Class 8 : Writers and Heroines

Writers and their Heroines

1. Class title 1 (*Wuthering Heights*)
2. Three novelists

[The picture is an illustration to *Wuthering Heights* by an English artist, **Lady Edna Clarke-Hall**. I have decided not to feature this novel after all, but I have kept the picture as the only illustration I can find of a work by a nineteenth-century female novelist done by a roughly contemporary woman.] The writers I *have* decided to include in the first hour are **Charlotte Brontë** (1816–55), **Elizabeth Gaskell** (1810–65), and **Louisa May Alcott** (1832–88). I featured these, plus three other English or American writers, in the first iteration of this class, but this time I wondered what I might find with women who did not write in English, and what my somewhat random choices said about the *kinds* of fiction in which women excelled. So I asked my wife (a former professor of writing). Her answer was splendidly correct: "Everything and nothing," on the grounds that a great novelist is not constrained by gender. But she went on to admit that most—not all—female novelists *chose* to depict the inner lives of their heroines.

3. Writers and their Heroines (transformation)

So in the first hour, I have taken three of the original writers, but decided to focus less on them than on their heroines: **Jane Eyre** in the novel by Charlotte Bronte (1847) , **Margaret Hale** in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854), and moving over to this country, **Jo March** in *Little Women* (1868) by Louisa May Alcott. Note that the photos are all from movies. Both here and in the second hour, which is entirely new, I am talking about novelists. But novels are cumbersome things to tackle in a short class, so although I will include a few text excerpts, the bulk of what I show will inevitably come from films.

A. Jane Eyre

4. Section title A (illustration to *Jane Eyre*)

I must admit that there is a certain similarity among the heroines I have chosen (Jane Eyre, Margaret Hale, and Jo March), in terms of their ability to stand up for themselves, and their rejection of what others might have considered good proposals of marriage. In the British novels, at least, I also see a certain similarity among the men: older, stronger, and taciturn. This is emphatically so with Charlotte Brontë's **Mr. Rochester**. Jane, who has been engaged by his housekeeper as governess to his ward, meets her employer for the first time on a rainy night straight out of Gothic romance, when he is thrown from his horse; she does not yet know who he is. This is the 2011 film by **Cary Fukunaga**, with **Mia Wasikowska** as Jane and **Michael Fassbender** as Rochester.

5. *Jane Eyre* film 2011, Rochester's fall from his horse
6. — scene from the above

The two, of course, do get to know one another better. Later, there is a dramatic scene in which Jane's competence becomes immediately apparent. Smelling smoke in the middle of the night, Jane runs to Rochester's bedroom and wakes him up. I have to go with the 1996 **Franco Zeffirelli** film for this, because the 2011 film does not follow Brontë as to *how* Jane wakes Rochester up! **Charlotte Gainsbourg** is Jane, and **William Hurt** Rochester.

7. *Jane Eyre* film 1996, Jane saves Rochester's life
8. — scene from the above

Charlotte Bronte wrote *Jane Eyre* as a first-person narrative. Indeed the original title-page declared it to be "*An autobiography, edited by Currer Bell*"—the Brontë sisters Anne, Charlotte, and Emily writing under the male pseudonyms **Acton, Currer, and Ellis Bell**. This ability to speak for herself is one thing that gives Jane Eyre her strength. Another is her willingness to speak out about her feelings. The passage here comes from Chapter 23. Jane, who now loves Rochester, is convinced that he is about to propose to one of his house-guests. [In fact, he is about to propose to *her*, but she does not know that yet.] So she tells him that she will leave and never see him again

9. *Jane Eyre*, quotation from Chapter 23

It is a remarkable speech, showing Jane as far from the mousy governess she had first appeared. Of course, Rochester does propose, and in due course there is a wedding—interrupted by a lawyer who declares that he has a wife already, a madwoman living in the attic, and responsible for starting the fire that had nearly killed Rochester. So now Jane has to leave for real. Rochester tries to detain her, but what he proposes is a true test of her love and moral strength. She does not fail it. Back to the 2011 film.

10. *Jane Eyre* film 2011, Rochester tries to persuade Jane to stay

B. Margaret Hale

11. Section title B (cover of Penguin *North and South*)

Margaret Hale, the heroine of **Elizabeth Gaskell's** *North and South* (1855), has a similar competence and as clear moral convictions as Jane Eyre. But she is shown in a world with much more down-to-earth concerns than ending up with the right marriage. Gaskell, who moved to the industrial city of **Manchester** with her husband, a Unitarian minister, writes about the Hale family forced into a similar move when Margaret's father finds he can no longer subscribe to the tenets of the Anglican Church, and leaves his position as rector of a rural southern parish. On her first full day in **Milton** (Gaskell's stand-in for Manchester), Margaret visits the cotton mill owned by **John Thornton**, landlord of the rooms the Hales are hoping to rent. Tired with kicking her heels in his office, she goes in search of him herself. This

is the 2004 BBC film directed by **Brian Percival**, with **Daniela Denby-Ashe** as Margaret and **Richard Armitage** as Thornton. [Note, however, that there is no direct equivalent in the novel!]

12. *North and South* film 2004, Margaret goes to the mill
13. — scene from the above

It is the Jane/Rochester situation all over again, but with some serious social criticism thrown in. I'm not saying that Elizabeth Gaskell was the first novelist to tackle the social implications of the Industrial Revolution. Dickens had done so only the previous year in *Hard Times* (1854)—but that was a satirical novel, not as fully developed as most of his works; Gaskell set her social concerns within the moral framework of a full-length novel. In fact, she serialized it in the very same magazine, *Household Words*, only a few months after *Hard Times.* It was Dickens' own magazine, in fact, and it was he who demanded that she change her title from *Margaret Hale* to *North and South.*

14. *North and South*, quotation from Chapter 15

As you might expect, Margaret has many subsequent encounters with John Thornton, especially as he goes to her own father as a pupil; he is a self-made man of humble birth, and feels the need to better himself culturally as he has already done financially. But their two cultures continue to clash, as you can deduce from this sprightly response of hers. Just as with Louisa's fall in *Persuasion* and the two fires in *Jane Eyre*, matters are brought to a head by a serious real-life event. The Union in Milton calls a strike, and when Thornton eventually responds by bringing in wrokers from Ireland, the mob breaks into the Mill. Margaret happens to be there at the time, and once more she intervenes.

15. *North and South* film 2004, the strike
16. — scene from the above

By this time, Thornton has become fascinated with this stong-minded girl who has risked her life for him, and goes to thank her, and also to propose. But like our other heroines today, Margaret does not automatically accept.

17. *North and South* film 2004, thanks, proposal, and quarrel

C. Jo March

18. Section title C: Jo March

Louisa May Alcott makes no bones about it; Jo March, the second sister, and an aspiring author, is as close to a self-portrait as you ever get in novels. And director **Greta Gerwig**, in her 2019 film of *Little Women*, freely moves the action around among time periods, so the entire film is contained within her struggle to get herself into print. This opening scene actually comes from well on in the second book, over 70% of the way through the novel. Jo is played by **Saoirse Ronan**.

19. *Little Women* film, opening scene
20. Quotes about Jo

Here is one of the many descriptions of Jo writing, together with two quotations from Jo herself that I'll get onto in a moment. Like Emily Dickinson, she defines herself by her work and is acutely sensitive to what others think of it. So when **Friedrich Bhaer**, an impoverished German professor staying at the same boarding house in New York, tells her that she is worth too much to be writing romantic pot-boilers, she does not take the implied compliment, but bristles at the criticism. **Louis Garrel** is Friedrich.

21. *Little Women* film, Friedrich's criticism
22. Quotes from Jo

We know this syndrome from *Jane Eyre* and *North and South*: the heroine professes to hate the older man who seems harsh and intractable, but will eventually—after a substantial lapse of time—end up marrying him. This is what happens in Alcott's novel also, but **Greta Gerwig** holds back. Her editor insists that she marry her heroine off at the end. She retorts that the same heroine has spent the entire novel protesting she never would—see the two remarks in pink here—but finally agrees to at least imply it. But this raises a quality that all our heroines so far have had in common, even though I haven't always played these scenes: their strength in refusing proposals from suitors when either the love is not there, or the timing is inappropriate. So let me end this section with two more clips from the film, both involving Jo and somebody else whom she loves deeply. The first is on the morning of his sister Meg's wedding; Meg is played by **Emma Watson**.

23. *Little Women* film, Meg's wedding morning
24. Emma Watson as Meg

The other scene is an actual proposal, and from a man whom she has loved since she was a child, her neighbour **Theodore Laurence** (**Timothée Chalamet**), "Laurie" to others, "Teddy" to her. She just does not love him in that way.

25. *Little Women* film, Teddy's proposal
26. Class title 2 (all the books in Hour 1)

D. Sophie

27. Section title D (book cover)
28. Sophie Rostopchine, Countess of Ségur (various portraits)

Whether they themselves are mothers or not, female writers often excel at writing for and about children. French girls in the later 19th century were taught composition from the books of this woman, the **Countess of Ségur** (1799–1874), most notably *Les malheurs de Sophie* (The Misfortunes of Sophie, 1858). Three striking things to note: the Countess was not French but Russian; she did not publish her first book until she was 58, writing for her gandchildren; and she gave her heroine her own name, Sophie. So to some extent this series is autobiographical—but it is a reflection of an unusually dark childhood followed by a lonely and loveless marriage.

29. Alexey Smirnov: *The Great Fire of Moscow, 1812*

The future writer was born **Sofiya Feodorovna Rostopchina** in St. Petersburg. Her father became Governor of Moscow, and it is reported that was he who ordered the burning of the city before Napoleon could capture in in 1812. Shortly after this, the family left Russia and eventually settled in France when the Bourbon monarchy was restored. Sophie married an impoverished French Count, who took mistresses and neglected her. But her worst traumas seem to have come earlier, at the hands of her mother, a sadist who brutalized her serfs and ruled her own children literally with a whip

30. Original illustration by Horace Castelli and 2016 film by Christophe Honoré

All three books in the *Sophie* trilogy consist of short stories, in which this naughty independent little girl gets into trouble, soaking herself under a waterspout, destroying her new doll (a present from her always-absent father), and getting into various escapades involving pet animals which usually end badly for them. But later on, the story takes a darker turn, which surely also reflects the writer's background. The family tries to emigrate to America, but the boat is shipwrecked and Sophie's mother is drowned. Sophie and her father survive, but he soon marries a terrible woman, **Madame Fichini**, dying soon after. Madame returns with Sophie to France, but it is clear that she is interested only in the estate and her social position. This element—clearly autobiographical—is greatly emphasized by director Christophe Honoré in his 2016 film, but he makes an important point about how an author—whether Louisa May Alcott or Sophie de Ségur—may use even traumatic autobiography as material for her writing. I'll play two excerpts back to back. In the first, Sophie is visiting her neighbors, who have girls of her age. She is rescued after falling through the ice on a frozen pond, but her stepmother, instead of being sympathetic, punishes her in a particularly cruel way. In the second clip, a few days later, the friends come to visit, and the stepmother humiliates Sophie by accusing her of a crime she did not commit. But it all ends happily, as you will see. Sophie is **Caroline Grant** and **Muriel Robin** plays the stepmother.

31. Christophe Honoré: *Les malheurs de Sophie*, clip 1
32. Christophe Honoré: *Les malheurs de Sophie*, clip 2

E. Heidi

33. Section title E (original cover of *Heidi*)
34. Spyri with Swiss postage stamps

"Stories for children… and also for those who love children" reads the original cover of *Heidi* (1889) by **Johanna Spyri** (1827–1901). It is one of the best-selling books ever written, and Spyri is Swiss national treasure. I would not say that the book reworks any childhood traumas. Spyri, a doctor's daughter, grew up near Zurich, though she did spend several summer holidays in the Alps. She moved into the city when she married a lawyer at the age of 18; it was apparently a happy marriage. If you look at all these covers for *Heidi,* they will appear to be romantic nostalgia for a supposedly idyllic life in the high mountains.

35. Covers of *Heidi* and *Ein blatt auf Vrony's grab*

Yet her first publication, the novella *A Leaf on Veronica's Grave,* is altogether darker in tone. The unnamed narrator also lives in the Alps with her best friend Vrony, who wants nothing more than to live in nature, close to God. They are separated as teenagers, but when they meet again, the narrator discovers that Vrony has married an abusive man and is close to death; only her religious faith has sustained her.

36. Spyri: *Heidi,* illustrated by Jessie Willcox Smith

I mention this because one element we do get from women novelists of the 19th century, whatever their apparent genre, is a strong moral sensibility. You see it clearly in *Jane Eyre*; you see it in *North and South,* though it is intimately bound up with social responsibility; you see it in *Little Women,* as a reflection of the Transcendentalist beliefs of the Alcott family. And though *Heidi* begins as an Alpine idyll, the heroine goes through many hardships before the novel ends with her finally persuading her crusty old **Grandfather** to pray again and return to Church; one of its recurrent images is the parable of the **Prodigal Son**. It is far too long for me to demonstrate all this, but I can at least give you the beginning where the orphan Heidi (short for Adelheid) is dumped on her reclusive grandfather by her selfish **Aunt Dette**, who is tired of looking after her, and has found a job in the city. It will not be hard to see that the arrival of the cheerful Heidi (**Anuk Steffen**) l will soon turn the Grandfather (**Bruno Ganz**) into a human being. If time is short, I'll cut the visit to the Priest that comes in the middle. The director is **Alain Gsponer**.

37. Alain Gsponer: *Heidi,* clip 1
38. Alain Gsponer: *Heidi,* clip 2, longer version
39. Alain Gsponer: *Heidi*, clip 2, shorter version

Though the Grandfather comes to love Heidi, incidentally, he is too much of a recluse to let her go to school, so she grows up illiterate until Aunt Dette returns and whisks her off to a job as companion to a crippled girl, **Klara**, in Frankfurt. The housekeeper there rivals the stepmother in *Sophie* for her harshness, but Klara's grandmother sees something in Heidi and teaches her to read . By the end of the book it seems that she, like Jo March, may well become a writer.

F. Eppie

40. Section title F (Eppie and Silas Marner)

The situation of the young girl and old man in *Heidi,* which believe it or not I had never read before this, reminded me immediately of a similar situation in *Silas Marner* (1861), written a quarter-century before *Heidi* by **George Eliot** (Mary Ann Evans, 1819–80). Nobody would say that the little orphan girl Eppie is the heroine of the book. Eliot created many strong women in her novels—not least Dorothea Brooke, the heroine of her masterpiece *Middlemarch*—but unlike the authors we have seen so far, not even the strongest women dominate their novels, but remain in balance with the male characters. It is this balance, among other things, that gives Eliot a claim to consideration as the greatest English writer of the nineteenth century. Though Eppie, whom we meet as an infant halfway through the novel, and who grows into her teens by the end of it, is not a heroine in the normal sense, she is absolutely the catalyst of the spiritual redemption of the title characters, which is the most important theme of the book. It is Eliot, more than any other, whom I think of when I praise 19th-century women novelists for their keen sense of morality.

41. Back-story of *Silas Marner,* in bullet points

Since we are beginning well into the novel, I am forced to give you the back-story in bullet points. **Silas Marner** is falsely accused of stealing the funds of his Calvinist congregation in the North of England. His fiancée abandons him. With his faith lost in God and humanity, he leaves the town, and moves to **Ravensloe**. Though living as a recluse, he makes money at his trade as a linen weaver, and turns into a miser, hoarding and worshipping his gold. **Dunsey Cass**, the dissolute younger son of the local squire, steals Silas' money, but is killed soon after by falling into a quarry while drunk. The loss turns Silas even more into a misanthrope. Hoping to marry the lovely **Nancy Lammeter**, Dunsey's elder brother, **Godfrey Cass**, tries to conceal his unwise marriage to **Molly Farren**, an opium addict who bears him a daughter, **Eppie**. Molly walks through the snow to confront Godfrey at a New Year's Eve Ball, but does not make it and dies near Silas' house. While Silas is in one of the fits that occasionally afflict him, Eppie walks in at his open door. Silas regains consciousness to see what he thinks are his gold coins returned to him at his feet, but soon realizes they are the golden curls of this beautiful little girl. Believing that she is a sign from God, he tries to do the right thing. Silas is played in this BBC film by **Ben Kingsley**.

42. *Silas Marner* film, Silas finds Eppie
43. Silas and Eppie with Dolly Winthrop

Silas gets help in raising Eppie from a kindly neighbor, **Dolly Winthrop**. Under her influence, Silas is gradually reintegrated into the community, and Eppie becomes the favorite and pride of the townspeople. Meanwhile, Godfrey Cass marries Nancy—still concealing his former marriage—but their only child dies and they cannot have another. The stage is set for the final act. Many years later, when Eppie is in her mid-teens, the skeleton of Dunsey Cass is found at the bottom of the quarry, still clutching the stolen money. The money is returned to Silas. But the discovery propels Godfrey into telling the truth to Nancy. Together, they go to visit Silas, with the offer to bring up Eppie as a wealthy

gentleman's daughter (which is fact she is). It is here, more than anywhere else, that I am most conscious of Eliot as a moral writer. I hope you agree. **Patsy Kensit** plays the grown-up Eppie, **Patrick Ryecart** and **Jenny Agutter** are Godfrey and Nancy, and the director is **Giles Foster**.

44. *Silas Marner* film, Eppie chooses to stay with Silas
45. Class title 3 (all the books in Hour 2)