

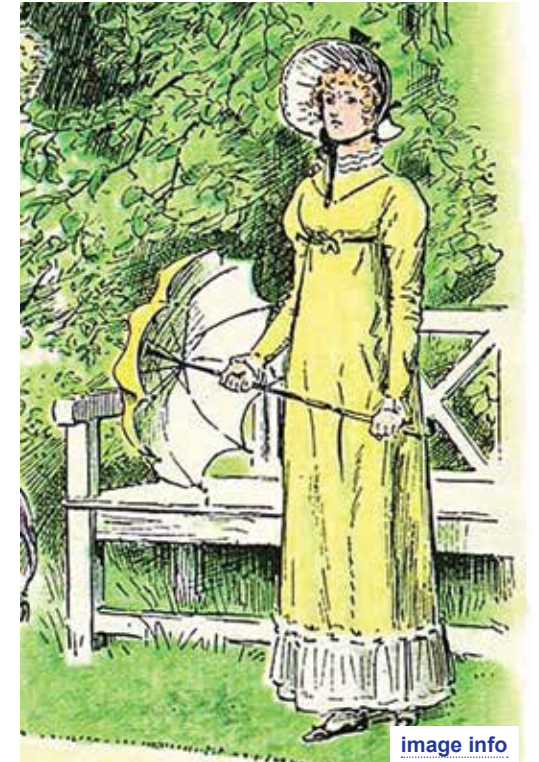
Phenomenal Women of Literature

ALISOUN, WIFE OF BATH is a character in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* whose story provides insight into the role of women in the late Middle Ages. Chaucer wrote the "Prologue of the Wife of Bath's Tale" during the fourteenth century, and at the time women were identified solely by their relations with men rather than by their occupations; a woman was either a maiden, spouse, or widow who was only capable of bearing children, cooking, and doing other "women's work." The Wife of Bath is a widow who has remarried more than once, a practice carried out by men but considered inappropriate when done by women. The tale addresses double standards and social beliefs regarding the inferiority of women. The Wife of Bath's tale argues that women are morally identical to men. [more](#)

KATNISS EVERDEEN is the protagonist in *The Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins. Katniss volunteers to take the place of her sister, Primrose "Prim" Everdeen, who is reaped (chosen) to compete in the Hunger Games, a televised fight to the death. During the fight, not only does Katniss use her knowledge of hunting and archery to survive, but she and her partner, Peeta Mellark, become the victors after defying the government's attempt to force one to kill the other. Katniss becomes a galvanizing symbol of rebellion against the oppressive autocratic nation. [more](#)

ELIZABETH BENNETT – called Lizzie by her family and friends – is the popular lead female character from the 1813 Jane Austen novel *Pride and Prejudice*. She is a beloved character, full of charm, grace, and wit, possessing just a bit of good-natured impertinence. As befitting her time period, she is expected to marry for status and money, not love. Elizabeth, however, has none of it. She is willing to remain single rather than disavow her beliefs. In the end, she marries Mr. Darcy and finds both love and status. [more](#)

Elizabeth Bennett in an illustration by C. E. Brock from the 1895 edition of *Pride and Prejudice*.



CELIE is both the narrator and protagonist of *The Color Purple*, the 1982 prize-winning novel by Alice Walker. Celie suffers physical and mental abuse from childhood, principally by her father who rapes her, impregnates her, and abducts both of the babies she delivers. Later, Celie is abused by her husband, a widower who marries Celie mainly to have someone to care for his children. When Shug comes into her life, she experiences genuine love for the first time, and through love discovers her independence. Despite her seemingly insurmountable difficulties, Celie finds strength and confidence for a meaningful future. [more](#)

Celie being played by Lovely Hoffman in *The Color Purple*, 2014.



DOROTHY GALE is the main character in the 1900 book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum. Dorothy has been called the greatest mythic heroine in English-language storytelling. Though seeming to be a child or young teen, Dorothy exhibits tremendous courage and determination during her quest to get back home to Kansas. During her journey she faces the forces of good and evil as well as truth and make-believe. She shows genuine compassion to all she meets and ultimately manages to rescue the residents of Oz from the talons of evil. She also learns that happiness is not a place, but a state of mind. [more](#)

W. W. Denslow, "Dorothy gazed thoughtfully at the Scarecrow," 1900. Illustration from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

LISBETH SALANDER is the lead character in Stieg Larsson's 2005 novel, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. Lisbeth suffered a traumatic childhood to become a world-class computer hacker with a photographic memory and goes on to solve a deep and dark family mystery. Her looks and behaviors, however, reflect a troubled life – tattoos; piercings; jet black, short, dyed hair; pale complexion. She is a sociopath of sorts, extremely introverted, and at times hostile toward men. A complicated individual, at the very least, she is, nevertheless, someone who follows a sincere moral code, albeit her own. [more](#)

HESTER PRYNNE, the protagonist in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*, may be one of the most important female characters in English literature. After having an affair, she is labeled an adulterer and sentenced to prison, and for the rest of her life, she must wear a red letter A. She then uses her situation to confront the self-righteousness of the Puritanical society, and she does so with defiance and compassion. [more](#)

NANCY DREW is a young sleuth in a series of mystery books written beginning around 1930. These books were devoured by young girls over many decades. A number of famous women, including Sandra Day O'Connor and Hillary Rodham Clinton, have said they were formatively influenced by Nancy Drew who is portrayed in the books as being smart and independent. [more](#)

MARY FRANCES "FRANCIE" NOLAN is the protagonist in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, the 1943 novel written by Betty Smith. The story follows Francie, whose parents are immigrants, as she grows up in Brooklyn in the early twentieth century. Francie's family is in constant poverty, partly due to her father's alcoholism, and her mother cleans apartments to support the family. Francie's mother becomes pregnant shortly before her father dies, and Francie and her brother, Neeley, must take jobs rather than stay in school. Francie, however, never loses her individualism and optimism for the future, and works hard to secure her future. Francie represents the hopes of immigrants to rise above poverty, become educated, and take their place among true Americans. [more](#)



Promotional still from the 1945 film *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, showing Francie and Neeley.



Author Zora Neale Hurston around 1940

JANIE CRAWFORD is the heroine of the 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. An African-American woman, Janie's search for spiritual enlightenment and a strong sense of her own identity is told through her marriages to three different men. The story takes place in Florida at a time when Jim Crow laws and tenant farming essentially continued the southern traditions of slavery and a broader misogyny was ever present. Janie does not find complete independence as a woman until after the death of Tea Cake. She returns to Eatonville with her hair down and she sits on her own porch chatting with her friend Pheoby. By the end of the novel, she has overcome traditional roles and cultivates an image of the "liberated black woman." [more](#)

JOSEPHINE MARCH is the tomboyish second eldest daughter in the March family in the 1869 novel by Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*. She is unlike her sisters, defying the rigid expectations for women in the nineteenth century. Jo March is strong-willed, confident, and literary, outspoken and uninterested in marriage. All in all, she is portrayed as a daring young woman at a time when such were frowned upon. [more](#)



Illustration of Jo engaged in writing from the 1869 edition of *Little Women*.