

# A World Apart and Other Stories



Czech Women Writers  
at the Fin de Siècle

Edited and translated  
by Kathleen Hayes

**A World Apart and Other Stories**  
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**Kathleen Hayes (ed. and transl.)**

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KAROLINUM PRESS  
Modern Czech Classics series  
Karolinum Press is a publishing department  
of Charles University  
Ovocný trh 560/5, 116 36 Prague 1, Czech Republic  
[www.karolinum.cz](http://www.karolinum.cz)

© Edited by Kathleen Hayes, 2022  
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Image of Beneš Knüpfer's *Soumrak* (ca. 1890)  
courtesy of National Gallery Prague  
Set in the Czech Republic by Karolinum Press  
Second edition

A catalogue record for this book is available  
from the National Library of the Czech Republic.

ISBN 978-80-246-4804-0 (pdf)  
ISBN 978-80-246-4805-7 (mobi)  
ISBN 978-80-246-4806-4 (epub)  
ISBN 978-80-246-4733-3



Charles University  
Karolinum Press

[www.karolinum.cz](http://www.karolinum.cz)  
[ebooks@karolinum.cz](mailto:ebooks@karolinum.cz)



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*I would like to express my thanks to those who took the time to read through drafts of the translations. Their suggestions were invaluable: Ivan Gutierrez, Linda Hayes, Radek Honzák and Deborah Michaels. Robert Pynsent gave advice regarding the selection of the stories and help with the translation of obscure words. David Short was kind enough to read and make corrections to the translation of 'Gazdina roba.' I would like to thank Mary Hawker in particular for the time and effort she took helping to prepare these texts. The errors and awkward phrases that remain are my own responsibility.*

## INTRODUCTION

### CONCEPTIONS OF WOMAN AND THE 'WOMAN QUESTION' AT THE FIN DE SIÈCLE

Few works by Czech women writers have been translated into English; Kovtun's *Czech and Slovak Literature in English* (1988) lists nineteen women whose works have been translated since the first known translations into English in 1832 up to 1982.<sup>1</sup> Most of these translations are of poems and short stories included in anthologies. From the paucity of translations, one might conclude that there were few women writing. Yet Czech women writers were published, widely read and admired. Karolina Světlá (1830–1899) may serve as an example. In her lifetime she was considered one of the greatest Czech writers of the century, yet only two of her short stories and one novella have been translated into English.<sup>2</sup> Some volumes published recently have tried to correct this imbalance.<sup>3</sup> Writers from the *Fin de siècle*, however, have not received much attention from translators, despite the amount of scholarly research concentrating on the period.<sup>4</sup> The present volume includes a selection of short stories by Czech women writers who were well known in their own era, although not necessarily at the time of the publication of the stories included. Several of

1 George J. Kovtun, *Czech and Slovak Literature in English*, Washington, 1988.

2 *Poslední paní Hlohovská* (*Světlozor*, 1870), translated as *Maria Felicia* (1898); 'Nebožka Barbora' [1873], translated 'Barbara' by Š. B. Hrbková, *Czechoslovak Stories* (1920), and as 'Poor Dead Barbora' by William E. Harkins, *Czech Prose. An Anthology* (1983); 'Hubička' was translated as 'A Kiss' by M. Busch and Otto Pick, *Selected Czech Tales* (1925).

3 For example: *Daylight in Nightclub Inferno*, selection by Elena Lappin, North Haven, CT, 1997.

4 Two fascinating studies are: Mark M. Anderson, *Kafka's Clothes: Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de siècle*, Oxford, 1992; and Jacques Le Rider, *Modernity and Crises of Identity: Culture and Society in Fin de siècle Vienna* [1990], translated by Rosemary Morris, Cambridge, 1993.



the writers represented here are more famous for their post-war works.<sup>5</sup> I have chosen material from the last decade of the nineteenth century up to World War I.

It has become conventional to describe the *Fin de siècle* as a period of change, and for women in Central Europe it certainly was that.<sup>6</sup> Before World War I, it was illegal for women in the Bohemian Lands, as in all of Austria, to join political organizations.<sup>7</sup> They did not have the right to vote. Their rights within the household were also restricted. For example, at the turn of the century, the husband's status as the head of the family was codified by law; his wife was obliged to be obedient to him; the father alone had the right to choose an occupation for his offspring, while they were still minors.<sup>8</sup> Even after the war, women, like minors, criminals, members of religious orders and foreigners, were not supposed to become legal guardians. In the event of the death of the father, the paternal grandfather, rather than the mother, would become the guardian of the children.<sup>9</sup>

5 Benešová, for example, for *Don Pablo, don Pedro a Věra Lukášová* (1936); Tilschová for *Stará rodina* (1916) or *Synové* (1918).

6 Catherine David provides an overview of the history of the women's movement in the Bohemian Lands in her study 'Czech Feminists and Nationalism in the Late Habsburg Monarchy: "The First in Austria"', *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 3, 1991, no. 2, pp. 26-45. Wilma A. Iggers has selected and translated autobiographical writings and letters by women from the period in *Women of Prague: Ethnic Diversity and Social Change from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*. Providence, RI, and Oxford, 1995. The work also includes a useful introduction. Pynsent examines the works of women writers more generally in his 'The Liberation of Woman and Nation: Czech Nationalism and Women Writers of the *Fin de siècle*', *The Literature of Nationalism*, Houndmills and London, 1996, pp. 83-155. See also: Marie L. Neudorflová, *České ženy v 19. století*, Prague, 1999.

7 Katherine David, 'Czech Feminists and Nationalism in the Late Habsburg Monarchy: "The First in Austria"', p. 27.

8 Alois Hajn, 'Hospodářská reforma manželství' [1909], *Ženská otázka v letech 1900-1920*, Prague, 1939, p. 110.

9 Alois Hajn, 'Nutnost další reformy manželského práva' [1919], *ibid.*, pp. 127-128.

Yet despite these restrictions on the lives of women, in 1912 Czech political parties cooperated to bring about the election of the first woman deputy to parliament in Central Europe: Božena Viková-Kunětická (1862-1934), an author of novels, short stories and plays who was well known for her feminism.<sup>10</sup> A municipal secondary school for girls (Městská vyšší dívčí škola) was founded in 1863. A technical school for girls was founded in Prague in 1884 (Městská pokračovací dívčí škola průmyslová), and similar training schools for girls appeared elsewhere in the Bohemian Lands. Minerva, a private grammar school (gymnázium) for girls preparing them for a university education, was founded in 1888; teaching began there in September 1890. From March 1897, women were able to enroll at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University (then named the Czech Charles-Ferdinand University). Women began to study at the Faculty of Medicine in 1900. The educational reforms opened up new employment opportunities; this meant that women did not have to depend on finding a husband to ensure their financial security.

Fashions were changing as well. The social reforms and even the new clothing trends reflected changing ideas about woman's 'nature' and role in society.<sup>11</sup> This discourse was manifest, for example, in contemporary publications like Otto Weininger's (1880-1903) notorious *Sex and Character* (Geschlecht und Charakter, 1903) and Freud's (1856-1939) *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie, 1905).<sup>12</sup> It was also manifest in contem-

10 She was elected to the Bohemian Diet. Viková-Kunětická, like those who voted for her, regarded her election as a victory for the Czech 'nation' rather than for the woman's cause. On the election, see: Jiří Kořalka, 'Zvolení ženy do českého zemského sněmu roku 1912', *Documenta pragensia XIII: Žena v dějinách Prahy*, edited by Jiří Pešek and Václav Ledvinka, Prague, 1996, pp. 307-320.

11 Eva Uchalová, *Česká móda 1870-1918: od valčíku po tango*, Prague, 1997.

12 See the useful introduction in: *Freud on Women. A Reader*, edited by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, London, 1990.

porary art work, both graphic arts and literature.<sup>13</sup> One can find many examples of literary meditations on the changing roles of the sexes: Ibsen's (1828–1906) *A Doll's House* (Et Dukkehjem, 1879), Henry James's (1843–1916) *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), Oscar Wilde's (1854–1900) *Salomé* (1894). Relations between men and women were a topic of great interest to Czech writers. The two most famous Czech women writers of the nineteenth century, Božena Němcová (1820–1862) and Karolina Světlá, had written about issues related to the 'woman question'.<sup>14</sup> At the *Fin de siècle*, both male and female writers treated this theme. A selection of the women writers is presented in this volume. Of works by male writers, one thinks of Josef Svatoopluk Machar's (1864–1942) *Magdalena* (1894) and Karel Matěj Čapek-Chod's (1860–1927) *Kašpar Lén the Avenger* (K. L. mstitel, 1908), both of which concern prostitution.<sup>15</sup> Matěj Anastazia Šimáček (1860–1913), in his novel *The Soul of the Factory* (Duše továrny, 1894), writes about a factory worker who is torn between her devotion to the factory and her ties to her husband and child. Czech Decadents also

13 The depiction of woman in the graphic arts is treated by Bram Dijkstra in *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin de siècle Culture*, New York and Oxford, 1986. Robert Pynsent discusses conceptions of women in the writings of the Czech Decadents in 'Conclusory Essay: Decadence, Decay and Innovation', *Decadence and Innovation: Austro-Hungarian Life and Art at the Turn of the Century*, London, 1989, pp. 111–248. More general studies of conceptions of women in the period concerned have also appeared; one thinks of Elaine Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de siècle*, London, 1990; and Nina Auerbach's *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, Cambridge, MA and London, 1982.

14 See, for example: Němcová, 'Čtyry doby' (1855); Světlá, *Frantina* (1880) and *Konec a počátek* (1874).

15 Machar was a feminist, whereas Čapek-Chod was not. Čapek-Chod's conception of woman, however, was in some respects unconventional. On the theme of prostitution, see: Kathleen Hayes, 'Images of the Prostitute in Czech *Fin de siècle* Literature', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 75, April 1997, no. 2, pp. 234–258.

wrote about the nature of the female outsider, for example, the courtesan in Miloš Marten's (1883-1917) *Cortigiana* (1911), or Salomé in Jiří Karásek's (1871-1951) 'The Death of Salomé' (*Smrt Salomina*, 1911). The Czech Decadent Arthur Breisky (1885-1910), however, displayed the characteristic Dandy disdain for women in his essay 'The Quintessence of Dandyism' (*Kvintesence dandysmu*, 1909). Perhaps the most famous Czech feminist of the period was Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937), who became the first president of Czechoslovakia. He frequently reflected on the woman question in his writings;<sup>16</sup> his American wife, Charlotte (1850-1923), translated John Stuart Mill's (1806-1873) *The Subjection of Women* (1869) into Czech.

In this introduction, I shall consider the changing perceptions of woman and the woman question in this period as these are reflected in several contemporary sources.

#### THE KREUTZER SONATA

In 1890, the first Czech translation of Tolstoy's (1828-1910) *The Kreutzer Sonata* was published (*Kreitserova sonata*, 1890, English translation 1890). The copies were confiscated, as the work had been banned in Austria-Hungary.<sup>17</sup> Before World War I, six more Czech translations of the work were published.<sup>18</sup> The number of translations indicates not only the renown of the Russian writer, but also the impor-

16 See, for example: T. G. Masaryk, 'Moderní názor na ženu', *Ženská revue*, July 1905. See also: Marie L. Neudorfl, 'Masaryk and the Women Question', *T. G. Masaryk (1850-1937)*, vol. 1, *Thinker and Politician*, edited by Stanley B. Winters, Houndmills and London, 1990, pp. 258-282.

17 The work had also caused a scandal in Russia. In 1890 Tolstoy wrote the postscript to the short story to try to clarify his views and intentions in writing the work.

18 1890, translation by Antonín Hajn; 1890, L. F.; after 1900, Ferdinand Kraupner; 1909, Vinc. Červinka; 1903 and 1910, J. Zvolský; 1912, Frant. Husák and Jaroslav Janeček. It was translated into Slovak by D. Makovický in 1894.

tance of the subject of the work – marriage and the woman question – at the *Fin de siècle*. The issues Tolstoy touches on were debated during the entire period under consideration: the education of women, the double standard of sexual behavior for men and women, prostitution, the ‘marriage market’.<sup>19</sup>

*The Kreutzer Sonata* is narrated by the character Pozdnyshev, who murdered his wife in a fit of jealousy. During a train journey, he describes his marriage to a fellow passenger and explains why he killed his wife. He criticizes the education of young men and women of his class, the landed gentry. Men, he argues, are brought up to believe that it is perfectly natural and healthy to turn to prostitutes for sex before they are married. They learn to regard women as objects of sexual desire, and they see their wives in the same light. The enslavement of women, he asserts, is due to the fact that men use women as instruments of pleasure.<sup>20</sup> Pozdnyshev claims that marriage is nothing more than a form of prostitution. Girls are raised in a state of ignorance about sex. They enter into marriage innocent, morally superior to men, and are degraded by sexual contact with their jaded husbands. Girls are practically sold to their husbands: the introduction of young women to society is nothing more than a marriage market; that is, they are taken to balls and parties where they might meet prospective grooms. The role of mothers is to set traps for these men, using their daughters as bait. The education of women is directed towards teaching them how to please men. It is unnatural, Pozdnyshev claims, to marry off girls to such

19 In his ‘Epilogue’, written after the first publication of the work, Tolstoy states that his intention was to argue in favor of the ideal of chastity. His ideals did not coincide in every respect with those of the Czech women’s movement.

20 See: Leo Tolstoy, *Sonata Kreutzerova*, trans. V. Červinka, Prague, n. d., p. 54.

immoral older men. The brides are shocked to learn about the sexual desires of their husbands; they do not enjoy sex themselves, and only tolerate it because they want to bear children. In marriages that are contracted in this manner, the husband and wife have little in common and their estrangement from one another is to be expected.

Pozdnyshv's interpretation of the debased relations between the sexes and the difficulties of a woman's position in society corresponds to the analysis put forth by supporters of the women's movement in the Bohemian Lands. The similarity of views is manifest in the review of *The Kreutzer Sonata* written in 1890 by Tereza Nováková (1853–1912), a Czech writer and supporter of emancipation for women. Nováková does not agree with all of the opinions expressed in the work or the epilogue; she does not share Tolstoy's belief that all sexual relations, even those within marriage, are debased. She rejects Tolstoy's contention that a mother's love for her child is animal and selfish. Nonetheless, she states that 'the principles expressed in the "Sonata" and in the "Epilogue" are profound, truthful and noble; they seem to be, and indeed they are, bitter, like a radical medication for a serious illness; they seem impossible because they are new and completely unlike anything proclaimed before now.'<sup>21</sup> Nováková suggests that if the work were not written in such a 'Naturalist' style, it would be advisable to recommend it as educational reading for young men and women.<sup>22</sup> She writes: 'There, where the first awareness of erotic passion slinks into a young heart, unspoiled by the tales of comrades – slinks in through rosy dreams, through

21 Tereza Nováková, 'L. N. Tolstého "Kreutzerova sonáta" a její "Doslov" ze stanoviska ženského', *Ze ženského hnutí*, Prague, n. d. [1912], pp. 13–32, see p. 14. Nováková notes under the title that the essay was written at the end of 1890. In this collection of essays Nováková outlines her views on a wide range of issues related to the woman question.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

all of the most beautiful impressions of life, through art and the delight of nature – there one must point out where that passion leads. One must point out how one day it will be a humiliation, a bond that, according to Tolstoy, will prevent the rendering of “service to humanity and God”. There one must offer support so that reason will prevail and not stray from the ideal of purity under the pressure of the powerful feelings set by nature in the human breast.’<sup>23</sup> She agrees with Tolstoy that most girls are preoccupied with finding a husband, stating that this is because they have thus far been dependent on marriage as a means of providing for their existence. If women are to pursue the ideal of chastity that Tolstoy extols, other opportunities must be made available to them; the view that the most appropriate position for a woman in society is that of wife and mother must be changed. Tolstoy’s ideal of chastity cannot be achieved, not even partially, until women have educational opportunities comparable to those available to men. She agrees with Tolstoy that many women consider sex unnatural, are disillusioned by marriage and would rather live in a state of absolute chastity. She concludes her essay with the remark that, with a few reservations, women will agree with the theses expressed in Tolstoy’s work, and in particular his sharp criticism of the double standard of sexual behavior. Nováková’s understanding of the position of women and the relations between the sexes is echoed in both fiction and non-fiction written by supporters of the women’s movement at the *Fin de siècle*.

#### MODERN WOMEN

The publication of a translation of Laura Marholm’s *Modern Women* (Das Buch der Frauen, 1895) in 1897 indicates

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

that a more traditional conception of woman was still prevalent.<sup>24</sup> In this work the author presents portraits of 'dysfunctional' women who tried to imitate men by pursuing careers and in doing so sacrificed their femininity. The work argues with feminist demands, yet inadvertently awakens the reader's admiration for the women described. It presents a perception of woman that was widespread in the period, one that was informed by anxiety over the changing roles of the sexes. The portrait entitled 'The Tragedy of a Young Girl' (Tragedie mladé dívky) gives an account of Maria Konstantinovna Bashkirtseva (1860-1884), a woman who tries to develop her artistic talents: she is a gifted writer, singer and painter. Her pursuit of an artistic career is presented as the result of her disappointment in love and subsequent desire to find a sense of self-worth in her own achievements.<sup>25</sup> She dies at the age of twenty-four; the author implies that this is the fate that awaits a woman with such unnatural desires. The author states that women are not interested in knowing themselves; they do not have an inner life.<sup>26</sup> Woman is, mentally and physiologically, an empty shell; she is completed by a man.<sup>27</sup> Women are incapable of reason, and they cannot create art because they are 'empty'.<sup>28</sup>

In the portrait 'Pioneer', the author describes the Swedish writer Anne Charlotte Leffler (1849-1892). The depiction illustrates the author's point of view: woman at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century wants to be independent of man, but really the life of a woman begins and ends with a man; man is

24 Laura Marholm, *Knihy žen. Podobizny časové psychologie*, translated by Olga Mužáková, Prague, 1897.

25 Marholm, 'Tragedie mladé dívky', *ibid.*, p. 21.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 25. Weininger, influenced by Wagner's anti-Semitic ideas, made the same claim about women and the Jews.



the 'contents' of a woman.<sup>29</sup> A woman who wants to write without the support of a man is an unhappy and divided creature.<sup>30</sup> The author describes the change in relations between the sexes as a kind of feminization of the times.<sup>31</sup> Women have not gained anything, however, as a result of this change. On the contrary, woman 'means' less than she did before; she has lost her importance as an individual.<sup>32</sup> Men and women no longer understand one another; relations between them are cold. In this portrait, the author suggests that women can be writers; their writing, however, is not 'rational', but rather 'temperamental'.<sup>33</sup> She expects a woman writer to manifest a 'mobile, nervous life'.<sup>34</sup> In his introduction to a collection of travel essays by Božena Viková-Kunětická, the feminist Machar also expresses the view that works written by women will be fundamentally different from works written by men because the former will express a woman's mind.<sup>35</sup>

In the portrait of the writer George Egerton (1859-1945), 'Nervous Basic Tones', the author describes the 'New Woman' who neither imitates nor seeks equality with man. The New Woman is refined, sensitive, feminine; she is independent. New women perceive one another in an entirely new manner.<sup>36</sup> As an utterly subjective being, woman can only present herself, her own ego, in her writings. This is what she contributes to literature, the expression of her

29 Marholm, 'Průkopnice', *Kniha žen*, pp. 38-39.

30 Ibid., p. 43.

31 Ibid., p. 35.

32 Ibid., pp. 34-35. Božena Viková-Kunětická makes this point about individuals generally in the increasingly mechanized society at the turn of the century. See her novel *Vzpoura* (1901).

33 Marholm, 'Průkopnice', *Kniha žen*, p. 40.

34 Ibid., p. 43.

35 J. S. Machar, 'Paní Božena Viková-Kunětická', Božena Viková-Kunětická, *Švýcarské scenerie*, Prague, 1902, pp. I-VIII, see pp. III-IV.

36 Marholm, 'Nervosní tony základní', *Kniha žen*, pp. 95-96.

female personality.<sup>37</sup> The author does not entirely rule out the possibility that women can produce art, but does insist that the only valuable new writing by women will express a woman's soul.

#### A PROGRESSIVE VIEW ON THE WOMAN QUESTION

Pavla Buzková (1885–1949) was a writer and feminist activist in the pre-war and inter-war period. In her collection of essays *A Progressive View on the Woman Question* (Pokrokový názor na ženskou otázku, 1909), she rejects the view of woman as victim. 'Mere violence does not give rise to slaves. I cannot be enslaved unless I allow myself to be enslaved,' she writes;<sup>38</sup> 'mental slavery is impossible, unless it is willingly accepted'.<sup>39</sup> Buzková accuses women of being morally weak: 'Woman allowed herself to be enslaved because it was pleasant for her to cast off the burden of responsibility'.<sup>40</sup> Woman's passivity confirmed man in his belief that she was an inferior creature, something half-way between a child and a man.<sup>41</sup> Buzková contrasts the oppression of women and the institution of slavery in America, and asserts that women had always had greater, but unrealized, opportunities for educating and liberating themselves.<sup>42</sup> She agrees with the harshest criticisms of women: 'If women are accused of shallowness, carelessness, lack of self-discipline, there's 95% truth in the accusations. How these flaws developed is another ques-

37 Ibid., p. 92.

38 Pavla Buzková, *Pokrokový názor na ženskou otázku*, Prague, 1909, p. 4.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., p. 5. Buzková's assertions remind one of Masaryk's philosophy of personal responsibility.

41 Ibid., p. 6.

42 Ibid., p. 7.

tion, but they do exist, that is a fact.’<sup>43</sup> Women are ‘drowning in pettiness’.<sup>44</sup> ‘It is not the fault of men,’ she writes, ‘but the fault of the superficiality and weakness of women in earlier eras, that we are where we are today.’<sup>45</sup> It is women, rather than men, who must fight for equal rights. Men are not the enemy; she states, ‘one hears that only from public speakers or those who don’t want to look at the root of things; women are the enemy, unconscious, uneducated women, and, of course, uneducated men.’<sup>46</sup> Buzková supports the idea of equal rights for women; she believes, however, that it is not a question of a struggle between men and women but rather a struggle between progress and backwardness.<sup>47</sup> She accuses women of being politically conservative, in particular because they are susceptible to the influence of the Roman Catholic Church (a view that was widespread at that time).<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, she believes that women should be granted the vote even if a conservative political reaction will follow. Buzková expresses a widely held view when she asserts that men should raise women to their level so that, as equals, women can help them in the struggle for the rights of the nation.<sup>49</sup> She links the freedom of women (understood in terms of the right to vote) with the future of the nation, which cannot consider itself cultured or free

43 Ibid., p. 9.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., p. 10.

46 Ibid., p. 12.

47 Ibid., p. 13.

48 Ibid., pp. 14–15. Pynsent also makes this point. Pynsent, ‘The Liberation of Woman and Nation’, p. 116. Buzková’s anti-clerical views were typical of the Czech nationalism of the period. Nováková also expresses this view in ‘Ženy pro svobodnou školu’ (written 1905), *Ze ženského hnutí*, pp. 222–224, 228.

49 Buzková, *Pokrokový názor na ženskou otázku*, pp. 22–23. Pynsent comments: ‘For Viková and Buzková every politically aware patriot should be a feminist.’ Pynsent, ‘The Liberation of Woman and Nation’, p. 85.

unless there is equality between the sexes.<sup>50</sup> She considers political participation to be the moral duty of women as members of the nation.<sup>51</sup> Her view on relations between the sexes is characteristic of Czech 'progressive' thinkers of the period:

Only a mutual intertwining of relations between men and women will remove the unhealthy [brand of] feminism from society, that incorrect understanding of the women's movement, which does not [actually] consist in the emancipation of women from men and men from women, but [rather] the emancipation of women from their laziness, shallowness, unconsciousness, and men from their frivolous perception of woman and their overvaluation of their own masculinity. Both sexes should then be liberated on the one hand from their animal nature, and on the other hand from demoralization, as Professor Masaryk put it so well in his *The Social Question*.<sup>52</sup>

She criticizes the contemporary upbringing of women. Girls are still educated as their mothers had been; they are prepared for marriage and motherhood, and this suffocates all talent and encourages frivolity. Society cannot expect anything from women until the entire system of education for girls is reformed.<sup>53</sup> She believes that every girl should be raised to become financially independent; she should also be obliged to devote a year of her time to serve the state.<sup>54</sup> She attacks middle-class women in particular. She asserts that: 'If bourgeois women would help themselves, a great act of social work would be achieved,

50 Buzková, *Pokrokový názor na ženskou otázku*, p. 23.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., pp. 26–27.

53 Ibid., p. 32.

54 Ibid.