Chapter Four

Effects of Time in the Gift Exchange

Time is related to the gift exchange by making the exchange a diachronic one. After Kate’s plan of money reaping is put into practice, it still takes a period of time to complete her exchange with Milly, for Milly’s countergift—money—is expected to be offered after death. Since the temporal extension of the gift exchange precludes the possibility of an immediate return from Milly, Merton’s marriage with Kate must be put off until the exchange is completed. Time and its requirements of waiting and patience, in this regard, are inseparable from Kate’s and Merton’s actions in the gift exchange.

To clarify the effects of time in the exchange between Kate and Milly, this chapter first attempts to introduce the necessary pause between gift giving and gift returning. The exchangers’ actions and strategies of gift giving in terms of their senses of time will then follow. In the exchange between Kate and Milly, in which Merton is assigned to bring the gift to the latter, it can be seen that the temporal order of the exchange either disturbs or fosters the exchangers’ choices of actions. Showing how the exchangers’ responses to time affect the effects or implications of the gifts given, this chapter will argue that the temporal structure of the exchange helps clarify the two heroines’ respective losses and gains in the end of the gift exchange.

I. Temporal Division between the Gift and the Countergift

Early in Mauss’s study on the gift, it has been specified that after a gift is given,
a certain period of time has to pass before the countergift is returned. Elaborating on
the “honor and credit” (31) implicit in the potlatch practiced by the peoples in the
archaic societies, Mauss explicates that

[. . .] in every possible form of society it is in the nature of a gift to impose
an obligatory time limit. By their very definition, a meal shared in
common, a distribution of kava, or a talisman that one takes away, cannot
be reciprocated immediately. Time is needed in order to perform any
counter-service. The notion of a time limit is thus logically involved when
there is question of returning visits, contracting marriages and alliances,
establishing peace, attending games or regulated combats, celebrating
alternative festivals, rendering ritual services of honor, ‘displaying
reciprocal respect’ [. . .]. (45-46)1

Although Mauss does not further his analysis of temporality of the gift, two points can
be perceived from the discussion. First, to reciprocate the gift after a period of time,
which allows the gift receiver temporal flexibility to return a gift, is for the
exchangers to show mutual respect and their trust in the credit of each other. Second,
the period of time is not to be prolonged incessantly. Instead, a term or a due time has
been settled since the gift was given. The gift receiver, when taking the gift from the
giver, is supposed to take his/her turn to give sooner or later.

A detailed discussion on the temporal interference in the gift exchange can be

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1 This passage adopts another English translation of Mauss’s Essai sur le don—W. D. Walls’s The Gift:
Cunnison’s translation, from which the rest of the thesis quotes Mauss’s study on the gift, does not
show the full meaning of time in the original French text, here I choose Walls’s translation, instead of
Cunnison’s, to present the issue of temporality in the discussions on the gift.
found in Pierre Bourdieu’s *The Logic of Practice* (1980). The “delay” (*Logic* 105) of the advent of the countergift, according to Bourdieu, is one of the elements that distinguishes the gift exchange from other forms of giving and returning such as swapping, which [...] telescopes gift and counter-gift into the same instant. It is also opposed to lending, in which the return of the loan, explicitly guaranteed by a legal act, is in a sense *already performed at the very moment* when a contract is drawn up ensuring the *predictability* and *calculability* of the acts it prescribes. (*Logic* 105, emphasis mine)

Synchronicity can be perceived in the overt transactions other than the gift exchange. In swapping, the acts of giving and returning take place at the same time. Similarly, when one lends something, the precise due time and the content of the repayment are prearranged and legally secured. In other words, the moments of giving and returning are either symbolically or lawfully condensed together. The gift exchange, on the contrary, is not a real-time performance but a diachronic process in which the instant of returning is separated from that of giving. In such a deferred exchange of objects, it requires a period of time to complete the circulation of the gift and the countergift.

On the temporal factor in the gift exchange, Bourdieu shows a perspective similar to but slightly different from that of Mauss. While Mauss shows the link between time and respect discussed earlier in this chapter, Bourdieu states that “the counter-gift must be *deferred* and *different*, because the immediate return of an exactly identical object clearly amounts to a *refusal*” (*Outline* 5, emphasis mine). That is, an immediate recompense from the gift receiver can be disdainful and offensive, for it suggests that both the gift and the interpersonal bond it attempts to develop are
turned down by the gift receiver. To Bourdieu, the deferral and the difference of the
countergift seem to function less to show reciprocal respect than to hide the paradox
of the gift that seems to be given disinterestedly but initiates an economic circulation.
Aided by the “time-lag” (*Outline* 6), the interflow between gifts and countergifts can
be experienced “as a discontinuous series of free and generous acts” (Bourdieu,
“Marginalia” 232). Each act of giving and returning will be taken as a single and
liberal offer, not as a bearer of debt that makes the act an economic circulation. The
“interval between gift and counter-gift” (Bourdieu, *Logic* 105), helping efface the rout
of the traffic of the gift, is thus a necessary condition for the gift exchange.

However, to observe the issue from a different angle, the deferral of the
countergift entails uncertainties that provide the exchangers with a space for
manipulations. In the gift exchange, as revealed in Bourdieu’s distinction between gift
giving and lending, the exchangers lack “predictability” and “calculability” (Bourdieu,
*Logic* 105) promised in lending. In other words, both the amount and the timing of the
restitution remain unknown to the gift giver when making the offer. It is because the
compensation in the gift exchange is entailed by an obligation, an implicit agreement
which cannot be announced in public. As the obligation to return lies between an
imperative and a noncompulsory commitment, the gift receiver is free to decide when
and how to offer the countergift, which nonetheless is neither predictable nor
measurable to the gift giver.

The temporal division between the gift and the countergift, in this sense, allows
the gift receiver to play on the “pace” (*Logic* 107) or the “tempo of action” (*Logic*
106). By prolonging the exchange, the obliged receiver gains more time to prepare for
his/her action of gift returning. Besides, putting off the due time of the recompense is “a way of keeping one’s partner-opponent in the dark about one’s intentions” (Bourdieu, Logic 106). The extension of the time-span can bring curiosity and anxiety to the gift giver, making him/her wonder if the previous offer is well accepted by the gift receiver or not.

Viewed in this light, the intermission during the gift exchange not only sets up the necessary condition for the exchangers but also renders the exchange a temporal game. Within the interval, the exchangers can employ strategies such as “holding back or putting off, maintaining suspense or expectancy; or on the other hand, hurrying, hustling, surprising, stealing a march” (Bourdieu, Logic 107). By accelerating or modulating the tempo of gift giving and gift returning, different meanings can be created from the same act of the exchanger. In other words, the effects of the gift and the countergift can be modified through different lengths of time. The uncertainty brought about by the deferred countergift, in this respect, generates an improvised game involved with “the exploitation of pause, interval, and indecision” (Jenkins 71).

II. The Necessity of Waiting and Patience

The diachronic circulation of gifts, in The Wings of the Dove, sets up the temporal structure that dominates the actions of Kate and Merton. In the process of Kate’s exchange with Milly, it can be seen that time precludes every possibility of an immediate return. First of all, it requires a period of time for Kate to offer her gift—Merton’s love—to Milly. After gift giving, Kate and Merton have to wait until the heiress dies so that they can have her property. Finally, during the interval between
the gift and the countergift, both Kate and Merton must maintain a long-term relationship with Milly to ensure that she will provide the couple with the countergift they desire. In this way, the circulation of the gift can be completed and the bargain with Milly can therefore be carried out only “in and through time” (Bourdieu, *Outline* 6).

Waiting with patience thus becomes the main chore for the couple during the time-consuming exchange. Such a necessity has been sketched in Henry James’s notebook, in which he states that Kate and Merton “are obliged to wait, to delay, to have patience” (*Notebooks* 104). Meanwhile, Kate and Merton have to hold their patience to solve the contradicted interests of other gift givers in the novel. “Proper waiting” is thus “a necessary condition for the fair weighting of conflicting claims” (Jackson 227).

Kate’s capability of waiting, however, is not gifted but acquired through her earlier position as a daughter deprived of autonomy. As described in the famous opening of *The Wings of the Dove*,

> She waited, Kate Croy, for her father to come in, but he kept her unconsciously, and there were moments at which she showed herself, in the glass over the mantel, a face positively pale with the irritation that had brought her to the point of going away without sight of him. It was at this point, however, that she remained; changing her place, moving from the shabby sofa to the armchair upholstered in a glazed cloth that gave at once—she had tried it—the sense of the slippery and of the sticky. (*Wings* 1; bk. 1)
At first, Kate’s waiting is a low profile compelled by her father. It reflects her helplessness in confrontation with her domestic predicament that the future of her family and of her own is solely out of her control. With this comprehension of the situation, Kate has no disposition to wait. She is impatient and irritated, hoping to flee from Lionel’s house and the future to which she is engaged.

But soon Kate realizes the impossibility of escaping her duty as a daughter and accordingly transforms her forced passivity into a willing choice of waiting. She learns that her irritations are of no avail and that her chance to escape can be prepared during the very time that confines her actions. It is because Lionel’s plan on her, later developed into Maud’s arrangement of her marriage, is also a gift exchange that requires a period of time for its completion. The time needed for the elders’ marital exchange with Lord Mark not only prevents Kate from being married off immediately but also offers time for her to collect resources to defend against the elders. Kate begins to change her waiting into “a positive type of resistance” to the doomed fate, a gesture by which she is able to “explor[e] all the possibilities of her present situation as she waits” (Komar 475). Consequently, she replaces her impatience with an attempt to find a place more favorable for herself, assuming the position of the gift giver in the exchange with Milly.

The situation of Kate’s exchange with Milly, suggested by the “slippery” and “sticky” (Wings 1; bk. 1) texture of the armchair on which Kate perches, is no less intricate than the previous one. Although Kate moves from the marital exchange of

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2 On the implications of the armchair, Victoria Coulson suggests that “the furniture is a leering, sneering reminder of Kate’s powerlessness: the armchair resists her control, baffling her with its slipperiness, while imposing itself on her, familiarly, with its importunate sticky touch” (115). Coulson further argues that James tends to use in his late fictions the lexicon of furniture and objects, a kind of
the elders to her own plan of gift giving, the situation still requires her patience to
wait until Milly returns the countergift. In the first two chapters of Book Sixth, it can
be discerned that Kate deliberately slows down her pace to adjust herself to the new
role of gift giver and to the temporal structure of the exchange. Book Sixth opens with
her reunion with Merton after his return from America. At their meeting, Kate
discloses her eagerness to remove the obstacle to their marriage, contending that it is
urgent “to face without delay the question of handling their immediate future” (Wings
217; bk. 6). Being desperate to take measures against the crisis, Kate cunningly
suggests that they should make no haste but “deal, deal in a crafty manner, with
difficulties and delays” (Wings 217; bk. 6). Restraining her previous uneasiness when
waiting for her father, Kate maintains her composure in coping with the problems in
her relationship with Merton. This time she understands that to solve the problem of
delay, they have to replace rush with discretion and effective management of time.
That is, they should pause and ponder even though the time for them is limited. The
self-possession shows that Kate is ready for a diachronic exchange and is able to
apply her patience to the time of waiting.

The next step of Kate’s plan is to convince Merton of the importance of patience.
As Kate puts it, she is going to sort things out “in a crafty manner” (Wings 217; bk. 6).
What Kate implies is that she perceives the prima facie evidence of Milly’s fondness
for Merton and that she decides to “make something out of that” (Wings 228; bk. 6).
In their next meeting, Kate further makes clear the temporal necessity for her plan.

“armchair hermeneutics” (116), to represent the personalities or inner states of the characters. For more
discussions on the domestic objects and the Jamesian thing, please refer to Bill Brown, “A Thing about
222-232.
She addresses that “I assure you I see my way—so don’t spoil it: wait for me and give me time. [. . .], only believe in me, and it will be beautiful” (Wings 229; bk. 6, emphasis mine). Without any allusion to Merton’s further duties to please Milly, Kate only puts forth her demand of time and of Merton’s patience during the time of waiting, namely, the premises under which they are able to enact the exchange.

What Kate asks Merton to do is not to wait passively but to take actions during the time of the exchange. Disregarding Merton’s discontent with the “permitted privacy” (Wings 228; bk. 6) of their meeting sanctioned by Aunt Maud, Kate in a commanding manner urges him to visit Milly:

‘Go to see Milly,’ she [Kate] for all satisfaction repeated.

‘And what good will that do me?’

‘Try it and you’ll see.’

‘You mean you’ll manage to be there?’ Densher asked. ‘Say you are, how will that give us privacy?’

‘Try it—you’ll see,’ the girl once more returned. (Wings 236; bk. 6)

Restating the imperative with its outcome kept uncertain, Kate attempts to drive Merton’s attention from their present condition to the prospect that can be brought about by his prompt action to please Milly. But Kate’s elusive tone manifests that she fails to promise Merton any definite result of her plan. It is because Kate, as a gift giver, is unable to predict the result of the gift exchange, which depends on the countergift given later. During the ineluctable time-lapse between the gift and the countergift, any conjecture about the outcome is futile. What she can do is to bring the gift to the appointed receiver, and then to wait with patience for the countergift from
Milly. Therefore, Kate insists that Merton should go to see Milly while leaving out the impact of the action on their future.

It can be perceived from Kate’s efforts that the temporal condition requires both of their patience. Since it is only through Merton’s agency that Kate is able to offer the gift, she has to make certain if he comprehends the necessity of waiting. In this way, they are able to keep in step even when parting with different jobs. That is why Kate attempts to make him accept that the time of waiting is inevitable for their future and thus demands his patience during the period of waiting.

III. Time as a Cause of Impatience

Despite that the temporal order of the gift exchange is a condition Kate and Merton should face together, there turns out to be great discrepancy between their senses of time. Kate, at the beginning of the exchange, acknowledges that the period of waiting is inevitable before the arrival of the countergift. But Merton, unlike Kate, can scarcely endure the time of waiting, which leads him to grudgingly accept Kate’s demand and to constantly interrupt her by questioning her scheme. It is because in the exchange between Kate and Milly, Merton is not so enthusiastic about the pecuniary countergift from the heiress as Kate is. Rather, what he desires is the possibilities Milly’s money can bring—the marriage with Kate. The difference between Kate and Merton, with the prolonging of the time spent on waiting, can drive both of them to impatience, which blocks their concerted action of gift giving. The time-span required for the journey of the gift, in this regard, becomes a limit to the couple in their exchange with Milly.
During the inchoate phase of the exchange, the disaccord of the couple’s
temporal paces is detectable in Merton’s departure from Kate’s maneuver of time.
What Kate suggests him to pass the time is a kind of active waiting—bringing the gift
to Milly by pretending to love her; after that he should keep his patience until the time
is ripe for the advent of the countergift. But Merton violates Kate’s instructions by
choosing to wait passively. Although he pays a visit to Milly at her lodging in London
at Kate’s request, Merton refuses to work as an active agent on behalf of the gift giver.
On the contrary, he is free to claim that he “had himself as yet done nothing
deceptive” (Wings 271; bk. 6) for he does not show any fake affections for Milly. If
Milly is misled to hope for further relationship with him, it is because of
Kate’s description of him, his defeated state, it was none of his own; his
responsibility would begin, as he might say, only with acting it out. The
sharp point was, however, in the difference between acting and not acting;
this difference in fact it was that made the case of conscience. (Wings 271;
bk. 6)

It is clear that Merton seeks to discharge his duty of gift giving as soon as he makes
the first move to see Milly. He is looking for the possibility of holding himself aloof
by remaining alert to the slight difference between his doing at Kate’s request and his
not doing so, namely, to the distinction between pretending and not pretending to love
Milly. As Merton is sincere in his appreciation of Milly’s benevolence, it would be
Kate who is to blame for misleading Milly’s comprehension of their relations. With
the efforts to cast aside his responsibilities, Merton strives to maintain the position as
“an outsider” (Wings 369; bk. 8) in the exchange between Kate and Milly.
Merton’s choice of nonparticipation, however, exposes his passive waiting in contrast to Kate’s resolute actions. While Merton categorizes the exchange into a matter of conscience, Kate never bothers herself with this moral judgment of the exchange. To Kate, it is a bargain in which she “play[s] fair” (Wings 495; bk. 10) with Milly, for the former is to be rewarded for supplying the latter’s demand of love. Yet the idea of equivalence is obviously beyond Merton’s comprehension. Next, he draws a line between action and inaction, but with such a discrimination he actually chooses none except “the space between them” (Ian 130), and in this way he attempts to maintain a place in the “neutral territory” (Ian 130) between the gift giver and the gift receiver. But his avoidance to settle down his position is futile. Even though he never lies to Milly, his silence in fact “equals ‘acting’ or doing” (Ian 130), for it endorses Kate’s distortion of their engagement. In the end, Merton’s inertia merely reflects his skepticism, which is “not so much the deferral of belief as the belief in avoiding risk” (Trask 364). That is, passive waiting reveals his mistrust of Kate and his fears of the potential harm they may do to Milly.

Paradoxically, Merton with his inertia fails to shun the responsibility for Kate, which in turn produces a counterforce against his performance in the exchange. On the one hand, his hesitation shows that he is unwilling to deceive Milly. On the other hand, he recognizes his inaction as “a kind of betrayal” (Wings 272; bk. 6) to Kate, for he believes that one is “[n]ot to give away the woman one loved, but to back her up in her mistakes” (Wings 272; bk. 6). Reminding himself of his duty as Kate’s lover, Merton means to revive his willingness to please Milly, only to find that he lapses into another oscillation between action and inaction when confronted with unexpected
conditions in the exchange. During his visit to Milly, for example, the hostess abruptly invites Merton for an excursion in the afternoon. Downstairs is the “waiting chariot” \( (Wings\ 279;\ bk.\ 6) \) at Milly’s command, but Merton is so indeterminate about his action that he fails to give a quick answer. To Milly’s invitation,

Densher’s happy response, however, had as yet hung fire, the process we have described in him operating by this time with extreme intensity. The system of not pulling up, not breaking off, had already brought him headlong, he seemed to feel, to where they actually stood; and just now it was, with a vengeance, that he must do either one thing or the other. He had been waiting for some moments, which probably seemed to him longer than they were; this was because he was anxiously watching himself wait. \( (Wings\ 280;\ bk.\ 6,\ emphasis\ mine) \)

Merton’s hesitation, as revealed in the passage above, prolongs the time of his reaction to the circumstance for which he is unprepared. Thinking hard about a proper response, Merton is soon frustrated by the fact that he is forced to be more active in the plan rather than staying in the safe zone between the exchangers. Meanwhile, it is even worse that his indecision consumes more time than needed, which again presses for a prompt reply to Milly’s request. After a winding resistance to his participation in the exchange, Merton finally recognizes the impossibility to remain neutral and accepts Milly’s invitation to go for a ride.

So far, a vicious circle is perceived from the way Merton deals with the temporal structure of the gift exchange. At first, he questions Kate’s demand of time, wondering if waiting is proper for their marriage hindered by Lionel and Aunt Maud. Following
that, he rejects Kate’s suggestion to be active in pleasing Milly and instead adheres to inertia in his meeting with Milly. In the end, his withdrawal of action not only produces a dilemma for himself but also prolongs the time needed for gift giving, during which time he is anxious of and irritated by his own tardiness.

Besides his passivity during the time of waiting, Merton also suffers from the growing intensity of his desire for Kate, which threatens to exhaust his patience before the completion of the exchange. As revealed in the actions he takes earlier in the exchange, it is his love for Kate rather than his recognition of his role as an agent of her that motivates him to visit Milly. Likewise, it is still his duty as Kate’s lover that reinforces his comprehension of the impossibility to keep away from Kate’s plan. But underlying Merton’s love for Kate is actually his sexual desire for her, which is so desperate that makes him sensitive to the passage of time. A case in point is his discovery after coming back from America that “[h]is absence from her [Kate] for so many weeks had had such an effect upon him that his demands, his desires had grown” (Wings 219; bk. 6). It is not until Kate asks him to see Milly that he plucks up his courage to utter his desire—asking Kate to “come to me” (Wings 236; bk. 6). But Kate merely replies with “impatience” and demands a prompt action of him, warning him not to “spoil for me the beauty of what I see!” (Wings 237; bk. 6).

Merton’s desire for Kate, in this sense, also gives way to “the lapse of time” (Wings 220; bk. 6) required for the gift exchange. For Merton’s desire to be fulfilled, he has to obtain Milly’s money to marry Kate. Yet the countergift is not given synchronically with the gift but is returned after the gift—the moment of its coming always lying in the future, later than the instant of gift giving. For now the countergift
and the prospect it enables are still out of his reach. Thus, before Milly requites the
gift giver, what is deferred in their exchange is not only Milly’s countergift but also
Merton’s expectation of marriage. The deferred countergift, in other words, signifies
the impossibility of a prompt fulfillment of his desire. Detained by the temporal
condition of the gift exchange, Merton’s personal desire is temporarily suppressed and
sacrificed before the arrival of Milly’s countergift.

The deferral of the countergift keeps Merton waiting, but to him “waiting was
the game of dupes” (Wings 220; bk. 6) that diminishes his patience. As the time of
waiting goes on, Merton begins to doubt if he could “hold out [. . .] against an
impatience that, prolonged and exasperated, made a man ill” (Wings 220; bk. 6,
emphasis mine). This situation is aggravated after he follows Milly to Venice. Even
though Merton thinks it “extraordinarily easy” (Wings 341; bk. 8) to get along with
her, he still finds himself unable to retain his patience reduced with time. Rather, he
feels “a kind of rage at what he wasn’t having; an exasperation, a resentment,
begotten truly by the impatience of desire, in respect to his postponed and relegated,
his so extremely manipulated state” (Wings 342; bk. 8, emphasis mine). It can be seen
that time not only consumes his patience but also arouses his anger towards the forced
passivity under Kate’s command. Here again Merton’s intolerance of waiting brings a
dilemma that retards the exchange in progress. On the one hand, his love for Kate
compels his pursuit of Milly, forbidding his withdrawal of actions. On the other hand,
he is now weary of the postponement of his desire and is unwilling to put up with the
time-span of the exchange. As a result, Merton is enraged and immobilized by the
conflict between his desire and Kate’s demand to woo Milly. His love for and loyalty
to Kate, therefore, become a confinement on his autonomy and desire, making him wonder “whether he had really no will left” (Wings 343; bk. 8). What is worse, pondering over his grievance against Kate’s manipulation consumes the limited time for their gift giving. Much to his annoyance, he finds that “[b]y the time he looked at his watch he had been for a quarter of an hour at this post of observation and reflexion” (Wings 344; bk. 8).

Merton’s irritation with time, however, does not come to Kate’s notice. In contrast to his impatience, Kate believes that the more time they are given, the greater success the exchange will turn out. Her faith in the temporal effect on the exchange, for instance, can be perceived in the discussion with Merton at the party Milly holds in her residence in Venice, Palazzo Leporelli. Kate sees that Milly’s confidante, Susan, is ready to conceal the truth about Milly’s health and the secret engagement between Kate and Merton “to please Milly” (Wings 377; bk. 8). It is because Susan strives to keep Milly from harm at all cost, which, when it comes to Kate’s plan, “gains [. . .] time” (Wings 377; bk. 8). To Kate, Susan’s concealment of the truths grants “[t]ime for something in particular that I [Kate] understand you [Merton] regard as possible. Time too that, I further understand, is time for you as well” (Wings 378; bk. 8).

Stressing the excessive time allowed by Susan’s concealment, Kate in fact attempts to remind Merton of the limited time for their gift giving and thus presses for Merton’s taking actions in time. But Kate fails to identify his reluctance during the process of gift giving, which leads to a broadening rupture in their senses of time.

In view of Kate’s negligence of his repressed desire, Merton decides to put forward his own bargain with her. Out of impatience, he finally makes clear about his
urgent desire—“I’ll stay [in Venice], on my honour, if you’ll come to me” (Wings 382; bk. 8). That is, Merton will do his part in Kate’s plan only if she promises to have sex with him. This time his condition is accepted by Kate. The fulfillment of his desire not only quenches Merton’s impatience but also brings “the general feeling of his renewed engagement to fidelity” (Wings 387; bk. 9).

Merton’s precipitation of the sexual relation with Kate, however, turns out to be a false duplication of the Londoners’ mode of exchange and threatens to expose the paradox of their gift for Milly. This problem can be clearly seen in the commercial terminology Merton uses to state how he is bound by the sexual contract:

The force of the engagement, the quantity of the article to be supplied, the special solidity of the contract, the way, above all, as a service for which the price named by him had been magnificently paid, his equivalent office was to take effect. (Wings 387; bk. 9, emphasis mine)

Metaphorically, he is the employee whom Kate recruits and remunerates in advance for pretending to love Milly. But Merton’s bargain with Kate in fact reduces their relationship to that in a transaction. At the beginning, his support for Kate is supposed to be given out of pure love, which dominates and initiates the exchange with Milly. Yet the terms of Merton’s “contract” reduce his affections for Kate from the motivation to an additional term of his participation in the exchange with Milly. Furthermore, Merton’s commercial tropes follow the same logic behind the fake affections they offer Milly, which are by no means a generous gift aimed at developing genuine interpersonal relations. With the advancement of the reward for his job, Merton’s love for Kate, as that for Milly, is neither unconditional nor
gratuitous. Rather, it is bargained over with personal interest, as what they do with the
gift for Milly. Merton’s contract, in this sense, reflects that both performances of love
become convertible and are converted into a means to obtain Milly’s money. It is
revealed in Merton’s bargain that the relationship between the lovers has been
contaminated by their own plan to use Milly, which predicts the ultimate alteration in
Kate and Merton’s love.

The time needed for the exchange with Milly, resulting in Merton’s improper
interference with Kate’s plan, also threatens to exhaust Kate’s patience before Milly
returns the countergift. Kate’s diminished patience, on the one hand, is partially
caused by Merton’s ill management of the limited time allowed for their gift giving. A
case in point occurs when Kate informs him of the additional time gained from
Susan’s concealment of their relations, Merton gives a frustrating response: “Time for
what?” (Wings 377; bk. 8). Since he is unable to keep up with her pace of action, Kate
begins to show “impatience” (Wings 377; bk. 8) when restating his duty of gift giving.

On the other hand, time itself is a crucial factor in Kate’s impatience, for the
deferral of the countergift suggests the uncertainty of her ultimate gain from the
exchange. Before obtaining Milly’s legacy, Kate as the gift giver receives nothing for
her present sacrifice of Merton’s love. To put it differently, Kate’s offer is at stake for
she is unable to see if she can successfully acquire the money. Thus, Kate claims that
she “risk[s] [. . .] everything” (Wings 358; bk. 8) for the exchange with Milly. That is,
she risks losing all but having nothing in the end. However, the uncertainty within the
time limit of the exchange is not Merton’s concern. He presses for the sexual bargain
with Kate, which drives her again to “impatience” (Wings 359; bk. 8) and threatens to
lessen her usual ability to wait.

Kate’s inability to sustain her patience leads to her breaking step with Merton when he finally resolves to put the exchange into action. During the time when Merton is left with Milly in Venice, Kate has “a talk” with Lord Mark in which the latter “spoke out” (Wings 490; bk. 10) his suspicion on the relations between Kate and Merton. But Kate, rather than concealing the truth as she is supposed to, acknowledges her secret engagement to Merton. The fact about their relations, to Lord Mark, is a vantage point from which he sees the prospect of his marriage with Milly. On account of his own benefit, Mark divulges their engagement to Milly and in doing so wishes to cause her distrust of Merton.

The relations between Kate and Merton, apparently, are a fact Milly “learns [. . .] too soon” (Wings 447; bk. 10). It is because Merton’s love, as a gift that is supposed to be offered by no one but himself, should be misrecognized as pure and natural throughout the exchange. That is, Kate’s intention of gift giving cannot be uncovered until Milly dies and offers her money. Now that Kate and Merton’s engagement is exposed to Milly ahead of schedule, their scheme and interests can no longer be kept from the heiress. Milly, provided with the whole picture of the exchange, thus learns that Merton’s love is never a gratuitous gift from himself but that which, manipulated by Kate, requires her repayment.

Kate’s premature disclosure of her interest, however, may be intentional rather than accidental. Kate, for example, attempts to claim her innocence by laying the blame on Lord Mark. According to Kate’s report, Lord Mark is “the one person we [Merton and Kate] hadn’t deceived” (Wings 491, emphasis mine). That is, Mark,
attracted by the heiress’s material capital, refuses to partake in the collective
misrecognition by which Kate’s intention of gift giving is wrapped up.³ Kate, though
refuting that she has any idea of the aftermath of verifying Mark’s conjecture (Wings
490; bk. 10), did not deny the truth to Mark. Her accusation of Mark, therefore, is
merely a self-defense to discharge her responsibility of letting out the inside story of
her exchange.

Moreover, Kate equivocally admits that she would have done the same thing if
she knew the following step Mark was to take (Wings 490; bk. 10), and the very
confession reveals her unwillingness to wait. Kate’s failure of keeping the truth, in
this sense, can be a strategy aimed to speed up the circulation of the gift. Uncovering
her relations with Merton, Kate may attempt to remind Milly through Mark of the
exchange in progress and thus of the gift receiver’s obligation to return a countergift.
After all, whether her revelation to Lord Mark is done deliberately, Kate has violated
her previous sense of time and earlier insistence on waiting. The impetuous exposure
of the truth reflects that she has lost her patience to keep the truth until Milly’s death,
which proves to be an untimely move in the diachronic exchange.

Obviously, Kate’s impatience works against her own plan. The greatest problem
it creates is to disrupt Merton’s rhythm of gift giving by betraying his trust. It is
because Kate’s impetuousness aggravates Milly’s illness, which breaks her earlier
promise to Merton that the exchange would not cause any harm. As a result, Merton
begins to reveal his disbelief in Kate. For instance, he refuses to continue her plan and

³ Kate’s strategies of gift-wrapping and the collective misrecognition are discussed in Chapter Three of
the thesis.
confirms their engagement to Milly when asked about their relations (Wings 450; bk. 10). He also hides himself from Kate after his departure from Venice, coming back to London for “a whole fortnight [. . .] without [. . .] making a sign” to Kate (Wings 441; bk. 10). What is more, he suspects Kate’s motivation of initiating the exchange with Milly. When he meets Kate in her sister’s house, Kate “affected him at once as a distinguished stranger [. . .] who was making the best of a queer episode and a place of exile” (Wings 479; bk. 10, emphasis mine). From his description of Kate, it can be perceived that he ceases to appreciate what she does to escape her family. To Merton, Kate’s plan should not be carried out at the cost of Milly’s death.

Regarding the counter effect of Kate’s impatience, it can be added that the hasty disclosure of interest complicates Milly’s motivation for gift returning. Early before she learns what Kate is up to, Milly realizes that “wouldn’t her value, for the man who should marry her, be precisely in the ravage of her disease?” (Wings 325; bk. 7). She not only acknowledges her value in the marriage market but is also ready to show her ability to give—“she being clearly a person of the sort esteemed likely to do the handsome thing by a stricken and sorrowing husband” (Wings 325; bk. 7). The interflow of material capital in Milly’s marriage, however, is still a gift exchange with tacit understanding between the exchangers. Now she is provided with the fact about Merton’s love, her countergift for Kate and Merton can hardly be a reward she is perfectly happy to offer. Rather, Milly’s money, like what she receives from Kate, is turned into a payment used to buy the relationship between Kate and Merton.

From the instances examined so far, it can be concluded that both Kate and Merton fail to respond patiently to the time of waiting required for their exchange
with Milly. Merton, disturbed by his concern about the potential harm to Milly, first attempts to shirk his duty of gift giving assigned by Kate. Next, he is afflicted by his sexual desire for Kate, which is repressed for the duration of the gift exchange. Out of impatience, he presses for the bargain with Kate. But the symbolic contract derived from this bargain reduces their love to a condition under which their exchange with Milly is carried out, showing that the relations between the couple are gradually corrupted by the plan of gift giving. Kate, like Merton, also fails to keep the misrecognition of her gift until the arrival of Milly’s countergift. Kate’s early admission turns out to be an improper expedition of the tempo of gift giving, for it is inconsistent with Merton’s resolution to please Milly after having sex with Kate. The interval between the gift and the countergift, therefore, constrains both Kate and Merton by consuming their patience. “The two fiancés,” as James depicts in his notebooks, finally become “weary of their waiting” (James, Notebooks 104). In the end, the couple supposed to cooperate in the exchange with Milly can no longer keep step with each other. Instead, each of them does something that counteracts the effect of the other’s action of gift giving.

IV. Milly’s Temporal Maneuvers of Gift Returning

The temporal condition of the gift exchange, with its constraints on Kate’s and Merton’s actions before the arrival of the countergift, shows an opposite effect on the process of Milly’s gift returning. To Kate, when Milly will die and make her offer is unpredictable. But Milly is able to manipulate the temporal uncertainty allowed by the lapse of time between the gift and the countergift. It is because Milly, as the obligated
gift receiver, is free to determine the pace of gift returning.

After Milly learns her obligation to return, her countergift is prepared in silence. Showing no condemnation on the unfaithful couple she takes as friends, she draws in the horns and remains silent at her mental and physical pain. As Susan describes, Milly is “able [. . .] not to show anything” (Wings 422; bk. 9). In fact, her private feelings are kept so secretly that, before she passes away, the words she leaves to Merton are no more than her asking him “not to stay [in Venice] any longer” (Wings 452; bk. 10) in their last meeting in Palazzo Leporelli. Except that, Merton’s knowledge of Milly’s reaction is confined to her having “turned her face to the wall” (Wings 410; bk. 9) and her worsening illness, gathered either from Susan’s report or from Merton’s observation of Sir Luke and Lord Mark. Compared with the dovelike image represented earlier by the Londoners, Milly’s deliberate alienation here shows more passivity. As John Auchard points out, Milly as a passive figure is defined “in terms [. . .] which move along a negative path toward absences, silences, and voids” (101).4 Now she gets to know Kate’s exchange with her, but the way Milly participates in the exchange is circuitous: fading out and vanishing from the eyes of Kate and Merton.

When Milly’s withdrawal of words and actions is positioned in the temporal structure of the gift exchange, it can be seen that her silence does not leave a meaningless void. Due to her stillness, the countergift is deferred, the time limit of the exchange prolonged. The temporal suspension, according to Bourdieu, can be a

4 Considering Milly’s absence, Nichola Bradbury added that she is “isolated, by nationality, wealth, sex, illness” (87) from the society she seeks to enter. More discussions on her absence and her being alienated can be found in Millicent Bell’s Meaning in Henry James, p. 312, and Brenda Austin-Smith’s “The Reification of Milly Theale: Rhetorical Narration in The Wings of the Dove,” p. 189.
“strategic deferment” manipulated by the gift receiver so that “the moment for the counterstrike becomes impossible to determine, like the really evil moment in the ill-omened periods of the ritual calendar, when the curve turns up and when lack of response ceases to be negligence and turns into disdainful refusal” (Logic 106). That is, the gift receiver, by delaying the fulfillment of his/her obligation to return, not only suspends the exchange but also keeps the gift giver in suspense, making the latter wonder if the withheld countergift is intentionally kept to insult the gift giver.

It is before long that Milly’s inaction shows its impact on Kate: immobilizing the latter by submitting her to a pace determined by the gift receiver. Because Milly offers the countergift at her own pace, Kate is unable to dominate the exchange as usual but wait passively for Milly’s money. During the extended time-span, Kate is thus confined to making random conjectures about the silent gift receiver’s intentions and the possible outcome of the exchange. Seeing that Milly “has had all she wanted” (Wings 456; bk. 10), Kate surmises that the exchange will proceed, for Milly “won’t have loved you [Merton] for nothing” (Wings 456; bk. 10). Indeed, Kate knows for certain that Milly is still bound to fulfill the obligation of the gift receiver, yet the reciprocal relation between the gift exchangers is the only thing Kate is allowed to expect. Except for this, she is unable to make any move in confrontation with Milly’s silence. By suspending the exchange, Milly thus shows an “art of ostentatiously giving time” that grants her “power” over the original gift giver (Logic 107).

Like Kate, Merton is helpless when confronted with Milly’s silence. Finding that Milly has learned his secret engagement, Merton is eager to know if Milly “utterly hates me” (Wings 414; bk. 9). Nevertheless, he cannot get a definite answer, and this
uneasiness at Milly’s reaction leads to his belated compassion for Milly. He examines
his doings and their harm to her, regretting the fact that he has “never been near the
facts of her condition” (Wings 431; bk. 9). Rather, he joins the “conspiracy of silence”
by which all except Milly create “beautiful fictions” from his relationship with her
(Wings 431; bk. 9). Merton’s self-reproach then prompts him to terminate the
exchange before she is able to offer the countergift, which is undesirable for him now.
As a result, he admits his engagement with Kate when Milly asks about it, and to
“right everything that’s wrong” (Wings 467; bk. 10), he proposes to Kate when going
back to London. In this way, he strives to leave behind his deception as “an ugly
madness” or “a bad dream” (Wings 467; bk. 10). But Merton’s attempt to halt the
exchange is opposed to Kate’s thoughts and is thus rejected. Merton’s sense of guilt,
in a final manner, cannot affect the circulation of the gift.

Besides the silence, Milly’s temporal maneuver can be found in her choice of
timing to introduce her gift in return. On Christmas Eve Merton receives a letter
handwritten but sent posthumously by Milly. He realizes at once that the date of its
arrival is by no means accidental. Taking it to Kate at Christmas, Merton says:

‘[. . .] It came to me, while I worried it out, last night. It came to me as an
effect of the hour.’ He held up his letter and seemed now to insist more
than to confess. ‘This thing had been timed’

‘For Christmas Eve?’

“For Christmas Eve.’

Kate had suddenly a strange smile. ‘The season of gifts!’ After which,
as he said nothing, she went on: ‘And had been written, while she could
write, and kept to be so timed?’ (Wings 494; bk. 10)

Obviously, Christmas Eve—“[t]he season of gifts” (Wings 494; bk. 10)—suggests that Milly is ready to offer the long-awaited countergift. But the letter’s being “kept to be so timed” (Wings 494; bk. 10) is also a way to accentuate that Milly’s offer is a “gift,” which, provided in the Londoners’ system of gift exchange, is never gratuitous. With its timing carefully chosen, Milly’s belated announcement of her countergift in fact reminds the couple of the obligation to make another return.5

Through the “effect of the hour” (Wings 494; bk. 10), Milly’s bequest is turned into a “burdensome gift” (Wakana 54) to its receivers. Merton, for example, hands over the unopened letter to Kate. Although the letter is “the symbol of her [Kate’s] sustained rightness in following a roundabout course” (Williams 132), she still refuses to take it if Merton rejects his partnership in her previous action of gift giving. It is because Kate’s motivation of the exchange is to earn financial props for her marriage with Merton. If he denies the propriety of their share, the material reward will mean nothing to Kate. In the end, both of them refuse to open the seal and read Milly’s announcement of the undesired gift. Unyieldingly, Kate tosses it into the fire. Unable to stop her in time, Merton merely “watched, with her, the paper burn” (Wings 406; bk.

5 The circulation of the gift, as Jacques T. Godbout and Alain Caillé point out, is a “spiral” (130) movement in which the countergift renews another exchange of the gift. Since the value and the quantity of the countergift are often greater than those of the gift given by the original gift giver, the surplus of the value or the quantity of the countergift becomes a gift for the original gift giver. According to Godbout and Caillé, the countergift “enables the recipient [the original gift receiver] to take the initiative in his turn and to assume the role of donor” (133). Consequently, the gift exchange is in permanent regeneration. In The Wings of the Dove, although the value and the quantity of Milly’s material countergift can hardly be said to outweigh those of Kate’s gift (Merton’s love), it can still be perceived that Milly with her later bequest offers more than she is supposed to do. It is because she does not fully possess the gift Kate offers—Milly not marrying Merton after all—but she still bequeaths Merton in return. In this sense, it can be seen that Milly does provide a countergift greater than what she receives from Kate and Merton, and that the very countergift renews the circulation of the gift by obligating the couple to give in return.
The burnt letter, however, shows effect by altering Merton’s sense of time. Rather than showing impatience as he did during the earlier process of gift giving, Merton now feels

the lapse of the weeks [. . .] almost swingingly rapid. They contained for him the contradiction that, whereas periods of waiting are supposed in general to keep the time slow, it was the wait, actually, that made the pace trouble him. The secret of that anomaly, to be plain, was that he was aware of how, while the days melted, something rare went with them. (Wings 502; bk. 10)

As Merton later admits, it is the permanent loss of the text of Milly’s first letter, which may explain “the turn she would have given her act” (Wings 502; bk. 10), that he struggles to protect against time. Because the letter is “missed for ever” (Wings 502; bk. 10), Merton will never have the chance to know why Milly participates in the exchange regardless of the insincere gift from the couple. Yet the permanent loss of Milly’s intentions is exactly what summons him to revisit the past. The lost content, like “a priceless pearl cast [. . .] into the fathomless sea,” provides infinite possibilities” (Wings 502; bk. 10) that bewilder Merton and arouse his memory of Milly. His obsession with her memory is so strong that it is even molded into a presence, a “maimed child” (Wings 502; bk. 10) of whom he feels obliged to take care. Merton, in view of this, attempts to protect it against “the hunger of time” (Wings 502; bk. 10). Unfortunately, his resistance is in vain. As David McWhirter points out, time is “desire’s greatest enemy, for as soon as the moment is swallowed up into the
historical continuity which surrounds it, it [. . .] becomes, in effect, a specifically determining step in an actual sequence of events” (104). Thus, no matter how hard Merton tries, he is still unable to preserve the reminiscences of Milly against time and retrieve the lost words in her letter which has been burnt up.

Although Merton’s struggles against time are futile, it is through him that Milly’s countergift has an effect on Kate. Milly’s bequest, as a countergift officially announced in a legal document coming after the first letter, accelerates the tempo of the gift exchange. By reducing the time limit, it compels the couple to make decisions on whether they should accept the gift now less desired but still required for their marriage. The second letter, in this sense, brings up the problem that Kate and Merton sought to set on fire with the first letter.

This time Merton takes a firm stand on dealing with the document. He seeks to call off the exchange by transferring the second letter to Kate as soon as it arrives. In so doing he means to give her a “test” (Wings 505; bk. 10)—to see if she can “send it back [. . .] intact and inviolate” (Wings 504; bk. 10). It is because Merton cannot marry Kate with the burdensome gift that binds them with the obligations to return. Unless she agrees to renounce Milly’s bequest, giving up the exchange as he did, Merton can marry Kate as they planned before. In this situation, Kate is forced to “choose” (Wings 508; bk. 10), choosing between Milly’s money and Merton’s genuine love, rather than having both as she expects at the beginning of the exchange. The economic principle Kate follows, which aims at maximized profit, now loses its domination of the exchange and the exchangers.

Unexpectedly, Kate’s choices are impossible because the countergift from Milly,
given at such a moment, can neither be turned down nor be given back. Since only “after death” is Milly able to bequeath the fortune, its recipients lose the addressee to whom they should send back the gift intact or give another one in return. Whether Kate and Merton are willing to accept it or not, their decision means nothing to the dead. Milly’s gift, without the possibility of being returned, is thus a compulsive offer to the couple. As a result, the gift exchange reaches to a deadlock. Kate is left with no choice but to accept Milly’s countergift, and Merton cannot fulfill his wish to marry Kate without Milly’s bequest.

At last, their inability to reject the countergift isolates Kate from Merton, whose only desire at present is still “to escape everything” (*Wings* 507; bk. 10), abandoning Milly’s entire offer which leaves a sense of indebtedness by obligating the couple to return a gift. As he says to Kate:

‘[. . .] I’m willing to believe that the amount of money’s not small.’

[. . .]

‘If she was to leave me a remembrance,’ he quietly pursued, ‘it would inevitably not be meagre.’ (*Wings* 507; bk. 10)

Apparently, Merton’s memory of Milly is proportional to the amount of her money. Just because her money is never a returnable debt, her impulse to make the prodigal offer without receiving any return is engraved on Merton’s memory. As this memory will not cease to last if Milly’s money cannot be refused, Kate now realizes that underlying Merton’s urge to terminate the gift exchange, he is actually “afraid of all the truth;” that is, he is “afraid [. . .] to be in love with her [Milly]” (*Wings* 508; bk. 10). Although Merton defends himself by saying that he “never was in love with her,”
Kate sees clearly how Milly’s death and bequest change the inner state of Merton. Certainly, he is not in love with Milly “for the time she lived,” but Kate points out to Merton that “your change came [. . .] the day you last saw her; she died for you then that you might understand her. From that hour you did [understand her]. [. . .]. And I do now. She did it for us.” (Wings 508; bk. 10). It is not until then that Kate has a full view of the effect of Milly’s countergift, which is given to impose on the couple an unavoidable obligation of gift returning and to work on Merton with this very obligation. And this effect is exactly contributed by Milly’s prearranged timing for gift returning, which precludes any possibility for the couple to make a return.

Milly’s bequest, in this sense, is at once a countergift (a reward to the couple) and a counter-gift—an “anti-gift” (Warren 272) by which she parodies the principle of exchange shared by Kate and the Londoners alike. On the one hand, Milly’s offer is given in the original system of exchange, recompensing Kate for Merton’s love. Fulfilling the obligation to return, Milly thus demonstrates her “‘paying’ power” (Wings 128; bk. 4) expected by those who have been trying to reap her money. On the other hand, Milly’s bequest exposes the problems derived from the Londoners’ beneficial aims behind gift giving. Since Milly makes a radical break with the system of exchange, Kate and Merton are left stranded in the rigid circulation of the gift, haunted by the principle of reciprocity that guarantees their material distribution from Milly but obligates their gift returning despite of her absence. The bequest of Milly, therefore, mocks Kate and Merton by playing with the paradoxical nature of the gift. As Emily Schiller indicates, “[m]oney can be used as payment for service, and given away as a gift. But it also can be used to make a purchase” by which “Milly buys the
relationship” (211) between Kate and Merton.

Stuck in this deadlock, Kate is forced to admit that

‘I used to call her, in my stupidity—for want of anything better—a dove.

Well she stretched out her wings, and it was to that they reached. They cover us.’

‘They cover us.” Densher said. (Wings 508; bk. 10)

The bequest certainly demonstrates how Milly transforms her dove-like position from that of an innocent victimizer to that of a silent schemer who performs temporal maneuvers behind gift returning and in so doing covers Kate and Merton under her wings. At the end of the novel, Kate comprehends that the genuineness of Merton’s love has been altered by the countergift they take from Milly, and that is why she utters the anguished cries: “We shall never be again as we were!” (Wings 509; bk. 10).

In the end, it can be seen that the temporal structure of the gift exchange has dual effects on the gift giver and the gift receiver. During the time of waiting, Kate and Merton lose their patience and break step with each other. Whereas the lapse of time between gift giving and gift returning enables Milly to withhold the countergift until the proper timing to strike back. With the temporal maneuvers of her gift returning, Milly successfully transforms her bequest into an undesired gift that undermines Kate and Merton’s intimacy.