

# **The Wings of the Dove Study Guide**

## **The Wings of the Dove by Henry James**

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# Plot Summary

In *The Wings of the Dove*, Henry James provides a rather unique approach to the timeless issues of selfishness, greed, conspiracy, love, and betrayal - universal themes in literature since early Greek theater. James sets his novel in turn-of-the-century London, a society that remains steeped in Victorian tradition and social mores that appear ridiculous to the contemporary youthful reader.

Kate Croy is in love with a poor journalist, Merton Densher. Unfortunately, despite her meager upbringing, Kate is now living with her wealthy and socially elite Aunt Maud Lowder, a woman who will never agree to their marriage. Social mores demand Maud's approval, and Kate and Merton are therefore at an impasse in their relationship. Enter Milly Theale, a lovely, altruistic heiress from America, who has no family and who is terminally ill. Once apprised of Milly's medical situation, Kate launches a plan to achieve marriage with Densher. He must court Milly, marry her, wait for her to die, inherit her fortune, and then, as a wealthy widower, marry Kate with Maud's blessing. Maud is pushing this new relationship, as well, for, in it, she sees the end to the threat of Kate marrying beneath her socioeconomic status.

Unfortunately, both Milly and Densher throw wrenches into the plans and schemes of both Kate and Maud. Milly is a thoroughly unselfish young lady, who, faced with her own mortality, has decided that her purpose shall be to bring peace and happiness to those she considers her friends. Densher, for his part, becomes increasingly uncomfortable with his part in Kate's scheme, and, in the end, though spurred somewhat by the treachery of Lord Mark, who has revealed to Milly the love of Kate and Densher, cannot continue the ruse and confesses to Milly that he and Kate have been secretly engaged for quite some time. Milly, upon learning this, urges Densher to return to Kate, in order to pursue his true happiness. As well, Milly leaves a large bequest to Densher, upon her death, hoping to seal the marriage for him and Kate. Densher, now decidedly miserable about his part in the plot, presents Kate with a difficult choice. They must both renounce the bequest and enter marriage free of any taint, or, if she refuses this choice, she will be given the entire bequest and Densher will not marry her. Kate, realizing that Densher is most certainly in love with the memory of the beautiful spirit that Milly was, walks out, stating that they will never have the love they once possessed.

Among the cast of characters, Milly and Densher, along with Susan Stringham, Milly's companion, are seen as the ethical, principled individuals who must be true to their basic moral principles. Milly stands above all, however, having spent the final days of her life with concern for others. Kate, whose scheme has backfired, has lost the man she loves because she cannot incur the wrath of her aunt and thus lose her lifestyle of opulence by marrying a man and entering a life of lower class. Maud and Lord Mark, although to the modern reader firm in their

morally bankrupt elitist attitudes, have remained true to their characters and emerge with their stations intact.



# Book First: Chapters I-II

## Book First: Chapters I-II Summary

Kate Croy is a beautiful young lady whose family is in disarray. Her mother and two brothers have predeceased her; her sister Marion is a poor widow with four children, and Kate is perhaps the only family member with some promise for a future. She is visiting her father, a man who has obviously engaged in unethical or illegal activities and who is now ill. When Kate offers to move into his meager quarters in order to care for him, he becomes angry and informs her that she must remain with her wealthy Aunt Maud in order to remain a young lady of privilege and worthy of marriage to one of high stature.

Chapter two provides a bit more background on Kate and her family. She has been living with Aunt Maud since her mother's death, and, while she enjoys the opulent lifestyle, views Maud as overbearing and controlling, capable of instilling fear if her directives are not followed. Kate has a young suitor, Merton Densher, of whom she is quite fond; however, Marion discourages the relationship because Maud will never approve. Densher is not a man of means, and Maud has already located the appropriate marriage partner for Kate - Lord Mark.

## Book First: Chapters I-II Analysis

Kate has come from a clearly dysfunctional family. Her father has obviously been a ne'er do well, and it is implicated that he has engaged in certain unethical, if not illegal, activities. Sister Marion is no better off. Having married a man of lowly status, she is now a widow with four children, struggling always to provide for herself and her children. Kate is perhaps the one redeeming feature of this family - young, beautiful, and unmarried. Perhaps Aunt Maud sees in Kate the child she has never had and fancies herself a surrogate mother who can provide the lifestyle and "station" for Kate that she would otherwise not enjoy. There is, as well, an element of control, as Maud attempts to design every activity and social connection for her niece. For her part, Kate exhibits ambivalence toward her current station. While she certainly enjoys the privileges of living with her aunt, she has some desire for independence, particularly relative to her romantic relationships. She is currently keeping company with Merton Densher, a poor journalist, but must do so in secret for fear of Aunt Maud's disapproval.



## Book Second: Chapters III-IV

### Book Second: Chapters III-IV Summary

Merton Densher works for a London newspaper and is a pleasant and educated young man without great ambition. He and Kate have been seeing one another regularly, having met at a party. The relationship is not formalized, however, until Densher begins to call upon Aunt Maud, as is the socially appropriate method in early twentieth century London. Though Maud is cordial, it is clear to Kate that her aunt is not in favor of this relationship due to Densher's lack of socioeconomic status. For his part, Densher realizes that he does not have sufficient income to support himself and a wife, though he is certainly willing to put more effort into career advancement. Ultimately, Densher proposes marriage, a proposal Kate accepts, so long as he obtains Aunt Maud's approval.

Maud is calm and benevolent throughout chapter four as she and Densher discuss his proposal. She appeals to his obvious desire that Kate have the very best and his knowledge that he cannot provide well enough for her. Densher accepts her current objection with the belief that he will alter her opinions in the future. Before there is time for any further developments, however, Densher's employer assigns him to a project in America, one which will take a number of weeks. He is clearly torn, but Kate encourages him to go for the sake of his career. She further declares that they are engaged, and Merton agrees.

### Book Second: Chapters III-IV Analysis

These two chapters begin to demonstrate the social structure in England at the turn of the century. Social classes remain within their own groups and marriages obviously occur only with the approval of parents or guardians. In order to "court" a young lady, it is imperative that a young man request permission and call upon the young lady at her home. In the case of Kate and Merton, the situation is completely unacceptable to Aunt Maud, though it is also clear that she enjoys him and respects his intellect. She believes, moreover, that once Densher is away in America, she will be able to steer Kate in a different romantic direction. There is a small hint that perhaps Maud has "arranged" for this overseas assignment so that she may implement her plans for Kate.



# Book Third: Chapters V - VI

## Book Third: Chapters V - VI Summary

Susan Stringham and Milly Theale become acquainted in Boston. Milly, an New York City heiress with no family, is visiting friends in Boston; Susan is a childless widow who writes short stories for magazines in order to support herself. Shortly after her return to New York, Milly invites Susan to travel to Europe as her companion, an invitation Susan gladly accepts, concluding that, somehow, her purpose is to direct Milly's life. It is while Susan and Milly are in Europe that there is a hint that perhaps Milly is not well; she had been ill for several days prior to their departure and decides that the Swiss Alps will be a healthier environment. After some time there, however, Milly abruptly decides that London must be the next stop, as she would now prefer to be around people.

In chapter six, while in New York, Milly had met Merton Densher and had invited him to her home on several occasions. She has promised to look him up if she is ever in London. By coincidence, Susan has an old friend in London as well - Maud Manningham. As a child growing up in Europe, Susan and Maud had attended the same boarding school and have maintained occasional correspondence through the years. Susan remembers that Maud had married well, and is determined to call on her once they arrive in London.

## Book Third: Chapters V - VI Analysis

Lives are beginning to mesh as these two chapters unfold. It becomes obvious that Kate, Merton, Maud, Milly and Susan will all come to know one another in London. Milly's motives appear to be quite innocent in contacting Merton, as do Susan's motives in calling upon Maud. Yet, there is important foreshadowing in these two chapters. Milly is young and without heirs; one certainly must suspect Susan's motives for her self-imposed purpose of directing such a wealthy young lady's life. On the other hand, there is a sense that Milly may have an illness that is more far-reaching than her few days of illness in New York. James has succeeded in interjecting some mystery for the reader and thus the motivation to continue reading.



## Book Fourth: Chapters VII - IX

### Book Fourth: Chapters VII - IX Summary

Chapter seven opens with a dinner party at Maud's home, during which time Susan and Milly meet Kate and Lord Mark, who obviously would like to marry Kate. He is much older, however, and Kate appears completely disinterested. Close in age, Kate and Milly strike up a friendship and begin to explore London together. Milly is quite generous with Kate on these outings, enjoying her company and lavishing her with exquisite meals and gifts. Maud, meanwhile, is entertaining Susan throughout chapter eight.

Maud is quite shocked, as chapter nine proceeds, to discover from Susan that Milly would like to locate Merton Densher, and Susan is surprised as well that Maud would know him. In her attempts to maintain some distance between Densher and Kate, Maud asks Susan and Milly not to bring up Densher's name to Kate. She is hoping that Kate has "moved on" and is not pining away for the journalist, who as yet may not even have returned from America. The subject of Densher is addressed with Kate by Marion Condrip, Kate's sister. Marion explains to Kate that, even though Densher is in love with her, she should not consider him as a marriage prospect. The problem with him, according to Marion, is his poverty.

### Book Fourth: Chapters VII - IX Analysis

Personalities are revealed in greater depth during this section. One cannot help but see the difference between the two wealthy women, Maud and Milly. Maud uses her wealth and accompanying power to control others. Milly, on the other hand, is generous without concern for control or power. She is portrayed as an innocent, albeit perhaps naive, sensitive and caring individual who simply wants happiness for others, and if her wealth can contribute to that happiness, she experiences pleasure. Marion Condrip, on the other hand, without wealth or power, is also attempting to control Kate. She adamantly opposes any relationship between Kate and Densher, for there would be no benefit to her. If, on the other hand, Kate is able to marry well, Susan will benefit in material ways. Marion has a difficult life, to be certain, but she is shown to be calculating and rather callous.



# Book Fifth: Chapters X - XVI

## Book Fifth: Chapters X - XVI Summary

The story's pace picks up during the next seven chapters. Chapters ten and eleven focus on Maud's continued attempts to control the behaviors of others. She attempts to convince Milly to remain in London, rather than return to the continent, as Milly is considering. As chapter eleven ends, Milly has made an appointment with a local doctor and requests that Kate accompany her. The doctor sees Milly twice, informing her that the condition is incurable and that she should leave London for a better climate in order to feel better as she endures her illness. As Milly walks the streets of London through chapter thirteen, she contemplates the remaining time she has and determines not to reveal the information to Kate, but, indeed, to leave London.

At a farewell dinner at Milly's hotel, Maud requests a favor of Milly. She wants to know if Merton Densher has returned to London and if Kate has spoken of him. Milly is not happy to be used in this fashion and suggests that Maud should perhaps ask these questions of Kate herself. Milly and Kate's conversation reveals nothing regarding Densher; however, Kate indicates no interest in Lord Mark, suggesting perhaps that he is now interested in Milly. As chapter fifteen ends, Sir Luke Strett visits with Susan to inform her of Milly's condition while Millie is visiting the National Gallery.

Chapter sixteen brings Milly, Kate and Merton Densher together. Milly is surprised to encounter Densher and Kate. They, of course, confront her in a friendly manner, and she invites them to lunch with her at the hotel. There, they see Susan, who, having met with Dr. Strett, takes Kate aside, presumably to tell her about Milly. Densher entertains Milly with tales of his remaining travels in America.

## Book Fifth: Chapters X - XVI Analysis

The revelation that Milly is terminally ill is certainly not a surprise, as the reader has been given many prior hints. Her reaction is calm and accepting as she considers how to spend the rest of her life. As she walks through London, active people are all around her, and she determines that she, too, shall remain active until the end. Her decision not to reveal her condition to Kate is a comment on her character, as she does not wish to burden or sadden others. Further, she is clearly uncomfortable with Maud's attempts to use her to gain information regarding Densher. James is clearly developing Milly into a courageous, altruistic young woman.





# Book Sixth: Chapters XVII - XXI

## Book Sixth: Chapters XVII - XXI Summary

It appears that Merton Densher had returned to London the previous day and had been met at the station by Kate. They have spent the morning together in order to discuss their future, and have run into Milly. Upon taking leave of Milly and Susie, Densher puts Kate in a carriage and takes a walk, in order to contemplate his situation and his future. For her part, Kate has determined to speak of his return to Maud and to request that he be allowed to visit.

Chapter eighteen finds Densher at Lancaster Gate, where he and Kate are allowed the privacy of a room to themselves. Knowing that Maud will never approve of their marriage, Kate is devising a plan, one that involves Densher seeing Milly. He believes, of course, that this behavior would be cruel to Milly. Not wanting to reveal Milly's condition to Densher yet, Kate simply state that Densher is to trust him, and that Milly must not know of their feelings for one another.

In chapter nineteen, Densher is invited to dine at Lancaster Gate the following evening and is informed, as well, that Susie and Milly will also attend. Susie arrives alone, as Milly is again ill. During much of the meal, the subject is Milly. Maud is bent upon fostering a relationship between Densher and her, hinting as well that their relationship in New York may have been more than casual.

In chapter twenty, during the after-dinner social time, Kate and Densher have opportunities to talk. Kate insists that Milly has fallen for Densher and that she seems to be quite ill. She asks Densher to give his time to Milly before she dies. Upon leaving, he has a final word with Maud as well. She encourages him to visit Milly and to develop a relationship that will obviously be advantageous to him. When Milly and Susan leave London, Maud explains, she and Kate shall follow and will send for him as well. As the conversation continues, it becomes clear the Maud is now arranging the marriage of Densher and Milly.

In chapter twenty-one, Densher visits Milly at her hotel the following day and finds her pleasant, quite charming and completely recovered. He begins to wonder if Kate has been untruthful regarding Milly's illness. Perhaps Kate no longer loves him and is attempting to let him down gently by matching him up with another woman. The two young people find much about which to talk, however, and decide, as well, to take a carriage ride together.

## Book Sixth: Chapters XVII - XXI Analysis

Conspiracy abounds in these five chapters. Maud, obviously believing that Densher's emotions can be influenced by the promise of a wealthy marriage, continues to encourage him to pursue Milly. Kate, knowing that Milly will soon die, sees an



opportunity for herself. If Densher marries Milly, he will inherit a fortune upon her death and then she and Densher can marry with Maud's complete approval. Densher, for his part, is confused and contemplating the possibility that Kate no longer loves him. Milly and Densher are both the victims of manipulation, though they do not yet realize it, and the reader comes to see Kate as not quite the lovely person she was originally portrayed to be. The reader, indeed, is uncomfortable with the "plot" Kate has devised, because it involves using others in very manipulative ways for her own happiness.



## Book Seventh: Chapters XXII - XXV

### Book Seventh: Chapters XXII - XXV Summary

Maud is finally informed of Milly's condition by Susan. Together, the women conspire to push for the marriage of Milly to Densher as quickly as possible. Susie wishes for Milly to have come happiness in her remaining time; Maud has her own reasons, and they are not to promote Milly's happiness.

In chapter twenty-three, prior to her departure for the continent, Milly visits Sir Strett once more. She is looking rather well, contemplating her impending residency in Venice, and informs Strett that Maud and Kate will be accompanying her, along with Susie of course, and that Merton Densher will be joining them shortly after their arrival. For his part, Strett states that he will be in Venice within a few months and will look in on her at that time.

Chapter twenty-four finds Milly and her entourage in Venice. Milly has a personal assistant, Eugenio, who acts as both a guide and "protector". He has become thoroughly loyal to Milly and has secured beautiful quarters in a castle for their stay. There has been a whirlwind of activity and sightseeing, and Milly is clearly quite happy and content. Sending her friends off for an afternoon, Milly has some precious solitude, but is interrupted by the arrival of Lord Mark.

In chapter twenty-five, Lord Mark discovers that Milly is fatally ill. He immediately proposes to her and is rejected just as quickly. As their conversation continues, she encourages him to pursue Kate and informs him, that, contrary to his belief, Kate has told her that she is not in love with anyone else. Lord Mark prepares to leave just as Merton Densher arrives.

### Book Seventh: Chapters XXII - XXV Analysis

It appears that Lord Mark is not above pursuing a fortune for himself. The reader has been given hints along the way that, while of noble background and heritage, Lord Mark may not be as wealthy as many others in his social class. Milly, true to her character, is attempting to assist Lord Mark in pursuit of Kate, whom she truly believes is not in love with Densher. Further, she is genuinely happy to see her friends enjoying Venice and is willing to rent a beautiful castle in order that they may reside in luxury and comfort. Densher's arrival motivates one to continue reading in an effort to discover how the plotting of Maud, Susie and Kate will further unfold.



## Book Eighth: Chapters XXVI - XXVIII

### Book Eighth: Chapters XXVI - XXVIII Summary

Densher is not enjoying his stay in Venice. He does not like his accommodations and he is feeling manipulated by both Kate and Maud. He is being pushed into spending time with Milly and looks upon her as a sister, not a love interest. Further, he is irritated with himself for coming to Venice at all, being "summoned" by Maud, and succumbing to that summons. To Densher, Milly is a lovely, peaceful individual who has spread her wings to encompass all of the people in her life and to provide for their happiness.

Chapter twenty-seven shows Densher and Kate having some time to themselves during a morning outing and taking the opportunity to discuss the relationships among themselves, Maud and Milly. Kate informs Densher that Milly has refused Lord Mark's proposal because she is in love with him instead. Densher does not deny this but still cannot understand what is becoming of their own relationship. Kate continues to posit that, so long as Maud sees a relationship developing between Densher and Milly, she will not try to destroy theirs. Densher insists that Kate profess her love for him or he will not continue the charade. He suggests that she prove her love to him by visiting him in his hotel room. Before she can answer, Maud and Susan rejoin them.

Densher arrives for dinner and a party at the castle as chapter twenty-eight opens. He is encouraged by Susie to speak with Sir Strett, who has arrived with his niece, regarding Milly's condition. Once Densher has the confirmation that Milly is indeed dying, Kate presses him to move forward with the plan. He is to marry Milly as soon as possible so that he may inherit the money. Kate is perfectly happy to wait for these events and tells Densher that she and Maud will be returning to London. He, on the other hand, is to remain in Venice, so that the plan may proceed quickly.

### Book Eighth: Chapters XXVI - XXVIII Analysis

Densher's love for Kate is creating a great deal of unhappiness for him as he becomes part of Kate's plan. He is clearly miserable in Venice, living in a shoddy hotel room and being "scheduled" for daily visits with Milly. He becomes more distrustful of Kate, in spite of his loving her, and insists that she visit him in his room to "prove" her love to him - a thoroughly unacceptable act in society at that time. His inner struggle is apparent, as he attempts to justify what he believes to be dishonest behavior in order to ultimately have the woman he loves.

The metaphor Densher uses in describing Milly as a dove is wholly appropriate. Milly is a lover of peace and seeks peace and contentment for those around her, even as she is dying. As well, she has accepted her fate with peaceful resignation, determined not to let her illness negatively impact the lives of herself and those around her.



## Book Ninth: Chapters XXIX - XXXII

### Book Ninth: Chapters XXIX - XXXII Summary

Prior to her departure, Kate has visited Densher in his hotel, and their love has been consummated. He is remaining in Venice, as requested by Kate, in order to fulfill the plan to marry Milly, but is obsessed with the memory of his final moments with Kate. Each day, he visits Milly, eventually admitting to her that he has remained because of her.

In chapter thirty, for three weeks, Densher continues his visits with Milly. On the twentieth day, however, he is turned away by Eugenio, who states that Milly and Susan are not receiving guests. Confused, Densher walks the city and spies Lord Mark in a cafe. Clearly, Lord Mark is in Venice in pursuit of Milly and has most certainly visited her on that day. Densher stays away for three days and hears nothing from Milly. He is contemplating many scenarios. Perhaps Milly has accepted Lord Mark's proposal, in which case he has let Kate down. On the other hand, Kate has safely returned to London and is removed from their "scheme", and he is now left to deal with the problem on his own. If, however, Milly has rejected Lord Mark, then Densher must determine how to circumvent Eugenio. On the third day, however, Densher receives a visit from Susan, and the situation is explained.

During chapter thirty-one, Susan explains to Densher that Milly is dying. In fact, she does not even speak. Sir Strett will not arrive for a couple of days, but an Italian doctor is currently with her. As the conversation continues, Susan tells Densher the cause of Milly's sudden deterioration. Lord Mark visited Milly and informed her that, all along, Densher and Kate have been engaged. Evidently, it is Lord Mark's hope that Milly will eventually agree to marry him, knowing that Densher is quite unavailable. Densher concludes that Kate must have revealed the engagement as she rejected a proposal from Lord Mark and that Lord Mark has revealed this information to Milly in hope of a second chance with her. Susan asks Densher to go to Milly and deny what Lord Mark has said.

Sir Strett has arrived at the opening of chapter thirty-two and presents himself to Densher's quarters, with the request that Densher accompany him on additional sightseeing. There is no talk of Milly throughout their sojourn throughout Venice, though Densher is aware the Sir Strett has had little sleep. When Densher accompanies the doctor to the station on his departure day, he learns that Milly is still alive and, indeed, a bit better. As well, Milly has asked to see him now.

### Book Ninth: Chapters XXIX - XXXII Analysis

Densher remains caught up in the schemes of others, primarily Kate's, and continues to struggle with the options of continuing to deceive Milly or "coming clean" and admitting



the true reason for his remaining in Venice. The sudden and mysterious appearance of Lord Mark is a further complication, Densher believes, and he has no idea of what Milly may now know or believe about him. Having been turned away by Eugenio and then learning of Milly's rapid decline, Densher blames himself. As well, it is the first time in the work that anger has surfaced. Densher is clearly angry with both Lord Mark and himself, although one wonders if there is not anger building against Kate as well. The moment of decision has arrived for Densher - he may choose to deny what Lord Mark has revealed to Milly and continue with the charade, or he must be honest with Milly about his feelings for both her and Kate.



# Book Tenth: Chapters XXXIII - XXXVIII

## Book Tenth: Chapters XXXIII - XXXVIII Summary

Chapter thirty-three finds Densher back in London and in contact with Kate through a letter to Maud. Kate knows that he has been back for three weeks, through letters from Susan to Maud. Milly is still alive but gravely ill and deteriorating. This decline has affected Densher significantly. During his visit to Lancaster Gate, Densher informs Kate of Lord Mark's treachery and its effect on Milly. He further states that Milly called for him and that he did, in fact, visit her one more time. He could not sacrifice his integrity and maintain the deception. During his final visit, moreover, Milly had requested that Densher leave Venice at once, so as not to be subjected to her decline and ultimate death. Kate surmises that he has actually fallen in love with Milly, and he admits as much, stating, however, that it is quite meaningless to their situation, considering that she is almost dead. Kate, for her part, justifies their behavior by insisting that Milly has at least had the passion of loving someone before she dies. Densher, for his part, feels that they are both somewhat responsible for the rapidity of Milly's decline.

Throughout thirty-four and thirty-five, Densher becomes a more frequent guest at Lancaster Gate. Maud seems to have changed her attitude toward him and shows not only great sympathy but greater acceptance as well. As the fall season progresses toward Christmas, Densher goes about his daily routine, having no further discussions with Kate relative to Milly or their own relationship. Ultimately, Densher sends a message to Kate, asking that she meet him at their traditional spot. As they stroll, he proposes that they announce their engagement immediately. They have failed in the attempt to make him wealthy and nothing will change in their near future, so there is no reasons to delay. Kate responds that there is no reason to alter their current status unless there is something he has not told her. Obviously, she is hinting that perhaps he knows he is to inherit from Milly.

Christmas arrives in chapter thirty-six. Densher has spent a sleepless Christmas Eve, contemplating his alternatives relative to Kate. As morning arrives, he dresses in his finest, with new resolve. Acting upon impulse, he walks to Sir Strett's home and, seeing a carriage, assumes that the doctor has returned from Venice. The carriage is, in fact, Maud's, and seated inside is Lord Mark. Without acknowledging him, Densher goes to the door. He learns that Sir Strett is to return the following day and that Milly is dead. Maud invites Densher to dinner, as Kate is with her sister and father, having been summoned there due to some crisis. Determined to go to Kate, Densher takes a detour, first, to church. Following church, Densher visits Kate at her sister's home. Kate knows of Milly's death, and Densher informs her that he had received a letter from Milly the previous day but has not opened it. Before he opens the letter, moreover, he wants answers from Kate relative to their relationship and potential for marriage. As well, he demands to know how Lord Mark could have known of their engagement in any other way except through Kate.



Densher and Kate continue to discuss their situation through chapter thirty-seven. Densher learns that Lord Mark is staying at Lancaster Gate through the holiday, having rented his London quarters and not desiring to go to his country quarters until the new year. For this reason, Kate has come to her sister's home. She insists that she has not revealed their engagement to anyone and that Lord Mark has probably merely guessed. Densher, however, knows that Lord Mark is not that clever. He presents the unopened letter from Milly to Kate, a letter Kate insists contains information relative to money Densher is to inherit from Milly. Angry, Kate throws the letter into the fire, informing Densher that he will be informed of his inheritance by Milly's financial institution in New York.

Indeed, Densher does eventually receive a letter from New York but, again, does not open it. He and Kate have seen one another on a few occasions during the past several weeks. During these meetings, however, they have avoided discussion of their past conspiracy, of Milly, and of their future. Upon receipt of the letter, Densher knows it is time for action. He sends a message to Kate, requesting that she visit him in his quarters. With the message he has included the letter from New York, unopened as well. She arrives not having opened the letter. He asks her to join him in refusing the bequest from Milly, as he has decided that, if he takes the money, he cannot marry Kate. If they both agree to renounce it, however, he will marry her; if she will not renounce it, he will then give her the money, and they will part. Kate's response is clear. He is obviously in love with the memory of Milly, and he must be satisfied with that. Her final words, as she departs, are, "We shall never be again as we were!"

## **Book Tenth: Chapters XXXIII - XXXVIII Analysis**

Densher has done some serious soul-searching throughout this book. While still in Italy, he realizes that his integrity has been sacrificed by the manipulation of Kate and that he must therefore reveal the truth about his attention to her. This, in turn, results in Milly's further deterioration, although she insists that he return to Kate and his life in London immediately. To regain his integrity, moreover, he has determined that he and Kate must both refuse the bequest from Milly in order to begin their own married life without taint.

Millie continues to be the altruistic individual, committed to everyone's happiness. Even after Densher has revealed the truth, she wishes him only the best and, indeed, leaves at least a part of her fortune to him. When Densher realizes the depth of Milly's character, he cannot help but love her and, as he contemplates the fact that Kate has thrown the unopened letter from Milly into the fire, he becomes angry that he will never be able to read Milly's last words to him.

Kate, on the other hand, becomes the least likable of all characters in the work. She is now seen as a scheming, unethical individual who is willing to take the money of a dead woman whom both she and Densher have deceived, believing somehow that this will not affect their lives now that Milly is dead. Lord Mark, as well, demonstrates that he is willing to do whatever necessary to marry whomever will have him and give him the opportunity to increase his wealth. If he marries Kate, they will surely inherit Maud's





estate. If he marries Milly, he will increase his wealth as well. Believing that Kate is truly out of reach, he reveals the engagement to Milly, convinced that this will change her mind about him. He does not consider that his actions will affect Milly's health and, once Milly has again refused his proposal, he does not care enough to walk from the carriage to Sir Strett's front door in order to obtain news of Milly's condition.

The tale ends well for no one. Milly is dead, the once pure love between Densher and Kate has deteriorated, and it appears that neither Maud nor Lord Mark have experienced any significant changes in their basic characters. Densher, however, has the memory of Milly and her inner beauty, and it seems that this will sustain him.



# Characters

## Milly Theale

A wealthy heiress from New York, Milly Theale is young, pretty and without heirs to her fortune. She is also ill and concerned that her illness may indeed be fatal. She meets Susan Stringham, an older woman, who agrees to accompany Milly on a European tour. For Milly, it is important to live fully and to do so in a manner that brings pleasure to others. She is willing to assume the entire cost of Susan's trip and truly wants them both to enjoy themselves. After spending some time in the less populated areas of the Alps, Milly decides to travel to London. She wants to be around the activity of a major city, where she can socialize more. As well, she wishes to look up Merton Densher, a young man from London, who she met in New York.

In London, Milly is introduced to Maud Lowder, an old school chum of Susan's, and her niece Kate Croy, who happens to have a romantic relationship with Merton Densher, though this is not known by Milly. As Milly's health deteriorates, she is told by her doctor to leave London for better air. She secures the rental of a lovely castle in Venice and takes Susan, Maud, and Kate with her. Densher arrives shortly thereafter, as a part of a manipulative scheme to obtain Milly's fortune after she dies. Milly is certainly devastated to learn of the attempt to "use" her and the knowledge perhaps hastens her death. Even as death is approaching, however, she remains the caring, altruistic individual to whom the reader is introduced in the beginning of the tale. Indeed, the "Dove" in the title of the work is Milly - a woman who desires only peace and contentment for all and who spreads her wings to cover everyone she knows with happiness and contentment. Despite the "betrayal" of Kate and Densher, she insists that he return to Kate in London and, ultimately, leaves him a large bequest.

## Kate Croy

The daughter of a man who has obviously engaged in unethical and perhaps illegal behavior and whose mother is dead, Kate Croy has been taken in by a wealthy aunt, Maud Lowder. Kate is now living in Maud's mansion, Lancaster Gate, and enjoying the privileges of being a part of the socially elite in London. Unfortunately, Kate has fallen in love with Merton Densher, a poor journalist who will never obtain Maud's approval for marriage to Kate. They are seeing each other secretly and attempting to determine a method by which they can gain such approval. Kate believes her luck has turned when Milly Theale, an heiress from New York, arrives in London, having previously met Densher when he traveled to New York. Milly is mortally ill, and it is Kate's plan for Merton to marry Milly and then inherit her money when she dies. Then, she and Merton will marry with Maud's blessing. The plan goes awry when Densher has pangs of conscience and cannot continue with the plan. As well, it appears that Densher truly has loved Milly because of her unfailing altruism and beautiful nature. In the end, Kate is unable to convince Densher to take a bequest from Milly and she walks away, realizing



that their relationship is over. In some ways, Kate is portrayed as a sincere, caring individual. She offers to move in with her father and care for him, and she loves Densher despite his meager status. She is willing to sacrifice ethical principles, however, and able to justify what she does in crafty ways.

## Merton Densher

Merton Densher is a poor journalist who, while clearly a delightful, intelligent man, does not enjoy the status in London society that will allow a marriage to Kate Croy, niece of wealthy Maud Lowder. Because of his love for Kate, he is manipulated by her into participating in a scheme to marry a mortally ill young heiress from America. To this end, he follows the heiress to Venice, visits with her, and, despite his love for Kate, ultimately is unable to follow through with the plan. He visits Milly one last time and tells her the truth - that he is, indeed, engaged to Kate, albeit secretly. He returns to London clearly torn between his love for Kate and his loss of principles, believing that he has been complicit in Milly's rapidly deteriorating condition. In the end, he gives Kate a choice. They can renounce the bequest that Milly has left him and marry, free of any taint, or, if Kate refuses this offer, he will give her all of the money, and they will part. Realizing that Merton probably did love Milly after all, and realizing that she cannot defy her aunt, Kate ends the relationship. Merton is portrayed as a gentle man who is deeply troubled by his own ethical compromises and who, in the end, redeems himself.

## Maud Lowder

The wealthy member of Kate Croy's family, Aunt Maud is a controlling individual, who has a need to manipulate others in order to see that her goals are achieved. She has taken Kate into her home, perhaps in an effort to mold the daughter she never had. She has introduced Kate to the elite in London and rather openly pushes Kate toward marriage with Lord Mark, an older man of similar social standing. Kate is not interested. When Milly Theale arrives from America, Maud sees the opportunity to promote marriage between Milly and Merton Densher, the man with whom Kate is clearly in love and of whom Maud does not approve. She believes that she can manipulate Densher by the wealth he is to gain by marrying Milly. She is unaware that Kate has a plan of her own, including the ultimate intention to marry Densher after Milly dies. In the end, Maud achieves her goal, though through nothing she has done. It is Densher and Kate who end their own relationship.

## Susan Stringham

An American woman who has been left relatively poor by her late husband, Susan writes for magazines in order to support herself. She meets Milly Theale and, through a developing friendship in which Milly truly wants to provide for Susan, the two agree to travel to Europe together. Susan is older and sees caring and protecting Milly as her new purpose in life. She is portrayed as a woman who is sincere, cares deeply for Milly



and who is determined to remain with Milly until she succumbs to her illness. After Milly's death, Susan returns to America but maintains contact with Maud Lowder, a childhood school friend, through correspondence.

## Lord Mark

Of noble heritage, Lord Mark has seen his fortune decline somewhat, but he remains among the socially elite of London. He is obviously looking for the correct marriage, and sees this potential in Kate Croy, who may one day inherit her Aunt Maud's estate. He pursues Kate, even though she has indicated no interest in him. When Milly Theale arrives in London, Lord Mark sees another possibility. Lord Mark proposes to Milly as well and even reveals to her that Kate and Densher are secretly engaged, at a time when Milly has been led to believe that Densher loves her. Lord Mark is an opportunistic, insensitive individual, who appears to care only for his own well being.

## Sir Luke Strett

An esteemed London doctor, Sir Luke cares for Milly during her illness, even traveling to Venice when she moves there to live out her short remaining life. He is a kind and sincere man, trusted by everyone to provide the best possible care for Milly.

## Marion

Sister to Kate, Marion is a widow with small children and very poor. More than anything, she wants sister Kate to marry into wealth so that she may benefit from it herself. Marion thoroughly discourages Kate from her relationship with Densher and hopes that she will instead marry Lord Mark as Maud wishes her to.

## Eugenio

Personal assistant and "protector" of Milly, Eugenio takes care of all administrative matters for Milly during her stay in Venice. He is fiercely loyal, turning Densher away from a visit, when he believes that Densher has been the cause of Milly's deterioration.

## Lionely Croy

The reader is not given a first name for Kate's father, but he is certainly portrayed as a man who has lived a sordid life. Having left Kate's mother, forcing the children to grow up in poverty, he insists that Kate stay with Aunt Maud and marry a man that pleases her. In this way, Kate will inherit Maud's estate and perhaps benefit her father in the future.



## Objects/Places

### London

Capital city in England and the setting of a large piece of this novel.

### Lancaster Gate

Name for the estate of Maud Lowder.

### National Gallery

Art gallery in London and site of first meeting of Kate, Densher, and Milly.

### Venice

City in Italy to which Milly goes during the late summer before her death, and where she remains until she dies.

### The Continent

Refers to the mainland of Europe, separated from England by the English Channel.

### Boston

City in Massachusetts and site of initial meeting between Milly Theale and Susan Stringham.

### Swiss Alps

Part of the Alpine mountain chain that runs through several countries in Europe and one stop in Milly's European trip.

### Dove

"Dove" is the main word in the title of the work, and used to refer to Milly, a young, beautiful spirit, who wishes only happiness, contentment and peace for her friends. In many ways, she spreads her wings to encompass her friends, hoping to assist them even as she is dying.



## **Gondola**

Small boat and method of transportation through the canals of Venice.

## **Bequest**

An amount of money left to Densher by Milly, which he ultimately renounces.

## **Palazzo Leporelli**

Palatial home in Venice at which Milly rents.



# Themes

## Confronting One's Mortality

The concept of man's approach to his own death has been the theme of many literary works throughout the ages. In his work, James places this approach in the hands of a young woman, clearly in the prime of her life, who is facing an early death due to an illness that cannot be cured. Milly's acceptance of her fate and her decision to live fully and to assist others to do the same is not necessarily unique. It is, however, her consistent unselfishness and her lack of sorrow that is. She takes under her wing Susan, Kate, and Maud, insisting that they accompany her to Venice and reside in a beautiful castle she has rented. She entertains them and sees that they take in all of the sights. She treats Merton Densher as an equal, a status he would never have in London society. When Densher admits to Milly that his attentions have been part of a plan and that he is indeed secretly engaged to Kate, Milly insists that he return to London and Kate immediately in order to pursue his true love. Milly has confronted death with a determination to contribute to the happiness of others and to leave both a financial and spiritual legacy that will hopefully serve as models for the lives of those she has touched. Certainly her impact on Densher has been significant. When he contemplates Milly's behaviors in the face of death, he is prompted to be a better person, insisting that he and Kate cannot marry unless they renounce Milly's bequest to him. Milly's death has, indeed, redeemed Densher's character.

## Manipulation

Against the backdrop of turn-of-the-century London, James has provided a solid look into man's use of manipulation in order to achieve his goals, those goals usually involving money, power, or, control. While not as treacherous as Lady Macbeth in the manipulation of her husband to kill the king, Maud Lowder is clearly into control through the same type of manipulation. She wishes to control the selection of a husband for Kate; she attempts to control Lord Mark, through constant invitations to her home and contact with Kate; she attempts control of Merton Densher by appealing to the financial benefits of a marriage to Milly; and she asks Milly to collaborate in her control by requesting that she talk to Kate in order to determine Kate's feelings for Densher. Kate uses Merton's love for her as a means to manipulate his behaviors in her scheme to make him wealthy so that they may marry. Lord Mark uses secret information to achieve a marriage to Milly. While many are certainly able to manipulate people and circumstances throughout their lives, James appears to state quite clearly that schemes and manipulation in order to benefit oneself and to control the lives and circumstances of others are unethical and, indeed, often backfire. Thus, Densher retreated to his basic ethical makeup and thwarted Kate's scheme.



## Selfishness

Selfishness, in varying amounts, appears to be a basic part of human nature. Most balanced individuals behave in both selfish and unselfishness ways, but do not allow their selfishness to harm others if that can be avoided. In *The Tale of the Dove*, James treats this character trait in a variety of ways, through the characters he has fashioned. Perhaps at the extreme of selfishness is Lord Mark, a man who is willing to seek marriage with two women for the purpose of improving his financial state. When he discovers that Kate is in love and secretly engaged to Densher, he selfishly reveals this information to Milly, disregarding the impact that it may have on her health, in the hopes that she will accept his proposal. Maud is selfish in a controlling way. She is intent on arranging the proper marriage for Kate, in order to maintain her own reputation and status. Kate is an interesting study in contrasts relative to this character trait. On one hand, we see her offering to reside with her father and care for him, as the novel opens. When she sees an opportunity to marry the man she loves, however, she is willing to devise a deceptive scheme in order to achieve that goal. She justifies her behavior with the rationalization that, in marrying Milly, Densher will have at least given her a small amount of time with someone she loves. Merton Densher agrees to be a part of Kate's plan, with the selfish motive of ultimate marriage to the woman he truly loves. In the end, however, he behaves unselfishly, admitting the truth to Milly. Unwilling to sacrifice his principles, which can itself be seen as a form of selfishness, he rejects the money and, in so doing, destroys his future with Kate. Milly is portrayed as the extreme of unselfishness. She uses her wealth for the pleasure and happiness of others and, in a supreme act of unselfishness, sends Densher back to Kate, and, upon her death, leaves him enough money so that they may marry. Though they live and operate in Victorian England, each character represents individuals who are timeless and, thus universal.





# Style

## Point of View

In order for James to achieve his goals relative to this work, it was obviously necessary to use a third person omniscient point of view. By allowing the reader to access behaviors, dialogue and the inner most thoughts of the major characters, the plot unfolds in much greater detail, and the reader is able to more fully understand the sequencing, rising actions, and ultimate climaxes throughout the work. A prime example of this understanding are the many portions during which Merton Densher contemplates his relationship with Kate, his reactions to Maud Lowder's judgments concerning him, his struggle with the part he must play in Kate's scheme, and his moral dilemma of courting Milly in a dishonest manner. As well, Milly's thoughts provide a far more complete picture of her beliefs about the purpose of her life and her desire to provide pleasure, peace and happiness for others, even as she faces her own demise. It is difficult to see Milly as the "dove" of James's tale without knowledge of her introspection. Susan Springham, if only portrayed by her actions and words, could easily be perceived to be a "gold digger" of sorts, developing a friendship with Milly for her own personal gain. Through revelations of her thoughts, however, one is able to glean that Susan's motives are based upon sincere desire to care for and to protect Milly. Third person omniscient point of view, in the case of this work, is absolutely essential for thorough understanding of both the plot intricacies and the characters.

## Setting

James chose two major geographic settings for the novel - London, England and Venice, Italy. He was obviously intimately familiar with both cities, as descriptions of landmarks, such as the National Gallery and specific sections of London and the squares, churches, and canals typical of Venice are accurate for the chronological setting of the time in which the novel was written. The chronological setting, the turn of the century, is also critical to plot credibility, as the social mores of that time are fully contained in the work. The courting of a young lady was conducted within very strict guidelines, and, indeed, Densher courted Kate under the nose of her Aunt Maud. As well, they must meet secretly, knowing that Maud disapproves of their relationship. Behavior of young couples of this era was also strictly defined among members of the upper class, and certainly Kate's visit to Densher's hotel room in Venice, including the sexual activity, was fully outside the acceptable limits of courtship. In all, author James has accurately depicted both the geographical and chronological settings of his tale.

## Language and Meaning

For the contemporary reader, the language of this work may prove to be a bit difficult. While certainly not the Middle English of Beowulf nor the poetry of Shakespeare's plays,



James nevertheless uses the very formal English of the Victorian Age in England. Descriptions of thoughts and behaviors of the characters may, indeed, be difficult to interpret correctly with only a cursory reading, although direct conversations is a bit easier to immediately comprehend. The young reader may, indeed, need to read portions more than once in order to achieve complete understanding of meaning, but the language and vocabulary is both credible and correct for the setting and therefore an accurate depiction of the language of the upper class in England during this time. James is a master of this language because, as he explains in his own introduction to the novel, he spent a great deal of time in turn-of-the-century England and obviously was able to write in a style and usage that correctly depicted the time.

## Structure

The novel is divided into ten books, each containing two or more chapters, and providing a chronological plot development. Book First introduces Kate Croy and her family, including father, Lionel, sister Marion, and wealthy Aunt Maud Lowder, and the relationships among them. Book Second covers the background and current situation of Merton Densher, suitor of Kate, as well as Maud's obvious goal of finding someone far more suitable for Kate to wed. In Book Third, the reader meets Milly Theale, the wealthy young heiress and her older companion, Susan Stringham, both Americans, who are beginning a European trip. Book Fourth complicates the plot by bringing Kate, Milly, Susan and Maud together in London and by introducing Milly's obviously serious illness. Further complications include the encounter of Milly with Kate and Densher, the introduction of Lord Mark as an additional suitor of Kate, and the impending travel by Milly to Venice. Book Sixth provides the reader the beginnings of Kate's plan to orchestrate the marriage of Milly and Densher so that Densher may inherit her fortune and marry her. Maud is a conspirator with Susan to achieve this marriage as well, both with separate reasons. Book Seventh moves the location to Venice, where the women are all housed. Densher also arrives, as a part of Kate's plan. Book Eighth provides the increasing complexity of the schemes and Densher's increasing discomfort with the deceptions. By Book Ninth, Kate and Maud have returned to London, leaving Densher in Venice to continue the courtship of Milly as she deteriorates, a deterioration quickened by the treachery of Lord Mark. Book Tenth provides the climax, the destruction of Kate's plan, and the end of the relationship between Densher and Kate.



## Quotes

"It was the language of the house itself that spoke to him, writing out for him, with surpassing breadth and freedom, the associations and conceptions, the ideals and possibilities of the mistress. Never, he flattered himself, had he seen anything so gregariously ugly - operatively, ominously so cruel."

Book Second, Chap. 2, p. 85-86

"Less than a month after the event that had so determined Mrs. Stringham's attitude - close upon the heels, that is, of her return from New York - she was reached by a proposal that brought up for her the kind of question her delicacy might have to content with. Would she start for Europe with her young friend at the earliest possible date, and should she be willing to do so without making conditions?"

Book Third, Chap. 1, p. 110

"They were already dining, she and her friend, at Lancaster Gate, and surrounded, as it seemed to her, with every English accessory; though her consciousness of Mrs. Lowder's existence, and still more of her remarkable identity, had been of so recent and so sudden a birth. Susie, as she was apt to call her companion for a lighter change, had only had to wave a neat little wand for the fairy-tale to begin at once; in consequence of which Susie now glittered - for, with Mrs. Stringham's new sense of success, it came to that - in character of a fairy godmother."

Book Fourth, Chap. 1, p. 133

She laughed to Milly when she also said that she didn't know where it would end; and the principle of her uneasiness was that Mrs. Lowder's life bristled for her with elements that she was really having to look at for the first time. They represented, she believed, the world, the world that, as a consequence of the cold shoulder turned to it by the Pilgrim Fathers, had never yet boldly crossed to Boston - it would surely have sunk the stoutest Cunarder - and she couldn't pretend that she faced the prospect simply because Milly had had a caprice."

Book Fourth, Chap. 2, p. 151

"She knew how to be quaint with the new quaintness - the great Boston gift; it had been happily her note in the magazines; and Maud Lowder, to whom it was new indeed and who had never heard anything remotely like it, quite cherished her, as a social resource, by reason of it."

Book Fourth, Chap. 3, p. 163

"Above all, you must help me with Kate, and you must stay a little for her; nothing for a long time has happened to me so good as that you and she should have become friends. It's beautiful; it's great, it's everything."

Book Fifth, Chap. 1, p. 183

"What, however, on his seeing more, struck him as most distinct in her was her sense that, reunited after his absence and having been now half the morning together, it



behooved them to face without delay the question of handling their immediate future. That it would require some handling, that they should still have to deal, deal in a crafty manner, with difficulties and delays, was the great matter he had come back to, greater than any but the refreshed consciousness of their personal need for each other."  
Book Sixth, Chap. 1, p. 247

"What was in retrospect more distinct to him was the process by which he had become aware that Kate's acquaintance with her was greater than he had gathered. She had written of it in due course as a new and amusing one, and he had written back that he had met over there, and that he much liked, the young person; whereupon she had answered that he must find out about her at home."  
Book Sixth, Chap 1, p. 252

"If he was interesting it was because he was unhappy; and if he was unhappy it was because his passion for Kate had spent itself in vain; and if Kate was indifferent, inexorable, it was because she had left Milly in no doubt of it."  
Book Sixth, Chap. 5, p. 301

"Mrs. Lowder's eyes still rested, and Susan now felt, for a wonder, not less sincere by seeing that she pleased her. But there was a great limitation. 'I don't handle Kate.'  
Book Seventh, Chap. 1, p. 328

"There had been now five days of it all without his risking even to Kate alone any hint of what he ought to have known and of what in particular therefore had taken him in. The truth was doubtless that really, when it came to any free handling and naming of things, they were living together, the five of them, in an air in which an ugly effect of 'blurting out' might easily be produced."  
Book Eighth, Chap. 1, pp. 379-80

"This manner, while they stood a long minute facing each other over all they didn't say, played a part as well in the sudden jar to Densher's protected state. It was a Venice all of evil that had broken out for them alike, so that they were together in their anxiety, if they really could have met on it; a Venice of cold lashing rain from a low black sky, of wicked wind raging through narrow passes, of general arrest and interruption, with the people engaged in all the waterlife huddled, stranded and wageless, bored and cynical, under archways and bridges."  
Book Ninth, Chap. 2, p. 433

"He was mixed up in her fate, or her fate, if that should be better, was mixed up in him, so that a single false motion might either way snap the coil. They helped him, it was true, these considerations, 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."  
Book Ninth, Chap. 2, p. 428



"Nothing was open to him but to follow Kate, nor was anything more marked than the influence of the step she had taken on the emotions itself that possessed him. Her complications, which had fairly, with everything else, an awful sound - what were they, a thousand times over, but his own?"

Book Tenth, Chap. 2, p. 507



## Topics for Discussion

Do you know of someone who typifies the character traits of Maud Lowder? In what way does her character demonstrate the somewhat universal character traits of control and need to preserve the status quo? What types of things or conditions do they attempt to control?

Kate is a complex character, perhaps the most complex in this work. As you think about her behaviors from beginning to end, what, in your opinion makes her complex? Support your thoughts with specific examples from the book.

The "dove" in the title represent Milly Theale. In what ways is this symbolism correct? Support your answer with examples from the work.

Manipulation is a major theme of this work. Can you think of times in your life when you have been manipulated or have manipulated others? Describe at least three of these experiences.

Normal people are both selfish and unselfish. Occasionally, however, these two traits are present in extreme. Consider individuals in your own experience or renown contemporary figures who demonstrate these extremes. How do these individual typify these extremes? Support your descriptions with specific examples of their behaviors.

Everyone must confront the fact that he or she is going to die. If you learned today that you had a year left to live, describe the year you would live.

Write or verbally describe a contemporary scenario that generally mimics the novel's plot.