

# WOMEN IN THE ARTS



Charlotte Brontë

# WRITERS & HEROINES

WHAT DISTINGUISHES FEMALE NOVELISTS FROM MALE ONES? The short answer is *nothing*; great writing is independent of gender. But ask what women novelists *choose* to do that men attempt less often, and you get a different answer, at least in the 19th century. Women more often focus on the inner life of a heroine who comes to define herself over the course of the novel as a woman of strength and independence, who refuses to slip easily into the romantic and social roles prescribed for her by men. Three such heroines will be the subject of our first hour.

It may seem a lesser genre, but women have always excelled at writing for and about children. The fact that a book is popular with young readers does not mean that the life of its heroine lacks nuance or moral purpose, and many such books illuminate dark shadows in the lives of their creators.

In order to sample six novels in a two-hour class, I have had to turn to films, choosing the most persuasive examples I can find. I cannot emphasize too strongly, however, that while each director has tried to hold true to the author's intent, there will often be shifts of emphasis and sequence that do not have direct equivalents in the novel. *rb.*

## A. JANE EYRE

Jane, the eponymous heroine of *Jane Eyre* (1847) by **Charlotte Brontë** (1816–55), arrives at Thornfield Hall, the seat of Edward Rochester, as a timid governess. But later events will show her as far from timid at all, and in possession of a clear moral sense that guides her through some disturbing situations involving both her duty and her heart.

*Jane Eyre* (film 1996). Charlotte Gainsbourg (*Jane*), William Hurt (*Rochester*), Franco Zeffirelli (*director*)

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*Jane Eyre* (film 2011). Mia Wasikowska (*Jane*), Michael Fassbender (*Rochester*), Cary Fujinawa (*director*)

## B. MARGARET HALE

Margaret Hale, the heroine of *North and South* (1855) by **Elizabeth Gaskell** (1810–65), accompanies her parents to the northern industrial town of Milton when her father resigns his comfortable rectorship for reasons of conscience. And Margaret has a conscience too, as will become clear when she is faced with social conflicts far more serious than the usual romantic situations of Victorian novels.

*North and South* (BBC 2004). Daniela Denby-Ashe (*Margaret*), Richard Armitage (*Thornton*), Brian Percival (*director*)

## C. JO MARCH

Jo March, the second sister in *Little Women* (1868) by **Louisa May Alcott** (1832–88), is an aspiring author and as close to a self-portrait as you are likely to get in novels. She seems to define herself through her work in preference to romance and marriage, but she too gets caught up.

*Little Women* (film 2019). Saoirse Ronan (*Jo*), Emma Watson (*Meg*), Louis Garrel (*Friedrich*), Timothée Chalamet (*Laurie*), Greta Gerwig (*director*)

## D. SOPHIE

Sophie is the wild little girl in *Les malheurs de Sophie* (The Misfortunes of Sophie, 1858) by the **Comtesse de Ségur** (1799–1874). The 2016 film by Christophe Honoré is perhaps more explicit than the book in presenting the stories as a reflection of the author's own traumatic childhood in Russia.

*Les malheurs de Sophie* (film 2016). Caroline Grant (*Sophie*), Muriel Robin (*Mme. Fichini*), Christophe Honoré (*director*)

## E. HEIDI

*Heidi* (1889) by **Johanna Spyri** (1827–1901) is one of the best-selling children's books ever written. While her writing may be sentimental, it does not hide the serious moral purpose behind the apparent escapism.

*Heidi* (film 2015). Anuk Steffen (*Heidi*), Brun Ganz (*Grandfather*); Alain Gsponer (*director*)

## F. EPPIE

We are well into *Silas Marner* (1861) by **George Eliot** (Mary Ann Evans, 1819–80) before the child Eppie appears at the home of the title character, a reclusive miser. Nobody would call her a heroine in the sense of some of the other figures in the class, but she is the moral catalyst through whom most of the other characters find redemption.

*Silas Marner* (BBC film 1985). Ben Kingsley (*Silas*), Patsy Kensit (*adult Eppie*), Patrick Ryecart (*Godfrey*), Jenny Agutter (*Nancy*), Giles Foster (*director*)

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