Class 8 : Writers and Heroines

Six Women: Five Fictional, One Real

1. Class title 1 (*Wuthering Heights*)
2. Six Writers

The picture is an illustration to *Withering Heights* by and 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. In addition to **Jane Austen** (1775–1817), shown at top left, the writers I *have* decided to include are the novelists **Charlotte Brontë** (1816–55), **Elizabeth Gaskell** (1810–65), **Louisa May Alcott** (1832–88), and **Kate Chopin** (1850–1904), together with the poet **Emily Dickinson** (1830–86). English before the break, American after it.

3. Title transformation

I have also slightly changed the emphasis of my title, which is now **Six Women: Five Fictional, One Real**. The real one, of course, is **Emily Dickinson**, or whatever vision of her we can conjecture from reading her poems. The fictional ones are a mixture of the utterly familiar (**Jane Eyre** and **Jo March**), a slightly less well-known figure from an utterly familiar author (**Anne Elliot** from Jane Austen's last-published novel, *Persuasion*), and two that will perhaps be less well known (**Margaret Hale** from Gaskell's *North and South* and **Edna Pelletier** from Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*). Novels are cumbersome things to tackle in a short class, so although I will be discussing a few text excerpts, the bulk of what I show will come from films; you will be seeing these actresses again!

A. Anne Elliot in "Persuasion"

4. Section title A (illustration to *Persuasion*)

Almost all the illustrations to Austen's posthumous novel *Persuasion* (1817) that I can find emphasize its male hero, **Captain Wentworth**, and present the heroine **Anne Elliot** as the simpering recipient of male attention; this picture is no exception. But I find her one of the strongest of Jane Austen's heroines, and certainly the most mature. For Anne finds love at the age of 27, an age when most women of her class and time would be considered on the shelf.

5. *Persuasion*: quotation from Chapter 4

She had been in love before, at the age of 20, and even engaged to a dashing young naval officer—Wentworth himself. But her widowed father, and especially his companion Lady Russell, whom Anne viewed almost as a mother, feel that Wentworth is too young and too impulsive to be a suitable husband, and Anne is persuaded to give him up. This is the first, and most important use of the idea of persuasion in the novel (the emphasis is mine).

6. The Cobb at Lyme Regis
7. — the same, with quotation from Chapter 12

If this were a literature course and I had more time, I would have you read the novels in question, and frame all my arguments around quotations from them. But I have to turn instead to films; in this case, to the 1995 BBC film directed by **Roger Michell**, starring **Amanda Root** as Anne, and **Ciarán Hinds** as Wentworth. I shall play two scenes. The first is from about two-thirds of the way through the novel. Seven years after their parting, Anne encounters Wentworth again. He has prospered in the Napoleonic Wars, and is now a Captain and relatively rich because of the prize money he has won. They are visiting the seaside town on Lyme Regis, and he is flirting with Anne's friend **Louisa Musgrove**. While they are all walking on the Cobb, the two-level breakwater at Lyme, the feather-headed Louisa insist on jumping into Wentworth's arms. But there is an accident, and as Austen puts it, *"…she was too precipitate by half a second, she fell on the pavement on the Lower Cobb, and was taken up lifeless!*" It is a more dramatic incident than Austen had put into any of her novels to date, though it turns out that Louisa is not in fact dead. But Wentworth is impressed by Anne's clear-headedness in the situation, and she in turn notices his changed opinion of her.

8. *Persuasion* film, Louisa's fall
9. — scene from the above

It is a significant moment, because it involves a heroine acting in a way that is not occasioned or defined by her relation to some man. But of course it becomes the seed that leads to Anne gradually admitting to herself that she has never ceased to love Wentworth, and his coming to accept his similar feelings for her. This is the more important sense of the theme of **persuasion** in the novel, and a much slower-operating one; it happens only after a seven-year gap, and it takes 12 chapters in a 24-chapter novel. The climax comes in a scene in Bath, when Anne is arguing with Wentworth's friend **Harville** (**Robert Glenister**) about the relative capacities of women and men—a gently feminist speech, and another sign of her maturity and independence. Wentworth is writing a letter at one side of the room, and he overhears….

10. *Persuasion* film, Wentworth's letter

B. Jane Eyre

11. Section title B (illustration to *Jane Eyre*)

I must admit that there is a certain similarity among the heroines I have chosen (Anne Elliot, 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.

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

The two, of course, do get to know one another better. As in *Persausion,* 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.

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

Jane Austen wrote much of *Persausion* in what is now called **free indirect speech**, or speaking from within the mind and feelings of the protagonist, yet filtered through that of the author. *Jane Eyre*, on the other hand, is 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

16. *Jane Eyre,* quotation from Chapter 23

It is a remarkable speech, and far from the mousy governess she had first appeared. Of course, he does propose, and in due course there is a wedding—interrupted by a lawyer who declares that Rochester 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 now 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.

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

C. Margaret Hale

18. Section title C (cover of Penguin *North and South*)

Margaret Hale, the heroine of **Elizabeth Gaskell's** *North and South* (1855), is as competent as Anne Elliot and has 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 an affluent 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.

19. *North and South* film 2004, Margaret goes to the mill
20. — 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.*

21. *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 culture 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.

22. *North and South* film 2004, the strike
23. — 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.

24. *North and South* film 2004, thanks, proposal, and quarrel
25. Class title 2 (all three titles so far)

D. Emily Dickinson

26. Section title D: Emily Dickinson

We have already observed that to try to conjecture an artist's biography from her work is a futile and somewhat demeaning exercise, more frequently applied to women than to men. It is a fact that **Elizabeth Gaskell's** husband moved her to Manchester, and it is clear that she had a strong social conscience, but we cannot assume that in other respects her life paralleled that of **Margaret Hale**. On the other hand, as we shall soon see, **Louisa May Alcott** made one of her characters, **Jo March**, a writer embarking on something very much like *Little Women*. And although she was a poet rather than a novelist, it is especially tempting in the case of **Emily Dickinson** (1830–86), because her poems seem to be so personal, yet we know so little about her as an individual. In her lifetime, she was known as "The Myth," because she was known about, but almost never seen. She did try to publish, but the editors who received her work mostly belittled it. Here is a clip from near the beginning of *A Quiet Passion,* the 2016 biopic by **Terence Davies**, starring **Cynthia Nixon**.

27. *A Quiet Passion* film, editor's letter
28. Dickinson: "Wild Nights" in frame
29. Dickinson: "Wild Nights," with Munch: *Lovers in the Waves*

Nursery rhymes? So where on earth does a poem like this come from? I got this picture from a company on the web, advertising a framed version of it; do you think it fits the words? Surely it would be more appropriate to pair it with something like this print of *Lovers in the Waves* by **Edvard Munch**, even though it is later by many decades? Even the so-called complete edition of her poems that I bought thirty or forty years ago omits this poem; it was too unruly to be part of the accepted canon. I have watched two movies about Dickinson, and they offer different solutions. *A Quiet Passion* stops short of saying that she had any physical experience of sex, but suggest that she could become passionately and emotionally attached to anyone who would take her seriously as an artist. Such as Amherst's new minister, the **Reverend Wadsworth** (**Eric Loren**).

30. *A Quiet Passion* film, Reverend Wadsworth
31. Dickinson: "If you were coming in the fall"

Of course we do not know if the poem that Emily recites in the film, "If you were coming in the fall," has anything to do with Wadsworth. It might refer to a close firendship just as easily as love. Yet the film-makers do suggest that there is something altogether more passionate going on here, as in this scene when Emily's sister **Lavinia** (**Jennifer Ehle**) comes to tell her that the Wadsworths—yes, the minister is married—is leaving town.

32. *A Quiet Passion* film, Emily and Vinnie
33. Dickinson: "We outgrow love"

I did not know the poem with which that clip ended, "We outgrow love." It has a controlled bitterness, hasn't it, and it speaks to me of real emotional wounds, covered now with scar tissue. The other movie I

mentioned, with the more sensational title *Wild Nights with Emily,* was made in 2018 by **Madeleine Olnek** from her own play; it stars **Molly Shannon** as Emily. It is billed as a **comedy**, but a great deal of it rings true. Its central idea is that Emily had a very close relationship with her childhood friend **Susan Gilbert**, who eventually marries her brother **Austen** and moves in next door. The two friends maintain a constant routine of note-passing between the two houses, and Emily shares all her poems as soon as they are written. Susan is played by **Susan Ziegler**.

34. *Wild Nights with Emily* film, Emily shares poems with Susan
35. Dickinson: "She rose to his requirement"

We don't know if Emily was thinking of Susan in her sarcastic poem "She rose to his requirement," but it certainly shows what she thinks of conventional views of marriage. *Wild Nights with Emily* suggests that Susan did her duty with Austen and nothing more, but married in order to be close to Emily. And writer-director Olnek leaves us in no doubt as to *how* close. This is one of the more restrained scenes!

36. *Wild Nights with Emily* film, Emily lying with Susan

The erasures at the end are central to Olnek's point. There is good evidence now, apparently, that Dickinson's literary heirs suppressed a lot of Emily's personal letters, and repeatedly erased Susan's name from others, all in the cause of preserving the brand identity.

E. Jo March

37. Section title E: 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 action 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**.

38. *Little Women* film, opening scene
39. 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.

40. *Little Women* film, Friedrich's criticism
41. 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 point 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**.

42. *Little Women* film, Meg's wedding morning
43. 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.

44. *Little Women* film, Teddy's proposal

F. Edna Pontellier

45. Section title F: Edna Pontellier

Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of Kate Chopin's 1899 novel *The Awakening,* is different from the other heroines we have considered. For one thing, she is already a married woman. For another, this is not a story that ends happily, although some of its ideas point in a positive direction. Plus there is the practical matter that the one film made of the book, the 1991 *Grand Isle* starring **Kelly McGillis**, never made it to DVD. There is, however, a trailer, which will do to start us off.

46. *Grand Isle* film trailer
47. — still from the above

The story is simple enough. Edna Pontellier is the wife of a successful New Orleans businessman and the mother of two young children. They spent their summers at the resort of Grande Isle on the coast, but Mr. Pontellier has often to remain in the city for business, leaving Edna and the children alone. There she attracts the attentions of a rather younger man, **Robert Lebrun** (**Adrian Pasdar**). He dotes on her, and she comes to love him, but I don't think they actually sleep together. He goes away to Mexico, realizing that the relationship is not one he can realistically pursue. That winter, back in New Orleans, with her husband away on a lengthy trip North, she does fall into bed, but with a more practiced seducer, **Alcée Arobin**. Here she is the morning after; this is the entirety of Chapter 28.

48. Chopin: *The Awakening*, Chapter 28

What is going on here? Which would you isolate at the key sentence? To me it is the phrase "She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes." This is all part of her *Awakening*, which of course is the title of the novel. Chopin is a skilful writer, and there are hints of this all the way through. Here is a comparatively early example, from Chapter 9, when she is listening to a professional pianist, **Madame Reisz**, playing at the hotel in Grande Isle.

49. Edna and music

Another example of her awakening is that Robert teaches her to swim. Let's listen to a reading of the entire Chapter 6, when she first goes down to the beach with him. Tell me what strikes you here.

50. Chopin: *The Awakening,* Chapter 6
51. Chopin*: The Awakening,* Chapter 6, text, part 1
52. Chopin: *The Awakening*, Chapter 6, text, part 1

What did you think? The striking thing all through the book is that Edna's romantic adventures or misadventures are always secondary to the fact of her finding herself as a woman, as an individual. She is not so different from Jo March in that respect, except that she has no outlet to channel her self-awareness into. So she ends by swimming out deliberately farther than she can manage. Chopin, with exquisite skill, repeats many of the phrases from the chapter we have just heard, now revealing the tragedy that had been latent all along.

53. Chopin: *The Story of an Hour,* title slide

The Awakening shocked Southern readers by its portrayal of a married woman as a sexual being (cearly they had never read *Madame Bovary*), and Kate Chopin had no more publishing success. But she had already put her vision out there in a number of short stories, and I do have a video of the famous of those, *The Story of an Hour*, so I will end with it. Louise Mallard is also a businessman's wife, and her husband Brently looks after her very closely, because she has a delicate heart. Then comes news of a fatal railroad accident, to a train that Brently was on. Everybody is concerned for Louise, but she just wants to go to her room alone. Chopin describes her looking out of the window at the grey blustery day outside. Then something happens. I'll read a few paragraphs myself, and then let **Frances Conroy** take over in the 1984 film by **Tina Rathbone**.

54. *Chopin: The Story of an Hour,* text excerpt
55. *Chopin: The Joy that Kills* film, ending
56. Class title 3 (all three covers)

Chopin, it seems, has a very clear vision of emancipated womanhood. But she also sees it as no more than a vision. None of her works that I have read reach a happy conclusion.