



Who is Merton Densher ? The Male Protagonist of The Wings of the Dove

Yasuko Tanimoto

► To cite this version:

Yasuko Tanimoto. Who is Merton Densher ? The Male Protagonist of The Wings of the Dove. Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion, 2003, Henry James and Other Essays, 23, pp.13-24. hal-02344250

HAL Id: hal-02344250

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02344250>

Submitted on 4 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Who is Merton Densher?

The Male Protagonist of *The Wings of the Dove*

Who is Merton Densher, and what role does he play in the love triangle in *The Wings of the Dove*? He is in the position to choose one girl over the other, but it is Kate who has the final voice at the end of the story. He is left alone in his room with her words that they will never be again as they were. There seems to be no life left in him besides his memory of the dead Milly, whose passion for life and love he failed to share while she lived. Densher is supposed to be weak in character, sensitive and passive, always doing what others expect of him. But it is his latent egotism, the reader comes to notice, that prevents him from fulfilling his life either as Kate's companion or Milly's. We will sum up the story from the male protagonist's standpoint to find the final message of *The Wings of the Dove*: failure of fulfillment due to one's egotism. We will also discuss some parallels between Densher and his creator, Henry James.

Densher is a handsome young man of English style. When he first appears in the novel, he is walking aimlessly along the London streets. James says the reader's impression is: "Distinctly he was a man either with nothing at all to do or with ever so much to think about . . ." (I: 47). His father was a chaplain in many English settlements, and his mother a copyist at great museums. After their death he came back to England with his education of Swiss schools and a German university. His Cambridge years and his subsequent years as a London journalist have not converted him into a complete English man. Thus he is defined as a man of thought rather than of action, and a marginal man in his native country. And he is a born writer with no prospect of becoming rich by his pen.

Densher, who holds his dead mother's image sacred, is the type of women's man who generally likes and is liked by the softer sex. Kate first meets him by chance at her friend's party after six months on the Underground Railway, finding they are inseparable. Milly meets him three times in New York

during his business trip, falling helplessly in love with him. Thus, the two girls with different characters and backgrounds come to like him to an extraordinary degree. Even Mrs. Lowder likes him personally, and so does Mrs. Stringham for Milly's sake. In return, he more or less likes them all.

But he is Kate's lover more than anything else. Physical desire is not a small part of his passion for her. Delayed and frustrated, it grows unbearably strong. He proposes to her several times throughout the story, only to face her rejection. All he can do is to help her as much as he can; he will be "patient, ridiculous, reasonable, unreasonable, and above all deeply diplomatic" (I: 75). After she has conceived her "beautiful idea" of getting Milly's money through him, their love gradually deteriorates. He knows that Kate is mistaken in her design, and that he is abject because of his passion for her. But he dares not penetrate the nature of her plot, because of his fear of judging her or sharing her mistake. He is an egotist and a coward as well as a devoted lover.

Densher manages to keep his relationship with Milly not absolutely guilty till the end, because of his willingness to be kind to her and of her eagerness to spare him. When he accepts the invitation she makes in her London hotel room to go for a drive together, he feels he has turned the corner. Later, recalling the occasion, he feels: "he was not *there*, not just as he was in so doing it, through Kate and Kate's idea, but through Milly and Milly's own, and through himself and his own, unmistakably—as well as through the little facts, whatever they had amounted to, of his time in New York" (II:186). There seems to have been something transcendently good and innocent in their three meetings in New York, or he tries to regard them as such in order to justify his awkward situation between the two girls.

In Venice, Densher is Kate's frustrated lover more than ever. Under Mrs. Lowder's direction, he retraces his steps to Milly's palace while others are on the streets. He denies his duplicity by thinking that he was acting for Kate. And he finds a workable law by thinking that one has to behave as a gentleman in the complicated situation. The straight way would be to tell Milly that he and Kate are pledged lovers and that he is acting for Kate's sake. He cannot utter the words because of his loyalty to Kate, and because of his keen sensitivity to Milly's "disconcerting poetry," that is, her welcome, her frankness, sweetness, sadness, brightness, which works on his imagination "like vague faint snatches, mere ghosts of sound, of old-fashioned melancholy music" (II: 185).

With his strong tendency to self-justification, Densher is the protagonist-reflector in the latter parts of the story. He has some moral and esthetic delicacy, to be sure, but he is not the story's moral standard by which to judge others. Not until later does he dare to confirm the nature of Kate's plot

against the dying girl. Finally, in the scene of Milly's party, Kate makes him articulate their plot with her confirming echoes: "Since she's to die I'm to marry her? So that when her death has taken place I shall in the natural course have money?" (II: 225). He shows no shock at his own words, because, the reader feels, he has always known them deep in his mind. Instead, he repeats with enflamed eagerness that Kate should come to his rooms. Here, the two lovers seal their pact with words of honor on each side. She will come to his rooms on her honor if he will stay on in Venice on his honor.

This is a most blasphemous scene, not religiously, but humanly blasphemous against the sacred bond between the most closely united lovers. Shrewdly taking advantage of the situation, Densher succeeds in manipulating Kate physically and spiritually. Once he releases his desire in such a situation, his pure passion for his adored lady loses its magical power. This is the beginning of their final separation.

After her departure from Venice with her aunt, he continues his double life between the two girls. Even though he is immersed in Kate's aftertaste in his rooms, he makes his daily visit to Milly's palace. He does not pretend to be Milly's lover in his talks nor in his own mind; he feels as if he were repeating his visit to his afflicted sister. And he makes their relationship less guilty by making her accept the notion that they are "indissoluble good friends," with Milly playing a spontaneous American girl, and Densher appreciating her as such.

As the days pass, he cannot but be deeply affected by the fact that Milly is living her passion for him while staring death in the face, and that her life is absolutely in his hands. Because of his great concern about her, Kate's ghost in his room comes to lose its magical power. After leaving the palace one day, instead of coming home directly, he drops in at a café, remaining there, "all motionless, for three hours on end" (II: 252). In the three weeks after Kate's departure, his concern for the dying girl becomes stronger than his loyalty to his lover.

With his need simply to be kind to Milly, he feels himself almost clear of duplicity in their relationship, which he really is in his inclination and willful self-image. But in reality, he is Kate's pledged accomplice in their plot against Milly. Without doubt the deep gap between his inclination and reality plays havoc with his nerves. So, declined admittance to her palace one day, he is plunged into strong agitation and confusion, as if he, instead of Milly, had got a deadly blow. What he cannot bear is to be regarded suspiciously by her servant as if he were a fortune hunter, which he really is.

His violent mental reaction to Lord Mark's figure in the stormy Venetian streets reveals his strong desire to escape by making the other fortune hunter

out to be the regular villain of a melodrama: "The vice in the air [. . .] was too much like the breath of fate. The weather had changed, the rain was ugly, the wind wicked, the sea impossible, *because* of Lord Mark" (II: 263). And after his night of reflection, he finds a perfect self-serving answer: "the only delicate and honourable way of treating a person in such a state was to treat her as *he*, Merton Densher, did," and "his sense of contrast, to the advantage of Merton Densher, became a sense of relief, and that in turn a sense of escape" (II:265). Thus, by taking advantage of Milly's crisis, he tries to find his way out of his involvement with her fate.

But he cannot run away from Milly with a clear conscience. Waiting for a note from the palace, with his taste for ordeal and solitude, he feels there is a deep gap between Kate and himself. And with the appearance and the prolonged stay of Mrs. Stringham with her message that Milly has turned her face to the wall, he realizes that Kate's presence has evaporated from his rooms. The elder lady puts him to the test with her appeal: to save Milly's life, does he consent to deny Lord Mark's words to her?

He comes to meet Milly's London doctor, Sir Luke, at the station, with his anticipation: "*he* [the doctor] would somehow let him off" (II: 301). Alone in his rooms waiting for the news from the palace, he feels as if he were at the bottom of the abyss with his inescapable fate lying before him. While he guides the doctor around Venice, Sir Luke, a man of the world who knew how to carry off "the business of making odd things natural" (II: 305), says nothing but that he has saved Milly from her crisis. Densher feels: "He was *being* let off; dealt with in the only way that didn't aggravate his responsibility" (II: 304-05). But at the last moment at the station, the doctor gives him Milly's message that she would like to receive him at her palace. "So Densher, held after the train had gone, sharply reflected; so he reflected, asking himself into what abyss it pushed him . . ." (II: 309).

Thus the most dominant feature in Densher's mind after he learns of Milly's crisis is his desire to escape by any means. But now he has to descend into his abyss to decide his way, that is, either to deny Lord Mark's words to save Milly's life, or to confirm them in order to save himself from being a liar, to which he is averse more than anything else. There will be no way out.

It is Milly who delivers Densher from his abysmal dilemma. This is the meaning of their last meeting. Their farewell scene is indirectly presented through his later reflections and his reports to Kate and Mrs. Lowder back in London, a few weeks after the event. Here, more than ever, his desire to evade his responsibility is clear. The reader's interpretation of the unwritten scene can be different from the protagonist-reflector-reporter's. My new psycho-realistic

reading of the scene is as follows: Milly would have liked to hear him deny Lord Mark's words so as to make it possible for them to continue to meet just as before, as if nothing fatal had happened between them. But she asked him nothing while he was with her for twenty minutes. And he told her nothing voluntarily.

Betraying Mrs. Stringham's appeal and Sir Luke's suggestion, and most probably Milly's silent yearning, Densher did not act out his appointed role in this crucial scene. He was a mere spectator, while Milly heroically played out her role of a proud American girl. She improvised her speech, with her beauty and strength, saying that there was no need for him to continue to stay in Venice for her sake. He was willfully blind to the fact that his distance and reticence dealt her a far more brutal blow than Lord Mark's descent and disclosure. Kate says in the last scene of the novel: "she died for you then [the day you last saw her] that you might understand her" (II: 403). Densher killed Milly's will to live at the final stage of her life, without clearly acknowledging it.

But Milly's pathetic yearning for life and love under the cover of her heroic performance struck him in to the core, and significantly affects his feeling for Kate. He does not go straight back to her, and when they meet after three weeks in London, he finds a peculiar strangeness in her handsome presence, a harshness and glibness in her tone. Answering her suggestion as to his denial of Lord Mark's words to Milly, he declares with a decisive tone new to him: "I wouldn't have made my denial, in such conditions only to take it back afterwards" (II: 325). Kate, unaware of his change, declares that they have succeeded in their game of getting Milly's money.

Densher's talk with Mrs. Lowder, eulogizing Milly, her tragic heroism and her forgiveness as if she were already dead, is nothing but his way to escape from her horrible reality, her ordeal of consciousness in her physical pain and spiritual suffering. He throws himself into the elder lady's huge sentimentalism to escape from his own ordeal of consciousness, as if he himself had been through the horrible experience. Mrs. Lowder likes him more than ever now, because, as the reader will be informed in a later scene, she got from Lord Mark, who came back from his descent on Milly in Venice, the false impression that Densher was sincere in his courting of Milly, and that he loved *her* (II: 381). He has been involved in Mrs. Lowder's huge diplomacy, and becomes its most important part. Densher, without clearly realizing that he is being manipulated, comes to be conscious of his huge insincerity, while gossiping endlessly with her about the "dead Milly" in her gorgeous drawing room.

What Densher cannot bear is to judge himself guilty of duplicity in his relationship with Milly. So, to "right everything that's wrong," he meets Kate in

the Park as before, urging her to announce their marriage immediately: "We shall be so right [...] we shall be strong; we shall only wonder at our past fear. It will seem an ugly madness. It will seem a bad dream... It's as I am that you must have me" (II: 348). Here he is desperately sincere in his attempt to get rid of Milly's possible legacy this way, even if it gives the final deadly blow to the dying girl. Kate's idea is just the opposite; she will consent to his proposal, only if he is sure to inherit Milly's legacy. She once more puts him under her control by taking advantage of his physical passion for her, in which she still has undiminished confidence.

Densher cannot escape from Milly's legacy after all. She sent him a letter arranged to arrive on Christmas Eve, when she dies in Venice watched by Mrs. Stringham and Sir Luke. Her letter to him is her personal gift to the man she loved till the very end, an even more precious one than her legacy to him. His giving it to Kate saying it is hers is his final cruel act to the dead girl. The deepest motive of his action is his desire to escape from what he has done to Milly, and what Milly has done to him. He hopes to be spared knowing its content, and surely he is spared: Kate throws it unopened into the fire. He will miss the letter most poignantly after it becomes irredeemably lost.

Left alone with Kate and their expectation of Milly's legacy, he would like to cling to Mrs. Stringham as to "a small emergent rock in the vast waste of waters" (II: 391) in order to be protected from public exposure. Then he feels he can never escape from Kate's knowledge: "Only Kate at all events knew [...] she was also the last person interested to tell it; in spite of which it was as if his *act*, so deeply associated with her and never to be recalled nor recovered, was abroad on the winds of the worlds." He is afraid that his image is damaged in the human eyes, in the public's and in Kate's. What he fears after all is his own mind: "His honesty, as he viewed it with Kate, was the very element of that menace . . ." (II: 391). In this situation, they do not often meet, and in their occasional meetings and outings, Kate is better and more agreeable company for him, with her great talent for life more conspicuous than before. He finds himself admiring her as if she were a stranger at dinner table.

And while they are waiting for their final fate, something rare happens to him:

This something was only a thought. . . . The thought was all his own, and his intimate companion was the last person he might have shared it with. He kept it back like a favourite pang; left it behind him, so to say, when he went out, but came home again the sooner for the certainty of finding it there. (II: 395-96)

He is suspended between his memories of the stillness of dead Milly's world and the inevitable harsh sounds of life embodied in Kate.

In the final scene of *The Wings of the Dove*, in Densher's room, the two lovers confront each other over Milly's legacy which has materialized in the form of a legal letter from New York. Densher has made up his mind; he will have nothing to do with the money, the constant reminder of his and Kate's ugly plot against the dying girl. As far as money is concerned, he has been consistent throughout the story. He was deeply united with Kate in their poverty, urging her to marry him just as they were several times in the story. And in the shabby drawing room of her sister, "he felt himself less appointedly a stranger than she [Kate]" (II: 364). On the other hand, Kate is ready to accept Milly's money; she cannot afford not to. She is doomed to live as a social value with whatever money is available to her.

They have to face their respective truths, however terrible their gap may be.

It had come to the point really that they showed each other pale faces, and that all the unspoken between them looked out of their eyes in a dim terror of their further conflict. Something even rose between them in one of their short silences—something that was like an appeal from each to the other not to be too true. (II: 401-02)

Densher leaves Kate to decide their fate. She will have Densher without money, or money without him. She says he has fallen in love with the dead Milly, but this is not true. He has never loved Milly either alive or dead, in the way he has loved Kate. He is sincere in his final proposal to Kate: "I'll marry you, mind you, in an hour." But her final words are: "We shall never be again as we were!" (II: 405).

Initially full of life and love to share with the two girls, Densher has failed to realize their potentialities as well as his own. In his relationship with Kate, while appreciating and enjoying the life in her, he could not sink to the bottom of her predicament to save her from her doomed state as a social value nor to share it with her by abandoning or debasing his thought. In his relationship with Milly, he abandons her to her solitary death at the very end. All he can do is to share her loss after her death. In the end he has to live with his thoughts, egotism being his only companion. This is the final message of *The Wings of the Dove*.

Robert B. Pippin, along with others, finds in Densher early symptoms of the modernists, with their loss of definite identification and morality. In my interpretation, Densher is partly the author's surrogate to deal with his "very

old motive" of *The Wings of the Dove*, as mentioned in the Preface to its New York edition (I: v). Strictly speaking, the old motive is not the tragic figure of Minny Temple herself, but James's unfulfilled relationship with her in their youth.

There are some parallels between Densher and James in their attitudes toward dying and dead girls. While deeply appreciating Milly's "disconcerting poetry," Densher will not commit himself to her fate, abandoning her to die in Venice. In a similar way, James enjoyed Minny's charming company along with other members of his select circle while she was well and active. In the last part of the Second Book of his *Autobiography, Notes of a Son and Brother* she is attributed with being the symbol of youth for both William and Henry James. They felt her death "as the end of our youth" (544).

But James, as is well known, was not Minny's supporting companion during her last months. It was John Chipman Grey, a lawyer, who came forward to support her as her friend and correspondent. James started on his European tour in the spring of 1869 to educate himself as an aspiring novelist as well as to receive some medical treatment. In the opening part of the unfinished *The Middle Year* (the Third Book of his *Autobiography*), James comes back to the problem of what one's youth is:

We are never old, that is we never cease easily to be young, for all life at the same time: youth is an army, the whole battalion of our faculties and our freshneses, our passion and our illusions, on a considerably reluctant march into the enemy's country, the country of the general lost freshness. (547)

Then he comes to his point:

It was at any rate impossible to have been younger than I found myself, from the first day of March 1869 in the face of an opportunity that affected me then and there as the happiest, the most interesting, the most alluring and beguiling, that could ever have opened before a somewhat disabled young man who was about to complete his twenty-sixth year. (548)

Here he admits that while Minny was courageously living her doomed life in America, he found another kind of youth in Europe, a youth which was more exciting and thrilling than the one he had innocently enjoyed in her company.

Lyndall Gorton's biographical work makes clear James's egotistic attitude toward Minny during her last months. When he started on the Grand Tour, she was glad he would enjoy himself in Europe, heartened by the prospect of their meeting there. In his absence she cherished the dream of

spending a winter in Italy. It came to assume some reality in the winter of 1869-70 with her plan to go to Europe with her relatives. Hearing of her plan, James wrote a long letter to her from Florence, about which Gordon says the following:

Her 'plan' was Minny's lifeline through the winter in Pelham, but it held only if she could rely on her cousin to take up the farther end. On 26 January, she received a long letter from Florence, in which Henry James spoke of homesickness. Since it was Minny's habit to mention any form of encouragement, and since for once she had nothing hopeful to say, it is possible that unintentionally, this letter made her 'drop' when he broke it to her that he would not wait in Europe until she arrived. She never replied. (117-18)

James's homesickness is, the reader feels together with Gordon, a transparent excuse not to wait for her arrival in Italy. In midwinter he left Italy, reaching England in early February. Milly died in March, and James started for America on April 30th.

Minny's Italian tour would have been unrealistic with or without his help, but it seemed as if James had killed her will to live by crushing her dream. Learning of her death while in Malvern, he wrote three long letters, to his mother, to his brother William and to his friend Grace Norton, full of his sense of loss, admiration and love for his late cousin. At the same time, his sense of relief is clear. To his mother he says: "There is absolute balm in the thought of poor Minny and rest—rest and immortal absence!" (I: 219) To his brother: "I'm really not sorry not to have seen her materially changed and thoroughly thankful to have been spared the sight of her suffering" (I: 226).

Similar to the case of Densher and Milly, Minny became James's intimate companion in soul after her death. But James was not a mere victim of his loss. He vigorously exploited her memory as the richest source of inspiration for his artistic works throughout his career as an ambitious novelist. Minny became the archetype of the American girls in his numerous novels and stories. Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* and Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove* are the most important heroines modeled after her. In the former, early death is the fate of Isabel's cousin Ralph, a kind of surrogate of the author to deal with the heroine's young life. Here James/Ralph dies so that Minny/Isabel can live on in Europe, however harsh it may be. In the latter, Minny/Milly dies leaving James/Densher to be confronted with his own mind and egotism, the egotism of an aspiring novelist in James's case.

The treatment of the heroine in the latter part of *The Wings of the Dove* is indirect and circumstantial, which the author calls in the Preface "some

kinder, some merciful indirection" (I: xxii). It seems as if James was still afraid to deal with her last days directly. Milly's letter to Densher is an important prop in the story, indicating her forgiveness for his final unkindness. But there is no chance for the reader, nor for the characters, to know its contents. James dared not write it in the novel. The unwritten and unread letter reminds the reader of the "long never-to-be-answered letter" James wrote to Minny from Florence, to which he referred in his letter to her mother quoted above (*Letters* I: 221) neither Minny's letter to him nor his reply to her remains.

Minny Temple was a spontaneous and copious letter writer, writing many letters to her confidant John Grey while she was living under the shadow of death. Those quoted in James's *Autobiography* are full of courage and charm in the midst of her suffering and fear of impending death. Alfred Habegger's research reveals another case of James's egotism concerning his work and its source: James edited and rewrote Minny's original letters rather freely, violating their authentic value as historical and personal documents (272-93). For James the Master the artistic effect of his *Autobiography* was everything. Indeed, as he admits in his letter to Henry Adams, he was "that queer monster the artist" (IV: 706).

After making full use of Minny's letters in his *Autobiography*, James burnt them. Leon Edel says that his burning of her letters was consistent with his belief in "the law of not leaving personal and private documents at the mercy of any accidents" (*Henry James: The Master* 437). Unfortunately for the Master, Minny's original letters have survived in the form of long-hand copies made by Alice James and Margaret Mary James (William James's widow and his daughter), who duplicated them before sending them to the novelist at Grey's request.

James would deserve harsh criticism in the name of warm humanity, were it not for the fact that he was a most devoted Artist who staked his whole life on novel writing, aiming at and yearning for both artistic and professional success. James the aspiring novelist in his youth could not afford to sacrifice his time and energy for "some irresistible mission to reconcile her [Minny] to a world to which she was essentially hostile" (I: 219). His rewriting Minny's letters in his *Autobiography* would seem to be almost unpardonable, had it not been for the fact that the old James, with his own death somehow coming into his view, had to make his final effort to present himself as the Master novelist, as well as to secure his financial gain, through his exceptionally profitable autobiographical work. This problem is discussed in detail by Edel in *The Master* (475-79).

James was a novelist who would appreciate the comfortable life secured by his financial success, while feeling disgusted at the vulgarity and corruption of the modern society caused by lust for money. To be true to his own mind, he could not achieve financial success like his protagonist Merton Densher, a born writer who has no prospect of becoming rich by his pen. At the end Densher gives up his life embodied in Kate to be true to his own thought. James's and Densher's views of Kate are ambivalent: neither could help appreciating her talent for great life, though they would not accept her method of getting money.

James yearned for the life, a great life if possible, of a dedicated Novelist. His sense of loss must have been huge when he realized that his fate had been the solitary struggle of a great under-appreciated novelist. He could not get rid of the obsessional feeling that something had been missed in his youth because of his egotism, which could not be undone throughout his whole life. From his sense of loss were born his masterpieces, which as a whole, a century after his death, came to be hailed as one of the greatest monuments to the modern novel.

✎

Yasuko TANIMOTO¹
Shinshu University, Japan



WORKS BY HENRY JAMES

The Novels and Tales of Henry James, 26 vols. New York: Scribner. 1907-1909, 1917.
New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1971-79.
The Wings of the Dove, 2 vols., 1909, in *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, 1976.
The Portrait of a Lady, 2 vols., 1908, in *The Novels and Tales of Henry James*, 1977.
Autobiography, 1913, 1914, 1917. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
Letters, 4 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974-84.

¹ This article is the revised version of the paper read at the International Conference of the Henry James Society, "Henry James Today," July 5-9, 2002, American University of Paris, France. A slightly modified version is to be published as a chapter in Yasuko Tanimoto, *A New Reading of The Wings of the Dove*, University Press of America, 2004.

OTHER WORKS CITED

- Edel, Leon. *The Life of Henry James*, 5 vols. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1954-72.
- Gordon, Lyndall. *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and His Art*. New York: Norton, 1998.
- Habegger, Alfred. "James's Rewriting of Minny Temple's Letters," 1986. *On Henry James: The Best from American Literature*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1990.
- Puppin, Robert B. *Henry James and Modern Moral Life*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.