

# The Balcony as a Transitional Space in Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*

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## Abstract

This paper examines the roles of balconies in Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* (1902). Balconies are transitional spaces, both part of the indoor space of a room and part of the outdoors. For the character Kate, however, these seemingly open spaces in fact appear dark and confining; they serve to emphasize her imprisonment in both poverty and her social class. For the character, Milly the balcony is a grand and open space that invites her on adventures which she cannot take part in, being sickly and confined indoors, she cannot take part in. Balconies are also used to emphasize her high social status compared with that of Kate, and to evoke imagery of her as a “dove” – something which Kate repeatedly likens her to. In this way, balconies express important aspects of the two characters and differences between them.

Keywords: Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, balcony, social class, poverty

## I. Introduction

This paper will focus on the use of balconies in Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* (1902). In the novel, Milly Theale, a wealthy American heiress who is ill with a serious disease, is involved in a love triangle with the poor and seemingly sympathetic Kate Croy and the impoverished journalist Merton Densher. Balconies, transitional spaces that are neither completely inside nor entirely outside the building, appear frequently in the first half of the novel, and are used to express important aspects of two of the main characters, Milly, and Kate.

## II. Kate and the balcony

For the beautiful but poor Kate Croy, the balcony is a negative space. It is like a prison, and it illustrates how she is trapped by her circumstances. Kate first appears on a balcony in book one, chapter one. She is waiting to meet her father, Lionel Croy, to discuss their family's troubled financial situation. Her father is very late, however, and Kate seeks some relief by moving onto the balcony of her father's house:

She had looked at the sallow prints on the walls and at the lonely magazine, a year old, that combined, with a small lamp in coloured glass and a knitted white centre-piece wanting in freshness, to enhance the effect of the purplish cloth on the principal table; she had above all from time to time taken a brief stand on the small balcony to which the pair of long windows gave access. The vulgar little street, in this view, offered scant relief from the vulgar little room; its main office was to suggest to her that the narrow black house-fronts, adjusted to a standard that would have been low even for backs, constituted quite the publicity implied by such privacies. One felt them in the room exactly as one felt the room—the hundred like it or worse—in the street. (23)

The balcony, however, offers Kate no escape, but instead just emphasizes her entrapment. James emphasizes the smallness of the balcony and the street it overlooks (it is, for instance, “narrow” and “low”), even suggesting that the residents must bend their backs in order to enter the little houses. The street is described as “vulgar,” black, and crowded with houses, which Kate imagines having rooms “a hundred like it or worse” (23) than her father's.

Later in book five, chapter five while meeting with Milly, Mrs. Lowder, and Mrs. Stringham at a London hotel, Kate goes on to the balcony for a brief respite:

Mrs. Stringham, before adjourning with her, had gone off for some shawl or other accessory, and Kate, as if a little impatient for their withdrawal, had wandered out to the balcony, where she hovered for the time unseen, though with scarce more to look at than the dim London stars and the cruder glow, up the street, on a corner, of a small public-house in front of which a fagged

cab-horse was thrown into relief. Mrs. Lowder made use of the moment: Milly felt as soon as she had spoken that what she was doing was somehow for use. (213)

As in the earlier scene, the balcony offers little escape but only emphasizes Kate's entrapment. The scene is dark and full of despair. The stars are "dim," and the light of the small pub is "crude," showing an exhausted cab horse. Moreover, on the balcony, Kate is said to "hover." Rather than moving of her own volition, this word conjures images of floating without being able to control her movements. To add to this lack of control, Kate is described as being "unseen." She is, in other words, floating trapped and invisible.

Furthermore, with Kate unseen on the balcony, Mrs. Lowder seizes the moment to have a private discussion with Milly about Densher, the third member of the love triangle with Milly and Kate, and presses Milly about her relationship with him. This again highlights Kate's lack of control over her destiny. As the scene progresses, Milly declares her intention to help Kate to Mrs. Lowder, but the poor, lower-class Kate herself remains trapped on the balcony:

What one was therefore one's self concerned immediately to establish was that there was nothing at all. 'I shall like to help you; I shall like, so far as that goes, to help Kate herself,' she made such haste as she could to declare; her eyes wandering meanwhile across the width of the room to that dusk of the balcony in which their companion perhaps a little unaccountably lingered. (217–218)

There is also the subtle suggestion that Kate is temporarily imprisoned on the dark balcony in the description of her there as "perhaps a little unaccountably linger[ing]."

According to Bradbury's *Henry James: The Later Novels* (1979), James sets up Kate to be a sympathetic protagonist. "Kate is given a setting, potential, and constrictions enough to excite our sympathy"; he notes that some critics call her "James unrecognized heroine" (72). These scenes on the balcony can be said to be part of this establishing of Kate as a sympathetic character. It is interesting to note, however, that in the earlier scene on her father's balcony, James hits at

Kate's darker side:

She readjusted the poise of her black closely-feathered hat; retouched, beneath it, the thick fall of her dusky hair; kept her eyes aslant no less on her beautiful averted than on her beautiful presented oval. She was dressed altogether in black, which gave an even tone, by contrast, to her clear face and made her hair more harmoniously dark. Outside, on the balcony, her eyes showed as *blue*; within, at the mirror, they showed almost as *black*. She was handsome, but the degree of it was not sustained by items and aids; a circumstance moreover playing its part at almost any time in the impression she produced. (24, italics mine)

On the balcony, Kate's eyes are described as blue, but when she returns indoors, they are said to be almost black. As argued in this paper, being both indoors, and outdoors, the balcony can be viewed as a transitional space. For Kate, this seemingly outdoor space is just the opposite: a dark prison. What should be a transition from the dark and confining indoor space actually becomes a transition to a darker, even more confining space. Moreover, here, the transitional aspect of the balcony is reflected withing the character of Kate herself. She is presented here as sympathetic, but as she moves through the transitional space of the balcony, we glimpse something dark within her. Just as the balcony should be a space of comparative freedom but actually serves to further imprison her, in that transitional space, Kate, who is supposed to as Bradbury says, "excite our sympathy," actually becomes something fearful.

### III. Milly and the balcony

In contrast, for Milly the balcony is a positive space; it represents both freedom and her position in society. Milly is a rich woman from New York. It is said that she is modeled on Minny Temple, who was James's younger cousin whom he was quite fond of. As with the fictional Milly, Minny suffered from poor health and died at an early age of tuberculosis. She is mentioned in his *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1913) and can be said to be a symbol of James's youth.

In the novel, the sickly Milly is mostly confined indoors; whereas for Kate, the balcony becomes a prison-like space, for Milly it is a breath of freedom. This can be most clearly seen in the scene when Lord Mark visits her at her palace in Venice in book seven, chapter four. They discuss the fact that Milly, due to her unmentioned sickness, can never leave her palace and go outside. They stand by the window, and she looks out:

The casements between the arches were open, the ledge of the balcony broad, the sweep of the canal, so overhung, admirable, and the flutter toward them of the loose white curtain an invitation to she scarce could have said what. But there was no mystery after a moment; she had never felt so invited to anything as to make that, and that only, just where she was, her adventure. It would be—to this it kept coming back—the adventure of not stirring. 'I go about just here.' (349)

This description is the complete opposite of Kate's impression of the dark and confined balcony at her father's house. James emphasizes the open casement windows, the "broad" space of the balcony, the vast "sweep" of the canal, and the white curtains "fluttering" in the breeze. Where Kate seemed to feel suffocated on the balcony, for Milly, it is a breath of fresh air. And unlike for Kate, who laments the "vulgar" scene she surveys, for Milly, the view is "admirable." It seems to invite her on an adventure that at the end of the passage, she sadly has to refuse, saying "I just go about here." That is, she spends her time indoors in her palace.

As Charles H. Anderson writes, James modeled Milly's palace on the Palazzo Barbaro near the famous Grand Canal, which was the home of a friend of his

whom he stayed with in Venice (206). Rich Americans used the *palazzi* as vacation homes, and James likely intended the palace he described in his novel to both show Milly's wealth and link her to the aristocratic glories of Venice's past. He shows us the contrast between Milly and Kate in an earlier balcony scene in book five, chapter four:

Milly, alone, as happened, in the great garnished void of their sitting-room, where, a little, really, like a caged Byzantine, she had been pacing through the queer, long-drawn almost sinister delay of night, an effect she yet liked—Milly, at the sound, one of the French windows standing open, passed out to the balcony that overhung, with pretensions, the general entrance, and so was in time for the look that Kate, alighting, paying her cabman, happened to send up to the front. The visitor moreover had a shilling back to wait for, during which Milly, from the balcony, looked down at her, and a mute exchange, but with smiles and nods, took place between them on what had occurred in the morning. (207–208)

Here the “caged” Milly escapes from the sitting room to the balcony. Again, the windows are open, highlighting her brief feeling of freedom. The next lines clearly emphasize the differences between Milly and Kate. Milly looks down on Kate, who is unhappily waiting for change from the cabman. Kate notices Milly and they look up and exchange “smiles and nods.” The wealthy and aristocratic Milly is literally above the lower-class Kate in this scene. Milly, whom Kate repeatedly refers to as a dove, is like a bird sitting on a balcony above her. As Kenneth Graham wrote “Milly's ‘dove-like’ flight is simply the soaring ‘great power’ of her money” (215). In other words, the image of her sitting like a dove on a balcony is another way to emphasize her high social and financial status compared with Kate. This scene is also poignant in another way; Kate, who earlier in her own balcony scene looked down on a “fagged cab-horse” with disdain, here has become part of that view as she fumbles for small change with the cabman, further emphasizing her poverty.

## IV. Conclusion

For Milly then, the balcony has two representations. First, it is a space of openness, brightness, and freedom that offers her escape from the indoor “prison” she is confined to because of her sickness, whereas for Kate, the balcony is a small, dark prison. Similar to Milly’s illness, Kate’s poverty confines her to poor and vulgar spaces, such as her balcony and entraps her in her social class, which leads us to the second representation of the balcony for Milly: It displays her high social status; she literally looks down on the lower-class Kate, who perceives her as an aristocratic dove. For Kate, too, the balcony can be seen to represent her low social class and poverty. In one dramatic scene, she is imprisoned “hovering,” unable to move and invisible while her social betters discuss her future without her.

In this way, James uses the transitional spaces of balconies to express vital aspects of the two main characters in the novel in Henry James’s *The Wings of the Dove*.

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