

English Literature in Lockdown

Female Protagonists Throughout Literature, 50 CE - 1963

By Jennifer S, Year 13



Medea, Euripedes, published 50 CE



Medea, from Euripedes' Greek tragedy of the same name, is often characterised as a woman completely consumed with madness. After being abandoned by her husband Jason, she murders his new wife and both her own children and then escapes to Athens to begin a new life.

On the surface, Medea may have been the 'Madwoman' she was written to be: attempting to enact total and brutal revenge, blind to the pain that it would eventually create for herself. However, when considering Medea's past, the landscape of the play is viewed slightly differently. We are reminded that Medea sacrificed a great deal for Jason ("I betrayed both my father and my house [...] now where should I go?") but even once fulfilling her role as a mother and wife, was betrayed by those who swore to protect her.

In this context, Medea can be viewed as a subversion of the typical Grecian woman, not standing for the injustice in which she faced but instead fighting to enact revenge thus creating a sort of 'equality' the only way she knew how, in the language of male violence. Her ambition after all, is primarily to protect her sons, not to murder them, but is driven to commit such a crime when her judgement is overridden.

"Of all creatures that can feel and think, we women are the worst treated things alive".

Judith 1215



Judith is the heroine of an Old English poem sharing the same name, written in 1215. The poem follows Judith as she resists Holofernes and protects her people from invasion by "hacking off his head". Judith as a protagonist is unusual for several reasons. Most obviously, female protagonists during this period were notably uncommon, and women in leadership was virtually non-existent. Civil War in England had broken out only 100 years earlier due to the crowning of Empress Matilda, daughter of Henry I, thus Judith's key role in defending tyranny is all the more impressive.

Furthermore, wherever women were presented in literature and art, it was not in the same violent and ambitious manner. Women were not viewed as violent, or in fact capable of such behaviour if their intentions were good. A pure, devoted and virtuous woman was instead the ideal. Violent women were generally evil women yet, Judith is able to defy this and enact violence in the name of her people.

***"Judith had ordered those misery-minded people before,
the clever-thoughted maid, when she departed on her journey,
a courageous lady"***

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Beatrice

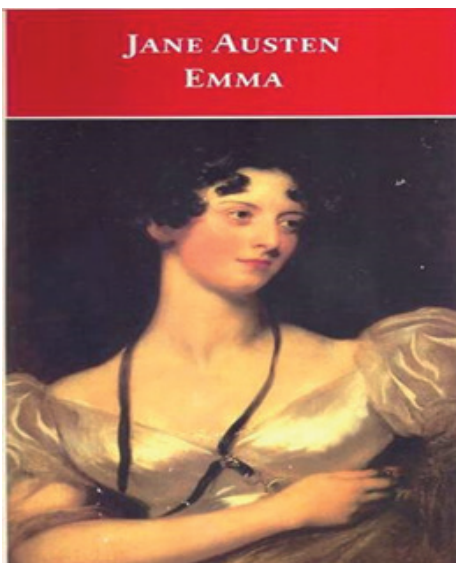


'Much Ado About Nothing', Shakespeare, first performed 1623

Beatrice, although not the protagonist of the play, is certainly one of the more colourful characters, guided by her own morals and principles, not those that were decided for her. She allows herself to be independent, witty and loyal to her own family, but still retains agency by swearing she will never marry ("I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me"). Despite her "merry war" of wits, Beatrice is far from one dimensional and stubborn, allowing herself to be vulnerable at times, but independent when necessary. Although by Shakespeare's time female characters were far more common on stage, they often remained underdeveloped and bound by social convention. Female characters were either the epitome of virtue and devoid of any agency, take Ophelia for example, or monstrous and evil, bordering on inhumane, like Lady Macbeth. Beatrice was one of the first to take the middle ground, proving that female characters were capable of free and independent thought but, not removed from sensibility.

***"He that hath a beard is more than a youth,
and he that hath no beard is less than a man:
and he that is more than a youth is not for me,
and he that is less than a man, I am not for him."***

Emma Woodhouse



'Emma', Jane Austen, published 1815

Emma is one of Austen's most beloved characters, famous for her clever mind and sharp wit. In a period where 'the marriage contract' was rife, Emma chooses to meddle in the daily affairs of her village companions and set up advantageous 'matches'. Not only is Emma somewhat revolutionary as a character for her unwillingness to settle into what may have been a loveless marriage but, her abandonment of her duty in favour of such frivolous activities makes her distinctly proto feminist.

Until this point, women who defied social convention often did so in the name of glory, valour and principle. Emma, who is perhaps intended to be unlikeable in this regard, is privileged enough to do so simply because she does not want to. She is indeed frivolous and meddling in a period where women had no economic or social freedom, but this frivolity is what makes her character important. Women, at this point, were often not permitted to exist as Emma did, and thus in her own way, she defies what is expected of her. Importantly, she learns and recovers from her mistakes very publicly, ignoring the notion that women existed only to live innocent, good natured and ultimately private lives.

***"I always deserve the best treatment,
because I never put up with any other."***

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Jo March

'Little Women', Louisa May Alcott, published 1868

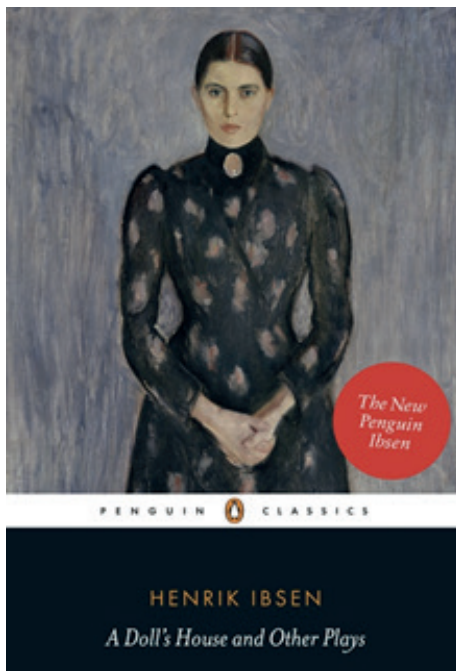


Similarly to Emma, Alcott's Jo is famous for her sharp and independent mind. Set during Civil War America, Jo as the second eldest is expected to make an advantageous marriage and secure her family's social standing. Not only is Jo particularly outspoken with her disregard for marriage ("I love my liberty too well to be in a hurry to give it up for any mortal man"), she openly rejects the wealthy Laurie to the dismay of her Aunt March, believing that they are romantically incompatible. Eventually Jo does marry, however it is in no way advantageous and completely on her own terms, thus fully retaining her agency and independence.

Jo as a character is also loved for her personality. Whilst most proto feminist characters reject convention in a measured and calm manner, Jo is often rebellious, angry and headstrong, making her distinctly more human. Although hesitant at first, she ultimately accepts her older sister Meg's decision to marry, proving that whilst outspoken she is still forgiving and multi-dimensional. As a character, Jo is fundamental in illustrating flawed female heroines.

***"I want to do something splendid
before I go into my castle --something heroic,
or wonderful--that won't be forgotten after I'm dead.
I don't know what, but I'm on the watch for it,
and mean to astonish you all, some day"***

Nora Helmer



'A Doll's House', Ibsen, published 1879

Nora Helmer as a female protagonist, represents the conflict of personality with personal life. Although she initially appears content with her 'doll-like' existence, as she awakens to her true character and need for independence, the play culminates with her leaving both her husband and children to pursue an individual life. The play caused a great deal of controversy upon its first performance, as a wife leaving her traditional role as 'Angel of the House' was extremely uncommon. Ultimately, Nora's journey throughout the play as she discovers that her 'duty' to herself is just as important as her 'duty' to her family, is representative of the growing wider breakdown of traditional female dependence during the 19th century.

Aside from Nora's internal struggle, Ibsen's characterisation of Nora through her mannerisms is equally important. During this period, women were expected to not only be socially inferior to men but morally superior, the epitome of good nature and purity. Nora subverts this entirely by swearing, lying and breaking the law across the three acts and in her past. Overall, as a female protagonist Nora was one of the first to break both patriarchal structures, through the abandonment of her marriage, and patriarchal attitudes through her outward personality.

"I have another duty, just as sacred. [...] my duty to myself"

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'Orlando'

Virginia Woolf, published 1928



The life of Orlando, from Woolf's sixth novel, spans nearly 400 years and two genders, beginning as a young nobleman and ending as a woman in the present 1928. Orlando as a protagonist is important primarily due to their self-awareness and complexity. Woolf uses Orlando as a vehicle for exploring both biological and societal gender differences. Orlando is notably unphased by a change of gender and acts no differently as a woman. It is not until forced to wear women's clothing in public society that the realisation that gender is societal, not biological occurs.

Orlando is also adaptable but grows tired of changing herself with each different life. Eventually, she stops conforming and begins living independently, coming to the realisation that people are not simply one thing, but the sum of experience throughout their lives. Woolf's Orlando is thus important as a female protagonist, as one of the first to experience full actualisation, self-awareness and a deep sense of reflection. Whilst many preceding female protagonists had rejected ideals placed upon them, Orlando is arguably the first to have rationalised these feelings and not only physically, but intellectually rejected them.

"As long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking."

Esther Greenwood

'The Bell Jar', Sylvia Plath, published 1963



Esther, the semi biographical protagonist of Plath's only novel, struggles with the confinements of modern womanhood in 1950s America. The female characters preceding Esther were left with limited options, as you were either married or unmarried, whereas Esther is given all at once far too many options, and seemingly no options at all. Living in an American society before the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 70s where sexism was still rife, but after women were given legislative equality with the right to vote, it appears as though women can do anything men can, but the reality is the pressure of starting a family is still very real.

Esther as a character is consumed by want, undecided on her future as "She wants [...] to be everything". As a protagonist, she is important in illustrating the idea that women have the same ambition, desires and goals as their male counterparts do but, still accurately depicts how difficult it is to overcome external pressure surrounding their biological 'destiny'. Thus, Esther as a character is symbolic of the confusion and struggle against the breakdown of traditional female stereotypes in the mid 20th century, and the difficulty that lies with leaving these ideas behind.

*"because wherever I sat—on the deck of a ship
or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok
I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, s
stewing in my own sour air."*