

THE CONCEPT OF INNOCENCE IN HENRY JAMES'S *THE WINGS OF THE DOVE*¹

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ABSTRACT

IN HIS INTERNATIONAL NOVELS, HENRY JAMES INCLUDED AN ELABORATED MODEL OF MORAL AND CULTURAL CONTRAST BETWEEN EUROPE AND AMERICA WITH THE PURPOSE OF HIGHLIGHTING THE AMERICAN'S INNOCENCE. JAMES'S AMERICAN CHARACTERS REPRESENT VITALITY, FRESHNESS, BEAUTY, INNOCENCE AND FREEDOM, AS THEY ARE OPEN TO EXPERIENCE. A VITAL ASPECT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NOVELS IS WHETHER THE AMERICAN CAN PRESERVE THIS QUALITY AGAINST A SPACE OF VICE AND COMPLEXITY. IN *THE WINGS OF THE DOVE* THE SELF BECOMES AN OTHER TO THE OTHER. MILLY THEALE BEGINS TO DISCOVER THAT SHE CAN USE THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE AMERICAN GIRL, OF DOVE OR PRINCESS TO HER OWN ADVANTAGE. SHE IS AWARE OF HER INNOCENCE, SELF-CONSCIOUS OF IT AND IT IS PRESENTED IN IRONIC JUXTAPOSITION TO HER POWER AND WEALTH. THE IMAGE OF THE DOVE WITH WHICH SHE IS ASSOCIATED IS OBVIOUSLY A SYMBOL OF INNOCENCE. SHE BELIEVES THE DOVE-LIKE QUALITIES ARE THE REASON FOR NOT HAVING ACCESS TO THE ORDINARY EXPERIENCES OF LIFE. SHE CONSCIOUSLY ADOPTS THIS ROLE, SPREADING HER WINGS IN PROTECTION AND EVEN REDEMPTION OF THE WORLD THAT SHE LEAVES BEHIND THROUGH DEATH.

Innocence and purity represents one of the conventional motifs often met in the literary works, being an ordinary concept, but important for humanity. Moreover, it is a defining aspect for the beginning of a Native American mythology. In the nineteenth century, the authentic American as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history, was one of the most fruitful ideas. In that period, the main intellectuals, including poets, novelists, essayists, critics, debated on different aspects of the new world, including innocence, novelty, experience, evil, sin, time, the present, the past, memory and tradition. They introduced the American myth which saw life and history as a beginning, as a second chance for the human race, after the first one was missed in the Old World. The Democratic Review stated in 1839 that "Our national birth

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was the beginning of a new history...which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only.”³

This myth introduced a new type of hero, an embodiment of ideal human qualities. The new personality was emancipated from history, untouched by the inheritances of family and race, a self-reliant individual, ready to face whatever awaited him with the help of his own resources. As at the moment the society was a religion based-one, this ideal person was soon identified with Adam before the Fall: “Adam was the first, the archetypal, man. His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. The world and history lay all before him. And he was the type of creator, the poet par excellence, creating language itself by naming the elements of the scene about him. All this and more were contained in the image of the American as Adam.”⁴

The tragedy inherent in the American Adam’s innocence inspired Henry James and determined him to create such characters as Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer, Christopher Newman. In his development of Adam’s myth, he was influenced by Hawthorne and by his father, but as Lewis explained, he got the “most important inheritance from his own culture, ...where everyone else seemed to be getting it: in the impalpable atmosphere of the time. The myth of the American Adam was simply a formula for the way life felt to alert and sensitive Americans during the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century; it could hardly have been missed by the younger Henry James.”⁵ Many of his characters and actions had the tendency to dramatize the conventional contrast between the European experience and the American innocence. This contrast was developed in his international literary works full of autobiographical because like many of his heroes, James left his home land for Europe in order to find a better place and to enrich his experience of life and, therefore, he found himself on a different territory, with another mentality and another way of life. His works illustrate the European experience of young Americans, who come to the Old World to enrich their knowledge, but who finally become corrupt and alienated by the European system.

³ R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 5.

⁴ R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 5.

⁵ R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 4.

In his famous international novels, he included an elaborated model of moral and cultural contrast between Europe and America, Europeans and Americans with the purpose of highlighting the American's innocence, provided that, as it has been stated before, only in the presence of each other their traits can be fully identified. The Americans "confronts the possibilities of good and bad in a life of superior cultivation and mundane happiness; while the worldly people, who usually are Europeans or Europeanized Americans are auctioned, changed, sometimes even destroyed by the unique power of innocence."⁶ The effect that these antinomies have on the innocents' identities who come from the New World can be understood only by an anterior description of the prototype of American in Europe, opposed to the Europeans' personalities. James's characters represent vitality, freshness, beauty, innocence and freedom, as they seem to be open to experience. On the other hand, Europeans are characterized by corruption and sophistication. The American is simple, and to a certain extent ignorant. He acts in a free, natural manner, as opposed to the self-consciousness of the ones he meets. A vital aspect for the development of the novels is whether the American can preserve this quality against a space of vice and complexity, in case he struggle sufficiently for protecting his integrity and freedom against alteration by the exterior world.

In Henry James's later fiction, he returns to the international theme, a rich resource at the beginning of his carrier, but he goes beyond the strict social analysis to "both a manifestation of and a metaphor for the gap between the Self and the Other"⁷. Europe is obviously "the Other" and the American "Self" is no longer characterized only by innocence and vulnerability, as it knows how to use innocence to win power.

The third period of James's career reached its most significant achievement in three novels published just after the turn of the century. Critic F. O. Matthiessen called this "trilogy" James's major phase, and these novels have certainly received intense critical study. It was the second-written of the books, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) that was the first published. This novel tells the story of Milly Theale, an American heiress stricken with a serious disease, and her impact on the people around her. Some of these people befriend Milly with honorable motives, while others are more self-interested. James stated

⁶ F.W. Dupee, *The Question of Henry James. A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1945), 13.

⁷ Paul B. Armstrong, *The Phenomenology of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 144.

in his autobiographical books that Milly was based on Minny Temple, his beloved cousin who died at an early age of tuberculosis.

“The idea”, tells James in his Preface, “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.”⁸ In this novel, the Self becomes an Other to the Other. “The international material thus dramatizes the complex, dynamic interactions of the Self and the Other and reveals a gap that can rarely be traversed, let alone bridged.”⁹ Milly Theale begins to discover that she can use the attributes of the American girl, of dove or princess to her own advantage. She is aware of her innocence, self-conscious of it. She can show her power to Kate and Densher, leaving them no grounds on which to object. In this way, Henry James doesn’t make anymore the clear distinction between “good” and “bad” heroines, as he did in *The Portrait of a Lady* with the opposition between Isabel Archer and Madame Merle.

The international theme becomes a metaphor for the distances separating the Self from the Other. In comparison to the characters from the early international novels, here the Americans have the power and responsibility converged from their fabulous wealth. Their innocence is presented in ironic juxtaposition to this power and they become accomplices in the plots that exploit them. The deception practiced on Milly Theale by the other characters is a result of her own desire to be deceived as Kate says to Densher that Milly “never wanted the truth....She wanted *you*. She would have taken from you what you could give her and been glad of it, even if she had known it false. You might have lied to her from pity, and she have seen you and felt you lie, and yet- since it was all for tenderness- she would have thanked you and blessed you and clung to you but the more. For that was your strength, my dear man- that she loves you with passion”.¹⁰

Milly’s death seems to be an act of will as Sir Luke Strett says that she could live if she “would take the trouble to do” so¹¹. Milly herself explains us that “It was perhaps superficially more striking that one could live if one would; but it was more appealing,

⁸ Henry James, Preface to *The Wings of The Dove* (London: Macmillan, 1923), 2.

⁹ Virginia C. Fowler, “The Later Fiction” in *A Companion to Henry James Study*, ed. Daniel Mark Fogel (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), 183.

¹⁰ Henry James, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, vol. XX (New York: Scribners, 1908-9), 326.

¹¹ Henry James, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, vol. XIX (New York: Scribners, 1908-9), 246.

insinuating, irresistible in short, that one would live if one could.”¹² Her tragedy is not the result of her suffering and death, but of her discrepancy between her big fortune and her psychological and spiritual deficiency. In contrast to Isabel Archer, she knows what to do with her money, so she defeats her rivals.

The image of the dove with which she is associated is obviously a symbol of innocence. She consciously adopts this role, spreading her wings in protection and even redemption of the world that she leaves behind through death, as she “found herself accepting as the right one, while she caught her breath with relief, the name so given her. She met it on the instant as she would have met the revealed truth; it lighted up the strange dusk in which she lately had walked. *That* was what the matter with her was. She was a dove. Oh *wasn't* she?”¹³

Beside the dove role, she plays that of American girl, for Merton Densher, and of princess, for Susan Stringham and these identities actually mask her inner emptiness. She becomes, in fact, a greater presence in the novel the more she is absent from it, just as she is more real, in her death, for Merton Densher than she was in her life. Milly, as well as Kate, suffer from the constraints of being female, but are freed of many of the external restraints on the individual. If Kate's value is only her beauty, Milly's is her wealth. She is conscious of the roles attributed by others to her so she learns how to act these roles. At the same time she is also conscious that her success with the people at Lancaster Gate is a result of her fortune. Both of them are betrayed by Merton Densher, the third person in their triangle. The novel tries to show that human happiness is impossible as it always imply a violation of the Other.

The heroine sees her differences from Kate as a deficiency of herself. “Kate represents Milly's first experience of the Other” and obviously this “discovery of such a lack leads to a desire for unity, which in itself prompts a kind of identification with the Other. This desire for unity is, of course, ultimately a desire for death.”¹⁴ She becomes alienated from herself and begins to experience her own life as a drama unfolding before her. She prefers to identify herself with the lady of the Bronzino portrait rather than with the vibrant Kate because she is afraid she can't be beautiful and passionate as Kate. The possibility of love between Kate and Densher is the main source of her anxiety. Her

¹² Henry James, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, vol. XIX (New York: Scribners, 1908-9), 254.

¹³ Henry James, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, vol. XIX (New York: Scribners, 1908-9), 283.

¹⁴ Virginia C. Fowler, *Henry James's American Girl. The Embroidery on the Canvas* (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1948), 92.

disease is a refuge from active participation in the world, a source of security. “Incapable of actively asserting herself in the London world, she views herself as being at the mercy of others and begins almost to invite their victimization of her.”¹⁵

Milly’s illness remains mysteriously unnamed. Her physician Sir Luke Strett suggests that love may be a cure for it. In the novel and in the Preface, James suggests that her illness is rooted in her cultural identity, as she is “the last fine flower...of an ‘old’ New York stem.”¹⁶ Not only her physical malady makes her a victim of Lancaster Gate, but her own personality and character make her unable to cope with life and reflect a spiritual purity that has redemptive effects on others. In the Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, James says that “a young person so devoted and exposed, a creature with her security hanging so by a hair, couldn’t but fall somehow into some abysmal trap.”¹⁷ She has difficulty in living within the subjective ‘I’, and she is surrounded by characters who deny her this status and this leads to a defensive isolation. She can exert an influence on the world, but she can do this only by dying, “since I’ve lived all these years as if I were dead, I shall die, no doubt, as if I were alive.”¹⁸ Her presence in the Lancaster Gate challenges her to wonder for the first time who she is.

Susan Shepherd Stringham describes the tension that exists between Mill’s great fortune and her naïve innocence, between the countless opportunities offered by this wealth and her lack of preparation to take advantages of them. She lacks knowledge and abilities. “It was rich, romantic, abysmal, to have, as was evident, thousands and thousands a year, to have youth and intelligence and, if not beauty, at least in equal measure a high dim charming ambiguous oddity, which was even better, and then on top of all to enjoy boundless freedom, the freedom of the wind in the desert- it was unspeakably touching to be so equipped and yet to have been reduced by fortune to little humbleminded mistakes.”¹⁹ At the beginning she tries to reject the simple ready-made identities she is given by the others. She wants to live within a more complex subjectivity but she fails because of her fear and pain that accompany this attempt.

Milly herself reflects on her innocence as she follows a current determined by others. This timidity makes her aware that she is fragile in a world not designated to

¹⁵ Virginia C. Fowler, *Henry James’s American Girl. The Embroidery on the Canvas* (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1948), 97.

¹⁶ Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James* (New York: Scribners, 1962), 292.

¹⁷ Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James* (New York: Scribners, 1962), 293.

¹⁸ Henry James, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, vol. XIX (New York: Scribners, 1908-9), 199.

¹⁹ Henry James, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, vol. XIX (New York: Scribners, 1908-9), 110.

protect fragility. She believes these dove-like qualities are the reason for not having access to the ordinary experiences of life. She finds the ready-made identities less painful than living within a complex subjectivity.

Milly Theale represents an exponent of Henry James's American girls who are unable and afraid to become wholly human and to achieve a mature identity. Her inability to achieve a sense of self leads inevitably to her death. It is not only her innocence and goodness that leads to her victimization by the European experience, but also her culturally determined psychology. The consequences are the most extreme for James's American girl.

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