

The Burden of Leisure: A Study of Henry James's The Wings of the Dove

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The Wings of the Dove belongs to the last phase of James's career as a novelist. During this period he wrote three major novels in quick succession-**The Ambassador** (1902), **The Wings of the Dove**(1903), and **The Golden Bowl**(1904). Among these, **The Wings of the Dove** is considered as the "tragic masterpiece, the richest and most moving of his works,"¹ representing the highest expression of the concept of art and life developed by him during a career of nearly six decades contemplating upon observation and analysis of affluence and leisure in the contemporary European and American culture. In his last phase James revived the international theme and made it serve the current balance as well as his own totality of experience as an American expatriate in Europe. Europe is still included in these novels as a school of worldly experiences and America represents a process through which that experience can be communicated with moral import in the context of affluence. In a way, **The Wings of the Dove** is just a repetition of **The Portrait of a Lady** with some changes, but it basically follows the same theme. In the words of Walter Allen, *The Wings of the Dove* "is a re-statement of that of **The Portrait of a Lady**."²

In this novel, taking international theme as the base Henry James takes up the characters that belong to affluent class and enjoy maximum leisure in their lives. The main representative of American culture is Milly Theale, a rich American girl, who has inherited a large fortune with the death of her parents. Her character is created and shaped "in response to inner pressures of will, moral intent and aspirations."³ Mrs. Stringham, an intimate American friend of Milly, is not affluent but enjoys affluence and leisure in the company of Milly Theale as a close friend always on her heels. Contrastingly, the European culture is represented through Mrs. Lowder, an English lady of great wealth and social status. She is a friend of Mrs. Susan Stringham. Mrs. Lowder is the aunt of Kate Croy, a young London girl being adopted by her rich aunt and provided with all the facilities of rich class. Merton Densher is another character in the novel, who is a reporter of London newspaper and is secretly engaged to Kate. The decaying aristocracy of British nobles is represented through Lord Mark, who appears as a suitor of Kate Croy. Sir Luke Strett is an eminent British doctor of London, who attends upon Milly Theale, the heroine of the novel. Milly Theale is the main character in **The Wings of the Dove**. She is the central figure around whom the whole story revolves. She is the 'dove' of the story under whose wings, when spread towards the end of the novel, all other characters stay. "The novel focuses rather on the personages around her and the cruel plot of her friend to supply her with a 'lover' who will inherit her money and thus be free after her death to make the marriage he wishes."⁴

The novel opens showing Kate's as also her father's attitude towards affluence and leisure. In the first two chapters, Henry James through his characters Leon Croy, the father and his two daughters, Kate and Marian and through their dialogues tries to express their attitude towards affluence, being members of such a group in the society who are not lucky enough to be rich. Kate is being offered affluence by her rich aunt Mrs. Lowder with a condition that she will not have any relation with her never-do well father or her elder sister Marian, who did not adhere to the advice of her aunt and married a poor man. The father, Leon Croy, who has love for money, impels Kate to accept her aunt's suggestion of giving up all her relations with her father and sister and thus to accept the advantages of affluence and luxuries of Lancaster Gate -the residence of Mrs. Lowder, However, Kate shows her self determination and aversion towards affluence costing her filial relations as well as her love for Merton Densher. She makes last attempt to reconcile with her father by sacrificing the offer of her aunt. But, her father is not ready to take her back. At this Kate Croy says; "She wants me to choose. Very well, I will choose. I'll wash my hands off her for you to just that tune."⁵ The argument continues between the two and the father insists upon Kate to go to her aunt and enjoy fortune and leisure, as he utters "...I'll- upon my honor -take you in hand: put you into a cab and deliver you again safe at Lancaster Gate."(p.17) Kate is adamant to change his thinking.

"I've no intention of that sort with respect to anyone now -to Mrs. Lowder least of, if you fail me'- she seemed to make it out for herself- 'that has the merit at least that it simplifies. I shall go my way- as I see my way.'" (p.18)

Having discussed the matter with her insistent father, she takes up the issue with her sister Marian, who provides a horrible warning against the penalties incurred by marrying a poor man and exhorts her to prefer affluence and to do what their father advises and Aunt Maud Lowder stipulates. She remarks:

"Well, your own business is of course your own business and you may say there's no one less in a position than I to preach to you. But, all the same, if you wash your hands off me for ever for it, I won't for this once, keep back that I don't consider you've a right, as well as all stand, to throw yourself away." (p.27)

Marian wants Kate to go to their aunt so that she does not share the property with her and has her own fortune through Mrs. Lowder.

Finally, Kate decides to go to her aunt and remain in the company of her wealth. But she is determined not to give up Densher. She enjoys the status of leisured class and has a

plan to win her struggle ultimately being a clever London girl. Book II is devoted to the young reporter, Merton Densher, who is having a love affair with Kate and has no apparent prospects of money or a place in society. "Distinctly, he was a man either with nothing at all to do or with ever so much to think about." (p.34) Kate has special liking for Densher that has been exposed in the form of imagery by Henry James as:

"it was on the side of the mind that Densher was rich for her, and mysterious and strong; and he had rendered her in especial the sovereign service of making that element real. She had had, all her days, to take it terribly on trust; no creature she had ever encountered having been able in any degree to testify for it directly." (p.36)

However, Mrs., Lowder breathes easier and feels happy when she learns that the young man is being sent to America by his paper to write a series of articles on the life in the United States. The Book III introduces the heroine of the novel, Milly Theale alongwith her permanent friend and companion throughout the story, Mrs. Stringham. The heroine is a "young and beautiful New York heiress, whose throbbing consciousness of life is mocked by her disease."⁶ She is an object of love and has wealth and leisure at her disposal, but she is caught in strange circumstances of physical incapacities. Merton Densher, who is working in New York for his paper, develops friendship with Milly Theale who is "a New York legend of affection, of romantic isolation, and, beyond everything it was by most account, in respect to the mass of money so piled on the girl's back, a set of New York possibilities." (p.72) She is the representative of American affluence and James tries to emphasise that being rich it is convenient for her to buy happiness. "She was alone, she was stricken, she was rich, and in particular she was strong- a combination in itself of a nature to engage Mrs. Stringham's attention." (p.72) Merton Densher has a novel experience as he has come across for the first time in his life "the potential heiress of all the ages." (p.74)

As the narrative proceeds Henry James provides a look into affluent society of Americans and the ways in which they were enjoying leisure through riches. In the description of Milly Theale the author suggests "to have got near the luxuriant tribe which the rare creature was the final flower, the immense, extravagant, unregulated cluster, with free-living ancestors, handsome dead cousins, preserved, though so exposed." (p.75) Henry James considers Milly Theale as a princess in the company of Mrs. Stringham. "That a princess could only be a princess was a truth with which, essentially, a confidant, however responsive, has to live. Mrs. Stringham was a woman of the world, but Milly Theale was princess, the only one she had yet had to deal with, and this in its way, too made all the difference." (p.81). It is in the company of Susan Stringham, her bosom friend that Milly embarks on her tour to Europe. Here tourism is shown as the major leisure activity of the American affluent people especially directed towards Europe to satisfy their urge to have a confrontation with classical experience. Milly Theale, even if she is not keeping good health and in spite of all the hazards of strains of travelling, is observed as an affluent lady having free time and enjoying leisure of a foreign trip.

"She couldn't have lost it if she had tried -that was what it was to be really rich." (p.82)

Milly asks her friend Mrs. Stringham, a widow and a writer, to go with her to Europe. Within a matter of days they take passage in a liner and arrive in Europe. Their first halt is Italy. After enjoying the Italian architecture and grandeur of cultural heritage, the two ladies travel up the Italian peninsula and enter into Switzerland having no preoccupation and only free time to enjoy leisure with the help of big money with them. Mrs. Stringham has in London an old acquaintance, Mrs. Lowder, a companion of her school days. Restless and wealthy, Milly decides to go to London and to see the modern English culture with the background of decaying British aristocracy. Mrs. Stringham sends a word to Mrs. Lowder. In London they become the familiar callers at Mrs. Lowder's place, Lancaster Gate. This again is a leisure time activity of the affluent class and is presented in abundance in the novel, characters paying social visits and attending or giving parties and dinners.

Because of her beauty, money and imposing personality Milly is a great success in the environment of English affluence. Lord Mark becomes infatuated with her beauty and affluence. In the meanwhile, Milly and Mrs. Lowder's niece, Kate become good friends. Milly being aware of her illness visits Sir Luke Strett, an eminent surgeon, who after a through examination tells her that there is no remedy for Milly's disease in surgery or medicine. The inevitable being pertinent, the doctor advises Milly to make the best of her time of the remaining life. On the advice of the doctor Milly feels encouraged and in the words of Leon Edel, it seems to her "as if she has been to confession and been absolved. She faces the world with renewed hope."⁷ Now Milly develops an interest in life and intends to enjoy her leisure and society to the possible extent with her money. She decides to go to Venice, and in the words of S. Gorley Putt:

"So the ailing 'princess' sets up her household in the Venetian Palazzo Leporelli, the stricken 'dove' retires to balance her will to live against her destiny to die."⁸

Milly and Kate, though good friends they are, keep their mutual acquaintance with Merton Densher a secret. Kate never discloses her secret engagement to Densher to anyone. Kate and Densher both are equally poor and they cannot realize their dreams. Merton has already met Milly in New York and is considerably attracted towards her, in the words of F.W. Dupee:

"And now the fateful circle -the Americans and the English, the rich and the poor, the loved and the unloved -constitutes itself."⁹

Both the girls Kate Croy, the protégé of her aunt, English lady and the rich American princess Milly Theale are in love with each other. They exhibit sincere and dedicated friendship. Milly Theale has inherited her affluence from her parents. So the wealth is her own and so is her leisure. On the other hand, Kate is dependant for wealth and enjoyment of leisure on her aunt, Mrs. Lowder. Kate and Milly do not disclose their knowing of Densher and it seems both are acting on some obscure impulse of simple tact or with a

hope for some personal gain. Kate through her guess-work senses Milly's soft corner for Densher. According to Edmund Wilson:

"Kate Croy, though hard and crass, is striving for the highest aspirations. She is capable of understanding, just as the more fastidious Milly is."¹⁰

With the passage of time, Kate develops some greed. She has an eye upon Milly's wealth. So she forms a design, which, in the words of Stewart, is:

"Densher is to conquer her (Milly's) affections and marry her, so that her wealth may come to the lovers when she dies."¹¹

In Venice the four ladies stay together and enjoy the affluence of Milly Theale. Densher takes a room in a hotel but he is a regular visitor and companion of the group. It is in "Milly's thronged drawing room and practically under Milly's eyes,"¹² that Kate's design of a definite conspiracy against Milly's wealth is hatched. She tells Densher to marry Milly for making her happy during the remaining few months of her life. It is there and then that she uncovers her scheme to Densher. Kate describes Milly's affluence and also her fatal disease as "if you can imagine an angel with thumping bank-account you'll have the simplest expression of the kind of thing. Her fortune's absolutely huge;" (p.228) Kate explains to Densher Milly's beauty of arranged life that deceives an observer of her fatal disease.

"Yes, she's so wonderful. She won't show for that, any more than your watch, when it's about to stop for want of being wound up, gives you convenient notice or shows as different from usual. She won't die; she won't live, by inches. She won't smell, as it were, of drugs. She won't taste, as it were, of medicine. No one will know." (p.230)

We find everyone in the house participating in this scheme considering their individual viewpoints as well as the gains of the game. All the three ladies in their own ways are interested in uniting Milly Theale and Merton Densher through nuptial ties. Mrs. Lowder in this scheme is quite a participant. She wants Densher to marry Milly Theale as this act of Densher removes him away from Kate and she is keenly interested in giving Kate in marriage to Lord Mark. On the other hand, the marriage of Milly and Densher will get after her death. He will be then free to marry Kate with the acquired affluence by erasing the objections of Mrs. Lowder that he is poor. Mrs. Stringham and Sir Luke Strett want to see Milly happy even if her happiness may be short lived.

Kate makes Densher promise that he will do as she has planned. She wants him to behave like an actor in the play of life according to the wishes of the director, Kate. Kate equates this acquired affluence with her freedom from Mrs. Lowder. Densher agrees to everything and promises to move about as Kate desires, "well, then just as you like. I'll stay and do my best for you." (p.257)

Thus the intrigue starts and Densher places himself at the disposal of Milly Theale. Kate's plot has the moral advantage also because she wants to give Milly all happiness

which is not available without her scheme in spite of her affluence. Mrs. Stringham plays a major role in encouraging Milly for Densher. There is a multifocal impact of the intrigue, wherein two ladies enjoying affluence, namely Milly Theale and Mrs. Lowder, have free play for their wills to go with the strength of their money. The scheme belongs to all because Milly adopts it in the innocence of her love for life and special preference for Densher; Mrs. Stringham with a noble cause to save Milly's life as per doctor's advice and Mrs. Lowder and Lord Mark with a hope of getting rid of the hurdle created by Densher in between Lord Mark and Kate Croy for their happy marriage.

Densher makes little headway with his plan to marry Milly until Mrs. Lowder and Kate return to England for a few weeks. Before leaving, Kate makes Densher promise to follow her plan in her absence from the scene. He extracts a promise from Kate as a price for his participating in the scheme. He asks her to come to his rooms and the power of affluence demeans Kate to consent to this demand of Densher which she fulfills and in turn Densher is to see that the plan is successfully implemented. The scheme proceeds with Densher in the presence of two ladies Milly Theale and Mrs. Stringham while left back in Venice and Mrs. Lowder and Kate leave for London. The advances start with an explosive exposed to Milly by Densher that he wants to write a book in the congenial environment of Venice. The idea gets encouragement from Milly. He tells her that she is the only reason for whom he has been neglecting his work. She is pleased with him and has every hope that Densher will propose her for marriage, the ultimate objective. In the meanwhile Densher comes to know that Milly has rejected Lord Mark because the girl detects unwanted sympathy in his proposal and suspects that he has no love for her but a keen eye upon her wealth. Densher gets moral boost and believes that Lord Mark's rejection shall give him some reason to be hopeful for the success of the promised scheme. It appears Milly is ready to provide Densher with her affluence to enjoy and the necessary leisure as inputs to Densher to realize his long cherished desire. Milly starts feeling fresh in the company of Densher. She begins to love life. She tries to forget her fatal disease in his company. Thus, she improves psychologically, as is clear from the following dialogue between, Milly and Densher;

"Well then, I'm splendid.'
'oh, I don't need you to tell me that.'
'I mean I'm capable of life.'
'I mean, ' she went on, ' that I want so to live-I' "(p.354)

Lord Mark disappears from Venice for almost a month. Supposing Kate to be free, Lord Mark goes to London and makes her a final proposal of marriage. Kate refuses his proposal bluntly. This is a clear hint to him regarding the great conspiracy. He decides to take a revenge upon Milly. He informs Milly regarding the secret engagement of Kate and Densher. "For her it is the fatal shock"¹⁴ and "she turns her face to the wall." (p.401). "A final incapacity for love is intimately linked with a final incapacity to confront the fact of death."¹⁵ This makes Milly lose all interest in life and she refuses to eat or to talk to anyone. Densher goes back to London but does not go to see Kate, as he feels himself guilty as his promise is unfulfilled and he cannot even bear

the idea of having hurt Milly as he has done through his participation in the intrigue. On Christmas day he goes to Sir Strett's residence where he finds Mrs. Lowder who tells him about the death of Milly Theale. After it Densher gets the letter from Venice announcing the wealth bestowed upon Densher by Milly. Neither Densher nor Kate dare open the letter because they are ashamed of their conduct towards Milly. They burn the letter in the fire-place. Kate is pleased to liken Milly to a 'dove' and now as it turns out after her death Milly has forgiven them and left Densher money. "She has stretched her wings and it was to that they reached. They cover us.' They cover us', Densher said," (p.456) However Densher is horrified and suggests that he is in love with Milly's memory. He will marry Kate without the money or he will make it over to her and remain single. In short, he shall not touch and enjoy money himself

".....With an intensity now beyond any that had ever made his breath come slow, he waited for her act. 'There's but one thing that can save you from my choice.'
 'From your choice of my surrender to you?'
 'Yes'- and she gave a nod at the long envelope on the table-
 'Your surrender of that'.
 'What is it then?'
 'Your word of honour that you're not in love with her memory.'
 'Oh-her memory!'
 'Ah'-She made high gesture- 'don't speak of it as if you couldn't be, I could, in your place; and you're one for whom it will do. Her memory's your love. You want no other.'
 He heard her out in stillness, watching her face, but not moving. Then he only said;
 'I'll marry you, mind you, in an hour.'
 'As we were?'
 'As we were.'
 But she turned to the door, and her headshake was now the end.
 'We shall never be again as we were!' "(p.456-57)

Just before this final act Kate is fully hopeful for the success in her plot. She feels that they would receive their love, money and also the dove. But the plot "does fall through a combination of bad intentions, bad judgment and bad luck."¹⁶ Kate dismisses death as something suitable for other people and not herself, "Kate insists that Milly's fate has been wholly appropriate, because, after all, she loved Densher. What more could she want."¹⁷ However, the whole scheme falls and the things do not move in the desired direction. "One's plan alas was one thing and result the other."¹⁸

For Kate the failure of the scheme cannot be harsh, she is a modern London girl. She has her own conviction of freedom and attitude towards affluence and leisure. This is apparent from the ease with which she develops friendship with Densher at a Bohemian party and then continues it with frequent meetings converted into a secret engagement in defiance of her undertaking given to her aunt Mrs. Lowder. Kate Croy in a way is a refinement over Isabel Archer. "Kate too dreams of having love and glory both. She discourages Lord Mark as Isabel Archer turns down a proposal from Lord Warburton."¹⁹ The source of her passion is traceable in the general failure of fortune and honour of

her family. Her father has done something dishonourable and her sister Marian has married for love and is cursed to poverty. Therefore, affluence is the first choice in Kate's world. But unfortunately like her mother and her sister Marian, she is in love with a poor man of no monetary prospects. She is fully aware of these ironies and is determined to surmount them through her wealth of plan and in this lays her talent for life which is matched by her singular beauty. The strange gestures and decisions of the novel are mostly owned by her. She knows how to assimilate Densher in her scheme. She has strange attitude towards life upon which Densher wonders at times. She is non-possessive and can like lending Densher to Milly against her wishes. "Even in crime she remains romantic, resolved to walk straight as the crooked road of her choice permits her."²⁰ In the plan, Kate surrenders the initiative to Densher once he has agreed to the plot to act for himself while remaining in Venice.

Contrarily, Milly Theale, the 'dove' of the story has money. Both Milly and Kate Croy love young Merton Densher, a moneyless but clever newspaper man. The story remains restricted to Milly's reactions to her knowledge of her own certain and immediate death. "The movements of the story from Switzerland to England, to Italy and its splendour of setting are due to the fortune over which so much deadly skermmishing takes place."²¹ It is due to Milly's money and her love for leisure, for traveling that gives James chance to describe American and European affluent society. In her act of spending, Milly shows a liberal view and also has a philanthropic attitude of giving it away. She gives sufficient money to Densher, an image of love for her. "She joins in her friend's commerce, completes their transaction, redeems their enterprise by transforming it into a gift making her love surrender to her tragic fortune and joining the imagination of expenditure."²² Milly's affluence, whereas, is a strength and synthesizes into the 'princess' image with noble motives, there ironically, in the words of O.P. Sharma:

"The possession of wealth instead of aiding exposes her to new menace, making it almost impossible to seek fulfillment of the world she inhabits. Thus the area of conflict is carried more fully into her spirit, and the moral issue is intensified by her freedom from economic necessity."²³

The life that Milly makes for herself, knowing her days are numbered and knowing almost, their number, comprehends abysses both sublime and terrible, she recognizes, from the first, the effects of her shepherd, so graphically, if unintentionally particularized for her by kind, corrupt Lord Mark who brings her before the Bronzino portrait. All her putative friend deceive themselves in regard to her, acting for their own good but in the name of her happiness, but Milly does not deceive herself. Her surrender is deliberate. In this she is supreme artist. She makes of her life an instrument for Mrs. Stringham's gratification, for Kate's enlightenment, and for Densher's redemption, a creative act of the highest kind.

All this great work, as well as diverse strokes of wickedness, is done in a few murmured words, a nod or a look, an invitation accepted or declined, gestures always within the

bounds of property. Such an exposition of the instincts of the jungle expressed in the manners of the salon generates, in the end, more force than many a less subdued narrative for the reader is treated not only to the powerful spectacle of Kate Croy prowling her situation with the disciplined rage of a caged tigress but also to the glorious vision of Milly Theale, triumphant over betrayal and death, fulfilling her extra ordinary nature to its high potential.

The novel, **The Wings of the Dove**, Whereas exposes the affluence of Milly with her refined tastes for leisure derived out of traveling and social parties, therein it is also a story of Kate's horrified views regarding poverty and her attempt to acquire affluence through Densher with the help of the intrigue. The novel, also reveals Mrs. Lowder, the British affluent lady, always in search of affluent society for leisure as well as social status through her niece Kate Croy by providing her necessary support of leisure. The story equally exposes the decaying British aristocracy that is represented through Lord Mark attempting to arrest his monetary bankruptcy by marrying either the rich American girl, Milly, to inherit her fortune, who has a very short life being victim of a fatal disease or alternatively Kate Croy, the niece of Mrs. Lowder, to acquire the fortune of Mrs. Lowder, Kate Croy being the only scion of her wealth. The entire novel, on the whole, depicts effluents in easy mood enjoying leisured activities as an international group. The last two books of the novel dilate upon the innocence of affluents and expose the deceit of common people as an attempt of material acquisition.

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