CHAPTER IV
BEATITUDE OR TRAGEDY?

The Wings of The Dove (1902)

The idea, reduced to its essence, is that of 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 in" before extinction as many of the finer vibrations as possible, and so achieve, however briefly and brokenly, the sense of having lived.¹

This is how the author of The Wings of the Dove summed up the 'formidable' theme when he reviewed his novel some years later. "The image so figured would be at best, but half the matter; the rest would be all the picture of the struggle involved, the adventure brought about, the gain recorded or the loss incurred, the precious experience somehow compassed."³

The 'image' or nebulous identity of Milly Theale, the heroine moves before the reader's eyes as through the various refractions of a spectrum. Whatever form and colour are given to her are tinted according to the person's

¹Henry James, Preface to the Wings of the Dove, p.v
³Preface, p.v
attitude towards her, through whose eyes she is presented. All throughout the novel she is assigned a passivity which logically removes her from the actual purview of the actions and reactions of the story. She is best seen as a symbolic figure rather than the real life representative of any society or country in particular. Whether it is as the “potential heiress of all the ages” (WD, p.82) which refers literally to her millions as well as to her symbolic significance, or as the princess, dove, priestess or even simply as the American Girl, Milly fails to have any meaningful human interaction with any of the other characters. In her isolation, whether it is forced on her or it is out of her own volition, there hovers an air of desperate seeking for protection from some unknown, unnamed apprehension. It is in the context of this that the quotation from Psalms 55 can be related to her situation.

My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me.
Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. And I say, "O that I had wings like a dove."
I would fly away and be at rest; Yea, I would wonder afar, I would lodge in the wilderness.
(Psalms 55:4-7(RSV)

In a method which Mathiessen calls "deliberately
indirect presentation of its heroine," Milly is first introduced through the romantic perspective of her Bostonian companion, Susan Shepherd Stringham.

Mrs. Stringham was never to forget - for the moment had not faded, nor the infinitely fine vibration it set up in any degree ceased - her own first sight of the striking apparition, then unheralded and unexplained: the slim, constantly pale, delicately haggard, anomalously, agreeably angular young person, of not more than two-and-twenty in spite of her marks, whose hair was somehow exceptionally red even for the real thing, which it innocently confessed to being and whose clothes were remarkably black even for robes of mourning which was the meaning they expressed. It was New York mourning, it was New York hair, it was a New York history, confused as yet but multitudinous, of the loss of parents, brothers, sisters, almost every human appendage, all on a scale and with a sweep that had required the greater stage; it was a New York legend of affecting, of romantic isolation, and beyond everything, it was by most accounts, in respect to the mass of money so piled on the girl's back, a set of New York possibilities. She was alone, she was stricken, she was rich, and in particular, she was strange - a combination in itself of a nature to engage Mrs. Stringham's attention.

(WD, pp. 79-80)

The elder lady instinctively grasps the enigmatic quality of Milly from the moment she comes into contact with her.

Mrs. Stringham found herself from that hour, in other words, in presence of an explanation that remained a muffled and intangible form, but that assuredly, should it take on sharpness, would explain everything.

would become instantly the light in which Milly was to be read. (WD. p.88)

Though Milly is shown as "intangible", "muffled", her effect on others, from the very beginning is sharp. Because of her isolation and her detachment on account of her extraordinary circumstances like her youth, her wealth, she possesses the power to "reduce" whoever comes into close contact with her to a "consenting bewilderment". The "light" therefore in which she "is to be read" always presents her as a little better, much richer and far greater to "escape measure" than "they" - the people who are closely associated with her.

Susan Stringham thinks of herself as "a woman of the world" but Milly Theale is to be a "princess". The air of mystery and enchantment which Mrs. Stringham introduces in her 'reading' of Milly is sustained all throughout. The terms of reference used for her are therefore all symbolic and what eventually emerges is an image which is more of a poetic vision rather than a human being of real flesh and blood. Though she is the heroine of the story she remains only on the periphery of events and emotions in the novel.

The scene on the Alpine ledge where Milly is found to be so "precariously perched" for a "mere maiden"
can be seen as a metaphor for the role assigned to her. Her entire situation in life is precarious, for she is a 'mere maiden' sitting on the thin edge of an abyss - the abyss of aloneness and precarious health - yet it is this very situation that infuses the scene with so much heady romance for the "woman of the world". Milly is supposed to be contemplating the "kingdoms of the earth", not with an air of renunciation but with an eye for new connections - choose some or take them all?

Milly does not have to say anything, she need not do anything - yet her very stance, whether it be on this lonely but picturesque Alpine ledge or in a crowded room in a palazzo, - her impression upon others is vivid - strong and indelible. Without ever becoming aware of her presence, Milly gives Susan Stringham the impression of a future which the latter's imagination can so distinctly perceive.

For she now saw that the great thing she had brought away was precisely a conviction that the future was not to exist for her princess in the form of any sharp or simple release from the human predicament. It wouldn't be for her a question of a flying leap and thereby of a quick escape. It would be a question of taking full in the face the whole assault of life, to the general muster of which indeed her face might have been directly presented as she sat there on her rock. (WD pp.94-95)
Her 'precarious perch' thus becomes her 'rock', her stance, her attitude to life. This 'mere maiden', thus willing to face "the whole assault of life" is the 'potential heiress' of the young girl who had earlier set out "to affront her destiny".

However, like her predecessor, the tragedy of this 'princess' is that she is transposed into a world where the "assault of life" involves direct human relationships, not mere romanticization of them and requires a sharp insight into the power of money in human equations, not the mere possession of it. Despite her increasing passivity on account of her ignorance of these factors, interest in her is sustained by the promise of what she is potentially capable of doing. She is young, she is comely and hence the promise of love and romance. She is rich and there is just the possibility that she may yet grow to understand money and use it to enhance her life. Above all, there is in Milly Theale the spontaneous response to life which Densher calls her "talent for life" an aspect which balances the effects of her mysterious and unnamed malady, to constitute her "interesting state". When it transpires that Milly cannot translate the promise of her life into reality - when "the mine of her treasures" cannot be worked to
the full, this mysterious malady affords her the transition from an otherwise uneventful life into an impressive death; impressive on account of the continued effect it has upon the associates she leaves behind.

The light in which Susan Stringham sees Milly is the theme in which she is pictured and the statement of this in Chapter V reads like a musical rendering of the key note which is counterpointed throughout, by the variations on the note by the other characters, specially Merton Densher.

The next frame or light in which she is presented is a comparative one, the focus alternating between her and Kate Croy, her English friend. By presenting Kate through Milly's adoring eyes the author not only draws a parallel between the two but emphasizes Milly's inherent lack of self-confidence.

In contrast to Milly's obscure past, which is left vague and amorphous, Kate Croy's milieu is presented in concrete terms. In fact, the very first few chapters of the novel dwell on Kate's family and social background. Her adoption by her aunt Maud Lowder is shown as something which is more appropriate as a background for Kate's personality than the comparatively poor surroundings
of her childhood. The implication seems to be that Kate deserves more than she has.

In terms of physical appearance too, Milly is instantly struck by Kate's beauty - 'the handsome girl' is the key phrase used to describe Kate. Milly herself does not have any great claims to beauty herself. Susan Stringham, remarks on this aspect of her ward, "...spoke of her friend as plain, as ugly even, in a case of especially dense insistence", (WD p.89).

In the milieu of Lancaster Gate, Maud Lowder's home, Milly is seen for the first time actively participating in human interactions. Within a short time she becomes quite intimate with Kate Croy. Her admiration for her and the slight awe with which she views this 'handsome girl' contributes to her ingratiating air towards the English girl. Moreover, the "cultural deficiency" which Susan Stringham sees in Milly as the representative of a presumptuous society, quite determines Milly's attitude to Lancaster Gate and all that it stands for. The superficial grandeur and ostentatious display of Mrs. Lowder's wealth dazzles the young girl, so much so, that even when Lord Mark tells her that "nobody here does anything for nothing", (WD p.120) Milly fails
to grasp the real implication of the remark. Thrust, as it were into the very materialistic society of London, Milly herself becomes an object, a "trophy" for Susan Stringham to flaunt before her wealthy former schoolfriend Maud Lowder as though in compensation for her own lack-lustre life and circumstance. Thus the person who was shown as an interesting, even romantic personage gets gradually dehumanized in this society into a prize — a thing to be used and "made fun of."

Milly's failure to be aware of the subtleties of human relationships is displayed even in her association with Merton Densher whom she knew since her New York days.

But Kate's omission of Densher's name from their list of confidences does awaken a troubled, unnamed and unnameable feeling in Milly's mind.

She had lived with Kate Croy for several days in a state of intimacy as deep as it had been sudden, and they had clearly, in talk, in many directions, proceeded to various extremities. Yet it now came over her as in a clear cold way that there was a possible account of their relations in which the quantity her new friend had told her might have figured as small, as smallest, beside the quantity she hadn't.

(WD pp.139-140)

And Milly continues to ruminate that "this abrupt extrusion of Mr. Densher altered all proportions, had an effect on all values." (ibid.)
The word "extrusion" is the pointer to the way Milly feels about the omission. In 'extruding' one applies force, violence, and it is a deliberate act. Webster's definition includes one sense which says that it is done at 'threat' and one is extruded for being unworthy of an honourable calling. All the implications of the word have a negative tinge and Milly clearly sees Kate's deliberate intention in this fact. Had Milly not been interested in Densher, this would not have affected her so much as this and she also realizes that her attitude to Kate undergoes a visible change. She now looks at her friend as the 'other' - the side of her which is illuminated with reference to Merton Densher. But she is troubled to note that Kate pretends as if there is nothing amiss in their relationship and this awareness comes as a premonition of her "possible betrayals."

The sense of being "on the edge of a great darkness" on account of this is natural, because when she comes on the scene certain relationships and alignments have already been made in the circle into which she has been introduced. This "edge of darkness," this abyss now becomes the challenge of life. What she does in the face of this challenge, how she reacts to it
will determine the course of her future. Here is an opportunity for Milly to start the "assault on life" but the young girl fails to give an adequate response to the situation. She can either dismiss the whole issue regarding Densher as of no importance whatsoever as far as her relationship with Kate is concerned, or confront the latter with the facts. She cannot ignore the issue because she does have enough feelings for Merton Densher and yet she cannot face Kate with her knowledge because she lacks the self-confidence required for such an act. This also shows her apparent ignorance of the mutual obligations of a relationship. She is neither mature or experienced enough to fully grasp the opportunity provided by the situation to gain new experience and assert her own individuality.

On the contrary she agonises over a possible meeting among the three of them lest there be some unpleasantness. She even thinks of going away if necessary. The intention to turn away from a reality because it may be unpleasant, signals her withdrawal and disengagement from the rougher aspects of life. The allusion to her health and possible death in the context of this episode, only confirms this withdrawal from life.
In contrast to Milly's refusal to get involved, which Susan Stringham describes as that she "never really cares." (WD p.138) Kate Croy is a person who is willing to go to any length to get what she wants and cares for.

Milly views Kate as "the product of a packed society" thus bringing out her own essential American- ness, that aspect of her personality which is emphasized all throughout the novel. In the face of so many romantic roles assigned to Milly Theale, the one role which makes her more real and human is that of the American girl, especially emphasized by Merton Densher. She herself lays a great stock on this. She tells Sir Luke Strett, her physician in London "... I'm American. Not that I mean that makes me worse. However, you'll probably know what it makes me." (WD p.180) When Merton Densher talks of Milly's "direct talent for life" (WD p.356) he seems to mean a certain spontaneity and 'directness' of action which has been so characteristic of Milly. In contrast when he applies the same phrase to Kate it is quite in another sense.

... which was precisely a high proof of how Kate had steered her boat. The situation exposed in Mrs. Lowder's present expression lighted up by contrast that superficial
smoothness, which afterwards with his
time to think of it, was to put before
him again the art, the particular gift,
in the girl, now so placed and classed
so intimately familiar for him, as her
talent for life. (italics mine) (WD p.488)

This difference may also be taken as an index
to Milly's American character which, according to Susan
Stringham, suffers from a "cultural deficiency" (WD p.83)
In contrast, Kate possesses that culture or 'art'
which can brazen out an awkward moment like the one
in the British Museum, an event over which Milly had
agonised so much.

Just as Milly is apprehensive in her relationship
ships with others, Kate is assertive and demonstrative
of her feelings. Milly thinks of her as someone who
could be "the heroine of a strong story." (WD p.128)
When she and Merton Densher get engaged, it is Kate's
initiative which brings this about.

Suddenly she said to him with extraordinary beauty. "I engage myself to you
forever."

The beauty was in everything and he
could have separated nothing - couldn't
have thought of her face as distinct from
the whole joy. Yet her face had a new
light. "And I pledge you - I call God to
witness! - every spark of my faith. I give
you every drop of my life." (WD p.72)
The beauty, the sincerity and the intensity of her emotions is something which speak for her initial innocence and her whole hearted acceptance of their love regardless of all other considerations. This is an important fact to remember when one comes to examine later the complexities of her actions and intentions. Taking this instance, and the earlier one when she was ready to give up the comparatively more luxurious life offered by her aunt on certain conditions if only her family would consent to have her back, one can see a personality who is capable of much spontaneous animation in a human relationship.

Milly's sojourn in the "packed society" is inextricably linked with the happenings of Lancaster Gate and its immediate circle, and the alliance between Kate and Densher is to be regarded as the backdrop against which the tragedy of the American heiress is played out. Viewed in this perspective, The Wings of the Dove becomes in more ways than is normally acknowledged the history of the relationship between Kate Croy and Merton Densher. Milly Theale is the spirit which provides the moral tone to the novel but the real warp and woof is woven round the plight of these ill-fated, and ill-advised lovers. The social milieu of
Lancaster Gate is the concrete 'world' which most 'impinge' upon Milly's life and which eventually 'devour' her in the sense that caught in the vortex of the diabolical machinations of its representatives, she eventually loses her tenuous grip on life.

For this society, Milly is alternately the 'princess' of Susan Stringham's romantic idealization, the 'attendant fairy' of Maud Lowder, the 'dove' of Kate Croy's imagination, and the American girl of Merton Densher's sensibilities. When the group at Lord Mark's country house unanimously vouch for her strong resemblance to the Brozino portrait, she too is caught up in the spirit and her subjective identification with the portrait is instinctively related to her stricken conditions when she talks of the lady of the portrait as "dead, dead, dead." Like the personage in the picture the others too seem to think of Milly as already belonging to time and history, thus heightening the sense of disorientation and alienation surrounding her character.

In a society where she is regarded in such a light, the process of her betrayal is set in motion by herself when she confides to Kate about her malady. Kate therefore becomes the prime mover of actions in the drama of her betrayal and even though he is an
accomplice, Merton Densher becomes the vessel of consciousness upon whom the spiritual effect of Milly is felt most.

Though assigned a secondary role to Kate's assertive one, as the novel progresses, Merton Densher becomes more and more the moral centre. Compared to the other illustrious members of the Lancaster Gate circle like Lord Mark, he is a non-entity, a poor penniless journalist. But from the outset a special quality in him is made clear. It is Kate Croy who first recognises this,

He represented what her life had never given her and certainly, without some such aid as his, never would give her; all the high, dim things she lumped together as of the mind. 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. (WD pp. 38-39)

When he and Kate get engaged and promise to keep their engagement a secret, it is he who cautions Kate against allowing her aunt to build false hopes on her for anyone else. The implied morality is subtle but all the same it is the index to the moral fibre of his sensibility and it is on this consciousness that the total effect of Milly is to be reflected in the end.
Armed with the knowledge of Milly's fatal malady, Kate decides to launch a diabolical scheme when she is convinced that Milly really 'likes' Densher. The theme of the victimization of the heroine on account of her wealth is a recurrent one in James's fiction. But it is in this novel that the familiar theme assumes such sinister proportions. In *Mme de Merves*, *Washington Square*, *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Golden Bowl* the heroine's fortune is the great motivating factor for 'acquiring' her but in *The Wings of the Dove*, the heroine's imminent death becomes the expedient to acquiring her wealth.

The plot to 'use' Milly originated on account of the opposition set up by Maud Lowder to Kate's involvement with Densher because, though he is a likeable person he is 'socially' not 'good' enough for her niece. And so in a way this scheme is to deceive her also. But the role played by Maud Lowder provides the irony to the intrigue. Having convinced Milly that Kate does not care for Densher at all, she proceeds to encourage Densher to pay court to Milly by pointing out that her fortune is a 'real fortune'. Though both Mrs. Lowder and Kate are proposing the same thing, their motives are entirely different. However the important fact remains that Milly has been "successfully deceived."
In this overall scheme of deceiving Milly, Densher is the appointed agent. Though he starts out, however reluctantly, as the typical male seducer of James's fiction, he however undergoes a substantial psychological change as he realizes the extent of the havoc he causes on the young girl's life. From the moment he is assigned this role, he is shown as trying to rationalize his intentions and actions. He is perceptive enough to realise what his assignment entails. Milly's "beautiful delusion" and her "wasted charity" constitutes for him 'as pretty a case of conscience as he could have desired, and one at the prospect of which he was already wincing." But in his situation whatever consideration he might have on Milly's behalf, must be subservient to his loyalty to Kate. To clear Milly's delusion would amount not only to Kate's "exposure" but would be "a kind of betrayal".

Kate's design was something so extraordinarily special to Kate that he felt himself shrink from the complications involved in judging it. Not to give away the woman one loved, but to back her up in her mistakes - once they had gone a certain length - that was perhaps chief among the inevitabilities of the abjection of love.

(WD p. 281)

Thus one sees a man who is totally aware of what he is in for but who seems incapable of the right decision at the right moment.
On the other hand Densher is also aware of the fact that Milly's typically American naïveté would simplify matters for him.

"... the impression that American girls when, rare case, they were as charming as Milly, were clearly the easiest people in the world." (WD p.277).

And this conviction removes any 'primary awkwardness' he might have had in carrying out his scheme of "paying court" to Milly which he sees as that of Milly being "sacrificed."

This word "sacrificed" once again evokes certain connotations of the word 'dove' associated with Milly and alludes to certain Hebraic laws in the Old Testament. The dove was a 'sacrificial' bird as sanctioned in Leviticus 12:8 and the practice was continued even upto the time of Jesus. The dove was a fit item of sacrifice because of its innocence - "innocent as doves" (Mathew 20:16.) and Milly, the dove is also being sacrificed because of her innocence, naïveté as well as her great wealth.

The process of betrayal of this unsuspecting girl which has been set in motion at Lancaster Gate is transported to the ethereal, make-believe grandeur of
the rented Venetian palace for the last phase of the
drama. And "the pink dawn of an apotheosis" that Milly
thinks of as happening while viewing the Brozino
portrait at Matcham, finds its culmination in Venice.
The scenario here is at once a tableau out of a fairytale or at least a legend captured in a picture.
Surrounded by her "servants, frescoes, tapestries,
antiquities, the thorough make-believe of a settlement"
the note is once again on the amorphous quality of Milly's
existence, she is a "priestess of the worship"(WD p.325)
Adding one more sparkle to her many splendoured roles,
Susan Stringham compares Milly's passage through Venice
as that of the Empress Catherine's progress across the
steppes of Russia. The make-believe settlements, the
dancing peasants who greeted the empress were all provided
by her protege called Potemkin to give a false impression
to the empress. The implications of the analogy are
apt references to Milly's situation because the improvised
gaiety and grandeur of her Venetian palace is yet another
attempt to circumvent the misery of her stricken condi-
tion.

Progressively, the terms of reference used for
Milly and her entourage emphasize the slightly unreal
air about her existence - like the comparison to the Maeterlinck play and the Veronese picture. The essence of Milly's Venetian sojourn is very aptly summed up by Lord Mark.

What a temple to taste and an expression of the pride of life, yet, with all that, what a jolly home! (WD p.333)

Here in this setting which is her deliberate choice, Milly is seen stretching out to the breath-taking beauty of a poetic existence - the vision of what could have been. The scenario that she conjures up for herself is an immensely romantic ramification of her enchanted existence.

That was nothing, verily, but the perfection of the charm - or nothing, rather, but their excluded, disinherited state in the presence of it. The charm turned on them a face that was cold in its beauty, that was full of a poetry never to be theirs; that spoke, with an ironic smile, of a possible but forbidden life. If all rolled afresh over Milly: "Oh, the impossible romance!" The romance for her, yet once more, would be to sit there forever, through all her time, as in a fortress; and the idea became an image of never going down, of remaining aloft in the divine, dustless air, where she would hear but the flash of the water against stone. The great floor on which they moved was at an altitude, and this prompted the rueful fancy. "Ah, not to go down - never never to go down!" She strangely sighed to her friend. (WD p.334)
But it is not all romance and poetry that Milly sees in her situation. In an amazingly lucid, practical analysis of her circumstance with reference to her great wealth, she reveals an aspect of her personality which was almost 'muffled' over by the impressions of her varied roles.

With that there came to her a light: wouldn't her value, for the man who should marry her, be precisely in the ravage of her disease? She mightn't last, but her money would. For a man in whom the vision of her money should be intense, in whom it should be most of the ground for "making up" to her, any prospective failure on her part to be long for this world might easily count as a positive attraction. Such a man, proposing to please, persuade, secure her, appropriate her for such a time, shorter or longer, as nature and the doctors should allow, would make the best of her, ill, damaged, disagreeable though she might, be for the sake of eventual benefits: she being clearly a person of the sort esteemed likely to do the handsome thing by a stricken and sorrowing husband. (WD pp.335-336)

If this is to be taken as the most realistic aspect of Milly's personality, one can see that in all the other aspects she is merely taking the cue given by the others to enact the various roles assigned to her. Ironically it is only Nerton Densher, the man who is moving now in very calculated steps against her, who is willing to concede a concrete, definable identity to Milly, a person capable of making such a perceptive
analysis about herself as is shown by the passage quoted above.

He continued to see her as he had first seen her - that remained ineffaceably behind. Mrs. Lowder, Susan Shepherd, his own Kate, might, each in proportion, see her as a princess, as an angel, as a star, but for himself, luckily, she hadn't as yet complications to any point of discomfort: the princess, the angel, the star were muffled over, ever so lightly and brightly, with the little American girl who had been kind to him in New York and to whom, certainly - though without making too much of it for either of them - he was perfectly willing to be kind in return. (WD p.354)

Densher considers and accepts Milly as a real person, with real feelings and longings and therefore the impact of her life and death on him is painfully real because of what he has done to her.

But despite her lucid side, Milly has set up a make-believe milieu of her choice in the Venetian palace and it is here that the highpoint of her drama is enacted. In the party given at her palazzo, the overall effect of her ethereal appearance, all swathed in white is built up like the final crescendo of a symphony. This party is Milly's last public appearance as the 'princess', the 'angel' and 'the star'. In fact, this is the last scene in the drama of her apotheosis and she is accorded the ultimate accolade by being presented in white. The
symbolism as embodied in her white garment is best interpreted in terms of the Biblical passage quoted below.

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "who are these, clothed in white and whence have they come?" I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "these are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of Lamb.

Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night within his temple; and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Revelations 7:13-17, RSV)

Even when Milly is actually seen in company with other people it is the amorphous, or spiritual quality of her nature which becomes more pronounced than her actual presence. This is exactly what happens in this party too. Certainly the switch over from her habitual garb of mourning of black to white would be significant in itself but here the symbolism of the white garment seems to be stretched to its ultimate meaning; her mourning has now been changed into joy, she is no longer the "joyless" lady of the Bronzino portrait but is a
joyous 'princess' of another 'court'. She is a 'priestess of the worship' who has a new shepherd now. Thus in one symbolic stroke Milly's transition from the earthly existence into another is quite aptly heralded.

For all the others surrounding her, Milly's apotheosis has been some kind of escape from their various mundane modes of life. But for Merton Densher who does not see Milly quite in the same light as the others do, her transformation, when he sees it, is a movement towards a moral meaning of life. Even during the party at the palace, Densher consistently holds on to his own views regarding Milly's identity.

She was acquitting herself tonight as hostess, he could see, under some supreme idea, an inspiration which was half her nerves and half an inevitable harmony; but what he especially recognised was the character that had already several times broken out in her and that she so oddly appeared able by choice or by instinctive affinity to keep down or to display. She was the American girl as he had originally found her—found her at certain moments, it was true, in New York, more than at certain others; she was the American girl as, still more than then, he had seen her on the day of her meeting him, in London in Kate's company. It affected him as a large though queer social resource in her—such as a man, for instance, to his diminution, would never in the world be able to command; and he wouldn't have known whether to see it in an extension or contraction of "personality", taking it as he did most directly for a confounding extension of surface. (Italics mine) (WD p.384)
Densher is not denying Milly her enchantment and mystery, he is merely trying to make her more human than the others are willing to do, and give to her, her dues as a distinct human being.

But it is Densher now who voices the transformation of the dove image associated with Milly so far. The stricken girl whom he himself had thought of as the "sacrificial dove," is given the ultimate spiritual status. In Biblical terms too, the image of the dove of the old Hebraic reference is given a new meaning.

Milly was indeed a dove; this was the figure, though it most applied to her spirit. But he knew in a moment that Kate was just now, for reasons hidden from him, exceptionally under the impression of that element of wealth in her which was a power, which was a great power, and which was dove-like only so far as one remembered that doves have wings and wondrous flights, have them as well as tender lints and soft sounds. It even came to Densher dimly that such wings could in a given case — had, in fact, in the case in which he was concerned — spread themselves for protection. Hadn't they, for that matter, lately taken an inordinate reach, and weren't Kate and Mrs. Lowder, weren't Susan Shepherd and he, wasn't he in particular, nestling under them to a great increase of immediate ease? (WD pp.386-387)

In comparing Milly's spirit to a dove, Densher unconsciously gives the greatest religious meaning to the concept of her apotheosis. In the New Testament interpretation of the 'dove' in the context of Jesus'
life and ministry, the spirit of God is likened to a dove. The Gospels of Matthew 3:16, Luke 3:22 and John 1:32 all record the descent of "the spirit of God in bodily form, as a dove" upon Jesus soon after his baptism by John the Baptist. And after Jesus' ascent into heaven, his disciples experience the descent of his holy spirit on the day of the Pentecost and this 'spirit' according to the believers is the 'Presence' of Jesus among his congregation on earth.

Stretching the suggestions of association even to the brink of the blasphemous, one is constrained to add here that it is the 'spirit' of Milly after her death which Kate and Densher mean when they agree that, they are covered by her 'wings,' the wings of the dove. (WD p.52)

With Milly's exit from public view after he last recorded interview with him, the focus is more or less concentrated on Densher's psyche and the moral questions of the novel are handled through his consciousness and actions.

Beginning from the instance when he warns Kate not to allow her aunt to build false hopes on her for someone else, Densher displays a finer moral sensibility
than Kate, lovers and accomplices though they undoubtedly are. When Kate spells out that he should propose marriage to Milly, he tells her, "And what I don't make out is how, caring for me, you can like it." And again "what I don't make out then is how you can ever bear it."

(WD p.393). He also sees the indelicacy and difficulty in dissimulating before Milly. "Only you see, one has to try a little hard to propose to a dying girl."(WD p.395)

But inspite of such moral stirrings in his mind he is too much in love with Kate not to go along with her plan. His love for Kate is shown as being as much physical as anything else. But when he strikes a bargain with Kate in order for him to stay back in Venice and carry out their scheme to the end, it is as much a lover's natural impulse to want to possess his loved one as well as a surety that having gone the whole way, Kate would not betray or desert him.

There's nothing for me possible but to feel that I'm not a fool. It's all I have to say, but you must know what it means. With you I can do it - I'll go as far as you demand or as you will yourself. Without you - I'll be hanged. And I must be sure."

(WD p.374)

In this remark there is also a subtle hint as though meaning that on his own and out of his own volition, he would never have considered what they are proposing to do.
Despite their mutual attraction, there seems to be a great difference in their moral sensibilities. The circumstances of Kate's early life may provide extenuation for her tenacity and cruelty to a certain extent but despite a shared experience, she remains unregenerate till the end. She sums up this difference when she tells Densher, "I'm just where I was; and you must give me some better reason than you do my dear, for your not being." (WD p.460)

Densher had long been pliant in the hands of the cold and calculating Kate and had been merely gliding along with the superior force of her scheming mind. The first mote of moral decisiveness is struck when he tells Kate, "If I had denied you moreover, I would have stuck to it." (WD p.463) In the context of his moral regeneration, the most valid interpretation for this would be that having deceived Milly already by dissimulating a false affection for her, he was not going to further deceive her by denying the truth about himself and Kate. He has been prepared to take a stand in order not to go further into the moral abyss which is of their deliberate making.

Densher comes back from Venice bearing the full brunt of his last interview with Milly and fully
acknowledges the fact they have acted abominably. He has lost faith in their common goal and in order to make right the wrong that has been committed against Milly, he proposes the announcement of their engagement immediately, thereby making public the confession which he so miserably failed to give Milly during their last meeting. But Kate will not have him on these conditions.

Densher's experience has been such that the change wrought by it on him is quite perceptible. Though indissolubly bound by their common crime Kate however fails to grasp at the significance of this change. "My dear man, what has happened to you?" She asks him as though to hint that he has lost his reason.

"Well, that I can bear it no longer. That's simply what has happened. Something has snapped, has broken in me, and here I am. It's as I am that you must have me."

Out of Kate's failure to understand the change in Densher, a psychological and moral barrier is created between them. There is even a subtle vein of antagonism and suspicion between them now evident, an element so detrimental to any relationship.

"You see in everything, and you always did," Densher returned, "something that, while I'm with you at least, I always take from you as the truth itself." (WD p.503)
In spite of the growing alienation between them, Densher still attempts to build a future for themselves out of the chaos of their common crime by trying to make Kate understand the intensity of his experience with Milly. As a last gesture of expiation for a shared guilt, he brings to Kate Milly's letter unopened. In his own way he is trying to invest the simple ritual of breaking open the seal of the letter with a symbolism which he says is "a symbol of my attitude." But Kate simply throws the letter into the fire in the grate with the callous remark, "you'll have it all, from New York." (WD p.509)

This process of alienation is completed when Densher tells Kate that she has to reject the legacy if she still wants to marry him. But she leaves him with the sad rejoinder - "We shall never be again as we were." (WD p.522) articulating the sense of universal loss on which note the novel ends.

As Densher's consciousness comes to recognise his guilt, his motives and actions reflect more and more the moral beauty and power that Milly Theale represents. It is as though in the indirect light of his consciousness she is finally actualised as the poetic vision of moral
truth and beauty. The symbolic imagery and language that always described her short life is also used to announce her final withdrawal from life.

"She has turned her face to the wall" announces Susan Stringham in a somewhat melodramatic scene to Densher in his lodgings about Milly's last illness. The Biblical allusion here is to II Kings 20:2-3. King Hezekiah, when told of his imminent death by the prophet Amoz, turns his face to the wall to pray, to weep and to supplicate God to grant him life. In a similarly symbolic way Mrs. Stringham is telling how much Milly wants to live, how she is "clinging to it". But when Densher recounts this to Kate later, his interpretation is that Milly had given up her will to live on learning from Lord Mark about their engagement, thus bringing in a slight manipulation to the allusion.

The complex conglomeration of ideas and images that is Milly Theale remains a poetic vision of the ultimate in moral truth and beauty. The strange mixture of 'Byzantine' mysticism and Biblical allegory which went into creating this vision perhaps was the only material which James could employ in order to give coherence to a lifetime's obsession with the perfection of his craft.
as well as articulating his ethics about human relationships. Christof Wegelin argues that though Milly Theale is the heroine,\(^5\)

She is for more than the last fifth of the whole novel present only as a reflected image so that even certain highly climatic scenes like Densher's leave-taking of her, are not enacted. The reason for this indirection is simply that in the moral scheme of the novel Milly finally has to undergo a kind of transfiguration, both the pain and the sublimity of which are beyond dramatic representation. (pp.111-112)

Wegelin however emphasizes that The Wings of the Dove should not be read as an "allegory" or a "Biblical subject." According to him it is a drama not of unambiguous conflict between heaven and hell, but between two kinds of human ethics." (p.112)

The Wings of the Dove can however be seen as the crystallization of James's idea of the "certain sort of young American" as the "heir of all the ages." The artistic pursuit of an ideal which had its genesis in the portraiture of Daisy Miller in the nouvelle of the same

\(^5\)Christof Wegelin, The Image of Europe in Henry James, Ch. V.
name finds its acme in this novel. In the two parallel media employed in *The Wings*, the real blends into the beauty of the allegorical thus giving a strangely beatific quality to the final vision of this "potential heiress of all the ages."

On the thematic level too, *The Wings of the Dove* introduces important changes in the pattern of seduction and betrayal of the heroine in the fiction of James discussed so far. Here the heroine dies physically inviolate but it is her sensibility which has been ravished. In an intricate reversal of roles, the 'actor' (Merton Densher) and not the passive 'sufferer' (Milly Theale) who undergoes the most significant changes in his consciousness and makes the moral decisions in the end. If he is to be considered a representative of the old world civilization rather than just one of 'the tough English gang', his regeneration into recognising the moral beauty of Milly, the ultimate 'American Girl' would point to a gradual synthesis of the two world views. Cast in the role of the typical male seducer of James's fiction, this important change in his psyche makes him altogether a unique character. Comparing Densher to Gilbert Osmond of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Philip Rahv says, "Merton Densher (The Wings of the Dove) and Prince Amerigo
(The Golden Bowl) are men of grace and intelligence whose wicked behaviour is primarily determined by the situation in which they find themselves."6

Kate Croy too has been conceived in the type as represented by Mme Merle in The Portrait of a Lady but whereas Mme Merle was truly only a satellite of the heroine, Kate Croy's character is sketched much more prominently and not without sympathy either. True to the symbolic promise of the title, the heroine is amorphously conceived and presented by reversing the method he earlier used in The Portrait of a Lady. He presses hardest not on the consciousness of the heroine but on those of her "satellites." Yet the overall impression of her character is real and relates to the moral drama which according to Mathiessen is James's "most thorough-going." He moreover sums up James's achievement in The Wings of the Dove in the following passage, a view one would like to endorse.

In a more restricted but very relevant sense one may also look for the essential design, not through the successive stages of an artist's whole development, but in his masterpiece, in that single work where his characteristic emotional vibration seems deepest and where we may have the sense, therefore, that we have come to the very soul.7

7 Mathiessen, The Major Phase, p.74.
The most intriguing part of James's technique in this novel is that the last scene between Milly and Densher remains shrouded in mystery - only its impact on Densher is the index to the nature of the confrontation. Whether she accused or he confessed is left entirely to the imagination of the reader. But ultimately, the 'presence' of the 'absent' Milly is to surround his sensibilities for the rest of his life. That is why Kate wants him to reassure her that he is not in love with her memory. She intuitively responds to this state of Densher's mind when she tells him "We shall never be again as we were!"

The tragedy of it all in this novel is in the pathetic end to Milly's desire to "live - Oh so to live" as well as in the destruction of Densher's conscience. In the context of the Jamesian moral code, the latter would seem to be of greater consideration and therefore, while the lingering sadness is for the people whom Milly leaves behind, Milly's tragedy is informed with a definite spiritual beauty and poetic grandeur.

Undoubtedly, the character of Milly Theale was fashioned on the model of his cousin Minny Temple who also died of tuberculosis at the age of 24. James's affection for this sensitive, vivacious girl was much
more than that of a mere cousin and there is a reason to believe that Minny too reciprocated that feeling. Her death therefore was felt as a great personal loss and he was to record that this event marked "the end of their youth" both for himself and his brother William.

But whatever be the genesis of the idea for his heroine, the beauty of James's achievement in *The Wings of the Dove* lies in the fact that he translated an intensely personal experience into an artistic reality. With consummate skill he controls the narrative, not allowing the allegorical element to suffuse the real and yet making the allegories give coherence to the real. The overall effect of the novel is that it has both the amorphous beauty and realism of an impressionistic painting.