

The aim of this work is to document how the substantial change in the social status of women that took place at the turn of the twentieth century is reflected in three novels of that period, *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James, *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton, and in the lives of the authors. The essential and common themes of these texts are marriage and motherhood, the two institutions which reflect the most the changing consciousness of women. The historical background of the period provides evidence for the division of roles in the marital institution, which was strongly established in the preceding centuries, and for the unequal position of women in general, resulting from the male superiority, mostly fortified by men's financial dominance. The heroines, akin to the authors, come from the upper or upper-middle classes which were the most active in the feminist movement because these classes had time and education to assess the situation and propose transformations. Art and sexuality are in various ways essential to the process of self-realization. The creative and sexual drives can be both an opportunity for a woman's liberation as well as an incentive for rejecting to submit to men that is enforced by men's habit of collecting works of art (inclusive of women) or their lust (Gus Trenor's claims on Lily or less explicitly, Goodwood's passionate good-bye kiss). As Elizabeth Ammons pointed out, the historian Eileen Krador had observed that for privileged American women by the end of the nineteenth century "[t]he issue of abstract equality had been settled, and the debate now concerned the meaning of equality."<sup>1</sup> The attempt at actualizing the desired independence is central to the three female protagonists of the above-mentioned works.