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The Theme of Death of the Female Protagonists in *The Awakening*, "The Yellow Wallpaper," and *The House of Mirth*, and Its Realistic Foundations

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Declaration

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I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the source of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another diploma.

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Permission

Souhlasím se zapůjčením své bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed to study purposes.

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Abstrakt práce

Tato práce analyzuje téma smrti nejenom jako výhradně vnitřní konflikt daného jedince, ale sleduje jej i v kontextu společnosti a jejího tlaku působícího na tohoto jedince. Předmět analýzy tvoří *Probuzení* Kate Chopinové, *Dům radovánek* Edith Whartonové a „Žlutá tapeta“ Charlotte Perkins Gilamanové. Stěžejní úlohu pak v této práci sehrává literární typologie, která nejenom pomáhá pochopit kontrast, který vznikl v pojetí smrti ženských hrdinek, ale zároveň poskytuje výkladový rámec u jednotlivých děl.

Smrt, jakožto komplexní jev, je v dílech Chopinové, Whartonové a Gilmanové pojímána v širší perspektivě, tedy netvoří ji pouze samotný konec fyzické existence, ale je vnímána jako odraz konfliktu mezi vnějšími faktory společenskými, ekonomickými, rodinnými a vnitřními predispozicemi, tužbami, představami, ideály a hodnotami. V ryze osobní dimenzi pak práce reflektuje vliv tohoto konfliktu na vnímání vlastní identity analyzovaných hrdinek. Právě ona eroze původní identity a snaha následně se s touto situací vyrovnat tvoří nejenom přímý předstupeň, jenž je následován smrtí v tradičním pojetí, ale umožňuje i samostatné pojetí této fáze jakožto metaforické smrti, jak ilustruje „Žlutá tapeta“ Gilmanové. V případě *Probuzení* a *Domu radovánek* tato je tato fáze konfliktu následována sebevraždou hrdinky a smrt tak tvoří dvoufázový proces, jehož druhou fází je samotná smrt. Smrt protagonistek, ať už v konvenčním či metaforickém pojetí, se v analyzovaných dílech navzdory negativním konotacím, které toto slovo obecně implikuje, ve výsledku stává i aktem sebeurčení a utvrzením se ve vlastních ideálech a hodnotách, které jsou v neslučitelném kontrastu s obecnými principy a společenskou praxí.

Ať už je smrt vnímána v konkrétní realizaci jako osobní vítězství, či prohra, obecně se analyzované autorky shodují, že téma smrti není v kontextu své doby míněno jako trest pro hrdinky, ale spíše poukázáním na negativní aspekty jejich doby. Proklamován jako éra pokroku, rostoucího bohatství, zlepšování postavení žen i rozvoje vědy a techniky se však přelom 20. století pod drobnohledem ukazuje jako období přežívajících stereotypů a nemilosrdného oportunismu.

Klíčová slova

- Gilmanová, Charlotte Perkins
- Chopinová, Kate
- Whartonová, Edith
- „Žlutá tapeta“
- *Dům radovánek*
- *Probuzení*
- Smrt
- Sebevražda
- Metaforická smrt
- Zygmunt Bauman
- Literární typologie
- Identita
- Konflikt
- Izolace

Thesis abstract

This thesis analyzes the theme of death not only as the internal struggle of a certain individual, but follows its development with respect to society and the pressure that society places on the individual in question. The main foci of the analysis are Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. Literary typology is emphasized as a tool for creating contrasts in specific conceptions of the deaths of the women protagonists, and for facilitating an understanding of the basic framework of the individual novels.

Chopin, Wharton and Gilman conceptualize death, as a complex phenomenon, in a broad perspective, not perceiving it exclusively as an end to physical existence but also as a reflection of the struggle between, on the one hand, external elements that are social, economic and familial in nature, and on the other, the sum of internal elements–predispositions, wants, imaginations and ideals. The thesis analyzes the impact that this struggle has on the perception of the heroines´ own identities. The erosion of their original identity and the effort to cope with the problem is not only a direct precursor of a 'traditional' death but also allows an understanding of this phase as 'metaphorical' death. Gilman´s "The Yellow Wallpaper" illustrates this point. In *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth*, this phase is followed by the suicide of the heroine and thus death forms a two stage process, the second stage of which is physical death. The heroines' death, in both a conventional and a metaphorical sense, is perceived as an act of self-determination and as an affirmation of one´s ideals and values that are in direct contradiction to general principles and to society's ways of thinking.

It does not matter whether the specific act of death is perceived as a personal victory or as a defeat; the women writers under analysis agree that the theme of death, with respect to social background in the fin-de-siècle United States, is not meant as a punishment for the heroine but serves more as a reference to negative aspects of their milieu. Although the turn of the twentieth century is considered to be the age of progress, increasing wealth, the changing status of women and of advancements in science and research, it seems, in the micro-perspective, to have been an age of persisting stereotypes and remorseless opportunism.

Key words

- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins
- Chopin, Kate
- Wharton, Edith
- “Yellow Wallpaper”
- *The House of Mirth*
- *The Awakening*
- Death
- Suicide
- Metaphorical death
- Zygmunt Bauman
- Literary typology
- Identity
- Conflict
- Isolation

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Death as a macabre and dramatic expression of one's own individuality has found its stable place in the literary tradition owing to socio-historical changes which culminated in the eighteenth century. The death of a woman, because of the specific "feminine" aspects she is traditionally connected with (such as beauty, life or peacefulness), has multiplied in readers an unparalleled feeling of intense fascination interwoven with a feeling of unease. Edgar Allan Poe was not the only author who noticed this effect and who used it in his artistic creation. Beside Poe, writers who used the death of a woman as a semantic vehicle were for instance Gustave Flaubert, Leo Tolstoy, Henry James or Bram Stoker. Moreover, the death of a female protagonist has often been used as a means of expression by women writers.

This thesis analyses selected works written by American women writers who were inspired by the experience of women who lived in the era of fin-de-siècle socio-economic development. The chosen literary works, written by Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, reflect significant social changes. The social group of women is not represented in this thesis just by the analyzed women writers but primarily by their protagonists Edna Pontellier, Lily Bart and the protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper." The aim of this thesis, though, is not to interpret the protagonists as multilayered individualities but to see them as typologically representative substitutes that appeared in fin-de-siècle literature. As such, these literary types point to the broader context and reflect general social trends.

Yet thematic reduction of the subject of my analysis and the eventual selection of the American women protagonists requires further reductive selection. For this reason the thesis analyzes only particular prose published between the years 1892 and 1905, and written by American women writers who are not connected only by geographical and temporal factors but who also share a similar social status. When it comes to the content-based selection of this thesis, its important role presented exactly the female aspect – specifically, it was the focus on the reaction of an individual to her social environment traditionally established on patriarchal models. The depiction of a woman as a model mother and a model wife, or the hyperbolic demonization of those who diverted from these roles, was gradually replaced by new revolutionary literary types that emerged as a reaction to the organized movement for women's

emancipation which started in the nineteenth century. The women writers themselves were often inspired by these changes and transmitted this experience to their works. Consequently, their protagonists bear superficial similarities to some biographical aspects of Chopin, Wharton, and Gilman but none of the analyzed texts can be characterized as biographical.

In the course of the thesis I move from two texts that represent women in the last months of their lives, eventually depicting their deaths, namely Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, to a text that is concerned with an exclusively metaphorical depiction of death – Charlotte P. Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper." The thesis analyzes the theme of death in the following manner. The second chapter presents the selected socio-economic factors which changed the social perception of life and death, and which were relevant even to the position of women in society. I also discuss the relationship of women to literature and present major tenets of my thesis, namely three literary types in women's turn-of-the-century fiction. The subsequent three chapters provide analyses of the selected works. They contain categorization of the protagonists in the view of feminist theories, an identification of the protagonists' motives that result in their deaths, and a comparison of artistic strategies used in the depiction of the theme of death. The conclusion represents an evaluation of the hypothesis that suggests an interrelation between historical reality and the presentation of my selected female protagonists' deaths.

Chapter 2: CONTEXTS

Since all the female protagonists chosen for the purpose of this thesis are representatives of the nineteenth-century Western culture based on Christian values, the cultural background provided in this chapter to establish the necessary socio-historic frame is chosen to match the social group in question. It is also necessary to note that despite the specifications of American culture which developed out of its unique economic, cultural and historical situation, many of its roots are found within the European Christian tradition. For this reason some of the philosophical and scientific innovations listed in this chapter are of European origin.

This chapter therefore first discusses general socio-cultural backgrounds relevant for my thesis, with attention paid to changing attitudes to death. Second, I move to a religious context, which is followed by an outline of a path toward women's rights with focus on the nineteenth century. Finally I present the literary background where I introduce types of characters that are analyzed in my thesis.

2.1 Attitudes to Death from the Eighteenth Century

Only recently has death become an exclusive concern of an individual himself. This was a result of changes in the society as not just our earthly existence but attitudes to death are subjected to religious, philosophical and political changes as well. The era of Enlightenment, originally related to European context, brought a huge expansion of industrial development and increased interest in science which resulted in a number of significant discoveries of natural laws. The new center of attention was a human being with strong inclinations to rationalistic thinking. This new ideal—the rationalistic individual—was allowed to question, to explore, and to find his or her new place in the world. Consequently, this historical milestone represented a great break not only in attitudes to life but also in attitudes to death, whether it be voluntary or natural.

Drawing on Petra Kuncová's research,[1] we may observe that the beginning of the Christian tradition showed rising incidence of martyrs' deaths, which had to be distinguished from suicides per se, as the latter were mostly considered a mortal sin. Moreover, the fourth

[1] Petra Kuncová, *Sebevražda jako filosofický problém*, MA Thesis (Charles University in Prague, Prague, 2012) 27-51.

century AD witnessed discussions concerning the suicides of women who had chosen such a fate for themselves in order to avoid potential rape. Such acts were pardoned by Aurelius Ambrosius or Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus (better known as Saint Ambrose and Saint Jerome). Yet leaving aside these exceptions, suicide was generally perceived as a sin, later as a crime.

As a consequence of the influential European philosophical theories of modern times, the human being became an entity that represented a distinct contrast to the rigid ecclesiastical perception of the Middle Ages. In the new context, suicide was perceived as an act of the free-willed individual who established in this manner his or her (non-)existence solely in relation to his or her own self and his or her own conscience, all the remaining factors being part of the 'outer world.'[2] This transfer to personal responsibility led to expanded philosophical interest in the phenomenon of suicide as an act of autonomous and revolting individual who protested against unsuitable conditions and situations in society of which he or she was a part. Among the philosophers and theoreticians who took interest in this topic in the eighteenth century were, for instance, David Hume (1711 – 1776), Voltaire (1694 – 1778), or Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778).[3]

Phillipe Ariès also marks the eighteenth century as a significant milestone in this respect and adds another dimension to the distinctly modern perception of dying. As he explains, the newly crystallized perception of death "was henceforth increasingly thought of as a transgression which tears man from his daily life, from rational society, from his monotonous work, in order to make him undergo a paroxysm, plunging him into an irrational, violent, and beautiful world."[4] This transformed perception of afterlife as something beautiful was the result of the two preceding centuries that gradually eroticized dying by associating death with erotic love, which was often the motif of artistic creations, both in literature and art.[5]

The emergence of pre-Romanticism and, later, Romanticism, which praised emotions and purity of humans unspoiled by society, represented a counter-reaction to cold rationalism. The

[2] Kuncová 37.
[3] Kuncová 36-51.
[4] Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (London: Marion Boyars, 1976) 57.
[5] "These are erotico-macabre themes, or simply morbid ones, which reveal extreme complaisance before spectacles of death, suffering, and torture. Athletic, nude executioners strip the skin from St. Bartholomew. When Bernini portrayed the mystic union of St. Theresa of Avila with God, he juxtaposed the images of the death agony and the orgasmic trance. The baroque theater staged its love scenes in tombs, such as that of the Capulets. The macabre literature of the eighteenth century united the young monk to the death beauty over whom he was keeping watch." Ariès 57.

inclination to subject humans to profound feelings often led to literary creations that featured distinct individualistic characters who sought unrefined and pure internal experiences. If overcome with emotional pathos, such protagonists often chose suicide as an escape from a cruel world. Among the leading contemporary philosophers of this era who, influenced by the Romantic theses, elaborated on the subject of voluntary death were for instance Arthur Schopenhauer (1788 – 1860) or Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900).[6]

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that Margaret Higonnet, contrary to Ariès, sees the period of the nineteenth century, which brought "reorientation […] toward love [and] passive self-surrender,"[7] as representing a break in the general perception of death. She offers yet another conception of death (with focus on female suicides) for she focuses on its ideological manifestation. As Higonnet explains, before the advent of Enlightenment, which as the era of reason and focus on an individual prepared suitable soil for the change, suicide was vicariously presented as an act with an important message for survivors. It was primarily intended to remedy particular social matters via the strongly function oriented literary portrayal of the final act.[8] In this perspective, suicides were masculine in their nature.[9] Contrary to this, from the beginning of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century, suicide was evaluated as a personal weakness, its voluntary nature was diminished; the very act of deliberate death, which violated social norms, was seen as "a malady."[10] Thus, its literary rendition developed into a "Wertherized" format. In other words:

> [I]n literary depictions of suicide, the focus shifts from function to motive. At the same time, the stock motives for suicide narrow in range and become more "feminine." […] This pattern is visible in the case of men as well as women. The century starts with the Cantonian, republican sacrifice of a Jacopo Ortiz, but his story is already Wertherized: an impossible love

[6] Kuncová 36-51.
[7] Margaret Higonnet, "Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide" *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986) 71.
[8] Deborah S. Gentry, *The Art of Dying: Suicide in the Works of Kate Chopin and Sylvia Plath* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006) 1-2.
[9] Margaret Higonnet, "Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide" *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986) 68 - 71.
[10] Higonnet 70.

occupies far more verbal and emotional space that the plight of Napoleonic Italy.[11]

Despite the difficulties to define the exact temporal point in history which would mark the aforementioned changes in attitudes to death, it is certain that the viewpoint has changed relatively recently. The newly emerged viewpoint of death as reflected not just in daily life, but as also sensitively depicted in arts, was further complicated by the influence of surviving religious perspectives.

2.2 Religious Perspectives

As George B. Tindall and David E. Shi emphasize, few of the European enlightenment principles directly threatened the religious principles of Protestants in America; some of these principles even coexisted with Christian theology.[12] The transplantation of the European enlightenment tradition with its growing interest in natural science onto the American continent was not problematic for it "fitted the American experience."[13] Despite the new focus on secular matters, the privileged position of God was not radically endangered.[14] Actually, the expansion of American pioneers further inland, and lack of religiosity in the newly settled areas caused by initial lack of church personnel therein, led to revived wave of religiosity in the eighteenth century (which would not be the last wave of the "Great Awakening" in the history of Americans).

However, when the rationalistic principles were taken to their logical conclusion, the Christian God was reduced to a more passive figure. The industrial revolution and its merits came hand in glove with many drawbacks and soon brought pessimism despite the confident proclamations of some thinkers who resolutely supported the transformation. The large number of scientific discoveries, together with significant publications such as Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and the *Communist Manifesto* (1847) of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, seriously undermined the traditional pillars of Christian piety. Poets and writers became

[11] Higonnet 71.
[12] George B. Tindall, David E. Shi, et al., *America: A Narrative History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997) 153.
[13] Tindall, Shi, et al. 153.
[14] Tindall, Shi, et al. 157.

sensitized to this decay as well and they saw the faith of certain classes as "merely hypocritical, even mercenary in its motives."[15] Despite the fact that Americans have remained religious people, organized religion faced serious threat.

The shift from strict religiosity has been demonstrated for example by Paula Bernat Bennett in her essay "God's Will, Not Mine," where she analyzes the theme of child death in the elegiac nineteenth-century poems written by American women writers.[16] Bennett's analysis[17] shows that even deeply religious texts, as evangelical elegies were, demonstrated certain inclinations of female writers to question strict spiritual orientation. Bennett discovers that despite the predominant tendency of the women writers to accept God's will no matter how painful and unfair the death of the little ones was for them (in numerous cases their own children), there appear also explicit tendencies to argue with the God's ruling.

This poetry supports the fact that in society, there appeared a growing trend to treat even the originally very orthodox theme of death as a means reflecting writers' own discontent. These poets began to treat deaths of their children in broader social terms, consequently, as Bennett confirms, "[s]uch scenes [… were] not mere occasions for emotional excess but instruments for social and spiritual transformation."[18] This transformation, though, has not only a spiritual and literary dimension, but the growing awareness of the discontent with one's earthly situation in this era was reflected also by civil and political endeavors of women.

2.3 The Position of Women

The attention of women in the nineteenth century also turned to entirely secular matters as they focused on their position within society and started to seek new opportunities to improve their situation in both the public and domestic spheres of life as well as to redefine some of their traditionally and institutionally inscribed roles and rights. As Tindall and Shi state, the official

[15] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English* (New York: Norton, 1985) 167.
[16] Paula Bernat Bennett, "God's Will, Not Mine: Child Death as a Theodicean Problem in Poetry by Nineteenth-Century Women," *Representations of Death in Nineteenth-Century US Writing and Culture*, ed. Lucy Elizabeth Frank (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate Pub., 2007) 125-139.
[17] Bennett chooses poets who critiqued orthodox tendencies inscribed to bereaved mothers, for example Lydia Huntley Sigourney, Margaret Bailey, Frances Ellen Watkinson Harper, Emily Dickinson, Sarah Piatt, etc.
[18] Bennett 126.

position of women before the first quarter of the nineteenth century "was like that of a minor, a slave, or a free black."[19] They were not allowed to participate in important public affairs since they were not granted the right to vote; a husband had control over their property and even over their children. Moreover, numerous legal matters were conducted only with a permission of their husbands.

However, women's discontent with their situation soon developed into an organized bettle for emancipation and then for suffrage. The year 1840 is considered to be the start of the organized movement for women's emancipation. The representatives who were leading the campaign to improve social, political, and civil position of women were, among others, Sarah Moore Grimké, Angelina Emily Grimké, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, or Julia Ward Howe. In the same year Mott and Stanton decided to convene a public meeting where the issues of both public and private situation of women and their rights were discussed, but it took eight years before they were able to call together the convention in Seneca Falls, New York. The result of the Seneca Falls gathering, which took place in 1848, was the "Declaration of Sentiments." It was written largely by Stanton, and found its inspiration in the "Declaration of Independence" penned mainly by Thomas Jefferson. The "Declaration of Sentiments," also known as the "Declaration of Rights and Sentiments," was founded on the assumption that women are naturally equal to their male counterparts and it is against the law of nature to put them in inferior positions.

Women's call for (more) equal status was not unanimous, however. Representatives of both sexes who refused some of the core ideas of the emancipation movement, and, as Tindall and Shi document, "[r]uffled male editors lampooned the women activists as being 'love-starved spinsters' and 'petticoat rebels.'"[20] But even relatively "enlightened" women, such as Catherine Beecher, were relatively limited in their demands. Beecher, the leading advocate for the women's education and the founder of schools, aimed at the education of women; notwithstanding, the sphere she proclaimed to be suitable for a woman and her sole concern was her household. She argued that women should master all the duties necessary for running a

[19] Tindall, Shi, et al. 572.
[20] Tindall, Shi, et al. 753.

household and instructed young women in various domestic chores. None of the protests and limits, though, could have stopped the emancipation.

Despite various objections and broader counter-reactions, women's conventions were organized annually until the Civil War. A great support to the movement represented the participation of Susan Brownell Anthony, who joined the movement in the 1850s, but women's rights had also its prominent male proponents such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, William Ellery Channing, and William Lloyd Garrison.

Women resolved to take the question of their position and rights into their own hands fully after the split with the anti-slavery movement, with which the women's movement had been closely related. After the Civil War, and the subsequent abolition of slavery, the movement focused on women's suffrage:

> Along with the readmission of southern states, with which it was closely connected, black suffrage became the pivotal issue of postwar Reconstruction politics. This in turn encouraged a shift in emphasis among women's rights advocates toward the suffrage demand. After the war feminist activists began to refer to themselves as "the women suffrage movement," rather than the "women's rights movement."[21]

The movement thus saw yet another narrowing in its orientation.[22] The National Woman Suffrage Association founded by Anthony and Stanton in 1869 aimed at gaining voting rights, but this association was concerned with other aspects of the "Woman Question" as well. In November 1869, the American Woman Suffrage Association was established by Lucy Stone, Henry Blackwell, Julia Ward Howe, and others; this organization was established by suffragists who required that women's suffrage should be the only concern of the movement. Eventually, in 1890, the two organizations merged to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association.

[21] Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America 1848 – 1869* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) 54.
[22] DuBois 53-78.

The victories of the movement came relatively slowly and most of them were only partial and affecting specific states. They first concerned the modifications of legislation. After two decades of this crusade, in the 1860s, married women had the right to control their property in twelve states. The amendment that granted universal suffrage was finally ratified on August 18, 1920.

This trend of social changes was sensitively reflected also in literature. Yet, as the following literary introduction and the subsequent analytical chapters show, despite the improving position of women, some women writers still let their protagonists die. This seeming paradox only illustrates that women (as represented by the protagonists of these works) often had to struggle for this social change. Their deaths prove that the development was not easily attained.

2.4 Changes in Literature

Literary reflection of the aforementioned social changes led to the establishment of several new literary types, which were dramatically different from their literary predecessors from the Victorian era.

To introduce them, it is necessary to go back to history, specifically to the Victorian period when the literary tradition relied on two predominant prototypes of female characters (despite numerous variations of their specific portrayals in literature). Both the categories were constructs created, in compliance with literary conventions of the era, by male writers. The first type established the female character of "an angel," who represented the condensation of typical positive characteristics traditionally associated with and required from women of Western culture of the nineteenth century, such as tameness, selflessness, or humility.[23] In other words, as Gilbert and Gubar point out, favored merits of typical women protagonists of the nineteenth century were influenced by the popular presentation of a woman as an exemplary mother and wife; consequently, as the two critics argued, following Virginia Woolf, "the 'angel in the house'

[23] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Madwoman on the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 20.

is the most pernicious image male authors have ever imposed upon literary women."[24] This artistic image of the ideal woman originated from idolization of the Virgin Mary in the Middle Ages, but nineteenth-century secularization transformed the image of female purity and the divine figure was replaced by a domestic angel.[25] Examples of the angel in the house include Harriet Beecher Stowe's little Eva (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*) or Charles Dickens's little Nell (*The Old Curiosity Shop*).[26]

The counterpart to the aforementioned type, necessary for enhancing but undermining its angelic characteristics, was the female monster. This type represents an embodiment of "male anxieties about female autonomy" as she represents the opposite of the humble angel.[27] "Assertiveness, aggressiveness–all characteristics of a male life of 'significant action'–are 'monstrous' in women precisely because 'unfeminine' and therefore unsuited to a gentle life of 'contemplative purity.'"[28] The "monstrous" features of this second literary type emerged from several possible flaws of her character; the first being mental illness, the second her image of "a fallen woman," and the third "flaw" stemmed from her putting personal interests above those of others.[29] Protagonists who embody the "monstrous" divergence from the ideal include William Makepeace Thackeray's Becky Sharp (*Vanity Fair*) or Charlotte Brontë's Bertha (*Jane Eyre*).

Due to this strong literary tradition, as Gilbert and Gubar argue, numerous women writers tried unsuccessfully to dispose of such models but they were not able to entirely transcend the conventions of male writing.[30] Writing which praised humble and unselfish women was also used in contemporary moralistic and educative texts, and in instructions written for women not just by moralists and educators, but also by nineteenth-century physicians and psychologists. The situation during most of the nineteenth century was therefore still to a great extend influenced by the two predominant literary types created in compliance with the patriarchal tradition.

However, despite this widely spread practice of writing about "angels in the house" and "female monsters," at the end of the nineteenth century there started to emerge a new practice

[24] Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic* 20.
[25] Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic* 20.
[26] Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic* 25.
[27] Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic* 28.
[28] Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic* 28.
[29] Gentry 3.
[30] Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic* 17.

among women who willingly infringed at least some of the rules. Thus, in the literary realm there also appeared new types of characters: "the femme fatale" and the so called "New Woman."[31] Both of them, same as their Victorian literary predecessors, showed surface variety but shared basic characteristics typical for each type.

The femme fatale was described by Gilbert and Gubar as a rebellious person and a sexual symbol who evoked strong lustful fascination simultaneously with apprehension.[32] This type that shares both these contradictory qualities appeared already in late-Victorian works, such as H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887) or George MacDonald's *Lilith* (1895).[33] An in-depth study of the Femme Fatale is beyond the scope of this thesis, so let me turn to the New Woman. In the third chapter of this thesis, we will see that Edna Pontellier from Chopin's novel represented the so-called "New Woman." The New Woman was depicted as a courageous representative who willingly tried to find her place in the new, more liberal society. As Gilbert and Gubar state, this practice:

> [F]ocused on female characters who actively and articulately expressed their dissatisfaction with conventional feminine roles. Frequently as seductive and divided as the *femme fatale*, the New Woman was a rebel who regarded marriage as incompatible with emancipation, but who just as frequently suffered a tragic penalty for her views.[34]

There was, however, another innovative type of a female literary character, which Elaine Showalter called the "Perfect Lady."[35] We will see in the fourth chapter that Lily from Wharton's novel is such a character. This literary type emerged as the necessary complement of the aforementioned newly emerged types of the New Woman and the femme fatale. To categorize Lily as either of these would be reductive, and to identify her with the earlier types of the angel

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[31] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: the Tradition in English* (New York: Norton, 1985) 958.
[32] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* 958.
[33] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* 958.
[34] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* 959.
[35] Elaine Showalter, "The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton's *The House of Mirth*," *Representations* 9 (Winter 1985): 133-149 rpt. in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* ed. Linda Pavlovski, vol. 149, (Detroit: Gale, 2004). *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 5 Mar. 2013. <http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420057114&v=2.1&u=karlova&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.

or the woman-monster would be misleading. The Perfect Lady is not merely polite and beautiful, but she is also a distinguished woman perfectly able to live in higher social circles. She can solve various precarious social situations with grace.

Finally, the protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" could, according to the classification of Gilbert and Gubar established in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, fit into the category of the female monster, who represents the opposite pole of the angel in the house. Specifically, she could represent the subtype of the madwoman, whose "deviation" from established social norms included depression, weepiness, rapid changing of moods, extreme reactions, eccentric behavior, relatively inappropriate emotional reactions such as the lack of motherly affection, etc.[36] Nonetheless, the previous paragraphs showed that simple typological classification is not always possible without further adjustments. In the fifth chapter, we will therefore see that the protagonist of the "Yellow Wallpaper" does not completely fit into the category of the madwoman in the attic as defined by Gilbert and Gubar. The woman of the story herself considers herself as "being sick"[37] and despite her disagreement with the specifics of treatment, she initially submits herself to her husband's therapeutic proceeding. This acknowledgment differentiates her from the madwoman described in Gilbert and Gubar's study. Nonetheless, it is not merely the protagonist's willing submission that differentiates her from the previous type of madwoman, but also her being a victorious madwoman. This feature is fully revealed in the ending of the short story, where the protagonist, despite her "handicap," manages to win over the attempt of her husband John and destroys the hated wallpaper. If we compare John's wife and Bertha (from *Jane Eyre*), the prototypic madwoman from the attic mentioned by Gilbert and Gubar,[38] we see that Bertha also destroys the hated place, but her motivation and the fact that she dies during the process make the reading of her last deed as victory completely impossible.

Let us now turn to individual chapters. They analyze the deaths of the three aforementioned protagonists in relation to the outlined literary typology. Natures of their deaths are, to a certain extent, influenced by the inscribed personal traits. Nonetheless, apart from the

[36] Lisa Appignanesi, *Bad, Mad and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind Doctors from 1800 to the Present* (London: Virago, 2008) 102-192. Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic* 53-59.
[37] Gilman, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the Yellow Wallpaper* 41.
[38] Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic* 336-371.

personal dimension, it is necessary to consider external factors, which also influence the particular individuals. Their deaths thus represent metaphorical resultants of both forces.

Chapter 3: THE AWAKENING

Turning from the necessarily schematic historical, philosophical, and literary introduction which brings closer some of the important features of the turn of the century, when Chopin, Wharton and Gilman lived, as well as some of the distinct milestones heralding this era, this and the two subsequent chapters will turn to specific works of literature. Despite the fact that neither Wharton nor Chopin "embrace[d] contemporary women's movement,"[39] they criticized some side effects and drawbacks of the nineteenth-century social changes, and they reflected the changing position of women in their works. Specifically, this chapter will discuss *The Awakening* (1899), a novel that concludes as the protagonist commits suicide, after a long struggle to find her new position in relation to her family and to her personal desires. I will argue that the heroine's death demonstrates the acme of her rebellion against social restrictions. This rebellion allows categorization of Edna as the New Woman type defined in the preceding chapter.

3.1 Figural Death

Death functions, in *The Awakening*, also as "a communicative act"[40] which allows the female protagonist to make an ultimate statement in a culture she perceives as oppressive; in a culture which allows women only limited access to self-realization (or almost none should it require any rejection of the duties and role boundaries associated with the position of a middle- or upper-class woman of the nineteenth century). Edna's rejection of prescribed social roles of her unfavorable social climate—a rejection comparable to figural death and which eventually escalates towards her physical death—represents her "self-disintegration [as well as] an act of self-construction."[41]

The heroine's death, as an act of idiosyncratic communication, is not composed solely of the final scene on the beach, but the ultimate statement is the consequence of a long chain of events which preceded her physical death. Edna's gradual establishment of new relations with

[39] Deborah S. Gentry, *The Art of Dying: Suicide in the Works of Kate Chopin and Sylvia Plath* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006) 8.
[40] Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 141.
[41] Bronfen 141.

her environment leads to her public exclusion and her repudiation of all the features which defined her life as Mrs. Pontellier. This process of rejection is like a protracted social dying which is initiated by Edna's first encounter with several important experiences that help the protagonist to escape from conventions, and all of which are sources of such "a figural suicide."[42]

Chopin's presentation of Edna's living as figural suicide allows, despite its rather negative connotations, for an optimistic reading of *The Awakening* since Edna's death is perceived as the ultimate liberation of the emancipated woman who awoke to the recognition of her genuine desires and who had the courage to reach for them even at the cost of her public alienation that equaled social death. In other words, the alienating effect of certain of Edna's self-indulgences does not stop them benefitting her, as using them as a form of escape involves deep personal and unrestricted introspection and a consequential integrative moment for her self.[43] So, where the values forming one part of Edna's identity are rejected, there can emerge, after the necrosis of that part initiated by the process of her own fulfillment, genuinely personal attitudes to her life. Thus the awakening suggested by the title of the novel is recognized as an "awakening-unto-death,"[44] where physical decay per se represents the acme of previous long psychological development, externally manifested as a negative path for freedom: "she sheds everything external to herself, first routines, bienséances of the alien Créole culture, then her family and home, finally her clothes and herself."[45] Edna herself confirms this personal development when she compares her life before and after the changes that she encountered during the year of her awakening by calling her life before them "a life-long, stupid dream."[46]

The first stage of Edna's personal change is exemplified on the level of her subconsciousness, which is manifested externally, yet, as Paula A. Treichler points out, it

[42] Bronfen 157.
[43] Bronfen 142.
[44] Anca Parvulescu, "To Die Laughing and to Laugh at Dying: Revisiting 'The Awakening'," *New Literary History*, Summer 2005. 5 October 2011 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20057907>.
[45] Margaret Higonnet, "Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide," *The Female body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986) 80.
[46] Kate Chopin, *The Awakening: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives* ed. Nancy A. Walker (Boston: Bedford Books: 2000) 132.

happens in the form of subtle, barely detectable expressions.[47] Edna is well aware of her troubles as they cause many sorrowful moments, but early in the novel she is not able to identify (or admit) their real source. Edna confusedly observes her poignant emotional excesses:

> She could not have told why she was crying. Such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon to her married life. […] An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish.[48]

Treichler emphasizes, and this extract confirms, that the sense of enigmatic vagueness which surrounds Edna in the first chapters of the novel can be supported by the linguistic analysis of the novel's language that refers to the protagonist's initial state of mind. It is predominantly composed of words expressing personal distance, her doubts and hesitation; in other words remoteness and a sense of the abstract.[49] Chopin also describes Edna's eyes in the following way: they "were quick and bright. […] She had a way of turning them swiftly upon an object and holding them there as if lost in some inward maze of contemplation or thought."[50] This description is, only a few lines later, contrasted to the description of Robert's eyes: "[t]here rested no shadow of care upon his open countenance. His eyes gathered in and reflected the light and languor of the summer day."[51] Robert's carefree look stands in contrast to Edna's and further emphasizes her up to now lack of introspection concerning her personal desires. From the beginning of the novel, Edna perceives herself rather as someone who is at the mercy of forces that are beyond her personal control. She is trapped in between the mortifying restrictions of the social role that she is required to follow and her state of mind.

Gradually, though, Edna is able to recognize her true self and her personal desires. This turn in her introspection is triggered by a crucial event for Edna: she learns to swim and the power of this experience is tantamount to a feeling of intoxication. This is the moment of gained

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[47] Paula A. Treichler, "The Construction of Ambiguity in *The Awakening*: A Linguistic Analysis," *The Awakening: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives* ed. Nancy A. Walker (Boston: Bedford Books: 2000) 354.
[48] Chopin 27-8.
[49] Treichler, "The Construction of Ambiguity in *The Awakening*: A Linguistic Analysis" 354-7.
[50] Chopin 24.
[51] Chopin 25.

"unity of emotions and will,"[52] which activates her courage to externalize her desires, to follow them, and to go beyond the "psychical rigidity and unchangeability" of prescribed feminine roles.[53] Edna's awakening progressively negates her whole life as a Mrs. Pontellier: Mr. Pontellier's wife and the mother of his children. At first, she "just" neglects her duties as a wife when she rejects to follow her husband to bed: "She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted."[54] Edna further challenges strict gender boundaries with her inappropriate emotional involvement with Robert Lebrun and, to Robert's great shock, she verbally confirms this flagrant rejection of her position as a wife: "I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I chose."[55]

Edna also refuses to be the type of woman represented by Adèle Ratignolle, the "mothering" woman who is willing to give anything, literal or metaphorical, to her children. Edna confesses to her friend: "I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself."[56] Margit Stange explains that Adèle's presence in the novel functions as "reminder of the self-constituting function of motherhood," which is incompatible with Edna's tendency to reject motherhood as yet another role which is unwilled and imposed upon her.[57] This break with Edna's former life as Mrs. Pontellier is confirmed publicly when Edna moves from the house in which she used to live with her husband and their children. Free from these constraints, she awakens to a new sensuous life.

The first of the self-indulgences with which Edna experiments on her search for a new identity—her newly acquired ability to swim—is the most important one for the heroine's personal integration because it gives her a sense of power. Nonetheless, this aforementioned sense of "power of significant import" which "had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul"[58] should not be considered to represent any authoritative tendencies. Rather,

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[52] Treichler, "The Construction of Ambiguity in *The Awakening*: A Linguistic Analysis" 357.
[53] Sigmund Freud, "Freud on Femininity," *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 13 May 2004, 10 May 2011 <http://instruct.westvalley.edu/lafave/freud_on_femininity.html>.
[54] Chopin 53.
[55] Chopin 131.
[56] Chopin 281.
[57] Margit Stange, "Personal Property: Exchange Value and the Female Self in *The Awakening*," *The Awakening: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives* ed. Nancy A. Walker (Boston: Bedford Books: 2000) 283-4.
[58] Chopin 49.

it stands for Edna's own self-government, which influences her mind and so prompts the steps she takes subsequently. Having acquired the ability to swim, Edna realizes and even anticipates the possible fatal implications of her awakening:

> She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself.[59]

The most intense of the experiences that contribute to her self-fulfillment, though, as Edna suggests, is her romance with Robert Lebrun: "It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream."[60] The strength of Edna's feeling for Robert is underlined by her proclamation that he is the only love of her life.[61] Her faith in reciprocity of his genuine feeling is, hovewer, destroyed by his revelation that he is not able to accept Edna's new, unconventional position which she built.

Another step on the way of Edna's personal awakening is her sexual intercourse with Alcée Arobin. His place in the heroine's sexual life is different from that of her husband, who represents history that she decided to leave behind. Edna's relationship to Arobin is also different from that with Robert, who symbolizes, at least for some time, a voluntary and liberal attachment to another man. Alcée has no special emotional significance for Edna apart from his role as someone who allows Edna to experience another journey to her new self.[62] In this sense, his meaning for her is exactly that he has minimal emotional value for her— something which would have been unacceptable in the eyes of conventional nineteenth-century society. Edna recognizes what an intoxicating experience it is to feel sexual desire without any emotional attachment.

The novel introduces also other possibilities for Edna's self-determination. Their role is significant for her development but they occupy much less space in the novel. Painting

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[59] Chopin 49.
[60] Chopin 132.
[61] Chopin 132.
[62] Elaine Showalter, "Tradition and the Female Talent: *The Awakening* as a Solitary Book," *The Awakening: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives* ed. Nancy A. Walker (Boston: Bedford Books: 2000) 217.

introduces Edna to the life of Mademoiselle Reisz, who lives as an artist; childless, without a partner, but firm in her belief and willing to sacrifice to her dream. In the end, though, Edna rejects this way of life. The protagonist also often digresses in her thought to her childhood, which always represents her personal form of escape from her present state of mind. Observing the ocean, Edna recalls her childhood when she walked on a far-stretching meadow and "threw out her arms as if swimming."[63] She realizes that she misses exactly the freedom which she felt as a child, when she just followed an "impulse without question,"[64] and confesses: "I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking, unguided."[65] Finally, Edna is introduced to the world of gambling, where luxury meets with the adrenaline of high stakes: "[t]he fever of the game flamed in her cheeks and eyes, and it got into her blood and into her brain like an intoxicant."[66]

None of these experiences can, however, satisfactorily distract Edna from the growing apprehension that she is no longer comfortable in an alien social reality, and her rebellious path towards freedom gradually approaches its final stage.

3.2 The Rebel's Death

Edna's rebellion against the life laid out for her has been undermined by critics' discussions that evaluate her real motivation to commit suicide.[67] These discussions have divided critics, and two possible readings of Edna's suicide have emerged. The more pessimistic of the two–and with which this thesis disagrees–identifies Edna as a weak character, degrades her rebellion into disillusionment, and explains her suicide as a personal failure. Such an explanation emphasizes the alienating effect of external distractions and experiences on Edna's life. Her attempt to establish herself as a painter, to find new love in the person of Robert Lebrun, and to embrace the

[63] Chopin 37.
[64] Chopin 38.
[65] Chopin 38.
[66] Chopin 97.
[67] The reluctant way of Chopin's description of the last scene and her unwillingness to allow the reader to witness Edna's real fate did not only trigger literary critics to ask for the incentives of heroine's compulsion to swim further than her physical limits allowed her and thus deciding between suicide and tragic accident, but they also discussed the very probability of her death. (Showalter 219) Nonetheless, this thesis works with the suicide scenario which I find the most probable due to my analysis of the novel.

heady power of sea and gambling, consume her realistic sense of life, and she spends that life in delusion rather than living. According to the proponents of this reading, Edna is alienated and killed by her desires, and her suicide emerges as the final act after finding her life misspent and hopeless. This practice of seeing women's suicide as a personal failure, as Gilbert and Gubar state, appeared traditionally in the literature of the nineteenth century for it was "often used to dramatize what many men of letters saw as the self-destructiveness of feminism."[68] Moreover, as Showalter observed, "[r]eaders of the 1890's were accustomed to drowning as the fictional punishment for female transgression against morality."[69] And even at present, critics such as Wendy Martin read Edna as a tragic heroine who is not able to reach desired autonomy.[70]

Nonetheless, my reading sees Edna's change, even with its pessimistic ending, rather as personal development that culminates in her suicide.[71] For Edna, the sea represents a space where her self-reliance is not only metaphorical, but takes also the literal meaning.[72] She is responsible for her own fate. Despite the ecstasy of the sensual experience connected with this element, Edna is aware of the deadly potential of the sea: when swimming for the first time further than she thought she would be able to get back, "[a] quick vision of death smote [Edna's] soul."[73] Despite this realization, Edna is trapped by the sea's depth and its therapeutic power. In her dying moment in the sea, she confirms her self-definition and the fact that despite her originally submissive position in the Creole majority which was too narrow to accept her with her self-reliance, she managed to find her self. Her last thoughts affirmed her position:

> She thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could posses her, body and soul. […]

[68] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* 959.
[69] Showalter, "Tradition and the Female Talent: *The Awakening* as a Solitary Book" 219.
[70] Wendy Martin, ed., "Introduction," *New Essays on The Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
[71] This image of personal growth and rising independence is also underscored on the level of recurring motifs appearing in the novel. For instance, the flying birds which follow Edna's story throughout the novel reflect her emancipation and death likewise. The novel opens with an image of a parrot in a cage, later this motif changes to a wild bird flying on the horizon. The last chapter provides an image of a bird with the broken wing "reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water." (Chopin 138) This image directly precedes Edna's entrance into the water in the last chapter and may thus be considered to work as a herald of Edna's death. As such, it supports the reading of the last chapter as Edna's fatal yet liberating decision that results in her actual death.
[72] Treichler, "The Construction of Ambiguity in *The Awakening*: A Linguistic Analysis" 360.
[73] Chopin 50.

> He [Robert] did not know; he did not understand. He would never understand.[74]

This ultimate statement in the form of her last mental detour confirms Edna's "self-ownership," which, born from feminist endeavors to improve a domestic position of women and popularized in the latter half of the nineteenth century, signified the right of a wife to refuse to be subjected to her husband's desires, and, as such, to have control over her own person.[75]

The afore-discussed development of the novel to its dramatic culmination communicates the message of rising possibilities and requirements of women. Despite the fact that in her death scene Edna remains isolated, this solitude is an inevitable result of her awakening. As Showalter summarizes, one of the reasons why Edna did not manage to fulfill her vision of emancipation was her solitude.[76] But this solitude may be viewed also in positive terms—as freedom. She felt free and unafraid that anything or anybody would take her back:

> When she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her.
>
> How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.[77]

Edna's voluntary solitude even in the moment of her death corresponds to her desire to extricate herself from society. This process was initiated by her increasing estrangement from her husband, her children, and eventually from the socially ritualized acts connected with the appropriate roles of an upper-class woman in her thirties. This situation only confirms that Edna's character, according to the definition of the revolutionary New Woman, does not leave the protagonist much space to make compromises: she does not die because she would not be

[74] Chopin 139.
[75] Stange 276.
[76] Showalter, "Tradition and the Female Talent: *The Awakening* as a Solitary Book" 218.
[77] Chopin 138.

given a chance to survive or because she would be punished for her divergence from conventions, but because she refuses to sacrifice herself. In her last moments Edna solidifies her denial of domestic life, and, in her death, completes her personal fulfillment.

Chapter 4: THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

Lily Bart represents another significant female protagonist of the turn of the century. Despite a number of similarities that she shares with the aforementioned heroine Edna Pontellier—such as their age, the social stratum where they were brought up, disillusionment with their life, or their tragic fate—the characteristics and background factors of and motivations for Edna and Lily's deaths demonstrate significant differences. As a literary type, Lily differs in numerous aspects. Edna's struggle, both external and internal, reflected a gradual and deliberate rejection of conventional life of her social circles and of the roles traditionally prescribed for a married woman, such as obedience, selflessness, or absolute devotion to her children. As such, this protagonist fitted into the category of the New Woman. Lily, in contrast to Edna, is characterized as "the Perfect Lady" defined earlier in this thesis. As Showalter pointed out in accordance with this typology, "Lily's uniqueness, the emphasis Wharton gives to her lonely pursuit of ladylike manners in the midst of vulgarity, boorishness, and malice, make us feel that she is somehow the *last* lady in New York."[78] Together with her stunning beauty, this distinguishes Lily as an exceptional character.

4.1 The Death of the "Wasted Bride"[79]

According to Elisabeth Bronfen, Lily Bart proves to be another literary character who, after Edna, objects to Freud's "death sentence" for women who turn thirty.[80] In order to overcome the ostensible rigidity that marks the life of an adult woman in "a firm position [which is] unattractively masterful,"[81] Lily's strategy in *The House of Mirth* is to postpone such a prospect by prolonging her status of an unmarried girl.

As Bronfen further states, Lily, as the unattached girl, is found in an existentially unstable position, which represents a direct disadvantage of her risky attempt to overcome her potential

[78] Showalter, "The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton's *The House of Mirth*" 133-149.
[79] Bronfen 269.
[80] Bronfen 270.
[81] Frances L. Restuccia, "The Name of the Lily: Edith Wharton's Feminism(s)," *The House of Mirth: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives*, ed. Shari Benstock (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994) 404.

psychic death. The indefiniteness of Lily's status resides in the fact that at her age, she is at the transitional point between her childhood household and some future dwelling of her potential husband.[82] This instability further implies possible risks for such a person since: "the danger and fascination that the bride exerts can also be attributed to the fact that she could potentially belong to everybody."[83] The maturing girl may be described as a "commodity," which reflects a change in post-bellum industrial society, the main concern of which was "the war of the dollar."[84] This materialistic orientation of the New York milieu is tightly connected with personal prestige which the old dynasties guarded and the nouveaux riches attempted to enhance. The danger for a young woman would be to spoil her price, for in that case she would become "damaged goods"[85] in terms of her marriageability. In such a case, the Freudian psychic death of the matured and settled woman would simply be exchanged for metaphorical death of the girl, who would be left without prospects of suitable marriage and endangered by possible social exclusion.

Being about thirty, just as Edna, Lily struggles against this prognosis of feminine "rigidity and unchangeability," yet she struggles in another way. Lily's life, as described in the novel, is oriented more on the directly external factors that shape her life; specifically it could be argued that the financial factors belong to the most important ones for Lily. Her materialistic orientation and her desire to escape the mortifying position of a settled, mature woman, lead Lily to prolonging her position as an unmarried girl (with the numerous possibilities that such a position offers), and she oscillates between marrying in order to achieve financial security and affluence and marrying for love. Fortunately for Lily, her rare beauty could "arrest even the suburban traveler rushing to his last train,"[86] so she has many opportunities: both options, the consumerist dream embodied in Percy Gryce or Simon Rosedale as well as the romantic choice represented by Lawrence Selden, are available to her.

However, the superficiality of Lily's environment, with its double standards applied unequally to men and women, takes Lily by surprise despite her awareness of its destructive potential which she already experienced as a child. Lily herself shrewdly acknowledges that the

[82] Bronfen 270.
[83] Bronfen 270.
[84] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* 951.
[85] Genrty 4.
[86] Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth: Complete, authoritative text with biographical and historical contexts, critical history, and essays from five contemporary critical perspectives*, ed. Shari Benstock (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994) 26.

beauty which she inherited offers a distinct advantage in the world that hankers after everything desirable. She explicitly admits the superficial tastes of the people around her: "if I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself."[87] This emphasis on external appearances and their role in public display, as well as caring for the opinion of others, were instilled in Lily by her mother, who had perceived that gift of Lily's as if it were "some weapon she had slowly fashioned,"[88] and taught the girl that this is the only valuable thing about her and the key factor for a marriage. Lily herself enjoys being admired and feeling "one's self lifted to a height apart by that incommunicable grace which is the bodily counterpart of genius!"[89] She embraces this rather superficial taste, for she admits to herself the power of public admiration and realizes that "her triumph gave her an intoxicating sense of recovered power." This, nonetheless, does not diminish Lily's sense of morality, which she proves to posses when she refuses to use the originally secret letters written by Bertha Dorset to Lawrence Selden as a means of blackmailing Bertha. Lily, however, underestimates the potential danger of the fact that the social judgment of her comprises predominantly of misinterpretations, both voluntarily and involuntarily designed. In other words, "the tea tables that once supported her social climb now host gossip mongers who would pray on her disgrace."[90] It is exactly Lily's enjoyment of being in the spotlight that to a large extent contributes to her eventual social exclusion and, in this way, to her suicide.

Lily publicly displays herself as a marketable object[91] available to potential husbands or even to those, such as Gus Trenor, who are already married. Such a perception redirects attention from Lily as a person with internal qualities which, as the novel implies, are even more important for they distinguish her from the distorted moral principles of upper-class New York society. Yet these internal qualities of Lily are ignored by others. When seeing her as Reynold's 'Mrs. Lloyd', Selden, who has deep feelings for Lily, admits that she makes him long to be with her, but this realization consists solely of his contemplation of her external beauty:

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[87] Wharton 33.
[88] Wharton 52.
[89] Wharton 123.
[90] Bonnie Lynn Gerard, "From Tea to Chloral: Raising the Dead Lily Bart," *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, Winter 1998. 5 March 2013 <http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420057125&v=2.1&u=karlova&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.
[91] Robinson 345.

> [t]he noble buoyancy of her attitude, its suggestion of soaring grace, revealed the touch of poetry in her beauty that Selden always felt in her presence, yet lost the sense of when he was not with her.[92]

This dehumanizing perception of Lily does not struck only Selden but later in the novel the mediated image of Lily seriously destabilizes her own identity. Sadly for the protagonist, these implications result from her indefinite position which she chose to avoid possible psychic death. However, they only make her choose real death instead. Margaret Higonnet summarized Lily's situation pertinently when she argued that the position of a woman in Western society is tightly connected to the perception of her in connection to others rather than to an evaluation of the real qualities of the woman as an individual.[93] One side of Lily's personality represents her own image of herself and the other introduces the construct created by others. The latter half, fuelled by the distorted gossips that defame Lily with regard to her chastity, soon undermines Lily's own perception of herself. Consequently, she starts to see herself as a monster:

> Can you imagine looking into your glass some morning and seeing a disfigurement – some hideous change that has come to you while you slept? Well, I seem to myself like that – I can't bear to see myself in my own thoughts.[94]

In the previous chapter we could see that Edna also experienced a fatal divergence of her identity, though of a different kind. Her identity was divided into the empirical self, which allowed the protagonist to live as Mrs. Pontellier–the embodiment of inscribed roles of a mother and a wife–and the self that represented her inward life. This second, insightful self reflexively evaluated the empirical experiences of Mrs. Pontellier's social roles.[95] Thus, the conflict between Edna's social life and her private was the result of these gradually diverging selves. In Lily's case, the lethal destruction of her personal and consistent perception of herself results from the foreign construct – created and imposed on her by the people present in her life. In other words, when her image is publicly distorted and her reputation is ruined, Lily eventually accepts this, doubts about herself and consequently refuses to defend her reputation. The difference between

[92] Wharton 139.
[93] Higonnet 72.
[94] Wharton 165.
[95] Parvulescu 478.

Lily and Edna's identities resides in the natures of both women. While Edna's conflict remained predominantly her own affair and the opinions of others did not distract Edna from her rebellion, Lily's self is vulnerable and she accepts her dependence on the opinions of others more easily.

This tendency could be read as Lily's metaphorical dying, where the part representing the individual per se is slowly killed by the newly penetrated other self which was developed from the internalization of the public image of Lily. Selden confirms that even his view of Lily is tightly connected to the prevailing ethos of the specific social stratum with its "mixed motives on which social judgments depend."[96] Even if it is difficult to decide whether Lily's death is a mere accident or the result of her wish to cease facing her problems, Higonnet points out that this breakdown of personal identity is conventionally considered a major factor in one's decision to commit suicide.[97] This crisis of her identity represents only one dimension of Lily's tragedy which is further intensified by her public victimization.

4.2 If Only Life Could End Now[98]

Being excluded from the circle of people among whom she so desperately wanted to belong, Lily is eventually forced to seek shelter among the working class. Her attempt to work as a milliner at Regina's also fails, and with it dies her chance provided for her living. Yet despite her inability to adjust to this new environment of "the rubbish heap,"[99] Lily refuses to involve herself in immoral practices of manipulating Bertha Dorset with the compromising letters and thus Lily sacrifices herself to "an implacable natural law that dictates the victimization of those who threaten the power of others."[100] In this light, Lily, despite the changes of her status, remains faithful to her typological role of the Perfect Lady. This characteristic is her stable referential point which she preserves despite the new environment and which helps her to maintain her honor when she experiences the "vulgarity, boorishness, and malice" of the worst kind. On the other hand, it seems to be Lily's addiction to opulence that prevents her from surviving among lower classes. The final pages before Lily's actual death remind the reader of the conscious and

[96] Wharton 160.
[97] Higonnet 72.
[98] Wharton 298.
[99] Wharton 287.
[100] Gerard 409-427.

organized settling of one's matters: Lily methodically settles her personal affairs with friends, checks her lacking savings, pays her debts, and organizes her dresses and the connected memories. As a result, the protagonist loses all chances for a better future.

Lily's last visit to Selden, which precedes the death scene, supports a reading of Lily's death as deliberate suicide rather than a tragic accident. The visit represents for her the last reaffirmation that Selden's image of her is not, and probably never will be, repaired and that, consequently, his love for her, or for the part of her he knows as the unparalleled ideal beauty forever beyond his reach, cannot be resurrected. She metaphorically leaves behind the first part of Lily Bart, that unviable image of her: "There is some one I must say goodbye to. Oh, not *you*–we are sure to see each other again–but the Lily Bart you knew."[101]

Moreover, when Lily gets back to her room after calling herself "a useless person"[102] during the farewell meeting with Selden, she is overpowered by the prospects of living in abject poverty, by feelings of rootlessness, and by the disappointment that the relationship with Selden caused her. All of these matters having been settled, Lily only desires to sleep. While Edna's last scene was accompanied by an intense feeling of intoxication, Lily experiences immense weariness. In other words, the enchanting feeling of intoxication which Lily used to have when she looked at Selden or when she enjoyed the public admiration of her beauty, is replaced with this weariness that accompanies Lily during her social descend.

As Bronfen proposes, the actual death scene in *The House of Mirth* nevertheless raises ambiguity. The suicide of Lily Bart could be identified as the supreme moment in the free will of the protagonist, who, similarly as Edna, could experience this as "a moment of subjectivity because it engenders a destruction of the gendered body, which, were the bride to accept it, would also mean accepting the constraints culture requires."[103] On the other hand, as Bronfen further admits, there appear relevant reasons to read Lily's death as the tragic acme of her public ill-treatment. As this thesis discussed above, similar ambiguity in reading the heroine's death, according to some critics, appears also in *The Awakening*.

[101] Wharton 288.
[102] Wharton 287.
[103] Bronfen 270.

Nevertheless, as in the case of *The Awakening*, this thesis argues that the ambiguity of Lily's suicide, interpreted on the one hand as an act of supreme "subjectivity because it reflects the choice of her fate," and on the other hand as "the acme of her social victimization,"[104] is at least questionable. Lily undeniably aspires to free herself from the type of death sentence as defined by Sigmund Freud. She tests her power and confidently faces the possibilities open to her. In other words, the major part of the novel presents Lily as consciously fighting the dire prospect of her psychic death. In this way she is not depicted as the passive creation of her environment.

Nonetheless, when her life conditions are dramatically changed, Lily appears to represent an individual who does not see life as a struggle, offering other ways. She seems to aim outright at downfall. Moreover, Lily does not appear to really embrace the idea of courageous protection of her unmarried status by choosing her death rather than accepting a marriage. She would have willingly subjected herself to "the constraints the culture requires" had she been given the chance: she eventually accepts Rosedale's proposal to marry her and after he withdraws his proposal, Lily hopes that Selden will marry her. All the disappointments brought together create an unbearable burden for Lily, which she tries to escape. Her relief would be undisturbed sleep, which she tries to secure with the help of chloral. It is no coincidence that she seeks a state which is similar to real death. Lily desperately wants to escape "the terrible silence and emptiness" symbolizing her future. As Higonnet notices such a practice of describing women's suicides as if the protagonists were somehow not definite appeared in the nineteenth century literature.[105] This finding will probably not satisfactorily solve the case of Lily's death, yet it can be added to the number of arguments which point out that Lily's carelessness with the chloral might be the result of her present state of mind or even of her wish not to have to ever wake up.

Either way, Lily dies as the Perfect Lady. She is too proud to contribute to "backstage" speculations by refusing to express her opinion when blamed for having had an affair; she also refuses to use the compromising letters and to manipulate Bertha. Despite this, Lily, as a real lady, is not able to live outside the upper-class habitat:

[104] Bronfen 270.
[105] Higonnet 79.

> No; she was not made for mean and shabby surroundings, for the squalid compromises of poverty. Her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in.[106]

Lily's death, when compared to Edna's, is for this reason much more motivated by the direct influence of her unfavorable external environment. Expelled to the working classes, as a lady with distinguished tastes, Lily is not able to adjust to the new life rhythm and ends up insolvent. In addition, Lily's metaphorical death, same as Edna's, has another dimension. Apart from the public dimension which is represented by her exclusion and by the wasting of her chance to marry a wealthy husband, Lily experiences also the internal divergence of her identity when she as the beautiful and earlier admired lady is publicly victimized and, consequently, sees herself as a monster. This collapse is also in the case of Lily followed by a final attempt to form some kind of a private last judgment. Lily's last review, though, seems to be much more tragic than Edna's because Lily sees her life as a failure and her struggle to win it back seems to her lost. As the Perfect Lady, she is not able to survive among the working classes but she cannot return to her desired milieu. The only escape seems to be suicide.

[106] Wharton 45.

Chapter 5: "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER"

The last analyzed work of art which introduces the theme of death is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." This short story represents another link in the chain of women's turn-of-the-century texts that feature the theme of death. "The Yellow Wallpaper," in contrast to both *The Awakening* and *The House of Mirth*, is not concluded with the physical death of its female protagonist, but in the case of this short story, it is possible to use the term 'death' in an exclusively metaphorical sense. Before turning to "The Yellow Wallpaper," I will therefore introduce the concept of metaphorical death as formulated by Zygmunt Bauman.

5.1 Metaphorical Death

According to the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, metaphorical death exists side by side with physical death. It results from an instability of interpersonal relations, which, when broken, lead to the social exclusion of the affected person(s). The breaking of social bonds demonstrates how easy it is to lose a close person, which not only resembles the natural death of a person, but also serves as a reminder of one's mortality.

> There is little point in questioning the validity of equating the loss of a partner due to separation with the 'truly final' loss caused by physical death; what counts, is that in *both* cases '*a* world', *each* time 'unique', vanishes – and that either the will or hope are missing to challenge, let alone reverse, the finality of its disappearance.[107]

In its essence, as Bauman notices, this death forces the person to adjust to the new life situation and start over again, which he compares to a 'metaphorical rebirth'.[108]

The fundamental difference between this metaphorical death and the real, physical, unrepeatable and irreversible death of an individual, resides in the fact that metaphorical death is still a part of one's life and in number of cases it occurs several times during one's lifetime, thus

[107] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006) 45.
[108] Bauman 45.

creating a cycle of "dying-rebirth-dying."[109] Such a death does not stand for the end of one's life as bodily existence and spiritual transcendence to eternity. Contrary to that, physical death is not in ordinary circumstances (which Bauman calls "'normal,' 'peaceful' times"[110]) caused by any human intentional action and death in such cases is the acme of the existence of one's body, which can no longer function on its own.[111] In other words, agents in such cases are not people but external causes, such as illnesses, negative influences of the environment, etc. Metaphorical death, on the other hand, is in its nature, and in all the cases, a direct consequence of intentional human action. Bauman adds:

> Sometimes it can be traced to an act that with a modicum of stretching could be registered under the rubric of (metaphoric) murder, but in most cases it is close to being classified as a result of (metaphoric) homicide.[112]

Finally, the attitudes of various participants (direct or indirect) in metaphorical death can be significantly different. Bauman highlights that the breaking of relationship bonds can happen on the basis of "mutual consent," but almost never implies positive results for everyone affected or directly involved.[113]

Turning now to the "Yellow Wallpaper," we can see that it is exactly the protagonist's typology as the madwoman, and the accordingly adjusted attitude of her surroundings towards her, which enable us to establish the connection of her story with death. Unlike Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart, the protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" does not die, and she does not do anything which would suggest any intention to commit suicide. Nonetheless, her mental state deteriorates and the therapeutic method chosen for her requires, among others, a complete social exclusion, which could be from the modern point of view considered as "metaphorical death." Like Edna and Lily, she is metaphorically killed by her surroundings.

[109] Bauman 45.
[110] Bauman 46.
[111] Bauman 46.
[112] Bauman 46.
[113] Bauman 46-47.

5.2 You Can't Put Me Back[114]

The protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" maintains an ambivalent attitude to her exclusion from her environment. She admits that she does not feel well but she complains that her husband does not take her health condition seriously enough. Despite her doubts about being separated from her baby, and about the restrictions on writing, she submits to his medical procedure and, at least at the beginning, tries to follow the prescribed therapeutic method.

The arrival of the protagonist and her husband to their colonial mansion, which is rented as a proper and quiet (and rather detached) place for the woman to recover from her mental breakdown, represents the first phase of the protagonist's metaphorical death. The interruption of interpersonal relations was a part of the therapy that was, during Gilman's lifetime, often prescribed as a cure for neurasthenia and hysteria.[115] Specifically, the diagnosis that made the protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" seek domestic treatment was "nervous depression – a slight hysterical tendency."[116] The therapy was generally known as the rest cure. The patient was expected, among other things, to avoid any stimulus–including contact with people–that might over-excite her or him. The location of the hereditary estate in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is therefore appropriately chosen and the protagonist does not have a chance to make any acquaintances:

> It [the place] is quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village. It makes me think of English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gate that lock […][117]

What is especially painful for the protagonist, though, is the loss of her beloved ones. This exclusion from human company represents for her the metaphoric death as defined by Bauman. The undying sense of loss in the short story is often reflected by the protagonist. In her memories she returns several times especially to her baby, whom she was forced to leave. Her

[114] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman, The Yellow Wallpaper* ed. Dale M. Bauer (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998) 58.
[115] In this historical period the diagnosis of certain mental disorder (mostly neurasthenia or hysteria) was not anything unusual with upper-class women when compared to current ratio. (Appignanesi 115)
[116] Gilman, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman, The Yellow Wallpaper* 42.
[117] Gilman, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman, The Yellow Wallpaper* 42.

grief is intensified by the room where she stays, which was originally a nursery, and which evokes memories flooding back her grief. Her consolation is that the baby is in a better place and does not have to stay in the hated room which is assigned to her. Missing the baby, the rest of her family, and her friends, the speaker starts to cry when her husband forbids her to make a visit to her relatives.[118] Her grief resembles the bereavement of lost beloved ones. The protagonist's only companions are her husband John and his sister Jennie. Nonetheless, the protagonist spends most of the time alone as John takes care of the patients in town, often staying there overnight. Jennie, who substitutes her brother in taking care of his wife, rather than being a good companion to the lonely woman, is only a poor substitute of the desired human company. During her three-month stay in the "stimulus-deprived environment,"[119] the protagonist mentions only a single visit of her mother, and of Nellie and her children – another human contact besides the rare presence of her husband or Jennie.

The experience of metaphoric death has another dimension besides experiencing it as death-by-proxy where the victims are the absent people and the narrator the observer. In other words, apart from the prolonged detachment from her baby, which is comparable to the feelings of loss which one feels after the physical death of another person, in the case of "The Yellow Wallpaper" the protagonist's very existence resembles rather numb surviving—a living death rather than real human living. Not only is she separated from the outside world but she is deprived of any stimuli: she is not allowed to do any creative work (she likes to write); she is expected to mortify her emotional excitements (she is advised to sacrifice her memories as well); and most of the time (day or night) she has to spend asleep, for in this physical state, she is finally unconscious, empty-minded, and physically inactive as nothing connects her to her earthly worries. The rest cure aimed at the protagonist's metaphorical rebirth after all her apprehensions and both psychic and physic discomforts are mortified. This medical procedure was absolutely essential, otherwise: "deviation of any kind [from social restrictions] would bring breakdown, not only of the mind but of the [human female] species."[120] The only thing which distinguishes the target state from the deathly (non-)existence is the prescribed overfeeding and the narrator's own rebellious mental resistance. However, despite all her mental attempts, the

[118] Gilman, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman, The Yellow Wallpaper* 49.
[119] Paula A. Treichler, "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Autumn 1984. 5 March 2013 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/463825>.
[120] Appignanesi 120.

combination of the tormenting need for human contact and the growing desire to free herself from this death-like living leads to the protagonist's dramatic mental deterioration – deterioration that may nevertheless be read in an equally ambivalent manner as the suicides of Edna and Lily.

We have already observed that the rest cure is close to Bauman's definition of modern metaphorical homicide. Having both the metaphorical culprit and the metaphorical body, John could be argued to be directly involved in the metaphorical death of the protagonist, though we could hardly blame him for the conscious intention to apply anything detrimental to his wife. The protagonist, on the other hand, assumes the role of a victim. As Bauman emphasizes, these unequal roles in the process of exclusion are not unusual:[121] eventually, the protagonist refuses to accept the separation and repeatedly asks her husband for being allowed to visit, or be visited by, her relatives–her cousin Henry and Julia. Nonetheless, her endeavors fail:

> I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him [protagonist's husband] the other day, and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia.
>
> But he said I was not able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there; and I did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying before I had finished.[122]

It is known that the rest cure was the therapy that Charlotte Perkins Gilman (same as Edith Wharton) also underwent. Similarly as the protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper," she had to leave her little daughter Katherine, when she tried to recuperate from "hysteria" and depression in 1885 for the first time. In her first refuge, she stayed with a friend of hers and this rapidly, although temporarily, improved Gilman's state. Nonetheless, after her return into the family environment, as she herself notes in her memoirs, her state worsened in a month.[123] She underwent the rest cure voluntarily after she decided to seek help of the specialist Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, a doctor who introduced the rest cure, in 1886 but as she commented later:

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[121] Bauman 46.
[122] Gilman, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman, The Yellow Wallpaper* 49.
[123] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (abrev.), *Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the Yellow Wallpaper* ed. Dale M. Bauer (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998) 341-342.

> [I] followed those directions rigidly for months, and came perilously near to losing my mind. The mental agony grew so unbearable that I would sit blankly moving my head from side to side – to get from under the pain. Not physical pain, not the least "headache" even, just mental torment, and so heavy in its nightmare gloom that it seemed real enough to dodge.[124]

Even though it is not possible to identify the protagonist with Gilman, their lives share many similarities. That Gilman drew inspiration also from her life is indicated even by the fact that she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" after her stay in Mitchell's sanatorium outside Philadelphia and sent him one copy to prove him how harmful she considered his treatment.[125]

This short story shows, and Bauman confirms almost a century later, that the essence of the anxieties which affect the victim of metaphorical death (regardless of what crime he or she is the victim of) is always the mortifying fear of consequential social exclusion.[126] Exactly this isolation can be elemental for the declining condition of the protagonist. As Jonathan Crewe confirms, "[d]espite her own revolt against the therapy to which she is subjected, the protagonist becomes the exemplary subject of power […] as her "madness" progresses."[127] It is impossible to overlook that the textual parts concerning her memories of the beloved ones are directly ensued by the parts in which the protagonist retreats to the thinking about the disturbing patterns on the yellow wallpaper found on the walls of the nursery where she is forced to stay – as if she was unconsciously looking for a human company and creating the mental construct of a woman who, as is gradually revealed, tries to free herself from her solitary confinement. This mental projection is strongly amplified by the mourning for her beloved ones.

Unlike in the preceding two novels, the protagonist's escape in Gilman's story does not represent her physical death but her destruction of the wallpaper, the pattern of which reminded her of bars. Nonetheless, this personal victory is only partial and most probably short-term for it does not save her from the metaphorical death. The protagonist never showed suicidal tendencies

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[124] Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 342.
[125] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper?," *Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the Yellow Wallpaper* ed. Dale M. Bauer (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998) 348-349.
[126] Bauman 47.
[127] Jonathan Crewe, "Queering *The Yellow Wallpaper*? Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Politics of Form," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Autumn 1995. 5 March 2013 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/463900>.

and even though she "thought seriously of burning the house,"[128] she never realized this impulse. For her, physical death does not represent either a desired way of rebellion or an appropriate way of escape from her uneasy life situation, which hers indisputably is. Yet her final act of defiance, as ambivalent as the deaths of Edna and Lily, does not spare her and she continues most likely to live "dead" "at least" metaphorically.

[128] Gilman, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman, The Yellow Wallpaper* 54.

Chapter 6: CONCLUSION

The theme of death in the above analyzed literary works represents the testimony of women concerning their life prospects at the turn of the twentieth century. It is a balance of dashed hopes, resentment and visions of the past and the future. It is loneliness. This phenomenon does not have merely a private dimension, related to a particular individual, but it must be approached from the socio-cultural perspective, of which it is an inseparable part. In other words, death is not just a fleeting moment when an individual transcends the constraints of this world, but in the analyzed works of art, where death is the direct consequence of particular tensions, it is necessary to perceive it as a multi-stage process with the physical destruction of the body as its (potential) escalation. As such it contributes to the discussion of the society for death is the litmus paper of its state.

The deep cultural and historical changes that took place in the nineteenth century had enormous effect upon the value system, which included the attitude to life as well as death. Social tensions were, among other things, by-products of growing urbanization. The city was not only a chance for a more opulent lifestyle but its moral disorder triggered by the striving for success and opportunistic violence made life in the metropolis in many cases an oppressive burden. Moreover, desire for the American Dream resulted in the pursuit of profit and power, which was seen by some as a cause for deteriorating mental and physical health. The gradual improvement of political and domestic positions of women was undeniable yet certain old patriarchal models tended to persist unaltered and, for instance, the concept of voluntary motherhood or the call for sexual liberation remained (for a long time) a reprehensible deviation. The changing position of women reflected also the tendency to oppose the Victorian literary types, which presented uncomplimentary depictions of the "Women Monsters" who disobeyed well-established traditions and opposed the obedient "Angels in the House." Consequently, the altered realities represented new challenges the women writers and their protagonists had to cope with.

Chopin, Wharton and Gilman described how socio-cultural influences crept into the previous order of things and initiated the destabilization of their protagonists' self-perceptions. The theme of death, thus, appears in the analyzed works of art as a one- to two-phase process,

where the physical death is preceded by the first phase which represents in these works a clash between colliding personal myths and external realities. The impact of this conflict reveals at the exclusively intimate level the vulnerability of identities.

This conflict, which appears in all three works discussed in this thesis, is in the case of Edna Pontellier presented as a rebellion of the courageous type of the New Woman against the traditional limiting image of a woman as an affectionate, obedient wife and a self-sacrificing mother. Nevertheless, Edna refuses to subject her aspirations and searches for her own identity. Edna's attempt to transcend her personal desires, however, collides with misapprehension of her surroundings. The tragic nature of Wharton's text even intensifies the urgency of the protagonist's conflict. Lily becomes a victim of social disorder and moral decay characteristic of city life at the time of opportunistic social climbing; not even her privileged position and her beauty can save her from her fate. Her characteristics of the Perfect Lady prevent Lily from her social revival for she refuses to be a part of intrigues but her vital need of upper-class life standards does not allow the protagonist to live below her social status. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the protagonist manages to destroy her imaginative prison, but her victory is only partial because despite the fact that the madwoman tries to resist her worsening situation, requirements of the therapeutic procedure have a radical influence on her sanity. The breaking of social bonds, which implies the conflict of the protagonist's former identity and the necessity to adapt to the new situation as illustrated in "The Yellow Wallpaper, thus fulfills the definition of the metaphorical death.

These attempts to struggle against the inscribed positions and roles, or to come to terms with the newly acquired ones, eventually escalate and the protagonists search for an escape from their oppressive situations. The second phase, which appears only in the two of the analyzed works, represents death in the conventional sense. In accordance with the mental predispositions of the particular protagonist types and the turn of events they are exposed to, the interpretation of their deaths varies from an acme of rebellion to an escape from victimization. In the case of the short story where the phase of the physical death is absent, the metaphorical death is a one-phase phenomenon.

To sum up, then, the aforementioned three writers observed and experienced their social changes and depicted them artistically. Thus their protagonists' deaths function as symptoms

which in the broader perspective reveal a diagnosis of the fin-de-siècle United States where Chopin, Wharton and Gilman lived and where they described various forms of prevailing gender inequity and disorder. However, death in their works is not a punishment for their protagonists' inadaptability; rather, the works of these writers are constant reminders that the development at the turn of the twentieth century was not leveled. Warner Berthoff's claim which praises the endeavors of realistic writers and their literature felicitously mirrors the success of Chopin, Wharton and Gilman:

> [T]hey are also prophets of consciousness in a fundamentally spiritual calling, willful instruments of moral reformation; producers of objects which like sacred objects strive in the making to become their own excuse for being and so to affect us not merely in our habitual behavior as consumers of marginal time but as seekers, in however limited a way, of a truly better life.[129]

[129] Warner, Berthoff, *The Ferment of Realism: American Literature, 1884-1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 4.

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