# The Influence of Society, Gender and Psychology on Women Characters in the Works of Kate Chopin, Charlotte P. Gilman and Erica Jong

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# The Influence of Society, Gender and Psychology on Women Characters in the Works of Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Erica Jong

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**Summary**

In the attempt to analyze any type of literary work, one cannot focus on one single aspect if he/she wants to present the complex web of notions and ideas which make a work of art deserve its name. A story is not simply a chain of events ordered in one fashion or another. Every story consists of numerous strings which intermingle, attach themselves to one another and even disrupt each other.

The main goal of this paper is to try to concisely present this complex web of strings in the works *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *Fear of Flying* by Erica Jong - more precisely, the influence that society, the gender of the main characters, and the psychological issues have on the heroines and the way they behave because of these influences.

The complexity of this task deems it necessary to analyze why the character acts or thinks a certain way and this means a lot of different influences need to be taken into account: from the relationships in their families, to their own relationships to the people surrounding them – husbands, lovers, doctors, friends – and further to the inner thoughts and doubts of the heroines.

This paper attempts to follow the path the three young women take in order to find out who they are, what role they play in the societies they live in and how they can live up to their full potential.

**Key words**: womanhood, behavior, independence, Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Erica Jong

**Contents**

## Introduction

The following paper was written as an effort to effectively and concisely present and discuss the main issues which appear in the works of Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Erica Jong (more precisely the works *The Awakening* by Chopin, "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Perkins Gilman and *Fear of Flying* by Jong) and which influence the behavior and thinking of the heroines in these works.

The issues mentioned range from the expectations society has about women's roles in life to the influence people close to the main characters have and, last but not least, the attitudes and opinions the heroines have about themselves and the position they are in.

The paper is divided into eight chapters, each discussing a major theme found in all three works of fiction, beginning with the basic assumption of what being a woman actually means to both the individual women and the society the stories are placed in. The second chapter deals with the notion of an 'ideal' woman which is present in the stories and further discusses two important sides of an 'ideal' woman – wifehood and motherhood.

The following chapter discusses another notion connected to all three main characters – the artistic sides all of them possess and develop in their own way. These artistic sides are an important means for them to communicate their needs and also serve as a tool in discovering their identities, which is the leading thesis of this paper.

Chapters six, seven and eight all deal with men who are present in *The Awakening*, "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Fear of Flying*, ranging from husbands to lovers and doctors. They all play an important role in the self-discovery of the three heroines and also exert a great influence on them.

The last chapter is constructed as the presentation of the findings which the three main characters gathered throughout their 'quest for womanhood' and discusses whether or not they succeeded in the task they had before them – facing obstacles in their path to self-discovery and trying to find freedom and independence, from both men and their own fears and doubts.

## 1. The Quest for Womanhood

Prior to analyzing all the issues that influence the behavior and thinking of the main female characters in the works of Chopin, Perkins Gilman and Jong there is a need to examine what exactly being a woman means in these works of fiction and for these characters. Despite having been written in different decades (*The Awakening* was first published in 1899; "The Yellow Wallpaper" in 1892; *Fear of Flying* in 1973) and the female characters therefore living in a different time as well, there still is a resemblance between the notions of womanhood in both Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Gilman Perkin's "The Yellow Wallpaper" as well as in Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying.*

Jong's heroine Isadora best describes the issue which is battled in all three works in a conversation she has with one of the many psychiatrists she visits: "Don't you see that men have *always* defined femininity as a means of keeping women in line? Why should I listen to *you* about what it means to be a woman? Are you a woman? Why shouldn't I listen to *myself* for once? And to other women?" (Jong 18).

In this short statement lies one of the basic problems all three heroines face: a patriarchal society which defined femininity as it saw fit, not taking into account actual women surrounding them or their beliefs. The quest these women are on is the quest to find out for themselves what it means to be a woman and how to live a satisfied and fulfilled life.

In *Fear of Flying,* the heroine talks about her fear of being alone and being independent. The readers witness her struggle to define herself as a woman and, most importantly, as a person. In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening,* Edna gradually discovers she is much more than a wife and mother and searches for answers about herself in an effort to set herself free of a society which oppresses her. The short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman seems to stand out among these three works of fiction, but by examining it closer the reader can discover that the main theme is the same as in the former two: the heroine's struggle to discover her true identity and place in a society which wants women to act according to a patriarchal model. This model of what society thinks a woman should be is the bane in all three heroine's lives.

In *The Awakening*, Edna, a young woman married to Léonce Pontellier, who she has two sons with, starts questioning her own existence and role in life. She truly 'awakens' to her life to find that new ideas and sensations are building up:

> A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her, – the light which, showing the way, forbids it. At that early period it served but to bewilder her. It moved her to dreams, to thoughtfulness, to the shadowy anguish which had overcome her the midnight when she had abandoned herself to tears. In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eighth—perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman. (Chopin 17)

In a poetic and transcendent picture of a dawning light, Edna's realization is shown as appearing gradually and turning her inner world upside down, questioning and searching for answers. This realization started gently, like a spreading mist, but by the end of the book she knows exactly what it is she needs to find in order to become independent:

> One of these days, she said, I'm going to pull myself together for a while and think—try to determine what kind of woman I am; for, candidly, I don't know. 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. I must think about it. (Chopin 109)

Edna longs to be free from the role which has been pushed upon her solely based on her gender - the role of a devoted mother and wife. She wants to find out what kind of a woman she is and by comparing herself to the standard women around her she realizes she is different from them, 'a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex'. Although she is different, she does not think this is a bad thing and plans on thinking about it more carefully. But she does not succeed in rationalizing her situation and acting logically in order to gain independence, because she never learnt she could do it. Men do such things, not women. Instead, she flees from reality into her romantic dreams:

> Because of the social conventions that prescribe behavior in her world, Edna has nowhere to go, succumbing to the promises of romanticism while living in a society that will not tolerate the terms she sets for her own freedom. Although she manages by sheer force of will to free herself from the oppressive marriage with Léonce, Edna does not experience freedom; instead, she finds herself trapped by her romantic visions… (Thornton 52)

Living in such a world where she has nowhere to go, the only escape is the escape into her own mind-into daydreams and fantasies, where she can experiment and find out who she is and what she wants without society judging her.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman describes the same struggle for freedom, but in a very symbolic and poetic way. The young woman, who is left nameless (symbolic in itself for the lack of identity), becomes obsessed by a wallpaper pattern in a summer house where she spends her vacation with her husband and child. As she analyzes the pattern more and spends more time thinking about it, the pattern becomes that of a woman behind bars. The symbolism and connection to her own quest for freedom are quite clear and the better she understands the pattern, the closer she is to freeing herself from it: "Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day. It is always the same shape, only very numerous. And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern" (Perkins Gilman 8).

Not only is there a woman in the pattern, but "the faint figure behind it seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out" (Perkins Gilman 8). The symbolism in this one sentence succeeds to summarize the whole plot in only one image. The faintness of the figure stands for the heroine's own symbolic faintness, the fact that as a woman she does not play an important role in either society or even her own life. The figure shakes the pattern and the main character figuratively shakes the life she has been living so far, trying to find a way to free herself from the prison her life has become. At the time in her life when she finally discovers how oppressed by her marriage she is, she discovers the figure in the wallpaper that is trying to get out:

> I really have discovered something at last. Through watching so much at night, when it changes so, I have finally found out. The front pattern *does* move — and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it! Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over. Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard. And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern — it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads. They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white! (Perkins Gilman 12)

The tragedy of the wallpaper's pattern is that women cannot escape. 'The pattern strangles them off' because it represents society's expectation and the male repression of

women. So many of them fall victim to the pattern that there are some of them turned upside down with white eyes, a gruesome symbolism of the strangling of women's freedom that has been taking place for so long. Yet the heroine seems to be an exception because from a gentle woman who is dominated by her husband she becomes the dominant one and takes control over her own thought and life.

A very important notion that stretches throughout all three plots is that of the feeling of guilt which is closely linked to the idea of 'womanhood' for all three characters. The causes of this guilt are many, from being considered inferior only due to their gender to the guilt of a mother who can never reach the goal of being a perfect, selfless caretaker of her children. The causes are irrational, yet the roots of this guilt are deeply set: "From time immemorial it has been the custom of woman to sacrifice herself whenever she got a chance, and any deflection from the course she was expected to pursue must necessarily occasion a deal of comment. Unselfishness with her has been a cult" (Dix 128).

This cult of unselfishness, as Dix calls it, is very true and visible in the struggles of the heroines in these three works. Isadora ironically comments on it herself:

> Oh I talk a good game, and I even *think* I believe it, but secretly, I'm like the girl in *Story of O*. I want to submit to some big brute. 'Every woman adores a fascist,' as Sylvia Plath says. I feel guilty for writing poems when I should be cooking. I feel guilt for *everything*. You don't have to beat a woman if you can make her feel guilty. (Jong 131)

In this last sentence lies the sad truth: no one treats Edna, Isadora and the wife in "The Yellow Wallpaper" as bad as they do themselves. The guilt is so much a part of them that they do not even question whether there is a reason to feel it. Dix states that with women this is normal whereas men have a more practical approach to the problem:

> Men have always taken a saner view of life than women. A woman sacrifices herself in a thousand needless little ways which do no one any good, but when a man makes a sacrifice it is big with heroism, and counts. A woman thinks she is being good when she is uncomfortable. (128)

The same notion of being uncomfortable as the normal state is mentioned in *Fear of Flying* when Isadora's lover Adrian tells her that she actually likes to suffer: "You *are* a puritan, he said, and of the worst sort. You do what you like but you feel so guilty that you don't ever enjoy it" (Jong 169). Throughout her whole journey across Europe with Adrian, she never seems to enjoy one moment of it, always feeling guilty about not being with her husband, although she was not happy with him. If something bad happens, Isadora

automatically thinks it is her fault. When she talks about her first marriage to Brian, who turned out to be a schizophrenic and started believing he was Jesus, she again blames herself and it seems like such a natural act, an inborn response: "The marriage was my failure. If I had loved him enough, I would have cured his sadness instead of being engulfed by it and longing to escape from it" (Jong 136). She feels guilty about a situation she had no possibility of bettering and states that if she had tried harder, loved him more, there would have been a happy ending she so longs for.

Another very thought-provoking anecdote which links the idea of 'womanhood' with guilt in *Fear of Flying* is when Isadora tells the story of how she felt in Italy, where she was chased after by men wherever she went. The norm in our society is to take this behavior as a compliment. But Isadora does not think like that:

> Later, in Italy, when men followed me in the ruins or pursued me in cars down the avenues (opening their doors and whispering *vieni, vieni*), I always wondered why I felt so sullied and spat upon and furious. It was supposed to be flattering. It was supposed to prove my womanliness. My mother had always said how womanly she felt in Italy. Then why did it make me feel so *hunted*? There must be something wrong with *me* I thought. I used to try to smile and toss my hair to show I was grateful. And then I felt like a fraud. Why wasn't I grateful for being hunted? (Jong 273)

This is interesting because of two points: there is the feeling of guilt and blaming herself for not liking to be treated as a piece of meat. Logically, no one should like to be pursued like this and yet Isadora feels like there is something wrong with her. The notion of 'womanly' is here linked to a quite scary image of being followed against someone's will. The fact whether or not the woman actually wants the attention is of no importance.

The second point is a vicious circle being formed based on such thinking, which Jong further elaborates:

> A man assumes that a woman's refusal is just part of a game. Or, at any rate, a lot of men assume that. When a man says no, it's no. When a woman says no, it's yes, or at least maybe. There is even a joke to that effect. And little by little, women begin to believe in this view of themselves. Finally, after centuries of living in the shadow of such assumptions, they no longer know what they want and can never make up their minds about anything. And men, of course, compound the problem by mocking them for their indecisiveness and blaming it on biology, hormones, premenstrual tension. (Jong 274)

The question briefly discussed in this paragraph is one which could take hundreds of pages to worthily explain; the question of who the guilty ones are for the *status quo* – men or women. Jong discusses the credibility that is given to men and women and it is clear that there are double-standards. Society believes a man when he speaks, but when a woman does there is suspicion of the truth in those words, even if it is a simple 'no'.

Isadora's current husband blames the attention she gets from strangers solely on her, as if the men pursuing her had no will of their own and could not be held accountable:

> Even Bennett, with all his supposed psychology and insight, maintained that men tried to pick me up all the time because I conveyed my 'availability'—as he put it. Because I dressed too sexily. Or wore my hair too wantonly. Or *something*. I deserved to be attacked, in short. It was the same old jargon of the war between the sexes, the same old fifties lingo in disguise: *There is no such thing as rape; you ladies ask for it. You ladies.* (Jong 273)

This paragraph clearly shows the attitude an ordinary man in the work of Jong has about who the guilty ones are. Men are never to be held accountable simply because no one expects it from them.

In *The Awakening* Edna blames herself even for her husband's bad mood: "Wasn't it enough to think of going to the *Chênière* and waking you up? she laughed. Do I have to think of everything?—as Léonce says when he's in a bad humor. I don't blame him; he'd never be in a bad humor if it weren't for me" (Chopin 43).

The idea of 'womanhood' is necessarily tied to the idea of 'manhood' because they are opposites and are described accordingly. You cannot describe a woman without including a man. In all three works of fiction there is hardly any evidence that this is not true. Isadora in *Fear of Flying* takes on this discussion and asks the most important question:

> Then why did our lives seem to come down to a long succession of sad songs about men? Why did our lives seem to reduce themselves to man-hunts? Where were the women who were *really* free, who didn't spend their lives bouncing from man to man, who felt complete with or without a man? (Jong 100)

The quest the three heroines in Chopin's, Perkins Gilman's and Jong's works are essentially led by is the question of whether there are women who are free and happy without men and whether it is possible to define yourself as a woman without including men. The answers they find differ as the characters themselves and are discussed in further detail in the following chapters.

## 2. The Ideal Woman

The afore discussed notions of 'womanhood' in *Fear of Flying*, "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Awakening* are closely linked to the already mentioned model of an 'ideal' woman all three of the heroines meet in one form or another. The term 'ideal woman' existent in these three works contains two halves: the idea of a perfect wife and that of the perfect mother. The best description of this complex issue is found in *Fear of Flying* when Isadora talks about her idea (or rather the idea which was forced upon her by society) of this 'ideal' woman:

> Somewhere deep inside my head (with all those submerged memories of childhood) is some glorious image of the ideal woman, a kind of Jewish Griselda. She is Ruth and Esther and Jesus and Mary rolled into one. She always turns the other cheek. She is a vehicle, a vessel, with no needs and desires of her own. When her husband beats her, she understands him. When he is sick, she nurses him. When the children are sick, she nurses them. She cooks, keeps house, runs the store, keeps the books, listens to everyone's problems, visits the cemetery, weeds the graves, plants the garden, scrubs the floor, and sits quietly on the upper balcony of the synagogue while the men recite prayers about the inferiority of women. She is capable of absolutely everything except self-preservation. And secretly, I am always ashamed of myself for not being her. A good woman would have given over her life to the care and feeding of her husband's madness. I was not a good woman. I had too many other things to do. (Jong 210)

As already discussed in the previous chapter, the heroine feels shame and guilt for not being able to live up to the impossible. The model of a perfect woman is basically a servant who has no notion of her own identity. She selflessly cares for her family and is completely content in her servitude. The perfect woman is therefore not a person; she is a tool and has no wishes of her own. This idea is irreconcilable with the true needs of any person, male or female. Because of this gap between reality and (it can freely be said) fantasy she cannot accept herself as long as she holds on to society's expectations.

Both "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Awakening* feature female characters that, at first glance, seem to represent an 'ideal' woman as Isadora described her. In "The Yellow Wallpaper" there is the sister of the main character's husband whom she describes as follows:

> There comes John's sister. Such a dear girl as she is, and so careful of me! I must not let her find me writing. She is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession. I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick! But I can write when she is out, and see her a long way off from these windows. (Perkins Gilman 5)

Although she seems perfect, the reader can sense an undertone of light sarcasm when it is said that she 'hopes for no better profession', as if the heroine mocked the satisfaction her husband's sister seemingly gets out of being a housekeeper. It is an indication of the negative way she feels about her own position.

In *Fear of Flying* there is not one person who could present the perfect woman, but rather women who present aspects of 'female perfection' Isadora does not want or is not able to reach. Her sister Randy is an example of the ideal mother:

> Gundra Miranda called herself "Randy" and married at eighteen. She married a Lebanese physicist at Berkley, had four sons in California, and then moved her family to Beirut where she proceeded to have five daughters. Despite the seeming rebelliousness of a nice Jewish girl from Central Park West marrying Arab, she led the most ordinary family life imaginable in Beirut. She was almost religiously in favor of *Kinder, Küche,* and *Kirche*—especially the Catholic Church which she attended to impress the Arabs with her non-Jewishness. (Jong 40)

Quite like Randy, Isadora's other sister Lalah also represents this side of womanhood, as she married an orthopedic surgeon, leads a life in high society and has quintuplets:

> With all these gadgets and horses and three cars (one for each of them, and one for their white South American housekeeper), we all assumed that they hadn't time even to *consider* having children—to my parents' relief, I suppose. Arab grandchildren are one thing, but at least they have straight hair. However we were wrong. Lalah was, in fact, on fertility pills for two years (as she later informed us and all the newspapers), and last year gave birth to quintuplets. (Jong 41-42)

Her third sister is likewise a mother, although she only has one child, but this leaves Isadora as the only woman in the family without children and, as she says herself, she is "never allowed to forget it" (Jong 43) because her sisters constantly judge her way of life, emphasizing that only they lead a meaningful one. The sisters can in this regard be seen as symbols of the motherhood side of Isadora which she has problems coming to terms with. The quarrels she has with her sisters resemble conflicting voices in her head representing the fight

she has with her own doubts and fears: “Is that really how you expect to spend the rest of your life? Sitting in a room and writing poetry? Well why not? What makes it any worse than having nine kids?” (Jong 44). This constant blaming of each other goes on throughout the whole novel and is the perfect depiction of the choices a woman has to make, not only in regard to childbearing but in many other issues which will be discussed in the following chapters of this paper.

In *The Awakening* the perfect woman is Adèle Ratignolle, who is described as a loving wife and mother. She spends her summer making winter clothing for her children and seems to live only for them and her husband. Whenever she is mentioned, it is not as a person, but as a wife and mother. As Kearns puts it:

> One is nonetheless seldom vouchsafed more than a glimpse of Adèle at her most stereotypically “feminine”—sorting laundry, nurturing her husband, having her baby. What we see of their conversation is hardly flattering to Adèle, as she also takes on Léonce’s admonitory tones. (70-71)

She is an example of what Chopin calls a ‘mother-woman’. The word itself means that she is only a type of woman, seemingly not a real person. And Edna is not a ‘mother-woman’, which only adds to her guilt and struggle:

> In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. (Chopin 10)

This description matches the previously mentioned one in *Fear of Flying*: a mother whose life centers on her children and their needs as well as the needs of her husband. Through further scrutiny one can see that not only does Edna not want to be that kind of woman but she also seems to look down upon women like that. When she talks about Adele she even pities her:

> She was moved by a kind of commiseration for Madame Ratignolle –a pity for that colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life’s delirium. (Chopin 74)

Here an interesting issue arises – like the young woman in “The Yellow Wallpaper” Edna does not respect women who are happy being mothers and wives. The morality of such

a stance is questionable because it is hypocritical. They both judge other women because they themselves were judged. As Kearns puts it:

> For Edna seems fully to have accepted a masculinist definition of selfhood that brings her to be "fondly" condescending toward her "intimate" friend. In this, Edna performs an essential act of betrayal. Her gynocentric sympathies have, we know, never been allowed to develop, brought up as she has been in a stony, motherless household, but she is gradually revealed as a woman who cannot really like or value other women. (73)

The psychology behind this issue is very interesting because it is complex. Edna feels dissatisfied with her life and the way she is supposed to live it. She tries to find an alternative, but this alternative for her lies in accepting the only other way she knows – the male way of thinking and living. Therefore she starts to think about women around her like the men surrounding her, mockingly and condescendingly. This is a hypocritical act of which she is not even conscious. Her lack of rational thought and escape into dreams are the main reasons why she cannot be completely free as a woman and as Thornton says: "Simply put, she cannot see beyond the romantic prison of imagination. To illustrate her myopia, Chopin introduces Mademoiselle Reisz, whose clarity of mind offers a striking contrast to the essentially abstract nature of Edna's quest" (54). Madame Reisz does seem to be the only woman in all three works who has an identity without the need for a man:

> Mademoiselle Reisz functions as the only example of a free, independent woman whose hardiness Edna must emulate if she is to succeed and soar above "tradition and prejudice". There is no question that the older woman provides Edna with a more viable model than Adele Ratignolle, who is, after all, trapped without even knowing it. (Thornton 55)

## 3. Motherhood

The question of motherhood is an issue which is impossible to ignore in defining a woman as well as in the struggles of Edna, Isadora and the woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper". Being able to bear children is an essential part of the biology of women and deciding upon their attitudes about their own bodies and having children is one more difficulty they have to face.

Isadora in *Fear of Flying* is torn between the need to own her body and identity and the desire for a baby. The greater part of her fears pregnancy and sees it as losing control over her life, identity and body: "Pregnancy seemed like a tremendous abdication of control. Something growing inside of you which would eventually usurp your life" (Jong 38).

In *The Awakening*, Edna shares the opinion of children being almost a burden which prevents her from fulfilling her life. At the end of the novel, her children are the ones she thinks about as the ones who have brought on her downfall:

> 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. She was not thinking of these things when she walked down to the beach. (Chopin 151)

It is easy to call a woman who expresses such an opinion about her children a bad person and a bad mother. Women tend to feel guilt if they put their own needs first and only then the needs of their family. Society expects a woman to be fully dedicated to her children and husband and accuses her of being selfish if she thinks about her own needs too. In this aspect, children do act as a burden, even as oppressors, as Dix puts it: "Chief and foremost among these oppressors are children. In her desire to be a good mother, and to do everything possible for her child's welfare, the average mother permits herself to be made a martyr before she realizes it" (128). Here we see evidence of the before mentioned deeply rooted guilt in women.

In the quest to find what kind of a person they truly are, Edna, Isadora and the wife in "The Yellow Wallpaper" have to face the fact that they are much more than mothers and have to take a stand on the issue of child-bearing and even their own attitudes about their children.
In Edna's case there is a visible imbalance in the way she feels about her children and acts towards them. Sometimes she loves them dearly and at times she completely forgets about them:

> She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them. The year before they had spent part of the summer with their grandmother Pontellier in Iberville. Feeling secure regarding their happiness and welfare, she did not miss them except with an occasional intense longing. Their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her. (Chopin 24)

The last part of this paragraph is crucial for understanding this kind of behavior. Edna sees children as a responsibility (which they are) but having married young she was not prepared for everything raising a child meant. In a way, it is like a child giving birth to and raising a child, for Edna had not matured enough to take on such a responsible role. It is a role 'for which Fate had not fitted her' and it reveals another trait of Edna's. Some people like children, some like them less. When you are a woman, it seems a must to like children, although this is a hypocritical assumption and not true. Edna seems to be a person who is not that fond of children and while there is nothing wrong with that, her being a woman makes this issue an important one in her finding freedom.

It is interesting that all three women in the works of Chopin, Perkins Gilman and Jong show a picture of a mother or of motherhood vastly different from what is usually assumed in society. The wife in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is also not pictured as an adoring mother. On the topic of raising her child she says: "It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby! And yet I *cannot* be with him, it makes me so nervous" (Perkins Gilman 4). Thinking about this nervousness of hers makes you wonder about the causes of it. People are usually nervous when they are afraid or in an unknown situation they do not know how to respond to. It is possible that the case of Edna not being prepared for having children can be applied here too. She is a young woman, growing up with expectations of marriage which are nothing like the reality of it (this topic will be further discussed in the following chapter) who is required to take on such a responsible role without previously having been prepared for it. Another cause that might cross the reader's mind is a fairly new concept even today. She might have been suffering from postpartum/postnatal depression – the state when the mothers do not seem able to be around their children for the first few months. It might be highly unlikely but there is at least a certain possibility of it.

As already mentioned, in *Fear of Flying* Isadora expresses her concern that bearing a child could mean the loss of control over her own life. While in *The Awakening* and "The

Yellow Wallpaper" a topic like contraception could not have been discussed, it provides Isadora in *Fear of Flying* with a third option and she is clearly aware of the significance of it:

> The diaphragm has become a kind of fetish for me. A holy object, a barrier between my womb and men. Somehow the idea of bearing *his* baby angered me. Let him bear his own baby! If I have a baby I want it to be all *mine*. A girl like me, but better. A girl who'll also be able to have her own babies. It is not having babies in itself which seems unfair, but having babies for men. Babies who get *their* names. Babies who lock you by means of love to a man you have to please and serve on pain of abandonment. And love, after all, is the strongest lock. The one that chafes hardest and wears longest. And then I would be trapped for good. The hostage of my own feelings and my own child. (Jong 47)

In all of the opinions the women express regarding the topic of motherhood none of them blame the children themselves for any of the struggles they face. Rather, they are bitter that biology determines such an important part of their lives without them having much of a choice. As Edna witnesses Adèle giving birth to her child, her bitterness comes to view in one single sentence: "With an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature, she witnessed the scene of torture" (Chopin 146).

Without the context, this sentence could refer to a scene of murder or some other violent situation. The moment a woman gives birth to a child, it seems she can never be truly free of it, and as Kearns puts it: "She is eaten up by them and regenerated day after day, making nihilism a perpetually reiterated torture. She can feel that she exists as long as her children demand substance from her, but such appetitive verification is torturous" (77). This is an interesting concept and when looking at Edna's relationship with her children in *The Awakening* it is indeed true. She cannot exist as long as her children need her. She cannot free herself of the expectations of society without harming her children in the process. For example, when Edna leaves Adèle after her having given birth, Adèle warns her to "think of the children" (Chopin 146).

According to Franklin, "Adèle's 'Think of the children' reminds Edna of her 'duty' and may suggest, at least subconsciously to her, the reality that, if she lives as a fully sexual woman, a state to which she has now awakened, she will likely have to think of some future children, a horrid idea to one struggling so desperately for her independence" (525).

Still, she does not give up and eventually finds a way which she sees as the perfect escape. In a conversation with Adèle, she expresses probably the most meaningful thought she has had: "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 62). At the time she says it she is still uncertain about the true meaning of it, she only feels it to be true. But later she realizes and concludes that "they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (Chopin 152).

In the end, each in her own way, the three heroines come to terms with the issues of motherhood and the idea of a 'perfect' woman; Edna and the wife in "The Yellow Wallpaper" by escaping from their former life and Isadora by coming to terms with herself as a woman.

## 4. The Artist

As previously discussed, the three heroines in the works of Chopin, Perkins Gilman and Jong have similar attitudes and face the same challenges on their path to self-realization. Another trait they have in common is their inner artistic ability. All three of them, in varying amounts, are talented and use art as a form of expressing themselves. Isadora in *Fear of Flying* is a poet, Edna in *The Awakening* draws, and the young woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" writes. They may not all strive to become artists, but art and creativity are two things which allow them to express themselves and are also an important tool in discovering themselves.

In literature, as in any field of art, men have always been dominant. What was written about women and issues close to them was written by men, and women who studied these works could only do so through a male perspective. This is the reason why art is so important in the lives of the three women because it offers them a way to discover the world through their own eyes and not through the male ones as has been the case so far. Isadora addresses this issue in *Fear of Flying* by talking about her first encounters with women in literature: "I learned about women from men. I saw them through the eyes of male writers. Of course, I didn't think of them as *male* writers. I thought of them as *writers*, as authorities, as gods who knew and were to be trusted completely" (Jong 154).

Again the reader encounters the same notion as in the beginning – women defined through men. A young girl reading about herself, but seen through the eyes of a person who could not possibly understand all the complexity, simply because the person never experienced it. Growing up while reading about yourself through the eyes of a man makes it hard to define yourself without the help of one in later years.

Isadora worked for a newspaper while living in Germany with her husband and there she started two novels. The consequence of male dominance in the literature she reads leads her to make both of the narrators in these novels male because she assumes that "nobody would be interested in a woman's point of view" (Jong 118). Furthermore she states: "Until women started writing books there was only one side of the story. Throughout all of history, books were written with sperm, not menstrual blood" (Jong 24). This paragraph contains the main reason why it is important for the three main characters in the discussed works to write and draw. They are telling their side of the stories of their life and learning from it.

The heroine's gender plays an important role even in this aspect of their lives. Like in literature, where you have writers and female or women writers, it is apparent that as a woman you cannot be an artist without having an additional adjective or noun to mark your gender as well. This is the reason why Isadora struggles with accepting herself. Even when she was a teenager this bothered her. There is evidence of this in the conversation she has with one of her many psychiatrists, to whom she talks about the loss of her menstruation due to eating disorders and the reason why she does not want it to come back. She gives him the following reasons: "Because I don't want to be a woman. Because it's too confusing. Shaw says you can't be a woman and an artist. Having babies uses you up, he says. And I want to be an artist. That's all I've ever wanted" (Jong 156). It seems like there is no middle ground here – you are not allowed to be a woman and an artist, because to be an artist you have to neglect an important part of what makes you a woman.

Nitzsche discusses this incongruence as well:

> The conflict between Isadora's body and mind, or the disjunction between the woman and the artist. At fourteen, for example, Isadora saw this conflict as an either/or dilemma: *either* a woman accepts her sexuality (through intercourse with Steve, her first lover), thereby implicitly denying the artistic drive, or a woman denies her sexuality (through masturbation, through starvation to stop menstrual periods) to retain the option of being an artist. (93)

While for a man his sexuality is of no great importance when he defines himself as an artist, for the women in the works of Chopin, Perkins Gilman and Jong their gender is a major issue. Isadora further asks an interesting question connected to the topic: "Why was it that so many women artist who had renounced having children could then paint nothing but mothers and children? It was hopeless. If you were female and talented, life was a trap no matter which way you turned" (Jong 157). She has a difficult time imagining whether it is possible to be both a woman and an artist and the main reason for this lies in what her mother kept telling her: "If it weren't for you, I'd have been a famous artist" (Jong 38). It is no wonder Isadora has such an opinion about both herself and being an artist while growing up in an environment which led her to believe it was impossible to combine these two sides of her.

In *The Awakening*, Edna is not so much an artist as Isadora as her artistic side does not really have a chance to develop because she struggles with defining herself first and only when she does that can she focus on other aspects of herself. Franklin supports this thesis as well:

> When she throws herself feverishly into sketching, she especially seems a dilettante. Her work is erratic and controlled by her moods; she needs sunny days to paint, but her dark moods are dragging her down. As she begins to sell her sketches, she becomes more confident of their gathering force, but Chopin places all this development so far into the background that the reader intuits Edna's struggle to become an artist will not be her major battle, for the more rudimentary one of developing self comes first. (522)

Edna's paintings seem to have value and there are buyers, but this fact alone is not enough to make her think she could be a great artist: "Edna is responding to market value—her paintings, reassuring to the addressee, sell—but she sees no genuine artistic value in what she is able to produce" (Kearns 72). Unlike Edna, Mademoiselle Reisz is a character that represents a true artist and Edna realizes this as well as the fact that she does not have the most important traits an artist must have, which Mademoiselle Reisz does have. In the end, when Edna finds her way out of the struggle she is stuck in, she remembers the words Mademoiselle Reisz told her and says that she "would have laughed, perhaps sneered, if she knew! 'And you call yourself an artist! What pretensions, Madame! The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies'" (Chopin 152).

Likewise, the wife in "The Yellow Wallpaper" cannot truly be called an artist, but she uses writing as a means of expression and that is the most important trait of an artistic person. In the chapter about husbands and marriage there was already mention of how her husband does not want her to do any work and get only rest, and he does not like her to write either. It is clear that forbidding someone to write is an attempt to prevent that person from expressing their opinions; an attempt at silencing what might come out of it. Because what could come out of it might destroy everything they had before, their marriage and his dominance.

In addition to censorship by other people in *Fear of Flying* Isadora realizes she is the one who prevented herself from writing about what she truly wanted as well: "Even without fascism, I censored myself. I refused to let myself write about what really moved me: my violent feelings about Germany, the unhappiness in my marriage, my sexual fantasies, my childhood, my negative feelings about my parents" (Jong 67). This censorship can be linked with the discussed feeling of guilt. Isadora feels guilty because writing about what bothered her included writing about people surrounding her and these people would find out the truth she most likely wanted to hide. Isadora lives in a million contradictions, being afraid of being an artist and telling the truth, but again feeling guilt over suppressing her talent. She longs to

have a life without pain and turbulence, but she forgets an important fact, of which her lover Adrian reminds her:

> You're not a secretary; you're a poet. What makes you think your life is going to be uncomplicated? What makes you think you can avoid all conflict? What makes you think you can avoid pain? Or passion? There's something to be said for passion. Can't you ever allow yourself and forgive yourself? (Jong 169)

## 5. Of Husbands and Marriage

After discussing what being a woman means in the works of Chopin, Perkins Gilman and Jong, and after addressing issues like motherhood and children it is impossible not to scrutinize the notion of marriage as well. From a traditional viewpoint the notions of having children and being married are supposed to go together and therefore also play a major role in the lives of Isadora, Edna and the young woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper".

There are quite a few similarities in the attitude these women have towards the institution of marriage. The first one is the recurring idea of having expected marriage to be different than it turned out to be. For example, Isadora in *Fear of Flying* states that "you expected *not* to desire any other men after marriage" (Jong 10). The reader can see that marriage is being presented or imagined to be a union which fulfills all your prior needs until you actually get married and see that this is not the case.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper" one of the first things we learn about the husband of the heroine is that he seems to have a condescending attitude towards her after he mocks her thoughts about the house they chose for their summer vacation: "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage" (Perkins Gilman 1). She is questioning why the house stood uninhabited for so long and her husband does not take her seriously but laughs it off. What is even worse is the fact that she finds this kind of behavior normal in a marriage and actually expects it.

As to Edna's attitude towards marriage, it changes as she spends more time thinking about herself and her position in society. From the way she thinks and feels about Léonce it is clear that she expected marriage not to be like the infatuations she had had as a young girl; she thought of marriage as necessarily being deprived of passion and great emotions: "She grew fond of her husband, realizing with some unaccountable satisfaction that no trace of passion or excessive and fictitious warmth colored her affection, thereby threatening its dissolution" (Chopin 24). This is the way she thought marriage should be like, not a union out of love but security and little emotional satisfaction. There is further evidence of this when she talks about the reasons why she married him in the first place:

> Her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate. It was in the midst of her secret great passion that she met him. He fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing, and pressed his 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 to her marriage with a Catholic, and we need seek no further for the motives which led her to accept Monsieur Pontellier for her husband. (Chopin 24)

The reasons she married her husband were not love or friendship. He was there, he treated her nicely and her family was against it so she said yes. There is no mention of her having any other expectations from marriage. What is even more interesting is that not only her marriage to Léonce stems from such dubious reasons but it was actually common. Considering all of this, it comes as no great surprise that she gets disappointed after analyzing her life so far. So much even that she refused to attend her sister's wedding, saying that "a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth" (Chopin 87).

In Erica Jong's work the issue of marriage is a recurring theme and most of Isadora's thoughts are connected to it or one way or another lead her back towards it. Mostly her thoughts show her negative attitude about it, especially when she talks about how she felt in her society being single, even in 20th century America:

> It is heresy in America to embrace any way of life except as half of a couple. Solitude is un-American. It may be condoned in a man—especially if he is a "glamorous bachelor" who "dates starlets" during a brief interval between marriages. But a woman is always presumed to be alone as a result of abandonment, not choice. And she is treated that way; as a pariah. There is simply no dignified way for a woman to live alone. (Jong 10)

Even though *Fear of Flying* is set more than seventy years after "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Awakening* nothing much has changed in regard to women living alone and leading their own life. A woman is still not seen as complete without a man and this fact accosts for much of the trauma the women go through while searching for their own identity.

Further evidence for Isadora's belief that she is not complete without a man can be found in the paragraph where she actually admits this to herself:

> All my fantasies included marriage. No sooner did I imagine myself running away from one man than I envisioned myself tying up with another. I was like a boat that always had to have a port of call. I simply couldn't imagine myself without a man. Without one, I felt lost as a dog without a master; rootless, faceless, undefined. (Jong 80)

But Isadora is not to be stereotyped as a woman who is against marriage; even after everything she went through she still believes in it: "I was not against marriage. I believed in it in fact. It was necessary to have one best friend in a hostile world, one person who'd always be loyal to you. But what about all those other longings which after a while marriage did nothing much to appease?" (Jong 9). It is clear that Isadora does not believe marriage to be a bad institution *per se* but she doubts that the form it is in now allows a person's needs to be fulfilled. The wrong expectations these women have about marriage are the main reason they do not find satisfaction in it. Isadora's belief in marriage is supported by the fact that she does know people who are in good marriages and do not feel miserable about being married:

> I know some good marriages. Second marriages mostly. Marriages where both people have outgrown the bullshit of me-Tarzan, you-Jane and are just trying to get through their days by helping each other, being good to each other, doing the chores as they come up and not worrying too much about who does what. (Jong 81)

According to Isadora the key problem that prevents marriages from being good is the traditional division of roles, without taking into consideration whether this is actually the most practical approach in a given situation. In *The Awakening* and "The Yellow Wallpaper" this truly is the case.

In *The Awakening* at the beginning of the story the reader witnesses a situation which proves Isadora's claim. After coming home late in the evening, Edna's husband goes to look after the children, who are in bed. He goes to Edna and informs her that one of the children seems to have fever, which Edna knows is not true because she had seen them not long ago. Her husband does not believe her but neither does he take care of the assumed sick child. Instead he criticizes Edna:

> 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 7)

The oddity of this lies in the fact that he insists his wife to take care of the children, but still he does not believe her when she tells him the child has no fever. He does not allow her autonomy even though he claims not to be able to take care of both providing money and protecting the family. In all three works of fiction the analyzed husbands have a similar tendency to treat their wives as incapable of deciding for themselves.

In “The Yellow Wallpaper” this is quite obvious from the beginning. The husband treats his wife almost like a child and decides about her life and the way she spends her day. The wife seems to suffer from a kind of depressive disorder, she is tired, exhausted, and experiencing phases of manic happiness and phases of deep depression. But her husband does not believe it: “John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no *reason* to suffer, and that satisfies him” (Perkins Gilman 3). As Edna’s husband does not believe her about the child, so does John not believe his wife when it comes to her own feelings. Furthermore she says: “John says if I feel so, I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself-before him, at least, and that makes me very tired” (Perkins Gilman 2). It almost sounds like the way you would treat a child when it is not behaving the way you want. It is not important what his wife feels or says, it only matters what he thinks she feels. On another occasion, she is writing in her room and sees her husband approaching and says: “There comes John, and I must put this away,-he hates to have me write a word” (Perkins Gilman 3). Again the burden of changing her habits to please her husband is on the wife. He does not like her writing, so she does not as well, at least not in front of him.

Another proof to the theory that her husband treats her almost like a child is visible in the fact that he even decides whom she will or will not visit: “When I get really well, John says we will ask Cousin Henry and Julia down for a long visit; but he says he would as soon put fireworks in my pillow-case as to let me have those kinds of stimulating people about now” (Perkins Gilman 4).

In another instance she feels unwell and describes that “dear John gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed, and sat by me and read to me till it tired my head. He said I was his darling and his comfort and all he had, and that I must take care of myself for his sake, and keep well” (Perkins Gilman 7). This is the exact way one would try to soothe a child who is ill or had a nightmare.

An interesting symbolism connected to marriage can be found in the fact that the bed in the bedroom of their summerhouse is impossible to move. As the wife tries to move the bed she exclaims: “This bed will *not* move!” (Perkins Gilman, 14). The marital bed is a clear symbol of their marriage and as she is not able to move the bed on her own, so is she not able to change anything in their marriage. Her husband ordered her to rest most of the day and while she does, she says: “I lie here on this great immovable bed, – it is nailed down, I believe—and follow that pattern about by the hour” (Perkins Gilman 6). Not only can she not move the bed but it is actually nailed down, even firmer than it seemed. The fact that she

spends hours looking at the pattern on the bed can freely be translated as her thinking about her own life and position in her marriage to John.

Like John, so does Léonce approve of his wife only as long as she acts the way he wishes. As Edna grows stronger and more independent, her husband becomes more dissatisfied:

> Mr. Pontellier had been a rather courteous husband so long as he met a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife. But her new and unexpected line of conduct completely bewildered him. It shocked him. Then her absolute disregard for her duties as a wife angered him. When Mr. Pontellier became rude, Edna grew insolent. She had resolved never to take another step backward. (Chopin 75)

It is clear that Léonce does not really think of Edna as a person, only as a wife and mother who is expected to fulfill her duties. Moreover, there are moments when she seems to him to be only one more possession he bought and takes care of. When Edna comes home from a day at the beach he tells her that she is "burnt beyond recognition" (Chopin 3) while "looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (Chopin 3).

As shown, marriage is far from what all three women expected it to be. As Isadora in *Fear of Flying* goes through one of her phases during which she thinks her unhappiness comes from not having stayed with her husband Bennett and her leaving the good marriage they have, she remembers how it actually was while she was with him:

> But then the fantasy exploded. It burst like the bubble it was. I thought of all those mornings in New York when I had awakened with my husband and felt just as lonely. All those lonely mornings we stared at each other across the orange juice and across the coffee cups. All those lonely moments measured out in coffee spoons, in laundry bills, in used toilet paper rolls, in dirty dishes, in broken plates, in cancelled checks, in empty Scotch bottles. Marriage could be lonely too. Marriage could be desolate. (Jong 253)

An important question she asks herself is: "Not: when did it all go wrong? But: when was it ever right?" (Jong 80). She sees that if there is to be a good marriage it cannot be built the way it always was, the traditional way where the man is dominant and the woman subservient. The marriage of Edna's parents can only serve as another proof of this. Edna's father comes to visit them and gives Léonce advice on how to handle the 'problem' – Edna's growing independence – and this is what he says: "You are too lenient, too lenient by far,

Léonce, asserted the Colonel. Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it. The Colonel was perhaps unaware that he had coerced his own wife into her grave" (Chopin 94).

Marriage, in its traditional form, is one of the greatest obstacles in the lives of all three heroines in *The Awakening*, "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Fear of Flying*. All three of them come to the same conclusion that the only way out of its misery is finding their own independence. For Isadora this means overcoming her fear of being alone; the main motive why she even gets married. For Edna it means breaking free of the bonds which tie her to her husband and children; and for the wife in "The Yellow Wallpaper" it means the figurative escape of the woman in the wallpaper.

## 6. Of Lovers

In *The Awakening* and *Fear of Flying* an important influence are not only the husbands, but also the lovers Edna and Isadora have affairs with. What they have in common is the fact that they each represent a side of the heroine's personality the women are either exploring or becoming aware of.

Isadora's first husband Brian, who was later discovered to be suffering from a psychosis which made him think he is Jesus Christ, represents her need for intellectual stimulation, for communication and discussing various concepts and ideas about life. Her second husband Bennett represents the opposite, her need for physical stimulation. Adrian, the lover she leaves Bennett for to travel across Europe, presents her unconscious drive for freedom which forces her to face her fears, even against her will. According to Nitzsche,

> unfortunately, each man she chooses fulfills only one half of her divided self, either her body or her mind: Brian before his psychosis represents the intellectual who prefers a sexless relationship in marriage; Bennett, in contrast, represents the sexy psychiatrist who rarely talks to his wife about shared interests; Adrian, finally, talks incessantly but remains frequently impotent, similar then to Brian. (93)

Throughout the whole novel, Isadora is torn between Bennett and Adrian. It is clear that her indecisiveness when it comes to the two men symbolizes her inner straining to accept both her mind and body. As Isadora herself says: "They only represented the struggle within me" (Jong 73). By 'they' she means Bennett and Adrian. The psychological torture this puts her through is made only worse by her feeling guilty about leaving Bennett even though he actually did not do her wrong:

> Ever since Adrian had appeared on the scene, Bennett had become so gallant and solicitous. He was wooing me all over again. It made things so much harder. If he only would be a bastard! If only he would be like those husbands in novels—nasty, tyrannical, *deserving* of cuckoldry. Instead he was sweet. And the hell of it was that his sweetness didn't diminish my hunger for Adrian one bit. (Jong 76)

Isadora sees no way of reconciling both of her needs, both of the men in her life. As she puts it: "there just didn't seem any way to get the best of both exuberance and stability in your life" (Jong 74). Clearly, the stability in her life is Bennett and the exuberance is Adrian.

She comes to ask an interesting question regarding the topic: “Do two men perhaps add up to one whole person?” (Jong 126). Figuratively speaking, this would mean that she needs to accept both of her sides, her mind and her body to be a complete person.

When talking about what Isadora’s affairs represent, Nitzsche makes an interesting connection to the title of the book. According to her, Isadora’s ‘fear of flying’ is not only her fear of being alone:

> In her relationships with all of her men, especially with Adrian, she encounters the second fear of flying, consisting of those social or sexual inhibitions that prevent her from realizing her fantasy of the archetypal casual sexual union during which bodies flow together and zippers melt away (described at length on pp. 11-14). Only with Adrian does she overcome her fear sufficiently to brave convention. (Nitzsche 90)

When Isadora’s attitude towards Adrian is considered, it is clear that it is based on her sexual attraction to him, although he later turns out to be mainly impotent. She decides to leave her husband for that exact same reason – to discover her sexuality which was oppressed or at least dimmed in her marriage. Adrian represents one further step which will take her to her freedom, and this step is overcoming her sexual inhibitions and moral dilemmas she has about it.

Nitzsche mentions another type of ‘fear of flying’, namely, Isadora’s fear of being alone: “Finally, in her relationship with herself, the most important relationship of the three, she fears confronting and being herself: living independently of men, without their approval. Thus when Adrian abandons her in Paris, he forces her to survive alone, to ‘fly’” (90). Again, Adrian becomes the most important agent in Isadora’s path to self-realization and independence by literally leaving her in a situation where she can count on no one but herself and in the end this is what makes her realize she is strong enough to be alone.

Adrian also serves as a medium to express Isadora’s doubts and dissatisfaction with her own life. He states all the things Isadora cannot seem to say out loud or admit to herself:

> Look—I don’t see what’s so super about the sort of hypocrisy you live with. Pretending to all that crap about fidelity and monogamy, living in a million contradictions, being kept by your husband as a sort of spoilt talented baby and never standing on your own two feet. At least we’d be honest. Nobody would exploit anyone and nobody would have to feel guilty for being dependent... (Jong 124)

Adrian represents the side of Isadora which doubts all the conventions she has forced herself to live by, although she does not really believe them to be truly deep down inside her. Isadora's lovers are a means of escaping her unsatisfactory *status quo* but they are not limited to only that; all of them are a challenge, a test she has to pass on her way to independence. Nitzsche even compares Isadora's relationships with Brian and Adrian as a type of prison she has to break out of:

> First, Brian holds her hostage in their bedroom during the final period of their marriage when he becomes completely psychotic, an ironic prison given his previous neglect of her sexual needs. Second, Bennett, the Freudian psychiatrist and father figure, has imprisoned her in a motel room in San Antonio, in an Army ghetto in Heidelberg, and in their silent marriage, about which she feels ambivalent, as it expresses only one side of herself… (96)

The same notion of lovers representing different sides of the heroine appears in *The Awakening*. It has already been mentioned that Edna escapes her suffocating life through romantic daydreams about men, but later in her life her lovers are more than fantasies; they present the struggle in her.

An interesting fact about her early romantic fantasies is that the men are always unreachable; they represent an ideal which she cannot touch because they are not a part of her life. The first man she had romantic daydreams about was a cavalry officer, a distant idol she could not get close to:

> At a very early age—perhaps it was when she traversed the ocean of waving grass—she remembered that she had been passionately enamored of a dignified and sad-eyed cavalry officer who visited her father in Kentucky. She could not leave his presence when he was there, nor remove her eyes from his face, which was something like Napoleon's, with a lock of black hair falling across the forehead. (Chopin 23)

The second infatuation is likewise a man she cannot reach: "At another time her affections were deeply engaged by a young gentleman who visited lady on a neighboring plantation. It was after they went to Mississippi to live. The young man was engaged to be married to the young lady..." (Chopin 23)

The third man she fell for like that represents an even bigger ideal because he is a tragedian, not a person from her surroundings but someone she cannot even see on a regular basis, only dream about:

> She was a grown young woman when she was overtaken by what she supposed to be the climax of her fate. It was when the face and figure of a great tragedian began to haunt her imagination and stir her senses. The persistence of the infatuation lent it an aspect of genuineness. The hopelessness of it colored it with the lofty tones of a great passion. (Chopin 23)

When it comes to accepting her own sexuality, it is no wonder she had been infatuated by distant men. She was too young and too inexperienced to accept this side of her and therefore being in love with a man she cannot possibly end up with is a safe solution – she can experience the first romantic sensations but without the 'danger' of having to face her sexuality. Franklin also supports the thesis of Edna being enamored with men she cannot be with:

> Her early erotic fantasies tell us even more about her habit of longing for the unattainable and her later refusal to learn from these experiences. They centre on three unreachable men: a cavalry officer, who appears when she is too young to love; a young man engaged to her neighbor; and a "great tragedian," whose picture she keeps. (Franklin 516)

This habit of Edna's changes only slightly after the summer when she meets Robert Lebrun, her first true lover. He is not a distant ideal, he is a man she develops feelings for and interacts with. With him, she for the first time experiences sensation of romantic love. Kearns sees Robert as yet another escape from her life, just like the romantic daydreams had been when she was younger. She asserts that "Edna, feeling herself inadequate, can temporarily envision the traditional antidote for this ailment in Robert Lebrun" (83). By ailment the author means Edna's marriage to Léonce. Her affair with Robert is not based on true love. As Franklin states, "Edna does not love the individual, only what she has projected upon them" (514). Here the reader can recognize the same notion as in *Fear of Flying*; the lovers do not represent people, they represent issues the heroines have to solve.

Robert Lebrun represents Edna's need for romantic love and her other lover, Alcée Arobin, whom she meets after Robert leaves for Mexico, clearly stands for her sexual side which has so far been kept dormant. As described in the novel, "Alcée Arobin was absolutely nothing to her. Yet his presence, his manners, the warmth of his glance, and above all the touch of his lips upon her hand had acted like a narcotic upon her" (Chopin 102). In this description there is no trace of Edna liking him for the person he is, for his qualities and personality. The solely superficial traits draw him to her and this is an important experience for her. It is further described that "he sometimes talked in a way that astonished her at first

and brought the crimson into her face; in a way that pleased her at last, appealing to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her" (Chopin 103). The 'animalism that stirs impatiently within her' is her sexuality which only now awakens.

Franklin mentions her sexual side awakening as well and explains that "as she returns to New Orleans, Edna must differentiate between her sexual awakening and her awakening to self, a difficulty because both are occurring simultaneously" (Franklin, 519). Here lies the key struggle which Edna faces. Like Isadora in *Fear of Flying*, she has to decide whether she will let her opposing sides control her or whether she will be the one taking control.

Edna in the end does take control, which is visible in something she says to Robert when they meet again after he comes back from Mexico:

> You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both. (Chopin 143)

Edna finally realized she is no one's possession and she is the only one who can decide about her fate. Even though her love to Robert seemed like a grand emotion in the beginning, Edna comes to realize that not even love is worth to sacrifice herself for and finds her peace, for once not in the figure of man.

## 7. Of Doctors and Madness

In addition to husbands and lovers, there is a third category of men who play an important role in the lives of Edna, the wife in "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Isadora. Those men are either doctors or psychiatrists and analysts. They serve as representatives of a view on women which finds them to be controlled mostly by biology or psychological motives present in the stereotypes of women: moods, hormones and bad temper.

This is mostly visible in "The Yellow Wallpaper". John, the husband, is a physician and as already discussed, dominant when it comes to the relationship in their marriage. He thinks he knows what is wrong with his wife and does not believe her opinions because she is a woman: "John is a physician, and *perhaps*— (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind—) *perhaps* that is one reason I do not get well faster. You see, he does not believe I am sick!" (Perkins Gilman 1). For John it only matters what he knows and can see and he only smiles at his wife's beliefs as you would smile at a child who is telling a story it made up. Moreover, not only does he not believe her when she says she does not feel good, he assures other people of this in her name:

> If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression-a slight hysterical tendency-what is one to do. My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing. (Perkins Gilman 1)

It almost seems like the young woman is living in an environment which conspires against her – in this case, the men who are most important in her life; her husband and brother. The fact that they are both doctors only adds to the amount of authority they represent. Because her husband, the authority in their marriage, believes her not to be sick, there should be no reason for her to think she is sick. This is not only illogical and hypocritical but also the symbol of how the misbalance in the relationship between a man and a woman twists reality and puts the woman in a position where she has no way of defending herself.

Not only does John not take his wife seriously, he even threats that he will send her away if she does not get better, as if her will was the only thing standing in the way of her getting better: "John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall. But I don't want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is

just like John and my brother, only more so!" (Perkins Gilman 6). This is a frightening image because many women were treated this way in the past. If you do not act the way your husband or doctor wishes you to act, you will be sent to a place where they will know how to handle your disobedience. As can be seen, the men in the novels and short story do not tolerate any behavior other than the traditional one they expect of a wife.

As soon as a woman starts acting in a way which displeases her husband, his first thought is that there is something wrong with her. In Edna's case in *The Awakening* Léonce thinks his wife has mental problems when she starts standing up to him and demanding her rights:

> It sometimes entered Mr. Pontellier's mind to wonder if his wife were not growing a little imbalanced mentally. He could plainly see that she was not herself. That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world. (Chopin 75)

Léonce consults their family doctor about Edna's behavior and the conversation strangely resembles the way two farmers would talk about a cow or a horse: "Nothing hereditary?" he asked, seriously. "Nothing peculiar about her family antecedents, is there?" "Oh, no, indeed! She comes of sound old Presbyterian Kentucky stock" (Chopin 87). As strange as it is, the fact that they talk about Edna's 'stock' represents the way men see women – as possessions they buy to serve them.

The answer Léonce gets when asking about how to behave only brings forth further evidence of men seeing women as prone to be overly controlled by their hormones and moods, presenting them as beings who are not able to act in a logical, reasonable way:

> It would require an inspired psychologist to deal successfully with them. And when ordinary fellows like you and me attempt to cope with their idiosyncrasies the result is bungling. Most women are moody and whimsical. This is some passing whim of your wife, due to some cause or causes which you and I needn't try to fathom. But it will pass happily over, especially if you let her alone. (Chopin 88)

Men take their independence for granted, but when women start acting the same way they think it must be a whim of theirs, because as women, they are not to be taken seriously. Again this image resembles one of a child throwing a tantrum and the parent thinking that it will pass easily if he just ignores the child. The consequences of such a treatment of women

are vast: from making them miserable to actually driving them insane; from making them doubt themselves to making them think they truly are beings only controlled by their moods.

In Edna's case this is apparent when she talks about an oppressive feeling she experiences – it is a new sensation she only came to feel now that she realizes her position in her marriage and in life in general:

> 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, which had directed her footsteps to the path which they had taken. She was just having a good cry all to herself. (Chopin 8)

In this paragraph the reader can see that Edna does not give in to her whims and she is not acting irrationally; her misery is brought about by her unhappiness in life which she only just begins to understand. That she still does not completely understand all the origins of her unhappiness becomes apparent when she tries to explain to herself why she is crying in the first place:

> She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life. They seemed never before to have weighed much against the abundance of her husband's kindness and a uniform devotion which had come to be tacit and self-understood. (Chopin 8)

The interesting part in this paragraph is that she states that such feelings are common in her married life which means she never felt like that in her earlier life. Her feelings are not a whim; they have an actual cause in her married life. Edna experiences distinct phases of opposing feelings – great happiness and great misery as well. When she is happy, it seems almost maniacal:

> There were days when she was very happy without knowing why. She was happy to be alive and breathing, when her whole being seemed to be one with the sunlight, the color, the odors, the luxuriant warmth of some perfect Southern day. She liked then to wander alone into strange and unfamiliar places. She discovered many a sunny, sleepy corner, fashioned to dream in. And she found it good to dream and to be alone and unmolested. (Chopin 76)

When read without context, such phases of happiness may not seem odd but they are followed by periods of depression which are described as follows: "There were days when she

was unhappy, she did not know why—when it did not seem worthwhile to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead; when life appeared to her like a grotesque pandemonium and humanity like worms struggling blindly toward inevitable annihilation" (Chopin 76).

The interesting thing is that the wife in "The Yellow Wallpaper" experiences similar mood changes: "I don't feel as if it was worthwhile to turn my hand over for anything, and I'm getting dreadfully fretful and querulous. I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time. Of course I don't when John is here, or anybody else, but when I am alone" (Perkins Gilman 6). At first glance, the reader could easily misjudge these mood swings as whims, just like the husbands of the heroines do. But one has to keep in mind the circumstances in which Edna and the young woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" live. Both are controlled by their dominant husbands and treated as inferior. When they speak up, their husbands either mock them or accuse them of being bad wives and mothers. The women are completely helpless and no one cares to sympathize with them.

The short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" is the most symbolic among the three discussed here and therefore the influence of society on the wife must be taken as symbolic as well. The main focus of the story is the freeing of the woman in the wallpaper. As discussed in previous chapters, this stands for the wife's own struggle to free herself from her oppressive surroundings. The wife becomes more and more obsessed with the pattern on wallpaper and if taken on a superficial level, this could be simply presented as the wife indeed going mad. On this same level the story would be that of a young woman who goes insane. But since it is full of symbolism, the wife's 'escape' in the madness of her mind actually stands for her escaping the cuffs society lays upon her in regard to the behavior expected of women.

Her behavior becomes more and more erratic and she starts suspecting her husband and his sister of plotting against her. Both of them disapprove of her obsession with the wallpaper but she does not give in; instead she says: "Of course I never mention it to them any more — I am too wise, — but I keep watch of it all the same" (Perkins Gilman 8). Her husband thinks it is only a nervous condition and sees it as an illness he can cure:

> Indeed he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after each meal. It is a very bad habit I am convinced, for you see I don't sleep. And that cultivates deceit, for I don't tell them I'm awake — O no! The fact is I am getting a little afraid of John. He seems very queer sometimes, and even Jennie has an inexplicable look. (Perkins Gilman 10)

Taken literally, it might look as if the wife is developing a kind of paranoid disorder, but the suspicion towards her husband and his sister is rather a symbolic questioning of the way things were before and of the influence they have (or had had) on her. In the end, her husband thinks the wallpaper is the reason of her illness. Seeing it symbolically, her husband blames his wife's ideas about gender equality and personal freedom for her behavior which he disapproves of. He proceeds to tell his wife that he thinks she is doing better and the wife responds by saying: "I turned it off with a laugh, I had no intention of telling him it was *because* of the wallpaper —he would make fun of me. He might even want to take me away" (Perkins Gilman 11). The wife is now the one ridiculing the husband for his beliefs that not thinking about the wallpaper (her own independency) makes her feel better.

In *Fear of Flying* the situation with doctors is multiplied. Isadora's husband is an analyst and therefore they are always surrounded by some kind of doctor or psychiatrist who impose their view onto them. On the flight to Vienna at the beginning of her story she describes the people on her plane as follows: "A planeload of shrinks and my adolescence all around me. Stranded in midair over the Atlantic with 117 analysts many of whom had heard my long, sad story and none of whom remembered it" (Jong 5). Unlike Edna and the wife from "The Yellow Wallpaper," Isadora lives in a surrounding even more controlled by 'higher authorities':

> I'm not talking about the first years of analysis when you're hard at work discovering your own craziness so that you can get some work done instead of devoting your *entire* life to your neurosis. I'm talking about when both you and your husband have been in analysis so long as you can remember and it's gotten to the point where no decision, no matter how small, can be made without both analysts having an imaginary caucus on a cloud above your head. (Jong 7)

Even though Isadora's situation differs from the one Edna and the wife in "The Yellow Wallpaper" are in, the same judgmental attitude of the doctors is present. In the conversation with one of her analysts she argues that using her seductiveness as a woman to get what she wants from men makes her feel dishonest and that she thinks women should be more open about their needs: "But Dr. Kolner could only see anything which vaguely smacked of Women's Lib as a neurotic problem. Any protestation against conventional female behavior had to be 'phallic' and 'aggressive'" (Jong 7). Again a doctor judges a patient by her gender and not solely by the problems she has, just as Edna's family doctor and John in "The Yellow Wallpaper" do.

## 8. The End of the Quest

After a brief discussion of all the major issues Isadora, Edna and the wife in "The Yellow Wallpaper" face, the only thing left to do is to look at where their struggles and decisions have taken them and whether they succeeded in realizing their potential and becoming independent. Although all three of them faced the same problems and similar situations, the results of their efforts and struggles vary.

Edna's story ends with her swimming out into the ocean, and presumably drowning, if taken in a literal way. She commits suicide to escape her impossible situation, but more importantly to avoid hurting her children (this topic has been discussed in the chapter about motherhood) by breaking the conventions of her time and running away with Robert. If she had stayed, she would have been judged her whole life for abandoning her family and being a bad mother and wife. Edna realizes that she is the only one who can set herself free:

> To-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be someone else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn't matter about Léonce Pontellier—but Raoul and Etienne!" She understood now clearly what she had meant long ago when she said to Adèle Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children. (Chopin 151)

Franklin argues that "Chopin has led us to sympathize with Edna's rejection of conventional illusions of fulfillment: children, marriage, even lovers. But she is left to confront solitude, presented throughout as magnetic and destructive" (526). In the last scene when Edna swims out into the deep water, she indeed stands there alone, even naked because she took off all her clothing. This solitude represents the last struggle she faces and Edna decides to leave everything behind (her nakedness symbolizes her shedding of everything which has burdened her) and go forward.

The last scene is open to interpretation. One way to understand it would be as a suicide which frees her of the earthly struggle she does not have the power or will to deal with anymore. Kearns supports this theory by saying: "As if it is inevitable, Edna kills herself, but one must see that Chopin has driven her to it, a sacrifice to the seemingly irreconcilable imperatives of autonomy and motherhood" (Kearns 78).

And if it were not for the last few words, this assumption would be logical. But as she swims further and further it is indicated that "she heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air" (Chopin 153).

This makes one cautious of interpreting the end literally, as Edna merely drowning. It seems as though her life comes to the point where her path to self-discovery began – to her first infatuation with the cavalry officer. One way to understand this is to present it as a picture of how Edna sees the afterlife or even the last memory she has as she draws her last breath.

But since *The Awakening* has a somewhat poetic, mysterious undertone this end can be interpreted as symbolic. Edna left everything behind which burdened her and in her solitude discovered a completely new level of existence – she is alone but not unhappy. She is calm and finally free of everything which oppressed her. The end does not seem like an ending. The reader is left to speculate about what happened to Edna and whether she actually committed suicide. Kearns summarizes the meaning of the ending in Chopin's story in only one sentence: "In this, of course, she merely shows one the door that opens onto the labyrinth" (88). For Edna it seems the quest is over and she found her freedom, but there might still be a story to tell which Chopin does not share.

Isadora in *Fear of Flying* is left in Paris, abandoned by Adrian and forced to face her fear of independence. Like Edna, she comes to realize that marriage, children and love cannot set her free. Isadora asks herself:

> Was there no way out? Was loneliness universal? Was restlessness a fact of life? Was it better to acknowledge *that* than to keep on looking for false solutions? Marriage was no cure for loneliness. Children grew up and went away. Lovers were no panacea. Sex was no final solution. If you made your life into a long disease then death was the only cure. (Jong 254)

She sees that holding on to the wrong people or ideas brings you nowhere but turns your life into a suffering, a 'long disease' which can only be cured by death. Although there is a hint at suicidal thoughts, Isadora quickly denies them by saying that "it was easy enough to kill yourself in a fit of despair. It was easy enough to play the martyr. It was harder to do nothing. To endure your life. To wait" (Jong 288).

Unlike Edna, Isadora finds the path to her own independence by staying alive and truly coming to understand that she does not need a man to feel whole:

> I thought of my crazy notion that Adrian was my mental double and how wrong it had turned out to be. That was what I had originally wanted. A man to complete me. Papageno to my Papagena. But perhaps that was the most delusional of all my delusions. People don't complete us. We complete ourselves. If we haven't the power to complete ourselves, the search for love

> becomes a search for self-annihilation; and then we try to convince ourselves that self-annihilation is love. (Jong 300)

Not only does she recognize her strength but she learns how to forgive herself and let go of the guilt which haunted her for so many years:

> I stopped blaming myself; it was that simple. Perhaps my finally running away was not due to malice on my part, not to any disloyalty I need apologize for. Perhaps it was a kind of loyalty to myself. A drastic but necessary way of changing my life. You did not have to apologize for wanting to own your own soul. Your soul belonged to you—for better or worse. When all was said and done, it was all you had. (Jong 288)

Isadora claims her independence by allowing herself to have faults, to not strive for an ideal which she (or anyone else) can reach. This one simple act of forgiving yourself for being mortal is all it takes for her to take control of her life and stop being afraid of 'flying'. Her story, just like Edna's in *The Awakening*, does not truly end. In the last scene she is shown in Bennett's apartment, waiting for him to come home: "I hummed and rinsed my hair. As I was soaping it again, Bennett walked in" (Jong 311). The reader is left hanging in mid-air when it comes to closure. One cannot tell how their meeting will end, whether she will stay with him, whether they will decide to divorce or not. This is the strongest point Jong makes in her story. Isadora managed to battle her issues and stopped being afraid of being alone, and this is the important conclusion of the story. What happens next is not important because whatever it is, Isadora now has the strength to overcome it.

As already mentioned, "The Yellow Wallpaper" is the most symbolic story amongst the three analyzed. In this regard, the ending is very symbolic as well. The wife in the story becomes obsessed with the wallpaper and wants to help the woman she sees there get out. This represents her own wish to set herself free of a life which strangles her, just like the pattern strangles the women in the wallpaper. She becomes more and more adamant about freeing the woman:

> As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper. A strip about as high as my head and half around the room. And then when the sun came and that awful pattern began to laugh at me, I declared I would finish it to-day! (Perkins Gilman 13)

The physical act of stripping down the wallpaper represents her 'stripping down' the things in her life which suppressed her: from the way her husband treated her and did not allow her to make independent choices to the role she was expected to play as wife and mother but which clearly exhausted and depressed her.

As the end of the story is coming closer, the reader can observe a very unusual change in the way the wife talks about the woman in the wallpaper. She suddenly refers to herself as the woman who was trapped there and struggles to strip down the wallpaper so her husband and his sister cannot put her back there again:

> I don't like to *look* out of the windows even – there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast. I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did? But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope – you don't get *me* out in the road there! I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard! It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please! I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to. (Perkins Gilman 14)

As mentioned in the chapter which discusses the role doctors play in the lives of Edna, Isadora and the wife in "The Yellow Wallpaper", the wife's erratic behavior in "The Yellow Wallpaper" can be interpreted as her going insane. But as the story is very symbolic, the transition of identities from the wife to the woman in the wallpaper stands as another proof of the escape from the wallpaper meaning the wife's 'escape' from the narrow minded way of thinking about a woman's role in society.

The ending is very interesting because there is an apparent switch of roles between the wife and her husband. The wife chains herself to prevent anyone from getting her back into the role she does not want to play and when her husband finally comes home and sees this he faints:

> I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder. "I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time! (Perkins Gilman 15)

The triumphant tone of the last paragraph adds to the impression that she finally won and beat her husband and his sister. She freed herself and became the dominant one in their relationship, which is only accentuated by him fainting, a behavior stereotypically connected to women. There is almost a humor in this scene as the wife keeps on stepping over her

husband while she goes around the room; the stepping being symbolic for the smothering which he inflicted upon her for so long.

Each of the women in the end managed to gain their independence one way or another. The various influences changed their path and made it harder but all of the hardships were essential in their quest to freedom. As Cixous states: "Harmony, desire, exploit, search – all these movements are preconditions – of woman's arrival. Preconditions, more precisely, of her arising" (Cixous 66). And as visible in the endings of *The Awakening*, "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Fear of Flying*, the end of the story does not truly mean the end, but only the beginning of a new life, a richer and more independent one.

## Conclusion

After having discussed the main issues the heroines of Kate Chopin's, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's and Erica Jong's works face on their way to independence, the reader can see how similar their journey is in many aspects, from the fears they struggle with to the society they live in which in many ways hinders their progress.

Although these books were written in different decades, the issues mentioned are current even today. Women face the same struggles as Edna, Isadora and the wife in "The Yellow Wallpaper"; they question their position and role in the societies they live in; they try to free themselves of manipulating forces in their surroundings, whether they are husbands, lovers, friends or even family; they aim to find out who they are and come to terms with the person they are.

The aim of this paper was to try to present the complexity of the influences which determined the behavior and thinking of the heroines in *The Awakening*, "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Fear of Flying*. As the three stories consist of numerous strings which form a complex web, this paper aimed to show where the strings of each respective story touch one another and even knot to form a bridge between them.

Although the task was to analyze the complex sociological and psychological topics in the mentioned works, the main conclusion lies in the discovery that no matter where or when you live, human beings face the same troubles. Women all around the world are on a quest of finding their identity and freeing themselves of oppressors. Edna, Isadora and the wife in "The Yellow Wallpaper" are only a small part of this struggle and once again show that literature is the device by which this knowledge is passed from generation to generation.

The words Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Erica Jong wrote in 1892, 1899 and 1973 still echo through the heroines they created and are true today as they were back when they were first published.

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