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**Awakenings: Classic American Feminist Texts of the Turn of the  
Twentieth Century**

Bachelor's thesis

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Prehlasujem, že som túto bakalársku prácu vypracovala samostatne pod odborným dohľadom vedúceho práce a uviedla som všetky použité podklady a literatúru.

V Olomouci dňa.....

Podpis .....

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## 1. Introduction

Gender equality is a problem that we as a society have been facing since the beginning of time. Even now, in the twenty-first century we still deal with women's inequality. Fortunately, there have been women throughout history that helped with highlighting this problem and make society talk about it and ideally try to solve it. Women fought all over the world in many ways: they protested, wrote fiction, gave speeches... It was not easy for women to make people listen, especially men.

In the nineteenth century, however, things started to change. Women fought even harder and started to demand an equal place in society. The suffrage movement began in the middle of the nineteenth century in the USA. Many laws were being passed which were in favor of women, concerning marriage, work, inheritance and more. Female writers contributed in this movement with their essays and fiction portraying the lives of ordinary women, criticizing society for classifying women as the weaker and inferior sex, and arguably less intelligent. Women writers in this age were trying to prove that they were not less than men, and that they too had dreams of their own. They no longer wanted to be dependent on males.

The main point of my thesis is to focus on some of these women and their work. First there will be discussed the historical and social background in general. It will look at females' social status and how it evolved and improved over time. In the second part, I will look at some essays by Virginia Woolf, a famous feminist female writer of both fiction and essays who wrote an important essay *A Room of One's Own* which is considered to be one of the most influential feminist texts because it focuses on women's independence to write fiction and independence in general. The third and the fourth part will be focused on portrayal of women in American literature on the turn of the twentieth century. It will be focused on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wall-paper* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* – both very important pieces of fiction of that era. Both of these works, as well as many others, brought the issue of female inequality to the forefront. These books were heavily criticized, and for quite some time they were even banned. I will be focusing on the similarities that these books share, to try to better understand how women lived back then, how they were treated and how they coped with their destinies, oppression and criticism from their husbands, families and society.

## 2. Historical and Social Background of Women in the Nineteenth Century

Women have never had it easy. When we look at the history, we can see that there has mainly been patriarchy for most of the time. There was no such thing as equality at least not until the nineteenth century. There have been exceptions, of course, but the real battle for women's equality has begun in the nineteenth century.

Life in the nineteenth century was not ideal for ambitious women. Back then women did not have as many rights as they do now. It was quite unusual for women in the nineteenth century to attend a university, to have a career or to even make money that they could keep. This was only the male's privilege. Whether it was a husband, a father or a brother, only a man was responsible for the family's income. Whenever women did try to make their own money, they were most of the times not allowed to keep it. As Virginia Woolf in her critical essay *A Room of One's Own* writes: "Every penny... will be taken from me and disposed of according to my husband's wisdom."<sup>1</sup> Not only were males taking their wives' money, they were not even legally allowed to keep them: "...the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned."<sup>2</sup>

The patriarchy was quite apparent. People were divided by their gender roles i.e. women dealt with home, family, kids and husband's well-being while men took care of the rest. Though women were only housewives, they in fact worked very hard every day for free. While their husbands were at work they had to cook, wash the clothes, raise the children and take care of their home and their husbands. They were inferior to men, though they did not perceive it as a form of humiliation. They truly believed that they need their husbands to protect them and worship them and that they would be lost without them. Unfortunately, society in the nineteenth century was built that way. Women did not have as many rights as men and that is why it was more convenient for women to get married as soon as possible. Not having a husband and trying to sustain themselves was for women at that time almost impossible.<sup>3</sup>

Until the year 1848 this sort of life was normal for women and men back then, and nobody really questioned it or did anything radical about it. Sally McMillen

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, 29.

<sup>3</sup> Sally G. McMillen, *Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women's Rights Movement*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12-13.

explains in her book *Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women's Rights Movement*: “No women’s rights movement existed before 1848, nor had there ever been much appetite to question women’s status.”<sup>4</sup> That year marks the beginning of the suffrage movement in America. This was for the common citizens quite unusual and controversial. People were skeptical, not only men but also women. As McMillen states in her book “their biggest challenge was to convince women themselves that they deserved better, that they needed to fight oppression and demand their rights.”<sup>5</sup> Many tried to silence them, calling their cause just a whim. No wonder it took them more than half a century to convince the public and the government that their cause is important and that they were capable of enforcing it.

Marriage, for women, was beneficial from social point of view but lawfully it was quite disadvantageous. By law, wife and husband were one, meaning that women were solely dependent on their husbands. No woman wanted to end up an old maiden and grow old unwedded, but ironically an unmarried woman had much more freedom than a married one. After the wedding, all of the wife’s property that she might have owned before fell into the hands of her new husband. Worst of all, they lost custody of their own children. On the other hand an unmarried woman, or as they called it back then a “feme sole” was able to own property, run a business and even write her own will.<sup>6</sup>

Although the decision to be single was for women advantageous from the judicial point of view, it was not very well accepted by the society. Unmarried woman was an unfortunate woman and independence was more pitied than admired. Women did not have as many opportunities at subsisting a living as men did and were often forced to live with their parents or siblings. Single women had to be cautious of their decisions as to not make any social scandals. Having a lover was risky and moreover, having a child out of wedlock was unacceptable. So much so, that it could bring shame upon her entire family. To sum up, the decision to stay single was courageous and progressive but also challenging and risky.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of marriage, from some points of view, may have seemed like a prison. Marriages in the nineteenth century were anything but equal. Partners were chosen by the parents, based on the economic and social standing of the particular family. Love was not an important factor in the union of two people. It was said that

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<sup>4</sup> McMillen, *Seneca Falls*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> McMillen, *Seneca Falls*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> McMillen, *Seneca Falls*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> McMillen, *Seneca Falls*, 20.

feelings would develop over time.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately in some marriages deeper feelings never developed and some relationships even grew into a violent nature. In these cases divorce was allowed. However, divorces were generally looked down upon since they could bring shame not only unto the people involved i.e. the husband and wife, but also unto their families. McMillen sums it up in her book quite nicely: “Couples were supposed to remain united, survive the trials and tribulations of life, and provide stability for their children. Therefore, extended family members sometimes did everything possible to ensure that a couple, however unhappy, stayed together.”<sup>9</sup>

Although divorces were in special circumstances in the nineteenth century allowed, they were not very advantageous for women. Men had more privileges: they were entitled to keep all property they owned before and even all property they gained after marriage, they gained custody of their children and they could even remarry. This was not possible for a divorced woman. Another disadvantage was that a divorced woman could not support herself financially. That is why most couples remained married even if they led separate lives.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1830s however, laws started to change. Women started to demand divorces more often and the judges, despite the prevailing patriarchal ideology, were willing to grant them. By this time, women were able to ask for a divorce if one or both of the partners were unhappy. McMillen in her book states: “If a husband and wife were truly miserable or incompatible, it made little sense to maintain the marriage at any cost.”<sup>11</sup> This was for that age very progressive.<sup>12</sup> Women were also trying to enforce laws about the ability to own a property. This also passed, however it was not for the women’s sake. The law that made it possible to divide property between the husband and wife was passed for the sake of families. If anything happened to the husband, whether he died or had debts, the rest of the family did not have to pay for it. Therefore, this bill protected wives and their children from financial problems that the husband could have caused. For that particular day and age these steps forward to a better and more equal future were very admirable but they still overlooked the fact that women are not just wives and that they should have equal rights and opportunities as males do.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> McMillen, *Seneca Falls*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> McMillen, *Seneca Falls*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> McMillen, *Seneca Falls*, 21-22.

<sup>11</sup> McMillen, *Seneca Falls*, 28.

<sup>12</sup> McMillen, *Seneca Falls*, 28.

<sup>13</sup> McMillen, *Seneca Falls*, 28-29.



Though society was moving forward, there were some people who unfortunately did not support this new ideology and were still holding onto old traditions and manners. Women were always inferior to men and were only treated as the husbands' companions. Women's role in marriage was always an inferior one and their dependency on their husbands was crucial from the society's perspective. Many feared that with women being able to own property and therefore slowly gaining their freedom and independency from males, that that would result in horrific consequences and the harmonious marriage as they knew it would be gone forever. McMillen in her book says: "To men's thinking, female dependency created the ideal domestic relationship for both husbands and wives."<sup>14</sup> Men started to be afraid that they would lose their superiority to women in this gender war.

Women were known to be hard workers since the dawn of the time. However, from the society's point of view, this was considered to be normal. Wives had a number of duties that they had to take care of without the acknowledgement or any payment for their hard work.<sup>15</sup> With the industrial revolution blowing up, women started to participate in the country's economy by working minimal wage jobs. They mainly worked in textile productions, they participated in manufacture of shoes and hats, they were teachers, lecturers and could even participate in writing jobs such as newspaper editing, essay and poem writing.<sup>16</sup> With these new work opportunities, single women found purpose in their day to day life as well as gained a way to support themselves, making them less prone to become depended on their families. Making their own money was exciting in ways that they could now spend their earnings however they saw fit and that they were now able to live on their own, out of their families' reach.<sup>17</sup> Many positive things came out of these big social and economic changes; however it did have some downsides as well. Women made hardly as much money as men did. Oftentimes their salary was half of the men's salary even if they worked at the same position. Women were also less likely to get promoted or be in managing positions even if they had more experience than men. Furthermore, "women were excluded from the most rewarding or esteemed professions such as law, medicine, the military, and the ministry, and from jobs deemed inappropriate for women."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> McMillen, *Seneca Falls*, 29.

<sup>15</sup> McMillen, *Seneca Falls*, 25.

<sup>16</sup> McMillen, *Seneca Falls*, 30.

<sup>17</sup> McMillen, *Seneca Falls*, 30-31.

<sup>18</sup> McMillen, *Seneca Falls*, 30-31.

The most impactful change in this century was the possibility for women to get an education. Up until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century women did not receive a proper education. They did learn how to read and write, usually at home by their family members, but further education seemed redundant for women as they did not need much education to only become housewives. However, providing an education for women became more lucrative once the question of bringing up sons came up. Many agreed that an educated wife was going to have a better impact on children's upbringing and would be more eligible to her husband. That, however, did not imply that women and men were intellectually equal. Many believed this to be true, that is why women received only elementary education while men were encouraged and even expected to get a higher education. Women's lust for education rose and by the 1850s there was a huge increase in women's literacy. Receiving an education was for women one step closer to equality.<sup>19</sup> McMillen sums it up at the end with an apt thought: "As women began to awaken to the intellectual challenges of an education, they yearned for more."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> McMillen, *Seneca Falls*, 32-34.

<sup>20</sup> McMillen, *Seneca Falls*, 33.

### 3. Virginia Woolf's Essays on Women and Fiction

Known for her feminist input in the English literature, Virginia Woolf wrote many essays on women's rights, women's depiction in literature and women writers. In this thesis I will be focusing on three essays in particular: *Professions for Women*, *Modern Fiction* and *A Room of One's Own*.

In 1931, Virginia Woolf delivered a speech before National Society for Women's Service which later turned into an essay which was included in a book called *The Death of the Moth*. This book was written by Virginia herself but was published in 1942 posthumously. In this essay Woolf speaks about her experiences and beginnings in her profession as a writer and a literary critic. She casually states that being a writer is not very difficult in theory. In practice, however, it is more difficult because there are many factors influencing the writers themselves, especially the female ones. Woolf describes how even after her ancestors' effort in making life easier for women in terms of equality, it is still quite difficult to become an independent writer who writes her own opinions and is accepted by the general public. She compares herself to her predecessors like Jane Austen and George Eliot and acknowledges that the way of becoming a writer is now much easier than it was for these female writers.

The difficulty in becoming a female writer in this day and age was the battle between the expectations of society and staying true to oneself. As a female literary critic, she was expected to write in a womanly fashion. Woolf talks from her experience, that she felt this looming presence - or rather a phantom - that forbade her to fully express herself. It was a phantom of an ideal woman of that time: obedient, modest and selfless – the Angel in the House.<sup>21</sup> It was a woman that never expressed her true feelings, never spoke her mind, and preferred wishes of others instead of her own, as Woolf sums it up: “she was pure.”<sup>22</sup> Whenever Virginia wanted to write, this phantom of hers always appeared and was telling her demotivating things, such as:

My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all arts and

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<sup>21</sup> A term from Coventry Patmore's book with the same title “The Angel in the House” depicted an ideal woman who was loyal and obedient to her husband

<sup>22</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Professions for Women*, 3. PDF file. March 4, 2020. <http://www.wheelersburg.net/Downloads/Woolf.pdf>

wives of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure.<sup>23</sup>

Women were expected to not have a brain, to think critically or to have their own opinion. They were supposed to write only nice things. But as Woolf rightfully states: "...you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth..."<sup>24</sup> This dilemma ate her up entirely. Say your truth and face the possibility of not being published or accepted by the public, or lie to yourself and others but be beloved by everyone? Gilbert states in her book that "women who did not apologize for their literary efforts were defined as mad and monstrous."<sup>25</sup> The phantom, however, kept telling her that women had to "tell lies if they are to succeed."<sup>26</sup>

Fortunately, over time and with practice she learned to free herself of these doubts and limitations. She argues that this is not only her case, but that this happens to every young female writer. The battle is hard, as she says "it is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality,"<sup>27</sup> but she managed to do it, to overcome the expectations of society and to do things her way. However, she doubted herself not because of what society would think but mainly what men would think. She was afraid to fully express herself, her thoughts and views were oppressed because women were still considered to be inferior to men. They were the gentle sex, not the ones who would speak their mind freely. In Woolf's opinion men did not even realize how free they are in contrast with women: "I doubt that they realize or can control the extreme severity with which they condemn such freedom in women."<sup>28</sup> She explains that men unconsciously undermine women and their powers, which makes women afraid to speak their opinion.

Virginia Woolf lived in times when things such as gender equality were not fully developed and thought out just yet. In theory, women were able to do almost any profession they wanted to, but that looming phantom – as she called it – or the judgement from others and their opinions were still creeping in. That is why even in these times it was difficult for women to pursue their dream profession even if they already had the freedom to do so.

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<sup>23</sup> Woolf, *Professions*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Woolf, *Professions*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Gilbert, *Madwoman*, 63.

<sup>26</sup> Woolf, *Professions*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Woolf, *Professions*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Woolf, *Professions*, 5.

The next essay *Modern Fiction* does not focus solely on women as much as it focuses on fiction as a whole. Woolf wrote this essay in 1919 but it was published in 1921 in a collection of short stories called *Monday or Tuesday*. In the beginning of this essay she compares what kind of opportunities we have now versus the opportunities that writers such as Jane Austen had. She argues that fiction in the past seemed rather simple, that it had no spirit, and that fiction certainly improved over the years. However, as she explains, there are still many things to improve in the modern fiction.

Later on, Woolf brings up three major male fiction writers and analyses their works. She concludes that they have rather materialistic feel to it. Her reasoning for this kind of assessment is that “they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body.”<sup>29</sup> Woolf argues that modern writers are bound by the unwritten rules that fiction should be filled with action and extraordinary instances even though no one’s everyday life resembles the things that modern writers write in their fiction. Woolf develops this idea in further detail:

The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour.<sup>30</sup>

Woolf was simply pointing out the fact that writers themselves are somehow forced to write something spectacular than something more relatable and normal. The plots focus mainly on the amazing things that happen in one’s life, it never mentions the simple everyday life. Instead all the fantastic events, Woolf suggest a more simple approach: “examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day.”<sup>31</sup> She herself followed this approach as we can see in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. It describes an ordinary day and ordinary experiences such as buying flowers for her party. Furthermore, Woolf points out that life in fact “is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged,”<sup>32</sup> and modern fiction should reflect that.

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<sup>29</sup> Andrew McNeille, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf. Volume 4: 1925 to 1928*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), 158.

<sup>30</sup> McNeille, *The Essays*, 160.

<sup>31</sup> McNeille, *The Essays*, 160.

<sup>32</sup> McNeille, *The Essays*, 160.

Woolf prefers the more spiritual approach to fiction however at the end of this essay she reminds us that “there is no limit to the horizon and that nothing... is forbidden, but only falsity and pretence.”<sup>33</sup> Woolf does not necessarily dictate what is correct about writing a fiction and what is not, she simply suggests that in modern fiction writers should not only stick to the concept that has been used for such a long time. She suggests that fiction can be anything and everything we want it to be. She encourages others to forget the customary rules for writing fiction, the action packed plots and she suggests that even the simplest things and thoughts can make a great piece of fiction. Her essay ends with this statement that applies even now and probably forever: “‘The proper stuff of fiction’ does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss.”<sup>34</sup>

The last essay by Virginia Woolf *A Room of One's Own* is the most extensive one and it touches upon multiple topics in great detail and also about both women and fiction. This essay was composed of two speeches she gave at different universities, and it was published in 1929. The main point of this whole essay, as the title suggests, is that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”<sup>35</sup>

In the beginning of the essay, Woolf gives us a review of women's social status in the past, how women lived, what rights and obligations they had and how easy or difficult it was for women to get a job. She discusses issues concerning money making and consequently inheritance. While men were able to make their own money, and inherit money from their fathers and grandfathers, women did not have such possibilities. Women were neither allowed nor capable to make their own money since they had to bear and take care of their children. Women also did not own any property therefore were not able to inherit any money or property. That is why, she explains, the transition from not having any rights to being able to support themselves was for women quite challenging, since they did not have any inheritance that they could use. They once again had to rely on men or their families to support them. Woolf argues that her mother, for example, could have gone to work but if she did, then Virginia would never be born. It was very hard for women at that time to take care of children and simultaneously go to work. However, the question of whether women would be now

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<sup>33</sup> McNeille, *The Essays*, 164.

<sup>34</sup> McNeille, *The Essays*, 164.

<sup>35</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 4.

better off if their female ancestors had worked or not is useless, because as Woolf states: “in the first place, to earn money was impossible for them, and in the second, had it been possible, the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned.”<sup>36</sup> The inequality of the sexes was apparent. Woolf at the end of the first chapter says how she could not stop thinking and wondering about the fact that one sex was “safe and prosperous” and the other was “poor and insecure.”<sup>37</sup>

In the second chapter Woolf starts off with many definitions and perceptions of women by famous men. Of course there were many contradictions; some claimed that women were incapable of education, some disagreed; some people argued that women have no souls; others claimed that they are divine and need to be worshipped.<sup>38</sup> There has occurred a quite a bit of confusion and disagreement as to what women really are. For a very long time women have been considered and treated as the weaker sex, that is why it was quite difficult to forget the old habits and stereotypes; move on and try to make women more included and to think of them in a different light. Woolf, however, acknowledges that society has been improving in giving women more opportunities and she strongly believes that “in a hundred years... women will have ceased to be the protected sex.”<sup>39</sup> She claims that seeing a woman driving a car in a hundred years will be completely normal. She hopes that in the future women “will take part in all the activities and exertions that were once denied them.”<sup>40</sup>

The third chapter of this essay focuses on women throughout history. Woolf looks at the opportunities women had and did not have in the past. As mentioned before, women were treated as the inferior sex. In some cases that meant that men treated their wives and daughters as objects or property. They were not only allowed to treat them like animals, they were often encouraged. It was generally accepted for men to beat their wives when they were disobedient and their daughters when they refused to marry whoever they picked for them. This, fortunately, was socially acceptable in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. However, arranged marriages were still happening in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and any objections from the young women were almost forbidden.<sup>41</sup>

The perception of women in the past was quite a paradox. On one hand women were an important part of society; they were often poets’ muses, men’s partners, bearers

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<sup>36</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 29.

<sup>37</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 31.

<sup>38</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 38.

<sup>39</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 52.

<sup>40</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 52.

<sup>41</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 54.

of children and much more; but on the other hand they were treated as men's slaves, they did not appear quite so often in history and most of the times they were illiterate. Woolf sums up the importance of women in her essay as "imaginatively...of the highest importance; practically... completely insignificant."<sup>42</sup>

In this chapter, Woolf contemplates a thought whether women would be capable of writing plays as Shakespeare did. The consensus was, that women did not "have the genius of Shakespeare."<sup>43</sup> Men at that time truly believed that women were intellectually inferior and that educating women was a waste of time. Woolf however, argues that women would be capable of writing plays as Shakespeare did, but they were not educated enough and even if they were, it would be socially unacceptable for women to be writers at that time. Just for the sake of proving her point, Woolf entertains an idea of what would happen if Shakespeare had a sister who was just as talented as he was. She explains the different treatments each gender received. While William was sent to school where he learned to read, write, to think logically amongst many other things, his imaginary sister Judith would not have the same opportunities. She would not be sent to school. She would not learn how to read or write properly. She would not have the same access to knowledge as her brother did. She would have to run the household, marry a man of her father's choice and then run her husband's household. None of this would be her choice. Her life, and as a matter of fact every young woman's life at that time, was already all planned in advance. Those were some of the factors because of which there were not any female writers in Shakespeare's time.<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, that did not mean that in Shakespeare's time there were not any intelligent women. Woolf argues that the intelligent women at that time were considered to be witches or possessed by demons. These women, as Woolf proposes, could have been the "lost novelists" or "suppressed poets" of that time, but unfortunately they did not have a platform to express themselves in that way back then.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Woolf claims that these intelligent women who lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century would probably be banished, mocked, gone crazy or they would simply kill themselves altogether.<sup>46</sup> Because of all this judgement, prejudice and disapproval, women were forced to write under male pseudonyms such as: Curer Bell, George Eliot, George Sand. This, however,

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<sup>42</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 56.

<sup>43</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 59.

<sup>44</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 60-61.

<sup>45</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 63.

<sup>46</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 64.



did not happen until the nineteenth century. There were exceptions of course, such as Jane Austen, although she published her works mainly in the nineteenth century.

All of this is of course hypothetical. Woolf simply wonders how women would live now had they taken more action in the past and had they been given the same rights as men did.

At this point in the book, Woolf finally comes back to the main theme of this essay: a room of one's own. As she states in the beginning: "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction."<sup>47</sup> This however was not possible. The woman's parents must have been extremely wealthy for her to have a room where she could be all by herself, in silence and at peace where she could write fiction; and even if they were, it was highly unlikely that this woman's parents would give her such a room in the house.<sup>48</sup> All of this would not matter anyways because even if women did have a room of their own, they still would not be able to write and publish fiction. With the mindset that the majority of the population had, that "the best woman was intellectually the inferior of the worst man"<sup>49</sup> and that "nothing could be expected of women intellectually"<sup>50</sup> women did not have enough courage to stand up for themselves. Even their own parents did not encourage young women to explore their abilities: "... a father... did not wish his daughter to leave home and become writer, painter or scholar."<sup>51</sup> Even though they have not said it out loud, the young women could tell that they would not make their parents happy by pursuing art, and that discouraged them from any kind of protests or rebellion.<sup>52</sup> As Virginia Woolf sums it up: "a woman was not encouraged to be an artist... she was snubbed, slapped, lectured and exhorted."<sup>53</sup> Women simply did not have the freedom to express themselves in any kind of artistic way, because if they did, men would lose the only leverage they had against women: their superiority. As Woolf adds at the end of the chapter, males' desire was "not so much that *she* shall be inferior as that *he* shall be superior"<sup>54</sup>

The fourth chapter of *A Room of One's Own* focuses on literature. It talks about women's portrayal versus men's portrayal in fiction. It focuses on men's perception on female writers, as Woolf claims "men are hated and feared, because they have the

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<sup>47</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 4.

<sup>48</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 67.

<sup>49</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 69.

<sup>50</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 70.

<sup>51</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 70.

<sup>52</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 70.

<sup>53</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 71.

<sup>54</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 71.

power to bar her way to what she wants to do – which is to write.”<sup>55</sup> Women argue that males’ perception to their writing is that they would only waste their beauty and their time and that basically women should not focus on such things. Men only perceived women as the beautiful but useless creatures; and that should not worry about such things as literature.<sup>56</sup> If a woman was trying to pursue a career instead of being a good obedient housewife, their whole feminine purpose; their beauty, fertility; was being wasted. That was the male reason why women should not think, make money or pursue any kind of career other than being a good wife and a mother. To put it bluntly, women were just used for reproduction; they weren’t valued as equal members of society with the same rights as men. However, this stigma that women are something less than men was according to women ridiculous because “women feel just as men feel”<sup>57</sup> and therefore should be allowed to express themselves just as men do and that includes literature.

The most common argument on why women’s writing was not as essential as men’s was that men as opposed to women wrote about serious topics such as war and politics. According to society, male’s literature was more important because they wrote about important topics while women were writing about such trivial things as their feelings. Woolf argues that with this mindset even her book *A Room of One’s Own* would be considered trivial.<sup>58</sup> Nowadays, however, it can be seen that this book was quite important for aspiring female writers and the equality and diversity movement. It was quite useless for women to prove that they were “as good as a man”, because masculine values prevailed. No one in the nineteenth century thought that women’s point of view on the world or their feelings were important enough that there should be fiction written about it.

In this time it was never really easy for women to publish their works and be acknowledged as writers; that is why, as mentioned before, they wrote under pseudonyms which were mostly male pseudonyms. Women literature was not important according to literary critics back then.

In the fifth chapter Woolf shortly comments on the portrayal of women in fiction. She calls the female characters “much too simple and much too monotonous.”<sup>59</sup> Woolf

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<sup>55</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 76.

<sup>56</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 76-77.

<sup>57</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 89.

<sup>58</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 96.

<sup>59</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 108.

considers this to be quite unfair since males were mostly portrayed as the brave soldiers and conquerors, thinkers and dreamers. She claims that if the portrayal and role of men in fiction reversed then literature would suffer.<sup>60</sup>

As the book is coming to a close, Woolf shares some last thoughts. She compares this gender war to a private school quarrel. There should not be any sides that others should be taking or not taking.<sup>61</sup> Her intention was not to turn women against men, but rather empower and encourage women to write fiction, to say and do what they want. She just simply wanted to highlight the history of women and she wanted to point out all the possibilities that women have nowadays, which they did not have before. She is trying to prove that women are as good as men and that they are neither inferior nor superior. However, she does admit that throughout history men had it easier when it comes to writing fiction. She states that:

Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor... from the beginning of time. Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of ...slaves. Women, then, have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry. That is why I have laid so much stress on money and a room of one's own.<sup>62</sup>

It is all linked together. To write great and authentic fiction one must have a complete freedom and to have freedom means to be independent both financially and mentally.

At the very end, Woolf just reminds us, readers, what opportunities women already have. She reminds us that women are able to attend colleges; that a married woman can own a property, they can do any profession they want and last but not least that women can vote. Therefore she claims that “the excuse of lack of opportunity, training, encouragement, leisure and money no longer holds good.”<sup>63</sup> Woolf simply reminds us that women are no longer the inferior sex, that they can achieve great things, just as men do; they just need the courage and the dedication.

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<sup>60</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 108-109.

<sup>61</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 138.

<sup>62</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 141.

<sup>63</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 147.

## 4. Introduction to the Texts

This section will be focused on introducing the texts that will be analyzed later on, as well as a short biography of the authors.

### 4.1 Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *The Yellow Wall-paper*

Charlotte Anne Perkins was born in 1860 in Connecticut. Her life was not easy. After she was born, their father abandoned them. Perkins' mother had to support her children on her own, which at that time was quite difficult. With her father gone and her mother never really being present, Gilman describes her childhood as "painful and lonely."<sup>64</sup> She suffered from depression and father issues, which reflected in her fiction, especially in *The Yellow Wall-paper*.

Gilman lived in a society which closely resembled the one that Woolf described in her essays. In spite of these "conventional values" and as she called it "'masculinist' ideals"<sup>65</sup> she wrote many works about feminism. *The Norton Anthology* declared her to be "the leading feminist theoretician and writer of her time."<sup>66</sup>

*The Yellow Wall-paper* is a short story about a woman suffering from a nervous depression who is taken by her husband to a house on the country for her to get better. The story is written in a form of journal – the narrator is writing in her diary in secret, because her husband wanted her to rest both physically and mentally. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz in her book *Wild Unrest: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Making of "The Yellow Wall-Paper"* explains: "the author places the narrator's voice within a world that denies her the ability to define herself and to live by her own lights."<sup>67</sup> Her husband forbade her to do anything, which is slowly but surely driving the narrator even madder. Sandra M. Gilbert in her book *The Madwoman in the Attic* argues: "The cure, of course, is worse than the disease, for the sick woman's mental condition deteriorates rapidly."<sup>68</sup> The narrator is an obedient wife, an inferior partner in the marriage, unwillingly

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<sup>64</sup> Nina Baym, *The Norton Anthology Of American Literature*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 1570.

<sup>65</sup> Baym, *The Norton Anthology Of American Literature*, 1569.

<sup>66</sup> Baym, *The Norton Anthology*, 1569.

<sup>67</sup> Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Wild Unrest: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Making of "The Yellow Wall-Paper"*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 177.

<sup>68</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert, *The Madwoman in the Attic : the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 89.

listening to everything her husband tells her to do. Writing of this story is one of the main violations she commits. With her husband being away from the house for the most of the time because of his profession as a physician, she finds herself bored senseless. Despite her objections and pleads she is forced to stay in her room and not do anything intellectual. With nothing to do all day, she starts to observe the wallpaper in the room she is staying in. She starts to see a strange figure which, according to her, is trying to escape from the wallpaper. Slowly losing her sanity, she convinces herself that she needs to free this person. She starts to peel away the wallpaper, finally releasing the woman from behind it. Now – arguably a completely insane woman – is found by her husband creeping in her room saying that she is free and that they will not be able to put her back into the wallpaper. The story ends with her husband fainting and the woman keeping on creeping about the room.

This story, as Gilman admits, is partly biographical. She too suffered from depression and her husband had sent her to the best doctor in America at that time. The doctor, of course, confirmed her husband's concerns and treatment for this disease which was as much rest as possible and willpower to overcome this illness.<sup>69</sup> As Gilman in her article *Why I Wrote "The Yellow Wall-paper"* wrote: "(the doctor) sent me home with solemn advice to 'live as domestic a life as far as possible,' to 'have but two hours' intellectual life a day,' and 'never to touch pen, brush or pencil again, as long as I lived.'" <sup>70</sup> This proves that Gilman's life and *The Yellow Wall-paper* have many similarities. The narrator too was forbidden from her husband who was a doctor to do anything intellectual, that also meant writing. That is why she writes this story in secret and in fear that her husband might find out.

## 4.2 Kate Chopin and *The Awakening*

Born as Katherine O'Flaherty in 1850 in St. Louis, Kate Chopin's childhood was in comparison with Charlotte Perkins Gilman quite easy. With her family being economically successful and socially well-known, one would not think that Chopin would end up as a writer who wrote about topics that were considered to be scandalous at the time. She got married when she was only twenty years old, however her marriage

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<sup>69</sup> Baym, *The Norton Anthology*, 1570.

<sup>70</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper And Other Stories*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 331.

did not last long. Her husband soon died and she found herself alone, having to provide for the family and to raise her children by herself. In addition to managing a household, she was trying to become a writer. She did not have a room of her own; she had to write “in the midst of a busy household”<sup>71</sup> making it almost impossible to tend to every detail. While this method “ensured freshness and sincerity”<sup>72</sup> of her works, critics argue that her stories sometimes seem “anecdotal, . . . too loose or thin.”<sup>73</sup>

Chopin’s stories are mainly set on the south. She drew inspiration from her life in Louisiana, where she lived with her husband before he died. Her writing was recognized mainly because of her “local-color fiction.”<sup>74</sup> *The Awakening* is considered to be Chopin’s major work which gained her national recognition. In *The Awakening*, as Heather Ostman in her book *Kate Chopin in Context: New Approaches* explains, Edna “speculates more daringly than ever before on the consequences for middle-class women of society’s authorization of female desire.”<sup>75</sup> Chopin deals with the issue of self-image and the psychological and sexual awakening of a young woman. The important thing about this novel is that it promoted the ideology “new woman” which was an important wave of feminism, demanding more opportunities and equality for women.<sup>76</sup> However, Chopin’s depiction of such woman was according to critics more than they “could allow to pass.”<sup>77</sup> *The Awakening* caused a scandal and was not critically acclaimed; some even called it “vulgar”<sup>78</sup> and were offended by this book. *The Awakening* was published ahead of its time. While before it was considered obscure and offensive, now it is one of the most important literary works on feminism in America.

The story of *The Awakening* is set in the Grand Isle on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana. Edna Pontellier with her husband Léonce and her two children are staying there for the summer. The owner of the estate where they were staying, Madame Lebrun, has a son Robert who is known for seducing beautiful women. Edna catches his eye and even though she is married they develop a friendly relationship. Through this relationship she starts to notice the differences between Robert and Léonce. Robert pays Edna attention and even flirts with her which she enjoys. Without admitting it to herself

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<sup>71</sup> Baym, *The Norton Anthology*, 1539.

<sup>72</sup> Baym, *The Norton Anthology*, 1539.

<sup>73</sup> Baym, *The Norton Anthology*, 1539.

<sup>74</sup> Baym, *The Norton Anthology*, 1539.

<sup>75</sup> Heather Ostman and Kate O’Donoghue. *Kate Chopin in Context: New Approaches*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 32.

<sup>76</sup> Baym, *The Norton Anthology*, 1540.

<sup>77</sup> Baym, *The Norton Anthology*, 1540.

<sup>78</sup> Baym, *The Norton Anthology*, 1540.

at first, Edna realizes that she does not love her husband. Their relationship is not really based on love, honesty and affection. They do not share the same interests or support each other. She realizes that they are together just because of their children and for the sake of already being married. Edna eventually grows tired of the married life and the bossing around by her husband. She begins to long for freedom. She realizes the responsibility toward her family but the taste of freedom is sweeter and the thought absolutely consumes her. Edna decides to be selfish and she starts to prioritize lovers and her freedom over her husband. Tired of the monotonous marriage with Léonce she finds herself falling in love with Robert, which fulfills her needs and fills her up with excitement and happiness. She chooses to rebel against the stereotypes and the norms set by society of being an obedient wife and decides to leave the family house to live on her own. Edna begins to emancipate herself by working – making art and making her own money. Her freedom, happiness and well-being are much more important to her, than what society thinks to be important and that is to be a good and obedient wife and mother. However, depression starts to dawn upon her and she starts to feel lonely. Even though she does not care about what society thinks, other people – in this case the man that she fell in love with, Robert – do and that makes her feel alone and abandoned. Despite the criticism she chooses Robert over her husband. She was ready to devote herself to him, but his lack of passion and loyalty disappoints her. The feeling of guilt – that she is a bad mother and a bad wife – starts to eat her up. She feels disappointed that she cannot have what she wants, she feels misunderstood and trapped. She wants to be free but social norms do not allow it. At her wits' end, feeling hurt, frustrated and careless, Edna ends up drowning herself in the ocean.

## **5. Analysis of the Underlying Issues in *The Yellow Wall-paper* and *The Awakening***

In this part there will be discussed three main themes and issues that these two works – *The Yellow Wall-paper* and *The Awakening* – shared. There will be analysis of these works as well as depiction of the three chosen issues which are: marriage and gender roles, depression and escaping the oppression.

## 5.1 Depiction of Marriage and Gender Roles

Marriages in the late nineteenth century, when these two works were written and published, were very unequal. Patriarchy ruled the society and women were considered to be the inferior gender and partners in the relationships. Women were taken as the emotional, less intelligent and capricious creatures. That is why males were in need of directing their own wives and bossing them around, believing that only they know what was best for them.

In *The Yellow Wall-paper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, there are many indications that the woman in this marriage was inferior and that she gave in to her husband's orders and opinions. Horowitz explains: "the reader experiences male supremacy in marriage through the consciousness of the wife narrating the tale."<sup>79</sup> Right on the first page the narrator expresses her concerns about the house that they rented. Her husband laughs at her "trivial" worries and the narrator responds: "one expects that in marriage."<sup>80</sup> She treats this kind of behavior as a norm. The wife's inferiority, uselessness and helplessness are expressed in the following excerpt:

You see he does not believe I am sick!

And what can one do?

If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency – what is one to do?<sup>81</sup>

With the words "what can one do" she expresses that her opinion is worthless and not valued by her husband. To put it bluntly, men are the smarter ones and they know better – especially since it is the narrator's husband who is also a physician. This phrase "what can one do," is repeated multiple times, suggesting that she would like to do something about it but she feels restricted.

The narrator's feelings have been repressed for so long that she is made to believe that whatever she feels, she feels because of her disorder. However, her feelings

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<sup>79</sup> Horowitz, *Wild Unrest*, 177.

<sup>80</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 3.

<sup>81</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 3.



are completely normal, though they do go against the social norm of that time. We can see that in this excerpt:

I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition.

But John says if I feel so, I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself – before him, at least, and that makes me very tired.<sup>82</sup>

This shows how manipulated women were in marriages. Whatever she feels that is not in accordance with the role of an obedient wife, she automatically goes on feeling ashamed for her feelings and trying to find an excuse for them. Even her own husband tells her to repress her feelings, so that he has his wife under control.

The narrator confirms our suspicion that John, the narrator's husband, made our protagonist into an obedient wife. She writes: "He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction."<sup>83</sup> This shows that the narrator looks up to her husband but is somehow forced to listen to him. It shows how much John has her wife under control. At the end of the first diary entry the narrator shows her disobedience to her husband: "There comes John, and I must put this away, - he hates to have me write a word."<sup>84</sup> As much as she is willing to listen to her husband, we can sense some rebellion in her. Clearly the husband has the authority however, there are some things that the protagonist is not willing to let go of, even if it goes against the wishes of her husband.

In the next entry the belittling of the narrator and not acknowledging her feelings continue. The narrator claims that her husband John does not consider her case to be serious.<sup>85</sup> The narrator continues: "John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him."<sup>86</sup> It is enough for John to objectively and selfishly assume that a married woman such as his wife has nothing to worry about. He does not need to be compassionate or try to acknowledge his wife's true feelings, because from his point of view everything that women worry about is trivial.

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<sup>82</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 4.

<sup>83</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 4.

<sup>84</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 5.

<sup>85</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 5.

<sup>86</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 6.

When the narrator suggests a little house renovation to her husband, it is yet again indicated that she only worries about the silly things. She goes on saying that her husband calls her “a blessed little goose”<sup>87</sup> which could be either a form of endearment or a derogatory term. Finally the narrator yet again gives into the husband’s opinions saying “I would not be so silly as to make him uncomfortable just for a whim.”<sup>88</sup> At this point it is clear that this woman has no voice in this relationship and feels as if she only bothered her husband with her trivial requests.

Right from the beginning of *The Awakening*, we can see that Edna’s and Léonce’s marriage is very lax. Edna seems to be quite careless towards her husband’s interests, which upsets him: “He thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concern him, and valued so little his conversation.”<sup>89</sup> Edna was indifferent to her husband’s problems. They did not have much in common. Léonce was into business, but Edna did not care about it. To put it simply, they did not share interests – which otherwise would be a very desirable quality in a relationship – and that frustrated them both. They did not understand each other and could not support and confide in each other. They were incompatible.

Mr. Pontellier did not think highly of his wife. He often found flaws in her character mainly concerning her role as a mother. Mr. Pontellier’s thoughts towards Edna are described as: “(she) failed in her duty toward their children”<sup>90</sup> and “Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman.”<sup>91</sup> By the latter statement, as the narrator describes through Léonce’s eyes, we find out that Edna was not this “mother-woman” for “they were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands...”<sup>92</sup> Edna is not to be characterized as the stereotypical wife that simply takes orders from her husband. She does not even worship her husband – as Léonce would wish – but Edna is a free spirit, who has yet to find herself. In some ways, she is still a child, unwilling to comply with the society’s nor her husband’s rules and expectations. However, with Léonce’s idea of an ordinary wife and a mother, he blames Edna multiple times for not being there for their children: “If it was not a mother’s place to look after children, whose on

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<sup>87</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 6.

<sup>88</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 6.

<sup>89</sup> Kate Chopin, *The Awakening And Selected Stories*, (New York: Penguin, 1986), 48.

<sup>90</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 50.

<sup>91</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 51.

<sup>92</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 51.

earth was it?”<sup>93</sup> The deeply rooted stereotypes caused Edna seem like a terrible mother, while Léonce was “the best husband in the world”<sup>94</sup> according to other people, because he was the money maker and he was spoiling his wife and his children with gifts on occasions. That was apparently enough for Léonce to be the good husband, while there were a lot of expectations on Edna, and when she did not meet them, she was immediately criticized. Ostman sums Edna’s situation up in her book: “Representations of motherhood in *The Awakening* emphasize the biological link between mother and children, even as that link, in Edna’s case, prevents her from realizing her self-defined identity.”<sup>95</sup>

Women were expected to obey their husbands and do as they say. They were simply not expected to have a mind of their own or to make their own decisions. An example of this is when Edna is sitting on the porch and Léonce tells her to come inside. When she refuses he is shocked and orders her to come inside: “I can’t permit you to stay out there all night. You must come in the house instantly.”<sup>96</sup> In a different circumstance, Edna would listen as her husband tells her to do. Now however, when she starts to awaken, she refuses. Léonce, upset that he is losing control over his wife, stubbornly sits on the porch with her until she decides to go inside the house on her own.

When they come back to New Orleans and Edna’s awakening is growing, she begins to disobey her husband more often. She does not really care what society thinks anymore, she acts as she pleases. That however, does not please Léonce. When Edna goes out on Tuesday – a day when she accepts visitors – Léonce becomes very angry with her. He hopes that she at least “left some suitable excuse”<sup>97</sup> for her absence, but when her answer is negative Léonce gets furious. First of all, his control of his wife is almost completely gone and second of all with Edna’s behavior she brings shame on both Léonce and their family. When Edna notes that Léonce is making it into a much bigger thing that it is he responds: “I’m not making any fuss over it. But it’s just such seeming trifles that we’ve got to take seriously; such things count.”<sup>98</sup> Léonce really cares about his image and the fact that his own wife is destroying their reputation makes him furious.

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<sup>93</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 48.

<sup>94</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 50.

<sup>95</sup> Ostman, *Kate Chopin*, 105.

<sup>96</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 78.

<sup>97</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 100.

<sup>98</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 101.

With Edna changing, Léonce starts to show his true colors. At one point we get a fairly close description of Léonce as a husband: “Mr. Pontellier had been a rather courteous husband so long as he met a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife. But her new and unexpected line of conduct completely bewildered him. It shocked him.”<sup>99</sup> Léonce takes Edna’s actions very personally. He thinks that his wife is changing, not being able to understand that Edna has always been like this but due to the pressure from society she has been afraid to express herself. Now that she realizes that she has nothing to lose and can do whatever she wants, Léonce cannot help himself but to believe that Edna must be sick. He even goes to a doctor, telling him how disobedient Edna is. He complains that “her whole attitude – toward me and everybody and everything – has changed”<sup>100</sup> and that “she’s got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women”<sup>101</sup> and that she “has thrown over all her acquaintances, and goes tramping about by herself, moping in the street-cars, getting in after dark.”<sup>102</sup> Her becoming more independent infuriates Léonce because he loses control over the family. He was used to Edna being the inferior one and the change scares him. Even Edna’s own father advised Léonce to “put (his) foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife”<sup>103</sup> suggesting that women cannot be on their own and need to be coerced by a man.

Even though both of these marriages were the prototypical marriages of that time, their wives chose to disobey the social norms in their own way. They chose to not be the stereotypical wives who listen to their husbands’ every wish. They felt bound by these restrictions and wanted to set themselves free both physically and mentally.

## 5.2 Depiction of Depression

The characters, through constant nagging and manipulation by their husbands, become depressed. They do not feel the freedom to express themselves and to show their true feelings. That makes them repress those feelings, which only worsens the depression and pushes them to the edge, which leads them to resort in unhealthy coping mechanisms.

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<sup>99</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 108.

<sup>100</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 117.

<sup>101</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 118.

<sup>102</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 118.

<sup>103</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 125.

In *The Yellow Wall-paper* the narrator's husband forbids her to do many things, which makes her scared to express her true feelings to her husband. Through the husband's manipulation and superiority, she feels that if she had said something she would be laughed at, or that her feelings would not be acknowledged. When her husband ordered her to rest she disagreed with his ideas, saying: "Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good."<sup>104</sup> However, since her husband is the superior one in this relationship and knows best, she is sentenced to solitude and doing nothing all day long. That, however, upsets her and it awakens negative feelings in her. She keeps these feelings hidden from her husband: "I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time. Of course I don't when John is here, or anybody else, but when I am alone."<sup>105</sup> Whatever she says is dismissed. That is why she is scared to open up to her husband.

The depression starts to show on the protagonist: "Half the time now I am awfully lazy, and lie down ever so much."<sup>106</sup> The narrator is forced to do nothing and that causes her mental and physical well-being to take a toll on her. Doing nothing all day long does not do her good but she is too scared to oppose her husband's wishes and orders. She is put in place by her husband. When finally she gathers up the courage to tell her husband that this does not do her good, she is again dismissed by her husband saying that she is doing better. However the narrator opposes: "I don't weigh a bit more... nor as much; and my appetite may be better in the evening when you are here, but it is worse in the morning when you are away!"<sup>107</sup> She is trying to persuade her husband that his methods might not be the most effective. She is lonely and her husband's orders to stay in bed all day do not improve her health despite what he thinks. Her husband does not believe her because he sees that physically she looks normal, but he does not take in account her mental state. When again he argues that she does look better she says "better in body perhaps"<sup>108</sup> which indicates that she is trying to prove to him that mentally she is doing worse. Her husband dismisses her again, saying that "I'm a doctor, dear, and I know."<sup>109</sup> Tired of all the arguing with her husband and trying to tell him how she really feels; she keeps her thoughts to herself, which at the end does not have a pleasant outcome.

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<sup>104</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 3.

<sup>105</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 9.

<sup>106</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 10.

<sup>107</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 11.

<sup>108</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 12.

<sup>109</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 11.

With the change – the awakening – that Edna is going through, she starts to notice how her husband treats her. When Léonce talked to her with a superior tone:

She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. Of course she had; she remembered that she had. But she could not realize why or how she should have yielded, feeling as she then did.<sup>110</sup>

Before, she was willing to accept her fate, but now that she is changing she has grown tired of Léonce's constant bossing around. Before her awakening, however, it really bothered her how her husband treated her. After the argument with Léonce about their children, she started to cry: "She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life."<sup>111</sup>

Their marriage was not making Edna happy. Only after some time of being married, she realized that she and Léonce are nothing alike and that there is neither love nor passion in their marriage. That is what started her awakening. That is when she "was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being."<sup>112</sup>

She started spending more time with Robert, a man, who as opposed to Léonce, gave her attention, cared about her and made her happy. Edna was finally happy once again. However, their relationship deepened and since Edna was a married woman her relationship with Robert could not continue. Robert realized this and left Grand Isle. Edna, upset that when she was finally beginning to be happy again, the reason of her happiness deserted her. When she was watching Robert leaving, she was "striving to hold back and to hide, even from herself as she would have hidden from another, the emotion which was troubling – tearing – her. Her eyes were brimming with tears."<sup>113</sup> With her marriage collapsing and Robert leaving "her whole existence was dulled."<sup>114</sup> She felt as if Robert left "a void and wilderness behind him."<sup>115</sup> It is apparent that Edna developed some deeper feelings for Robert. She even admits it to herself, with the narrator explaining: "The sentiment which she entertained for Robert in no way resembled that which she felt for her husband, or had ever felt, or ever expected to

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<sup>110</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 78.

<sup>111</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 49.

<sup>112</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 57.

<sup>113</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 94.

<sup>114</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 95.

<sup>115</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 95.

feel.”<sup>116</sup> The situation with her husband Léonce started to get more intense. Edna, now a changed woman, makes her own decisions and is no longer dependent on her husband. However, she still lives with him, and Léonce, unwilling to accept his wife’s transition, often instigates quarrels. One time it makes Edna so upset that she takes off her wedding ring and tries to destroy it; however “her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet.”<sup>117</sup> In the frenzy and frustration that nothing happened to the wedding ring, she still felt like “she wanted to destroy something.”<sup>118</sup> She breaks a vase and the sound of shattered glass summons a maid. While cleaning up the mess she finds Edna’s wedding ring and gives it to her. Edna, still not completing her transition and her awakening, puts it on her finger. However upset Edna was with her husband, she still could not get over the stereotypes and was still afraid to let go and fully free herself of the shackles of unhappy marriage and monotonous family life.

Even though Edna is unhappy with the life she is leading, she does not want to be alone. She is just looking for a man that she would love and that would fulfill her every need and desire. Edna does not strive for independence from everything and everyone; she just wants to free herself from the situation that she is in. When she spends some time with the Ratignolles – her friends – and sees how harmonious their marriage is, she is repulsed by it. The narrator explains Edna’s feelings as she leaves the Ratignolles:

Edna felt depressed rather than soothed after leaving them. The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui.<sup>119</sup>

After visiting the Ratignolles Edna realized, that she does not care about such life. However happy their marriage was, however faithful and kind they were to one another she did not want that kind of life for herself.

With the unfulfilling lifestyle she was leading she grew more and more depressed. During the day she did what she wanted to, what made her happy, but in the

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<sup>116</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 96.

<sup>117</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 103.

<sup>118</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 103.

<sup>119</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 107.

evening she was yet again with her husband with whom she was not happy. These ups and downs had negative effect upon Edna, causing her mood swings:

There were days when she was unhappy, she did not know why,- when it did not seem worth while to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead; when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation.<sup>120</sup>

Edna was searching for her place in the world, for the meaning of life. She did not enjoy her current relationship and her family life, the man she has fallen in love with had been gone, even her friends did not bring her as much joy as she would have wanted. She was not the same person anymore. She did not have the same interests as she did before. We can see that when she throws a very fancy party at her house and she invites all her friends, yet she is not enjoying it:

But as she sat there amid her guests, she felt the old ennui overtaking her; the hopelessness which so often assailed her, which came upon her like an obsession, like something extraneous, independent of volition... There came over her the acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision the presence of the beloved one, overpowering her at once with a sense of the unattainable.<sup>121</sup>

However she tries to distract herself, her true desires always resurface. After all this time she is still in love with Robert. Nevertheless she does realize that it would not be possible for them to be in a romantic relationship, since she is a married woman, not to mention that Robert was still gone.

At first, Edna might not be fully in control or understanding of her own feelings, but through this awakening she starts to realize what it is that is missing in her life. She admits to her doctor:

There are periods of despondency and suffering which take possession of me. But I don't want anything but my own way. That is wanting a good deal, of

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<sup>120</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 109.

<sup>121</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 145.



course, when you have to trample upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others...<sup>122</sup>

Edna finally realizes what it is that is bothering her. She finally knows what she wants, however, she still feels trapped, not allowed by the society to do what she wants, and that brings up the feelings of depression and despair. She just wants to be free; free from the judgement, free from the expectations, free from her husband. However, “Chopin makes clear that the kind of liberty that Edna seeks—pure autonomy, complete freedom from relation—is impossible.”<sup>123</sup>

The restrictions that society set for women as normal were not in accord with what these women wanted. They felt oppressed and their lack of freedom made them feel trapped and that caused their depression.

### 5.3 Escaping the Oppression

It was hard for these women to protest against these social norms which were already customary. Since this kind of mindset – that men were superior to women – was considered normal, the protagonists’ husbands thought that their wives were just crazy for trying to express their true selves. Their true desires – to be free- did not comply with the society’s norms. They had neither their husbands’ support nor the society’s. That is what made these women to try to deal with their problems in their own way. They wanted to free themselves from the oppression and from the pressure that the society posed.

The protagonist in *The Yellow Wall-paper* is slowly losing her sanity because of the isolation. Even though her husband John, a physician, ordered her to stay in bed and do nothing; we can see that it does not improve her well-being. In order for her to get better, she believes that she needs to occupy her mind. However, since she does not have anything intellectual to do, she starts to analyze the environment that she is in: “the protagonist wills herself to shift her attention away from her own infirmities and toward the house.”<sup>124</sup> Being bored, she invents a story that there is a woman trapped in the wallpaper that is in her room and she starts believing that. At first it scares her: “...it is a

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<sup>122</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 171.

<sup>123</sup> Ostman, *Kate Chopin*, 38.

<sup>124</sup> Horowitz, *Wild Unrest*, 179.

woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern. I don't like it a bit. I wonder – I begin to think – I wish John would take me away from here!”<sup>125</sup> John, however, does not take her away because he does not believe his wife and he thinks that she is just making things up. Forced to stay in that room, the narrator seems to accept her fate and the thought that there is someone behind the wallpaper consumes her. Since she has nothing better to do, she starts to analyze the wallpaper. At first she was scared, but now the mystery of the wallpaper gives her something to do, which improves her mental state. John notices that his wife is doing better, living in naivety that he is the one who cured her. However, it was the wallpaper that gave her purpose and a reason to stay in her room all day. When John comments on how much healthier she looks “in spite of (the) wall-paper”<sup>126</sup> which she previously dreaded, she thinks: “I had no intention of telling him it was because of the wall-paper – he would make fun of me. He might even want to take me away.”<sup>127</sup> Fascinated by the wallpaper, the narrator is determined to solve its mystery: “I don't want to leave now until I have found it out. There is a week more, and I think that will be enough.”<sup>128</sup> John simply being happy that his wife seems to be doing better does not worry much about the reason why she is doing better. Unfortunately he does not realize that with his actions he drove his wife away from him, resulting in her going insane. The protagonist, believing that there is a woman behind that wallpaper, starts to see her creeping around:

I see her... creeping all around the garden. I see her on that long road under the trees, creeping along, and when a carriage comes she hides under the blackberry vines. I don't blame her a bit. It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight.<sup>129</sup>

It is highly unlikely that a random woman would be creeping around their house. However, what confirms the reader's suspicion that the narrator has gone completely mad is when the narrator admits that she also creeps around: “I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. I can't do it at night, for I know John would suspect

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<sup>125</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 11.

<sup>126</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 14.

<sup>127</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 14.

<sup>128</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 14.

<sup>129</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 16.

something at once.”<sup>130</sup> Naturally, a healthy person does not have a need to creep around. What is also concerning is, that before the narrator used to tell her husband everything, even if she was worried that he will not listen. Now, however, she does not feel such need and the thrill of having a secret is much more exciting to her.

Determined to find out who is behind the wallpaper, she locks herself in her room and peels the wallpaper. She “wants to astonish”<sup>131</sup> her husband before he comes back. After she peels all the wallpaper, she finally feels free, revealing that she felt that she was the woman trapped behind it. She felt finally free from her husband’s oppression, feeling that she can do anything that she wants. However she is still afraid of her husband’s reaction: “I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard!”<sup>132</sup> She is still worried that when John is around she cannot be her true self. When she is alone, however, she feels free: “It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please.”<sup>133</sup>

When her husband comes back she expects him to be impressed by the thing she has done. She had freed herself: “I’ve got out at last... in spite of you and Jane! And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!”<sup>134</sup> She freed herself from her husband’s oppression. She was finally not afraid to do as she pleased and to say what she wanted to say. As Horowitz in her book explains, the protagonist was: “Once the passively submissive wife, she is now an active force, and her language is direct and clear.”<sup>135</sup> However, the desire to be free on one hand but also feeling oppressed by her husband on the other caused her to have a mental breakdown and to lose her sanity. Essentially she got what she wanted but the cost was her sanity. In the last sentence we can sense her lack of care about anything but herself. After her husband finds her in the room creeping, he faints: “Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!”<sup>136</sup> She does not understand his reaction. She is happy and she is finally free to do whatever she wants.

Edna’s way of escaping the oppression from her husband was essentially through her awakening. Her realization of who she is and what she wants freed her from the stereotypical image of what a wife and a mother should be like. Her new attitude

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<sup>130</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 16.

<sup>131</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 18.

<sup>132</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 18.

<sup>133</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 18.

<sup>134</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 19.

<sup>135</sup> Horowitz, *Wild Unrest*, 185.

<sup>136</sup> Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-paper*, 19.

towards life was that “she began to do as she liked and to feel as she like.”<sup>137</sup> She decided that she no longer cared for what the society and her husband expected of her to be like. She moved out of her husband’s house and she started having meaningless affairs, which fulfilled her physical needs and desires. However, her emotional desires have not been fulfilled yet. She was still in love with Robert, who at the end of the book came back to New Orleans and confessed his feelings to her. Edna, finding out that she in fact can have everything with Robert by her side, is finally content with her life. When Robert confesses his fear that Léonce might not be willing to set Edna free, so that he can be with her, Edna laughs: “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, ‘Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,’ I should laugh at you both.”<sup>138</sup> Edna’s transition is complete. She is now fully awakened, believing that she does not belong to anybody but herself, and that she can live her life however she wants without fearing what the society might think. She wants to be with Robert; however she needs to leave to attend childbirth of her friend Adèle Ratignolle. Robert promises her to wait for her and Edna, full of hope for the future and full of love, leaves Robert in her house.

There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that... he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone.<sup>139</sup>

She walked to the beach with her mind full of thoughts. She thought of her husband and her children thinking that “they were a part of her life” but “they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul.”<sup>140</sup> They were only a part of her life, not her sole purpose. She cared about them, but she cared about herself and her well-being more. Nothing was more important to her than herself. However she was clinging onto the thought of being with Robert and that might have been even more important to her, since she ended her life which she cared about so much because of a man who betrayed her. She once again thought of the note that Robert left her thinking that “he did not know; he did not understand.”<sup>141</sup> Robert did not understand how much

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<sup>137</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 107.

<sup>138</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 167.

<sup>139</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 175.

<sup>140</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 176.

<sup>141</sup> Chopin, *The Awakening*, 176.

Edna has put on the line and the only thing that would make her come through was the promise of a future with him by her side. He did not understand how much she relied on him, how much she loved him and how much she was willing to give up because of him. Hopeless Edna decides to free herself once and for all from everything that has ever held her back, swims out into the ocean and drowns herself.

These women did not want to go back to the lives that they led before with their husbands and the society telling them what to do and what not to do. However they were alienated because of their opinions and had to deal with their self-image and their longing for freedom themselves. Since they could not execute their wishes due to society's opinion, they were sentenced to free themselves in any way they were capable of, which in their case was losing sanity and committing suicide.

## 6. Conclusion

The focus of this thesis was to point out the struggles that women in the past went through. It analyzes how women were the oppressed sex and how they fought this oppression. It also analyzes how women's lives were portrayed in American fiction, by which they wanted to bring in the forefront the issue that they and the society as a whole faced. The aim was to show how women fought through fiction for their equality and how they perceived their position in marriage and society.

In the first chapter I explained how women lived before the nineteenth century before there was any real or successful effort for gender equality. It shows how women were treated, how they were viewed by the society and what rights they had and did not have. The first chapter points out how inferior women were and how restricted their lives as individuals were. It goes into detail how they were inferior to men, how they could not earn their own money or own any property and how they were obligated to worship their husbands.

The second chapter discusses Virginia Woolf's point of view on women and fiction. She herself was struggling with her writing career and she describes in her essays how difficult it used to be for women to be accepted by the society as writers and also as individuals. It talked about the restrictions that women had both in ordinary life and also professional life as writers, where they were expected to write in a womanly fashion i.e. not criticize men's writing and not expressing their opinion and their feelings publicly.

The third chapter is about introducing the literary works that I chose to analyze. The works chosen are from the feminist point of view very important, because they depict some of the major struggles that women went through and that were mentioned in the previous two chapters. It also briefly introduces the reader to the authors Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin and the reason why they were inspired to write such progressive pieces of fiction.

The fourth chapter is focused on the analysis of the texts themselves. I chose three issues that these works share that were quite common in society at that time. These issues were: depiction of marriage and gender roles, depiction of depression and escaping the oppression. The analysis is focused on the details; the pressure that was put on women and the feelings they felt which they were not allowed to express freely. It

talks about how women were manipulated by their husbands to act a certain way even though it did not come naturally to them. In *The Yellow Wall-paper* the protagonist is driven insane by the inability to express her true feelings and needs. Her husband believed that he knew what was best for his wife, even though she disagreed, and that drove her to cope with the issues in her own way. In *The Awakening*, the protagonist realizes that the life she is leading is not in accordance with what she wants and what she needs. She decides to go against the social norms to discover herself. She is judged for her opinions and her actions. With the society not allowing her to be who she wants to be, she breaks under the pressure and commits suicide.

In conclusion the aim of this thesis was to show the struggle that women went through to achieve gender equality and how they portrayed it in their fiction. It shows that women were not always taken seriously and that they did not have as much freedom as they do now. I wanted to point out that no matter what society considers normal or not, should not be an obstacle for others – in this case women – to achieve their dreams, whether that is to become a writer, express their feelings, needs and desires, or simply wanting to make a change in the world, no matter how controversial the topic might be.

## 7. Resumé

Zámerom tejto bakalárskej práce bolo poukázať na problémy, ktorými si ženy v minulosti prechádzali. Táto práca sa zameriava na to, ako ženy boli utlačovaným pohlavím a ako sa proti tomu snažili bojovať. Tiež sa zameriava na to, ako boli životy žien vykreslené v americkej literatúre. Týmto opisom sa autorky snažili dostať do popredia problémy, ktorým ženy a spoločnosť ako celok, čelili. Účelom bolo poukázať na to, ako ženy bojovali za svoju rovnosť skrz literatúru, a ako vnímali ich rolu nie len v manželstve, ale aj v spoločnosti.

V prvej kapitole som priblížila ako ženy žili pred devätnástym storočím, pred tým, než nastal nejaký pokus o nastolenie rovnakých práv a príležitostí pre obe pohlavia. Snažím sa poukázať na postavenie žien v spoločnosti – aké práva mali, a aké naopak nemali. Prvá kapitola zdôrazňuje podradnosť žien a ako boli ich životy a ich možnosti limitované. V tejto kapitole sa detailne diskutuje o nadradenosti mužov, o tom, ako ženy nemohli pracovať a zarábať si vlastné peniaze, ako nemohli vlastniť žiaden majetok a ako bolo od nich očakávané že budú uctievať svojich manželov.

Druhá kapitola sa sústreďuje na eseje od Virginie Woolfovej, v ktorých píše jej pohľad na ženy a na beletriu. Sama Woolfová mala problém presadiť sa ako spisovateľka, a vo svojich esejach opisuje aké zložité bolo pre ženy, aby ich spoločnosť prijala a akceptovala ako spisovateľky ale aj ako jednotlivcov. Woolfová diskutuje o obmedzeniach, ktorým ženy čelili ako v osobnom živote tak aj v tom profesnom ako spisovateľky. Od žien bolo očakávané, že budú písať ako ženy; to znamenalo, že nemohli kritizovať texty napísané mužmi a nemohli verejne vyjadrovať svoj názor a svoje pocity.

V tretej kapitole som predstavila diela ktoré som sa rozhodla analyzovať. Tieto diela sú z feministického pohľadu veľmi dôležité, pretože sa zameriavajú na jedny z najväčších problémov, ktorým ženy v minulosti čelili. Tieto problémy boli opísané do podrobnosti v predchádzajúcich dvoch kapitolách. V tejto kapitole sa tiež nachádzajú krátke biografie autoriek Charlotte Perkins Gilman a Kate Chopin, a čo ich inšpirovalo k tomu, aby takéto progresívne diela napísali.

Štvrtá kapitola sa zameriava na analýzu samotných diel. Vybrala som si tri problémy, ktoré sa vyskytujú v oboch dielach, a ktoré boli v tej dobe celkom aktuálne. Tými problémami sú: vyobrazenie manželstva, vyobrazenie depresie a vyslobodenie



hlavných hrdiniek z útlaku. Táto analýza sa zameriava na rôzne detaily, ako napríklad: tlak, ktorý bol vyvíjaný na ženy a pocity ktoré cítili a ktoré nemohli verejne prejavovať. V tejto kapitole poukazujem na to, ako boli ženy v minulosti manipulované svojimi manželmi, aby sa správali podľa ich predstáv, aj keď týmto ženám prišlo také správanie neprirodzené. V *Žltej tapete* sa hlavná hrdinka mentálne zrúti, pretože nemá slobodu byť sama sebou a necíti slobodu vyjadrovať svoje pocity a túžby. Jej manžel verí, že vie čo je pre jeho manželku najlepšie, a keď sa hlavná hrdinka snažila svojmu manželovi oponovať – ktorý ju nepočúval a nebral jej názory vážne – bola prinútená vysporiadať sa so svojimi problémami sama. To ju ale bohužiaľ priviedlo k šialenstvu. V *Prebudení* si hlavná hrdinka uvedomí, že nežije svoj život tak ako by si to predstavovala a nemá v živote to, čo by chcela a potrebovala. Rozhodne sa postaviť proti spoločenským normám a snaží sa nájsť samu seba. Je však za svoje názory a činy odsúdená spoločnosťou. Keďže jej spoločnosť neumožnila prejavovať svoje pravé ja, zlomí sa pod celým tým náporom a spácha samovraždu.

Na záver, cieľom tejto bakalárskej práce bolo poukázať na problémy, ktorými si ženy prešli aby dosiahli rovnosť pohlaví, a ako sa to všetko odzrkadľovalo v literatúre. Poukazuje na to, že ženy neboli vždy brané vážne a že nie vždy mali toľko slobody, ako majú teraz. Chcela som zdôrazniť, že to, čo spoločnosť pokladá alebo nepokladá za normálne, by nemalo byť prekážkou pre ostatných – v tomto prípade pre ženy – v tom, aby dosiahli svoje ciele a sny. Či už je to stať sa spisovateľkou, vyjadriť nahlas svoje pocity, túžby a potreby alebo snaha zmeniť svet k lepšiemu, ľudia by si mali za svojimi snami stáť, nezávisle od toho, ako veľmi kontroverzné ich nápady a ciele sú.

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## **9. Annotation**

Name: Sára Seidlová

Department: Department of English and American Studies

Title of the thesis: Awakenings: Classic American Feminist Texts of the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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### **9.1 Abstract**

This thesis is focused on portrayal of women and the question of inequality in American literature on the turn of the twentieth century. The first part is describing the historical and social background of women in the nineteenth century, mainly on the way of living, their rights and their position in society. The second part is focused on Virginia Woolf and her critical essays and thoughts about women and fiction. The third part provides an introduction to *The Yellow Wall-paper* and *The Awakening* and also to the lives of its authors Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin. The last part consists of the analysis of the texts themselves and is focused on highlighting the social issues that these two works share.

## 10. Anotácia

Meno: Sára Seidlová

Katedra: Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Názov bakalárskej práce: Prebudenia: Klasické americké feministické diela na prelome dvadsiateho storočia

Vedúci práce: Mgr. David Livingstone, Ph.D.

Počet strán: 44

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Kľúčové slová: americká literatúra, feminizmus, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Žltá tapeta, Kate Chopin, Prebudenie

### 10.1 Abstrakt

Táto bakalárska práca sa zameriava na vyobrazenie žien a na otázku nerovnosti pohlaví v americkej literatúre na prelome dvadsiateho storočia. Prvá časť popisuje historické a spoločenské pozadie žien v devätnástom storočí, zameriava sa hlavne na ich spôsob života, na ich práva a na ich postavenie v spoločnosti. Druhá časť je zameraná na Virginiu Woolfovú a na jej kritické eseje a myšlienky o ženách a fikcii. Tretia časť poskytuje zhrnutie dejov *Žltej tapety* a *Prebudenia* a tiež poskytuje krátky životopis autoriek týchto diel Charlotty Perkins Gilman a Kate Chopin. Posledná časť pozostáva z analýzy samotných textov a je zameraná na zdôraznenie sociálnych problémov, ktoré sa v týchto dvoch dielach nachádzajú.