

Thesis abstract

This thesis analyzes the theme of death not only as the internal struggle of a certain individual, but follows its development with respect to society and the pressure that society places on the individual in question. The main foci of the analysis are Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. Literary typology is emphasized as a tool for creating contrasts in specific conceptions of the deaths of the women protagonists, and for facilitating an understanding of the basic framework of the individual novels.

Chopin, Wharton and Gilman conceptualize death, as a complex phenomenon, in a broad perspective, not perceiving it exclusively as an end to physical existence but also as a reflection of the struggle between, on the one hand, external elements that are social, economic and familial in nature, and on the other, the sum of internal elements—predispositions, wants, imaginations and ideals. The thesis analyzes the impact that this struggle has on the perception of the heroines' own identities. The erosion of their original identity and the effort to cope with the problem is not only a direct precursor of a 'traditional' death but also allows an understanding of this phase as 'metaphorical' death. Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" illustrates this point. In *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth*, this phase is followed by the suicide of the heroine and thus death forms a two stage process, the second stage of which is physical death. The heroines' death, in both a conventional and a metaphorical sense, is perceived as an act of self-determination and as an affirmation of one's ideals and values that are in direct contradiction to general principles and to society's ways of thinking.

It does not matter whether the specific act of death is perceived as a personal victory or as a defeat; the women writers under analysis agree that the theme of death, with respect to social background in the fin-de-siècle United States, is not meant as a punishment for the heroine but serves more as a reference to negative aspects of their milieu. Although the turn of the twentieth century is considered to be the age of progress, increasing wealth, the changing status of women and of advancements in science and research, it seems, in the micro-perspective, to have been an age of persisting stereotypes and remorseless opportunism.