

# **Girl with a Pen: Charlotte Bronte Short Guide**

## **Girl with a Pen: Charlotte Bronte by Elisabeth Kyle (Agnes Mary Robertson Dunlop)**

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



# Contents

<a href="#">Girl with a Pen: Charlotte Bronte Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>



## Overview

Girl with a Pen is an interesting account of an unusual life. Although most biographers describe Charlotte Bronte's life as tragic, Kyle focuses on the happier moments and telescopes the unhappy events of Charlotte's adult life. Thus, this biography is inspiring, rather than depressing.

In addition, Kyle deals with problems of special concern to young readers.

When Charlotte goes away to school, she feels out of place because of her poverty and shyness. These problems and society's discrimination against woman writers threaten to keep her from publishing her novels. Nevertheless, Charlotte succeeds as the result of her persistence, ingenuity, and faith in her talent. Thus, Kyle emphasizes that a strong character is more important than superficial characteristics such as physical appearance or social conformity.

## About the Author

Elisabeth Kyle was born in Ayr, Scotland, in 1896. Her father, who died when she was nine, was a lawyer who wanted to be a writer, and he tried to interest his daughter in good literature, carefully supervising what she read. Because her health was delicate, Kyle was privately educated by an English governess and making up stories was her favorite pastime.

While still in her teens, Kyle began writing stories for young readers, but she was, in her words, "sidetracked" into newspaper work for the Manchester Guardian and later the Glasgow Herald.

In the 1920s and 1930s she traveled widely in Central and Eastern Europe as a correspondent for the Guardian. Eventually she contributed to every major U.S. and European magazine of her time.

In the early 1940s Kyle began writing novels and biographies for young readers. She found that she could write a biography about almost any subject, but in fiction she wrote best about Scottish children, drawing on her own experiences and writing dialogue in the old "broad Scottish" dialect, which she learned when she played with other children during visits to the country.

Kyle is not generally considered an influential writer of young adult fiction, but her fictionalized biographies are widely admired, both in Great Britain and in the U.S. Many of her books have been dramatized on the British Broadcasting Corporation's Scottish "Children's Hour," and *Girl with a Pen* was the only work on Charlotte Bronte to be approved by the president of the English Bronte Society before publication.

Kyle lived in Ayr, Scotland, until her death on February 23, 1982. The National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh houses her manuscript collection.

# Setting

Charlotte Bronte lived from 1816 to 1855. Although she spent a few days in London, several months in Brussels, and a brief period as a governess at Stonegappe, *Girl with a Pen* takes place where Charlotte lived most of her life, with her family at the Haworth Parsonage in the Yorkshire moors of England.

## Social Sensitivity

Because Elisabeth Kyle wrote her account of Charlotte Bronte's life for young readers, she perhaps felt it necessary to avoid a starkly realistic depiction of Charlotte's difficult childhood, the tragedies that she endured until her death in 1855, and the sexist literary climate of the nineteenth century. Although this romanticized view in some ways minimizes the impact of Charlotte's struggle to become a serious writer in her time, Kyle portrays Charlotte as an intelligent, determined nonconformist who achieves her ambitions. She presents Charlotte as a role model for young female writers, noting in her afterword that her purpose in writing the book was to stir interest in a "remarkable girl" who wrote "remarkable books."



## Literary Qualities

Kyle's assessment of *Girl with a Pen* as fictionalized biography requires that the book be judged by the standards of both fiction and biography. Kyle's careful selection of significant events makes Charlotte Bronte's life even more interesting. The narrative includes only the people and incidents that directly influenced Charlotte's personal and literary choices. Thus, this account of Charlotte's literary success and her decision to marry Nicholls conveys the impression of inevitability that Edgar Allan Poe insisted was the hallmark of a good plot.

Kyle also possesses the novelist's ability to render lively and thoroughly believable major characters. She portrays Charlotte as a complex human being experiencing doubts, uncertainties, and failures familiar to most young readers. Emily and, to a lesser degree, Anne emerge as distinctive personalities as well. Kyle hints at the complexities of Elizabeth Branwell's personality, but most of the other characters are seen only as they affect Charlotte's life.

Kyle's primary intention is to interest readers in the Brontes and their novels, not to provide a complete biography of Charlotte Bronte. *Girl with a Pen*, therefore, serves only as an introduction to the lives of the Brontes. Readers should be reminded that most of the dialogue is Kyle's imaginative reconstruction, that Charlotte's relationships with men have been romanticized, and that the sequence of events has been altered to a greater extent than Kyle acknowledges.



# Themes and Characters

A plain, shy, frail girl with vast reserves of pride and determination, Charlotte Brontë is the main character in *Girl with a Pen*. Her shyness makes her reluctant to leave home, but her handling of the girls in her class at Madame Heger's pensionnat and her trip to London to confront George Smith prove her ability to think quickly and act decisively. Her letter to Robert Southey demonstrates her ambition. She will consult no lesser authority than the poet laureate, and his negative response hurts her pride.

Nevertheless, her persistence leads her to continue writing and to mail her novel to London publishers despite the rejections she receives.

While *Girl with a Pen* is Charlotte Brontë's story, her sisters Emily and Anne also play important roles. Emily, the more forceful personality, combines shyness and brusqueness. She resents any invasion of her privacy, but her kindness to animals reveals a softer side to her nature. When family members approach her tactfully, they persuade her to cooperate in ventures such as the proposed boarding school and the publication of the sisters' poems and stories.

Anne seems the most passive of the sisters, but her insistence that their novels be published reflects her determination. Considerably less important is Charlotte's brother, Branwell. He helps to stimulate her youthful imagination and ambition, but his failure adds an element of pain to her success.

Also important in this story are Charlotte's father, Patrick Brontë, and her maternal aunt, Miss Elizabeth Branwell.

Patrick's eccentricities—such as unloading his gun by shooting out the back door each morning or refusing to allow curtains, carpets, or dresses of certain fabrics—heighten Charlotte's self-consciousness, and his withdrawal from family life after his wife's death increases both Charlotte's shyness and her desire to win his approval. The narrative depicts Miss Branwell as a stern disciplinarian who attempts to teach the Brontë sisters social graces and financial practicality. Her character is softened by her willingness to assist them in setting up their school, as well as by her nostalgia for the pleasant life she has given up in order to care for the children of her dead sister.

Minor characters include Mr. Brontë's two curates, William Weightman and Arthur Bell Nicholls. Nicholls's steadfast devotion eventually wins Charlotte's love, and she marries him a year before her death. Weightman provides a foil for Nicholls in that the marked contrasts between the two men allow Nicholls's distinctive personality traits to emerge.

The thwarted relationship between Anne and Weightman clarifies the important elements of romantic love for Charlotte.

Charlotte has few friends, but her relationship with Ellen Nussey is vital. Ellen's acceptance builds Charlotte's self-confidence, and through this friendship Charlotte





acquires much of her knowledge of the world beyond Haworth and the Yorkshire moors. Henry Nussey, Ellen's brother and the pompous young clergyman whose marriage proposal Charlotte rejects, serves as the model for the character St. John Rivers in *Jane Eyre*.

Charlotte's literary mentor is Constantine Heger, her teacher in Brussels. He tries to curb what he sees as her wild imagination, advising her to depict realistically the people and situations she knows well. Although Charlotte believes she has completely disregarded his advice in *Jane Eyre*, the novel's careful depiction of people and places reflects the discipline he has imposed.

457 *Portrait of Charlotte Brontë* by George Richmond (1850). Reprinted in *Girl with a Pen* by Elisabeth Kyle. Holt, Rinehart and Winston: New York (1964).

Perhaps the dominant theme of *Girl with a Pen* is the value of persistence.

Charlotte Brontë confronts a variety of difficulties, including her family's poverty, her own shyness, the relative isolation of Haworth, her sister Emily's reluctance to have her work published, the indifference of publishers to unknown writers, and society's negative view of woman writers. Nevertheless, Charlotte maintains her faith in the novels she and her sisters have written, and she continues to submit her work to publishers until it is finally accepted.

The difference between appearance and reality constitutes a secondary theme. Brontë amazes George Smith of the London publishing firm Smith and Elder; he simply cannot believe that this seemingly simple country woman wrote the deeply moving *Jane Eyre*. Kyle also points out how Charlotte repeatedly refuses to conform to the expectations of others, instead following her own standards.

Likewise, Kyle develops the theme of honor. Charlotte always strives to behave honorably. She forces herself not to be jealous of her sisters' earlier success in placing their novels, she visits sick children in the parish when she would prefer to look for early primroses, she will not advertise French as part of the parsonage school curriculum until she is truly proficient in the language, and she will not remain at Madame Heger's pensionnat when she realizes that Madame Heger wishes her to leave.

Kyle also addresses the importance of resourcefulness. The Brontë children's ingenuity results in the development of their imaginative powers as they write stories to entertain themselves. Moreover, Charlotte's resourcefulness leads her to plan the establishment of the parsonage school so that none of the sisters will have to work as a governess.

Further, the Brontës realize that their poetry will not be treated seriously if the publishers know it was written by women, but their scruples prevent their taking definitely masculine names; so they cleverly choose ambiguous names, knowing that publishers will assume the writers must be men.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Charlotte receives marriage proposals from two young clergymen. Why does she refuse the first and accept the second? Are her decisions wise ones?

Why or why not?

2. What course does Robert Southey advise when Charlotte seeks literary advice from him? How does his advice affect Charlotte's career?

3. Charlotte's teacher in Brussels, Constantine Heger, strongly influences her first novel. What advice does Heger give her? Why does she not succeed when she attempts to follow this advice?

Does *Jane Eyre* in any way reflect Heger's influence? If so, in what way?

4. At first Branwell Bronte is considered the family genius. How does his personality differ from his sisters'? Why does he not succeed as they do?

5. Perhaps influenced by Patrick Bronte, who did not like her very much, some of Charlotte's biographers have depicted Miss Elizabeth Branwell as extremely critical and demanding. How does Kyle soften this portrait?

6. Kyle emphasizes the shyness of the Bronte sisters. What other elements of their personalities does she describe?

Do these characteristics explain their lack of success as governesses? Why do they fail when they attempt to set up a boarding school? How might their literary careers have been different if their school had succeeded?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In *Girl with a Pen*, Kyle describes Charlotte's reactions to Queen Victoria and the celebrations surrounding the English queen's visit to King Leopold.

Using library reference sources, compare Charlotte's impressions with accounts of the celebrations associated with this state visit. Why was Queen Victoria such an appealing figure to Charlotte?

2. Some critics contend that *Jane Eyre* is largely autobiographical. Read the novel and perhaps another biography of Charlotte Bronte, then discuss which elements of her life and personality the novel reflects.

3. Most critics today prefer Emily's *Wuthering Heights* to Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, while nineteenth-century critics preferred Charlotte's works. Read both novels, and explain which you prefer.

4. Although *Jane Eyre* is the best known of Charlotte's novels, she wrote three others. Read *The Professor*, *Villette*, or *Shirley*. How do the incidents, themes, and characters reflect parts of Charlotte's life?

5. Some of Charlotte's early stories are available in *The Miscellaneous and Unpublished Writings of Charlotte and Patrick Branwell Bronte*. Read some of these stories, and compare their plots and characters with those found later in *Jane Eyre* or with people and events in *Girl with a Pen*.

6. The Bronte sisters lived in Yorkshire. Probably the best known modern Yorkshire writer is James Herriot. Read one of his books, such as *All Creatures Great and Small* or *All Things Bright and Beautiful*. What similarities and differences exist between Herriot's and the Brontes' portrayal of Yorkshire?

7. Read *Jane Eyre* and a novel by another nineteenth-century woman, such as George Eliot or Elizabeth Gaskell. What similarities and differences can be found?

8. Kyle describes nineteenth-century medical treatment, especially Patrick Bronte's cataract surgery. Investigate the differences between this procedure and modern medical treatment.

## For Further Reference

Alexander, Christina. *The Early Writing of Charlotte Bronte*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1983. Analysis of Bronte's childhood writing and.

according to Alexander, the "first attempt at a scholarly survey of the early manuscripts in their entirety."

Crompton, Margaret. *Passionate Search: A Life of Charlotte Bronte*, 1975. Reprint. Philadelphia: Century Bookbindery, 1982. An analysis of Bronte's relationships with her brother, sisters, freinds, and suitors, including Arthur Bell Nichols.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *The Life of Charlotte Bronte*. 1857. Reprint. New York: Penguin, 1975. Written by a nineteenthcentury popular novelist, this was the first biography completed after Bronte's death. Gaskell had the cooperation of both Patrick Bronte and Arthur Bell Nicholls.

Gerin, Winifred. *Charlotte Bronte: The Evolution of Genius*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967. A comprehensive study of the "growth of Charlotte Bronte's moral and artistic stature," emphasizing the influence of her environment.

Kirkpatrick, D. L., ed. *Twentieth Century Children's Writers*. 2d ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983. Contains a bibliography of Kyle's works and brief critical comments.

Knies, Earl A. *The Art of Charlotte Bronte*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1969. An analysis of Bronte's novels that emphasizes her artistry and contains an extensive bibliography.

Peters, Margot. *Charlotte Bronte: Style in the Novel* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973. A study of Bronte's prose style.

*Unquiet Soul: A Bibliography of Charlotte Bronte*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975. A feminist psychological study.

Ratchford, Fannie Elizabeth. *The Brontes' Web of Childhood*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1964. An examination of the Brontes' childhood writing that attempts to resolve "most of the long-studied, much discussed Bronte problems."

Vipont, Elfrida. *Weaver of Dreams: The Girlhood of Charlotte Bronte*. New York: Henry Z. Walck, 1966. An account of the lives of Charlotte and her sisters and brother, from the time the family moved to Haworth until Charlotte and her brother left home to work. Includes a list of suggested readings.

## Related Titles

Girl with a Pen's fictionalized and somewhat romanticized style resembles that of Kyle's other biographical works, especially her accounts of Queen Victoria, *Victoria: The Story of a Great Queen*, and Jenny Lind, *The Swedish Nightingale*.

# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996