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The Sense of Place in Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*

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Abstract:

James significantly treats the European places such as London and Venice in *The Wings of the Dove*. The American heroine Milly Theale, with her friend Susan, is brought into the corrupt and experienced world of Kate Croy and Merton Densher, the Britishers. They have interaction first with the English society and then at last the heroine. Milly, meets her catastrophe in Venice. The stylistic peculiarity of the novel lies in its lyrical, reflective, and psychological passages in which the physical action is most artistically concealed. What matters most is not the shabbily sordid physical action enunciated by Kate but the gradual revelations which it brings to Milly and above all to Densher. Kate, who is almost completely responsible for the physical action is presented as a forceful and beautiful apparition to whom Milly regards as a symbol of the English society, which is a subject of special fascination and observation for her and from which Densher liberates himself, thanks to the spiritual light that Milly throws on it for him.

Keywords: Major phase, Sense, Place, Innocence, Experience, Corrupt, American, European.

The sense of place is one of the most interesting and revealing aspects of Henry James's art. The description of place—its environment, its topographical condition, its ethos and its milieu—imparts it a distinctive individuality and charm in his fictional works. The vivid and picturesque description of the place makes its presence felt to the reader. James writes primarily about Americans coming to Europe to which they cannot remain unresponsive. His American characters feel a change as soon as they enter the boundaries of England, France, or Italy. Thus, his encounter with the European setting and its social and cultural values became a predominant condition in his literary creations.

Henry James shifted from his London flat to an eighteenth-century house in Rye, Sussex in 1898. The peaceful surroundings of the Sussex countryside enabled him to concentrate on the greatest works of his literary achievement—the “major phase”, as F.O. Matthiessen so well designated it. The most striking feature of the last period of his career was his impressive creation of the three great novels in three successive years—*The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904).

The Wings of the Dove is James's tragic masterpiece, the richest and most touching of his novels. It has the complexity of characterization, the depth of the theme, the power and mystery deriving from the unique, undulating structure, and the evocativeness of the richly imagined settings. Henry James's beloved cousin Minny Temple's death in 1870 inspired the creation of Milly of *The Wings of the Dove*. Writing of the cousin in his autobiographical volume, *Notes of a Son and Brother*, he asserts, "she would have given anything to live—and the image of this, which was long to remain with me, appeared so the essence of tragedy that I was in the far-off aftertime to seek to lay the ghost by wrapping it, a particular occasion aiding, in the beauty and dignity of art" (Dupee 544).

The novel shows the exposure of American innocence to an experienced and corrupt Europe. It is the story of the European experience of America which depicts America as seen through the eyes of an American. The novel is intrinsically, composed from two points of view—Milly's—the American's and Densher's—the Englishman's. Milly's, however, is augmented by another American, Susan Stringham whose function as a "choral" is to supply "an animated reflexion of Milly Theale's experience of English society". (James, *The Art of the Novel* 299).

James significantly treats the European places such as London and Venice in *The Wings of the Dove*. The American heroine Milly Theale, with her friend Susan, is brought into the corrupt and experienced world of Kate Croy and Merton Densher, the Britishers. They have interaction first with the English society and then at last the heroine. Milly, meets her catastrophe in Venice. The stylistic peculiarity of the novel is in its lyrical, reflective, and psychological passages in which the physical action is most artistically concealed. What matters most is not the shabbily sordid physical action enunciated by Kate but the gradual revelations which it brings to Milly and above all to Densher. Kate, who is almost completely responsible for the physical action is presented as a forceful and beautiful apparition to whom Milly regards as a symbol of the English society, which is a subject of special fascination and observation for her and from which Densher liberates himself, thanks to the spiritual light that Milly throws on it for him. Thus, Eros has been sublimated to a Minervan Psyche. Christ of Wegelin aptly observes: "Kate in fact is all action, while Milly is spiritual sufferance and Densher physical response and finally intellectual rejection. (107).

Although, Kate is the one who creates the physical action but it is the character, dilemma and fluctuation of Milly as emphasized in the preface to *The Wings of the Dove* that makes her the central figure of the novel. James recorded that the essence of the idea on which he built the novel was the struggle to live by a young person, "conscious of a great capacity for life", but early stricken by a fatal disease "while also enamored of the world" and "passionately desiring" to achieve before her death, "however briefly and brokenly, the sense of having lived" (*The Art of the Novel* 288). Milly's amazing curiosity about London society and people whom she does not know, is a symbolic manifestation of her eagerness for gaining experience and "taste of happiness." Such an eagerness and taste is the consequence

of a unique positive outlook, which is extremely difficult to be found in a mind of an inhabitant, who is counting down the vital breath.

The action of the novel chiefly unfolds in London and Venice. Milly Theale, typically American girl, comes to Europe in the company of her Boston friend, Susan Stringham. Mrs. Stringham has an old acquaintance in London, Mrs. Lowder, who wants her niece, Kate Cory, to “marry a great man” (109) and be “high, high up-high up and in the light” (James, *The Wings of the Dove* 108). Kate, on the other hand, is secretly engaged with Densher, a young journalist who is as poor as she herself is. Densher has already met Milly during an American tour in New York and attracted her a great deal. This is the circle—the circle of American and the English, the rich and the poor, around which the story moves. “*The Wings of the Dove* takes place in London and Venice, and in the atmosphere of the latter James again makes scenery an aspect of the plot” (Moore 92-93).

The action is to “occur “somewhere” in the social world of Europe, among the people who are attracted to her [Milly] less as appreciators of what she is than as potential exploiters of her fabulous wealth” (Anderson 174). Such a pecuniary approach is not unknown to the European World. Kate and Densher cannot marry because they do not have enough money. But after their contact with Milly, the fatally ill girl from America with large fortunes, the lovers plot a sordid scheme to snatch her wealth. Densher becomes an instrument of Kate’s design out of a mixed feeling of sympathy and greed towards Milly. Kate strategically calculates that Densher should marry Milly and after her inevitable death she would be able to marry the wealthy widower. Therefore, engagement of Kate and Densher is to be kept secret. The scheme moves successfully until Lord Mark, a desperate suitor of both Kate and Milly, guesses their plan, and informs Milly. “This is the essence of the experience,” remarks Wegelin, “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” (108). The holy sacrament of matrimony has been polluted by Mammon; materialism supersedes spiritual unification blessed by Hymen.

James had been intensely striving for dramas but in vain just before writing *The Wings of the Dove*. And here, in depicting the triangular relation of Kate Croy, Merton Densher, and Milly Theale—the ‘Dove’ herself—against an English and Venetian background, James most triumphantly fulfils what he called in his *Notebooks* the “Scenario,” the marriage of novelistic with the dramatic technique—a technique for rendering rather than telling. The former tells what has happened, while the latter explores what has made it happen. The place, scenes, and pictures provide an understanding of the characters, both in themselves, and in relation to each other. Anderson aptly remarks: “the picture elements either carry the narrative forward or are themselves to a certain extent dramatized and become “scene-setting,”—scenes-without-dialogue, taking place in the mind of a character” (177).

Like Irving and Hawthorne, England for James was experience to be appropriate at the most basic level. They all write basically about Americans coming to terms with a

country to which they cannot be unresponsive. With his penetrating vision for the “illustrational” and the “documentary,” he could make a vivid and pointed little scene of the most everyday English phenomenon. James is master in the art of scenic and picturesque presentation for truly exhibiting the sense of place. Milly Theale's launching into the whole brilliant circle of London society is highly revealing. Like a typical Jamesian heroine this fabulous heiress has come to Europe on an extended tour to enrich her experience of life. This makes place and person march together simultaneously. She settles in London for some time where her companion Susan Shepherd comes in contact with an old acquaintance, Maud Lowder, now a famous personality in London society. In a dinner party at Lancaster Gate house of Mrs. Lowder they meet her beautiful niece, Kate Croy. Here Milly and her confidante, Susan, find themselves in typical English atmosphere. Milly fully realizes the “sense of a situation really romantic” and it seems to her being surrounded “with every English accessory” (*The Wings of the Dove* 147). For a moment she fails to decide with her quickened and awakened perceptions, whether she were enlivened or oppressed. In order to solve this enigmatic riddle James observes:

She thrilled, she consciously flushed . . . it had never been so present—that she should find herself completely involved: the very air of the place, the pitch of the occasion, had for her both so sharp a ring and so deep an undertone. The smallest things, the face, the hands, the jewels of the women, the sound of words, especially of names, across the table, the shape of the forks, the arrangement of the flowers, the attitude of the servants, the walls of the room, were all touches in a picture and denotements in a play; and they marked for her moreover her alertness of vision. She had never, she might well believe, been in such a state of vibration. (149)

Milly, overwhelmed by social circle of London, talked to herself that she had not wished to do anything so inane as “get into society” (*The Wings of the Dove* 149). She was motivated only by “a desire to see the places she had read about” (150). But now, seated with Mrs. Lowder and her companion Susan at the other end close to handsome Kate, she began to realize how “her poor prevision had been rebuked by the majesty. . .of the event” (150). Here she met Lord Mark, an enigmatic English nobleman. Everything about him was quite puzzling. He was perhaps “those characteristic cases of people in England who concealed their play of mind so much more than they advertised it.” She could not reckon “whether he was a young man who looked old or an old man who looked young” (151). It indicates that English people, as members of a unique social set up are mysterious, for, like Cyclopes of the old, they are ‘laws unto themselves’.

The houses in James's novels reflect their spirit and reveal many more things about their dwellers. On his very first visit Densher is impressed by Mrs. Lowder's house. Her “apartments at Lancaster Gate had struck him from the first as of prodigious extent.” He walked to and fro about the place, for sometime before meeting Aunt Maud “taking in the message of her massive florid furniture, the immense expression of her signs and symbols” (*The Wings of the Dove* 104). The full picture of the house as drawn by Densher is highly

reflective of the spirit of the place. Everything that he saw was still there for Milly to see, though she may not have got such sensitive aesthetic vision. When a house becomes home, it becomes equivocal of the external civilization and internal culture of inhabitants. The whole passage that delineates Densher's impressions is worth quoting:

Lancaster Gate looked rich—that was all the effect. . . . It was the language of the house itself that spoke to him, writing out for him with surpassing breadth and freedom the associations and conceptions, the ideals and possibilities of the mistress. Never, he felt sure, had he seen so many things so unanimously ugly—operatively, ominously so cruel. . . . He couldn't describe and dismiss [its heavy horrors] collectively, call them either Mid-Victorian or Early. . . . It was only manifest they were splendid and were furthermore conclusively British. They constituted an order and abounded in rare material—precious woods, metals, stuffs, stones. . . . He had never dreamed of so much gilt and glass, so much satin and plush, so much rosewood and marble and malachite. But it was above all the solid forms, the wasted finish, the misguided cost, the general attestation of morality and money, a good conscience and a big balance (*The Wings of the Dove* 105-106).

The Americans are always occupied with a preconception about the sedative and curing effect of the European places. It is with this notion in mind, Milly, along with her New England friend Mrs. Stringham, takes a trip to various European places to cure her of a mysterious disease. Dr. Finch in New York, while talking with Mrs. Stringham about Milly's illness, also enthusiastically exchanges his views "in respect to the remedial properties of 'Europe'" (*The Wings of the Dove* 138). On their way to London, Milly and Mrs. Stringham stay for sometime on Brunig pass in Swiss Alps for a luncheon but "under the charm of the place" (131) they extend their stay for a longer time. Mrs. Stringham had studied for years during her childhood at Vevey in Switzerland and now she is on the ground of thrilled recognitions and recollections. She cannot help feeling the pulse of the place. Milly too clearly feels the impact of the place but it is her companion, Mrs. Stringham, who was much more affected at the moment by the Swiss air. James heightens the sense of place here most adequately while reviving her past associations: "The irrecoverable days had come back to her from far off; they were past of the sense of the cool upper air and of everything else that hung like an indestructible scent to the torn garment of youth—the taste of honey and the luxury of milk, the sound of cattle-bells and the rush of streams, the fragrance of trodden balms and the dizziness of deep gorges" (132).

Milly's visit to the National Gallery with her English friend Kate Croy is in line with her "desire to see the places." The idea of visiting this place "had seemed to her at home as one of the attractions of Europe and one of its highest aids to culture" (*The Wings of the Dove* 238). She felt a dip into the stream of history and once she was inside the agreeable halls of her preconception of it was justified. Milly succumbed to the charm and spirit of the place: "It was the air she wanted and the world she would now exclusively choose; the quiet chambers, nobly overwhelming, rich but slightly veiled, opened out round her, and made her

presently say, 'If I could lose myself here!'" (239) Archeology has kindled the lamp of culture in the premises of National Gallery and Milly's heart as well.

James is sometimes critical of certain aspects of the British life. This he does here, although with a touch of humour, while describing Mrs. Lowder's life style, her interior and her body language. Mrs. Lowder is an incarnation of "Britannia of the Market Place" (*The Wings of the Dove* 73). Kate has been quite familiar with her Aunt's tall rich house at Lancaster Gate since her childhood. She beholds there "a whole side of Britannia, the side of her florid philistinism, her plumes and her train, her fantastic furniture and heaving bosom, the false gods of her taste and false notes of her talk, the sole contemplation of which would be dangerously misleading" (74). *Lingua corpora* or 'body language' may appear to be a modern concept, but Henry James, with his sense of place, makes it antique and current as well.

The peculiar dresses, accents, and gestures of the characters also reveal the sense of place in *The Wings of the Dove*. Kate "had a special strong beauty" which English girls "particularly showed in evening dress" (*The Wings of the Dove* 148). Lord Mark's "cool English eyes" (346) reflect his origins and Mrs. Stringham's "typical organism" divulges her "little dry New England brightness" and "all the shades of the American complexity, if complexity it were" (274). The impact of the place is clearly visible on the face of Densher after his visit to America. And when Milly meets him in London she becomes "aware of America, under his eyes, as a possible scene for social operations" (270). It indicates that sense of place reflects dress code, as 'apparel oft proclaims the man'.

The Italian city of Venice is another setting that James makes as an important part of his plot in *The Wings of the Dove*. Venice had always been a place of attraction for him. On his visit to Venice in 1869, James caught the distant sea-smell; was swept through the water by the brown-skinned white-shirted gondolier in his gondola across the Grand Canal, and walked through the city of ruins seeing the church and place. Leon Edel remarks: "It was not, however, Venice in its details, but Venice in its totality that fired his imagination" (*Henry James* 99). In a letter of 1869, James records his impressions: "Venice is quite the Venice of one's dreams, but it remains strangely the Venice of dreams, more than of any appreciable reality. The mind is bothered with a constant sense of the exceptional character of the city . . . It's awfully sad too in its inexorable decay" (*Letters* 134). Thus, the Venetian sense of place has an *oneiromantic* (dream prognostication oriented) urbanity far from the clutches of reality, that seldom wins an admiration from the genius of Henry James.

For Milly too Venice is a city of dreams—the place to be lived upon. The strategic plot of Kate and Densher unfolds in the atmosphere of Venice. The "Venice of dreams" becomes the city of "inexorable decay" in the end when she is enlightened about the deception of the Europeans, namely, of Kate and Densher. The sense of place begins to operate on Milly the moment she lands on the Italian soil. She feels herself into the possession of the delightful "warmth of the Southern summer" (*The Wings of the Dove* 334). In Venice she asks her faithful servant Eugenio to manage her lodging not in vulgar hotel but

in “some fine old rooms, wholly independent . . .with a cook. . .servants, frescoes, tapestries, antiquities, the thorough make-believe of a settlement” (336). Palazzo Leporelli, the Venetian Palace, fulfills her desire. The place, as James says, “held its history still in its lap, even like a painted idol, a solemn puppet hung about with decorations. . .pictures and relics, the rich Venetian past, the ineffaceable character, was here. . .” (337). Amid the sweet taste of solitude, things seem to speak to her with penetration. She makes all alone “the full circuit of the place, noble and peaceful” and feels “clinging to it. . .sit tight in it and float on and on” (342). The sense of place reveals that even inanimate objects become eloquent with a maiden of finer sensibility.

The unsuccessful suitor, Lord Mark, after his arrival in Venice meets Milly in her abode. He is stirred by the genius of the place in her palace and enamoured by the place he exclaims: “what a temple to taste and an expression of the pride of life, yet, with all that, what a jolly home!” (*The Wings of the Dove* 344) Milly too is all in love with it. She roams all around it with Lord Mark. She adores it and doesn’t want in the least to relinquish it: “She looked over the place, the storey above the apartments in which she had received him, the sala [large room] corresponding to the sala below and fronting the great canal with its gothic arches. The casements between the arches were open, the ledge of the balcony broad, the sweep of the canal, so overhung, admirable, and the flutter toward them of the loose white curtain an invitation she scarce could have said what” (345). Such a sense of adoration has got an adamant link between the place and the resident thereof.

Densher’s recollections of his precious visits to Venice are highly revealing. Just to have an initiation into the homelier Venetian mysteries, every time he took his lodgings passing through Campo (Venetian name for square) far down to the great Canal, in an independent, although shabby but friendly asylums. In the palace he experiences himself to be “under a sufficient Venetian spell” (*The Wings of the Dove* 360). Piazza San Marco, a great place for social gathering where later Densher and Kate meet considering it a safe and favourable place for their talk, also displays a typical Venetian atmosphere. A place fit for exchange of views can happen only in Venice.

The key moments of the novel are set against a Venetian background. The most crucial and meaningful of these is when going to the palace at teatime as usual; Eugenio turns Densher away saying that Milly doesn’t want to receive him. Something had happened but Eugenio would give no inkling of what it was. Densher correctly senses the changed situation and as he walks back from the Palazzo; the stormy weather outside reflects the violently disturbed relation between him and Milly. He feels humiliated and amid the strong storm-gusts he has “a sudden sharp sense that everything had turned to dismal” (*The Wings of the Dove* 414). Here the scene-without-dialogue that is taking place in the mind of Densher, discloses that Venice is not all charming and peaceful. It has other aspects too: “It was a Venice of all evil. . .a Venice of cold lashing rain from a low black sky, of wicked wind raging through narrow passes, of general arrest and interruption, with the people engaged in all the water-life huddled, stranded and wageless, bored and cynical, under archways and bridges” (415). From the solid celestial atmosphere black rain and hail were bound to burst.

Densher makes his way in shock and despair to the Piazza San Marco where he can have the shelter of the galleries, the first sea-storm of autumn having broken upon the city. James picturesquely describes the whole atmosphere:

Here, in the high arcade, half Venice was crowded close, while on the Molo, at the limit of the expanse, the old columns of the Saint Theodore and of the Lion were the frame of a door wide open to the storm. . . There were stretches of the gallery paved with squares of red marble, greasy now with the salt spray; and the whole place, in its huge elegance, the grace of its conception and beauty of its detail, was more than ever like a great drawing-room, the drawing-room of Europe, profaned and bewildered by some reverse of fortune (*The Wings of the Dove* 416).

The ecclesiastical and leonine iconography suggesting tempestuous dynamics is remarkable. And when his eyes catch a familiar face, that is, of Lord Mark, behind the plate glass window of the café, Densher perceives immediately the “vice in the air.” Everything that happens continues to do so only in his mind: “The weather had changed, the rain was ugly, the wind wicked, the sea impossible *because* of Lord Mark. It was because of him, *a fortiori*, that the palace was closed” (*The Wings of the Dove* 418). Densher stands exposed to Milly. His consciousness elaborately fuses the outer chaos with the inner. Venice, thus, appears as a place of evil, but the sea-storm, which lashed for three consecutive days, gives Densher a spiritual lesson, it had to offer. With his awakened conscience he does not accept Milly's wealth and Kate's hand in marriage simultaneously, as was planned. On the contrary, Kate insists on having both Milly's fortune and Densher's love, which consequently leads to the dissolution of their engagement. It should not escape the attention of a conscientious reader that Shakespeare's *King Lear* had also felt such a fusion of outer and inner chaos in the storm scene.

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