



Defamiliarization, Setting and Foreshadowing of Death in Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*

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Abstract

Henry James is best known for his international theme of “American girl.” Most of James’s well-known fictions center a heroine with certain characteristics. The fact that women are playing a major role in James’s fictions channels a major body of criticism on James’s works toward women and psychoanalytical studies. James was to some extent a Formalist him-self, so I have done Formalistic readings of James’s novel, *The Wings of the Dove*. I have sought the matter that would it be possible for the reader to foreshadow the death of the heroine of the novel? Moreover, I posed the question that how would it be possible for James to exhaust his theme of “American Girl” without making his stories boring and tiresome. I derived the term defamiliarization from Russian Formalism, and discussed that James had used techniques like focalizing characters, blanks, and stylistic oddity in order to achieve defamiliarization. Furthermore, I have discussed the exploitation of setting, Venice, in the light of defamiliarization.

Key words: James; Shklovsky; Defamiliarization; Setting; Foreshadowing; Stylistic oddity; Blanks

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INTRODUCTION

Henry James was one of the few authors who exhausted several themes in his novels. He was a pioneer

Formalist in a sense that he involved himself in the art of representation rather than the subject matter. In his revolutionary essay “The Art of Fiction,” he overemphasized this fact that the art of representation is prior to the subject matter. He believed that there are no such things as high and low subjects in life and everything which is equal to life itself can be a subject for a novel. In his opinion, it is the author’s duty to capture the reality of everyday life and place it on pages of his narrative. Nevertheless, James was a fiction writer amongst other Novelists, and one can assume that he—like others—exhausts several themes and subject matters in his works. This repetition may arise from the fact that there are certain apprehensions and conceptions which are fixed in the mind of the author. The problem of overusing a subject or theme maybe become insignificant in the case of an author with limited number of books; but James was a prolific writer and if we do not take into account his numerous novellas, short stories, essays, etc., he wrote more than twenty novels which a great portion of them shares similar themes like “The American Girl.” Many critics believe that as James became older there was a certain shift in accordance to his style of writing. Although the theme was the same, the style became more mature and certain techniques added in his prose. We can call James a Modernist but surely we cannot call him a pure Formalist; nevertheless, many of his critical ideas conform to the ideas of the Formalists which came after him and one of these concepts is Shklovsky’s Defamiliarization which is discussed for the first time in the essay “Art as Technique,” which publish in 1925.

1. DEFAMILIARIZATION

In Russian Formalism “literary art devotes itself to the making strange [...] of our accustomed perceptions. [...] The purpose is to make life newly interesting as, or through, art: To get us to experience it as if for the first

time” (Mikics, 2007, p.83). Defamiliarization disturbs “its audience’s routine perception of reality. The term (in Russian *ostranenie*) was coined by the critic Viktor Shklovsky” and this technique “include placing characters and events in unfamiliar contexts, foregrounding dialects and slang in formal poetry, and employing unusual imagery” (Quiin, 2006, p.112). Shklovsky writes: The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception” (Shklovsky, 1998, p.16). Shklovsky believes that the artist should try as hard as he can to slow the process of perception in the eye of his viewer, because this slowness hinders the viewer from passing from the artistic object without pondering and it makes him to stop over the object and think about it for a while. He maintains that “author’s purpose is to create the vision which results from that deautomatized perception. A work is created ‘artistically’ so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception” (Shklovsky, 1998, p.19).

2. DEFAMILIARIZATION, SETTING, AND FORESHADOWING MILLY’S DEATH

James is best known for describing the clash between American and European society. Many of his novels are about the differences of European viewpoints and American perspectives. Shklovsky believes that the technique of art is to make the pre-established and common thoughts, uncommon and estrange for the reader, in order to slow down the process of perception, and therefore achieves an aesthetic mean. If we assume that James-like his other novels- develops a same theme which is the clash of European and American society, how he would change his way of writing in order to estrange his pre-established theme? *The Wings of the Dove* is James’s return to his “earlier international fiction,” which its central figure was “the American Girl” and “Although this novel does not, like *The Portrait of a Lady*, center itself on the American heroine, Milly Theale, in James’s mind her situation nevertheless forms the central idea of the novel” (Fowler, 1980, p.57). James himself declared that the “The idea, reduced to its essence,” was “that of a young person conscious of a great capacity for life, but early stricken and doomed, condemned to die under short respite, while also enamoured of the world” and James felt that “this doomed young person could only have been an American woman” (James & Blacmur, 1934, p.288).

Some critics blamed Milly for her naivety, and some praised her for her benevolence; but more or less, they all agreed upon the fact that “it is not simply Milly Theale’s physical malady that makes her a ready victim of Lancaster Gate and its milieu; it is, more importantly,

her own character and personality, of which her illness is a symbol, that unequip her for life itself” (Fowler, 1980, p.58). So we are striving to find those features which are in the text that can help us to foreshadow Milly’s death.

The first time in the narrative that the reader gets the vibe that Milly is not going to survive is when Lord Mark shows her the portrait of “Lucrezia Panciatichi”¹ and the portrait exactly resembles Milly. James writes:

She found herself, for the first moment, looking at the mysterious portrait through tears. Perhaps it was her tears that made it just then so strange and fair [...] the face of a young woman, all magnificently drawn, down to the hands, and magnificently dressed; a face almost livid in hue, yet handsome in sadness [...] that must, before fading with time, have had a family resemblance to her own. The lady in question, at all events, with her slightly Michelangelesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage-only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead. (James, 1999, p.152)

The portrait illustrates the state of Milly’s life. As some characters like lady Aldershaw “looked at Milly as if Milly had been the Bronzino and the Bronzino only Milly” (James, 1999, p.154), and focused on the exterior resemblance of Milly with the portrait, the author reveals the interior side of her character to the reader. We derive three impressions from the description of the portrait: “mysterious,” “bereavement of joy,” and “dead.” One can find all these qualities in Milly’s character. She remains a mystery because the reader does not have enough information about her. “Although Milly is Kate’s quarry and Densher her instrument, the novel does not narrate from Milly’s perspective until very late” and just about the time “when she herself must make peace with the terrible secret of her own illness” (Haralson & Johnson, 2009, p.190). Although James uses the technique of focalizing character-and surely Milly is the center of the plot and characters frame their intentions base on her fortune-but the author does not give her enough room in the novel to reveal her-self to the reader; in this sense she becomes a mystery. “Yet, precisely because she is slippery and veiled, she manages to become more than the sum of the points of view surrounding her” (Wineapple, 1999, p.xiii). She surely becomes more than others because she is veiled and the reader cannot read her as he reads the others. As Milly tries to input joy to her sad life, she knows that if she fails, her death would be inevitable; after seeing the portrait of “Lucrezia Panciatichi,” she turns to Lord Mark and retorts that “perhaps everything together will never be so right again” (James, 1999, p.152). Milly uses the word “perhaps,” and this means that she is not sure about the outcome; but the fact that she claims such a sentence reveals to the reader that if the things go wrong, she will never see light of a another day. “In front of

¹ The Portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi is a painting by the Italian artist Agnolo di Cosimo, known as Bronzino.

Bronzino's *Lucrezia Panciatichi* Milly [...] sees clearly her approaching death" (Zorzi, 2008, p.437).

Later in the narrative, Kate, who tries to persuade Densher to play his role in the foul play, reveals to Merton that Milly "at any rate does love life. To have met a person like you" (James, 1999, p.246); then Kate explains to Merton that living life and to be loved would be the greatest adventure of Milly's life. "Do let her have still her adventure. There are wrecks that are not adventures." Merton retorts to Kate that "If there be also adventures that are not wrecks!" (James, 1999, p.247) The characters are involved in a wordplay and they put "adventure" alongside with the word "wreck"; by comparing Milly's adventure to destruction, the reader can foreshadow a massive destruction. A kind of wreck that not only will not allow Milly to survive, but also will damage the culprits. This is ironic because eventually the reader would know the meaning of "wrecks" at the end. Foreshadowing of a tragic end- not only for Milly, but also for Merton- is not something far out of speculation for us; because later when Merton talks to Kate about her plan, he understands that Mrs. Lowder and Mrs. Stringham are also involved in this play of intrigue and this game is shaped by their implicit consent. Merton finds himself "in a wondrous silken web" of intrigue, and then he asserts to Kate that "You spoil me!" (James, 1999, p.255)

The thing which is palpable in the narrative is the confrontation of Milly's Spontaneity and naturalness with the duplicitous and aesthetic characters around her. James introduces Mrs. Stringham as "the woman in the world least formed by nature," and she is quite "aware, for duplicities and labyrinths" (James, 1999, p.71). Mrs. Stringham believes that her "observation" of Milly is "scientific." She strikes herself as "hovering spy, applying tests, laying traps, concealing signs" (James, 1999, p.81). The author hints that Milly's confidante is a tact, duplicitous, and observing person. In a part of the story James even compares Kate with Milly. He writes that Milly is "forward," but "not advanced," whereas Kate is "backward-backward still, comparatively, as an English girl-and yet advanced in a high degree" (James, 1999, pp.273-274). Having the qualities of backwardness and duplicitous makes a sharp contrast with the spontaneity of a person; as James mentions several times in the text that Milly is a spontaneous character: "It was spontaneous for his young friend to have asked him to drive with her alone" (James, 1999, p.273). On the other hand Kate's usage of the word "beauty" is pretty much prevalent all over the novel; one of the most noticeable times is when she tells Merton that he should act according to her plan: "I shall hate if you spoil for me the beauty of what I see!" (James, 1999, p.230)

Kate-unlike Milly-is an aesthetic person who pays so much attention to beauty. There are some hints in the text that differentiate Milly from the people who surround her; one of the hints is when Kate and Merton are at the

Venetian palace and they are attending a party which Milly wears a totally white outfit:

"She's a dove," Kate went on, "and one somehow doesn't think of doves as bejeweled. Yet they suit her down to the ground."

"Yes- down to the ground is the word." Densher saw now how they suited her, but was perhaps still more aware of something intense in his companion's feeling about them. Milly was indeed a dove; this was the figure, though it most applied to her spirit. (James, 1999, p.363)

This phrase "down to the ground" is ambiguous in the way that explicitly it means that the Milly's dress is long, but implicit we can assume that this will bury Milly "down" in "the ground," which suggests that the naturalness of Milly does not go along with the beauty and aesthetic values of the dress which both Kate and Merton are capable of sensing it. James hints that Milly is a dove in that dress and he suggests that "it most applied to her spirits," so it means that Milly is a free-spirited person like a dove which is the symbol of peace and freedom.

After Merton finds out that the state of Milly's health has been worsen, he ponders within himself about Milly's companions and the general Mood of Venice:

It was a conspiracy of silence, as the cliché went, to which no one had made an exception, the great smudge of morality across the picture, the shadow of pain and horror, finding in no quarter a surface of spirit or of speech that consented to reflect it. "The mere aesthetic instinct of mankind...!" our young man had more than once, in the connection, said to himself; [...] So then it had been-a general conscious fool's paradise, from which the specified had been chased like a dangerous animal. (James, 1999, p.418)

Well it seems that James magnificently sums up the story in these sentences. The author gives a portrait of a horrible picture; he asserts that the "aesthetic instinct of mankind" creates such an atmosphere. This aesthetic atmosphere is a picture of "fool's paradise"² which has created "a state of delusory happiness" for Milly, who is the dove of the story or as Merton thinks "animal." Another hint in the novel which shows that Milly is different from the people who surround her is Merton's assertion about her death; in one of his conversations with Kate at the end of the novel, Merton tells this sentence about Milly: "She must die, my dear, in her extraordinary way" (James, 1999, p.438). The fact that Merton thinks Milly's death is inevitable makes us understand that Merton understands that the quality of Milly's naturalness will not survive in that aesthetic surroundings; and the fact that she is "extraordinary," implies that she is the one natural character among all other ordinary and aesthetic ones.

"And can't you," she inquired, 'write about Venice?'" (James, 1999, p.356) Milly tells this sentence to Merton in

² "Fool's Paradise." Merriam-Webster.com. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) Web. 2 August 2014. Retrieved from [http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fool's paradise](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fool's%20paradise)

one his afternoon visits. But why setting becomes so bold in the novel? And how Venice acts in correlation with the concept of defamiliarization? Milly, as an American girl who travels in Europe and sees her death imminent, tries to experience felicity in her life-as her physician dictates it to her and James uses the word felicity several times in the narrative- but if we want to foreshadow that Milly becomes felicitous or not, first we should define felicity from the viewpoint of Milly. Perhaps a passage from the text can indicate Milly's expectation from Europe:

It had rolled over her that what she wanted of Europe was "people," so far as they were to be had, and that if her friend really wished to know, the vision of this same equivocal quantity was what had haunted her during their previous days, in museums and churches, and what was again spoiling for her the pure taste of scenery. She was all for scenery-yes; but she wanted it human and personal. (James, 1999, p.93)

This passage indicates that Milly like sceneries such as museums and churches but what she really wants is being with people; and the fact that she wants it "human and personal," implies that she wants to have a love affair with someone; to love and to be loved. Later when Milly talks with Lord Mark, James reveals Milly's desires: "As Milly made out these things-with a shade of exhilaration at the way she already fell in-She saw how she was justified of her plea for people and her love of life" (James, 1999, p.101).

Milly wants life, freshness, youth, love and so many other good qualities to help her survive from her illness and live. But when Merton arrives at Venice, these are the very first impressions that James gives to us: "The room [...] were unoccupied; [...] the ancient rickety objects [...] refined in their shabbiness, amiable in their decay" (James, 1999, p.335); the fact that the rooms are empty indicates that Milly will not see a lot of people in Venice; and words like "ancient," "rickety," "shabby," and "decay" signify that life would not be fresh and felicitous. There are other descriptions like this all over the Venetian section; for example, there is a great church which is "domed and pinnacled" and has a "vast empty space, enclosed by its arcades" (James, 1999, p.343); the vast empty space which is enclosed by its arcades is the kind of environment that the reader is pretty sure which Milly, our dove, will not survive in it.

As Milly's health condition deteriorates, James puts more emphasis on the setting and states that "The vice in the air" is "too much like the breath of fate." The weather has changed, and "the rain" is ugly, "the wind" is "wicked," and "the sea impossible" (James, 1999, p.393). It does not seem that the author puts all the blame on the weather only, but he puts the blame on "evil Venice" as well:

It was a Venice all of evil that had broken out for them alike, so that they were together in their anxiety, [...] 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 water-life huddled, stranded and wageless, bored and cynical, under archways and bridges. (James, 1999, p.390)

Laurence Lerner has discussed the same thing about the Venetian effect in the story; "after Milly has been told, by Lord Mark, that Densher and Kate are secretly engaged," Milly 'turns her face to the wall', and gives orders that Densher is not to be admitted." This stimulates "a long, painful, puzzled episode for Densher, for whom 'a Venice of all evil' breaks out, 'a Venice of cold biting rain from a low black sky, or wicked wind raging through narrow passes', a scene which Peter Brooks justly describes as 'a splendid operatic moment'³" (Lerner, 2002, p.280). Indeed it has an operatic effect in the story; Venetian sky is low and black; and this implies that Milly, who is the white dove of the novel, would be immured in here and metaphorically she cannot fly here and free herself of all evils that surround her. Felicity and joy gives its place to gloom; "everything had never even yet seemed to him incalculably much. 'Oh!' he simply moaned to the gloom" (James, 1999, p.414). After death of Milly, Merton who is in love with the memory of Milly, cannot retrieve himself from the gloomy state which he has experienced earlier. When he talks to Kate afterwards, he does not "even know what she" means, "and he only" looks at Kate "in gloom" (James, 1999, p.452). It is a state of melancholy which stays with Merton until the end of the novel. We have observed that Venice, or setting in general, shatters the idea of joy and felicity for Milly and it creates a gloomy effect on the narrative which kills Milly. Also the concept of defamiliarization applies here, because Milly as a character who is in search of paradise on the earth, have to experience her last days in hell on the earth.

Furthermore, Andrew Cutting in his book, *Death in Henry James*, talks about the narrative construction in *The Wings of the Dove*. Cutting writes:

The narrative constructs Milly from her first appearance, dressed in mourning for her whole family and perched on the edge of a cliff amid the Romantic scenery of the Alps, as a character through whom the reader will be able to enjoy the pathos, tragedy, and (in) justice of the death of a modern-day princess. [...] the expectation that Milly will eventually somehow die is fundamental to the interest of plot, character, and style throughout the novel. (Cutting, 2005, p.84)

Cutting maintains that "death is so pervasive in *The Wings of the Dove* that almost anything you can say about the novel can also be developed into saying something about how it represents death." Cutting continues that "Because death is so deliberately unnamed for most of *The Wings of the Dove*, it seems to flood out across the novel and to become accessible as an almost existential

³ Quoted from Lerner's essay; Lerner cited it from: Peter Brooks, introduction to the World's Classics edition of *The Wings of the Dove*. (Oxford, 1984), p.xi.

awareness and a morbid fascination with the idea of sickness and dying" (Cutting, 2005, p.82).

The Characteristic of being "unnamed" evokes to mind another technique which James uses in his narrative, which is the excessive use of blanks in the text. William Stowe asserts that the novel "tells some of the story" and not all of it. Merton's "most important interviews with the two young women take place between chapters" and the reader has to be sharp and read between the lines; "the crucial communication from the dying American is thrown into the fire before anyone finds out what it says" and "the novel ends before its story is concluded" (Stowe 188). Indeed, *The Wings of the Dove* is a novel of "well-kept secrets: a secret betrothal, the secret nature of Milly's illness, the unopened contents of her last letter. Scenes occur offstage" and "the narrative proceeds by concealment and silences" (Wineapple, 1999, p.X).

William Stowe asserts that "James's text blocks the reader's access to" the "conventional sequences," and it becomes "terribly frustrating," for the readers who in his words "making reading for the plots" only (Stowe 192). James tries to depict life piece by piece as he declared in his essay *The Art of Fiction*. Further Stowe hints that

the book's language is notoriously difficult, sometimes even undecidably obscure: Sentences wind interminably on, pronouns lack definite antecedents, characters use words like "everything" and "nothing" and phrases like "Well, there you are," which simultaneously suggest and obscure meanings and conclusions that they may or may not have reached. (Stowe, 1998, p.188)

Well, Stowe is right and all the readers would agree that the language of the novel is too difficult. Moreover, the "novel properly belongs to that group of James's work involved with exploring the void" (Jottkandt, 2005, p.43). The fact that novel is based on voids and blanks and the language of the novel is too difficult to comprehend brings only one thing to our mind. James uses this technique and style to achieve defamiliarization in his text. "The illness and death of [...] Milly Theale and such circumstantial misfortunes as the poverty of Kate Croy and Merton Densher are central factors in James's plots. But such matters are never treated for their own value, as they would be by a naturalist" (Ward, 1960, p.65).

As we discussed in chapter two, Shklovsky believed that the artist should not follow the routines and pre-established clichés which are so easily digested by the audience. The author should create something that makes the reader stop and ponder instead of passing from page to page. By using voids and adapting a difficult style of writing James tries to defamiliarize the pre-established norms of the plot. Stowe extends that

This challenge is even more pronounced in the novel's final book, which turns even more markedly than the rest of the text on voids, focuses even more intently on blanks. It begins with Merton's unusual and prolonged silence on his return from Venice, and his absence from Lancaster Gate; it centers on Milly's pervasive absence from London, on the process

of her dying in Venice, and on the lack of information about her physical and spiritual state; it turns on an unread letter and a rejected legacy. It presents the penultimate scenes of the romance and the melodrama, while leaving the final one unwritten. (Stowe, 1998, p.193)

Surely, we will never know what happened at the end of the novel. The author is dead, and the so many unanswered questions in the story will haunt the readers through the generations; and in this sense we can assert that James have achieved his intention to defamiliarize everything we know about fiction, and present his old "American girl" theme in a new light, which is simultaneously realist, strange and fabulous. As Haralson & Johnson asserted:

James takes his characters' drama of consciousness, a staple of realist fiction, to its formal extreme in this novel because although the plot turns on characters' coming to know or finally seeing important facts—that Milly is ill; that Kate and Densher are lovers; that Densher has told Milly the truth; that Milly's letter contains a bequest to Densher—the reader never learns what those important facts are. (Haralson & Johnson, 2009, p.190)

James's style of writing does not just end up in the technique of focalizing character or blanks; also it includes a format which for Laurence Lerner it is a "stylistic oddity." Lerner investigates the first paragraph of the novel and finds out that the novel deliberately deviates from the normal English language speaking. Lerner asserts:

The Stylistic Oddity of *The Wings of the Dove* emerges in the first, apparently unimportant, sentence: "She waited, Kate Croy, for her father to come in, but he kept her unconscionably, and there were moments at which she showed herself, in the glass over the mantle, a face positively pale with irritation . . .". There are two verbal oddities here, which, if we were correcting a sentence written by a foreigner striving to master English idiom yet more perfectly, we might, very delicately, draw a red line under. "She waited, Kate Croy, for her father to come in": the normal English would surely be simply: "Kate Croy waited". And then the mirror, in which she sees her face positively pale with irritation. A polished teacher would shake his head slightly and smile: Ah no, that is not quite how we say it: "She saw herself", or "she saw her face", not "she showed herself a face", which is charming, certainly, but not quite idiomatic. (Lerner, 2002, p.279)

Later, Lerner asserts that James departs from the normal English from time to time, and he poses the question that "What, apart from offering us James's stylistic finger- print, do these [...] departures do for us?" (Lerner, 2002, p.280) and by us, Lerner means "naïve but intelligent reader" who is not in favor plot-stricken narratives. Well, we understand that James departs from the normal English language to make a new and strange view of his old literary world.

CONCLUSION

In Henry James' *The Wings of the Dove*, we observe a major shift in author's style of writing. James exploited

several techniques in order to enhance his well-known theme 'The American Girl;' these techniques are including the exploitation of scenery and several alterations in the structure of the narrative. James deliberately estranges the subject matters which are previously taken for granted by his readers. By adopting an incomprehensible method of prose, the author hinders the process of conception in the mind of the reader. This hesitation over the artistic object (theme) – which probably the reader has already been familiar with – is a token that shows the author has won his battle of transferring his ideas to the mind of the reader. Shklovsky believed that this estrangement act is the most important act of any artist (author). With the aid of the hints, Organic Form, and the setting the reader can Foreshadow the death of the Milly Theale and if the reader would be a veteran reader of James, he could not take this Foreshadowing easily for granted because the author has something to offer for him. The excessive use of such techniques as Blanks, Focalizing character, and stylistic oddity aided James to give a new light to his old themes in the eyes of his professional reader.

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