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# The perversion of the concept of honour in *The Wings of the Dove*.

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Honour is a concept to which the characters of *The Wings of the Dove*[1] often refer either directly or indirectly when they speak of their "duty" or of what they consider to be their neighbour's duty. We shall see that a concept which normally implies a keen sense of ethical conduct and is associated with the notion of integrity undergoes a radical change when revised by people like Lionel Croy and his daughters, Marian and Kate, but also, more surprisingly, by Merton Densher, the young man on whose spiritual evolution the second volume of *The Wings of the Dove* focuses.

The first character to utter the word 'honour' is paradoxically Lionel Croy, the least honorable person in the novel. Mr Croy is presented by his daughter Kate as a discredited social adventurer, a shady dandy who has done something dishonorable — what exactly the reader will never know — and Kate seems to be sincere when she tells Densher that she does not know the precise cause of her father's ruined reputation. From the outset Lionel Croy is exposed as a deceiver although, judging from appearances, he looks "so particularly the English gentleman" (24). The narrator leaves us in no doubt as to Croy's character: "there was no truth in him [...] he dealt out lies as he might the cards from the greasy old pack for the game of diplomacy to which you were to sit down with him" (23). At the very moment when he should feel guilty of misbehaviour, Croy skilfully turns the tables and succeeds in making others feel guilty of some imaginary wrong done to him.

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[1]. Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1978.

Such is the man who speaks of duty to his daughter Kate when she tells him of her aunt's proposal to keep her at Lancaster Gate on condition that she break off relations with her disreputable father. Croy is quite put out by Kate's offer to stay with him because he cannot perform the part of the noble father which he had expected to play. He has never wished Kate to settle with him; what he meant was to give her up "with some style and state" (25), pretending to sacrifice himself to her best interest. Since his daughter does not express any desire to forsake him, Croy has to renounce the part of the generous, self-denying father, and his advice to Kate concerning what he regards as her duty reveals that he is interested in her only in so far as he can derive profit from their connexion.

> *'What I want to do, you see,' [Croy tells his daughter] 'is to put it to your conscience that you've an admirable opportunity; and that it's moreover one for which, after all, damn you, you've really to thank me. [...] Your duty as well as your chance, if you're capable of seeing it, is to use me. Show family feeling by seeing what I'm good for." (29)*

Croy's use of the words "duty" and "family feeling" is typical of the man's hypocrisy since, at the moment when he advises Kate to conform to the rules of honour, he is only thinking of his own advantage. Being a good daughter and an affectionate sister, Kate will feel bound to share with him and with Marian the money she receives from Aunt Maud.

Moreover, what Croy calls Kate's duty has nothing to do with the notion of honour commonly associated with this word. Apparently urging his daughter to do her duty towards her family, Croy in fact urges her to adopt an immoral course of action. Since Aunt Maud wants Kate to break off relations with her father, Miss Croy ought to "work it" and see what promises she can get from her aunt in return for her sacrifice. "I'm a poor ruin of an old dad to make a stand about giving up — I quite agree. But I'm not, after all, quite the old ruin not to get something for giving up" (29), Lionel Croy argues. Under the present circumstances, Kate's duty, then, would consist in obtaining as much as she can from her aunt against the deceptive promise of deserting her father. For Lionel Croy, the concept of honour and the type of relationship between people based on bargaining are not incompatible and he sees nothing shameful in advising his daughter to set the price for breaking off with him. Moreover, Croy does not seem to be aware of the cynicism involved in his suggestion that Kate should use her own father as a bargaining chip in her negotiations with her aunt. Conscious that his daughter is far from enthusiastic about her aunt's offer,

Croy practically turns her out of his house thus forcing her to follow what he calls the path of duty and honour — "It's just your honour that I appeal to" (30) he says to Kate as he orders her back to Mrs Lowder's house. Although Croy's reputation has long been ruined, this does not stop him from solemnly swearing upon his honour that if Kate cannot see where her duty and her interest lie, he will put her on the right path: "I don't quite see what's the matter with you [...] and if you can't pull yourself together I'll — upon my honour — take you in hand. Put you into a cab and deliver you safe at Lancaster Gate" (31-32).

Marian Condrip, Kate's widowed sister, also appeals to Miss Croy's sense of duty towards her family which is, in her own words, "the greatest duty of all" (43). Her language as well as her motives are similar to her father's. According to her, Kate should comply with Aunt Maud's wishes because it is the only way for her to help her close relatives and thus show them her family feeling. If Marian is to be believed, Kate's sense of duty should lead her to turn down Densher's marriage proposal because the young journalist has no money, and accept Mrs Lowder's offer — with the condition attached to it — to remain at Lancaster Gate where she can hope to meet a wealthy suitor. Kate has no doubts as to the selfish motives which underlie Marian's advice as well as her appeal to her sense of duty towards her family. When Mrs Condrip, speaking of money, vehemently exclaims: "You must have it. You shall have it" (42), Kate understands perfectly well that Marian is thinking neither of her sister's happiness nor of her prosperity but only of her own profit if Kate married for money. This is why Miss Croy abruptly asks Marian: "To give it to you?"

Like her father, Mrs Condrip resorts to the notion of family duty to conceal her own self-centredness and her utter lack of concern for her sister's interest. Like Croy, she advises Kate to behave in a way which is incompatible with any genuine notion of honour but from which she and her precious offspring would greatly benefit.

In appealing to Kate's sense of duty towards her family, both Lionel Croy and Marian Condrip touch the right chord since the strength of Miss Croy's family feelings is one of her characteristic traits. Kate does not consider herself as an isolated individual but as part of a larger whole to which she is bound by the bond of blood. For her all the members of the family cell are indissolubly linked whether they like it or not, and what happens to one of them has inevitable repercussions on the others. Her father, for instance, is responsible for "the failure of fortune and of

honour" (21) of his family. Here Kate takes the word "honour" in the sense of respectability, which is indeed one of its meanings. It is important in her eyes to enjoy public esteem, and Miss Croy knows that a good reputation is earned by observing certain ethical rules which constitute the social code of honour. The various members of the Croy family make up a "house" — by which Kate means some sort of a dynasty — whose history results from the sum total of their lives: "Her father's life, her sister's, her own, that of her two lost brothers — the whole history of their house had the effect of some fine florid voluminous phrase, say even a musical, that dropped first into words and notes without sense and then, hanging unfinished, into no words nor any notes at all."(21) Although Lionel Croy has ruined his honour and that of his family, his daughter does not despair of restoring it some day:

> *She hadn't given up yet, and the broken sentence, if she was the last word, would end with a sort of meaning. [...] It was the name, above all, she would take in hand — the precious name she so liked and that, in spite of the harm her wretched father had done it, wasn't yet past praying for. She loved it in fact the more tenderly for that bleeding wound. (22-23)*

Taking the precious name in hand means for Kate making the Croys as rich and respected as they used to be before her father disgraced the whole family. In her mind honour and fortune are closely associated, which is not surprising since she lives in a society in which money is a prerequisite if one wants to enjoy public respect.

When Aunt Maud offers to provide for her if she agrees to break off with her father, Kate is confronted with a dilemma involving, on the one hand her loyalty to Lionel Croy but also her love for Densher, and on the other hand her interest in material things for, the narrator comments, Miss Croy

> *saw, and she blushed to see, that if in contrast with some of its old aspects life (in Lancaster Gate) now affected her as a dress successfully 'done up', this was exactly by reason of the trimmings and lace, was a matter of ribbons and silk and velvet. She had a dire accessibility to pleasure from such sources. (35-36)*

Despite the attraction which Aunt Maud's wealth exerts upon her, Kate's first reaction is to suggest to her father that she come and live with him in Chirk Street. Her sense of duty towards the man who has ruined and dishonoured the family certainly accounts — at least to a certain extent — for her move, but Kate's apparently self-denying attitude conceals other less altruistic motives. Being a perceptive young woman, Miss Croy is not

deluded by her aunt; she is aware that Mrs Lowder is not the kind of person to give something for nothing. Alone in her citadel of a bedroom, she feels besieged by the "unscrupulous and immoral" lady (37) and sees herself as a trembling kid that will sooner or later be devoured by a lioness. Kate's first reaction, which consists in renouncing her aunt's attractive offer, thus owes as much to her desire to preserve her freedom, in particular as regards her relations with Densher, as to her sense of duty towards her father. Kate is not self-deluded about the true motives of her apparently selfless proposal to Mr Croy for, when Densher expresses his admiration for her generous attitude, she immediately sets things straight: "It wasn't courage — it was the opposite. I did it to save myself — to escape" (58)

It is ultimately Croy's rejection of his daughter which leaves her no choice but to accept Aunt Maud's offer, including of course the conditions attached to it. Kate did not mean at first to deceive her aunt by inducing her to believe that she and Densher had, in compliance with her wishes, renounced their love. If Kate decides to "square" Aunt Maud, it is because, as she puts it, her father wouldn't "help" her, wouldn't "save" her, wouldn't "hold out a finger" to her (58). Had Lionel Croy gratefully accepted his daughter's offer to come and live with him, Kate might have escaped from Aunt Maud and the temptation of money, and, despite his lack of means, married the man she loved. Since both her father and her sister advise — or rather order — her, in the name of her sense of duty towards them, to submit to Aunt Maud's wishes, Kate has the feeling that she does not belong to herself, that she is not free to decide of her own future. To Densher she confesses: "That's all my virtue — a narrow little family feeling. I've a small stupid piety [...] My position's a value, a great value, for them both [...] It's the value — the only one they have". And she goes on to add: "It makes me ask myself if I've any right to personal happiness, any right to anything but to be as rich and overflowing, as smart and shining, as I can be made" (59). Kate, then, seems ready to sacrifice herself to what can be regarded as her own notion of honour, her sense of duty towards her father, her sister and her young nephews.

When Kate turns down Densher's first marriage proposal, she does so, at least to a certain extent, because her duty towards her family forbids her to marry a penniless man. As she attempts to explain to Densher, she must not think of herself and of her suitor only: "I shall sacrifice nobody and nothing, and that's just my situation, that I want and that I shall try for everything. That [...] is how I see myself [...] acting for them." (60)

Kate's private notion of honour undoubtedly compels her to take her family into account when making a decision about her future, but one may wonder whether she does not put forward her family feeling to obscure the fact that although she loves Densher, she would rather have him with money into the bargain than without. In asking her suitor to wait and see what turn events may take she is in fact trying to reconcile her desire for romance and happiness not only with the interests of her father and sister but also with her own taste for wealth and the luxury that goes with it.

What Kate does not seem to be aware of is that her sense of duty towards her family combined with her own desire for riches leads her to adopt an attitude which is in contradiction with the rules of honour. Instead of either rejecting Mrs Lowder's offer or accepting it for the sake of her poor relatives, Kate merely pretends to comply with her aunt's wishes and invites Densher to help her in the squaring of Aunt Maud. The two lovers will keep their engagement secret, Kate will put on a show of indifference towards Densher, and they will live in the hope that Mrs Lowder changes her mind about their marriage. So little is Kate aware of the immoral nature of her behaviour that she speaks of honour where there is nothing but self-interest. When she has succeeded in dispelling Aunt Maud's suspicions as regards Densher's matrimonial views, she advises the young man not to come and see her in private at Lancaster Gate. It is clear to the reader that she realizes such an attitude would be likely to revive Aunt Maud's hostility towards Densher and would consequently be detrimental to their plans. This is indeed what Miss Croy explains to her suitor, but she surprisingly brings in the notion of honour which has no part in the matter: "They were now not to forget that, Aunt Maud's liberality having put them on their honour, they mustn't spoil their case by abusing it" (201). Miss Croy's moral values are so uncertain and confused that she makes no difference between the self-interest which should urge them to be careful not to excite Mrs Lowder's mistrust and the notion of honour which should forbid them to avail themselves of Aunt Maud's confidence to hoodwink her.

The word "honour" once more takes on ironical overtones in Kate's mouth, when, after persuading Densher to stay in Venice to carry on his courtship of Milly, she very naturally, almost innocently, asks him: "You'll, on your honour, stay then?" (311) Kate does not seem to realize the absurdity of requiring Densher to promise on his honour to do something which is incompatible with the commonly accepted meaning of the word. To put it plainly, what Kate demands of her lover is to deceive a dying girl,

to induce her into marrying him so that when she dies he will inherit her money and be able, as a wealthy widower, to marry Kate with her aunt's agreement. Considering the Machiavellian scheme in which she has embroiled Densher, the reader may wonder how she dares speak of honour. Despite appearances, Kate is not being cynical, she simply does not give the word 'honour' its usual meaning. In her opinion, Densher's honour does not consist in behaving, at every moment of his life and with anyone who crosses his path, in conformity with certain ethical rules; the concept of honour merely applies to the young man's relationship with her. She considers the bond which unites them to be as strong as that of the blood, for Merton and she are secretly engaged. They have exchanged solemn vows and Densher must consequently be loyal to her just as she must be loyal to him; but to the hostile world which stands in the way of their happiness they owe nothing. So, when Kate refers to Densher's honour she is exclusively thinking of his duty towards her. That he should deceive everyone else, whether it be Aunt Maud or a rich dying girl is immaterial to her. Besides, in case she should feel any doubt as to the honorable nature of the plans she has asked Densher to carry out, Kate persuades herself that she and her lover are in fact being kind to Milly who will die happy believing that her love is reciprocated.

Kate's corruption of the true meaning of the word 'honour' also appears in the answer she makes to Densher when, towards the end of the novel, he asks her whether Milly told her she would bequeath him her fortune. Judging from Kate's reaction to Densher's question one would think that she has been insulted: "'Never!' Kate visibly flushed at the thought. 'That wouldn't, on my part, have been playing fair with her. And I did,' she added, 'play fair.'" (393) Strangely enough Kate has the feeling that, in her relationship with Milly, she behaved in accordance with the rules of honour. The reason for this perversion of the concept of honour is undoubtedly to be found in the influence exerted on Kate by the kind of society she lives in, a society in which relations between people are not founded on affection or spiritual affinity but take the form of a game in which there must be a winner and a loser. "The working and the worked" are in London the parties to every relation and, as Kate explains to Milly, people can "quite like each other in the midst of it"(116). Kate does not feel guilty towards Milly since she has respected the rules of the game; the question of knowing whether she has behaved in keeping with moral principles never occurs to her. According to her own sense of honour, she has not misbehaved since she never tried to intrude upon Milly's private life and

feelings, she has respected her secrets and never asked her any indelicate question. Hence her indignant reaction when Densher hints that she might know from Milly herself that the American girl intended to make a will in his favour.

Densher's sense of honour is also, at times, influenced by the pressure of a society in which the respected man, the honorable man, is the rich man. In the Lowder circle, respectability is measured by the amount of money and by the property people own. This is the reason why the young man who barely earns a living as a journalist comes to wonder whether "marrying for money mightn't after all be a smaller cause of shame than the mere dread of marrying without." (54) In a money-minded society traditional values are reversed: marrying for money without love is a minor sin, if any sin at all, whereas marrying for love but without money is a major sin and brings dishonour upon you.

Being a 'moral' man at heart, Densher feels very ill at ease from the moment when Kate, turning down his marriage proposal, persuades him to keep their engagement secret so as not to anger Aunt Maud and thus forsake all hope of ever inheriting from her. In an attempt to soothe his conscience, the young man argues that since Mrs Lowder did not expressly require him to break off relations with Kate, he is doing nothing dishonorable in pledging his faith to Miss Croy for ever. Subtly establishing for the first time in the novel a distinction between passive lie and active lie, Densher tells Kate that "as by a blest turn Aunt Maud had demanded of him no promise that would tie his hands they should be able to propitiate their star in their own way and yet remain loyal." (73) The difficulty, Densher explains, will only arise when Mrs Lowder's choice settles on a particular suitor for Kate, then Aunt Maud will have to be told of her niece's secret engagement. But "so long as her view is content to remain as general as at present appears I don't see that we deceive her" (73) the young man goes on to add. In Densher's opinion, concealing the truth (his engagement to Kate), and thus inducing Mrs Lowder to believe that her niece and himself have heard the voice of reason, does not amount to deceiving her because no active lie is involved. Deception, according to him, would be explicitly to tell Aunt Maud the contrary of the truth, in other words that he is no longer thinking of marrying Kate. Since Densher has not given Mrs Lowder his word that he would stop meeting Kate, he considers that his loyalty is not at fault if his relationship with Miss Croy

remains unchanged. The young man thus proves to be something of a casuist, trying to reconcile his own interest and his sense of honour.

Densher's desire to keep a clear conscience is revealed when he tells Kate that he'd rather not address his letters from America to her elsewhere than in Lancaster Gate because "it's straighter" (74). Despite his claim that "they should be able to propitiate their star in their own way and yet remain loyal", Densher confusedly senses that there is something wrong in the "squaring" of Aunt Maud staged by Kate. But his moral notions are rather hazy since it does not occur to him that addressing love letters to Kate in Lancaster Gate is just as disloyal towards Aunt Maud as sending them elsewhere. What Densher does not seem to be aware of is that he will only preserve an appearance of loyalty, not the real thing.

But the less honorable side of his attitude as regards Kate's and his own relationship with Mrs Lowder is that he had rather leave "the freedom to deceive" (74) to Miss Croy. When he is in America, distance will act as a protective screen for him and ward off the risk that Mrs Lowder should come and ask him where he stands with Kate; it will be left to Miss Croy to lie if necessary. So, from the very outset, Densher's notion of honour appears to be very dubious since he does not realize that leaving it to Kate to lie to Aunt Maud and washing his hands of the problems she may have to face is unworthy of the gentleman he claims to be. In fact Densher wants both to enjoy a clear conscience and to keep his relationship with Kate unchanged. In transferring the responsibility for the "squaring" of Aunt Maud on to Kate, he succeeds in apparently reconciling what cannot, in fact, be reconciled: his moral integrity, the prospect of marrying Kate in spite of her aunt's opposition and Kate's desire to become rich. But one must not be too hard on Densher: the young man's personality is not yet settled, it is still in the making and his moral sense may, in the course of time, assert itself. As the narrator puts it: "He suggested above all [...] that wondrous state of youth in which the elements, the metals more or less precious, are so in fusion and fermentation that the question of the final stamp, the pressure that fixes the value, must wait for comparative coolness." (46)

When, after Densher's return from America, Mrs Lowder tells him that she and Kate will follow Milly to the continent and invites him to come and visit them abroad, the young man has to conceal his uneasiness. Although Mrs Lowder does not suspect it, her offer is a cause of embarrassment for Densher: "She was indeed putting him on his honour, and his honour winced a little at the use he rather helplessly saw himself suffering her to believe she could make of it." (223) By inviting Densher, Mrs Lowder means

to provide him with an opportunity of courting the rich American heiress, and she makes no mystery of her plans. The young man, on the contrary, sees in Mrs Lowder's offer an unexpected opportunity to be near Kate and enjoy her company, hence his embarrassment. If Densher's honour "winces", it is because his acceptance of Aunt Maud's invitation can only be interpreted by this lady as a tacit agreement to her suggestion that he should court Milly and make a financially interesting match. Since he cannot tell Mrs Lowder that it is Kate he is still in love with and whose company he yearns for, he has to let her believe that he is prepared to court a sick girl for her money. But his honour does not wince more than "a little" because he knows that he is not really the fortune-hunter Mrs Lowder takes him to be. The young man's acceptance of Aunt Maud's invitation clearly amounts to deceiving a woman who trusts him, but this idea does not seem to generate any pangs of conscience in Densher. What makes him uneasy is that Mrs Lowder, judging from deceptive appearances, should have a bad opinion of him, not the fact that he will avail himself of her trust in Kate and in himself to stay in Venice not for Milly but for Aunt Maud's niece. His would-be sense of honour sets greater store on his reputation than on any genuine ethical principles. When Mrs Lowder tells him: "But you don't know [...] how far I've gone for you", thus hinting that she has seen to it that Milly should consider his courtship and his marriage proposal in a favourable light, Densher feels red "as if his honour were colouring up" (223). Once more the young man's honour suffers not because he is aware of the disloyalty of his attitude towards Mrs Lowder but because he realizes that, in her eyes, he is bribeable and can be "bought off with Milly's money".

But it is his relationship with the American girl that provides a major test for Densher's sense of honour since he finds himself confronted with a particularly serious moral dilemma. Milly's attitude convinces him that she is sorry for him because she believes his love for Kate to be unrequited. At that point Densher realizes that "There was the place for scruples; there the need absolutely to mind what he was about."(227) The reader is tempted to think that the young man's honesty will prevail and prompt him to tell Milly that there is no reason why he should be pitied since Kate loves him as much as he loves her. But Densher soon falls into a kind of casuistry by means of which he justifies his silence and entertains Milly in her mistake. "He had himself as yet done nothing deceptive" (228) he argues with himself, trying to believe in his own innocence.

> *It was Kate's description of him, his defeated state, it was none of his own; his responsibility would begin, as he might say, only with acting it out. The sharp point was, however, in the difference between acting and not acting: this difference in fact it was that made the case of conscience. He saw it with a certain alarm rise before him that everything was acting that was not speaking the particular word.*

Densher is, in fact, perfectly aware that the only honest way of extricating himself from this tricky situation is to tell the truth, however unpalatable this may be. But the prospect is so unpleasant to him that he finds several good reasons to hold back from Milly the real nature of his relations with Kate: telling her the truth would amount to "challenging" her and would be "virtually as indelicate [...] as to leave her deluded" (228), besides it would constitute a kind of betrayal of Kate, and the young man comes to the conclusion that "Not to give away the woman one loved, but to back her up in her mistakes [...] that was perhaps chief among the inevitabilities of the abjection of love" (228). So, if we are to believe Densher, his loyalty to Kate, which he assimilates with his honour, compels him to act in a disloyal way towards Milly. The third reason he puts forward to vindicate his silence is that, out of loyalty to Kate, he must believe any design on her part, "however roundabout", aims at doing one "nothing but good". The young man becomes rather confused here since his previous sentence expressed the necessity of backing up Kate in her "mistakes". Densher's sense of honour seems, oddly enough, always to urge him to adopt a course of action which will preserve his relationship with Kate from any disturbance.

Yet the young man's sense of his own integrity is somewhat shaken when he hears Milly assert that she would do "anything" for Kate, and the narrator comments: "she might for the moment have effectively laid a trap for whatever remains of the ideal straightness in him were still able to pull themselves together and operate. He was afterwards to say to himself that something had at that moment hung for him by a hair." (232) Once more Densher persuades himself that "resisting the impulse to break out was what he was doing for Kate." (233) Instead of following the real code of honour which would compel him to tell Milly that she is deluded, Densher, speaking of Kate, confesses "with a good intention that had the further merit of representing a truth": "I don't feel as if I knew her — really to call know." (233) Although the young man argues with himself that his words contain after all "no element of falsity", he is not so devoid of moral

sense as not to add: "Strange enough therefore was it that he could go too far — if it was too far — without being false."(233)

When Densher embarks on his deceptive courtship of Milly or, to use his own words, when he "turns his corner" by accepting Milly's suggestion to go out with her for a drive in her carriage, the young man once more justifies his unethical conduct with sophistries: "Clearly what had occurred was her having wished it so that she had made him simply wish, in civil acknowledgement, to oblige her." (235) Not to feel guilty for his deception of a girl who sincerely loves him, Densher discovers an honorable reason for his unwarrantable conduct. In order to avoid an unpleasant situation in the present — having to tell Milly that she is deluded in thinking that Kate does not return his love — he gets involved in a process of deception which will end tragically. Later on, in Venice, Densher does not feel the same need to oblige Milly since he turns down her suggestion that she could come to his rooms and have tea with him. On that occasion he deludes himself into thinking that it is out of tact that he does not want her to visit him: "that glossed his predicament over, for it was of application among the sensitive and the kind. He wasn't inhuman, in fine, so long as it would serve. It had to serve now, accordingly, to help him not to sweeten Milly's hopes." (317) Whether Densher complies with Milly's wishes or manages to have her change her mind, the process remains the same: in each case he attributes noble causes to his actions, refuses to admit that the real motive underlying his conduct is self-interest, and as a result succeeds in preserving a clean conscience.

Once he has "turned his corner", Densher immediately declares to Kate: "I'm doing nothing — and shall not, I assure you, do anything but what I'm told" (236), which amounts to a refusal to assume responsibility for his own actions. In order to preserve his integrity which he feels compromised, Densher chooses to consider himself as a mere tool in Kate's hands: he only obeys her; it is she who makes the decisions and gives him her instructions. He finds it convenient to think of himself as deprived of the power to exert his own free will and behave according to his own judgment. In fact Densher sacrifices his honour to his love for Kate, a kind of love in which carnal desire plays a major part. "I'm letting you do — well, God knows what with me," (237) the young man confesses to Miss Croy. Because of the sexual appeal Kate exerts upon him, Densher consents in being manipulated by her, in perpetually bending to her will, but he refuses to admit that in carrying out her schemes he becomes her accom-

plice and truly shares with her responsibility for the deception of a girl who has done them no harm.

In Venice, the moral dilemma Densher is confronted with becomes intolerable. The young man mentally rebels against Kate's hold over him, and visualizing himself walking "on a high ridge, steep down on either side", concludes: "It was Kate who had so perched him" (280). Densher does not realize — or refuses to admit — that it is not Miss Croy but his frustrated desire for her which has placed him in such an awkward position. If his conduct is at odds with his sense of honour and makes him unhappy he should blame himself for it in the first place, but Densher resorts to his usual sophistries and absolves himself of all guilt: "as he hadn't really 'begun' anything, had only submitted, consented, but too generously indulged and condoned the beginnings of others, he had no call to treat himself with superstitious rigour." (285) What he forgets is that even if he has been a tool in the hands of others, he is a thinking tool and could have refused the use that was made of him.

At that point the problem for Densher is to decide "how a gentleman would behave". The narrator's use of "would" rather than "should" unobtrusively stresses the fact that the young journalist's conduct is not in keeping with a gentleman's code of honour. "Three women (Kate, Mrs Lowder, Milly) were looking to him at once. [...] The law was not to be a brute — in return for amiabilities." (285) The young man once more gives himself honorable reasons for carrying on his deception of Milly, and his spurious reasoning enables him to preserve a spotless conscience while serving his own interest which is to please Kate in the hope that she will, at last, yield to his entreaties and come to his rooms.

Although he thinks of himself as a gentleman, Densher does not hesitate to blackmail Kate in order to persuade her to have sex with him. If Kate refuses to come to him, he threatens to tell Milly the truth. To Miss Croy's objection that such a revelation would kill Milly because they have gone too far and told too many lies, Densher answers by dissociating himself from Kate, rejecting once more the responsibility for his misdeeds on the young woman. "I, my dear, have told none!" (294) he exclaims in perfect sincerity and complete self-delusion. It is paradoxically the same Densher who, a moment later, implores Kate in the following words: "I'll tell any lie you want, any your idea requires, if you'll only come to me" (294), thus sacrificing "whatever remains of the ideal straightness in him" to the prospect of carnal pleasure and the satisfaction of seeing Miss Croy yield for once to his will.

Despite his admission that he is ready to lie, the young man clings to the idea that there is no duplicity in his attitude since he has no feelings for Milly and is acting exclusively for Kate, "not, by the deviation of an inch, for her friend". Densher's spurious logic leads him to the relatively satisfying and comfortable conclusion that he is "purely passive" and that pure passivity has to represent "his dignity and his honour." (296) The young man can no longer delude himself into thinking that his conduct is that of a gentleman, he has relinquished his claims to genuine honour and dignity and only preserves some measure of self-respect by regarding his passivity as a substitute for them.

His desire for Kate being further exasperated by constant frustration, Densher resorts once more to blackmailing her in order to persuade her to come to his rooms. If she refuses to understand him, he will "wholly decline" to understand her (311) and leave Venice and dying Milly before Kate herself has gone back to London. It is paradoxically when he ought to be ashamed of offering to make a fool of a dying girl in exchange for a brief moment of sexual satisfaction that Densher solemnly swears on his "honour". Taking up Kate's own words, he promises: "I'll stay, on my honour, if you'll come to me. On your honour." (311) As in Lionel Croy's case, Densher's utterance of the word honour takes on ironical overtones since nothing could be more remote from the notion of honour than the bargain he is making with Kate. If she sleeps with him, he will implement her scheme and deceive Milly in order to inherit her money when she dies. Moreover one must not forget that at the turn of the century, making love outside marriage meant, for a girl, losing her honour. The ironical insistence on the word honour at the end of Book VIII when Densher finally extorts from Kate the promise to come "on her honour" highlights the fact that the two young people have lost sight of the true meaning of the concept which has become for them an empty word.

Once Kate has kept her promise and slept with him, Densher's "honour" consists in fulfilling the contract he has passed with her, however immoral this contract may be: "the price named by him had been magnificently paid, his equivalent office was to take effect." (313) The forms of honour are maintained but the substance is missing. By resorting to a strictly commercial vocabulary — "price", "paid", "take effect" —, James stresses once more the fact that both Densher and Kate have forgotten that honour implies ethical conduct and moral integrity.

When Densher realizes at last that, in order to fulfil his contract with Kate, he will be compelled to lie actively, in words, and not only passively

through his presence in Venice, his feeling of uneasiness turns to mental torture. So far he had succeeded in carrying out Kate's scheme while preserving his self-respect. This becomes impossible now since he finds himself confronted with two courses of action both of which entail the loss of his honour: if he does not fulfil his part of the bargain made with Kate he will behave dishonorably towards her, on the other hand keeping his word implies "that to-night in the great saloon [...] and straight in the white face of his young hostess, divine in her trust, or at any rate inscrutable in her mercy [...] he should lie with his lips." (316) And the reader discovered, even before Densher left London for America, that although the young man's sense of honour could put up with passive lies he could not bring himself to make active lies. Densher's notion of honour ultimately rests on two rigid principles: never to lie in words, keep one's engagements. The flaw comes from the fact that these apparently irreproachable principles are tainted by his non observance of the fundamental law of ethics: respect of others. Self-respect compels him to keep his promises but respect of others should have urged him in the first place to see to it that these promises were not likely to hurt anyone. Respect of others should also have made it clear to him that deceiving people through one's silent attitude is as unethical as telling them lies. In fact all Densher's sophistries aim at retaining Kate's love and preserving his self-esteem at the same time. This can only be achieved by a perversion of the concept of honour which is indeed what all Densher's casuistry amounts to.

A remarkable example of this casuistry is to be found in the passage when Densher meditates on the paradoxical sense of innocence surrounding both Kate's and his own relationship with Milly, an innocence which, he must admit, comes from the personality of the American girl:

> *Something incalculable wrought for them — for him and Kate; something outside, beyond, above themselves, and doubtless ever so much better than they: which wasn't a reason, however [...] for them not to profit by it. Not to profit by it [...] would have been to go directly against it; and the spirit of generosity at present engendered in Densher could have felt no greater pang than by his having to go directly against Milly. (314)*

Densher's surprising response to Milly's spiritual beauty is not a feeling of acute remorse for the deception he is practising upon her, on the contrary he finds in Milly's very spirit of generosity a new incitement to pursue his deception of her.

When Kate goes back to London, leaving Densher behind to carry out her scheme with the American girl, the young man has to answer evasively

to Milly's questions in order to avoid making an active lie and consequently losing his self-esteem. "You're not writing?" the girl asks him, probably in the hope of bringing him to confess that she is the only reason for his being still in Venice. "I don't know, upon my honour, what I'm doing", Densher replies, and the narrator's comment — "his honour, as he called it, was saved even while she didn't know she had threatened it" (320) — lays the stress on the spurious nature of the young man's sense of honour.

For the first time, because he must now face the situation alone, Densher begins to take the measure of his responsibility towards Milly whose life is, as he puts it, "absolutely in his hands" (321). But instead of generating in him a sense of shame and remorse such considerations as that "a single false motion might [...] snap the coil" help him "to a degree of eventual peace, for what they luminously amounted to was that he was to do nothing, and that fell in after all with the burden laid on him by Kate." (322) Once more, Densher feels justified in keeping Milly deluded while not really fulfilling his contract with Kate. His conscience remains clear since he manages to preserve a non committal attitude: "It was to this his wisdom reduced itself --to the need again simply to be kind. That was the same as being still-- as studying to create the minimum of vibration." (322) Densher deludes himself into thinking that he behaves with perfect tact when he keeps his intercourse with Milly in the key of good friendship while at the same time letting her believe that he has prolonged his stay in Venice for her sake. That the American girl is the cause of Densher's presence in Venice is after all the truth, but certainly not in the sense that Milly imagines.

When Densher sees Lord Mark seated in Florian's and has the sudden intuition that the man has told Milly the truth and is the cause of his being denied admittance to palazzo Leporelli, he can hardly keep his indignation under control. By transferring his repressed guilt on to Lord Mark, Densher succeeds in preserving the illusion of his own righteousness. Whereas Lord Mark appears to him as a "brute", a "hound", a vile fortune-hunter, the young man admires his own tactfulness and delicacy and feels "remarkably blameless" (328): "if [Milly] was upset it wasn't a bit his act." (329) As usual Densher's unconscious technique to preserve his self-esteem is to reject his own responsibility on to others: before Kate's departure from Venice she was the one to blame, now it is Lord Mark whom he condemns in order to be at peace with his own conscience. Once more James's comments lay the stress on Densher's self-delusion concerning the honorability of his conduct towards Milly: "Densher had indeed drifted by

the next morning to the reflexion [...] that the only delicate and honourable way of treating a person in such a state was to treat her as he, Merton Densher, did." (329)

From a conversation between Kate and her lover which takes place after the young man's return to London, the reader gathers that, in spite of Mrs Stringham's efforts to persuade him to deny to Milly Lord Mark's revelation, and in spite of his own pity for the dying girl, Densher could not bring himself to tell a lie. He skilfully managed to remain in a kind of no man's land between lying and saying the truth since he neither denied nor confirmed the news of his engagement to Kate. "If I had denied you", he confesses to Kate, "I'd have stuck to it." (360) There is no need for Densher to explain why and Kate immediately draws her conclusions: "Oh you'd have broken with me to make your denial a truth? You'd have 'chucked' me [...] to save your conscience?" (360) The reader cannot but share Kate's feeling that Densher places his conscience, in other words his honour, above every other consideration. Unlike Kate, who in this case proves more humane that her lover, Densher considers that even a white lie, told of pity for a dying girl, would have been a stain on his conscience. Obsessed as he was with saving his honour, locked up in his self-centredness, Densher did not perceive what seems obvious to Kate: 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. (360)*

The rigidity of Densher's principles as regards spoken lies sometimes verges on absurdity. The young man who was heading towards Chelsea to call on Kate suddenly turns his steps towards Brompton Oratory (380) remembering that he unthinkingly confirmed Mrs Lowder's assumption that he intended to go to church since it was Christmas morning. Ironically the man who has agreed in "squaring" Aunt Maud and has being passively lying to her for months in compliance with Kate's wishes, suddenly shrinks from what would not even be a real lie since it is quite immaterial to Mrs Lowder whether he goes to church or not. Formalism seems to serve Densher as a substitute for a genuine sense of honour. As long as he keeps from lying "with his lips" he can absolve himself of all guilt.

In order to soothe his conscience, Densher also resorts to the distinction between "essence" and "shell" (350). If we are to believe him, Sir Luke Strett, whose searching eye is able to see the essence under the shell, has understood that he "had meant awfully well." (364) In his desire to preserve his self-esteem, Densher easily forgets that his reasons for deceiving Milly were far from pure. All that can be said in his favour is that he was not aware from the start of the suffering his deceptive courtship of Milly would entail for the sick girl. But when he reflects that he has meant awfully well, Densher clearly indulges in wishful thinking, and deludes himself in a desperate attempt to preserve the last shreds that can remain of his honour.

The reader who notices that the two American characters of *The Wing of the Dove* are exempt from the perversion of the concept of honour which affects practically all the British characters, this reader is tempted to conclude that the reasons for such a state of things are to be sought in the British society of the time rather than in the individuals themselves. Whereas Milly and Mrs Stringham, the representatives of the New World, embody its innocence and integrity, Lionel Croy, his daughters, and even Densher illustrate the disintegration of traditional moral values which was taking place in the Old World at the turn of the century. The word "honour" is often used, but it has become an empty shell and those who speak of their honour are only thinking of their self-interest. Neither Kate nor Densher imagine what Milly's humiliation and spiritual torture would be if she discovered their scheme. Yet the two lovers are not presented by James as hateful villains but rather as victims of a society where moral values are crumbling. In an effort to preserve their self-respect, both delude themselves into thinking that they are behaving honorably. Of the three young people of the novel the American girl is the only one whose conduct is truly ethical not so much perhaps because she is fundamentally better than Densher and Kate as because she has not been corrupted by a kind of society where ruthless self-centredness reigns supreme. Unlike her British friends, Milly never utters such words as "honour", "duty" or "conscience" but, returning good for evil, she grants her forgiveness to those who, for all their sense of honour, have shamefully deceived her and abused her trust.