

Insights into Victorian Spiritualism through *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*

by Monica Postma

Abstract

This essay explores the supernatural themes in Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights. It includes a brief overview of spiritualism, a popular movement at the time when the Bronte's were publishing, and through literary analysis discusses how spiritualism might have affected the Bronte's writing.

In the Victorian era, ideas of the supernatural were pervasive. As the Victorians sought to explain things beyond their comprehension, whether it was the industrial revolution or the fracturing of the Christian church, belief in the supernatural abounded. The Victorians became increasingly concerned with mesmerism, spiritualism and ghost stories, and these beliefs are manifested in popular literary works from the era, such as those of the Brontes. Spiritualism, or the idea that the living could communicate with the dead comes up directly in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, as Heathcliff is haunted by the ghost of his lover, Catherine. Ideas of supernatural communication appear more obliquely in *Jane Eyre*, such as when young Jane is confronted with the ghost of her uncle in the red room and when Jane and Rochester confess their love for one another on opposite sides of the country. The way that these two stories approach the question of spiritualism is distinct—throughout *Jane Eyre*, the titular character seeks God's guidance and approval in every action, whilst *Wuthering Heights*' embittered Heathcliff seems to have given up the hope of holy support.

Various forms of magical superstitions arose and became widely accepted in the Victorian Era. Among them were mesmerism, the belief that "miraculous medical cures could be affected by manipulating the invisible flows of 'animal magnetism' that passed through and between bodies" (Supernatural Victorian Era) and spiritualism, the belief that the dead could communicate with the living through a variety of means including table-rappings, mediums, and seances. Queen Victoria herself, for whom the Victorian era was named, was known to have attended seances (Diniejko), while Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was a public believer in spiritualism (Huntington). The American Fox sisters popularized the idea of table-rapping, the supposed ability of the dead to communicate with the living through a series of knocks on a table or wall, in 1848, the year after *Jane Eyre* was published. The Fox sisters claimed that in this fashion they contacted a man who had been murdered in their house. Mediums only increased in popularity from that instance onwards.

These magical superstitions were frowned upon, especially by the church. Professor Charles Grafton Page mentioned this specifically in his book *Psychomancy : spirit-rappings and table-tippings exposed*:

In all ages, the Church has attributed sorcery to the agency of the devil. If this is his work, he certainly proceeds upon the same general *modus operandi* as ever. As one artifice wears out, or is exploded by the power of science, he resorts to another; that is, he prompts new tricks by his own unseen influences, upon the minds of those who become his willing instruments. (Page, 13-14)

In this passage, Page discusses the rise in beliefs such as mesmerism or spiritualism, and the book's purpose is to expose the falseness of these beliefs. While Page believes that any chance of communication with the dead is fraudulent, this passage conveys that whether or not mediumship is actually possible is beside the point. Page argues that even if such communication is possible, it should be condemned as the act of mediumship, which comes from the trickery and artifice of the devil. Page also subtly argues his case for the falsehood of spiritualism by implying that anyone who would believe in it is unintelligent or weak-willed, and such people are "willing instruments" to perpetuating this falsehood from the devil. Page is not the only dissenter to spiritualism. John Henry Anderson, who was himself a magician, remained skeptical towards the idea of spiritualism, publishing a book entitled *The Fashionable Science of Parlour Magic: Being the Newest Tricks of Deception, Developed and Illustrated: With an Exposure of the Practices Made Use of by Professional Card Players, Blacklegs, and Gamblers: To Which is Added, for the First Time, the Magic of Spirit Rapping, Writing Mediums, and Table Turning* which illustrates his disbelief by the somewhat sarcastic wording: 'fashionable science' implies that these practices are not truly supernatural acts, but merely stylish tricks of science, not magic. Furthermore, he identifies these acts as 'tricks of deception' that are to be 'exposed' as fraudulent (Anderson 5). If the title does not provide enough evidence of his skepticism, in the book itself he says on the subject "In no country, and at no other time has a more absurd and remarkable delusion gained possession of the public mind than that which has been recently obtained under the names of 'Spirit Rapping,' 'Spiritualism,' or 'Spirit Manifestations.'" (Anderson, 67). He characterizes the belief in spiritualism as a delusion which has incredulously seized the minds of people in the Victorian Era, which he believes would not be feasible in any other country at any other time.

One might readily argue that Charlotte Brontë also has a hand in dispelling the belief in spiritualism, as she offers rational explanations for nearly every supernatural moment in *Jane Eyre*. For instance, when young Jane is frightened in the red room, the older, narrating Jane postulates that the light was probably just someone carrying a lantern outside. Initially, Bertha is described in supernatural terms: "What creature was it, that, masked in an ordinary woman's face and shape, uttered the voice, now of a mocking demon, and anon of a carrion-seeking bird of prey?" (*Jane Eyre*, 248). After Mr. Rochester's bed has been set on fire and he has been clawed, in what seem to Jane as unnatural events, she wonders towards the cause of these acts and describes Bertha as both a creature and a demon. At this point in the novel the reader is also led to believe that these crimes are somehow supernaturally occurring, but later understand that the perpetrator is simply Rochester's mad wife locked up in the attic. While not necessarily a realistic explanation, at least Bertha is not a ghost or supernatural being interacting with the living in a spiritualistic manner, but a living woman behaving as she otherwise would. This sort of causal relationship with supernatural events occurs several times throughout *Jane Eyre*, and the supernatural is always given some sort of rationalization.

That being said, though, *Jane Eyre* is not necessarily a realistic novel. As Ruth Bernard Yeazell argues in "More True than Real: *Jane Eyre's* 'Mysterious Summons'": "Even the most conventionally romantic of readers could scarcely deny, of course, that midnight conversations between lovers many miles apart and mad wives who conveniently perish in great conflagrations are scarcely the stuff of which a realistic novel is made" (Yeazell, 128). While most supernatural events in *Jane Eyre* are given possible, if not entirely reasonable, explanations, *Jane Eyre* still borrows heavily from superstition and supernatural elements to work the machinations of the plot and to

create an atmosphere wherein the supernatural is a possible explanation for events. To revisit the scene in the red room for an examination of a supernatural occurrence:

At this moment a light gleamed on the wall. Was it, I asked myself, a ray from the moon penetrating some aperture in the blind? No; moonlight was still, and this stirred. While I gazed, it glided up to the ceiling and quivered over my head. I can now conjecture readily that this streak of light was, in all likelihood, a gleam from a lantern, carried by someone across the lawn; but then, prepared as my mind was for horror, shaken as my nerves were by agitation, I thought the swift-darting beam a herald of some coming vision from another world.” (Jane Eyre, 23)

The rational explanation is offered in hindsight, by an older Jane who’s become more attuned to reality than fantasy; and even this is hindered by a qualifying phrase “in all likelihood”. Young Jane might have been experiencing a spiritualistic connection with her dead uncle, having been primed for such an experience by an afternoon spent in the red room working herself up and an all-over familiarity with fantasy, as young Jane often read novels with supernatural or fantastical elements, such as *Pamela*, a rags-to-riches fairytale, and *Gulliver’s Travels*, a satirical novel employing elements of exaggeration and dehumanization to create the fantastical islands Gulliver visits. Other points in the novel also present the supernatural as only vaguely explicable. For instance, earlier in that same chapter, Jane looks at herself in a mirror and sees herself as a “strangle little figure... with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still... like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp” (Jane Eyre, 20) an instance which she never rationalizes.

It is at the end of the novel where the most prominent supernatural element stands out, however, in what can only be described as a supernatural communication, when Jane believes she hears Rochester though they are miles apart and she responds. This almost telepathic conversation spurs Jane to refuse St. John’s proposal and seek out Rochester. She finds him widowed and crippled, yet reformed, and discovers that he also had an encounter on the night she thought she heard him, and he heard her response. Aside from this scene being completely inexplicable, both Jane and Rochester had supernatural experiences of this exchange. Jane, after hearing Rochester’s voice, had run outside to nothing but the wind, and reacted: “Down superstition! I commented, as that spectre rose up black by the black yew at the gate. ‘This is not thy deception, nor thy witchcraft; it is the work of nature. She was roused, and did—no miracle—but her best’” (Jane Eyre, 485). Jane refers to the wind as a superstition, but the experience was so vivid that she knows, though any idea of the supernatural is false, her conversation with Rochester was somehow true, “a work of nature”. It is interesting that Jane characterizes the experience, however, as “no miracle” as the experience would seem, to anyone else, quite miraculous: just as Jane was about to give in to St. John’s proposal, she had asked heaven for guidance, and was answered immediately with this telepathic conversation with Rochester. And yet, in Jane’s view, this is just the best work of nature. Here, Jane might be trying to convince herself that this was not a God-given sign that she return to Rochester, but merely her own mind’s reaction to her plea, since her heart was not with St. John, her mind conjured this conversation to convince her to go to Rochester. However, one could easily choose to believe otherwise, that this truly was a miraculous experience, given Rochester’s side of the story: “As I exclaimed ‘Jane! Jane! Jane!’ a voice—I cannot tell whence the voice came, but I know whose voice it was—replied, ‘I am coming; wait for me!’ and a moment after, went whispering on the wind, the words, ‘Where are you?’” (Jane Eyre, 518). When one learns that Rochester experienced the very same conversation, on the very same night as Jane, it becomes difficult to believe that this was not a

supernatural or a spiritualistic experience. Especially when one considers that to Rochester, the last question came “whispering on the wind”—the very same wind Jane accused of being a mere superstition.

It might be incorrect to label this experience as spiritualistic, as Page would tell us that spiritualistic experiences are associated with the devil, and this seems very much to have been at the very least sanctioned and likely enabled by God. Both characters came to this conversation having prayed for an answer from God or heaven, and it would be difficult to ignore the immediacy of this experience as an answer to those prayers, as it allows both characters to overcome despair. Also, this experience differs from spiritualistic séances because both parties are alive. Communication with the living is not as unnatural as communication with the dead, and God’s hand in this communication seems only more prominent in light of that.

Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, on the other hand, offers a darker view of spiritualism, more in line with Page’s affiliation of spiritualism with the devil. The idea of spiritualism is presented within the first couple of chapters of the book, when Mr. Lockwood takes tea at the titular residence with Heathcliff, Hareton, and young Cathy: “I began to feel unmistakably out of place in that pleasant family circle. The dismal spiritual atmosphere overcame, and more than neutralized, the glowing physical comforts around me; and I resolved to be cautious how I ventured under those rafters a third time” (*Wuthering Heights*, 14). Mr. Lockwood’s description of *Wuthering Heights* as having a “dismal spiritual atmosphere” queues the reader towards future events. *Wuthering Heights* is a novel that revolves around the connection between the living and the dead, and Mr. Lockwood seems to have a sense of this before even he hears Catherine haunting outside his window. The connection between Heathcliff and Catherine is certainly a dismal one, and spiritual in nature, and Mr. Lockwood is aware of this already. Although Mr. Lockwood himself is skeptical of the validity of a spiritual connection with the dead, even after his encounter with the ghost of Catherine, believing it was the servant Zillah playing a trick, Heathcliff certainly is not (*Wuthering Heights* 27). When Mr. Lockwood describes his encounter with Catherine, Heathcliff calls to her on the moors after Mr. Lockwood’s dismissal. This reaction is telling of Heathcliff’s belief that Catherine still haunts *Wuthering Heights*, as is his initial soliloquy where he implores Catherine to haunt him:

‘Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest as long as I am living; you said I killed you—haunt me, then! The murdered do haunt their murderers, I believe. I know that ghosts have wandered the earth. Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad! only do not leave me in this abyss... I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!’ (*Wuthering Heights*, 165)

Immediately following Catherine’s death, a grief-stricken Heathcliff proclaims what he knows and believes about ghosts. Heathcliff’s unwillingness to let Catherine rest gives him an unwavering belief in what many would describe as a superstition. His emphasis on present-tense being verbs in reference to the act of haunting seem an attempt to keep Catherine alive, as though if she can be described as doing and having; therefore, she might be kept present, even though she is a ghost. However, this representation of spiritualism is not borne purely out of love as it was in *Jane Eyre*. In *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff is embittered, angry that Catherine has left him. In *The Disappearance of God* by Hillis Miller, Miller argues that to Emily Bronte, the world “is a realm of the unavailability of God” (Miller, 184), but in dying, Catherine would have attained a state wherein God was available, had Heathcliff not entreated her to haunt him. In *Wuthering Heights*, God is not the relieving presence He was in *Jane Eyre*, particularly because the characters in *Wuthering Heights* do not have the relationship with God that the characters in *Jane Eyre* were able to attain. As Miller

explained, the characters in *Wuthering Heights* (and all characters, and humans, in Emily Brontë's view) were guilty of either trying to attain union with God before reaching Heaven or trying to make peace in living in a world without, both of which are sinful actions leading to an imperfect relationship with both God and the world. This is why the experience of spiritualism is so different in *Wuthering Heights*, untouched by God.

Whether spiritualism is a superstitious phenomenon that fooled most of Victorian England, as Andersen suggested or is the result of the devil's trickery as Page thought, it is apparent that such supernatural ideas were on the minds of these two Brontë sisters, however different their interpretations were. In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, where the relationship between Jane and Rochester was sanctioned by God and the spiritualist conversation between enabled by Him, it was regarded as a sort of divine intervention to which the label spiritual might not be entirely accurate. In contrast to *Jane Eyre*, the earthly relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* was to the exclusion of God, resulting in a miserable experience of death and spiritualism for both of them.

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