Abstract

In *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), Henry James presents a flow of money in interpersonal relations from which a distinctive mode of exchange is derived. However, the issue of exchange does not arouse much discussion among the critics on James. Some critics tend to read the two heroines as representatives of moral oppositions—Kate and other Londoners as exploiters, the young American Milly as a victim. Although there are other critics who notice the exchanges in this novel, most of them choose to approach the issue with the mode of exchange in the market. Differing from these critical perspectives, in which the characters’ exchanges are taken as transforming or reflecting transactions of commodities, this thesis analyzes *The Wings of the Dove* in terms of gift giving and gift returning.

As the work of the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss shows, gift giving is not only a way to construct social relations but also a part of an economic circulation. But a paradox of the gift can also be observed from Mauss’s theory of the gift—the paradox that gift giving appears as a liberal offer but initiates an exchange of gifts by obligating the gift receiver to return.

What this thesis aims to explore with the theories of the gift is whether it is effective for the characters in *The Wings of the Dove* to exchange money for social resources, and vice versa. The exchanges in this novel, working alongside the Londoners’ quest for money, constitute a system of gift exchange that brings about Kate’s scheme to reap money from Milly. To look into the problems created from this mode of exchange, the thesis will further be committed to the discussions on the
characters’ strategies which help them conceal the paradox of the gift, as well as their actions and limitations in the temporal structure of the gift exchange. Ultimately, this thesis attempts to show the capriciousness of the gift revealed in the exchanges in *The Wings of the Dove*. In constant fluctuations, the gift never ceases to oscillate between the dichotomies of the economic and the noneconomic, which not only shows its elasticity but also offers a space for discussions of its logic from various critical angles.