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The **SUPER-NATURAL,** Christianity, and the Feminist Spirit in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*

by Kaitlyn Abrams

The critical assessments of Christianity given by both *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, particularly the commentaries on the patriarchal tradition of Christianity, further an unambiguous feminist discourse within Emily and Charlotte Brontë's novels. This discourse is strengthened and propelled by elements of the supernatural alongside the elements of religious dissension in the texts. The two stories are parallel in the sense that the key female character struggles with the restrictions of a Christian and male-dominated society, and she attempts to take control of her own life with the resources she finds available. In

both Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, the paranormal is undoubtedly among the strongest of the resources that enables the emancipation and empowerment of the leading female characters. Further, in the two novels, despite the reality of men constantly attempting to assert their power, it is the choices and actions of the female characters—sane or mad—that ultimately determine the fates of all.

In *Wuthering Heights*, the author's message of female empowerment can be best traced through the character of Catherine Earnshaw. Catherine's power resonates in the book's pages long after she has left the story. Twenty years after Catherine's death, for example, the most savage and formidable character in the novel is seen to call tearfully after her from a window, still painfully at a woman's mercy: "He got on to the bed, and wrenched open the lattice, bursting, as he pulled at it, into an uncontrollable passion of tears. 'Come in! come in!' he sobbed. 'Cathy, do come. Oh do—once more! Oh! My heart's darling! Hear me this time, Catherine, at last!'"¹ This passage, presented within the novel's first chapters, clearly indicates that the most significant choices and consequences of the story will revolve around a female entity.



In the early pages of the novel, Catherine is not a representative of female empowerment but is rather a figure bound by the constraints of her hierarchical and male-governed society. Catherine is barely fully grown when it becomes necessary for her to make choices about her future life and which man she will align her fortunes with. She is proposed to by Edgar Linton and accepts him, believing a life with Heathcliff (the man she truly loves) to be impossible.² According to Catherine, marriage to Heathcliff is impossible because her brother, Hindley Earnshaw, has degraded Heathcliff to such a degree that he could not make a suitable living to support them both: "I've no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven; and if the wicked man in there [Hindley] had not brought Heathcliff so low, I shouldn't have thought of it."³ Further, since Catherine's femininity makes her necessarily dependent on a man financially, the only way for her to provide for her own and Heathcliff's future is to marry well. Catherine says as much when explaining her decision to Nelly, the family servant. "Did it ever strike you that if Heathcliff and I married, we should be beggars? Whereas, if I marry Linton, I can aid Heathcliff to rise, and place him out of my brother's power."⁴ By marrying Edgar, Catherine believes that she will prevent both herself and Heathcliff from becoming destitute; she makes the only choice that she feels her male-dominated society allows.

The tragedy of Catherine's choice to be bound to a man she does not love or respect is all the greater for the heroine's passionate and untamable personality. As a child, Catherine's headstrong independence from male authority is

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pronounced,⁵ and she is accustomed to having males follow her wishes. Her marriage to Edgar, the novel's embodiment of Christian patriarchy, is almost as disheartening as her separation from Heathcliff (who is emblematic of her own wildness, her ability to love and connection to the supermundane). As Davie S. Davis claims in "Heathcliff, Lucifer and the Failure of the Christian Myth," Catherine's "decision to marry Edgar is her attempt to ally herself with the superficial refinements of conventional society rather than the creative forces of her own nature."⁶ While this is an apt description, Davis doesn't note that Catherine's society allows her little choice in the matter, or how much her soul suffers from this decision. Once married, Catherine is transformed into a far duller individual than her previous self; Nelly notes the absence of her mistress' usual animal spirits, saying that "she behaved infinitely better than I dared to expect."⁷ Here, we see that the absence of Heathcliff and exposure to Linton have left Catherine with merely a shade of her former vivacity. Readers are also shown that this change of life has not made Catherine happy—"Catherine had seasons of gloom and silence now and then . . . her husband . . . ascribed them to an alteration in her constitution, produced by her perilous illness; as she was never subject to depression of spirits before."⁸ Edgar's easy assumption that Catherine's sadness arises from some past physical ailment illustrates his ignorance of his wife's true nature. Edgar, a character typified as the weakest of men, little knows of his inability to stimulate the faculties of this most gifted and dominant of women. He cannot understand Catherine's all-powerful love for Heathcliff⁹ and thus cannot understand her own fervent nature; Edgar assumes Catherine to be equally as genteel and placid as himself and his family without ever once being curious

as to her inner self. In her marriage to Edgar, Catherine's feminine power suffers not from being vanquished by masculinity but rather from being shelved and ignored.

In order to properly qualify Edgar's particular style of oppression, it is relevant to restate his significance as the novel's embodiment of patriarchal Christianity. Edgar's unresponsive sexuality and cold morality are comparable to the figure of St. John in *Jane Eyre*; being passionless himself, he is similarly determined to suppress the passion he sees in others.¹⁰ His cool and unwavering Christian solidity may have held some small appeal for Catherine at the commencement of their relationship, but, shortly before her own death, Catherine utterly rejects him, indicating her strong preference for the passionate and pagan over the pious and reserved: "I don't want you, Edgar: I'm past wanting you. . . all you had in me is gone."¹¹ Counter to convention, as she nears the end of her life, Catherine becomes even further estranged with Christianity—she rejects it even as she negates whatever power she has given Edgar in the past and prepares to claim for herself the extreme authority that death endows.

Catherine's greatest rebellion against the imposition of men in her life occurs when the conflict between Heathcliff and Edgar comes to a head. The violent confrontation between the two men (which arises because each man feels that his rights over Catherine are being impinged by the other) infuriates Catherine, since she sees it as a refusal to honor her wishes that they treat each other civilly. "I'm delightfully rewarded for my kindness to each! After constant indulgence of one's weak nature, and the other's bad one, I earn for thanks two samples of blind ingratitude, stupid to absurdity!"¹² In order to punish Edgar and Heathcliff for the grief they have caused her, she resolves on (and eventually succeeds in) dying by starvation and sickness. This is a strange

form of retaliation, but ultimately the most effective punishment that she could devise; rather than struggling to assuage both men and keep them from fighting one another for years to come, Catherine simply removes herself from their presence, resultantly finding independence from them both in the world beyond.¹³ She leaves no doubt as to the reason for her departure, citing the two men as the direct cause of her death—"You and Edgar have broken my heart, Heathcliff! And you both come to bewail the deed to me, as if you were the people to be pitied! I shall not pity you, not I."¹⁴ As readers know, her punishment is more successful against one party than another—while Edgar lives out his days in resigned tranquility, Heathcliff exists in continuous torment until he is allowed to join Catherine in the afterlife.

Just as in the case of Emily Brontë's treatment of the supernatural and Christianity, the author's message of feminism takes a sharper form than might be expected. Both the punishments and rewards she bestows on her characters are harsher and more extreme than Victorian readers were probably prepared for—even Charlotte's comparatively mild narrative was reacted to in some cases with astonishment and censure. Emily's main characters are also what one might call 'fatally flawed,' the central figure of her feminist discourse being no exception. Catherine's self-imposed starvation and sickness may seem selfish and petty to the reader, and perhaps they are to a certain degree. What is of utmost relevance to the story, however, is the ending result of Catherine's emancipation from the men in her life. Through death and the aid of the supernatural, Catherine is able to gain power on her own terms

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(rather than another man's), and she eventually reunites with Heathcliff as an equal, outside the restrictions of class or gender hierarchies. It is relevant to note that Catherine could not engage in a socially-accepted romance with Heathcliff on earth; having married Edgar Linton for the express purpose of providing both for herself and Heathcliff, she has unknowingly trapped both of them into a life of mutual estrangement from which death is the only escape.¹⁵ Death, therefore, is the greatest emancipation for Catherine and likewise offers immortalization of her all-consuming passion with Heathcliff—an immortalization which is enabled by the supernatural with a ghostly nature that absolutely rejects and negates the merits of the eternity offered by a heavenly paradise.



The feminist discourse in *Wuthering Heights* is largely fueled by the presence of the paranormal and Emily Brontë's clear argument against patriarchal Christianity. In the novel, Catherine Earnshaw serves as a representative of foiled femininity that is later redeemed by the supernatural, resulting in a happy conclusion that derives from the victory of romantic love rather than Christian grace. The intertwined nature of the supernatural, religious commentary, and feminism in *Wuthering Heights* culminates as an artfully woven testament to the monumental power inherent in life, love and unrestrained femininity.

In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the novel's heroine struggles with societal restrictions allotted to her sex, much like *Wuthering Heights*' Catherine. As Rachel Katz explains in *The Horror of an Unleashed Woman: Self-Governance and the Supernatural in Charlotte Brontë's "Jane Eyre,"* in the times during which both *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* were written, it was accepted that "women must choose between empowerment through self-mastery or compliant suffering beneath the greater confines of custom."¹⁶ While Emily Brontë's

heroine is understandably not content with self-mastery, Charlotte Brontë's Jane achieves a unique self-mastery that allows her to reach the type of psychological and economic independence that Catherine never accomplishes while living. Jane avoids male subjugation through the guidance of "the feminine supernatural," a motherly force of nature that directs Jane away from the sexual and religious ensnarement attempted by male characters. In addition to the aid of the paranormal, Jane's ability to safely navigate her patriarchal society arises from her thorough understanding both of herself and the men in her life and her refusal to bend her own ethical creed to the will of any man.

The feminist discourse existent in *Jane Eyre* is most apparent in Jane's rejections of the two men who seek to control her through ownership (either via marriage, as in the case of St. John Rivers, or via sexual proprietorship, as in the case of Mr. Rochester). Jane's denial of St. John Rivers' proposal of marriage is a two-pronged weapon, brandished simultaneously against St. John's emotional domination and against the Christian authority that he wields so imposingly. Her refusal of a lifetime of servitude to the Christian doctrine is no less significant than her rejection of St. John himself. M. A. Blom confirms the dual obstacle of male ascendancy and pervasive Christian discourse presented to Charlotte Brontë's protagonist, observing that "Jane rebels against her male-dominated, Protestant society."¹⁷ One such display of feminine rebellion occurs when Mr. Rochester asks Jane to become his mistress and she refuses.

Jane's renunciation of Mr. Rochester's power over her is perhaps even more significant to the author's feminist agenda than her refusal of St. John; firstly, Jane's departure from a life with Mr. Rochester allows her to remain independent from his passionate but domineering influence. Blom argues that even before she becomes aware of his wife's existence, "Jane's unconscious fear of marriage to Rochester is real and deep-grained: her dreams become ominous - filled with images of desolation, isolation and suffering. Her refusal to use the new name tags for her trunks because 'Mrs. Rochester . . . did not exist' reveals her misgivings about a union which threatens her selfhood."^{18,19} Blom adds that, in Jane's current state as a nearly helpless inferior to her future husband, "marriage to Rochester will destroy her identity."²⁰ Jane's refusal of Mr. Rochester's proposal, therefore, is not only an act to reject male dominion but also (and more importantly) an act of safeguarding her very self.

Choosing a path other than the one Mr. Rochester has foolishly designated for her allows Jane the chance to develop her own identity in the outside world and eventually attain independence in her society.²¹ Further, while Jane's escape from Mr. Rochester doesn't include any repudiation of the Christian doctrine, it does establish Jane's moral superiority over her male counterpart—who, incidentally, is supposedly her better in terms of intellect, gender and social standing. Jane's refusal to live in sin with Mr. Rochester, in combination with her refusal to live a life of Christian martyrdom with St. John Rivers, places Jane not only as a female capable of choosing her own life course but also as a respectable moral entity that is separate from Christianity—Jane is a powerful woman, and righteous, but on her own terms rather than on any religion's.

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Both of Jane's assertions of independence from the men in her life are partially guided by the repeated intervention of "the feminine supernatural." Jane's departure from Mr. Rochester's home is prompted by a female vision who comes to her in the place of the moon and advises her to flee. It is important once again to emphasize that the spirit who attends Jane comes with many metonymic pagan associations—the moon, the night, earth, fertility, etc.—and is a female whom Jane calls "Mother" rather than the heavenly father that Jane was repeatedly directed to at Lowood school.²² This is the first instance of a feminine supernatural force that helps Jane to escape male subjugation. The second instance occurs when Jane is just on the point of relenting to St. John's demands, and, triumphant, St. John "pressed his hand firmer on my head, as if he claimed me."²³ It is at this moment that the disembodied voice sounds in Jane's mind and changes her life forever, averting what the reader knows would be a tragic turn of events for Jane (as it is several times confirmed that Jane would not only be unhappy but would also soon die if she went with St. John to labor in India.)

After this crucial moment passes, Jane identifies the voice that came to her as "the work of nature. She was roused, and did—no miracle—but her best."²⁴ Again, we observe a supernatural, female "Mother" figure intervening in Jane's life to help her maintain independence and happiness. The fact that St. John's claims on Jane are professed by him as purely religious is an intriguing point when one considers that nature herself "was roused" in order to prevent them from coming to fruition. In any case, the visitations of the feminine supernatural to Jane always have the effect of increasing Jane's own power and preventing her identity from being swallowed up in man's service.

In order to communicate the gravity of Jane's choices and transformation, it is perhaps necessary to explain where she began: a young and timid "governess: disconnected, poor and plain" who additionally calls herself "obscure, plain, and little."²⁵ Katz comments on the particular situation of a governess in Victorian England and the resulting significance of Jane's elevation: "This is a strange rank in the Victorian world, one in which woman's economic survival depends on her intelligence and work. This liminal rank will see Jane's economic priorities change from pure survival as a poor, autonomous woman to her maintenance of wealth as an heiress who may or may not marry."²⁶ Jane's position as a governess and her subsequent occupation as a teacher are relevant because, while they place Jane in a relatively lowly position and as a type of servant, they allow her to succeed on her own intellectual merit rather than on physical labor. It is because Jane comes to understand and appreciate her own merits—which are extensive, despite her appearance or position in society—that ultimately empowers her to reject the impositions of male dominance and to claim life for herself, existing as a servant to no one except by her own choice.

The conclusion of *Jane Eyre* shows the culmination of the author's feminist argument. Jane's return to Mr. Rochester sees both characters greatly changed; Jane is an independent heiress, and Mr. Rochester has become a blind cripple. Shortly after greeting him, Jane indicates how greatly her own societal influence has changed since they were last together: "I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress."²⁷ Jane's newfound independence and Mr. Rochester's disability create an almost complete role reversal, making Mr. Rochester the supplicant and Jane the generous provider.



Blom summarizes, "The novel ends with Jane victorious on her own terms—she is able to love and, therefore, to live fully, and Rochester's physical dependence upon her renders him incapable of dehumanizing her with patronage."²⁸ In other words, the new inequality between Jane and Mr. Rochester is one that is beneficial to them both; Mr. Rochester is given long-overdue lessons in humility while Jane is still allowed to indulge her natural 'giving' instinct by taking care of him. Their love is allowed to flourish without being darkened by a woman's powerlessness. In fact, Jane's words near the end of the novel speak of just the opposite: "Reader, I married him."²⁹ That Jane takes possession of the action shows the reader that this union is of her making and of her choosing. It additionally illustrates that she is no longer merely passive in her relationship with Mr. Rochester; instead, she has become an active and even dominant participant.

The message of feminine empowerment housed in the pages of *Jane Eyre* is similar to the same in *Wuthering Heights* in that it possesses a marked cousinship with the supernatural and anti-Christian discourse. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane is guided by the feminine supernatural to reject both religious servitude and male ownership, instead exerting her individual will to

choose an existence centered on the beauty of life and romantic love. In both texts, instances of religious divergence, the supernatural and feminine sovereignty all impart the ultimate moral of self-empowerment and a rejection of societal restrictions.

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte and *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte are sister-novels in more senses than one. These two 19th century texts, with their shared gothic setting and revolutionary content, have emblazoned history with their shared message of religious dissent and feminine reclamation. In *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, the life-giving supernatural presents an alternative to Christianity while also enabling emancipation and autonomy for the leading female characters. The actions and words of key characters in the two novels acts in combination with the supernatural to deny the creed of Christianity, rejecting precepts of total self-abnegation, righteous condemnation and male authority. Finally, the “feminine supernatural” and religious deviation join to raise the female characters to positions of agency and authority, emphasizing the prerogative of feminine empowerment and the fallacy of patriarchal norms. The intertwining of the supernatural, the departure from Christianity and empowered femininity in *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* allows for a complex but unified message of religious freedom, reclaimed feminine ascendancy and the triumph of the individual over societal constraints.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* (London: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2008), 875.
- 2 Like a young girl might be, Catherine is admittedly also tempted to accept Edgar because he is “handsome. . . young and cheerful. . . and he will be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighborhood.” Speaking realistically, in a world where a woman’s riches and societal status could only be gained through her husband, this would be no small consideration to a girl who sought to provide for herself and her loved ones. *Ibid.*, 904.
- 3 This line brings to the fore Bronte’s commentary on class constraints, which (alongside feminism) is consistently presented in *Wuthering Heights*. *Ibid.*, 906.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Mr. Earnshaw’s “peevish reproofs awakened in her a naughty delight to provoke him: she was never so happy as when we were all scolding her at once, and she defying us with her bold, saucy look, and her ready words.” Heathcliff obeying her: “The boy [Heathcliff] would do her bidding in anything, and his [Mr. Earnshaw’s] only when it suited his own inclination.” *Ibid.*, 882-3.
- 6 Davie S. Davis, “Heathcliff, Lucifer, and the Failure of the Christian Myth,” *Publications Of The Missouri Philological Association* 16, (1991): 60.
- 7 Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*, 912.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Edgar commenting on Catherine’s delighted reaction to Heathcliff’s return: “He never struck me as such a marvellous treasure. There is no need to be frantic!” *Ibid.*, 914.
- 10 St. John is described by Jane as “hard and cold,” (Charlotte Bronte, 299) and Edgar is accused by Catherine of having veins “full of ice-water.” (Emily Bronte, 934)
- 11 Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*, 934.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 927.
- 13 Before her death, Catherine seems to understand that death will only increase her influence. “I shall be incomparably beyond and above you all.” *Ibid.*, 954.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 952-3.
- 15 In fact, what tips Catherine into the maddened frenzy that leads to her death is Edgar’s statement that she may not see Heathcliff again if she wishes to stay under his roof: “Will you give up Heathcliff hereafter, or will you give up me? It is impossible for you to be MY friend and HIS at the same time; and I absolutely REQUIRE to know which you choose.” *Ibid.*, 928-9.

- 16 Rachel Katz, "The Horror of an Unleashed Woman: Self-Governance and the Supernatural in Charlotte Brontë's 'Jane Eyre'" (*Portland: Reed College*, 2005), 1.
- 17 M.A. Blom, "Jane Eyre: Mind as Law Unto Itself," *Criticism: A Quarterly For Literature And The Arts* 15 (1973): 355.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 19 Jane's ultimate answer to Mr. Rochester's proposition—"Mr. Rochester, I will not be yours"—is an assertion of her own individuality, morality and refusal of male ownership. *Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre*, 243.
- 20 Blom, "Jane Eyre: Mind as Law Unto Itself," 61.
- 21 Jane is able to acquire a respectable profession as a school-teacher and eventually comes into an inheritance of 20,000 pounds, which she generously divides between herself and her three cousins. *Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre*, 295-6.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 246.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 363.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 320.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 129, 197.
- 26 Katz, "The Horror of an Unleashed Woman: Self-Governance and the Supernatural in Charlotte Brontë's 'Jane Eyre,'" 3.
- 27 *Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre*, 330.
- 28 Blom, "Jane Eyre: Mind as Law Unto Itself," 363.
- 29 *Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre*, 341.
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