



Descent into Madness or Liberation of Self? An Analysis of the final scene of "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Elisabeth Würtz

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Studienarbeit aus dem Jahr 2009 im Fachbereich Amerikanistik - Literatur, Note: 1,3, Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Sprache: Deutsch, Abstract: When "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is first published in The New England Magazine in 1892, most readers and critics perceive it to be first and foremost a gothic tale following Poe. Although Gilman is a known activist for women's rights and notwithstanding the so-called woman question as one of the major issues of the 19th century, it is not until the short story's republication in 1973 that a noteworthy number of critics adopt a feminist reading of "The Yellow Wallpaper".

Among these critics – whether they analyze the short story's formal and stylistic features, prefer a reader-oriented approach or focus on the historical context - one of the most controversially discussed aspects of the short story is its ending : the scene, where Jane, the protagonist , has stripped off the wallpaper to liberate the woman trapped behind it and crawls through the room over her unconscious husband.

Some critics, like Quawas, Gilbert and Gunbar claim that the narrator is not insane, but instead achieves a different, elevated state of sanity and truth and therefore consider the ending as something positive, as a victory Jane gains over her husband and the patriarchal society.

Others however construe the final scene as a defeat and consider Jane to lose touch with reality and descend into insanity. Hedges, for instance, argues, that the protagonist "is at the end defeated, totally mad" and Sues constitues that she is unable to distinguish fantasy from reality and asks how "living in a state of psychosis [could] be considered triumphant in any way" . Johnson again doubts whether Gilman herself actually fully comprehended the dimensions of her protagonist's madness .

So what has really happened to the protagonist? How is the short story's final scene to be understood? Is Jane defeated or does she experience a triumph? Does she lose her mind or liberate her true self?

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