

# GODDESS, MUSE, CREATOR



Charlotte Brontë

## 8. WRITERS AND HEROINES

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# WRITERS AND HEROINES

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 Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* and **Edna Pelletier** from Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*). Perhaps just because I have chosen them this way, we shall see common threads: competence and some degree of independence, strong moral convictions, a willingness to speak truth to power, and most importantly the refusal to allow themselves to be defined solely in relation to men. *rb*.

## A. ANNE ELLIOT

Anne Elliot, the heroine of *Persuasion* (1817), the last-published novel of **Jane Austen** (1775–1817), is also her most mature heroine at 27. But her maturity is more than a matter of age. Ever since being persuaded to give up her engagement to dashing but impulsive Lieutenant Wentworth of the Royal Navy at the age of 20, she has grown in self-knowledge and independence, so that when she meets him again as the successful Captain Wentworth, she is no longer so easily persuaded.

*Persuasion* (BBC 1995). Amanda Root (Anne), Ciarán Hinds (Wentworth), Roger Michell (director)

## B. 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)

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

## C. 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)

## D. EMILY DICKINSON

**Emily Dickinson** (1830–86), the one writer in this class who was not a novelist, wrote almost two thousand poems, often in a highly personal tone. While it should not be automatic to deduce a writer's biography from her work, the contrast between the passion in Emily's voice and her reputation as a spinster recluse is too much to resist.

**A Quiet Passion** (film 2016). Cynthia Nixon (Emily), Jennifer Ehle (Vinnie), Eric Loren (Wadsworth), Terence Davies (director)

**Wild Nights with Emily** (film 2018). Molly Shannon (Emily), Susan Ziegler (Susan), Madeleine Olnek (writer-director)

## E. 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. Like Dickinson, she seems to have defined herself through her work in preference to romance and marriage, but unlike Emily, she too gets caught up.

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

## F. EDNA PONTELLIER

Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of *The Awakening* (1899) by **Kate Chopin** (1850–1904) is different from the other figures discussed so far. She is already a married woman when the novel begins, and her progress towards self-realization happens only during the course of it. [This is also, unfortunately, the only case where there is not a readily-available film to support the segment.]

**Grand Isle** (film 1991). Kelly McGillis (Edna), Adrian Pasdar (Robert), Mary Lambert (director)

**The Joy that Kills** (PBS 1985). Frances Conroy (Louise Mallard), Tina Rathbone (director)

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