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The Position of Women in the Fiction of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin

Diploma Thesis

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Z á s a d y p r o v y p r a c o v á n í :

V průběhu devatenáctého století docházelo nejen k velkým společenským změnám, ale i k hlubší reflexi a kritice postavení žen ve společnosti. Tímto tématem se zajímavě a mnohdy i kontroverzně zabývala řada amerických spisovatelek druhé poloviny 19. století, mezi nimi Kate Chopinová a významná představitelka hnutí za ženská práva Charlotte P. Gilmanová. Cílem práce bude proto porovnat jejich tvorbu z hlediska toho, jak v ní zachycují názory na postavení ženy ve společnosti. V úvodu práce studentka s využitím relevantní sekundární literatury uvede do problematiky tzv. ženské otázky, jak byla diskutována v posledních desetiletích devatenáctého století v USA a do tohoto kontextu zasadí názory Gilmanové a dále zařadí obě spisovatelky do literárního kontextu. Jádrem práce pak bude analýza a komparace zvolených literárních děl se zaměřením na způsob zobrazení ženských postav a jejich společenského postavení. Svě vývody bude studentka vhodně ilustrovat primárními texty a konzultovat se sekundárními zdroji.

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to lay down a general view of the position of women in society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America as a framework for the wider analysis. The thesis will continue to show how women were challenging society and actively seeking to change their position through movements such as the suffragette movement. The thesis will trace how the position of women was shown in the works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Benigna Machiavelli* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, and to what extent the ideas of these authors represented the changing ideas of society at this critical time in American history, while also making comparison to other works by prominent female authors of the time. It will compare the marked difference in the American public's reaction to these authors and their works to create an analysis of the struggle women were faced with. It will also show the extent to which these authors were offering guidance to women for a better future, and how much they were simply describing the times.

Key words

position of women in society, late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, America, suffrage movement, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Benigna Machiavelli*, Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*, feminism, female writers, women's rights, marriage, economic independence

Abstrakt

Cílem této práce je nastínit pohled na pozici žen ve společnosti na konci devatenáctého a začátku dvacátého století jako základ pro další analýzu. Dále chci ukázat, jak ženy samy aktivně hledaly cesty ke změně své tradiční pozice skrze různá hnutí, jako například hnutí suffrage. Tato práce předkládá, jak byla pozice žen vyobrazena v dílech

Benigna Machiavelli autorky Charlotte Perkins Gilmanové a *The Awakening* Kate Chopinové. Rozbor těchto děl má za cíl ukázat, do jaké míry se postavení žen vyobrazené v těchto prózách shoduje s měnícími se názory společnosti v tomto kritickém čase americké historie. Práce je doplněna o srovnání i s jinými významnými ženskými spisovatelkami té doby. Ukáže také, jak byly tyto autorky a jejich díla přijaty veřejností, jak složitým situacím musely ženy čelit, do jaké míry nabízely ostatním ženám vodítko k lepší budoucnosti a jak přesně popisovaly tehdejší dobu.

Klíčová slova

Pozice žen ve společnosti, pozdní devatenácté a začátek dvacátého století, hnutí suffrage, Charlotte Perkins Gilmanová, *Benigna Machiavelli*, Kate Chopinová, *The Awakening*, feminismus, ženské spisovatelky, práva žen, manželství, ekonomická nezávislost

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. WOMEN AND LABOUR	2
3. WOMEN AND THE FIGHT FOR SUFFRAGE	5
3.1 ANTI-SUFFRAGE MOVEMENTS	8
3.2 WOMEN BREAKING CONVENTIONS	9
3.3 THE OCCOQUAN WORKHOUSE AND THE END OF THE FIGHT	9
4. THE RISE OF INFLUENTIAL WOMEN WRITERS IN NINETEENTH- CENTURY AMERICA	11
4.1 CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN, WOMEN AND ECONOMICS	11
4.2 ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE AND FREEDOM	12
4.3 WOMEN'S NEW ROLES	14
5. KATE CHOPIN	15
5.1 THE AWAKENING	16
5.2 CONTROVERSY AND SEXUALITY	18
5.3 CHOPIN'S AMERICA AND DENYING GENDER ROLES	19
5.4 MARRIAGE AS A SOCIAL OPPRESSION	20
5.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION	21
5.6 CHANGING REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN	24
6. BENIGNA MACHIAVELLI – A NEW TYPE OF HEROINE	26
6.1 THE INFLUENCE OF LITERATURE ON BENIGNA	29
6.2 MACAVELLY AND MACHIAVELLI – THE IMPORTANCE OF A NAME AND AN IDENTITY	31
6.3 HARDWORK, INTELLECT AND FORWARD-PLANNING AS A KEY TO WOMEN'S ACCESS	32
6.4 POSSIBILITIES FOR WORK AND EMPLOYMENT	33
6.5 DREAMS OF AN INCREASED SOCIAL POSITION	35
6.6 BENIGNA AND MARRIAGE	37
7. COMPARISON OF THE AWAKENING AND BENIGNA MACHIAVELLI	38
7.1 MARRIAGE AND MARRIED LIFE	39
7.2 THE FAMILY UNIT – ROLES AND RIGHTS	40
7.3 CONTRASTING OPINIONS OF THE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE	43
7.4 HOPE AND HOPELESSNESS	46

8. CONCLUSION	49
9. RESUMÉ	53
10. BIBLIOGRAPHY	58

1. Introduction

Ehrenreich and English tell us that the position of women in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America was complicated and problematic. It was a time when traditional views of the roles women should take were being confronted by changing attitudes and increased social pressure. This pressure came from several fronts as female writers were gaining greater audiences and fame, especially as many prominent writers began to explicitly challenge the hegemony around them. At the same time, women were beginning to take a larger role in the labour market, while fighting against problems connected to education, legislation and unionisation. (Ehrenreich & English, 65, 72)

Women were expected to be mothers and wives, caring for children and their husbands alike. The notion of economic freedom and independence was still alien to women at this time, although it was being hard fought for by the women of the suffrage movement amongst others. One of the ways in which women could challenge the conventions around them was through writing. Women had very little influence in an economic or political sphere, and therefore had to rely on other ways, namely writing, to change the opinions of those around them, express themselves and push their new doctrine of true equality. Female writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin are now considered to be women at the very forefront of the feminist movement. However the difference in the way their famous works were received helps to give us some insight into the position of, and problems facing, women at that time. Both highly respected pioneers in the field of literature at the time, they help us to understand not only the historically documented situation of women at the time, but also, and arguably more importantly, the feelings of the women who were so trapped in a situation they knew how to improve, but were powerless to do so.

In this paper I intend to explore the position of women in society during the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century in America. I will look at the ways in which traditional values restricted the roles women could play in society

and kept them as subservient as possible. I will also look briefly at the suffragette movement and the ways in which the position of women was furthered by this cause. The main focus of this paper is to explore how feminist writers of the time, especially but not exclusively Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin, presented the situation through their literature and to what extent they had an impact on society.

2. Women and Labour

To begin with I will discuss the situation in America regarding women and labour . Before the Americas were colonized by settlers from Europe, a significant portion of the work was done by the native women. Therefore, women have always been an essential part of American labour. The jobs of men and women alike changed drastically as people became increasingly urbanized, and along with this change came a development in societies attitudes towards the roles of men and women.

According to Kamensky the life of the early colonists was heavily dependent on the financial circumstances surrounding the family. European women of the colonial era had rigidly specified roles in society. They performed the traditional household duties, and were responsible for cooking, cleaning and of course the children. Obviously they were shocked upon their arrival in America to see the native women labouring alongside men. Not only did they perform household duties, but these women were also working outside on the farmland and worked as potters and crafters, providing for their families as necessary. It was noted that men generally spent their time with hunting, fishing and building, while women carried out the majority of the actual labour. (Kamensky, in Pepek)

Pepek goes on to point out that working on farms was very difficult work during these times, far too difficult for the pampered Europeans who had arrived. The increase in the tobacco trade changed this however. A huge amount of labour was required for the tobacco harvests, so women were required in the new settlements, and often the only way for them to make the journey and survive was to sign themselves over as

indentured servants on contracts of around 5 years. The conditions they were then forced to work in were highly inhospitable compared to the lives these women were used to back in Europe. (Pepek).

Lewis tells us that extending from the end of the colonial period until the revolution women's work was focused mainly on domestic chores. Women supported their husbands while they were out at work , by ensuring that the household ran smoothly. (Lewis)

Cooking for the household took a major part of a woman's time. Making garments, spinning yarn, weaving cloth, sewing and mending clothes, also took up huge amounts of time. After the Revolution and into the early 19th century, higher expectations for the education of children fell, often, to the mother. Widows and the wives of men off to war or travelling on business often ran large farms and plantations effectively as the sole managers. (Lewis)

Often women were forced into work as domestic servants, or in some cases other forms of indentured servitude. “Unmarried women, or divorced women without property, might work in another household, helping out with household chores of the wife or substituting for the wife if there was not one in the family. Widows and widowers tended to remarry very quickly, though.” (Kamensky, in Lewis) However, according to Lewis, many women owned small businesses, working as apothecaries and textile manufacturers. Others ran businesses such as blacksmiths and agricultural farms, but obviously employed others to do the physical work for them. Bearing this in mind it is important to realise that the difficult times during this period in America meant that, despite overbearing traditional social expectations and restrictions of women, many women were employed, often as successful business owners, as a matter of economic survival. (Lewis)

As the industrial revolution became more dominant in America, an increasing number of women started taking employment in industry. There was a significant

increase in women working outside of the domestic sphere in the 20 years between 1840 and 1860.

By 1840, ten percent of women held jobs outside the household; ten years later, this had risen to fifteen percent. Factory owners hired women and children when they could, because they could pay lower wages to women and children than to men. (Lewis)

This however was not the only reason women were employed in these roles, at the time they were simply the only ones with the necessary skill-set and were therefore required to fill these roles. For the factory owners it was a perfect solution, the most highly qualified work force for certain jobs was also the one they could justifiably pay the least.

For some tasks, like sewing, women were preferred because they had training and experience, and the jobs were 'women's work.' (Lewis)

Kessler-Harris says that when the sewing machine was introduced to factories it was women who were first trained in their use, although this development did mean that more men could do sewing work compared to the times when sewing was done exclusively by hand. However, the situation remained that significantly more women remained employed in this sector, and women in some situations began to take a share of the bread winning load that previously their husbands had solely occupied. (Kessler-Harris)

Kessler-Harris continues by writing that in the late nineteenth century, women were highly dependent on their husbands and fathers for money. The work available to women was often difficult and labour intensive, so to be protected from this women could only hope that the men they relied on could provide for them. (Kessler-Harris) Kessler-Harris writes,

This 'family wage' would protect them from the harsh realities of the job market. But most women spent some portion of their lives before marriage at poorly paid, brutal work in the fields or factories or in someone else's kitchen. Lucky women and the

well educated might teach or serve as governesses or companions. (Kessler-Harris)

The poorer women, Kessler-Harris goes on to say, continued to make a wage from sewing, cooking, cleaning and other menial tasks. It was not to be until the further industrialisation of society that other opportunities would become available. (Kessler-Harris)

Lewis believes that fortunately for women, new job opportunities in offices and factory industries became available. Women had first begun office work during the Civil War, and this increased at a steady pace from that time. The invention of the typewriter helped to speed this process up as women were the first to be trained in this work, since they already worked in the office positions in which the typewriter became ubiquitous. (Lewis) Kessler-Harris points out, however that by 1900, still only around nine percent of all employed women were employed in office work. This increased dramatically to around twenty-five percent in the following decade. At the same time, the percentage of women who were working in domestic jobs decreased. By 1920, only around twenty percent of women were employed in this area, this is in contrast to sixty percent in 1872. Women also started to find work in fields like nursing, library science, and social work, and a handful began working in specialised areas like journalism and medicine. In 1920, around thirteen percent of women held jobs which required professional qualifications. (Kessler-Harris)

3. Women and the fight for suffrage

Schenken further describes the situation in 1920, which also saw the ratification of the 19th amendment which ended women's long-fought battle for suffrage, giving them the vote. The suffrage movement had begun to seek equality for women as a matter of legislature. In May 1869, the National Woman Suffrage Association was created by

Susan Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton; an almost exclusively female organisation at its beginning.(Schenken, 598) Schenken writes that they aimed to force a constitutional change opposing the Fifteenth Amendment (Schenken) which was due to read,

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, colour, or previous condition of servitce.
(Amendment XV)

Schenken continues to say that they aimed to oppose this unless it was changed to include women, a group not explicitly named in the original draft. (Schenken)

The history of the suffrage movement started much earlier however, and is key to understanding the role of women in American society during the nineteenth century. Ana explains that in 1848 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, an American social activist and front-line abolitionist, took a political stand, and publicly demanded, at the famous convention in Seneca Falls, that women be given the same rights that men had been granted for so long. (Ana) Stanton stated that “he [men] has never permitted her [women] to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise” (Stanton, in Ana). She was heavily criticised, Ana explains, for this public display, but she struck the first blow in a fight which was to go on for 70 years. This speech is now widely recognised as the start of the women's revolution in America. Despite the fact that America was not in a social position to accept the change which was being proposed, so even though suffrage could not be immediately achieved, it was the perfect time for the thought to be placed in people's minds. As people began speaking about it, even through negative criticism, the idea was being firmly entrenched in the general psyche and became open to debate. (Ana)

Ana goes on to say that as previously discussed Women were in a difficult position. They were expected to operate within a certain, clearly-defined, role. (Ana) According to Catholic spokesperson, Orestes Brownson, “Her proper sphere is home,

and her proper function is the care of the household, to manage a family, to take care of children, and attend to their early training” (Scott, in Ana). Ana writes that in fact to mention the Catholic church briefly, it should be noted that the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1912, recommended that Catholics support the anti-suffrage movement. The church, a highly influential body in nineteenth century America, was expressly against women moving outside the domestic sphere and seeking to acquire equal rights to men. For a woman to question her place, or seek to rise above it, was to defy concrete social expectations. However, that was just what women, initially, in the Western states did. Women in these frontier states had already proved themselves as being equal to men during the period of colonisation. Women stood alongside men and already had social acceptance of women's rights, and to some extent, equality. (Ana) Beeton writes that the state of Wyoming granted women the right to vote as early as 1869, and later it became the first state to approve full women’s suffrage in 1890 (Beeton, 87). It was early trend-setting micro-revolutions such as this which fuelled the debate already being held as a result of Stanton's work.

However, Ana writes, in other areas with a more traditional viewpoint, women still struggled with the confinement and restrictions placed upon her by society. (Ana) Clara Barton a Civil War nurse famously said,

“I struggled long and hard with my sense of propriety – with the appalling fact that I was only a woman whispering in one of my ears, and thundering in the other the groans of suffering men relying on me for life” (Clara Barton, in Scott, in Ana)

Especially during these times of conflict and hardship women had thoroughly proved that they were just as capable as men, but society was still too puritanical to give women the rights that men held so fundamental. It would be much later and following significantly greater hardships that finally women would have their chance at the recognition they were striving for.

3.1 Anti-suffrage movements

Giele describes the fight for Women's Suffrage as exactly that, a fight, and as such there were those who actively opposed the movement. The Catholic church were one of the largest detractors and they strongly stood against women gaining independence. The New York association published a magazine, initially called *The Anti-Suffragist*, edited by William Winslow Crannell from July 1908 to April 1912, which was later renamed *The Woman's Protest*. (Giele, in Ana) The publication ceased in 1920 when universal suffrage was granted. Camhi points out that the social activist Emma Goldman opposed the suffrage movement on the basis that women were already the equals of men in their own way, stating that men granting women suffrage would not make a difference and would only further in-debt women to men. The main point of her argument was that women should aim for real social change rather than being given more privilege in the restrictive system they already existed in. She viewed this as similar to a slave being given increased food rations for good behaviour and towing the line. (Camhi, in Ana)

Ana says that there were also those who supported suffrage but were cautious of showing it too explicitly, fearing public backlash from the wider majority. America was still dominated by men politically and therefore politicians were very careful about outwardly supporting this revolutionary movement. For example, despite Woodrow Wilson claiming his support for suffrage, he did this with such reluctance that it seemed as though he were trying very hard to place great distance between himself and the movement. (Ana) He praised the women for being patient and strong in the fight for suffrage, but at the same time he told them "they [women] could afford a little while longer to wait" (Woodrow Wilson, in Evans, in Ana). Despite being president Wilson did not apply his appointed powers to aid Women's Suffrage. So while voicing his support and praise he actively did nothing to make a change. This led Alice Paul and Lucy Burns, lead suffragists, to picket Wilson outside of the White House, asking "How long must women wait for suffrage?" (Alice Paul and Lucy Burns, in Evans, in Ana).

3.2 Women breaking conventions

Ana explains that women like Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Chapman Catt, and Paul and Burns acted outside of societies previously defined norms and were the main catalyst to move the suffrage movement forward. Susan B. Anthony defied social convention by refusing to marry and staying single until her death, she lived and thrived without “woman’s protector and defender” (Gurko, in Ana) and led a fully independent life becoming one of the suffrage movements most vocal characters. Stanton had seven children, and was a good and caring mother, yet also worked tirelessly giving speeches and lectures on the suffrage of women across America. In this way she can be considered as a quintessential working mother. A definition women across America and Europe are still struggling with today. (Ana) Beeton reminds us that without these women who existed outside of convention it would have been very complicated for other women to gain and cement their independence. (Beeton, 234) Suffragettes were often hated and railed against, and were looked down upon by various groups such as the Catholic church, men and of course other women who were firmly entrenched in their domestic lifestyles. However, even though the price some of these women paid was high, progress began to be made. Scott writes that in 1910, Alice Stebbins Wells was appointed as America's first female police officer. Sixteen other cities appointed female officers within a year of this ground-breaking development (Scott, 102).

3.3 The Occoquan workhouse and the end of the fight

Ana continues, saying World War I soon slowed down the progress which was being made. Across the Atlantic in the UK suffragettes ceased their protests and concentrated on the wider war effort and supporting the men who had gone away to fight. However the women of the NWP (National Women's Party) picketed the government at this time, and people strongly and vocally opposed this action. America had recently become involved in the war in Europe and the public viewed these protests as dishonorable and disrespectful to those fighting overseas. The patriotism of these women was also called

into question. Even in the face of this criticism, the women stood, continuing to demand and answer as to why the president had not yet agreed the promised new amendment to the Constitution . The protesters were eventually arrested and charged with obstructing traffic and were sentenced to sixty days in the Occoquan Workhouse. However the women were not ready to give up and refused to eat which forced the guards to respond by force feeding them. They were treated terribly and soon the public who had so quickly condemned their protest began to support the women in the face of government brutality. (Ana) As news of the terrible treatment became public knowledge, even those who opposed the protests knew “that brutal bullying isn’t [...] a statesmenlike method for settling a demand for justice” (Winslow, in Ana). Newspapers began to circulate stories about the terrible treatment of the female prisoners held at the Occoquan Workhouse. “They [the guards] beat Lucy Burns, chained her hands to the cell bars above her head, and left her there for the night” (Giele, in Ana). These horrors, and their public condemnation were the final catalyst required for the wider public to support Women’s Suffrage, all that was required was the, now inevitable, passing of the 19th Amendment. The amendment was finally ratified on August 18, 1920 and reads,

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation. (Amendment XIX)

While the ends of the struggle for suffrage exist outside of the main time period of this essay, I feel it is essential to include. The suffrage movement was the most important aspect of the liberation of women in America and I believe that to ignore its importance would be to do it great disservice. It is clear to me that the emboldening of women, culminating in the defiant stand leading to the Occoquan Workhouse atrocity is directly linked to the changing attitudes of, and towards, women as highlighted in the authors and texts I am discussing in this essay.

4. The rise of influential women writers in nineteenth-century America

It was not, however, only the women of the suffrage movement who were responsible for moving forward society's attitudes. Kimmel and Aronson tell us that during this period of social and economic change for women, a great number of highly influential and revolutionary women writers were beginning to attract admiration and attention for their work. Writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman began to take a harder and more critical stance on issues relating to women and their role in society. (Kimmel & Aronson, 2) It is true, as already discussed, that women were beginning to take a wider role in the workforce, but for some authors this was simply not enough. However, according to Schwimmer, for writers such as Gilman, it was more important for women to change their own identity and recognise the role of women in society as being different to the role of men, different but no less important. For her it was not simply a case of women gaining the vote and having better job opportunities and unionisation. She was concerned with the attitudes of society which were underlying these problems. (Schwimmer, 124)

4.1 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Women and Economics

The Gilman society tells us that Gilman was a widely read and celebrated author who self-published the *Forerunner* magazine, personally writing 186 short stories and essays for it. She also published 13 novels as well as various collections of poetry. Gilman was also involved in politics and social reform. As a delegate, she represented California at both the Suffrage Convention in Washington, D.C. and the International Socialist and Labour Congress which was held in England. She also worked as a lecturer and depended on her speeches as a source of income, she delivered around 90 lectures according to records, however this number could be greater. She became increasingly famous and was respected by other activists and feminist writers as one of the engineers of social change of the time. (Gilman Society)

Davis tells us one of Gilman's most celebrated works was her book *Women and Economics – A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*. Published in 1898, Charlotte Perkins Gilman claimed that economic independence was one of the answers to the problems facing women at the time. Its readers were surprised and interested by this approach. (Davis) One said, "Each of us was mulling away on her own little corner of the problem, with no idea that it could possibly be a path of light for our woes, until Mrs. Stetson [Gilman's maiden name] dared get it into print" (Knight in Davis). While one other concluded, "No woman, whatever her position or the conditions surrounding her, can read the book and not feel that the whole argument applies to herself and her concerns almost like a personal appeal" (Knight, in Davis).

4.2 Economic dependence and freedom

Gilman's fundamental theme in *Women and Economics* is fairly simple according to Hayden; as a result of generations of women having been economically dependent on their husbands for such a long time, they had become the male stereotype of femininity and less human, somehow less woman and more wife, upsetting, Gilman believed, evolution itself. The process would only reverse itself once all women learned to be independent and work for themselves, supporting their families and themselves. She claimed that when women achieved this, both they and men, would finally fulfil their human potential and purpose to the world's great benefit. She believed that once men and women viewed each other as being on an equal level, society could continue to constructively evolve. (Hayden, 117-119) If women could attain true economic independence and remove the need for men as financial support, men and women could focus on caring and loving relationships working together towards a greater family unit. While Knight reminds us that Gilman was a confirmed suffragist (Knight, 167), she did not believe that any progress could be made if men simply handed the vote to women. The progress women searched for was not measured only by a situation in which

suffrage was simply handed over like a gift, but “in the changes legal, social, mental and physical, which mark the advance of the mother of the world toward her full place.” (Gilman, in Knight)

Almost at the beginning of her novel, Gilman makes interesting comparison between humans and animals. She notes that of all the species in the world, it is only in humans that the females must depend on the male for food, a form of economic dependence,

In view of these facts, attention is now called to a certain marked and peculiar economic condition affecting the human race, and unparalleled in the organic world. We are the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which the sex-relation is also an economic relation. With us an entire sex lives in a relation of economic dependence upon the other sex, and the economic relation is combined with the sex-relation. The economic status of the human female is relative to the sex-relation. (Gilman 1966, 4)

The nature of this relationship requires women to earn their way in the world through what she describes as “sex-functions” (Gilman, 1966, 7) As pointed out by Ehrenreich and English this is not in reference to the physical act of sex, but rather a reference to women being forced to fulfil certain gender stereotypes of the time in order to earn their way of life. Gilman felt that women’s lives were almost exclusively controlled by men. These role distinctions based only on gender led to a negative balance and were harmful to men and women according to her. Gilman felt that since men had had power for such a long time then the contributions of women towards the progress of society had been largely ignored. This oppression of women on such a basic level was the main cause of women's growth being restricted, not simply economically but as an entire gender. (Ehrenreich & English, 346)

4.3 Women's new roles

Gilman strongly believed that women should still be the nurturers and educators in society. Hayden tells us Gilman's only complaint was that women were set in defined roles, roles that were seen as secondary in importance. She believed that women should be respected and the job roles they undertook should be equally respected by men. Her main argument in this respect, however, was that women should not be forced into these roles, and that women who desired a life outside of the domestic sphere should have the freedom and independence to do as they pleased and live their life their own way. Gilman praised the idea of women hiring domestic help so they would be free to engage in other activities. She visualised houses without kitchens and even went so far as to design and propose communal kitchens. The ultimate goal here was to aid women in balancing their private and professional lives. Thus enabling women to still be mothers but also develop a career, with the ultimate goal being Gilman's dream of women's complete economic independence. (Hayden, 172-173)

In this, I feel, exists a certain irony, as under Gilman's proposals the development of women in the workforce would have actually moved backwards. She was, in a way, suggesting that for women to have the opportunity to participate in the workforce to a greater degree, some women would have to work in these communal kitchens. The freedom of some would be sacrificed for the opportunities of others. It is not difficult to see a connection between this and the indentured servitude of previous generations, where women were employed to take care of the households of richer women.

Gilman stated her belief explicitly and forcefully that the changes she wanted should mean "better motherhood and fatherhood, better babyhood and childhood, better food, better homes, better society." (Gilman, 1966, 59) Kimmel and Aronson conclude however that her ideas on equality worked both ways. She was not simply hoping for women to change their cultural identities, but also for men to change as well, and subsequently society as a whole. If only women changed their attitudes no progress

would be made. Her goal, ultimately, was for a complete re-unification of men and women as equal and mutually supportive groups, not only the promotion of women's rights and women's development. (Kimmel & Aronson, 3)

Davis reminds us that it is certainly true that others had already made similar arguments, however few had stated the case with such clarity and persuasion. (Davis) Suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt considered *Women and Economics* to be an "immortal book on the status of women, [...] utterly revolutionizing the attitude of mind in the entire country, indeed of other countries, as to woman's place" (Knight, in Davis). At the time, Gilman was thought of as the most intelligent spokeswoman of the feminist movement and *Women and Economics* "the outstanding book on Feminism" (Schwimmer, in Davis).

5. Kate Chopin

Not all feminist writers of the time were as well received as Gilman. One writer in particular, Kate Chopin, was hated and eventually destroyed for her attempts to further the equality and rights of women during this difficult time. Kate Chopin was an American author of short stories and novels. Despite the critical reception which eventually destroyed her, she is now considered by many to have been a forerunner of the great feminist authors of the twentieth century. Between 1892 and 1899 she wrote many short stories as well as two major novels. And Koloski tells us that she was one of the few female writers of the time who did not need to write for financial reasons because her husband Oscar was the owner and manager of several plantations. However after his death in 1882, she was left with fairly significant debts and had to take over the running of the business herself. Something she managed with varying degrees of success for two years until she sold the business and moved back in with her mother. (Koloski, 21)

5.1 The Awakening

Published in 1899 her novel *The Awakening* caused huge controversy in America. It came at an interesting time, although it was possibly slightly ahead of its time, and this may have been the cause of her downfall. Women had begun to gain ground in the fight for suffrage, and more and more women were entering the workforce and earning alongside men. As such this seemed a perfect time for Chopin to publish her novel and introduce the revolutionary character of Edna Pontellier. The novel concerns the story of Edna, an unhappily married woman. Edna's husband spends large amounts of time away on business, so she is left at home to raise two children with whom she lacks any real emotional connection,

If one of the little Pontellier boys took a tumble whilst at play, he was not apt to rush crying to his mother's arms for comfort; he would more likely pick himself up, wipe the water out of his eyes, and sand out of his mouth, and go on playing...In short Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. (Chopin, 1984a, 50-51)

While her husband is away she begins to spend more and more time with Robert a man she eventually falls in love with. However, Robert's sudden departure leaves her surprisingly lonely, it is only after she accepts she is losing the man who gave hope to her lonely life that she really, truly reflects upon how strongly she had felt about him.

Robert's going had some way taken the brightness, the color, the meaning out of everything. The conditions of her life were in no way changed, but her whole existence was dulled, like a faded garment which seems to be no longer worth wearing. She sought him everywhere- in others whom induced to talk about him. (Chopin, 1984a, 95)

Chopin proceeds to dedicate a large portion of the book to Edna's feelings of loneliness and inability to find something to fill her life. Eventually Edna finds herself completely alone, with her husband once again away and her children being looked after by Leonce's mother. It is interesting to note, that Edna felt most lonely after Robert had left, even though she still had her family around her, it is only after they leave that she begins again to find some calm, "But after all, a radiant peace settled upon her when she at last found herself alone." (Chopin, 1984a, 125) Here Chopin is exploring the contradiction between being lonely and being alone. Edna is in fact sad when her husband leaves, and briefly considers joining him on his trip, but after his departure she forgets this idea quickly. Edna begins to be interested in and starts spending increasing amounts of time with Alcee Arobin, a young man of fashionable society. She initially rejects Arobin's subtle advances, but later on she regrets this as he begins to awaken feelings within her, she fantasises of something happening with Arobin,

She wanted something to happen- something, anything; she did not know what[...]But there was nothing else to do, so she went to bed, and tossed there for hours in a sort of monotonous agitation. (Chopin, 1984a, 129)

Edna eventually becomes intimate with Arobin, although Chopin shows us that it is he, rather than her, who pushes the affair forward. She seems reluctant even when he makes an advance on her, although it is clear she desires him.

He stood close to her, and the effrontery of his eyes repelled the old, vanishing self in her, yet drew all her awakening sensuousness, he saw enough in her face to impel him to take her hand and hold it while he said his lingering goodnight. (Chopin, 1984a, 131)

Edna refuses to act on her desires and asks him to leave, "My manner must have misled you in some way. I wish you to go, please." (Chopin, 1984a, 131) However Chopin makes it clear to us that Edna's words and actions lack substance and strength, despite not giving in to her physical desire, she knows that she wishes she could, "She

felt that her words lacked dignity and sincerity, and she knew that he felt it.” (Chopin, 1984a, 131) Edna goes on to discover Robert's love for her through an exchange of letters between Robert and Mademoiselle Reisz, but when he suddenly returns he chooses to avoid her. Robert, despite his love for her, refuses to break up her marriage and instead leaves her again. Edna now realises she has no place in the world and goes to the sea, apparently, although not explicitly, committing suicide. Robert refuses to outwardly break the codes and conventions of the society around him, he loves this woman, but knows that maintaining the sanctity of marriage is more important than his own desires. In this way he represents a counterpoint to Edna. She has the same feelings for him and is distraught and lost when he sticks to the codes which have so repressed her during her life.

5.2 Controversy and sexuality

To the modern reader the controversy surrounding the sexual nature of Chopin's book must seem strange. However, it is important to realise that the complaints levelled at the book relating to immorality were the result of a woman giving in to her physical feelings and not honouring her husband above all. Women at that time in a very puritanical America were not under any circumstances seen as sexual creatures, rather as wives, mothers and saints. Sex with husbands was for reproduction and duty, a duty which was not to be discussed. Even if women did not enjoy sex with their husbands they were expected to suffer in silence, as the idea of women seeking or revelling in the passion and pleasure of a sexual encounter went against the strict moral codes of the day. Even other writers at the time were shocked by Chopin's depiction of a woman outwardly displaying her sexual and physical desires. Edna broke social conventions by choosing to explore her sexuality and leave her husband, so she could pursue an affair. Chopin takes a neutral, non-judgemental stance throughout the novel and, it would seem, even celebrates Edna's unconventional actions. Culley describes how Kate Chopin, whose novel was thought lost until its rediscovery in the nineteen-sixties, was

forced out of society and her career destroyed. (Culley, in Jones) And that The Awakening was found again by chance and is now seen by theorists as describing a character who is the benchmark of an early feminist. Edna is removed from her time and views marriage contemptuously, and she regards weddings as “one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth“ (Chopin, 1984a, 73) she revels in her own sexuality, and aims to become socially, financially and spiritually independent of her husband.

5.3 Chopin's America and denying gender roles

Kate Chopin's America had very specifically defined ideas of what it was to be a woman. According to the expectations of the time, women were supposed to be subservient, domestic creatures, whose ultimate purpose was to be wives and mothers. Chopin's *The Awakening* and Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* show, in their own ways, two women who reject these defined roles, and, consequently, suffer from their decisions. The husbands of these women are shown to be the root cause of these women's problems. In the opening chapter of *The Awakening*, Edna's husband tells her off for not being a good mother and for raising the children badly. Edna's initial response is to cry, but after her initial emotional outburst, she shows strong defiance, refusing to accede to her husband's orders. As she becomes increasingly aware of her husband's oppression she is eventually led into an affair and ultimately suicide. Her husband is not shown to be a monster in himself, but rather a product of social expectations of the time. He is not oppressing his wife out of malice, he is simply following social conventions of the time and believes his wife should do the same. Edna herself cannot solely blame her husband, she also recognises that it is society she is railing against, but the husband in front of her is the face of this oppression to her, so it is him who must bear the brunt of her condemnation. At one point she questions whether or not she is truly the evil party in this situation, but cannot accept that her feelings are entirely wrong.

“By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can't convince myself that I am.” (Chopin, 1984a, 91)

She is still bound by the society which has created her, and recognises that by societies standards she is wrong, but refuses to feel guilty about the feelings which come so naturally to her.

5.4 Marriage as a social oppression

Chopin described Edna's life as being miserable, her husband being the chief cause of blame for this. She describes the sadness she feels as an, “indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, [and] filled her whole being with a vague anguish” (Chopin, 1984a, 89). This oppressive feeling, as stated, is related not only to her husband but the dull and restricted life she feels is in front of her. Edna is nothing but an object, a possession to Leonce, her husband, he owns her and expects her, without question fulfil the confining roles it she been given. She angers him through her “habitual neglect” (Chopin, 1984a, 91) of the children, and he chastises her for it. At one point he notices his wife has stayed too long in the sun, and Chopin tells us he “looked at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property that has suffered some damage” (Chopin, 1984a, 44). This shows quite clearly how Chopin viewed women's position in society. Women were property and expected to fulfil the roles which men deemed necessary for them. Koloski points out that Edna's struggle against this oppression is what made her such a controversial character. (Koloski, 21)

Edna's rebellion against the confining qualities of her marriage, and the misery it brings her, can also be seen in another short story by Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a short story first published in January 1892 in *The New England Magazine*. It is probably one of Gilman's most famous and most studied works. It concerns an

unnamed protagonist who is confined to an upstairs bedroom by her husband John. During this time her lack of stimulus drives her descent into madness. This physical confinement exists as a metaphor for the psychological confinement Gilman believed marriage enforced upon women. *The Yellow Wallpaper* shows how damaging a bad marriage, and the resulting lack of communication and mutual understanding between a man and woman, can be. Knight writes that since the protagonist finds no happiness in neither being married nor being a mother, she violates the strictly held code of womanhood, and is therefore diagnosed with a psychological disorder, a medical deficiency of some kind, and sentenced to subservience. (Knight, 122) Here, as with Edna in *The Awakening*, we have a woman yearning to break the shackles placed upon her. Edna in particular is strongly against the archetype of society's 'woman'. In one exchange with Robert she says:

“I suppose this is what you would call unwomanly; but I have got into the habit of expressing myself. It doesn't matter to me, and you may think me unwomanly if you like.” (Chopin, 1984a, 117)

This outburst tells us how Edna perceives the way in which people will view her and her willingness to show her refusal to submit to the role society wants to force her into. Culley states that the novel is an account of Edna's awakening to the reality of her situation, an account of her quest to discover herself; and ultimately the moment when she begins to accept and explore all her repressed desires. (Culley, 134)

5.5 Critical reception

Edna Pontellier cannot simply be seen or regarded as bad or wrong, either in her actions or morals. To make such an assumption is to over simplify the importance of this character and her actions. Despite making such a marked departure from previous novels and characterisations of women, she was required to exist for women to move forward. The shock society felt at reading the tale of Edna was one of the catalysts

which opened society's eyes. To create something new the old moulds first had to be broken, people had to be shocked into action and eventual change. Edna Pontellier was a perfect representation of the changing attitudes towards, and opinion of, women at the end of the nineteenth century. Edna Pontellier was suffocated by the puritanical oppression which surrounded her and her fellow women. She was a symbol for all the social ideals which women of that time were working towards. Sprinkle references Toth in claiming that since Chopin had previously gained success as an author, it seemed to suggest that *The Awakening* would be very successful. Shortly before it was published, Lucy Monroe reviewed it for Book News. The review describes *The Awakening* as being "remarkable" while Monroe personally considered it to be "subtle and a brilliant kind of art" (Toth, in Sprinkle). While also saying that *The Awakening* is "so keen in its analysis of character, so subtle in its presentation of emotional effects that it seems to reveal life as well as represent it" (Toth, in Sprinkle). However, this would be one of the few positive reviews the novel would receive. (Sprinkle)

Sprinkle tells us that during the weeks following its release, critics criticised and hated Chopin's novel. Despite the increasing strength of the women's movement, both Chopin and her novel were attacked by a series of negative reviews. The vast majority of those who wrote about *The Awakening* described it as being disgusting, against religion and a waste of Chopin's skill as a writer. The main criticism aimed at the novel was that it celebrated women's sexuality. Chopin saw women's freedoms as more than just something economic, she believed, as Gilman, that women needed to be treated as equal to men as a member of the human race. This extended to women gaining sexual independence as well as economic and social. Critics attempted to reduce Chopin's work to the level of base pornography. (Sprinkle) With one reviewer being furious that a writer of Chopin's talent would degrade herself by turning to "the overworked field of sex fiction" (Seyersted, in Sprinkle).

Sprinkle goes on to say that a few critics did sometimes print a less than wholly negative review. Although these critics didn't outwardly condemn the novel, they didn't have anything positive to say about its message or theme either. Their comments were

focused on analysis from the literary point of view, while ignoring the essential message of the novel. (Sprinkle) For example, the Book Buyer magazine said it "is said to be analytical and fine-spun, and of peculiar interest to women" (Toth, in Sprinkle). While a St. Louis Republic reviewer described it as " the work of an artist who can suggest more than one side of her subject with a single line" (Toth, in Sprinkle). Sprinkle points out it was Charles L. Deyo who provided one of the few positive reviews, probably the only favourable review by a man at the time, although this is hard to verify due to the controversy that surrounded the book. (Sprinkle) He praised Chopin's style and found that Edna was merely a victim of her own female ignorance. In the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* he wrote:

It is not a tragedy, for it lacks the high motive of tragedy. The woman, not quite brave enough, declines to a lower plane and does not commit a sin ennobled by love. But it is terribly tragic. Compassion, not pity, is excited, for pity is for those who sin, and Edna Pontellier only offended--weakly, passively, vainly offended. (Culley, in Sprinkle)

This in itself is not a particularly positive review and seems to highlight one of the main problems facing women at the time; the attitude of men. Even in this one positive review woman is pitied for her ignorance and her femininity is seen as not only a weakness but a social evil. Gilman was so celebrated as she sought to keep women as mothers and wives, although with the chance to work if they wished, but to also be respected as an important member of the human race, on whom men equally depend in different ways. However for Chopin, according to Toth, despite the social changes happening at the time, people in America, especially in the still male dominated media, were simply not ready to face the social and moral implications of the situation Chopin was describing. (Toth, in Sprinkle)

Culley describes the reaction of various reviewers upon the release of *The Awakening*, with the May 13, 1899, edition of the *Daily Globe-Democrat* calling Edna's suicide "a prayer for deliverance from the evils that beset her, all of her own creating"

(Culley, in Sprinkle). Sprinkle goes on to point out that the strong and restrictive religious beliefs of the time were among the greatest challenges women faced. The expectations of women in society stemmed from the puritanical dogmas of the colonial era. While the Catholic church, as previously discussed, were actively against the political movement fighting for suffrage, religion was also restricting women physically, emotionally and spiritually. (Sprinkle)

5.6 Changing representations of women

Emma Jones draws an interesting comparison between Edna Pontellier and Hester Prynne from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Although Hawthorne's novel is based in the eighteenth century it was written in the nineteenth century, and is therefore useful as a way to look at the changing representation of women during this time. Edna and Hester are very similar, in that they both are 'guilty' of exploring their sexuality outside of marriage. Hester engages in an affair with Reverend Dimmesdale and is forced to wear a red 'A' on her clothing, marking her as an adulteress. Hester endures the hatred and condemnation of the people around her with an almost saintly demeanour, and is eventually forgiven for being wronged. (Jones)

Jones points out that an interesting difference exists in the representations of Hester and Edna as mothers. Edna claims to love her children, but for much of the novel they are little more than a burden to her. She neglects them constantly and leaves them in the care of others so she can spend time with Robert. (Jones) She states that she would give up everything for her children except herself, the idea of abandoning her own freedom for the sake of her children is incredibly shocking to her:

“I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me.”
(Chopin, in Jones)

Jones goes on to say that Edna clearly cares more about being Edna the woman than she does about being Edna the mother. Her actions here are selfish, in the truest definition of the word, as she refuses to sacrifice her own happiness for her children. When this is juxtaposed with the maternal nature of Hester a true contrast is revealed. Hester loves her child dearly and without question and would do anything for her. Even though her daughter's puckish nature brings Hester many problems, she continues to put her daughter first in all respects. Hester works as a seamstress and does her best to give her daughter the best clothing she can, (Jones) for example:

Her own dress was of the coarsest materials and the most sombre hue; with only that one ornament, the scarlet letter, which it was her doom to wear. The child's attire, on the other hand, was distinguished by a fanciful, or, we may rather say, a fantastic ingenuity, which served, indeed, to heighten the airy charm that early began to develop itself in the little girl. (Hawthorne, in Jones)

So, Jones continues, even though Hester dresses as plainly as possible to somehow regain her reputation, she insists on the best for her daughter. This love can be seen again when the issue of her daughter being taken away is raised (Jones):

“Speak thou for me!” cried she. “Thou wast my pastor, and hadst charge of my soul, and knowest me better than these men can. I will not lose the child! Speak for me! Thou knowest, - for thou hast sympathies which these men lack! - thou knowest what is in my heart, and what are a mother's rights, and how much the stronger they are, when that mother has but her child and the scarlet letter! Look thou to it! I will not lose the child! Look to it!” (Hawthorne, in Jones)

When we look at this speech, according to Jones, we can see a vast difference between Edna's willingness to hand her children over to others so she may be free and Hester's desperation at the thought of her daughter being removed from her care. Hester believed that society needed to change, she claims, "the whole of society is to be torn down, and built up a new [. . .] before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position." (Hawthorne, in Jones) However, she knows that her role as a mother is more important and fears losing her daughter as a result of her revolutionary thoughts. A few years later however, Chopin gives us a character for whom the need to change the social injustice around her becomes even stronger than her love for her children. She is willing to give up everything, eventually her own life to break free of the shackles of society. Jones finishes by telling us that through these characters, written at different times in the nineteenth century, we see the way in which authors were becoming increasingly daring in their portrayal of female characters who acknowledged the injustices around them and sought to change their lives. Chopin went too far, leading to her being ostracised, but the evolution is noteworthy. (Jones)

6. Benigna Machiavelli – a new type of heroine

Charlotte Perkins Gilman is most famous for her two books *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*. I have chosen to write about one of her less known novels, *Benigna Machiavelli*, as it is a perfect representation of the struggle women faced at the time, as well as being a wonderfully written story in its own right. I was first introduced to the book by Mgr. Šárka Bubíková, Ph.D., my diploma thesis supervisor, to whom I must show great appreciation as without her advice I might have never discovered this novel. The novel itself highlights women's struggles in a very positive way, showing us that women had the key to their emancipation and knew what needed to be done, the only problem being that men still held the reins. Gilman shows us a modern and empowered young woman who finds salvation for herself and those around her without abandoning her femininity. Unfortunately, for the purposes of this

paper *Benigna Machiavelli* proved to be complicated as very few people have written anything about this masterpiece. Most work on Gilman focuses on either of the other two aforementioned texts, with *The Yellow Wallpaper* being a particular favourite amongst scholars. It even proved difficult to obtain a copy of the text as it is currently listed as being out of print and only used copies or library editions are available, fortunately Mgr. Bubíková Ph.D. brought it from America and therefore it was available in the University library. This lack of easy availability is a marked loss to the literary world as this remarkable book deserves a much wider readership. Due to the lack of available critique and analysis of *Benigna Machiavelli*, my analysis of it is almost entirely personal with very little reference to other works or papers. Despite this being the most challenging part of writing this paper, I found it to be the most satisfying. While I harbour no illusions that my critique is of the same quality and level as that of the highly respected scholars and writers I have referenced in connection to the other texts I have discussed, I do hope, and believe, that it shows my interest in, and understanding of, this neglected masterpiece of feminist literature.

Originally published in the *Forerunner* between 1914 and 1915, *Benigna Machiavelli* highlights women's struggle for independence. Benigna, the heroine, skillfully plays the role of the loving daughter, sister, friend, and at the same time, she assumes leadership positions inside and outside of her home. She is a liberated, accomplished girl that chooses her own fate. Though she thinks about herself as about an ordinary girl, she wishes to be "a good villain," (Gilman, 1994, 13) a desire that runs counter to the traditional image of women in the nineteenth century. Following a calculated plan, she manages to save both her sister, Peggy, and her mother from her father's tyrannical regime. First, she helps Peggy break up with her boyfriend Ned, a womaniser, and then, she guides her own father to take an interest in his homeland of Scotland. This new-found interest in his ancestors prevents him from continually interfering in the affairs of his nuclear family. While he is in Scotland, Benigna helps her mother take a much needed rest to cure the depression caused by his violent

behaviour. She also invites Peggy, the family housekeeper, Alison, and her neighbours to open up a boarding house in her home.

In the beginning of the story, Benigna explains why she aspires to be a villain. “A good villain. That's what we need!” (Gilman, 1994, 13) Unlike conventional heroines, who practice patience and modesty, she wants to work with her intellect. Benigna is an intelligent, almost precocious, child who has a great passion for reading, especially fairy tales. Throughout the text she is often berated by her father and other men around her for being lost in her fantasy world of books. Mr. Cutter is one of the most outwardly critical, although not in anger. “‘My dear little girl,’ he said to me, ‘a child has no right to criticize her parents. You read too many story books with that active brain of yours.’” (Gilman, 1994, 35) However it is from this world of books that she finds her inspiration to do good for those around her and become independent in the process. This is an interesting contrast to the things girls usually learned from books. Bubíková comments on the traditional role of books in the lives, and education, of young girls in America at that time by saying, that through reading girls learned about the ideal of the woman as a mother and protector of the family. (Bubíková, 59, my translation) Part of this can be seen in the character of Benigna as she does indeed become the protector and nurturer, the guiding hand for her families fortunes. However she works in direct contrast to the ideal of women simply becoming a mother. This shows Gilman's philosophy, as she believed that women should grow, but not completely turn their backs on all of the established order. While the idea of choosing to be “a good villain“(Gilman, 1994, 13) is fairly original, Benigna is by no means the only child in literature of this period who chooses to help her parents improve their life. Bubíková also quotes the literary historian Anne Scott MacLeod, who says that a feature of literature of the time was that good children sometimes led adults to a better life. (Bubíková, 35, my translation) Benigna can be seen as a perfect example of this, despite the fact she chooses to see herself as the villain, albeit the good villain.

Benigna seems to have a certain level of contempt for the traditional heroes and heroines of the stories she reads, she says at one point, “The heroes and middle ones

were mostly very stupid.” (Gilman, 1994, 12) She views the villains in the stories as being the only ones who actually use their brain, hatch plots and generally consider their plans. She decides that the only way forward, the only way to really have a chance of changing anything, is to use the intellectual qualities of these villains, but for good.

I learned a lot, when I was a child, from novels and stories, even fairy stories have some point to them- the good ones. The thing that impressed me most forceably was this: The villains always went to work with their brains and accomplished something. To be sure they were 'foiled' in the end, but that was by some special interposition of Providence, not by any equal exertion of intellect on the part of the good people[...]If bad things happened, they practised patience, endurance, resignation, and similar virtues; if good things happened they practised modesty and magnanimity and virtues like that, but it never seemed to occur to any of them to make things move their way. Whatever the villains planned for them to do, they did, like sheep. (Gilman, 1994, 12)

This foreshadows for many of her actions later in the story as she expresses all of the virtues she describes, combined with the calculated intellectual scheming of the villains. Her reference to sheep is of interest here, as one of the major themes of the text is obviously women breaking the traditional yoke they found themselves labouring under. For her to achieve all she achieves she must break the conventions she is surrounded by and not simply follow along with the rest of the herd. She believes that a good villain is a character that will bring luck to everyone and will break the conventional boundaries that limit women's lives.

6.1 The influence of literature on Benigna

Mr. Cutter's contempt of her obsession with books is hard to understand. While on one hand telling her that she should not spend so much time reading he, on the other hand, insists that she spends more time with her studies. He seems to be angry at her for having an “active brain” (Gilman, 1994, 35) and goes on to tell her that, “your business

is to study your lessons and obey your parents.” (Gilman, 1994, 35) Thus Gilman is taking a blatant stab at the expectations of intelligent and educated young women. While women were expected to learn and study and be intelligent and so be good assets to their future husbands, they should not under any circumstances think. Gilman was a strong believer in women's ability to use their intellect for financial independence, as shown earlier, in *Women and Economics*. Now it seems clear that she also considered women's intellectual independence as highly important. This expectation that women should not have an active brain was obviously of great offence to her, herself an educated, free-thinking woman. The power of reading to influence the thinking of women was obviously a theme of great importance to Gilman, we can see a similar theme occurring again in *The Crux*, also by Gilman but published 4 years earlier than *Benigna Machiavelli* in 1910. In *The Crux* Gilman shows us an exchange between Mr. Williams and Vivian, the main character of the story, in which they are discussing reading and the duty of daughters. Gilman writes,

“My dear young lady, you are not reading books of which your parents disapprove, I hope?” urged the minister.

‘Shouldn't I ever?’ asked the girl [Vivian] in her soft, disarming manner. ‘I'm surely old enough!’

‘The duty of a daughter is not measured by years,’ he replied sonorously. ‘Does parental duty cease? Are you not yet a child in your father's house?’

‘Is a daughter always a child if she lives at home?’ inquired the girl, as one seeking instruction.

He set down his cup and wiped his lips, flushing somewhat.

‘The duty of a daughter begins at the age when she can understand the distinction between right and wrong,’ he said, ‘and continues as long as she is blessed with parents.’

‘And what is it?’ she asked, large-eyed, attentive.

‘What is it?’ he repeated, looking at her in some surprise. ‘It is submission, obedience-obedience.’” (Gilman, 2003, 46)

The influence of books, especially fairy tales, on Benigna's thinking can also be seen in the way she tries to think of a plan to free herself, her mother and her sister from her father.

“Now suppose he were a Giant or an Ogre- and had us-what could I do to outwit him?’ Or ‘Suppose he were an Enemy, and had us in prison, or enslaved. What could I do for mother and Peggy?’ Opposition was out of the question, or Conquest, or Escape.” (Gilman, 1994, 35)

She talks first about outwitting him, and concludes that any form of confrontation is certainly not the answer. The imagery she uses here shows us her opinion of the conditions in which women and children lived under the patriarchal system of the time. She references her father to fairy- tale monsters, and looks at women being in a position of enslavement or imprisonment. She goes on to conclude, “Wives and children can't escape, it appears. I tried think that out, but I gave it up. (Gilman, 1994, 35)

6.2 MacAvelly and Machiavelli – the importance of a name and an identity

Benigna is proud of her paternal grandmother’s family name Machiavelli. Benigna's real name is MacAvelly, highlighting her Scottish heritage, but she feels more in common with her Italian grandmother’s side of the family,

That's where I come in. I'm a Machiavelli, and proud of it. The Scotch name I have to wear outside, like a sort of raincoat, but my real name I always feel is Machiavelli, Benigna Machiavelli. I mean never to marry and change it. (Gilman, 1994, 16)

This is the first indication in the story of Gilman's feelings that through marriage, women lose a certain measure of identity. Benigna has no desire to lose her individuality that she is so proud of, even if this means never marrying. To her the

feeling she gets from her connection to her name and her grandmother's side of the family is worth more than she would gain through a husband. Gilman's choice of the name Machiavelli is essential to the story. Machiavelli's most famous work *The Prince* describes the possibility of a "new prince", moving away from the traditional ideas and traditions of a hereditary prince. The main point of his novel is that the hereditary prince must carefully maintain the social and political structures which people are used to living in, to retain power and favour. However, for a new prince to rule he must first find a way to create stability in his position as ruler, this is the only way to build an enduring political system. Machiavelli argues that this would require the prince to be willing to act immorally, deceitfully and occasionally forcefully. In line with Machiavelli's philosophies Benigna acts deceitfully, realizing confrontation and force are not options available to her, and outside of the boundaries of the expectations laid upon her to seize power over her surroundings. It is easy to find a connection here between men, the hereditary princes, and women the 'new princes'. Gilman is arguing that for men to retain power in society they must maintain the old prejudices and restrictions, and it is only through women that a new order can be established. Men can never achieve this as they are implicit in the problem, only intelligent, free-thinking women can have any chance of changing their role in society. However, it must be done through intelligence, deceit and manipulation as brute force is not a viable solution in this matter.

6.3 Hardwork, intellect and forward-planning as a key to women's Access

Benigna is an ambitious child, she has dreams for the future and is constantly setting herself goals. Many of her aspirations sit within the realms of the conventional role of women. She does not desire to reach too far outside of the established job roles that women took at the time, but her ultimate goal is business, she desires financial independence. She is aware that she must start at the bottom, but even with this she sees an incredible sense of freedom and independence,

It was easy to see that I must do the lowest grade things first, pile up such experiences quickly and other names, and go on to the larger ones. I should have to cut loose from home altogether, that was clear. I could go to a distant city, have a settled address, and write such letters as I choose-meanwhile doing things. (Gilman, 1994, 159)

Here we can see the hard-working entrepreneurship not commonly associated with women at the time. Benigna is committed to her goals and is happy to do anything to achieve them. It is interesting to note her comment that she must, “cut loose from home altogether.” (Gilman, 1994, 159) This could be interpreted as physically moving out into the world on her own, leaving the world she knows and travelling away to forge a new identity for herself. Or this could be viewed as her cutting the domestic part of her life away to find success. Gilman was critical of women who gave up their family lives entirely to be successful, believing instead that women should strive to find balance, and here Benigna is implying that she must give up her home, or possibly even the very notion of home to find what she is looking for. However, Benigna seems to overlook the loss of her family and childhood, all things connected with the word home, instead focusing on the ability she would have to do all the things she chooses.

6.4 Possibilities for work and employment

Benigna is extremely focused in her planning of the future. She draws up a list of occupations she is interested in having at various points in her life. She strongly equates age and wisdom with success and organises her list of jobs based on her age and hoped for standing. She also shows how excited and impatient she is to reach the age of fifty, an age with which she correlates the best and most exciting jobs of her life.

I got a census list of Occupations and marked in red all the ones I'd really like to try. There were a lot. Then I put the the difficult and highly skilled well in toward the middle- things I'd like to do when I was thirty, when I was forty, when I was fifty- it was tremendously exciting to put things down on the fifty line. (Gilman, 1994, 158)

Her use of a census list shows us that Gilman was aware that even women as progressive as Benigna still had to work within the confines of women's position in society. Gilman was not expecting women to suddenly be able to fulfil all the job roles and positions typical of men, however hard they worked or intelligent they were. It also sends the message that success for women at the time was not something fantastical, it was wholly achievable. Although Benigna ultimately aims for very high positions, there is still a certain reality in her desires, these were jobs that women could and did have at the time, albeit only the most successful ones, "There was College President, Position in the City Government, Owner of a System of Hotels, Head of a Great School, Manufacturer with Model Factories- things like that." (Gilman, 1994, 158) Benigna is very aware and comfortable with the fact that no-one will hand these high positions to her, and, considering the position of women at the time, she would have to work from the bottom, learning and proving herself at every step, "I had arranged the successive smaller undertakings by which I proposed to lead up to the big ones." (Gilman, 1994, 158) Gilman also makes it very clear that it was necessary for women to work within the areas typical of women at the time, there was no option for them to simply be treated as men and given the same opportunities, they had to follow the set path to some extent, even if they were manoeuvring their way out of and above the system in the process. The jobs Benigna eventually has during her time travelling, clearly reflect a range of the typical jobs available to women at the time, based on the historical evidence discussed earlier in this paper,

Long before that first year was up I had some practical inside knowledge of nine trades, and a week-to-week trial of a dozen more. I had been a waitress in a cheap restaurant, a chambermaid in a hotel, a salesperson, a cap-maker, a neck-tie maker, a skirt worker, a box-maker, a typist and stenographer, and a nurse-besides a lot of mere investigating experiments. (Gilman, 1994, 163)

Gilman, through Benigna, does not look on any of these jobs contemptuously, she acknowledges that women at the time had to be occupied with certain professions. The main focus for her is not to radically change the types of jobs women held, but rather for women to become financially independent and respected while doing them. The most important thing was for women to take the opportunity to better themselves, learn and gain independence, even if it meant continuing to work in stereotypical job roles. In this way I feel that Gilman was very realistic in the suggestions she was offering to women. She was not trying to change or completely destroy the established system, she was simply trying to promote the rights and opportunities of women within the given system. An evolution rather than a revolution.

6.5 Dreams of an increased social position

Benigna plans her life backwards, first concerning herself with what she wants to be able to have around her when she is older, “Age. What do I want to have about me and behind me, when I am old?” (Gilman, 1994, 155) Benigna has firm ideas about the situation she wants to be in when she is older, she draws up a list of the things which will be most important to her when she is old. The list is simple and sensible, she requires health, money, a home, friends, languages and to grow. Ultimately, though, she wishes to be a good and respected person, one known for her ability to help and give good intelligent advice,

"I wanted above all things to be a *worthy* person. To be a plus and not a minus. Not to spend my days wanting things and hanging on to people, and being hurt or pleased or disappointed by the things they did. I wanted to be a *wise* person- wise and able. One that other folks would come to for advice and help, and not be disappointed. Sort of, 'Oh, we'll ask Benigna Machiavelli- she'll tell us!'" (Gilman, 1994, 156)

Even in her ideas of looking back over a successful life she is still aware of the restraints placed upon women. She sees that money, her own not that of her husband, is of critical importance to the way she is looked at in later life. Her view of money is made very clear, “I shall have my own money, and enough of it, I determined, 'married or single.’” (Gilman, 1994, 155) She draws comparison between grandfathers and grandmothers, and obviously feels some contempt at the traditional role of a grandmother, not wanting to fall into this situation herself,

[...]any old person has to have some money. If they haven't, they're just poor relations, and are put upon. Of course the old men generally do, but the old women generally don't. A grandpa is a person to be considered on account of what he may give you-before or after; but a grandma is only to be considered according to whether you love her or not, apparently. (Gilman, 1994, 155)

There exists here a certain irony as Benigna herself uses her grandfather to provide her with the opportunities she seeks. She goes to him for help, asking him to find her a position in an office through some of his business connections. She fairly callously claims, “Grandpa would do as a sort of springboard.” (Gilman, 1994, 152) This exposes a certain ruthlessness in her ambition, which is not as evident throughout the rest of the novel, where she appears to be generally benevolent. The problem for Benigna is that intellect, planning and manipulation can only get her so far, and she needs the help of a man to get her started in the world she desires to be a part of. Her grandfather, while initially reticent to help her, is surprisingly supportive, having a certain respect for all her talents and achievements. “Grandpa was not so old-fashioned but that he could see the sense of this idea (her moving away to learn) [...]Grandpa hemmed and hawed a good deal, but he came around, he had a good opinion of my abilities, you see, and a great respect for business training.” (Gilman, 1994, 159) However, despite him being fairly supportive, and respectful of his grand-daughter, she still has to appeal to him in terms of her being a boy, explaining in careful detail why a young woman could possibly need such training and experience,

“Don't you think a girl ought to have some real knowledge of business' I asked him. 'No matter what happens to her? Now I wish you'd help me in this, Grandpa; I want to get a position in a business office. Not here where anybody'd know me, but in a Western city. I want to board and work by myself for a while-I think it will do me good. Won't you make believe I'm a boy, Grandpa, and help me get a place, with some firm you know about, perhaps? I'd like to take the first with your knowledge and advice.” (Gilman, 1994, 159)

Due to the position of women in society at the time, Benigna is forced to appeal to him in a very subservient way. She knows what she wants, but must promise him that her decision will be based on his “knowledge and advice” (Gilman, 1994, 159) In the above quotation her repetition of Grandpa is also notable. She is talking to him as a small girl would when asking for a sweet, this can easily be seen as Benigna using her femininity to exploit men for her own devices. Something which connects very strongly with the main theme in the story, of women using the skills and abilities they have acquired to advance in the world, that Gilman has made so pronounced throughout the whole novel.

6.6 Benigna and marriage

She is adamant still that her life will not revolve around a man, “‘Here is a lifetime, ' I said solemnly. 'I will lay it out as if I were not to marry- that's safest.” (Gilman, 1994, 155) She is not entirely against the idea of marriage, but does recognise that it would be the end of her ability to grow and learn. She confides in her grandfather her reasons for wanting to move out into the world and learn,

“‘You see dear Grandfather, ' I'd tell him, just as fully and courteously as if it was necessary, 'I am not doing this beacuse I have to, but to gain knowledge first-hand, it hard for a woman to get this. After marriage I should have no chance for such attempts- now it is my time to learn.” (Gilman, 1994, 162)

Marriage is shown as restrictive, Benigna does not hate the institution, but she is wary of its ability to remove her freedoms. She does not even make any moves or suggestions to change marriage, she simply accepts that if she wants to be independent and learn all these things she must, for now, do it without a man. The final line in the above quotation could be seen as Gilman's message to all women. The changes happening in society at the time of the books publishing, and Gilman's belief that women using their intellects was key, seem to concur nicely with the above statement. Marriage as a restrictive entity, one that women were duty bound towards was a key theme for Gilman. Gilman touches upon this theme in *The Crux*, when Vivian confronts her parents about her desire to attend college to become a doctor. Interestingly it is both her mother and father who criticise their daughter's wish, although her mother with much less conviction, with an under-the-breath comment which could be seen as her speaking simply out of duty and expectation. Gilman writes,

“ I know one girl that won't (in response to Vivian's request to go away to college),' was her father's incisive comment, and her mother said quietly, 'A girl's place is at home-'till she marries.'

'Suppose I don't want to marry?' said Vivian,

'Don't talk nonsense,' her father answered. 'Marriage is a woman's duty.'” (Gilman, 2003, 30)

As with most of Gilman's criticisms of women's position in society of the time, it is the duty bound nature of marriage she objects to, the fact that for women it was a pre-determined fate, which left no room for free-will.

7. Comparison of *The Awakening* and *Benigna Machiavelli*

A comparison between Gilman's *Benigna Machiavelli* and Chopin's *The Awakening* may at first appear an unusual choice. Upon initial reading the two main characters seem incomparable. Edna and Benigna are of a different age, social standing, and

marital status. However, I feel that the spirit Gilman and Chopin have injected into their characters highlights the problematic nature of women's position and prospects at the time. Both Chopin and Gilman had different views and experiences of being a woman in late nineteenth century America, and these two characters are their attempts to present their feelings and ideas to a wider audience. This is what makes the differences in the two characters key to understanding how these writers felt, and what they felt was possible for women to achieve, and how they could achieve it. So while it may at first seem impossible to draw comparison between these two stories, it is in fact the differences which make it so possible and so interesting. The contrast between Chopin and Gilman in relation to the position of women in society also helps us to understand that the fight for and move towards women's liberation was a far more complicated and multifaceted issue than it may appear on the surface.

7.1 Marriage and married life

The difference in age and marital status between the two characters does make it impossible to make a direct comparison in relation to certain aspects of their lives, when you look at the whole text however it becomes apparent that other characters fulfil these roles, allowing us to gain a complete picture. Marriage and married life was one of the major issues that feminist writers of the time were concerned with. It was not so much the institution of marriage, as it was the restrictions marriage placed upon women at the time. In a way it was not the idea of marriage, but society's interpretation of marriage which was the real problem. Both Edna and Leonce and Benigna's parents are unhappily married. Benigna's father feels confined by his status as the head of the household, and her mother must endure his drunken and violent behaviour as a result of his insecurities. He never seeks to leave the marriage, just as he is never shown to seek the company of other women, he simply endures his misery, drinking to dull the pain. Her mother deals with him the best she can, although this means she is reduced to a life of passivity, simply enduring but not finding any happiness. Gilman is showing here

that even though men were placed by society as heads of families and households, it did not mean that they either relished the responsibility, or that they were good at it. Gilman's desire to change the nature of families extends, as previously mentioned, not just to changing women's roles and attitudes, but also men's. Therefore it is clear to see why she has included the character of a man who actually does not want the position he is forced into by society. Their whole marriage and family situation is shown to be a façade, serene on the surface yet rotten at its core. As Benigna states,

[...] and as to his treatment of us, well I guess I didn't make it clear. People didn't know he drank either, and they thought he was a 'good family man' because he stayed at home evenings. And as he didn't beat us until we screamed, nobody knew what we suffered. (Gilman, 1994, 35)

7.2 The family unit – roles and rights

Gilman is critical of the idea of the family which was so strong at the time. As long as people fulfilled their assigned roles, doing as society expected them to, everything would be perfect. This is of course not true, and through this dysfunctional family Gilman is explicitly showing us her opinion that families needed to be more than simply an ideal to work, they had to be based on love and mutual respect and support. It could not be expected that either men or women could simply be forced into a role and it would subsequently function as required. In contrast to this is the situation of Leonce and Edna. While they are also in an unhappy marriage, they deal with it in very different ways. Chopin shows nothing to be wrong with the marriage, except for the fact that they are unhappy. Leonce is a good and loving father whose only failing is that he is often away on business for extended periods of time. Edna is a seemingly uncaring mother who is lonely and feels oppressed. The main tension in the marriage comes from the fact that Leonce fulfils his duties with patience and attention, and he expects Edna to do the same. Leonce does not question his role, he simply carries it out to the best of his abilities, whereas Edna feels that the role she is forced into defines her in a way she is not happy to be defined. In late nineteenth century America women

were definitely seen as the mother, the raiser of children, however it is Leonce who is seen to have the affection of the children, “Both wanted to follow their father when they saw him starting off. He kissed them and promised to bring them back bonbons and peanuts.” (Chopin, 1984a, 45) Benigna's mother deals with her unhappy marriage with passivity, whereas Edna actively seeks entertainment outside her marriage. She is the one who instigates her affairs, giving in to her desires. In this Edna is shown to have great contempt for her husband and marriage in general. Leonce, on the other hand, knows that something is wrong with the marriage, and that they are both unhappy, but despite everything that happens, he never seeks to leave Edna, maintaining his commitment to their union. Both writers are showing us examples of men who refused to leave their marriages despite being unhappy. Marriage in both novels can be seen as a symbol of the wider situation of men and women in general. Men's position was very stable, whereas women had to fight for their rights. Leonce fulfils his duties and this is the cause of Edna's anger at his expectations she fulfil hers, she simply does not want to because she is expected to. Benigna's father either refuses to or cannot fulfil his duties satisfactorily, but Benigna's mother does not show anger at this, she must simply accept it. As a woman she does not have the right to outwardly criticise her husband, whereas men can easily criticise their wives if they feel they are not doing as they should. Leonce obviously has this right when he is criticising Edna for her raising of the children, among other things. This inequality actually creates a vast imbalance in the relationships between men and women. Benigna shows us the level of power this difference in rights can hold over a person when she tells us,

I believe that most people can be as brutal to each other's minds as they used to be in old times to their bodies. They can lash and burn and torture, they can cramp young brains as the Chinese do young feet, they can imprison and load with chains and starve and rack- all without it's showing outside or anybody's blaming them[...]I've seen Mother wince when Father spoke to her just as if it were a whip. She'd set her teeth and turn white and hold her hands tight, other times; and pray, pray dreadfully, for strength to bear it, to be patient, to do her duty, to love, honor and obey. (Gilman, 1994, 32)

Edna shows great anger, and rejects this imbalance in rights, while Benigna's mother is shown to be struggling to do her duty, to be a good wife, even in the face of such adversity. It is important to note that even though Gilman shows Benigna's mother trying desperately to, "do her duty," (Gilman, 1994, 32) Gilman connects this to images of torture and imprisonment, thus showing, very strongly, Gilman's attitude towards this expectation of and restriction on women. The way Chopin shows this situation is very different, when Edna's husband comes home and finds that the children have not been satisfactorily cared for, Chopin tells us,

He reproached his wife with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on Earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business. He could not be in two places at once; making a living for his family on the street, and staying at home to see that no harm befell them. (Chopin, 1984a, 48)

This seems to be a fairly reasonable and rational response given the situation, and Chopin certainly does not show Leonce to be abusing his right to criticise Edna. However, Edna's reaction is far different to Benigna's mother's prayer-filled attempts at acceptance. Edna's feelings about her husband's criticisms are described to us as,

An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood. She did not sit there inwardly upbraiding her husband, lamenting at Fate. (Chopin, 1984a, 49)

Edna refuses to try and accept that her husband may be right in this situation, somebody should be looking after the children, and since he is at work and she is at home, it would seem reasonable to expect that it should be her. However, Edna cannot see past the fact that she is expected to do it, and her inability to complain about the situation overpowers her sense of reason. In the end it is Gilman who offers us some

real hope for change, that things can be better for women in this regard. Upon Benigna's father's return he finds his wife to be a completely changed person. In his absence, and with Benigna's help, she has become a strong, independent woman, who upon being questioned about her duty to her returning husband, replies,

“I have done my duty to you, as I saw it, for many a long year; I have loved and served you and submitted to all your opinions. Now I shall still love you. You are my husband and the father of my children, but I have opinions of my own now Andrew. I think that this is right to do- and I shall do it.” (Gilman, 1994, 176)

Benigna points out that this was very hard for her mother to do, but highly beneficial. Gilman makes it clear that it is not only good for the mother, but good for everyone. Truly they are happily married at the end of the novel in a way they never were, and never could have been had it not been for Benigna's influence. The absence of the man in her life, the controlling and oppressive entity, gives her the chance to grow and become the person she always should have been, an equal and respected member of a marriage. Benigna tells us of her father's new found respect for his wife when she says, “[...] he seemed to be proud of Mother, to look at her as if she were someone to be considered on her own merits - not merely his wife.” (Gilman, 1994, 177) In all of this Gilman's own opinion that women must earn respect on their own merits, rather than be granted freedoms by men, is very apparent.

7.3 Contrasting opinions of the institution of marriage

Benigna and Edna share a common opinion of marriage, but they are looking at it from two very different perspectives. Edna from the inside of a marriage and Benigna from the outside. Both of them recognise the restrictive nature of marriage, Edna knows this from first-hand experience, and Benigna makes clear her belief that marriage would end her ability to learn, grow and travel. Benigna however, is still open to the idea of

marriage, she tells us, “You see, I had not made up my mind *inflexibly* not to marry; I just didn't mean to if I could help it, and certainly not until I had done a lot of other things first.” (Gilman, 1994, 154) and at the end of the novel we see her considering it with happiness. This could represent a certain naivety in an otherwise intelligent and insightful character, but I do not feel this was Gilman's message. Benigna, realises that marriage must be about love and a certain amount of equality. She envisions her future happily with or without a husband, it is not essential to her life, so when she chooses to marry it is free-will not necessity. She can therefore build her marriage on her own terms, something Edna thought she had found. Edna is shown to have had similar views of marriage for love, but her dreams are taken from her when reality comes into play and her husband, at first seeming so perfect for her, changes from romantic suitor into a husband, with all the expectations on him that role carries.

Her marriage to Leonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate. It was the midst of her secret great passion that she met him. He fell in love, and men are in the habit of doing and pressed suit with an earnestness and an ardour which left nothing to be desired. He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her. She fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them in which fancy she was mistaken. Add to this the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret and her marriage with a Catholic, and we need seek no further for the motives which led her to accept Monsieur Pontellier for her husband. The acme of bliss which would have been a marriage with the tragedian, was not for her in this world. As the devoted wife of a man who worshipped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams. But it was not long before the tragedian had gone to join the cavalry officer and the engaged young man and a few others; and Edna found herself face to face with the realities. She grew fond of her husband realising, with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or expressive and fictitious warmth colored her affection thereby threatening its dissolution. (Chopin, 1984a, 62-63)

Edna believes strongly in romance and having a husband truly devoted to her, but when she is actually married she cannot reconcile reality with her fairy-tale dream of marriage. It is possibly an aspect of this bitterness which makes her so unhappy at the idea of fitting into a stereotype. When her husband became the expected stereotype she lost her hopes and dreams. It is easy, therefore, to understand that she may fear losing something even more important if she were to also fulfil the stereotype expected of her.

Benigna also shares this fear of loss. Benigna does not want to change her name. Her name is so linked to her individuality and feelings of self that to change it would be to lose something essential, literally losing herself. She makes it clear that her main connection is to her grandmothers name, 'Machiavelli' but even her family name MacAvelly has power for her. At the end of the novel, Benigna is considering marrying her cousin, one of the main benefits for her is also the final thought of the novel, "All at once I stopped still in my tracks and stood seized by an idea- MacAvelly! His name was MacAvelly too! And I had thought I never could keep it." (Gilman, 1994, 178) Benigna seems to be resigned to the fact that she will have to give something up, something essential, here embodied in her name, to be married. What she would give up except for her name is never made explicit, although we can assume from her earlier opinions that it would be some measure of her freedom. By giving her the chance to keep her name at the end of the novel, Gilman is offering hope to women. The hope that they do not need to choose between individuality and marriage, that they can be married, have a family and not lose that which they hold as so essential to their being.

If we also consider in this comparison the character of Mrs. Mallard in Chopin's *The Story of an Hour*, a short story published in *Vogue* in 1894, we have three very clear examples of the position women were in in relation to marriage. Benigna is young and full of optimistic enthusiasm, she believes in marriage for love and claims she is happy to live without marriage if it means keeping the freedoms she holds so dear. Edna is in the middle of an unhappy marriage, with young children to consider, and she desperately tries to reclaim some of her lost freedom in the only way she can, accepting

the advances of men with whom she spends time while her husband is absent. Finally Mrs. Mallard is under the belief her husband is dead, and delights in considering all the freedoms she can now regain and enjoy. She has something of the childish optimism of Benigna, and sees ahead of her “[...] a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely” (Chopin, 1984b, 214). She goes on to clarify not only the freedom she believes will return to her, but also the way in which society forces men to treat women by saying,

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years, she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination (Chopin, 1984b, 214)

Of course, when her husband returns alive and well, her dreams are dashed and she dies. This seems to be a common theme for Chopin, a pessimistic view that for women death or suicide may be the only escape for these oppressed women. A view desperately lacking in hope of change.

7.4 Hope and hopelessness

Images of hope and hopelessness allow us to find another interesting comparison between the views of Gilman and Chopin about the position of women. *Benigna Machiavelli* ends on an incredibly positive, hopeful and optimistic note. All of Benigna's hopes and dreams seem to be coming true, and her theory of being the good villain has been successful, allowing her to change the lives, for the better, of those around her. She has acted throughout with dignity and motivation, working hard and using her intellect and strong sense of morals for good. In the final chapter of the novel she summarises her achievements by saying, “It was good, after all, to have Father back- so long as Mother was able to stand it better. [...] Mother was safe-safe and

happy. Peggy was going to have an extremely nice husband. Everything was all right and seemed likely to stay so.” (Gilman, 1994, 177) Gilman leaves us with the thought that change is possible, a major theme for her, as long as change happens in the right way. As previously mentioned, she believed that change had to, in some part, come from women, and this is exactly what she shows us in *Benigna Machiavelli*; women becoming independent and respected while still retaining their position as a mother and wife. This is exactly what Gilman believed and hoped was possible, for women to be women, but be respected for it accordingly in the same way men were respected for being men, husbands and fathers. This vision of change is not present in Chopin's work however. As previously discussed, death seems to be a theme for Chopin's female characters. Edna apparently commits suicide at the end of *The Awakening*, and Louise Mallard dies of a heart attack in the *The Story of an Hour*. Chopin's work seems bleak and uncompromising in comparison with Gilman's upbeat optimism. At the end of *The Awakening* we find Edna having lost the one thing she desires most in the world; Robert. She still has the marriage which has made her so unhappy, and the children for whom she has an unpredictable level of wavering affection, but it is not enough for her. Edna's desire for Robert can be seen as equal to Benigna's desire for her own freedom and her families happiness. Benigna achieves her goal, but Edna fails and Robert leaves her. At the very end of the story Edna walks to the sea, apparently to swim, when she arrives she first revels in her nakedness under the sun, another connection to the theme of awakened sexuality throughout the story. She says, “And for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her.” (Chopin, 1984a, 175) As she walks to the water she thinks about what has led her to this moment, surprisingly it seems to be her children she blames as much as the loss of Robert for her misery,

Despondency had come upon her there in the wakeful night and had never lifted. There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted except Robert; and she even realised that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like

antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them. (Chopin, 1984a, 175)

This is in such contrast to Gilman's vision. Benigna finds happiness through the happiness and well-being of her family, yet Edna's family become the source of her depression. Her children are closely linked to her unhappy marriage, and she sees them as a symbol of everything that became wrong with her life, everything that stopped her being with Robert. As she swims out into the sea towards her death, she feels no fear, instead imagining some peace, some relief awaiting her,

She remembered the other night she swam far out, and recalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore. She did not look back, but went on and on thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end. (Chopin, 1984a, 176)

She thinks briefly about her family, but her final thoughts of them are negative and of the imprisonment they represent to her, even at the end she can find no peace, no reconciliation with them. Chopin tells us, "She thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul." (Chopin, 1984a, 176) Chopin shows us that women's only hope of freedom and release lies in death, whatever their dreams of, or attempts towards, change may be, they will end in failure.

There is a stark contrast in the message being put forth by both writers. Gilman was obviously committed to genuine social change, she believed a difference could be made and was motivated towards sending this message to women everywhere. Chopin seems as though she was writing to express something of her own frustrations and opinions about the chances of women's positions changing. It is made all the more interesting as both writers give us fairly similar pictures of the actual position of women at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. The main and most

important difference between their works is not in the picture they paint of how women are, but in their vision for the future.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, women were beset on all sides by the major problem of expectation. Women were forced into roles, even if they were roles they sometimes wanted, like being a mother. It was the pressure to fulfil these roles and not seek to further themselves in the world which was the greatest bone of contention. While many women were happy to be mothers and wives, they wanted to be respected for these roles and treated as equal members of society to men. The common belief was that just because women stayed at home, it did not make their contributions any less important than a man's.

This situation was embodied in the suffrage movement. Women's desire for an equal share in the shaping of society manifested itself in their desire to vote and gain some measure of political influence. Less than one hundred years ago in western society, women were still very much second class citizens, although not through any lack of ability, hard work or intelligence, only because they were held in a subversive position by the bonds placed upon them. The suffrage movement fought long and hard against this inequality, against huge odds. They were supported by many, although often this support was quite weak and non-committal. However, they were criticised and attacked by the Catholic church, many men and even other women who saw these revolutionaries as betraying women everywhere. The incident at the Occoquan workhouse, possibly one of the main catalysts for the end of the fight for suffrage, shows us that society's very romantic image of its women actually worked in the suffrage movement's favour. People were so shocked and disgusted that women could be treated in such a way it moved them to support women's rights and desire for change.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a highly respected and influential writer of the time, and we can certainly see that her works were highly regarded by prominent feminists. Gilman believed that women could change society, she saw the strength of women and understood exactly what it was women needed to do and could do. She described to people a situation where women could be financially independent, valuable members of an equal society. Most importantly though, she foresaw this situation as not being detrimental to families, marriages and the relationships between men and women. In this way she was truly writing ahead of her time. Gilman skilfully presented the possibility that men and women could work together, moving forward as equals, to create a better society for all, not just women. Although Gilman was obviously critical of many aspects of society at the time, she always presents a level of positive criticism, She knew that simply attacking men and demanding total equality would only have her attacked in retaliation and her reputation ruined. Gilman also maintained the respect of men by not seeking to remove women from their role of mothers, in fact she believed that only women could possibly be mothers to their children, she simply sought for men to see this role as being as important as any other role in a family. Gilman clearly understood that to change society it had to be done by changing the way people think, especially men. By presenting them possibilities for the future which would ultimately be beneficial to all, she helped women and men to achieve this.

Kate Chopin's work was almost lost to modern readers as it was so controversial at the time that most copies of her novels and stories were destroyed. It is understandable to see why the public reaction was so strong though. Chopin's work was so revolutionary that it shocked society to its core, with many believing that the ideas she was presenting would ultimately lead to a complete breakdown of society. Chopin differs from Gilman in several ways, but the most important difference revolves around their hopes for the future development of women. Whereas Gilman gives us a positive and uplifting guide for the future, Chopin's works seem bleak and without solace. It could possibly be assumed that Chopin was giving us a more realistic interpretation of the real feelings of women at the time, as Gilman's works were

probably toned down in theme and critique to avoid the same public reaction which caused Chopin to be so ostracised. Chopin was clearly trying to highlight how desperate women felt about the situation, while Gilman was trying to help people find a way forward. It is also interesting that Chopin's main problem and criticism seems to have been of the institution of marriage, although as far as we know Chopin's marriage was relatively happy. In the end Chopin's work is now considered to be at least of equal importance to Gilman's, but her focus on sexuality and the apparent destruction of the institutions which society held so dear, without any real hope for a better future, meant that her message, influence and genius were only to be discovered in hindsight.

The position of women in society at the time was, as previously stated, complicated, problematic and fraught with conflict. During the late nineteenth century the position of women was certainly improving economically but the remaining issue was still the attitudes of society, especially of men. While it is unfair to generalise the men of the time, as there were men who supported the development and promotion of women's rights, it does seem to be true that men held the power over women's futures. Writers such as Gilman gained fame and respect through their beliefs that women should play a greater and more equal role in the development of society. These ideas were more accepted as they still had women in a position of motherhood, as well as economic independence. However, writers who pushed the boundaries further, such as Chopin, were ultimately destroyed. Society simply was not ready to face up to the idea that women could also be sexually independent members of society. It seems that people found it acceptable to make concessions based on economic necessity, but on matters of true female freedom people were still afraid of the perceived moral implications.

As a final thought, it is of great interest to look briefly at the position of men in these situations, although it is not the focus of this paper. Women at the time, as we can see through the writings of Gilman, Chopin and others I have mentioned, were searching, and fighting, for some measure of freedom and independence. Women were highly restricted in these elements and were pigeon-holed into specific roles. It could

be argued that throughout history, possibly due to some evolutionary development, women have taken on certain roles naturally, such as childcare and looking after the home while men were out hunting and gathering. However, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in America, women were forced and expected to do these things, it was not simply natural agreement. Women were subordinate to men in matters of opinion, education, economics, sexual freedom, and many other areas. Men were also forced into positions and roles though. Men were expected to be the breadwinners, they were expected to protect and care for women and provide for them. Women in many ways were treated with a certain respect and reverence and were seen as something pure to be guarded. The main difference here is that there is no real evidence of men seeking to escape their roles. Women were desperate to have the same opportunities as men, but men did not seem to relish the idea of taking women's positions. In *The Awakening*, Leonce fulfils his duties without question providing for his wife and children because it is his responsibility. His only real complaint is that his wife shirks her responsibility, despite the fact that he is performing his. Gilman seems to touch upon this in some way, by showing us that Benigna's father does not enjoy his duties as patriarch and struggles with them, possibly leading to his alcoholism. On the surface, to people outside his family, he appears as a model citizen, when in reality he was privately battling with the situation he found himself in. Chopin shows us very briefly in *The Story of an Hour*, the character of Brently Mallard, who has done nothing wrong and dearly loves his wife, his only crime is to be a man doing his assigned duties towards his wife and family. It is an argument for another paper to decide why men were not outwardly railing against the bonds placed on them by society. Whether it is because men were genuinely happy with the responsibilities given to them and the roles they were thrust into, or that men simply chose to accept the order of things as they were at the time. Men obviously had more freedoms and opportunities, yet they were still bound, but seem to have had no complaint about the issue. Men, it seems, already existed in the state in which Gilman was proposing men and women should live together, but men did not appear to have been searching for the kind of freedom Chopin was writing about.

9. Resumé

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá problematikou postavení žen ve společnosti v Americe v devatenáctém století a na počátku století dvacátého, což bylo bezesporu období velkých změn a dynamického rozvoje. Toto období provázela celá řada zvrátů, v mnoha oblastech se Amerika stala modernější a otevřenější, na druhou stranu zde stále přetrvávaly společenské konvence a pravidla, která byla americkou společností dlouho v téměř nezměněné podobě dodržována, a tudíž nebylo jednoduché tyto zakořeněné prototypy myšlení a chování tak snadno změnit.

Jednou z největších změn, která se v této době začala odehrávat, bylo smýšlení žen a jejich měnící se představa o tom, jakou pozici by měly vlastně ve společnosti mít. Tehdejší společnost byla téměř výhradně řízena a ovládána muži, což se mnohým ženám přestávalo jevit jako správné a začaly se dovolávat vlastních práv. Činily tak různými způsoby, ať už zakládáním různých hnutí či zveřejňováním příspěvků v časopisech, které v té době hojně vznikaly, nebo psaním knih, které by posloužily jako příklad, jak by se ženy mohly či měly chovat. Ženy se staly uvědomělejšími a už nechtěly být jen těmi křehkými, poněkud podřadnými bytostmi, ale měly touhu se vyrovnat mužům, získat více svobody a volnosti a také finanční nezávislosti.

Jak bylo zmíněno výše, začaly vznikat časopisy, články a romány psané převážně ženami, ale v malé míře i muži. Měly posloužit ženám jako příklad, inspirace a důvod k zamyšlení, či dokonce jako provokace a protest proti tehdejší společnosti.

Mezi nejvýznamnější představitelky zabývající se touto problematikou bezesporu patří Kate Chopinová a Charlotte Perkins Gilmanová. Cílem této práce je porovnat jejich tvorbu z hlediska zobrazení postavení ženy ve společnosti na konci devatenáctého a na počátku dvacátého století. Obě se zabývaly v podstatě stejnou problematikou, jejich názory byly veřejností mnohdy nahlíženy jako velmi

kontroverzní. Především Chopinová byla za své až příliš pokrokové názory vystavena nemalé kritice a mnohdy odsouzení ze strany mužů, ale i žen, které byly se stávající situací spokojeny a netoužily po radikálních změnách.

V první části práce je čtenář uveden do širšího historického kontextu, který směřuje hlavně k popisu situace na přelomu devatenáctého a dvacátého století. Ženy v té době byly ze všech stran obklopeny nějakým očekáváním. Svě role musely plnit nezávisle na svém vlastním rozhodnutí. Mnohé byly šťastné jako manželky a matky starající se o rodinu, ale přesto toužily a chtěly být více respektovány a považovány za rovnoprávné členy společnosti jako muži. Ti začali v té době cestovat za prací a ženy chtěly poukázat na to, že péče o rodinu a domov není o nic méně důležitá či méně náročná než mužské povinnosti, jejichž hlavním úkolem bylo rodinu finančně zabezpečit. Ženy začaly ukazovat na to, že jsou schopny také přinášet finance do rodinného rozpočtu, hlavně díky vzniku nových pracovních příležitostí, a přitom zůstat dobrými matkami a manželkami. Ke konci devatenáctého století se váže celá řada nových objevů, rozvoje průmyslu a jiných změn, přibývaly tak postupně různé pracovní pozice, které mohly být či byly téměř výhradně obsazovány ženami, což jen rozdmýchalo jejich touhu po samostatnosti, finanční nezávislosti a větší rovnoprávnosti s muži.

Tato situace se promítla do hnutí suffrage. Touha žen přispívat ke změnám společnosti se začala postupně týkat i politické sféry spojené i s volebním právem. Ženy již nechtěly být vnímány jako druhořadé členky společnosti, svázány pouty vyplývajícími z jejich postavení, rolí a obecného očekávání mužské části populace. Členové hnutí suffrage bojovali dlouho a těžce ve snaze podpořit a pomoci ženám dosáhnout změn tak vytoužených. Toto úsilí však nebylo po vůli katolické církvi a i americká vláda a politika sehrála nemalou roli v dalším vývoji tohoto hnutí. Incident v Occoquanském pracovním táboře byl asi jednou z posledních a nejvíce alarmujících událostí vedoucích k ukončení hnutí suffrage. Lidé byli tak šokováni tím, jak se

v Occoquanském pracovním táboře k ženám přistupovalo, že je to vyprovokovalo k podpoře boje za ženská práva a snaze o změnu jejich postavení ve společnosti.

O těchto změnách pojednává i další část této diplomové práce, která se však především zabývá situací některých prominentních spisovatelek, představitelk feminizmu a bojovnic za ženská práva. Jednou z hlavních zástupkyň této skupiny byla Charlotte Perkins Gilmanová, vysoce respektovaná a vlivná spisovatelka té doby. Její práce byly oceňovány mnohými představiteli feministického hnutí. Gilmanová věřila, že ženy mohou dosáhnout změn ve společnosti, byla si vědoma schopností a síly ženské části populace a měla poměrně jasnou představu o tom, co by měly ženy udělat, aby tradiční pohled na jejich role ve společnosti doznal změn. Skrze svá díla, jakými byla kupříkladu *Women and Economics* či do jisté míry *Benigna Machiavelli*, ukázala společnosti, především té mužské části, že finančně nezávislá žena se může stát plnoprávným a nezávislým členem společnosti, ale zároveň nepřestane být ani ženou, matkou, manželkou a ochránitelkou rodiny. Gilmanová dokázala velmi dobře prezentovat představu o společnosti, kde ženy a muži spolu pracují a vytvářejí lepší podmínky pro všechny, ne jen pro ženy. Toto její smýšlení bylo na tehdejší dobu velmi pokrokové a odvážné, nicméně se u ní objevovala nejen negativní, ale i pozitivní kritika tehdejší situace. Byla si vědoma, že pouhým napadáním mužské části společnosti a domáháním se naprosté rovnoprávnosti mezi muži a ženami by se sama stala terčem ostré kritiky a mělo by to negativní vliv i na její reputaci spisovatelky. Věděla, že změny takového rozsahu a významu se nemohou stát ze dne na den. Svými díly ukázala, že jisté změny mohou být přínosné pro obě strany, jak muže, tak i ženy, a není přitom nutné úplně zničit všechno to, co bylo v tehdejší společnosti tak hluboce zakořeněno.

Další významnou spisovatelkou té doby byla již výše zmíněná Kate Chopinová. Její díla však byla pro moderního čtenáře téměř ztracena, jelikož její velmi kontroverzní a na tehdejší dobu až příliš odvážné, pokrokové, a tudíž mnohdy v té době i nepochopené romány a příběhy byly po nějakou dobu skryty očím veřejnosti. Dnešní společnost, tolik jiná ve srovnání s tou, o které Chopinová píše a ve které žila, se na její

tvorbu dívá úplně jinak a mnohem pozitivněji. Díla Chopinové se tak stala jedním z největších klenotů americké literatury konce devatenáctého století. Důležitým tématem jejích knih je manželství. Je zajímavé, že ačkoli to její vlastní bylo na základě dochovaných pramenů v podstatě spokojené, ve svých dílech nešetřila kritikou manželství a poukazovala na některé velmi pokrokové myšlenky s tím související. Její asi nejznámější dílo *The Awakening* je dokladem tohoto paradoxu. Hlavní hrdinka Edna touží tolik po svobodě a volnosti, že i přes počáteční skutečnou lásku k manželovi podstatě není v manželství šťastná, jelikož má pocit, že ji tato instituce příliš svazuje a omezuje. Na druhou stranu se netají tím, že má sexuální touhy, v té době pro veřejnost něco naprosto nemyslitelného, dokonce si najde i milence, ale společenské konvence a očekávání jí nedovolí najít klid. Její neutěšený stav, kdy ona i její potřeby zůstávají tak často nepochopeny, ji nakonec zřejmě dovedou až k záhubě, jak se můžeme domnívat z událostí popsanych na konci románu.

Stěžejní sekce této diplomové práce je věnována Charlott Perkins Gilmanové, jejímu románu *Benigna Machiavelli* a analýze a srovnání s dílem Kate Chopinové *The Awakening*. Hlavní hrdinka knihy *Benigna Machiavelli* nesoucí totéž jméno je dokonalou představitelkou cílevědomé a pokrokové mladé ženy, která si klade možná mnohdy vysoké a odvážné cíle, ale je ochotná za úspěch bojovat. Je tak dobrým příkladem ženám té doby, které také musely překonávat mnohé překážky ze strany mužů a té části společnosti, která nebyla změnám v rolích a postavení žen příliš nakloněna. Gilmanová se stejně jako Chopinová věnuje celé řadě aspektů, které vzbuzovaly nespokojenost a touhu žen po změnách v tehdejší společnosti. Jednalo se jak o ekonomickou stránku a snahu začlenit se do pracovního procesu a stát se tím nezávislejší na mužském pokolení, tak o manželství, rodinu, sexuální potřeby a potřebu vzdělání. V neposlední řadě Gilmanová prostřednictvím Benigny ukazuje, jak důležitý je intelekt a schopnost žen nepřestat býti ženami na úkor svých tužeb po rovnoprávnosti s muži.

Obě díla pojednávají o situaci, ve které se ženy koncem devatenáctého století nacházely. Zprvu se hlavní hrdinky a jejich osudy zdají nesrovnatelné a příliš odlišné, ale faktem je, že právě odlišnosti a různé pohledy na jejich situaci činí toto porovnání tolik zajímavým. Jedním ze stěžejních pilířů je bezpochyby otázka manželství. Pohled z vnějšku v případě Benigny, která může zkušenosti čerpat jen z manželství svých rodičů či manželství jiných lidí, je pochopitelně jiný než Ednin pohled jako vdané ženy, která není v manželství šťastná. Edniny představy o manželství byly zprvu velmi podobné těm Benigniným. Manželství z lásky bylo i jejím snem. Tvrdá realita, očekávání a vyplývající povinnosti z manželského svazku však její sny zbouraly. Benigna nicméně také vyjadřuje jistou obavu z toho, jakým způsobem může manželství ovlivnit její velké plány, a můžeme se jen dohadovat, jaký by byl její osud jako vdané ženy. Možná stejný jako Ednin, možná úplně odlišný.

Posledním bodem této diplomové práce a komparace děl *The Awakening* a *Benigna Machiavelli* je téma naděje a beznaděje. Gilmanová vyjadřuje prostřednictvím Benigny opravdovou víru v lepší budoucnost, v pozitivní změny ve společnosti a v pohledu na pozici žen vůči mužům. Celým jejím dílem prostupuje naděje, že tvrdou a cílevědomou prací doprovázenou studiem a respektem k některým tradičním hodnotám lze dosáhnout úspěchu. Chopinová naopak vyjadřuje ve svém díle beznaděj a pesimistický pohled na tehdejší situaci. Na příkladě Edny můžeme sledovat její postupně narůstající nespokojenost se společností, ve které se pohybuje, s konvencemi a tradičním pohledem na mnohé aspekty života. Její neschopnost to změnit ji nakonec přivede k zřejmé záhubě.

Charlott Perkins Gilmanová i Kate Chopinová jsou velkými spisovatelkami americké historie. Svou literární činností a poselstvím ve svých dílech přispěly významnou měrou ke změnám v postavení amerických žen ve společnosti na konci devatenáctého století. Ač mnohdy ostře kritizované svůj boj nevzdaly a život zasvětily snaze o změnu smýšlení jak mužů, tak žen a vybudování lepší budoucnosti v rovnoprávné a plně fungující společnosti.

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