After the social stability, prosperity and consumerism of the Fifties, in the sixties America became a scene of dramatic changes in values, attitudes, and personal relationships. The widespread interest in the social and political situation of minority groups expressed in the emergence of various civil rights movements was followed by the reappearance of feminism. Yet, whereas the old suffragette campaign was about civic and legal equality articulated through the demand for the right to vote, the sixties saw a new wave of feminist struggle whose main mission was female "consciousness raising" aiming at the transformation of women's perception of themselves. Second Wave feminism, embodied in the Women's Liberation Movement, was concerned with the struggle for equal rights and opportunities for women, i.e. extending to women the same options and privileges men enjoyed, including sexual equality. The main goal was to establish a new feminist consciousness that would bring changes in the private, domestic lives of women. Second Wave feminism sought gender justice in liberation from traditional ways of thinking and behaving that stunted women's growth and kept them subordinate to men.

In 1953 *The Second Sex* by the French feminist writer Simone De Beauvoir was published in the United States. The phrase "women's liberation" later adopted by the feminist movement, was first used in this book. In 1962 Helen Gurley Brown published *Sex and the Single Girl*, in which she presented a picture of urban single girls who usually work in offices, thus supporting themselves, have "relationships," and consider the homebound housewives' lives boring. Paradoxically, their ultimate goal is still marriage. Probably the most influential journalist and feminist of the time was Betty Friedan, the author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the book that re-framed personal problems as social ones, and then developed a public cause that contributed to the materialization of the new feminist ideals.

Friedan interpreted American women's experience of the post-war era in terms of loss of freedom. She observed that the working girl, who finally gets married...
to fulfill her social role, continues to work for a period of time after marriage, but sooner or later retires to bear and rear children. Her horizon shrinks to the house, the shopping center and TV series, an occurrence that Friedan calls the "housewife's syndrome." Such a mother is the heart of the American family; she spends the father's earnings on consumer goods to enhance the environment in which he eats, sleeps and watches television. Although this popular ideology limited women's aspirations and deprived them of self-esteem, women had lived under the influence of these attitudes so long that they had come to accept them as a true estimate of womanhood. Friedan named this phenomenon of romanticization of domesticity "the feminine mystique" and described it as follows:

There is something wrong with the way American women are trying to live their lives today. (...) They sacrifice their talents and personalities to their roles as housewives and mothers. (...) It is my thesis that the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity—a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique. (69)

Profound transformation of the nuclear family with its belief that women "could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity" (Friedan 11) as wives and mothers became the main goal of the radical wing of the new women's movement. What followed was a rejection of the "current assumptions that a man must carry the sole burden of family support" (Hochman 364), and the female demand for freedom, the right to combine her professional career with private life, and true equality in every aspect of life. Convinced that women should be allowed to develop their full potential as human beings, members of the National Organization for Women stipulated gender justice.

When Friedan interviewed suburban housewives, she found that they had been aware of a problem that had no name, but seemed to have something to do with mystified sexuality. Friedan proposed certain remedies—mainly education and employment—that would liberate women from the suburban home. So far presented as passionless and passive, women were denied the right to be fully sexual beings. The postwar feminists wanted to prove that a woman was not an empty mirror or a useless decoration, whose only aim was to serve a man's pleasure: she was capable of speaking in a strong voice that was her own.

The feminist celebration of female sexuality—in radical discourse of the movement as well as in the work of Erica Jong—is best understood as part of a broader cultural trend and a result of major developments in scientific research concerning human sexual behavior. Alfred Kinsey stressed that a healthy sex life was a vital component of a good marriage and confirmed the existence of the female libido. His Sexual Behavior in the Human Male (1948) and Sexual Behavior in the Human Female (1953) were followed by Masters and Johnson's study of human sexology. These immensely influential studies brought an end to the concept of female sexual passivity. Meanwhile, the geneticist Gregory Goodwin Pincus, supported by Margaret Sanger and Katherine Dexter McCormick, was working on in vitro insemination and a female oral contraceptive. In 1960 the FDA licensed Enovid, a birth-control pill produced by G.D. Searle Company. The Pill was a breakthrough invention that accelerated female sexual liberation. As a birth control device exclusively under the female control, it meant that the most powerful sanction which men could apply to women, namely the inevitability of reproduction, was removed. Gradually, the underlying myth began to crumble: that women, because they had to have babies, were weaker and thus inferior to men. Sigmund Freud, referring to the extent to which women's lives were determined by their reproductive role, maintained that female anatomy is women's destiny. With the widespread use of the Pill women were no longer mere pawns in biological process. Besides ending the fear of unwanted pregnancies and male control over the female reproductive function, the Pill cleared the way to a new morality for unmarried women.

The Women's Liberation Movement of the Sixties also opened up new perspectives for female writers, dismantling the moldy theory that "women have no need, some say no capacity, to create art, because they create babies" (Cornillon 107). Second Wave feminism helped women understand how alienated they had been from literature. Many 1960s women writers negated the male views about women, but they also had to find their own territory beyond the traditional stereotypes associated with women and their creativity. They had to establish their own ground, one they could be certain of, and they found it in writing about female experience. A new generation of women writers took it upon themselves to express the whole body of female culture and the peculiarly different female erotic experience. In female experience works women are shown as working, creating, becoming politically active, living in relationships with other women, having adventures, growing, making significant choices, questioning and finding answers. This genre of women's writing—realist prose with a clear political message—expresses female aspirations and a yearning for personal liberation. According to Susan Cornillon, "the connections between feminism and literature are deep and abiding, if only because literature has been one of the few vocations open to women" (253). Feminist fiction of the Seventies was dominated by a new kind of novel whose content and shape was influenced by the consciousness raising (CR) practice of Women's Liberation activists. CR novels explored problems of female sexuality, gender, race and politics. Their aim was to make
their readers aware of the need for liberation, stressing that woman is a social construct so women as individuals should first redefine themselves in order to modify society and culture. The main goal of those works was to explain to their female readers how important the notion of "sisterhood" and awareness of one's limitations can be for social change to begin. The works of Erica Jong, Marylin French, Marge Piercy, Alix Kates Shulman are the major representatives of the genre. Unfortunately many of them failed to be appreciated by critics, and were labeled as simplified, ideological, or scandalous.

Erica Jong is most famous for her first novel Fear of Flying (1973) which expressed the wish to dispense with sexual inhibitions and to execute women's right to have man-like fantasies. The novel was called "a landmark for [the] women's movement" (Updike 150) and soon became a bestseller. Jong was praised by writers such as Henry Miller or John Updike for expressing both female experience and the anxieties of writing. Yet, called a pornographer by many critics, Erica Jong is largely excluded from the American literary canon. Few attempts have been made to analyze Jong's work seriously, although she offers profound insight into themes such as marriage and family, sex and feminism, motherhood and aging. Fear of Flying has been described as "a full frontal view of contemporary female sexuality in fiction" and the true representation of the "sex-crazed and drug-hazed culture of the early '70s" (Ward 253). Not only does the novel characteristically reflect the attitudes and concerns outlined by Second Wave feminism, but it is also a model literary work about female experience and consciousness raising.

In the essay titled "The Artist as Housewife," Jong writes about her first attempts to write. She had wanted to be a writer from the time she was ten or eleven, yet all her early texts had male protagonists because she did not believe that anybody would want to hear a story told from a woman's perspective. She was convinced that her own experience is less credible than the cultural norm and that no other culture accepted Freudianism as enthusiastically as Americans did. The extreme popularity of psychoanalysis in the USA lasted from the 1920s until the 1970s. What an average American eagerly perceived in Freudian theory was the idea of getting rid of repression and enjoying uninhibited sexual freedom. However, radical feminists saw many dangers in what they called Freud's "phallocentric approach." When feminism appeared on the scene, it seriously challenged the validity of a theory based on the assumption of women's passive sexual role, thereby calling into question the whole field of psychoanalysis, as it referred to femininity. Germaine Greer, one of the key feminist authors of the period, describes Freudian theory as follows: "Freud is the father of psychoanalysis. It had no mother. (...) Freud himself lamented his inability to understand women. The cornerstone of Freudian theory of womanhood is the masculine conviction that a woman is a castrated man" (92-93). A similar criticism of Freud can be found in Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (95-116). Erica Jong, however, does not totally discredit Freud. She appreciates his ideas.

When Jong completed Fear of Flying she was afraid that nobody would publish it. Aaron Asher did. At first the novel was a scandal, but after Updike and Miller reviewed it, it sold millions of copies, becoming the manifesto of the Seventies' feminism. We first meet Isadora—the heroine of Fear of Flying and the series of novels that followed it—on board of a plane to Vienna. She is quite literally trying to conquer her "fear of flying," an actual obsession as well as the leading metaphor of the book. She is trying hard to be a liberated woman but, as we later find out, at moments of weakness she clings to her husband Bennet, a psychiatrist. In fact, almost all the people on the plane are psychiatrists about to attend a congress devoted to Freud, to be held in his home town. This signals the Freudian aspect of the novel, its ambition to serve as a playful feminist rereading of the Father of Psychoanalysis.

It is useful to recall in this context that before the Women's Liberation Movement Freudian psychoanalysis was the dominant approach to the female self, and that no other culture accepted Freudianism as enthusiastically as Americans did. The extreme popularity of psychoanalysis in the USA lasted from the 1920s until the 1970s. What an average American eagerly perceived in Freudian theory was the idea of getting rid of repression and enjoying uninhibited sexual freedom. However, radical feminists saw many dangers in what they called Freud's "phallocentric approach." When feminism appeared on the scene, it seriously challenged the validity of a theory based on the assumption of women's passive sexual role, thereby calling into question the whole field of psychology, as it referred to femininity. Germaine Greer, one of the key feminist authors of the period, describes Freudian theory as follows: "Freud is the father of psychoanalysis. It had no mother. (...) Freud himself lamented his inability to understand women. The cornerstone of Freudian theory of womanhood is the masculine conviction that a woman is a castrated man" (92-93). A similar criticism of Freud can be found in Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (95-116). Erica Jong, however, does not totally discredit Freud. She appreciates his ideas.
of ambiguity and contradiction, inner conflict and ambivalence, as well as the fact that it was Freud who revealed that we are sexual beings and that eroticism pervades every level of our psyche, including those to which we have no access. What she does criticize are psychiatry’s abuses of psychoanalysis, and the general tendency to blame all female problems on the “phallic myth.”

The broken leg in the dream represents your own ‘mutilated genital’—you always wanted to have a penis and now you feel guilty that you have deliberately broken your leg so that you can have pleasure of the cast. no? (Fear 7)

It is soon revealed that Isadora’s main problem is her boredom with life. While her husband spends time at work she, although working part-time, feels lonely. During her hours of solitude she is either meeting interesting, available men, or having fantasies about them. Skeptical of the American idealization of the institution of marriage, Isadora rejects the belief that marriage ends all female sexual fantasies. She openly admits that a married woman continues to dream about other men, that she is still curious of the outer world and finally that she needs space of her own. In short, married women have the same longings as married men.

Those longings to hit the open road from time to time, to discover whether you could still live alone, to discover whether you could manage to survive in a cabin in the woods without going mad; to discover, in short, whether you were whole after so many years of being half of something. (Fear 10)

What bothers Isadora most is that her longings are so un-American. There is no dignified way for a woman to live alone in America. She is always “presumed to be alone as a result of abandonment, not choice. (...) Husbandlessness, childlessness equal selfishness and are a reproach to the American way of life” (11). That is why Isadora sometimes feels the need to become a good housewife, content with the compromises of daily existence, with a working husband and several kids. Without all that she feels rootless and homeless, out of touch with typical American female experience. Isadora’s dreams of escape and casual sexual adventures are her reaction to the split between duty and imagination—and they are Jong’s articulation of the problem that has no name described by Betty Friedan. The metaphor of the “Zipless Fuck” becomes an expression of the need to run away. Isadora’s prevailing fantasy is sex without complications and sexual adventures are her reaction to the split between duty and imagination—

For the true, ultimate zipless A-l fuck, it was necessary that you never get to know the man very well. (...) It was passion that I wanted (...) [he must have] the power to make me wake up trembling in the middle of the night. (...) So another condition for the zipless fuck was brevity. And anonymity made it even better. (47)

What all the ads and all the whoreoscopes seemed to imply was that if only you were narcissistic enough, if only you took proper care of your smells, your hair, your boobs, your eyelashes, your armpits, your crotch, your stars, your scars, and your choice of scotch in bars—you would meet a beautiful, powerful, potent, and rich man who would satisfy every longing, fill every hole, make your heart skip a beat (or stand still), make you misty, and fly you to the moon (preferably on gossamer wings), where you would live totally satisfied forever. (9)

Unable to accomplish this beauty ideal, women often internalize self-hatred. The results of this female anxiety are a deeply-rooted lack of self-esteem and an endless struggle with weight. Isadora’s own example cruelly exposes that no matter how educated and liberated a woman may be, deep inside she is still a prisoner of the beauty-trap.
I loathed every extra ounce of fat. It had been a lifelong struggle: gaining weight, losing it, gaining it back with interest. Every extra ounce was proof of my own weakness, sloth and self-indulgence. Every extra ounce proved how right I was to loathe myself, how vile and disgusting I was. (285)

According to Jane Hunter, the obsession with looks and the longings for "prince charming," typical of the model of femininity pervasive in the US, are the result of American consumerism:

American women did not have to be 'hard-working,' thanks to the wonders of American household appliances. Nor did they busy themselves with the affairs of men, such as politics. Rather they cultivated their looks and their physical charms, to become sexually attractive housewives and consumers under the capitalist system. The cost of sexuality then as before was objectification; women joined washing machines and backyard rotisseries as attributes of the American consumer dream. (527)

When Isadora admits that she comforts herself with shopping, she seems to confirm Hunter's view. The obsession with fashion, the need to make herself more attractive and more tempting to men lead women to compete against each other for men's approval, destroying the possibility of sisterhood among them. Work, writing, and travel do not provide freedom as long as women are on manhunts. Even liberated women, like Isadora, are still on a quest for the perfect man with whom to share one's life. Consequently, travelling with Adrian has one basic aim: "to find how strong she is" (132). It becomes her catharsis, a rescue, an experience she desperately needs to save her identity, and an act of loyalty to her own self. Thanks to it she has learnt how to protect and mother herself without turning to analyst, husband, or lover. "I was nobody's baby now. Liberated. Utterly free. It was the most frightening sensation I'd ever known in my life" (271).

Having evolved into a "liberated" woman, Isadora does not want to go back to her previous life of a dependent housewife. Not surprisingly, Jong had a problem with the ending of Fear of Flying. In classic novels about "fallen" women such as Anna Karenina or Madame Bovary, death was the inevitable result of a woman's quest for personal fulfillment. Abandoning this narrative paradigm, Jong allows her heroine to live and return home, changed and empowered. Isadora returns to Bennet on her own terms, ready to build a new basis for their marriage. She has lost many of her previous fears and learnt how to deal with her life. She used to dread being single; now she has discovered that other people do not make us whole, only we can complete ourselves. Thus relieved of her fears, she knows she has found her survival therapy and she is convinced of the wisdom of her choice. "But whatever happened, I knew I would survive it. I knew, above all, that I'd go on working. Surviving meant being born over and over. It wasn't easy, and it was always painful. But there wasn't any other choice but death" (303). Isadora goes on to write a novel about her European adventure, titled Candida Confesses. This book will provide her with the popularity and fame that she has been dreaming about.

This brings us to the second part of the sequence of novels about Isadora Wing, How to Save Your Own Life (1977). The book develops the theme of female creativity and shows how Isadora deals with her new position of a public person. With three successful novels, and her career as a writer firmly established, Isadora has to learn how to go through the fame craze and how to cope with her fear of success, which turns out to be even harder for her than her previous fear of failure. She writes: "I had lusted after fame, notoriety, adulation all my life. (...) And now it all seemed like some sort of a nightmare" (10). The plot of How to Save Your Own Life starts three years after the closing events of Fear of Flying. The novel begins with Isadora's leaving Bennet. Their marriage has lasted almost nine years and Isadora feels it is definitely over. She is now thirty-two, maturing and looking at both men and life from a different perspective. She leaves Bennet on Thanksgiving Day, the holiday most centered on the family, thus depriving herself of stability and roots, setting out for the unknown. She takes the risk and she feels proud of her boldness. Bennet, a repressed and silent man, who represents self-control, order and organization, has long prevented Isadora from "flying" and grounded her. Yet, Isadora confesses that despite all her feminist ideals, she still believes that marriage is a kind of "security blanket," which gives her the illusion of being protected by a man. She writes: "My husband. What security was in that phrase. (...) It was like saying ‘look I have a man, therefore I am a woman’" (98). Isadora wants to try to liberate herself once again and she is sure she can do it through her writing. The recognition of her readers had once helped her to feel productive and important, so currently she is again determined to change her life, to save herself. She agrees to write a screenplay for a movie based on her novel and sets out for Hollywood. At the very beginning of this journey she loses her "fear of flying."

Was it some new understanding of how uncontrolable life is, how little our anxieties influence our futures? Or was it suddenly growing up, growing afraid of leaving home, leaving Mother, leaving the Earth, leaving the street I grew on, leaving Bennet, the man who made me ‘Wing’ and then tried to keep me from flying. (205)

In California Isadora realizes that her main anxiety concerns the problem of integrating her private life with her career. She blames writing for keeping her away from real life and for not giving her fulfillment. "Fame. Books on the shelf. Crazy people sending me love letters. What I wanted was a man to love me. I didn't get it. ‘You got everything else you wanted.’ ‘Everything else is nothing without that. Empty. Meaningless.’" (140). She had hoped that professional success would replace her need to be loved. Writing, however, cannot be an alternative for love. Isadora seems to discredit the feminist hope that women can "have it all": love, job, children and family. She observes that one must give
something up in order to gain something else. In her case it is writing, for which she had decided to sacrifice everything. Now she seems to be questioning her choice: “Why do I play the little good girl and write about my fantasies instead of acting them out?” (141). Subsequently, Isadora starts a relationship with a much younger man, Josh, for whom she is even ready to give up her work, though later she believes may be possible to incorporate her fiction with her life. So far she has always assumed that

I had to be unhappy in order to be productive in my writing. (...) I must have made a pact with myself that I would give up love, if I could have literature. Men are allowed to have both. Women almost always have to choose. And if I had to choose, I would choose writing. At least that was less likely to disappoint than love. (242)

Isadora reveals this discrepancy between the privileges of male and female writers calling up the example of her friend, Jeannie, whom she calls a “Whitmanic poet,” and who commits suicide. When Isadora finds out about Jeannie’s death, she is stunned. For her, Jeannie was a courageous artist. What destroyed her was the war of the sexes.

Where a man poet would have been taken seriously—even if he saw God in a hunting knife or the wound in the war buddy—she was mocked because it is hard for many people to understand that the womb (with its red blood) is as apt a vessel for the muse or for God as the penis (with its white sperm). Perhaps these are our contemporary wars of roses. (181)

How to Save Your Own Life deals with the conscious choice of an artistic career as a fundamental value in life, a theme later developed by Jong in Parachutes and Kisses (1984). Isadora finally resolves her inner conflict, comes to terms with her Self and her writing. With Josh, an admirer of her poetry and writing, the goal of integrating her literary career with her private life becomes achievable. She believes she has found her “impossible man.” In the epilogue we find out, however, that their lived happily ever after odyssey is not as perfect as they hoped it to be. In fact, their marriage becomes a battlefield of their fears and desires. Still, as carnivorous rivals, or partners, they complete each other. Isadora discovers that in order to save her own life, a woman must find a man who is her soul-mate and lover in one. She has to risk everything, her independence, her freedom and let it fly: “Winging it is not a method. It was no good. All her feminism, all her independence, all her fame had come to this, this helplessness, this need. She needed him. She needed this man” (285). This ending anticipates the coming of a new set of problems for the women’s movement, as well as women’s literature.

The third part of the Isadora sequence, Parachutes and Kisses, published a decade after Fear of Flying, shows Isadora as an entirely different person. We meet her just after she has written another successful novel, the publication of which made her even more famous. Yet, accepting her success becomes increasingly hard for Josh who, feeling alienated, envies Isadora’s popularity. He is frustrated with playing house-husband to Isadora’s career-woman. The “perfect man” now accuses her of not being a typical American housewife. He is angry at playing “second fiddle,” as he calls it. Isadora, of course, feels cheated:

At first, he adored her, looked up to her age, her fame, her work, like a loving disciple. (...) Nothing she said was less than brilliant, witty and wise. (...) But then, as their problems progressed, as his reputation remained modest and hers exploded, he began, bit by bit, to believe that she was the one and only problem in his life. (Parachutes 51-52)

When Josh leaves her she goes through a period of an artistic stasis. “Why write,” she thinks, “if writing only loses you the one you love?” (327). Blaming her career for the split of her family, she questions her earlier belief that art is more important than real life. Thus, Jong again touches upon cultural stereotypes which say that integrating personal happiness with creativity is impossible in the case of female artists. Isadora desperately tries to regain Josh. She forgives his pride and does all she can to bring him back (she even throws herself in front of his car, a dramatically un-feminist move). The novel’s plot can be read as an allegory of the history of women in general: it deals with what happened after liberation, how the dreams of the Sixties were brought down to earth by the reality of the Eighties. Isadora must learn how to adapt to the new conditions, to live against all she has grown to believe. The new form of female desperation is a response to (and perhaps a symptom of) the era of backlash or post-feminism.

After the advances women made in the 1970s feminism came under many ferocious attacks and a powerful counterforce appeared—it was Susan Faludi who famously called it “backlash.” Conservatives were now claiming that “[w]hat made America great were the nuclear family, monogamy, the church, and the respect for authority. Feminists seemed to be attacking all of these, and hence to defend family was to destroy feminist ideology and preserve the status quo” (Chafe 216). In 1986, under the influence of conservative groups, a Harvard-Yale survey set out to “prove that all college-educated women over 29 stood less than 20% chance of getting married.” American media went wild about the story, developing the idea that single women are faced with a mate shortage, and childless women are depressed and confused. Other experts claimed that “women working full-time were becoming infertile, lonely and unhappy.” Psychologists added that independent women’s loneliness represents “a major mental health problem.” Even Betty Friedan warned that “women were now suffering from a new identity crisis and had new problems that had no name” (Faludi ix).

The message was clear. Equality, feminism and independence make women miserable; women have become enslaved by their own liberation. The women’s movement has proved to be women’s worst enemy. It has robbed them of the
quality upon which the happiness of most women rests, namely men, while a woman’s place is at home where she should stay and bake cookies. Backlash advocates called feminism the “Great Experiment that Failed” and proclaimed its death. Following this logic, conservatives called for a return of the traditional family with man as breadwinner and woman as mother/housewife. Basic rights and opportunities for women became increasingly threatened. Moreover, the backlash ideology insisted on traditional motherhood presenting images of it as alluring, and unproblematic. The philosophy behind all these ideas was that the women’s movement really hurt women because it taught them to value career instead of family.

Ironically, the conservative backlash against feminism began in earnest simultaneously with the election of the first British woman Prime Minister—Margaret Thatcher. In the U.S. Ronald Reagan became the president and with his election, women began to disappear from federal offices. All the public services that they depended upon were cut or downgraded. During the 1980s legislation mandating equal opportunity in education and employment was weakened by cuts in funds for Title IX, Small Business Administration funding for programs benefiting women, and funds for day care centers or battered women’s shelters. The White House was proclaiming a pro-family policy. Drastic cuts in federal funds for abortions for poor women were made and the reproductive rights of all women were threatened by congressional advocates of the Human Life Bill. Christian fundamentalists launched a crusade against women’s reproductive rights. Most of them were young, white men, earning less than their fathers, unable to pay rapidly rising mortgages, or to provide for food without their wives’ help. According to Faudi, angered by their falling economic power, they turned their resentment toward women and ethnic minorities.

In 1981, Betty Friedan published The Second Stage, where she formulated many charges against the women’s movement. She pointed to “a blind spot about the family” as the main failure of Second Wave feminism and found even her own old tactics too masculine. In fact, she accused her fellow feminists of promoting female machismo instead of celebrating female sensiveness. In 1984, Germaine Greer, the author of The Female Eunuch, published her second book Sex and Destiny. The former advocate of sexual emancipation now championed arranged marriages and chastity. She also named her new role model, namely the old-fashioned peasant wife, happy in the kitchen and nursery. In the Seventies, Greer had advocated birth control and sex for fun; now the best form of contraception was, in her view, abstinence. These two backlash books by former feminists had a damaging effect on the feminist cause, because they split women’s lives into two halves—work and home, with no vision of integrating the two. Media commentators declared that feminism had become careerism and pronounced the movement dead. Arguably, this was not true, but in the climate of political and social conservatism of the 1980s feminism had to fight hard to maintain gains already won. The movement also had to transform itself in order to adapt to these new conditions. On the one hand radical feminism of the mid 1970s gave way to cultural feminism with its search for the lost matriarchies and the cult of the Goddess; on the other hand, it was also the period of the expansion of feminism to women of color and ecofeminists.

Erica Jong captures the atmosphere of this era in her two later novels, Any Woman’s Blues (1990) and Parachutes and Kisses (1984). The heroine of Any Woman’s Blues is an embittered careerist whose failures as a woman are meant to demonstrate what sexual revolution and freedom brought to women. For such a presentation of her heroine Jong has been condemned by many feminists and accused of promoting the backlash. In Parachutes and Kisses Josh is a typical example of the disillusioned young man of the Eighties. He cannot support his family alone, so he must depend upon Isadora’s earnings. Throughout the years of their marriage Josh has evolved from a free spirit, indifferent to money matters, to a man bitter about Isadora’s leading role in their household. Having a powerful father and a famous wife, he is always described by the media as “the husband of” or “the son of,” which results in an inferiority complex. Isadora increasingly understands that it is her success that alienates her from Josh. This way she expresses the central concern of backlash culture: that when a woman is professionally successful she cannot cope with family duties, and that the more women achieve in their careers the higher their chances for divorce. In fact, men treat the threat of divorce or abandonment as their most effective weapon against women. Jong describes it as “every woman’s greatest nightmare: to win success only to lose the one man she ever really loved” (21). At the end Isadora comes to the bitter conclusion that loneliness and depression are the price for female freedom and independence, and that personal happiness can rarely be combined with fame and success. Nevertheless, she is satisfied with her life choices.

While her early novel, Fear of Flying, is the outcome of Jong’s excitement with the radical feminism of the Sixties, the mature feminism of Parachutes and Kisses stresses independence and personal responsibility for women, showing Second Wave feminism in confrontation with experience and time. Jong guides her readers through the meanders of contemporary feminism, which she compares to a roller-coaster. Simone de Beauvoir had discussed women’s past in terms of a male-created and male-centered culture. For ages women had been culturally constructed as the second or alien sex, the Other. Women in the contemporary world are still perceived as the Other, and Jong’s feminism is sometimes bitter in recording the effects this has on women’s lives. It is a feminism that reveals compromises, paradoxes and amusing controversies of modern culture, treating them with wit and humor. Her heroines, though seen by
some as simplistic, are, in fact, rather complex. Their dilemmas reflect the problems, hopes, and disappointments middle class American women experienced in the space of several decades. This persistent realism explains why Jong's representation of female experience appeals to so many women.

Jong's heroine is independent and self-reliant but always involved in relationships with men: her body craves passionate sex, while her mind wants fulfillment, independence, comfort, security, and finally power to work and write. She is strong and weak at the same time. Looking for freedom and adventure, she is torn between her loyalty to her family and her dreams and fantasies, which seem so much richer than her everyday life. Jong dwells on the conflict between a woman's sexuality and her intellect. For her a feminist is a self-empowered woman who wishes the same kind of stamina for her sisters. The prevailing theme of her work is the female search for identity, and although in Fear of Flying Isadora says: "if no man loves me I have no identity" (25), this is not true in the case of Jong's mature heroines, who find their fulfillment in their artistic work, their families, or a rediscovered motherhood.

Jong's heroine develops not only as a woman, but also as an artist. Her evolution leads from a young girl envious for success and fame of other writers, tortured by problems with articulation of her feelings, to a mature, self-assured female artist. In Fear of Fifty we read: "You can't really write about somebody you don't really love. And writing takes energy—more energy than you ever think you have. A poem is a one-night stand, a short story a love affair and a novel a marriage" (59). Following this metaphor, the majority of Jong's fiction can be said to describe the difficulty of combining being a woman with being a writer. The canon of American literature includes mostly men, and women authors are often silenced by fear of criticism. Coping with this fear is the main concern of female artists. Jong insists that in order to succeed you have to think of your own needs. Jong's heroine develops not only as a woman, but also as an artist. Her evolution leads from a young girl envious for success and fame of other writers, tortured by problems with articulation of her feelings, to a mature, self-assured female artist. In Fear of Fifty we read: "You can't really write about somebody you don't really love. And writing takes energy—more energy than you ever think you have. A poem is a one-night stand, a short story a love affair and a novel a marriage" (59). Following this metaphor, the majority of Jong's fiction can be said to describe the difficulty of combining being a woman with being a writer. The canon of American literature includes mostly men, and women authors are often silenced by fear of criticism. Coping with this fear is the main concern of female artists. Jong insists that in order to succeed you have to think of your own needs.

Women find this difficult, as for centuries they have been taught to put others' needs first. An artist needs a strong Self; women, whose experience for many centuries was represented by men and blurred by male definitions of womanhood, have problems with defining their identities.

I saw women through the eyes of male writers. Of course, I didn't think of them as male writers, I thought of them as writers, as authorities, as gods who knew and were to be trusted completely. Naturally I trusted anything they said, even if it implied my own inferiority. I learnt what an orgasm was from D. H. Lawrence, disguised as Lady Chatterley. (...) I learnt from Faulkner that they are Earth mothers and at one with the moon and the tides and the crops and I learnt from Freud that they have deficient superegos and are ever 'incomplete' because they lack a penis. (Fear of Flying 154)

Fear of Flying was shocking for some people, because sexual desire was not something women had written about openly before. While a male writer simply needs to find his voice, women authors simultaneously have to convince the world that they have the right to a desiring Self, and a voice of their own. As a novelist, Jong herself has broken many of the rules of narrative propriety. She has appropriated male picaresque adventures for women, writing about every aspect of female life, including passionate sex. Her metaphor of flying recalls the Icarus myth. Both Isadora and Icarus are people who ventured something they should not have dared, but Jong's heroine managed to soar. For both Isadora Wing and Erica Jong self-expression is a way to fly.

WORKS CITED


