youth shows his deepest attachment with his cousin. To perpetuate the memory of Minny he sought to create the character of Milly Theale, hoping in this way "to lay the ghost by wrapping it... in the beauty and dignity of art".

Milly Theale is depicted in the novel as "the slim, constantly pale, delicately haggard, anomalously, agreeable angular young person, of not more than two than two - and - twenty summers...Isolated unmothered, unguarded".¹ (**WD**, 143). As she is suffering from some disease which the novelist has not disclosed to the readers. Endowed with immense wealth and freedom, she decides to enjoy her life. She rejects the American way of life and along with her travelling companion, Susan Stringham, goes to London in search of art, beauty and culture. In London, she becomes a part of Lancaster Gate Circle which included Maud Manningham, Merton Densher and Kate Croy. After the death of her mother Kate Croy is living with a wealthy, and cultured aunt Maud Lowder. And Maud Lowder has an intention to set up her niece in a socially acceptable marriage. But Kate falls in love with a penniless journalist Merton Densher who is far below her social station. Her aunt threatens to disinherit Kate if she does not break off the relationship. Kate is faced with a moral dilemma. Since Mrs. Stringham was a school

friend of Mrs. Lowder long ago, they visit Mrs. Lowder at Lancaster Gate. Milly is a beautiful American multi - millionaires who adores Kate. In a way she enters into a new society which is totally materialistic and selfish. Hoping to enjoy life in pursuance of her own predilections and the advice by her doctor, Sir Luke Strett, she falls in love with Merton Densher. But all this involvement does not help her to extricate as much happiness from life as possible.

What we are made to see is that her quest for identity is ambivalent. Weak and sick as she is, she fears to live in accordance with her own individual identity and readily accepts ready -made identities thrust upon her by others who surround her. Her easy acceptance of different roles put on her by other characters apparently shows a passive and weak nature in her. When Mrs. Susan Stringham, who knows Milly had immense wealth and power calls her a princess, Milly feels very happy at this comparison. She knows that with all her money, power and freedom she can do whatever she likes just as a princess can. But when Kate Croy calls her a dove, she never objects to this description. On the other hand, she rather enjoys this title : "It was moreover, for the girl like an inspiration : She found herself accepting as the right one, while she caught her breath with relief, the name so given her" (WD, 236).

If we look closely, however, this easy acceptance of roles assigned to her or the description of her character given by others is rooted in a complexity of motives which should not be lost sight of. The acceptance is not simply out of lack of self - awareness or vanity, although these factors are also there. Behind this acceptance there are also qualities like an obliging temperament and a curiosity to see how life appears in new roles. Her happy acceptance of being associated with a dove shows her willingness to be accepted as a

meeek and innocent person and it is also seen by her as a convenient counter that would serve to deflect probing attention away from her real self. Marcia Ian rightly finds in Milly's personality "a proliferation of identities that combine to make her seem both infinitely rich in 'aspects' and mystically inaccessible to any ordinary reading of character".¹

What we are intended to infer is that Henry James has used the dove image to emphasize Milly's gentleness and spirituality as well as her sophisticated awareness that makes it necessary for her to assume roles which do not reveal or expose her total personality. But apart from religious implications which have been overemphasized, the dove symbol also refers to Milly's desire to escape and fly or to fade out of existence. We can see that Milly likes to be known as a rich and powerful person but at the same time she can also gladly imagine herself as a weak and vulnerable person. By moving between these two different identities, she can escape being labelled and also transcend the limitations of any definite role that is imposed on her by her actual living conditions, if it becomes unbearable to her.

Milly's decision to move in the social circle of Lancaster Gate is dictated by her desire to explore new possibilities of life. But instead of participating in the activities of life which open up before her, she very soon takes refuge in her illness. Her withdrawal into the doomed world of her sickness shows an inner fear which makes her wince before the stark realities of human existence. She thinks that her disease "would give her something firm to stand on ... It would be strange for the firmness to come, after all, from her learning in these agreeable conditions that she was in some way doomed" (WD, 206). Although Milly never allows other characters to talk of her illness, she knows very well in the innermost core of her being that she is bound by the limitations

of her illness. In a way, her illness and mortality provides an excellent pretext to her to remain shut up in her world of loneliness and seclusion.

Virginia C. Fowler has rightly observed that "Milly's mysterious illness, like Minny Temple's tuberculosis fortuitously allows her "a quick escape" and thus prevents her from having to take "the whole assault of life".¹ The fear of facing the actualities of life and the feeling of loneliness are clearly visible in that famous scene where Milly is seen sitting all alone on the edge of an Alpine cliff. On seeing her in that dangerous position, Mrs. Susan Stringham gets frightened because a single wrong movement could have proved fatal. It makes her think of some "horrible hidden obsession" in her mind that perhaps Milly was contemplating suicide. Other thoughts also come to her mind including the one that she was "meditating" or "looking down on the kingdoms of earth" (WD, 135). She also ruminates : "Was she choosing among them or did she want them all?" Different possibilities strike Susan Stringham's mind on seeing Milly sitting there and in the end she feels that perhaps life for Milly will not be "a question of a flying leap" but "would be a question of taking full in the face the whole assault of life" (WD, 136). (What we are made to see is her essential loneliness and the inner void which she also carries with her in her life.

Many critics have tried to find symbolic interpretation of this Alpine scene associating it with Christ's temptation in the wilderness. But we see that when James talks of her sitting on the mountain, he is trying to analyse the working of her mind to emphasize the fact that as a mortal human being, she has her earthly fears and doubts. He is not in any case projecting her there as a divine being. The sense of desolation and solitariness prepares the reader for the final doom towards which she is to move as if that were her real destiny.

As we shall see later, social gatherings and festivities do not appeal to her as much as places of seclusion and danger. In spite of being surrounded by so many friends and well - wishers, she likes to remain aloof.

Her desire to escape from the world is also reflected in her conversation with Mrs. Susan Stringham regarding the revelation of her friendship with Densher. When Susan suggests that after she returns from London, it would be good to reveal to everyone this fact of her friendship with Densher, Milly expresses her unwillingness to be present on the scene. She is afraid to reveal to others her feeling of love for Densher. Perhaps she is not sure of Densher's feelings towards her. Moreover, the thought of Densher's attraction towards Kate Croy also remains in her mind. To Mrs. Susan Stringham's fear that Milly wants to run away from Densher, Milly replies, "I don't know what I want to run away from" (WD, 182). This may indicate her hidden desire to escape from the possibilities of life or it may be an index of some finer moral scruples. It appears that she is scared of being tied to any commitment of love. She does not want to be emotionally attached to Densher. Alternatively, it is likely that she wants to avoid even the slightest admixture of crude selfishness in her love for Densher. To Mrs. Stringham's doubts that Milly is not acting wisely by hiding from others her feelings of love for Densher, Milly replies that her "most" beaux moments aren't such as to qualify, so far as appearance goes, for anything gayer than a handsome cemetery. Since I've lived all these years as if I were dead, I shall die, no doubt, as if I were alive ..." (WD, 183).

Milly's comment brings out another trait in her personality - the death wish which occupies a special place in her mind. The fear of impending death always lurks in her mind. As Stuart Hutchinson tells us, "Death has become the only certainty formally...."¹ We are forced to think that James' emphasis on death

again and again shows the pain he experienced from his cousin's death. James could not detach himself from the fact of her death and could not remove the shock of her death from his mind. His personal feelings that death was something dreadful and terrible which snatched beauty and youth from life is reflected here. Milly's association of life with death shows that death holds more fascination for her than it should in a robust personality.

The scene when Milly goes to Matchham along with Lord Mark and identifies herself with her Bronzino portrait is important for understanding Milly's psychological make-up. First, she is struck by the extreme beauty of the lady in that portrait. With tears in her eyes, she views the wonderful and beautiful face of the young woman. Her gorgeous clothes and the splendid jewels make her think that it "was a great personage - only accompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead (WD, 196). Although she fully appreciated the beauty and exquisite splendour of that portrait, the two things that struck her immensely were that the lady was not happy and that she was dead. A glimpse of that portrait makes her painfully conscious of her own short span of life. As Miriam Allot points out, the pale girl in the portrait "symbolizes her own doomed life and its brief significance". Where does James let us forget that Milly is to die soon and that is why Milly's obsession with death is referred to in many of these crucial scenes. Milly is shocked to see that in spite of money, beauty and splendour the lady in the portrait was unhappy and she could not escape from the cruel clutches of death. This compels her to recognize that in spite of her wealth and power she was soon to die and would not be able to enjoy the beauties of life for long. A note of pessimism and sadness marks this scene. It further explains that even things of art and beauty, instead of inspiring her to live, simply make her think of death and sorrow.

Commenting on the scene Kenneth Graham writes : "Milly's knowledge of the woman's death is part of her aesthetic perception of the picture"¹ F.O. Matthiessen also observes : "This scene before the Bronzino operates like a musical theme : it strikes the first note of the transition to Venice, where Milly plays out her make - believe role in the gorgeous rented palace which increases the ironic contrast between her fortune and her fear".¹

Milly's visit to Doctor Luke Strett immediately after the Matchham episode is significant in bringing out the positive aspects in Milly's personality. She feels safe and protected in his company. He advises her to take part in the activities of life and to grab whatever opportunity she gets to enjoy life. He makes her realize that she can live if she desires intensely enough to do so. The feeling of exaltation and excitement she experiences at that moment motivates her to accept life as it comes and try her best to involve herself in the stream of life around her. The passage in which James describes her feelings at this juncture is a fine piece of psycho-analytic writing. She decides to live as prescribed by her doctor, as he told her to live "by option, by volition" (WD, 213).

This brings to our mind the comment made by Dorothea Krook that it was Milly's "pride" which was responsible for her tragedy. She bases her opinion on the fact that Milly does not listen to the advice of others and refuses to take help from them.¹ According to Krook this is a flaw in her personality. But we do not agree with this view. Milly hardly ever shows any sign of obstinacy or pride. On the other hand, she readily agrees to do whatever she is told to do. If she does not talk about her illness and does not like to be sympathised with it is not because of pride but because of her desire to remain aloof and because of her shy but strong sense of self - respect. She does

not want to compromise her dignity by inviting pity or receiving it when offered unasked.

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