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The American phantasmagoria: The rise of spiritualism in nineteenth-century America

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The American Phantasmagoria: The Rise of Spiritualism in Nineteenth-Century America

by

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Thesis

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Abstract

Spiritualism, or the belief in spirit communications through mediums, was a movement in the nineteenth century which gained popularity within America. This thesis aims to widen the scope of spiritualism's historiography by exploring spiritualists' lives to reveal a more complex answer to why this movement gained a large following in antebellum America. The stories of spiritualists show that spiritualism rose in nineteenth century America because the culture placed death in the periphery, leaving certain Americans unresolved and therefore looking to the Victorian death culture for closure from a lost relationship. Additionally, spiritualists saw the muddled religious system as proof of its subjectivity and thus looked to the spirits for empirical evidences of its claims. Furthermore, spiritualism is explored through a gendered lens to show that women were drawn to spiritualism to soothe their grief from a lost loved one, whereas men sought to prove spiritualism's claims through a scientific method.

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Introduction

“It is somewhat remarkable that the appearance of spectres should, in all ages and in all countries, be an object of belief... We can’t tell what methods God may take to make beings of another world visible. He certainly has made angels visible.” In 1814, David Ogden, a minister at Yale University, wrote this in response to the question of whether the existence of ghosts or spectres was verifiable.¹ This question was not uncommon within the minds of antebellum Americans. Ogden represents the curiosity which Americans held regarding divine intervention, ghosts, and the communications with spirits. Ogden should rather be viewed, however, as not just an example of the curiosity within the American mind, but as precursor to what would come only decades after he put his pen to the paper.

Out of this curiosity came spiritualism. In its most simple form, spiritualism is considered a movement which sought communications with the dead through mediums, seances, or similar means to gain some sort of knowledge of the metaphysical. In 1848 in Rochester, New York, spiritualism materialized as Kate and Margaret Fox, also known as the infamous Fox sisters, communicated with the spirit of a man whose ghost still resided in their house. When they attempted to play a prank on their parents by tying apple stems to a piece of string to create the illusion of a spirit, what they received in turn was rather the “rappings” of an alleged spirit. Within the weeks that followed, neighbors would frequently visit the Fox household to have a chance to communicate with this “spirit.” Through their new-found mediumship, the Fox sisters helped their neighbors interact with this spirit and, through the weeks of investigation, discovered that this was a spirit of a man who was murdered and buried in the cellar by one of their neighbors for five hundred dollars. Although the body was never found and it could never

¹ David Ogden, “Dispute 33rd,” 23 March 1814, Journal 1, David Ogden Notebooks 1812-1848, Blandina Diedrich Collection, William L. Clements Library, The University of Michigan (subsequently WLCL).

be verified that this event actually took place, this phenomenon still held a place within the minds of Americans.

The interest in spirit communication is as old as human existence. It was seen as a possibility even when King Saul summoned the spirit of Samuel through a medium during biblical times. Yet, “modern spiritualism” began with the rappings of the Fox sisters in 1848 and remained popular in America until the early twentieth century. When the report of their findings was published, which documented both the family’s and their neighbors’ interactions with the residing spirit, known shortly as *Mysterious Noises*, it spread around the state and eventually the country thus beginning the phenomenon of spiritualism. The movement gained a large following, which ranged from political leaders, advocates of reform, religious leaders, and a mass of typical Americans who sought to connect with a world which they once believed that was out of reach. People all around the country flocked to mediums and seances to see the multiple attractions which spiritualism provided. Within the séance room, a medium could summon up any spirit who they thought would bring the most revelation to their participants. They stared in awe of the tables that were rising from the ground and shaking, the intense knockings coming from the walls, and the medium who would become possessed by the spirit whom they summoned and spoke from beyond the grave.

Yet within scholarship, spiritualism is seen as more of a footnote or a dated phenomenon which as soon as it happened disappeared from the public eye. This is not only false, but spiritualism reveals a massive part of the larger American story which sought to fill a void that the culture saw was growing. Spiritualism was so popular that historian Ann Braude was able to research over 214 periodicals coming from the spiritualist camp.² This thesis aims to explore the

² Ann Braude, *News from the Spirit World: A Checklist of American Spiritualist Periodicals, 1847-1900* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1989), 401.

reasons behind the cause and the rise of spiritualism. Its importance lies with the realization that the view of spiritualism remains in scholarship as a very minor part of American history while other events in America take precedence over it. Within the historiography of spiritualism as a religious belief, explanations revolve around the same premise while nuanced in some form. Differences exist not to change the argument, but to focus on some subcategory that has not necessarily been explored fully that could alter discourse on the topic. Typical in the research of spiritualism is the analysis of the motives behind public figures, such as Andrew Jackson Davis and Harriot Beecher Stowe, to represent the larger reasoning as to why spiritualism reached its peak in antebellum America. In its broad form, spiritualism was a movement of cultural progress. It aimed to improve humanity as a whole by placing Enlightenment theories at its forefront and making religion more empirical and scientific. Mainstream religions provided many different views on the nature of god and what a “perfect” life would look like to an individual. The result of such controversy was a religious culture of mixed feelings, which sought many different paths to improve society.

This thesis aims to fill the hole in the historiography of spiritualism which focused mainly on leaders and reformers. More specifically, why did spiritualism gain popularity within nineteenth century America? Why did some Americans believe that there was a massive void within the culture that facilitated a need for spirit communication, and more specifically, how did Americans come to this conclusion as a means to fulfill their own personal needs and provide answers in a divisive social and religious culture? Spiritualism arose in nineteenth century America because contemporary traditional religions treated death in such a dismissive way that it brushed off the grief of family members who lost those who were close to them. To counter this, elements of the Victorian death culture were used to remedy this lack of comfort. When these

elements, such as the ritualistic “good death” and personal relics, were denied in the case of sudden death or death away from home, the spirits could provide this for the bereaved.

Moreover, post-Second Great Awakening culture presented Americans with this need because, as a variety of revivals were occurring, Americans were left with a multitude of denominations, all with differing theological and eschatological beliefs, which caused a confusion to which belief system held the truth. Thus, the focus of spiritualists shifted orthodoxy from a faith-based system to a system that focused on scientific and empirical evidence to test the truth claims of others, evidence that only the spirits could provide. Finally, by looking at these spiritualists through a gendered lens, it is shown that spiritualism featured individualized solutions to these problems. As women were mainly in the domestic sphere, their attachments were to their homes and their children. The loss of their children, combined with a lack of comfort from orthodox religion, left them with grief and anxiousness and sought communications with the spirits of whom they lost. Men, on the other hand, were more likely to focus on attempting to find a scientific process which produced physical evidences of what was to be considered the truth. This argument therefore provides a commentary of nineteenth century America and what consequences arose out of such a time in which society and religion were, in effect, causing more questions than answers to the many issues which the culture was attempting to remedy through revivals, scientific discoveries, and social shifts involving gender roles. A consequence to this crisis was spiritualism. By contacting the spirits of the dead who were experiencing the afterlife and had an intimate knowledge of the truth, spiritualists could have their questions answered and be put onto a path of spiritual and emotional peace.

Spiritualists saw mainstream religion as flawed and any path to improve society solely based off of orthodox Christianity was bound for irrelevancy. They needed spiritual authority to

make a truth claim that would grab the attention of Americans. When the Fox sisters seemed to prove that a connection to the spirit world, one that could answer questions and solve mysteries, was possible, they flocked toward it. Abolitionists would conduct seances in homes to gain a platform in which they could claim that certain truths were from the spirit world. Intertwined with the spirit's intimate knowledge of the divine, these seances were highly effective. Likewise, the temperance and anti-masonry movements found a connection with the spirits to be especially useful as it was no longer the experience of man that their platforms were based off of, but of a higher world. More recently, however, spiritualism has been viewed from a feminist lens because of the realization that the majority of mediums were women who were mothers and ran their household. With the spirits flocking to the motherly and more compassionate, women found that they could find authority in a culture which disallowed the leadership of women.

Historian R. Lawrence Moore's book on the subject, *In Search of White Crows*, was one of the first book length studies on the history of spiritualism within America and his work was groundbreaking. Moore's thesis claims that spiritualism was a result of the improvements which the culture was experiencing in the fields of science and technology. To Moore, spiritualism was a response to an antebellum culture which contained many different religions, claims to the "truth," and opinions on morality while they were all placed in an America that was dominated with uncertainty. Spiritualism then "appealed not to the inward illumination of mystic experience, but to the observable and verifiable objects of empirical science."³ Spiritualism was also associated with the reform movements of the time as well. As the leaders of spiritualism focused on empirical and logical explanations of how the world was to work, social improvements must accompany the spiritualist's motives to obtain an even greater harmony with

³Robert Lawrence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 7.

themselves, nature, and the spirit world. Spirit communication made clear what the laws of nature were, how society was fighting against it, and clarity on the remedy without superstition or mysticism. Because they had access to these revelations, spiritualists had a responsibility to ally themselves with reform movements dedicated to social improvements.⁴ What Moore avoids, however, is the movement's interaction with the society it was fighting to change. Coupled with the abundance of writings of reformers and leaders of spiritualism, Moore effectively avoids the larger scope of the movement. By neglecting the viewpoint of other Americans, those who were not leaders within the movement, a hole in the argument is presented because it is left without explaining the motivations of converts. With the Civil War and death dominating the culture after 1862, it is doubtful that Americans became spiritualists for purely scientific reasons or to simply participate in reform movements.

Subsequent interpretations of spiritualism have emphasized religious aspects while neglecting the subject of death and grief. In *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, Bret Carroll argues that spiritualism's popularity was due to a muddled religious culture. To do this, Carroll's thesis is more centered on the religion as a whole while using solely the ideas of only the leaders to prove his thesis. Carroll examines spiritualism as an American counterpart to the ideas of Franz Mesmer and Emanuel Swedenborg which were used to counter the muddled religious environment in America. Spiritualism sought to downplay the importance of heaven and hell to rather focus on love and equality. Not only that, but the methodology of spiritualism aimed to provide the antidote to religious confusion. To Carroll, the theology and organization of the religion sought to remedy the religious zeitgeist failing the country. Much like previous scholars, Carroll focuses on the leaders of the movement, such as Andrew Jackson Davis, rather than the

⁴ Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 72.

followers. As Carroll seeks to show the reasoning and the appeal behind the movement, the motives of his followers are placed in the periphery.⁵

As spiritualism was a movement which featured the rise of women to leadership, mediumship, and altogether, a place of importance, some have interpreted spiritualism from a purely gendered aspect. Originally published in 1989, Ann Braude's *Radical Spirits* centered around the role of women and how spiritualism was used for social and political reform from the scope of women's rights. Spiritualism brought with it a focus on women because the majority of mediums, including the Fox sisters, were women who were given a variety of listeners. Because of their familial and society roles, women were able to communicate with the spirits in a far greater way than a man could. Unlike the majority of Christian denominations, spiritualism had the necessity of allowing women to practice some form of leadership. Because of this, women had the setting to not only expound upon the injustices of a male-dominated community, but they had the spirits to back them up. This bled into other areas of reform that had some form of women's rights within them, such as the temperance and the abolitionist movements. Although Braude agrees that "not all feminists were Spiritualists," she argues that "all Spiritualists advocated woman's rights, and women were in fact equal to men within Spiritualist practice, polity, and ideology."⁶ This was a religion of reform in which the spirits, who fled to women, guided and therefore gave women divine authority to preach on the failures and remedies of society. Braude's argument makes sense and no doubt is true. Her argument, however, is limited due to the scope of her study. By focusing on mainly women's rights and reform, Braude also

⁵ Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

⁶ Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 3.

misses both the view of the commoner and the role of religious beliefs which makes her thesis seem incomplete.

More recently within the scholarship of spiritualism, the argument has shifted to the movement being one that sought reform within more personal issues, such as sexuality. This interpretation attempts to present spiritualism as societal anarchy. For instance, in 2008, Molly McGarry's *Ghosts of Future's Past* brings the study of spiritualism into such perspectives. Spiritualism to McGarry touched more than just women and reform, but Native Americans, sexuality, and the medical field. Although she recognizes the appeal to new members as a way to contact their dead from beyond the grave, McGarry does not believe that the reasons which participants remained in spiritualism is likewise. Rather, spiritualism was an escape from the norms of society and a way to express freedom in whichever form participants found fit them. Rather than simply reforming religious structures, McGarry seeks to prove that spiritualism was "the old New Age, not a restitution of old institutions or beliefs but a transcultural and transtemporal expansion, heralding a 'new dispensation.'"⁷ Whether this be a man speaking through a woman as a form of expressing their sexuality through spirit communication or through a reform of the medical practices as guided by the spirit world, spiritualism can hardly be placed into one cultural arena. Like those before her, McGarry limits her sources to public mediums and trance lectures and avoids the views of the average participant, which stunts her argument's effectiveness.

Although the historiography of spiritualism is larger, these four works represent the main arguments of the cause and rise of spiritualism. When examining the historiography, however, it becomes clear that almost all the arguments have sources limited to those who were either

⁷ Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 14.

leaders of the movement or public figures, such as political actors who were spiritualists and well-known mediums. However, what is largely ignored is the view of the typical American. When the writings of these Americans are examined, it complicates the arguments within the historiography. To answer the question of why spiritualism began and why it became such a pervasive movement within America from the years of 1848 to the end of the nineteenth century accurately these people must be examined. Why are these people and their writings so important? In 1893, the movement contained approximately fifty thousand members within about three hundred affiliated groups. However, due to the movement's individualistic ethos, it is nearly impossible to estimate the number of participants within spiritualism because followers would neither join an organization nor even let others know that were communicating with the dead.⁸ When comparing the estimated number of admitted spiritualists, it is clear that participants far outweighed the leaders of the movement therefore making their individual stories more important and telling of the Spiritualist narrative than that of the leaders. Just as one scholar has said, "[P]reoccupation with the learned and sophisticated minority is as misleading as overattention to the crackpot fringe."⁹ The plain person gives spiritualism its purpose as more people flocked to the movement for their own reasons and did so because of the culture which surrounded them did not resolve their deepest fears and longings to know where their dead resided let alone if they were well. The stories that follow show how Spiritualism resolved their questions, gave authority to their Christianity, and gave them a sense of community with other believers who had similar fears.

⁸ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), 490; Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 25.

⁹ Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1957), 9.

Rather than to prove an argument wrong or insert a different perspective, my aim in this thesis is to show that there are certain elements that went into spiritualism that made it more appealing to the larger public. More specifically, the influence of the Victorian death culture, the role of mainstream religion and the after effects of the Second Great Awakening, and the gendered aspects which go beyond feminism but into the different roles of man and woman within spiritualism. The mid-nineteenth century was infused with a culture of bereavement. The mortality rate was incredibly high. Families were losing loved ones frequently due to disease and the Civil War. Because of these rapid losses, families were finding it harder to process the deaths of their loved ones, and the Victorian death culture provided them with a way to cope with the deaths of those close to them. When spiritualism was shown to be an empirical, scientific, and, in most cases, religious way to gain closure for their loss, they found that a continuation of a relationship could actually happen through rituals, seances, and direct contact with the spirits. Because of the Victorian death culture combined with the multiple religions claiming their own specific “truths,” spiritualists did not know where to gain knowledge of where their loved ones went after death. The Second Great Awakening effectively created a “marketplace of religion,” and spiritualists saw this as a fundamental flaw and proof that mainstream religion was based more off of theory and subjectivity. Religion was also evolving into liberalism and preachers were beginning to accept more possibilities of the supernatural, which provided spiritualists with encouragement to try more mystic forms of personal religiosity. Finally, when the roles of gender are explored within spiritualism, it becomes clear that both male and female participants joined for similar reasons while attaching different meanings behind their communications with the dead. With grief as the overarching theme, women were susceptible because of their familial and society roles as shown by their motherhood while men became spiritualists with the

advancing of empiricism and science as the primary reason behind the phenomena. By examining these aspects, it is hard to keep with the typical argument within the historiography that spiritualism gain traction mainly for political reasons.

The sources that are used will serve to show that there were different perspectives and motivations to lead an individual to spiritualism. These mainly consist of letters and writings from Americans that were less important than the highly published leaders of the movement. The letters of the Brownell family will show how certain aspects of the Victorian death culture created a pathway to contact Clarence, one of the Brownell sons, who died in Egypt unexpectedly. The Brownells also represent a shift in theology in that they were reading and gleaning from Horace Bushnell, a Congregationalist preacher who encouraged mysticism within his writings. The family of Tilghman Howard Swaim shows the role of science, empiricism, and gendered aspects of spiritualism. The family contacted their deceased father out of grief, but what made spiritualism even possible to the Swaims was that contact with the dead was a part of scientific and technological advances. It will also become clear that out of the families that contacted their deceased out of grief, differences in gender roles created differences in the ways they contacted their lost loved ones. Finally, the Tuck family will show the role of religious tension as a mother and wife was left alone as both her husband and son were just recently deceased. The current religious environment was seen to be failing and she used spiritualism for both a continuation of relationship to her family and for clarification of what the proper religion was on earth. What is also interesting and consistently minimized with the current historiography is that all three of these cases never refuted or were led away from Christianity, but they were strengthened in their faith as their communications to the dead revealed that Christ was always present with them.

Methodologically, this essay will be topical with each topic within spiritualism residing within its own chapter. Because of the relationships within the topic, some will necessarily blend together. It is nearly impossible to mention science without religious interaction. The Victorian death culture also mixes with the other topics because it was death that drew them all together. However, each chapter has a clear topic that is easily distinguishable. Chapter One will cover the Victorian death culture and its influences within American spiritualism. The frequent loss which families experienced caused by the Civil War during and after 1862 left families with an overwhelming amount of anxiety and grief. The Victorian death culture not only blended with American spiritualism but influenced it. Chapter Two surveys the religious environment of America during 1848 to the early twentieth century. The Second Great Awakening left citizens with a plethora of religious choices that each claimed a different truth. This proved to spiritualists that orthodox religion was subjective. This conclusion combined with more radical and mystic religions, such as the Quakers and the Mormon church, effectively cleared a path for spiritualism to be seen by its participants as a remedy to “market-place” of religion. The spirits communicated objective truths as they had knowledge of the divine. Chapter Three explores gender roles and how they pertained to the entrance into and continuance of spiritualism. Women were often the face of spiritualism because the spirits would often flock to them because of the roles in which they held. They were the leader of the physical home and they were the mother of the family. Men, however, often would become spiritualists because of its empiricism and scientific advances. It was less an emotional, grief stricken (although grief was involved) entrance into spiritualism but more of search for objective proof of the spirit realm, which would then provide them with divine truths, thus clarifying their current religious state.

Chapter 1: The American Antidote to Death in the Shadow of the Victorian Death Culture

Lucia Brownell was a mother who endured a large amount of grief within her lifetime. Two of her children died when they were teenagers, and then later her son Clarence, who was studying botanicals in Egypt, took ill suddenly and could not get notice to his mother before he died of that illness which would soon kill him. Within this time, Brownell found it hard to cope with such mounting losses in the midst of a religious culture which did not seem to cater to the grief she kept experiencing. Orthodox Christianity was not providing Brownell with the comfort the many preachers had promised. Not only that, but Brownell also questioned whether her late son was resting in a peaceful afterlife, which left her only to question her own eternal destiny. Through different influences, such as her family, newspapers, and even photographs, Brownell began to see a medium at an attempt to reconcile her with her lost son. After several conversations with a medium who was able to successfully contact Clarence, Brownell believed that she could not only find out where Clarence was metaphysically, but also reconcile the differences between the varieties of religion within America in the nineteenth century. Brownell was a spiritualist and found comfort in knowing she could keep in contact with those close to her, even in death.

Death in antebellum America was commonplace. Even before the Civil War, the mortality rate was incredibly high and often carried with it an intense period of grief. A parent would often mourn the loss of a child for a period of at least a year, a child would grieve over the death of their parent just the same, and becoming a widow or widower often included personal mourning for a period of over two years.¹ Death has never been an individual act, but death always affected, as it does now, the people who experience the loss. These could include an

¹ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 148.

individual parent, an entire family, friends, or even an entire community. While losses remained high within nineteenth century America, which was only set to increase even further during the era of the Civil War, Americans, such as Lucia Brownell, were finding it harder to cope with such piling losses. Mainline Protestantism, a topic which will be explored in more detail in the next chapter, has always sought to soothe the wounds of the bereaved by revealing to them the image of heaven, which not only they, but their loved ones, would experience. However, in the nineteenth century, orthodox Christianity was being criticized far more than it once had due to the multiplicity of denominations which each had its own version of the afterlife and who was to go there after death. Throughout the century, it became clear that orthodoxy, for most, was not sufficient to soothe the living from the sufferings of life or the consequences of death for those who have experienced the loss of a loved one.² Because of this, Americans were left with anxiousness followed by a state of immense mourning that could not be soothed by typical religious means. As a scholar of death, Philippe Ariès makes the observation that within these cases, “many turned away from classical eschatology and undertook to construct, sometimes within the Church but more often outside it, and sometimes in opposition to it, an elaborate theory of survival and a technique for communication with the beyond: in short, spiritualism.”³

Spiritualism sought to remedy the many faults in which Americans handled death in a culture that often sought to place death in the periphery, place them in heaven or hell, and move on to improve the conditions of the living, either politically or religiously. When the Fox sisters communicated with a “displaced soul” who seemed to seek justice for his death, communication with the dead was seen as an answer to the many questions of the bereaved who had lost

² Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death over the Last One Thousand Years*, trans. Helen Weaver, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 458.

³ Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 458-59.

somebody close to them. It is in this way that spiritualism provided an anthropology of death within nineteenth century America because many spiritualists often looked to the Victorian death culture to assist them in their grief. The beliefs of this culture of death arose out of Enlightenment ideals and, as Pat Jalland asserts, “the transformations in religious beliefs and the demographic pattern.”⁴ The Victorian death culture should therefore be considered as a culture which took death from an ambiguous event to a moment where one’s soul transferred into another world not far off from the world of the living. Victorians would often view not just death, but life, as a gradual process of immortalizing the soul where it can be actualized in an afterlife that resembled the world of the living. In this afterlife, the dead would operate as a living being that transcended from the physicality of the living and into a purely spiritual life where questions such as love, religion, and the afterlife could be revealed in full. This romanticized view of death saw the beginnings of personal relics, which often included photographs rather than holy relics, and the scene of the deathbed became an event revolving around the transformation of the soul. Death, in turn, was seen as “a moment of beauty, as a transformation of the loved one into a paradise lost, to be yearned for with an erotic ache, and ... understood as the beginning or continuation of a narrative.”⁵

Why did the Victorian death culture influence, and ultimately lead to, spiritualism? How did spiritualism apply the ideals of the Victorians, and how did it evolve into a religion that contacted the dead to fulfill these ideas? By using the correspondence of the Brownells and the writings of the Tuck family, it will be seen that the Victorian death culture influenced the rise of spiritualism because as traditional religion was failing Americans in their grief, they looked to

⁴ Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 2.

⁵ Deborah Lutz, “The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 39, no. 1 (2011): 130.

this culture to tell them where their loved ones resided in death. As the death rate in America was high in the nineteenth century, most times these deaths came quickly and unexpected, thus denying a death experience that fulfilled the Victorian ideals of the “good death,” and were they left without death relics to represent an immortalization of the soul. Thus, to make up for this, spiritualists would then seek out a medium to gain the “good death” scenario from the spirits of their deceased. Spirit photography, however, could also provide the bereaved with the death relics which the Victorians held fast to so that the soul of their dead could be present with them at all times. As Lucia Brownell lost her son, Clarence, while he was in the Nile and Lucy Tuck lost both her son and her husband within a short amount of time, the Victorian death culture provided them with an assurance of an immortal soul which was experiencing a perfect afterlife, thus reflecting what would happen to Brownell and Tuck after they were deceased. Their experiences were not perfect, however, in that the “good death” scenario was denied and death relics were not available for them to hold on to at the time of their loved one’s death. To heal this problem, these women sought mediums to recover the “good death.” Brownell, however, also sought out spirit photographs to further her experience of the Victorian death culture as these photos could serve as relics, thus allowing her to realize that her son was still living in a spiritual state. In a religious culture that only provided more questions and anxiety, Americans looked to the Victorian death culture to remedy this distress while spiritualism furthered their experience by using the spirits to confirm the actuality of an immortal soul, thus lessening their grief and allowing them to continue a relationship which they believed they lost.

First, a word about the Brownell family. Between the years of 1842 to 1899, the Brownells were forced to write each other simply to keep in contact with each other. They travelled, worked abroad, and wherever they resided they held strong ties to their community.

They were a large family that was educated and wealthy, which becomes apparent from both the frequency of their travels as well as the professions in which they held. Although the Brownells had many letters from many different family members, their spiritualism was limited to the correspondence that was directly related to the subject. When examined in this matter, it is clear that the key players in the family, in terms of spiritualism, were limited to a few. During the time of their correspondence, Lucia Emilia Brownell, the mother of family, also known to them as simply “Mummy,” would write mainly to her sons Henry Howard, Charles DeWolf, Edward Rogerson, and Clarence Melville Brownell. After her husband’s death in 1846, she moved back and forth between Bristol, Rhode Island, and East Hartford, Connecticut. Henry practiced law in Connecticut, but at the end of his life, he became a Civil War poet and a historian. Edward, also known as Ned, was a physician who graduated from medical school in New Orleans in 1850. After his graduation, he was married to Pamela Laysard and moved to Louisiana to combine his medical practice with his attempts to raise and sell cotton.

Charles and Clarence, however, were Brownell’s closest correspondents. Charles, a trained lawyer, published the book *The Indian Races of America* in 1850. However, shortly after the book was released, Charles decided against a career in law and became a landscape artist. He would often travel to exotic locations to illustrate the environments around him. Within the letters, he was in Cuba and in the latter part of his life, he travelled to Egypt, Egypt, and Jamaica and took frequent trips to different locations within the US.

Clarence was a trained physician and grew a very successful medical practice in Hartford, Connecticut. Clarence also loved to travel and enjoyed studying botanicals. Within his life, he travelled to Callao, Peru, in 1859 and explored the Amazon. In 1860, he explored St.

Thomas and Cuba. In 1861 when he was 31, Clarence made the trip down to Egypt to explore the White Nile to create a botanical collection. Clarence then became ill and died in 1862.

Like the many others in the period, the Brownells were submerged in a culture of grief. Although Lucia Brownell had four sons who lived full lives, she also had two children, Francis and Emilia, who died before reaching the age of sixteen. A close family friend who wrote to Henrietta Brownell, Charles's wife, Henrietta Silliman Dana, would perpetually write of the sorrow she felt over the loss of her children and the loss of those whom were close to her. Dana was in a constant state of grief over these losses and would write of how she prayed for patience because she "could never [have] imagined life could seem so long" without her children. Yet she had hope that she thought of her "darlings as safe, forever spared the weary heartache ... [with] no perception of time—one bright happy moment" in which her patience would yield her the reward of experiencing the same.⁶ When examining the correspondence of the Brownells, it becomes apparent that spiritualism was never their first reaction, but they slowly began believing when their losses were stacking up and their theological studies were becoming wrought with confusion through a variety of writings of pastors and theologians during a time of frequent revivals.

To counter the ambiguity of the afterlife as provided by their current culture, the Brownell's looked to the Victorian culture of death to provide them the answers that orthodox Christianity could not provide. The first aspect of the death culture that the Brownells looked to was the custom of the good death, which would have provided the family with comfort as this custom would see a proper end to life as the person on their deathbed would make peace with

⁶ Henrietta Silliman Dana to Henrietta Knowlton Brownell, 7 April 1862, Box 1, Folder 23, Brownell Family Papers 1842-1899, WLCL (subsequently BFP).

their death, god, and assure their family that their salvation would properly usher them into the afterlife with all of their earthly duties settled and officially closed.

The good death is a belief that originated through medieval and early modern England through a body of literature named the *ars moriendi*, or the art of dying, which described the ideal death of a Christian. In this view, the death of a person is a moment of eternal importance because the dying's stance with god determined where their soul would reside after death. Within both Catholic and Protestant theology, the moment of death was directly followed by divine judgment in which the soul would be sentenced to either eternal punishment in hell or peace in heaven. Because of this, many participants were instructed throughout their life to live as if it was their last day on earth, thus moving them to live a life of prayer and repentance.⁷ On the deathbed, however, the dying in this scenario were assigned duties. The first of which was "reconciliation, whereby hee is freely to forgive all men, and to desire to be forgiven of all" as a final sacrifice to god. Secondly, the dying was to "take order that their charges committed to them by God, be left in good estate after their death." Essentially, he must be sure that all of his civic duties are fulfilled and that his debts are paid. The dying's third duty was to "set their families in order before they die," where he is to "dispose of landes [*sic*] and goods" through the use of wills. Finally, the last duty was "that no Will is of force till the testatour be dead." These duties were to create a peaceful transition to the afterlife with proof to both himself and to god that he left the earth as god has commanded it be done.⁸

⁷ Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*, 17.

⁸ William Perkins, *A salve for a sicke man. or, A treatise containing the nature, differences, and kindes of death as also the right manner of dying well. And it may serue for spirituall instruction to 1. Mariners when they goe to sea. 2. Souldiers when they goe to battell. 3. Women when they trauell of child* (London: University of Cambridge, 1611), 140-151.

Central to the theme of *ars moriendi* was that death was an event in which the family was central. Family and friends would often gather around their dying loved one in hopes of listening to their last words, which would then comfort the viewers as he or she revealed their beliefs in religion to determine a rightful salvation. As Drew Faust observed, the final words of the dying would often be known as “the truth, both because they thought that a dying person could no longer have any earthly motivation to lie, and because those about to meet their maker would not want to expire bearing false witness.”⁹ The good death was central to both the dying and their loved ones because it truly revealed their heart in its most honest form. Furthermore, the dying would often share their story to provide their kin with certain life lessons that could carry on from generation to generation. It was their final moment to pass their legacy onto their families and provide closure and assurance to both themselves and their loved ones.

The importance of the good death is revealed when the good death tradition was denied in the cases of sudden death or death away from home. In linking the Victorian death culture with the massive death toll of the Civil War, Faust notes that “to be deprived of these [life] lessons, and thus this connection, seemed unbearable to many nineteenth-century Americans left at home while their sons, fathers, husbands, and brothers died with their words unrecorded or even unheard.”¹⁰ Sudden death and death away from home posed a massive threat to the good death as it could effectively steal away the assurance of salvation, a peaceful death, and closure as no final words could be passed to the family. In the case of the Brownells, Clarence, the son of Lucia Brownell, died from an illness that was contracted during his research in the Nile. His death came fast, and Clarence could not give notice to his family in a timely manner because he was attempting to communicate through overseas mail, and as Clarence became more ill, he

⁹ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 10.

¹⁰ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 11.

wrote less. When Clarence died, Brownell began to see a medium for an attempt to gain some closure and assurance from this death. How Brownell found a medium is unclear, but it was likely from an ad placed in *The Banner of Truth*, a spiritualist periodical which will be explored more in chapter three, in regard to mediums for hire. Because Clarence was not afforded the good death, however, Brownell lacked insight of how Clarence was while dying, his last words, and where he rested in the afterlife, if there was an afterlife at all. In mid-November of 1862, Brownell believed that through a medium, she “found something at last to awaken interest—an answer to my letter. Henry believes it fully—I do nearly as much...but you know my mind is highly skeptical. It is written in pencil, apparently with rapidity, and spelt backwards, going from right to left... O Charley, ...is not this wonderful? Here are two letters—one from the Nile—the other from another world.”¹¹ The letter spoke of the joy of being “in the sweet air, made gladsome by the sun” and the “dangerous as well as a wearisome journey” in the expedition to the Nile. Even though Brownell was not yet sure of either the truth behind these letters or even if it was Clarence or not, she believed it “sounds like him where he says, ‘one sitting at home and reading of it’ because he used to ‘sit in those rooms in Bristol, reading so much in those books!’”¹²

To counter the loss and lack of closure of her son’s death, Brownell began to probe spiritualism even further by seeing a medium regularly in the hope of reaching the spirit of Clarence. Upon her visit to a medium in Hartford, the medium began to form the image, albeit still unclear, of a man whom she started to believe was Clarence:

We sat alone in Union Hall – she took my hand to establish a rapport, and professed to see various spirits; one, a little child, who came round me lovingly. She heard a spirit saying, ‘Mother, Mother,’ then saw the spirit, a...young girl – then a young man that said must be my son though she observed that she did not know that I had any son. She

¹¹ Lucia Emilia Brownell to Charles DeWolfe Brownell, 18 November 1862, Box 1, Folder 26, BFP.

¹² Lucia Emilia Brownell to Charles DeWolfe Brownell, 23 November 1862, Box 1, Folder 26, BFP.

thought he died away from home...She said, "He seems to have a handkerchief in his hand, and puts it to his face and weeps." I asked if he regretted that he had not lived to carry out his project—he said no—"it was better as it was [as I] would have suffered more."

Brownell also claims that the meeting with the medium contained many other conversations, such as a discussion of an oil painting of this spirit in which the spirit wanted to know who the painter was. Although this spirit was still unclear to Brownell and the medium "could only see his figure, his face was indistinct," she had the hopes that this was Clarence's spirit based on the conversations that she had through the medium. Because of the convincing nature of the communication, Brownell determined to see this medium again. Additionally, the medium told Brownell that "if I come again she could do much better in a second sitting."¹³

Furthermore, when Brownell began to think upon her interactions with the mediums, she began to "think it was Clarence that talked with me through the medium, and that, though I could not see him, he saw me, which was why he wept. But O can it be that this shadow of a shade (as it seems) is all that is left of Clarence?"¹⁴ The thought that Clarence was still trying to reach Brownell was as close as she could get to knowing if her son was okay while avoiding the common orthodox views of death and grieving as provided by the church. The spirit of Clarence speaking with her was slowly becoming her religion. She found that the mediums gave the family "some consolation from the hope, and the belief, as far as we can have it, that he still lives, in a superior state, improving in happiness for him there is 'no more death.'" Even though she doubted the medium when she told Brownell that Clarence said that "of all things do not fear death—it is the easiest thing—I was all my life in bondage from the fear the fear of it," because Clarence "never had such fear, either in health or when he thought himself so near it, from that

¹³ Lucia Emilia Brownell to Charles DeWolfe Brownell, 3 December 1862, Box 1, Folder 26, BFP.

¹⁴ Lucia Emilia Brownell to Charles DeWolfe Brownell, 7 December 1862, Box 1, Folder 26, BFP.

fall, but rather congratulated himself that he should soon know the mysteries of another life, that he had wished so long to penetrate,” she still began to probe spiritualism further, looking for proof of its reality.

With the next trip to the medium and receiving a letter from “the dead letter office,”¹⁵ Brownell was in full belief that it was truly Clarence that contacted her from the afterlife. The letter from Clarence’s spirit explained away her doubt because Brownell was concerned that the medium was not reliable and was claiming things of Clarence that were not necessarily true. However, Clarence was easily able to explain why this distance existed. Clarence’s spirit explained that he was having trouble finding a medium that he can control:

For us to control a medium well, there must be a similarity in temperament or sympathy (in/and) I do not find it so with this medium you wish me to unite through. I had rather you would seek some other medium for one to control—if you can find one—there are many nearer home that I could control better...there will not be such confusion in spirit communication, for it will be seen that all cannot control the same medium.¹⁶

This explanation from the spirit of Clarence certainly explained away Brownell’s concerns, claiming that “there is not a doubt in my mind that it is from our dear Clarence.”¹⁷ However, she found that when Clarence spoke personally to her, it not only provided her comfort, but reassurance that her son was doing well in the afterlife and even there, he missed her greatly. A touching note from Clarence resolved her need for closure, saying, “I still remember the fruits of earth life and my mother has the brightest place in my love. I see now all your care and anxiety for me, and how little I (have!) done to repay your lovingkindness. Mother, please forgive me for all my neglect in earth life—if I did not love you, I should not try so hard to control the medium to write to you.”¹⁸ Certainly, after this interaction via correspondence, Brownell was a

¹⁵ Lucia Emilia Brownell to Charles DeWolfe Brownell, n.d., Box 1, Folder 26, BFP.

¹⁶ “Spirit” of Clarence Brownell to Lucia Emilia Brownell, n.d., Box 1, Folder 26, BFP.

¹⁷ Lucia Emilia Brownell to Charles DeWolfe Brownell, December 1862, Box 1, Folder 26, BFP.

¹⁸ Lucia Emilia Brownell to Charles DeWolfe Brownell, December 1862, Box 1, Folder 26, BFP.

spiritualist. Although one of the mediums she saw was exposed for fraud, Brownell did not believe that it was a sign that spiritualism, as a whole, was a sham, but rather that particular medium was a charlatan. This was not a unique instance in the religious environment of antebellum America in that a variety of preachers within orthodox religions were believed to be false teachers. Rather than dismissing the religion entirely, although some may have, believers would simply seek another preacher. Such was the case of Lucia Brownell. After this particular medium was exposed for being a fraud, although it is not clear how, Brownell simply sought another medium. Brownell was a spiritualist. She sought to contact the dead through mediums to fulfill the Victorian death culture's requirements of a beautiful death, or rather, a continuation of life within the metaphysical.

The communications between Brownell and Clarence's spirit was sufficient to provide Brownell with the comfort to accept the death of her son. However, even though she accepted the physical death of Clarence, her spiritualism provided a reunion with her son which could provide a continuance of the relationship rather than forcing Brownell through a larger grieving process. The good death tradition lived with the communication with the dead. Rather than facing a deafening ambiguity of the afterlife, the good death had shown the "goodness of death [which] made the moment of death, and even the expression on the face of the one just dead," or rather the imagery of a loved one's passing, "a kind of text that could express spiritual salvation, that might be marked with the signs of the loved one's final worthiness of passing into heaven."¹⁹ These thoughts also emphasized the thought that the dead were taking part in a "construction of heaven...as a home which appeared a good deal like 'middle class suburb in the sky' with families reunited."²⁰

¹⁹ Lutz, "The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture," 133.

²⁰ Lutz, "The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture," 133.

The same could be said for Lucy Tuck, who lost both her husband and son prematurely and felt unsure of where they rested. The Tuck family consisted of Lorenzo and Lucy Tuck, parents to Wadsworth Cecil Tuck. The family by no means would have been considered out of the ordinary. Born in South Weymouth, Massachusetts, Wadsworth graduated high school when he was eighteen and then Amherst College when he was twenty-two. After college, Wadsworth, after the influence of his mother who also was a physician, was interested in medical science and therefore entered the family medical practice and at the age of twenty-four, enrolled at Harvard Medical School, and graduated in 1887. After his graduation, he became the house physician at the Boston City Hospital. Religiously, Wadsworth's denominational affiliation is not quite known; however, he was "active in church and Sunday-school work all his life. He had no belief in the return of spirits, as far as any of his family knew, and no interest whatsoever in the subject."²¹

Wadsworth's mother, however, became interested in spiritualism after the death of her husband and father to Wadsworth, the date of which is unknown. When Lucy began to focus on spiritualism, she gained "experience [which] to her was evidence that it was a truth, but the matter was seldom alluded to between the mother and son." Wadsworth and his mother disagreed upon the subject, but Lucy held to the "principle that every person of mature age should be allowed entire freedom of thought."²² When Wadsworth contracted diphtheria from one of his patients and died on October 19, 1888, Lucy became fully emerged into spiritualism and sought to continue the relationship with her son through a medium who was possessed by the spirit of Wadsworth.

²¹ Sarah Louise Ford, *Interwoven: Letters From a Son to His Mother* (Chicago: The Progressive Thinker Publishing House, 1907), 1.

²² Ford, *Interwoven*, 1.

Much like the previous case mentioned, this was also an instance of spiritualism becoming a matter of seeking comfort and closure for the bereaved. It was not until the death of her husband that Lucy began to seek guidance from the spirit world, and it was not until after the death of Wadsworth which finalized the death of her immediate family members, that she relied on the spirits of her family to soothe the grief and loneliness that accompanied their early physical departure.

The scene which Lucy Tuck created within the realm of the Victorian death culture was that of the spirits of her family residing in an afterlife that was much like the life they lived on earth. They had a home, work to do, and relationships with each other. The draw to spiritualism for Lucy was that she could also continue her relationships with her dead son and husband through a medium and live with them between a physical and temporary life and a life that was spiritual and eternal. Through these thoughts, Lucy romanticized their deaths and the afterlife in that death was far greater than life because they could live in a new world without disease and loss. Death ushered her family to their permanent home, and she often grieved the separation that death caused in which Lucy had to wait to join them in the home that she imagined they were preparing for her. To reunite with her family was her only wish, and she sought the spirits of her family to reassure her of that reality. Frequently, the spirit of Wadsworth mentioned how he and his father were together and were happy. Wadsworth would reassure his mother that should be happy and have strength because they were continually with her: "I did not go into the ground or near the casket. I was out of it. My heart is in the home with you, and I don't know what you will do. Your love and thought I brought over here, and I can soon get strong; and surely you will try, I know, to feel strong with my love that I left. I am coming very near to-night."²³ Not only did

²³ Ford, *Interwoven*, 5.

that comfort Lucy, but the communications gave her the knowledge that her husband and son were already up there and waiting patiently for her arrival. It was if their death before hers actually benefitted her because they had already prepared a life and a home for her in the afterlife. Wadsworth described how this happened by arriving in the eternal after life after his father did: “[H]ow glad I am that father came first! For he always puts me ahead, and so I have to take all the benefits” of his preparations. Lucy’s love through the medium is often a source of “real help...for it is such love and sympathy for us; and, when you know we are watching and caring for you, you are never so lonely.” The afterlife never had a negative effect on their lives, but it was a renewal, a cleansing, of their bodies and souls: “[A]s father says, we are out of the old and in the new.”²⁴

A denial of the good death wrought anxiety and a lack of closure to a relationship that was near and dear to their life. Rather than sitting at their deathbed listening and assuring the family of their salvation, peace with their earthly departure, and final words of both their life and comfort, the dying left their family without closure regarding their final resting place even without a goodbye. The custom of the good death left the living with a romanticized view of death which presented it as a doorway to an afterlife that was far greater than life on earth. It provided the family with assurance of reunion and a continuation of a relationship that they lost through death. The good death ushered the dying into a life that had life’s hardest questions revealed in their fullest, such as their religion, true love, and a permanent relief from physical pain and struggles. This left the family with a joy that their dead relatives were much happier after death. Mixing with contemporary Evangelicalism, the good death provided the living with instructions on how to live their life to the fullest as if death could happen in an instant. They

²⁴ Ford, *Interwoven*, 31.

would live life in prayer and earnest repentance to prepare them for the afterlife and assure them of that reality. When death finally came, they would be fully prepared and surrounded by family who would pass on their legacy with the promise of reuniting with their family in the future. However, the story of the Brownells and the Tucks show that the good death was something that did not always happen which wrought havoc on their mental abilities to cope with such loss. Lucia Brownell lost her son Clarence while he was far from home in Egypt and died a seemingly sudden death to illness. Brownell could not hear the final words of Clarence and was left grieving for a loss that she was not prepared for. Lucy Tuck likewise lost both her husband and her son within a short time, and she could not handle what seemed to be the emptiness of their deaths. In turn, Brownell and Tuck both sought mediums in an attempt to make up for a lost good death to provide them the comfort of knowing where they were and that they were going to be together again. In the case of Lucia Brownell, the spirit of Clarence assured her that he was also grieving the separation from her but that he ultimately saw the afterlife as a much better alternative to an earthly life. They were going to be together again in spirit, but for the time being, Clarence's spirit would always be with her and their relationship could continue in some form. For Lucy Tuck, she was shown by the spirits of her son and husband that the afterlife is much greater than life on earth because they have a home and can resume their life but in a better state. A home for Lucy in the afterlife was being prepared for them and they eagerly awaited her homecoming where they could live a perfect life without disease and love that was perfected through death. The good death was substituted by spiritualism to reveal all of its typical customs but in a surer form coming from the spirits themselves while immortalizing their souls.

In the Victorian death culture, the immortalization of the soul through the good death was also assisted by the use of personal relics and photographs, which would hold not just the

memory of the dead but a part of the actual soul. The living could then carry with them these relics to be a constant reminder of the dead's spiritual presence. Relics, or the materials of death, found their beginnings when the Church held objects that were touched or contained some part of a dead saint's body. The relics of saints were believed to cause miracles and were seen as proof of the saint's immortal souls. For example, the amulet that Charlemagne gave his wife in the ninth century which contained the Virgin Mary's hair and actual pieces of the cross in which Christ died on was preserved and was believed to have divine healing properties. The relic could not be corrupted and could last over the course of thousands of years, never to be changed by the world. It was "frozen" and forever, much like the soul of Christ himself.²⁵

The Protestant Reformation, however, subjected these relics to a variety of beliefs which led to a shift within Victorian England whereas rather than the sacred being immortalized, it was then the "beloved individual" that was immortalized through the use of personal relics.²⁶ There were two types of personal relics: one which could serve as a *memento mori*, or a memory of an individual, and another to serve as direct connection to the body of a person which contained part of the soul which reminded the living that their beloved is still alive and well within a spiritual realm. Much like Charlemagne's amulet, these relics were not subject to rot and decay, or the antithesis of living flesh, but they could last for several lifetimes. To have these relics preserved, many Victorians would often send the hair of their lost loved ones to jewelers to encapsulate it within a locket or even hire somebody to weave a necklace made entirely out of the dead's hair to wear on them continually.

Within these two types of relics, however, existed two sub-categories: a primary relic and a secondary relic. These two types of relics are both defined and exemplified within the

²⁵ Lutz, "The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture," 128.

²⁶ Lutz, "The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture," 128.

Victorian novel, *Wuthering Heights*, which serves to show the purpose of these relics. Within the novel, Heathcliff's lover, Catherine, passes away through an untimely death and Heathcliff is left grieving. To soften this blow, Heathcliff uses relics of Catherine to soothe the wound that her death had caused. The most important relics that Heathcliff uses are parts of Catherine's corpse, such as hair, teeth, and even the corpse itself and were considered primary relics of Catherine. After Catherine's death, Nelly, the main narrator of *Wuthering Heights*, explains that Catherine's corpse appeared as though it was in peace and that Catherine appeared as never being in "a holier frame, than while [Nelly] gazed on that untroubled image of divine rest." Upon reflecting on the many other bodies she has looked upon, Nelly also saw "a repose that neither earth nor hell can break," and therefore felt "an assurance of the endless and shadowless hereafter—the Eternity they have entered where life boundless in its duration, and love in its sympathy, and joy in its fullness."²⁷ Furthermore, the hair, a common centerpiece of the Victorian death culture, was also seen to have contained the soul of its owner. Within *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff, right before his own death, replaced the lock of hair in a locket around Catherine's neck with his own because he believed the hair would then meld their souls together, even in death.²⁸

Lucia Brownell's struggles with the loss of her son exemplify the importance that primary relics had when these relics were either present or absent. The nature of Clarence's death left Brownell without a primary relic because he died while in Egypt. Because of this, not to mention a very late notice of his death, Brownell was bereft of even seeing the body of her deceased son. A primary relic was not possible in this case. Likewise, Lucy Tuck's situation lacked the same possibility of personal relics with the death of both her husband and her son. In no way was it possible to get any relics off of their deceased person. Although it is not stated

²⁷ Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1907), 173

²⁸ Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 147.

why this was not possible, it can be certain that the lack of these personal relics impacted Tuck in such a way that spiritualism was seen as a necessity to gain some knowledge of the immortality of her loved one's souls.

Secondary relics are the materials which the dead used or touched and were seen as having within them a part of the dead's soul or, in the least, a memory. In *Wuthering Heights*, Isabella describes secondary relics by saying that "any relic of the dead is precious, if they were valued living."²⁹ Within the novel Heathcliff collects these secondary relics of Catherine to surround himself with the memory of Catherine and her absence. Heathcliff surrounds himself not just to be constantly reminded of Catherine but to never leave the tragedy of the loss of his love and to know that he is still with her. Reflecting on this, Heathcliff exclaimed, "[A]nd what does not recall her? I cannot look down to this floor, but her features are shaped on the flags! In every cloud, in every tree—filling the air at night, and caught by glimpses in every object by day—I am surrounded with her image! The entire world is a dreadful collection of memoranda that she did exist, and that I have lost her!"³⁰ To Heathcliff, these relics "left traces of intensity in the objects touched by her or associated with her, not so different from the saints who were believed to sanctify the clothing, crosses, and other objects that bodies pressed, sweated on, or bled on."³¹ Much like the holy relics of the church, individual relics served the same purpose: a perpetual presence of a soul that was lost and knowledge that the living will one day join the dead in the bliss of a perfect afterlife.

These relics were, in part, were responsible for the rise of spiritualism through the use of photography. As photographic technology increased in the nineteenth century, the photograph

²⁹ Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 148.

³⁰ Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 301.

³¹ Deborah Lutz, "Relics and Death Culture in 'Wuthering Heights,'" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 45, no. 3 (2012): 397

began to replace relics because it was proof that dead had once been there and he or she “has been absolutely, irrefutably present.”³² The photograph was “an utterly unique, singular being, a whole that can never be replaced, duplicated, encompassed (even in memory).”³³ Ultimately, it showed the absent loved one and kept his or her soul alive, even if it was just a memory.

In the mid-nineteenth century, it was believed that photographic science had advanced to such a point where the spirits of the dead could be accurately photographed. This photography revolved around the same principle: a living man or woman posing, either sitting or standing, in front of the camera with a translucent figure, or a spirit, in the background. For those who did not have any relics because of inability to see the corpse of their loved ones, spirit photographs enabled the bereaved to have a primary relic of the lost to remind them of the soul’s immortality while enabling them to carry a part of the soul of their loved ones. Because of this, spirit photography became an industry that grieving families would flock to.

Spirit photography first gained a following through the approval of Andrew Jackson Davis, the bulwark of American spiritualism and a character explained more fully in the next chapter, through his periodical, *The Herald of Progress*, in 1862. In it, Davis proclaimed the advancement of science to produce these photographs of spirits alongside of the living. In 1865 in his *Death and the After-Life*, Davis speaks of the beauty and truth of spirit photography by saying that

A gentleman who is an expert in science says that he can demonstrate that the photographic instrument can photograph invisible substances. Thus mankind are getting ready to take the spirit form, to establish the beautiful fact, by photographic developments. Art has made the nearest approach to painting unsubstantial shadows, so that the human eye can, with admiring satisfaction, look upon them.³⁴

³² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, (Hill and Wang, 1982), 77.

³³ Lutz, “The Dead are Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture,” 135.

³⁴ Andrew Jackson Davis, *Death and the After-Life: Eight Evening Lectures on the Summer-Land* (W. White & Company, 1911), 68.

Davis saw these photographs as scientific proof that a spirit could be present among the living and because of this, spiritualists herded to them because they could provide a relic of the dead that was more detailed and surer than that of a secondary relic when a primary relic was not available.

At its fundamental core, spirit photography featured a juxtaposition of two main themes within spiritualism: mourning and a connection between the living and the dead. By capturing the spirit of a lost loved one alongside the bereaved, this medium encapsulated a moment of hope and grief in a single frame. A primary relic in this form materialized spiritualism because it provided the mourner with tangible evidence that the spirit of their beloved was with them in such a manner that, even while they were being photographed, they were seen to be with them. Moreover, it reversed the role of the grieving process which provided comfort and hope to the grieving. Within the photographs, it was the spirit that was over, even observing, the living thus revealing that it was not just the living who were grieving over death, but it was also the dead who were sorrowful over separation.³⁵ The connection between spiritualism and the Victorian death culture is thus uncovered in its fullest in that the “deadened image of the self, the mourner becomes like the ghostly image projected onto the film and is forcefully reminded of his or her own mortality.”³⁶ A connection through a photograph is forced and the mourner is faced with a perceived realization that the only difference between the living and the dead is merely material; the separation of flesh and spirit, in reality, impeded neither communication with the dead nor knowledge of the afterlife. Upon seeing his wife in a photograph with a stranger, Robert Bonner “could not express [his] feelings of astonishment and pleasure” and longed to see his wife with

³⁵ Jen Cadwallader, “Spirit Photography Victorian Culture of Mourning,” *Modern Language Studies* 37, no. 2 (2008): 14.

³⁶ Cadwallader, “Spirit Photography Victorian Culture of Mourning,” 17.

him in a picture to communicate with her once more.³⁷ So, the next day, Bonner wrote a letter to his wife as if she were still alive, sealed it, and sent it off. When it was returned to his house, he also received instructions from his wife instructing him how to get a picture with her:

[She] made a request, through the medium's wife, *Mrs. Mumler*, to be allowed to show myself the photographic plate of a gentleman by the name of *Bronson Murray*... Oh, my husband! do, do go to the spirit-artist *Mr. Mumler*, in Boston. I shall accompany you there, and show myself upon the plate with you; I will appear with flowers upon my head, a wreath in my hand, pointing upwards.... I have so many things to tell you and our darling little Hammie!³⁸

As Bonner went to get his photograph taken with his spirit wife, she appeared as she said, and Bonner's mourning was set in a photograph showing a mutual grief between him and his wife. The photograph placed the two in the same moment in time while giving Bonner a primary relic to mourn over the loss of his wife in the physical as he still communicated with her between the living and the spiritual realms.

In the case of Lucia Brownell, a primary relic of Clarence was not available because he died overseas. Because of this, Brownell read of this technology in the *Banner of Truth* and was excited about the prospect of seeing the spirit of Clarence in a photograph again. In writing to her son Charley, Brownell asked whether he read "the paper we sent, in which was the article about spirit photographs? It would worth going to Boston for."³⁹ In the influx of resources that praise this new medium, Brownell also exclaimed, "[T]he spirit pictures seem to be exiting much attention. Mr. Rose told me a friend of his was going to Boston and would investigate."⁴⁰

Although her writings do not say that she ever attained the spirit photographs, the search for them explain the reason behind the attention to spirit photography. The absence of a primary

³⁷ Louis Kaplan, *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 125.

³⁸ Kaplan, *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer*, 127.

³⁹ Lucia Emilia Brownell to Charles DeWolfe Brownell, December 1862, Box 1, Folder 26, BFP.

⁴⁰ Lucia Emilia Brownell to Charles DeWolfe Brownell, December 1862, Box 1, Folder 26, BFP.

relic drew families into a state of grief because they had no material reminder of the immortality of the soul. This combined with the lack of a good death made spiritualism more appealing to them because they could attain these aspects of the death culture through the spirit world.

The Victorian death culture influenced the rise of spiritualism because the religious environment of the nineteenth century fostered a culture of an ambiguous afterlife. The Victorian death culture was the remedy to this culture in that it provided a way to treat death as an important event which featured an ushering of the soul into an eternal afterlife with an immortal soul. This was done through certain rituals and when these rituals were denied, communication with the dead made this possible. The good death, a main Victorian tradition where a dying person would lie on his deathbed, surrounded by his loved ones, passing off his story, personal testimony of salvation, and the dear parting words and lessons to his kin, was an event that spiritualism made primary and thus spiritualists sought the spirits to fulfill tradition. When loved ones died suddenly or away from home, the good death tradition was denied and the family was left in anxiousness and an intensified grieving process because there was no assurance of their eternal resting place and no words that could signal closure for the living. This was made apparent in both cases of the Brownell and Tuck families. In both instances, the mothers were left with little knowledge of the deaths of family members and while a good death would have given them hope, it was denied because their death was during the absence or a disease took their life prematurely. When Lucia Brownell was left grieving the death of her son, Clarence, while he was in Egypt, she was bereft of a typical good death scenario. The death of Clarence away from home left Brownell with the need for closure. To achieve the good death tradition, Brownell began to see a medium with the hope that Clarence would speak to her and give her knowledge of his resting place, the nature of his death, and words of comfort as he departed the physical

world. What Brownell found was a satisfaction of the good death in that Clarence expounded on the beauty of the afterlife, words of hope that they would one day be together again, and comfort that death was not to be feared, but to be viewed with the utmost anticipation. Death did not separate Clarence and his mother, but it simply moved them to different realms in which they could continually communicate and still retain their relationship albeit in an altered form.

Likewise, Lucy Tuck, after losing both her husband and son, was left grieving because their deaths were untimely. However, through a medium and spirit communication, Lucy was given both hope and knowledge that not only would they all be together again soon, but they would live in a home without sorrow, disease, or pain. The afterlife, as communicated by the spirit of Wadsworth, was far greater than that of the living on earth. Lucy could now carry on her relationship with her son knowing that he was in an afterlife that was good. Final words from his death bed were not necessary because he could communicate from beyond the grave.

The Victorian death culture also influenced spiritualism because as a picture could serve as a primary relic of death and photos were not always available, spirit photographs breached the separation between relics and pictures because they could provide a relic of the dead in spirit form while accommodating for further communications between the spirit world and the world of the living. Lucia Brownell sought these photos out to gain such a relic and although it was never seen that she acquired them, the desire to find them shows that this was an important instance in her life that could further connect her with Clarence's spirit. Robert Bonner similarly sought to be photographed with his wife's spirit because he wanted to have that relic that could prove her soul's immortality. To do this, he sent a letter addressed to his wife off and when it was returned to his home, a letter from his wife provided instructions to do so along with the hope and comfort knowing that his wife likewise grieved the separation between the physical and

spiritual. When he got the photograph of him and his wife, this provided the necessary relic for the proof that he so searched for of his wife's immortality.

These connections reveal a truth behind spiritualism where a contemporary religious culture merely provided ambiguity regarding death and the afterlife. Most Americans did not go to spiritualism for political expediency, but they faced actual sorrow as their loved ones died leaving them with anxiousness and distress. The Victorian death culture provided both motivation and a longing to see their loved one's again. This death culture was necessary to these Americans because as the religious environment would often brush death off as a consequence of the innate sin of man, contemporary sects would often seek a form of perfectionism that would place the metaphorical blanket over American religion, thus shirking the individual's need for comfort in a country where the death rate was growing and would only continue to grow with the Civil War. The Victorian death culture was the antidote to a culture of curiosity where the religious environment was so muddled that Americans began to search for scientific proof to the truth claims which many different preachers within many different sects were said to have. Logic and science began to pick apart American religion, and the only remedy was contacting the spirits of the dead who could verify the truth from an experiential standpoint.

Chapter 2: A Spiritualist's Antidote to a Culture of Confusion

Spiritualism did not happen randomly. Spiritualists sought to fill an individual need within a culture which wanted to fulfill the needs of the many rather than a personalized one. That need was typically filled with grief and a religious ambiguity. The religious culture of antebellum America was becoming more fluid and because of what Nathan Hatch called “the democratization of American Christianity,” literally anybody who claimed a supposed “revelatory truth” could stand at the pulpit and preach this revelation no matter their education, literacy, or religious affiliation.¹ Spiritualism arose out of this turmoil because as Christianity was becoming ambiguous with a larger spread of theological beliefs, certain Americans could no longer trust their preachers or popular theological literature as providers of biblical truths with evidence to back their claims. Combined with their stacking personal losses, it was easier and more individualistic for spiritualists to contact the spirits directly rather than going to the church for comfort.

The nineteenth century began with the Second Great Awakening's shift from Calvinism to a rampant Arminianism which took predestination, claimed it as false, and replaced it with a person's individual freedom to choose Christ for themselves. Because of the evangelistic methods of Charles Grandison Finney in areas of population growth, such as Rochester, New York, during a dramatic population shift in response to industrialization and the building of the Erie Canal, this theology spread like rapid-fire and religious revivals were frequent and varied in content.² This saw an increase of participants within many different denominations, such as the Methodists gaining a larger following in America, the Shakers, and although they moved to a

¹ Hatch, Nathan O. *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

² Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950).

different region of America, the Mormons gained a larger following than it once had at its conception in the 1830s with the new “revelations” contained within *The Book of Mormon*.

While these denominations began to thrive, the religious environment began to have challenges which further challenged the practicality of religion in one’s life. Thus, a person’s struggles usually dictated which theological camp they would conform to. Belief was a matter of personal choice rather than a mainstream form of theology as it was during the colonial era before it. As time elapsed within the next few decades, however, Enlightenment continued to hit America and logic and reason began to further replace the typical faith-based theology that was at the core of Christianity. This then led to the questioning of the accuracy of the biblical record which preceded a liberalization, or rather a less biblical type, of Christianity which focused on mysticism and, ironically, science. At the beginning of the mid-nineteenth century, the Fox Sisters were seen as logical. They were indeed an answer to a culture of religious ambiguity that seemed to fester in the minds of Americans as the historical Christianity was fading into abstraction.

With a religious landscape that was filling with denominations which all claimed a different truth, why was there a perceived need to abandon these and create a new faith that claimed truths that were derived by the spirits themselves? Why did the “market-place” of religion fail these Americans to such an extent that they saw the only answer was to contact the dead through mediums? Did spiritualists seek to throw out orthodox Christianity as whole or did they somehow seek to reconcile Christian beliefs with that of the spiritualists? Through a brief narrative of antebellum America during the years of the Second Great Awakening, it will be seen that because of such a growing variation in belief systems, Christianity started to become liberalized and some sects began to feature a large degree of mysticism as a response to the

growing amount of questions regarding the accuracy of scripture. When the religious environment was combined with the theories of the Enlightenment and a scientific revolution, religious belief was furthered scattered. While Americans were experiencing grief in a culture of death, the scattered theologies of America placed the American mind in doubt of the existence of an objective truth regarding god, salvation, and the existence of heaven and hell. Spiritualism arose out of this culture because as these Americans experienced grief, they felt as though the many religious theories in America were not sufficient and sought that objective truth that was so missing. Thus, as the Fox sisters made a connection with the spirit world, the Americans who felt lost in their contemporary religious environment began to explore the possibility of spirit communication further. The spirits could provide a direct connection to the truth of the afterlife since they were experiencing it in the present and could provide the antidote to the diseased religious culture that America had fostered. As followers of Andrew Jackson Davis and the other spiritualist leaders, this group of spiritualists, such as the Brownells, the Swaims, and the Tucks, found that not only could the spirits bring clarity to the subject of god, but that spiritualism was also a scientific religion that could provide empiricism in a faith-based culture, find a parallel with common Enlightenment beliefs, and actually strengthen their faith in Christ as the spirits would attest to Christ's actual presence and work in the afterlife. It will be seen that antebellum America's intellectual environment was ripened for spiritualism and, although it fizzled out less than a hundred years after its conception, it was fairly successful as publicizations, organizations, and even transatlantic connections were formed in the years following the rappings of the Fox sisters.

The year of 1825 marked a new generation for New York which would then spread to all of America. It was the year of the finishing of the Erie Canal which would foster more

economic stability, a population boom caused by immigration, and a massive culture shift due to the increase of trading posts within the city. These changes in population and a mindset that was becoming more economically centered due to the increase of a stable agrarian society³ brought in many of the varying lifestyles that New York at the time had neither seen nor believed to be compatible with Christian virtue. Immigrants brought with them a type of urbanity which Whitney Cross describes as a group that was associated with “tobacco-spitting, heavy drinking, freedom of the streets for livestock, the bolting of meals without accompanying conversation, lack of regard for the privacy of travelers,” which was accompanied by their “persistent superstition and credulity.”⁴ This new culture that came off as a slacking in Christian morality was gaining within New York during this period that Cross also believes that the completion of the Erie Canal brought such a change in the economic, demographic, and ethical environments within the years that followed that if Charles Grandison Finney “had happened upon Utica in 1822, perhaps, or upon Rochester about 1825, neither town would have been so well prepared to listen” because at the time of Finney’s revivals in the 1830s, Americans had been in the midst of an economic decline while morality was still low within New York.⁵

When Charles Finney traveled to Rochester in 1830, he set out to evangelize the entire city while effectively transforming the old Calvinist doctrines into a free-will type based Christianity where predestination was essentialized as a heretical doctrine. While Finney’s evangelistic fervor, which preached a fundamental change in theology, spread through Rochester, it also allowed denominations to stray from a unified doctrinal stance further than they have in the past. Such was the case in the Baptist denominations as the sectarian stances,

³ Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, 56.

⁴ Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, 79-80.

⁵ Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, 75.

which originated in New England, began to grow. For example, the “Freewill Baptists and the Christians were sectarians descended from the Separatists of the Great Awakening and developed in the late eighteenth century... the former retained Baptist usages but maintained an open communion and an Arminian doctrine of salvation,” while the latter were considered a type of Unitarian Baptist who sought to uphold the position of the literal interpretation of scripture, and baptism as an adult believer by full immersion which followed their conversion.⁶ More importantly, the Methodists within the period of the Rochester revivals were also an influence because Finney used methods which the denomination used to gain such a massive following within the region.⁷ As the Methodists would fervently aim to convert souls with the intense pragmatism of camp meetings, prayer meetings at houses, and endless preaching, other denominations sought to follow their example and strive to convert souls to their own sects.⁸ Such was the case of the Presbyterians and the Baptists as well as fringe groups like the Millerites, the Mormons, and finally, the spiritualists.

Antebellum America after the Second Great Awakening was even further from being a religiously unified country than it ever was in the past, but it was also intellectually diverse. For some, it was considered to be a disheartening atmosphere because the growing variety of belief systems led them to question their own judgement of who held the absolute truth. It is no surprise then that when the Fox sisters discovered a “spirit” of a man in their house that people from all over the state flocked to communicate with this spirit, and it is no less surprising that some asked this spirit which denomination held the truth. Some of the most overlooked dialogues in the publication which chronicles the communications from the many people who interviewed the

⁶ Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, 15-6.

⁷ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 199.

⁸ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 200.

spirit within the Fox home, *Mysterious Noises*, reveal that some would ask the spirit of the Fox's house which sect was correct. In a specific instance, the statement of Wm. D. Storer, who lived near them for about five years, claimed:

I should think there was over two hundred people there during the evening. I went into the house and heard the noise: it seemed to be on the floor. Mr. Duesler was asking questions. He asked it to rap its age, and it wrapped *thirty-one*. Then he asked if — — — — — murdered it? and it rapped. — Mr. D. had been asking questions before in regard to its having been murdered &c. I was not in the room but about 15 or 20 minutes. He asked it if the Universalist doctrine was true? and there was no noise; then, if it was false? and it rapped three time. He also asked if the Methodist doctrine was true? and it rapped.⁹

Likewise, through the communications of the spirit of Wadsworth, Lucy Tuck sought to clear up the confusion of contemporary religion and purify her beliefs. Often mentioned by the spirit of Wadsworth was how there were many different religious beliefs on earth and even as “a Methodist insists there is a hell and a devil, and for a long time goes about with expectancy of seeing the burning souls,” and “in the borderland there are churches with the old names, as Baptist, or Methodist or Catholic... the orthodoxy,” generally speaking, “say if a soul does not repent it will be damned. This has a sense of right in it, after all; for it reads, ‘If you commit conscious sin, your spiritual self will never have enough elemental tissue to form in the next sphere [of the afterlife], therefore you will be coiled up, or, in other words, damned’ ... [his] idea is that all these religions lead to the same thing.”¹⁰ Wadsworth's spirit is claiming that even though earthly religion is muddled and confused, they all lead to the same idea of salvation or a rest, or even damnation in terms of not advancing into a greater realm of the afterlife.

What is different within this commentary, however, is that the spirit of Wadsworth never mentioned the presence of Christ within the afterlife but uses the words and actions of Christ to

⁹ John D. Fox, ed., *A Report of the Mysterious Noises, Heard in the House of Mr. John D. Fox, in Hydesville, Acadia, Wayne Co. Authenticated by the Certificates and Confirmed by the Statements of Citizens of That Place and Vicinity* (Canandaigua: E.E. Lewis, 1848), 25.

¹⁰ Ford, *Interwoven*, 27, 59, 294.

represent the changes and the glories of the afterlife. In some instances, Christ was an example and the first to experience the true changes after death has occurred. The spirit of Wadsworth explained this by claiming that “Christ was a man said to have passed through these changes in a few moments,” speaking of death, “so he had great control over himself and over matter, and could shape as he chose, or go any distance in a moment.” Christ was the one who had shown that the afterlife and the changes which took place between life and death were real.¹¹ The reason that the religions of the earth were so muddled was that preachers were simply preaching doctrines for financial gain. To illustrate this, the spirit of Wadsworth uses the example of a Unitarian preacher to show how “Unitarianism is a failure in earth; and brotherhood, except in a few individuals does not exist.”¹² This both explained and remedied the religious confusion which Lucy was experiencing while searching for comfort in orthodox religions. These instances confirm Bret Carroll’s claim that “the growth of population, the development of a mass society and culture, and the reality of cultural, ethnic, and religious pluralism encouraged among many middle-class Protestants a sense that social order was threatened and that their control over it was lost,” thus resulting in an ambiguous spirituality which resulted in a belief in a distant god within a culture that did not seem to address such a spiritual disconnect.¹³

This feeling was also deepened as this religious multiplicity found itself in a place which began to produce more questions than it did answers to life’s various trials. This situation provided an opportunity for a new form of Christianity to form: a liberal and mystic Protestantism which looked less to the bible and more toward personal feeling. This environment, therefore, left spiritualism open to be seen as a real possibility. Among its most

¹¹ Ford, *Interwoven*, 110.

¹² Ford, *Interwoven*, 294.

¹³ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 3.

influential preachers was the Congregationalist Horace Bushnell. The works of Bushnell that were fundamental to opening spiritualism up for serious consideration were the works which took mainstream Christian beliefs and placed them into a mystical environment thus furthering the liberal nature of Christianity that was becoming commonplace within America. A renowned Congregationalist pastor and theologian, Horace Bushnell was a man whose thoughts were complicated and changing. In the political realm, Bushnell's evolution went from a stark anti-migration stance, against any movements westward because they would ultimately lead to battles and turmoil which ruined the land, to embracing migration to redeem western civilization.¹⁴ His switch of ideology led to him going against the grain in society, because in the mid-nineteenth century, most Americans found urban life to be corrupting. However, when Bushnell realized that migration westward could actually redeem the land, he had taken the idea that man could use their religion to return America to being a "city on a hill." Nevertheless, his ideas how this would happen strayed from orthodox thought. He related the land's redemption to a relation between god and the work and play of man. By introducing his theory of "play," he switched the mindset of the previous evangelicals from the position that god is most glorified when the Christian is serving in a job that he is called to, to a mindset that it is not work that creates the man, but his religion which he equated to play, or rather, the enjoyment of god.¹⁵ This would ultimately spread "Christian love," which would grow within the country "the only ground of a perfect aesthetic culture."¹⁶ This type of thinking turned Bushnell from an orthodox evangelical to an outsider. Yet, if that did not completely separate him from the mainstream, his theology did.

¹⁴ Daniel Walker Howe, "The Social Science of Horace Bushnell," *The Journal of American History* 70, no. 2 (September 1983): 308.

¹⁵ Howe, "The Social Science of Horace Bushnell," 310.

¹⁶ Horace Bushnell, *Work and Play, Or, Literary Varieties*, (New York: Charles Scribner, 1864), 89.

Bushnell wrote works that combined mainstream views of Christianity with philosophy, nature, and individualism. His book *Christian Nurture* was Bushnell's attempt to show that revivals were essentially a waste of time because it was not a revival that would alter a man's soul, but it was the way the child was raised that put true religion into his heart. With this theory, Bushnell moved into the realm of the social sciences. It was a combination of Christianity, the Lockean theory that man is influenced by his culture beginning at birth, and psychoanalysis that would later be seen in the works of Freud. It was ultimately a healthy family which put the child in a good position to a true conversion rather than a revival. The determination of a child's salvation was the health of the family so that he may "grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise."¹⁷ Yet even in speaking in terms of social science, Bushnell inserted a form of spiritualism, used in the broader term of the word, in that it was too simplistic to say that a parents are only an influence on the child, but the parents contained within them an "organic relation" that is passed onto their children without any verbal communication.¹⁸

Bushnell further described this parental organicism as

a power [that] is exerted by parents over children, not only when they teach, encourage, persuade, and govern, but without any purposed control whatever. The bond is so intimate that they do it unconsciously and undesignedly—they must do it. Their character, feelings, spirit, and principles, must propagate themselves, whether they will or not. However...the control of the parents, purposely exerted, must be regarded... as an absolute force, not as an influence.¹⁹

How the parents acted within the household ultimately resulted in these actions moving into the child's unconscious mind, thus affecting them in their adult life. Finally, Bushnell mixed social theory and psychoanalysis with the old Calvinist beliefs of Original Sin. Even though the child's parents were a major determinant of their religious standing in the future, the doctrine of Original

¹⁷ Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, (New York: Charles Scribner, 1861), 4.

¹⁸ Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, 90.

¹⁹ Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, 93, 94.

Sin was still wrought in their souls. This was proven by two reasons: the parents naturally passed their sinfulness to their child and the child naturally contained within them selfishness and the childlike instincts which forced them to stray from their parents teaching. This ultimately harkened back to Adam and Eve, the first to sin in the Garden of Eden, thus beginning the sinfulness contained in that organic nature of the family.

Bushnell was also a master of language. Essentially deconstructing the typical rhetoric of theologians, he used it to show its inadequacy. He used this religious language more metaphorically than literally. Language was a representation of thought, yet it was never absolute.²⁰ This explained why Bushnell believed why mysticism was a partial remedy to religious confusion. Claiming that “a mystic is one who finds a secret meaning, both in words and in things, back of their common or accepted meaning—some agency of Life, or Living Thought, hid under the forms of words and institutions, and historical events,” all true teachers of religion who therefore dwell on the meaning of words and things, “or hold the truths of religion, not in mechanical measures and relations, but as forms of life, are so far mystics.”²¹ By applying this theory, he forcefully moved himself into the realm of mysticism and welcomed it. In his book, *God in Christ*, Bushnell claimed, “[T]here is a mystic element, as there should be, in what I have represented as the source of meaning in language, and also, in the views of Christian life and doctrine, that follow. Man is designed, in his very nature, to be a partially mystic being; the world to be looked upon as a mystic world.” At an attempt to prove this argument, Bushnell claimed there was even a mystical element, an element that reached beyond words into the world of the supernatural, in the teachings of Christ himself, but also “in almost every writing of the

²⁰ Catherine L. Albanese, “Horace Bushnell among the Metaphysicians,” *Church History* 79, no. 3 (September 2010): 647.

²¹ Horace Bushnell, *God in Christ. Three Discourses Delivered at New Haven, Cambridge, and Andover, with a Preliminary Dissertation on Language* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1876), 94.

New Testament. In John, it is a character. In ‘the dialectic’ Paul, there are very many passages quite as mystical as any in John.”²² However, when discussing orthodox views of theological issues, such as the idea of the trinity, Bushnell claimed that “their reality in and through the imaginative and morally aesthetic powers—truths of form and feeling, not of the logical understanding.”²³ With this claim, Bushnell resembled the theology of Sabellianism, a belief rooted in the third century, who saw the trinity as fallacy because it was god who projected both the Son and the Spirit, rather than the three being separate and distinct persons of the Godhead.²⁴ Although Bushnell resisted these accusations, he landed himself outside of mainstream Christianity and therefore was deemed as either liberal or heretical. Not to mention, Bushnell’s theories also caught the attention of Andrew Jackson Davis, and although they disagreed on some points, they nevertheless became associated with each other.

Thoroughly read in the works of Bushnell was Henrietta Silliman Dana, the mother of six children but who had lost two to diphtheria in 1861. Dana, a close friend and confident of the Brownell family, often looked to the works of Bushnell to soothe her grief as she was also surrounded by loss, yet still held on to her mainstream Christian beliefs. Dana was an influence on Charles Brownell and his wife, Henrietta, but also on the whole of the family and, even through her own grief, would encourage them in their faith and uplift them through their own losses. Henrietta Silliman’s father was a well-known professor and scientist at Yale, and in 1844 she married James Dwight Dana, who was also a professor at Yale who was well known in the academic field of geology. Later, her son, Edward, would also become a Yale professor. Dana, being quite literate as well, constantly read books pertaining to her Christianity and would share

²² Bushnell, *God in Christ*, 95.

²³ Bushnell, *God in Christ*, 106.

²⁴ Albanese, “Horace Bushnell among the Metaphysicians,” 647.

them with Henrietta Brownell. Henrietta Brownell and Dana kept close contact and would relate back and forth over the subject of loss, religion, and their children. Although it is not clear whether they shared the religious beliefs, Dana most certainly acted as an influence on the Brownells due to the waning influence of orthodoxy within their religious discussions. It is, however, unsure whether they shared the same evolution of religious beliefs because Dana's letters seem to decrease as time went on and Charles began to travel. However, it is clear that while their beliefs may have strayed from one another's, they began with a similar religiosity. Yet, it was Dana who, at the beginning, was very vocal and therefore a crucial part of the Brownell's story.

Writing to Henrietta Brownell in 1862, Dana's anguish over the loss of her children was still overtaking her. She remained steadfast in her faith yet was still sorrowful. She was often worried that she would end as her mother did, as her mother "parted with her eldest boy, a bright beautiful child of five years. Three followed, and each as they came to fill the vacant spot, were soon withdrawn!" Reflecting on this, Dana exclaimed, "Oh may I be spared that!"²⁵ It was hard for Dana to separate from the loss of family members because even her sister lost her daughter of twenty-two and then a year after had lost her son. She would often remind herself through her letters to Henrietta Brownell, whom she referred to as Nettie, that the afterlife was a wonderful place and she longed to see it. Writing on the transfiguration of Christ, she saw it as "foreshadowing" that in the afterlife, a person would still retain "one's humanity...purified and exalted it may be—not being merged in Angels but... rather exalted above them in that Christ took on our nature and passed from human view still wearing that mantle! Oh for one glimpse into those mansions! But then earth would be unendurable! We must wait and trust!"²⁶ Still

²⁵ Henrietta Silliman Dana to Henrietta Knowlton Brownell, 7 April 1862, Box 1, Folder 23, BFP.

²⁶ Henrietta Silliman Dana to Henrietta Knowlton Brownell, 14 August 1862, Box 1, Folder 24, BFP.

replaying the words of her departed daughter just learning how to speak correctly, Dana felt sorrow, which overtook her faith and she would be stricken by grief with the memories of how sweet her voice was when attempting to speak elegantly. Although she “tried to keep down thoughts and memories during wakeful nights...and tried to feel that they were not far from [her]!” Dana believed that “It will be a real relief to have the August days gone—each one...deep with its own peculiar heartache, and yet there is even a necessity for [her] to keep up the external.”²⁷ Even though she appeared to be pious, her faith was shaken and she was aware of it. She often compared herself to her husband: “[He] has a clearer, more obedient Christian faith than I, and that it is easier for him to submit. His...piety was of the same unquestioning character he had met many severe sorrows, and yet it always seemed to me that there was an actual joy to him in grief, because he so loved and trusted Him from whom it came!”²⁸ To attempt to glean and grow from her husband’s faith, she would often read and share with Henrietta the works of Horace Bushnell. Dana often reported the “precious thoughts” which Bushnell gave her. Henrietta Brownell likewise found that Bushnell was “particularly welcome” to her, and although Dana found Bushnell’s works *Christian Nurture* and *Nature and the Supernatural* to be “in some respects faulty,” nevertheless, it contained “much talent” and was “of great interest” to both of them.²⁹ Bushnell’s form of Christianity was able to individualize Dana’s religious affections while giving her the possibility of reaching a conclusion that could be revealed through nature and the mysticism which Bushnell was a staunch proponent of. This comforted Dana, and she was able to pass this on to the Brownells, who were also suffering from grief. Furthermore, reaching the “scientific horizon” of Christianity also came of great interest to them

²⁷ Henrietta Silliman Dana to Henrietta Knowlton Brownell, 28 August 1862, Box 1, Folder 24, BFP.

²⁸ Henrietta Silliman Dana to Henrietta Knowlton Brownell, 28 August 1862, Box 1, Folder 24, BFP.

²⁹ Henrietta Silliman Dana to Henrietta Knowlton Brownell, 19 April 1862, Box 1, Folder 23, BFP.

when Dana's husband had given her a pamphlet explaining the scientific properties of Christianity.³⁰

Through their interest in the works of Horace Bushnell and the science contained within Christianity, it becomes apparent that orthodox Christianity was simply not enough to satisfy the grief which they felt over their losses. These works signaled a switch from the typical Christianity over to an experimental faith in which science, philosophy, and nature were emphasized rather than plainly accepting the providence of god. This can be seen through their interest in Bushnell.

Horace Bushnell and his influence represents how the Brownells viewed Christianity as well. As Bushnell questioned the logic and language of Christianity, the Brownells did likewise. Paired with the confusion that was wrought through the many different theologies in a revival-based environment, the Brownells would soon look elsewhere to find out where their loved ones resided in the afterlife as well as who Christ really was. This became apparent when Lucia Brownell lost her son Clarence unexpectedly while he was along the Nile. Brownell always had a small seed of spiritualism in her, yet she did not fully believe in it until her son Clarence died. Brownell always believed that spirits made connections with the living although it was an unsure belief. Before the death of Clarence, Brownell attended the funeral of a friend Sam Colt. She noticed that "something rather curious happened at Sam Colt's funeral. About fifteen minutes before the body was carried out, a large mirror in one of the South rooms fell shattered, the frame still in its place. We think it was Sam."³¹ After Clarence's death, however, Brownell began to see a medium to try to gain some closure from his death. With Christian thought becoming more scattered in the American consciousness, Brownell used communications with the dead as a form

³⁰ Henrietta Silliman Dana to Henrietta Knowlton Brownell, 19 April 1862, Box 1, Folder 23, BFP.

³¹ Lucia Emilia Brownell to Charles DeWolfe Brownell, 26 January 1862, Box 1, Folder 23, BFP.

of mysticism to reveal to her the “secret truths” of the metaphysical that could in turn be used as an avenue to cure her anxiety while not straying from the Christian faith.

Along with this liberalization of Christianity, or a straying from a sole biblical record as its primary source, science and reason from the Enlightenment also threatened orthodox religious thought and further muddled the religious culture of America. While orthodoxy nearly faded into irrelevancy in the believer’s life, a large number of participants also sought to have a religion that was verifiable, empirical, and logical. The nineteenth century was filled with technological and scientific advancements, which created the expectation within people that they could look to these advancements to verify their religion. Furthermore, the publication of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* in 1859 shook the very foundations of Christianity by proposing an evolution theory rather than the creation narrative that was known since the biblical era. Spiritualism acted as both a separate denomination, one that took Christian thought and put it through a scientific procedure that could be seen and touched, but also as a proposed a way of thinking within Christianity itself. As critics of Christianity claimed that a purely faith-based religion was subjective, spiritualism could prove that Christianity could also have an empirical foundation. Spiritualism was rooted in the idea that every contact with the spirit world was an empirical event and could be repeated as if it was put through the scientific process.

Religion as a scientific and logical belief system caught the attention of the public through the works of Andrew Jackson Davis, known as the “Father of Modern Spiritualism,” who believed that if a person believed had a religious experience then it must also have been a scientific experience. Davis was what Bret Carroll calls the exemplification of the “broader currents of religious democratization,”³² in that, much like Joseph Smith within Mormonism,

³² Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 19.

Davis was an individual with no past religious experiences nor formal education yet had a religious “revelation” which spawned an entire movement. In his autobiography, Davis often makes mentions that he was always an anxious, untalented, and sickly boy that grew up with a father that he was never satisfied with. His only comfort was his mother who was “mystically inclined.”³³ Having claimed that he often experienced unusual visual and auditory experiences, Davis even caught a glimpse of his mother in heaven when she died in 1841. His childhood was also categorized by financial instability that forced the family to travel the Hudson valley often, which also provided him with a “religious restlessness punctuated by unsatisfying exposures to Dutch Reformed Protestantism, Methodism, Episcopalianism, Presbyterianism, and Millerism.”³⁴

In 1843, however, Davis met an itinerant preacher of Mesmerism who taught Davis how to hone his ability as a trance lecturer and clairvoyant healer. When he met and attracted a group of Universalists, including Dr. Silas S. Lyon, Rev. Samuel Byron Brittan, and Rev. William Fishbough, they opened up a clairvoyant medical clinic in New York and delivered a series of lectures which were believed to have been inspired and directed by the spirit of Emmanuel Swedenborg who had been his spirit guide since the original communication in 1847. The lectures attracted influential characters within America, such as Albert Brisbane and even Edgar Allan Poe. These lectures were then published in *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice of Mankind*. This work became the influential writing that would help spiritualism become a known religion within America which emphasized the failures of American Christianity due to its lack of scientific thinking with a damaging focus on a literal interpretation of the scriptures.

³³ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 19.

³⁴ Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 19.

In explaining this concept more fully, Davis said that there were people who believed that a literal interpretation of the bible would lead to a higher level of “celestial” thinking and he believed that this religious

reasoning is sophistical, and all such fanaticism is foreign to a healthy mind. For the rest, the internal and external of all things are married together and correspond literally to each other, and that which is true inwardly is true also without. Hence no religious truth can be incompatible with scientific or philosophic discovery in a corresponding department. So also there can be no antagonism between natural and revealed religion.³⁵

Because of his focus on science and logic, Davis fully believed that the Bible was flawed in that the writings contained within it were devoid of scientific accuracy. To him, this was something that was almost common knowledge because “every enlightened person knows that the Bible is wrong in scores of things. Its geology is wrong, its chronology is wrong, its astronomy is wrong; it is wrong in many prophecies; and there are doctrines, precepts, and practices, unfit for the child to learn or the man to follow.”³⁶ Davis believed the church’s belief in the infallibility of the scriptures that was the church’s fundamental flaw. Davis claimed that “the church fails, because it looks to a *wrong Source* for its aid,” while a belief in the “Love—and the Hate—of an omnipotent Jehovah; with the necessity of faith in the virtue of that blood tragedy called ‘Jesus Christ and him crucified’” is necessary to restrain the world from the evils contained within it and therefore will reform it. Even with such a sectarian divide within America, they all lead to a destruction of “their earthly voyage oftentimes as much in bondage—as little developed—as when they began.” The church, however, was not completely bereft of success but contained within it the accomplishment of the “triumph over dying”; something that was not unique to just

³⁵ Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Great Harmonia* (Boston: Benjamin Mussey & Co, 1850), 251- 52.

³⁶ Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Penetralia; Being Harmonial Answers to Important Questions* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1856), 135.

Christianity, but to the “warrior, the Hindoo [*sic*], the Turk, the Roman Catholic, reposing upon his bed of death with a serene resignation.”³⁷

To form an antidote to this disconnect between American religion and the true religion which brought science and the metaphysical together, Davis appealed to what he referred to as “nature.” This nature, to Davis, was defined as the nature of an individual man which encompassed the “beliefs, behaviors, and values” that surrounded him.³⁸ However, because of the many sects and beliefs in Christianity that focused on what he believed to be the removal of this individualistic nature and a focus on the teachings of “fanaticism that has covered the intellects of men,”³⁹ Davis believed that a sole belief in the bible was not only wrong but ignored the teachings of Christ because Christ himself also appealed to his inner nature. Christ did not have to rely on externalities to show his spiritual authority, but “Jesus found his authority within. He taught *this* principle and *that* precept upon the authority of his spiritually-illuminated intuitions; never relied upon any ‘say so’ or external authority; he appealed to Father-God and to Mother-Nature.” Davis therefore responded: “I am compelled to be *as true* to the light with me; as free, from outward standards of judgment.”⁴⁰ The teachings that ignored the principles of nature were considered by Davis a massive source of immorality because of the confusion that was caused by the teachings to ignore nature and focus on a denial of one’s own feelings. It fosters an immorality within the soul because the man’s “interest tells him one thing, while his conscience and duty tell him another...He is immorally situated who is obliged to withhold from the world his feelings and affections, and to suppress the general principles of his nature, in order

³⁷ Davis, *The Penetralia*, 135.

³⁸ Catherine L. Albanese, “One the Matter of Spirit: Andrew Jackson Davis and the Marriage of God and Nature,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 60, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 1.

³⁹ Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Principles of Nature, He Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind*, 8th ed. (New York: S.S. Lyon, and Wm. Fishbough, 1851), 8.

⁴⁰ Davis, *The Penetralia*, 189.

to preserve his individual interests. It is thus that the true principles of man's nature, and the true source of human happiness, are concealed."⁴¹ This also contributed to the many reform movements of the century, such as temperance, abolition, and women's rights, in which many spiritualists took to represent due to the perceived failures of orthodoxy. Furthermore, Davis believed that mainstream Christianity focused on denying one's own individuality and ignored man's innate nature. While trying to serve out one's corporate Christian duty, the individuality of man dies and the true religion of Christ, science, and nature were lost. The soul, therefore, was left within its own inner turmoil.

Davis believed, to remedy this flaw in American Christianity, contact with the spirit world was necessary because the belief in the physical presence of spirits appealed to both the individual, thus making the experience of religion a personal matter, agreeing with the empirical sciences. While explaining the differences between Christianity and spiritualism, Davis believed that

*Christianity has never suggested a single scientific fact—has never developed a single broad scheme for the practical relief of a suffering humanity; but, instead, the system has wielded its entire might in opposition to almost every new development... Spiritualism, on the contrary, has already discovered to the world a multitude of the most momentous and practical truths. In the fields of science and philosophy, especially in mental philosophy (which is foremost with all intelligent, cultured minds) it has revealed fresh facts and demonstrated several great principles. The sciences of magnetism, electricity, chemistry, psychology, clairvoyance, &c., have each received valuable additional illustrations and highly suggestive principles from some of the departments of spiritualism.*⁴²

Spiritualism proved to be scientific because these spirits were actually made from physical matter, gave truths from the metaphysical, and bypassed the dogmas of orthodoxy which hindered the soul from true freedom. The science of spiritualism freed the soul from the threat of

⁴¹ Davis, *The Principles of Nature*, 8.

⁴² Davis, *The Penetralia*, 208.

eternal damnation and did so, not for just the believer, but their lost loved ones as well. As Davis was widely read among Americans, many readers accepted his ideas as fact, thus placing spiritualism within the field of a scientific religion that logically existed while a faith-based, non-scientific orthodox religion was becoming outdated and nonsensical. It is as Mary Bednarowski claims in that “as a religion [that was] based on knowledge, then, rather than belief, Spiritualism provided an alternative to the unquestioning faith demanded by traditional religions as well as the belief in a totally materialistic world which was seemingly demanded by science.”⁴³

Such a case can be seen with the Swaim family. Compared to other stories of families that were drawn toward spiritualism, the Swaims seem to stand out because as most sought the spirits out of grief, the Swaims sought spiritualism because after all the technological developments in the nineteenth century, they saw spiritualism as a necessary and expected development. It is, however, clear that the Swaims began their journey into spiritualism because of the death and bereavement of a loved one, Tilghman Howard Swaim’s father.

Forty years after the death of his father, Tilghman Howard Swaim was requested to write a biographical sketch of his father, Colonel Jehu B. Swaim. Like the Brownells, the Swaims were shown in this biography as having been devoted to a mainstream denomination; however, unlike the Brownells who began to follow the changing theology of Horace Bushnell, there is no evidence that the Swaims contained any unorthodox thought until after Jehu died. It will be seen however, that the Swaims’ spiritualism was not a replacement for their Christianity, but an addition to it. After Tilghman’s father died, he only began communicating with the dead to continue the relationship with his father that he lost because of death. It is apparent that orthodox theology was not holding up under the scrutiny that their grief caused. Not only that, but the

⁴³ Mary Farrell Bednarowski, “Spiritualism in Wisconsin in the Nineteenth Century,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 59, no. 1 (1975): 4.

Swaims were drawn toward spiritualism because of scientific and evolutionary reasoning. Humans were becoming more advanced and society was growing culturally and technologically, and spiritual evolution was an obvious accompaniment. The old, orthodox religions were beginning to become outdated, muddled, and therefore irrelevant. Spiritualism was a remedy to this because as the mainstream was not adequately answering their questions of where their father was, his spirit answered those questions thus reaffirming the existence of life after death and the beauty of Christ within it. This is a representation that although grief is the main cause of one's entrance into spiritualism, many different forms of it existed and sought to fulfill individualistic needs.

In his biography of his father, Swaim described Jehu as the oldest male in a family of four siblings. In 1818, when Jehu was fifteen, the family moved from North Carolina to Indiana where they lived in "a small clearing in the green woods and put up a log cabin."⁴⁴ On February 26, 1824, Jehu married Mrs. Nancy Johnson-White, who already had two children. The newly married Swaims and their children did not have much and their possessions consisted of "a gray horse, an ax and a buckskin suit of clothes."⁴⁵ Jehu worked as laborer in a wool carding factory and with his earnings bought approximately eighty acres of school land, which he built his home on. In 1842, Jehu began working for the post office and continued to grow his wealth. He was also "a natural mechanical genius. He supplied himself with a cobbler's set of tools, and would make or mend his harness; and made the boots and shoes for the family."⁴⁶ Finally, Jehu "bought and brought into the neighborhood the first wheat threshing machine ever seen in that vicinity,

⁴⁴ Tilghman Howard Swaim, "Biography of Colonel Jehu B. Swaim of Parke County, Indiana," 1923, S1276, Tilghman Howard Swaim collection, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Indiana State Library (subsequently THSC).

⁴⁵ Swaim, "Biography of Colonel Jehu B. Swaim of Parke County, Indiana," 1923, S1276, THSC.

⁴⁶ Swaim, "Biography of Colonel Jehu B. Swaim of Parke County, Indiana," 1923, S1276, THSC.

and persons came for miles to see it thresh.” This machine would simply separate the grain from wheat straws.⁴⁷

Jehu was a very religious man. His son always knew Jehu as “naturally devotional.” Jehu became a Baptist at the age of ten and from after that remained in the church. He was also an “active leader in church work.” As one of the trustees in the church, Jehu played a large part in the building of a church and served as a deacon in the New Discovery church to which he and his family moved later in their lives. Not only was Jehu devoted, but he was considered “to be the best parliamentarian in the church. He was very firm in his convictions of right and duty, and would not swerve therefrom, because of censure or blame.”⁴⁸

For his military career, Jehu’s father served as a captain in the War of 1812 and Jehu followed suit and joined the militia when he became of age. He joined in the 50th regiment located in Indiana. After advancing through a period of ten years, Jehu was elected as colonel within the same regiment in which he started.

This commentary of Jehu Swaim’s life represents the fact that the Swaims lived an orthodox life within an orthodox religion. Even within their church, they were seen as upstanding members and never strayed from mainstream theology. Spiritualism was never a thought to them. However, upon Jehu’s death around 1883, his son Tilghman began to be interested in science and the advancement of technology. Writing in 1923, he recalled the technological growth within America, which he believed included the advancement of “the evolution of man himself, mentally and spiritually.” In describing the advances of communication, Swaim included the invention of the telegraph and the telephone and wireless transmissions such as the radio. New communicative technology led ultimately to “mental telepathy, the direct exchange

⁴⁷ Swaim, “Biography of Colonel Jehu B. Swaim of Parke County, Indiana,” 1923, S1276, THSC.

⁴⁸ Swaim, “Biography of Colonel Jehu B. Swaim of Parke County, Indiana,” 1923, S1276, THSC.

of ideas between mind and mind, [which] is now being gradually recognized and used by a few people.”⁴⁹ As advancements were occurring in both transportation and communication, the advancement of spirituality must naturally follow. It is with this thought that Tilghman added spiritualism to his orthodox Christianity. Tilghman claimed that “man is truly a dual being; that he possesses both the physical and the spiritual characteristics, here and now. That his physical body, and all its senses, have their counterpart in the spiritual, and in far greater degree of expression.”⁵⁰ Tilghman, in defense of clairvoyants, said that they “are now fully verified facts, as seen in their various degrees of development, these being clear hearing, and clear seeing, beyond the range of the physical sense.” This was all guided by the “spiritual faculties [which] are governed by the higher spiritual laws as accurately, and scientifically, as are the laws pertaining to the material aide of life.” The laws of spiritualism, or its principles of nature, the means to contact the dead, and how it was possible, were both empirical and scientific. Consequently, Tilghman saw this as the absolute best form of religion because of that verifiability.⁵¹ The Swaims were becoming one with the nature that Davis expounded on relentlessly and used this knowledge to reach beyond worlds and therefore reach a verifiable Christianity not based on faith alone, but based on scientific proof.

Because of these advancements and a unique oneness to his own human nature, Tilghman decided to soothe his grief over the loss of his father and other family members, by holding what he called a “family reunion” every year since his death at Christmas time. With these communications with his father, his religion was increased because not only did it “keep [him] in touch with spiritual realms; it adds much to one’s happiness and the true understanding

⁴⁹ Tilghman Howard Swaim, “Part 2: Innovation,” 1923, S1276, THSC.

⁵⁰ Swaim, “Part 2: Innovation,” 1923, S1276, THSC.

⁵¹ Swaim, “Part 2: Innovation,” 1923, S1276, THSC.

of life,” which could never be provided by orthodox Christianity.⁵² When Tilghman and his family communicated with his father, Jehu’s spirit comforted them greatly because not only did he confirm their beliefs about Christ, but gave them a full picture about what to expect in the afterlife. What they found was that the afterlife was a far greater place than earth, which gave them hope that Tilghman’s father was actually better off than he was on earth, thus resolving the confusion and lack of answers the orthodox provided, which provided the living with an answer to where their own souls would reside after death. The experience of the afterlife, as Jehu explained, was the same for everybody:

I come into this life expecting to find conditions quite different, as every one does who comes over without any previous knowledge about the facts of life here. However I was pleased to learn that life is one continuous progression. We being here just where we leave off there. Death does not change us. I found myself the same in every way except bodily conditions. They were greatly changed, I having lost my heavy physical body for the light ethereal one in which I found great freedom. Each one coming over goes to his own place. It being such place, home and environment, crude or beautiful, as he had made by his own earthly living, depending upon whether he had made his life one of selfishness, or one of love and service to others.⁵³

Christ is also residing with them in the afterlife, thus confirming their beliefs in Christianity and confirming that their confusion was common. Jehu alluded to how Christ’s presence was hindered on earth while Jehu’s spirit realized: “Christ [*sic*] presence here far more than I ever did in the earth life. It is joy, peace and satisfaction to know that He is with us continually.” Finally, Jehu’s provided comfort to the Swaims because he was adamant that “all today who are mourning their loss of dear ones, could know, that there is no death or great separation between loved ones, what a joy it would bring to their aching hearts.”⁵⁴ By combining the mysticism of Bushnell, where further truths of Christ were revealed only in a metaphysical way rather than off

⁵² Swaim, “Part 2: Innovation,” 1923, S1276, THSC.

⁵³ Swaim, “Part 2: Innovation,” 1923, S1276, THSC.

⁵⁴ Swaim, “Part 2: Innovation,” 1923, S1276, THSC.

of a sole reading of scripture, along with Davis's search for the scientific proof of Christianity, the Swaims were able to come to a conclusion of what Christianity truly was. Of course, this was only made possible by using the spirits of his loved ones to assist him in the search. Spiritualism provided a remedy to the ambiguity of earthly religion.

When compared to the Brownells and the Tucks, the Swaims reveal to be a similar case. Members of all three families were drawn to spiritualism because of the grief that they experienced over the loss of their loved ones. Albeit reaching spiritualism through different conclusions likely caused by their gender, such as the Brownells through mysticism and liberal theology and the Swaims through science and empiricism, they sought to contact their dead to find comfort: to soothe their grief and either find closure or a continuation of a relationship that was seemingly cut short. The Swaims provide a narrative that shows the relationship between a culture that was unsure of where it stood religiously, and because of this confusion, they pursued a remedy that would produce physical proof. That came in the form of spirit communication from their lost father. Because the science and technology were advancing, naturally spirituality, to the Swaims, was likewise advancing. This idea of spiritual progress opened their minds up to the possibility of spirit communication with the agenda of finding true religion and comfort from the loss of their father. When they did that, they found that Jehu was happier, in a better condition, and rather than finding closure, they received a continuation of a relationship which they thought they lost. Within the forty years of this continued relationship with the spirit of Jehu, they also found proof of their own religion in that Christ was with them and he was more present and clearer in the afterlife than on earth. Jehu gave them hope and proof that the afterlife was real and surer than what was being preached contemporarily.

The nineteenth century was a time of religious change. With the occurrence of the Second Great Awakening near the beginning of the century, Americans were left with a diverse and muddled religious culture. As Charles Finney preached a Christianity that claimed that traditional Calvinism was theologically narrow, other denominations began to thrive. These denominations, such as Mormonism, Presbyterianism, and the Baptists, all held different theological beliefs that not only contradicted each other but left a common religious standing in the past and let Americans choose what they believe for themselves. Although this could be seen as a good thing within the American religious environment, spiritualists believed that this disconnect revealed a major flaw within the culture; truth was subjective, and there was no truth that could be completely revealed within the physical. Spiritualists saw the answer in contacting the dead as a means to gain a scientifically proven truth because the spirits of their loved ones had experienced death, passed through the physical onto the metaphysical, and could attest to the truth of Christ from a first-hand experience. They were living in an empirical truth which the preachers on earth could not claim.

This was the story of the Tuck family. Lucy Tuck experienced the death of her husband and her son within a relatively short period, and because the American religion was seemingly muddled from Lucy's perspective, she sought the help of a medium to not only soothe the wound which these losses caused, but to actually gain answers from the spirits themselves to find the truth about religion, the afterlife, and where the souls of her loved ones resided. What she found was something that seemed to settle her grief and rather than grieving the loss of her loved ones, she grieved that she could not, in that particular moment, be with them. Wadsworth's spirit described a religious system that was wrought with corruption and that, no matter the sect, all led to the same conclusion that heaven was for the morally upright and hell for the corrupt.

However, as Wadsworth's spirit quoted Christ to back up his experiences, he described a home for Lucy which was actually waiting for her. It was a home that already being tended to by both her husband and her son.

The Tuck family was not an isolated case, however. As Christianity began to become liberalized, their spiritualism was inadvertently encouraged by preachers who sought to illustrate that many of the biblical revelations were brought on by a form a mysticism. Preachers, such as the Congregationalist Horace Bushnell, sought to reconcile Christianity with social science, sociology, and psychology while bringing in the mystic belief that the bible must have contained some "secret meanings" which only a divine revelation could reveal. Bushnell began to open up the possibilities that spirits were brought on by a divine intervention, thus showing these secret meanings within the scriptures. As Bushnell, and others, were widely published, Americans began taking them in and internalizing them to fill a need which orthodoxy left empty as shown be the case of Henrietta Dana in writing to the Brownell family. As Henrietta read Bushnell, she began to believe that there was more to the afterlife than what orthodox preachers were letting on. By reading pamphlets by liberal Christians, Henrietta learned that Christianity could be scientific while containing and revealing secret elements to the religion. As she wrote to the Brownell family to relate to the death of Clarence because Henrietta herself suffered from the loss of her multiple children, Lucia Brownell began to see spiritualism as an answer to the growing ambiguity of Christianity thus leading her to spiritualism.

As liberalism began to take over and more scientific studies gained prominence within America, spiritualist leaders, such as Andrew Jackson Davis, began to question the biblical record in its entirety. In his writings, Davis believed that Christianity was bereft of scientific accuracy which should cause a reevaluation of the Christianity's source of truth. Truth, to Davis,

was not found in taking the bible at its word but exploring it for its accuracy while leaning on the individual's own nature, or his or her impulses, feelings, and personal experiences. Christianity without science and nature was a faith that was based on the wrong things and should rather be founded on empirical data that could be repeated. Spiritualism, as Davis found it, was the remedy to this inaccurate and immoral faith because the spirits could individualize their subject's experience while incorporating and validating their own nature. Above all, these spirits were comprised of physical matter, thus making spiritualism a religion in its most empirical form. This knowledge of the scientific accuracy of spiritualism was published and read by citizens, such as the Swaims, who had experienced a personal loss and sought to breach the separation between the physical and the metaphysical through mental technology which was seen to be a natural advancement from the technological inventions that were increasing throughout the century. The Swaims had lost their father, and in believing that mental telepathy was the next step from the communication through telegraphy, they sought to have "family reunions" through these means. Through a scientific search of the spirits, the Swaims were thought to have re-established and continued a relationship with their lost loved ones. Not only that, but their Christianity was found to be strengthened because these spirits also attested to Christ's presence within the afterlife. Taken altogether, spiritualism provided a remedy to the faults in which they saw were being injected, such as disunity between sects, into orthodox Christianity, and the spirits were able to confirm the Swaims's suspicions while attesting to the presence and truth of Christ, and finally, spiritualism provided a scientific and empirical route to religion that could also comfort them after experiencing the loss of their loved ones. These spiritualists no longer needed faith, but a medium to connect them to the spirits that could individualize their experience, coincide with their own nature, and most importantly, be repeated.

Even within the muddled religious environment of America motivating these certain Americans to look to spiritualism to provide them with scientific answers, the experiences represented in this chapter are clearly separated by the experience of gender. The genders of these subjects influenced their individual motivations albeit with the same overarching theme of religious disconnect. As the Brownells found spiritualism to be a way to connect to their lost loved ones in the way which used the Victorian death culture to achieve this goal, the Swaims believed that it was made through science. This will be further examined in the next chapter to further represent the draw of spiritualism with Americans more broadly while using the same families in these last two chapters. However, they will be explored differently in that gender will be the focus to further explain their individual experiences.

Chapter 3: Spiritualism Through Gendered Experiences

Semantha Mettler's talent as a clairvoyant was not brought on by the scientific advances of the nineteenth century but was a result of a deeply troubled religious upbringing that gave rise to more questions than answers. As a young woman, Mettler would often question the goodness of god as she saw all of the pain and suffering that the world contained. How could a loving god allow such evil to occur in the world? As she grew older, these questions led her to experience a change in her theological stance that resulted in her becoming a Universalist. What followed was rejection from her Congregationalist church, and even when the family was firm in their Universalism, they continued to experience intense trials leading to sorrow. After attending a Universalist picnic in which Andrew Jackson Davis was a guest, Davis explained to Mettler that it seemed she contained a sort of "magnetism" in which the spirits of the afterlife were drawn toward her. The spirits that were drawn to her would assist her in the "healing by her hand." Mettler could then attempt to remedy the fallen world by providing a physical healing to the sick while also comforting families by revealing the afterlife of their bereaved.¹

After developing these spiritual talents, Mettler was both a Universalist and a spiritualist. Her contact with the spirits was able to reconcile her beliefs and make sense of the questions which had discouraged her from Christianity. She could finally feel comforted by Christianity because she was able to use the spirits of the dead for good. To Mettler, this was a representation of her belief that although there was death and suffering in the world, god had provided a way to show his love to mankind through the deceased which he had transformed into spiritual entities.

¹ Frances H. Green, *Biography of Mrs. Semantha Mettler, the Clairvoyant; Being a History of Spiritual Development and Containing an Account of the Wonderful Cures Performed through Her Agency* (New York: The Harmonial Association, 1853).

Rather than an empirical and scientific draw toward spiritualism, Mettler entered the spirit realm for mainly religious and emotional reasons that caused her to doubt her theological foundation.

The reasons for which Semantha Mettler entered into the realm of spiritualism were different, however, than those of Isaac Post, the mentor of the Fox sisters when they discovered their talents as mediums in Hydesville, New York. As Post and his wife, Amy, began to believe that the Society of Friends in America “strayed from its original principles,”² they began to explore different possibilities which adhered to both the principles and theologies of the religion that they once devoted themselves to. When the Fox sisters first communicated intelligently with the man’s spirit inside their house, the Posts saw this as a possibility to have empirical evidence that not only was their theology correct, but that it could stress the individualism that they so longed to have back since the Society of Friends abandoned the principle in the mid-nineteenth century. As Isaac grew more comfortable in his new-found spiritualism through his mentorship of the Fox girls, he began to communicate with the spirits of not just loved ones, but of characters from history, including the spirits of Emmanuel Swedenborg, Benjamin Franklin, and even Voltaire. The conversations that Post reporting having with the spirits of these historical figures revolved around the state of America and how it should be reformed, but they also contained a massive element of the scientific and logical thought which arose out of the Enlightenment. Science and logic to Post were items of great importance because they gave weight to his arguments against his contemporary society. Although his goal was ultimately to reform the nation of what he saw as social and cultural injustice, such as slavery and the

² Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 12.

inequality of women, without the empirical nature of spiritualism, his fight would be rendered invalid.³

Within the past chapters of this essay, spiritualism has been seen to being brought on by nineteenth century religious upheaval which spiritualism, along with the influence of the Victorian death culture, sought to remedy. Overall, however, the people who have been explored thus far reveal a strong gendered aspect as men and women sought spiritualism for different reasons. Why was each gender attracted to spiritualism, and what effects did this have on the religion as a whole? Throughout this chapter, it will be seen that gender differences are readily apparent within the characters of the past chapters, such as Swaim and Brownell. For Brownell, the culture, although evolving quite steadily within the nineteenth century, placed her into the sphere of domesticity where the only respite to the problems of suffering and death was to focus on religion. When Christianity failed her, she saw that spiritualism was both a logical response and a sure method to either confirm or deny theological claims. The domesticity of women, as a whole, also placed them in a prominent place to become mediums because people believed that the spirits would often seek a matriarchal figure who was capable of motherly affection and understanding, such as in the case of the clairvoyant, Samantha Mettler. On the other hand, Tilghman Howard Swaim found that spiritualism was the only contemporary religion that provided a scientific and empirical basis for his theology. The technological advances of America in the nineteenth century proved to Swaim that telegraphy could exist not just between two living parties but could cross over into the spiritual realm to contact the dead. Swaim is a signal that to men, as a whole, spiritualism was the logical evolution of the religious culture that had both Enlightenment principles combined with a proven and repeatable method of contacting

³ Isaac Post, *Voices from the Spirit World, Being Communications from Many Spirits, by the Hands of Isaac Post, Medium* (Rochester: Charles H. McDonell, 1852).

the dead. This ripened the religion for reform movements that men could use at an attempt to heal the culture of the problems that arose from the ever-changing ideologies of the century.

In this chapter, both Brownell and Swaim will be explored once again but through a gendered lens. Through these characters, the specific reasons why they became spiritualists will be compared to show that while Brownell and the clairvoyant Samantha Mettler were introduced and thus continued in spiritualism because their of domesticity and gender specific circumstances, which caused an inner turmoil within their religiosity, Swaim and the Reverend Edward B. Freeman became spiritualists for scientific and technological reasons. For Brownell and Mettler, spiritualism gave a remedy to their struggles in a society where women were seen to be the weaker sex, were dependent on men to support them, and were generally forced to be the cultivator of the home with limited career choices. In exploring Swaim in the same manner, along with Freeman, it is clear that these men became spiritualists because of their belief that science and empiricism were necessary, and a natural evolution of a growing technological culture, to prove or disprove the truth claims of traditional religion. Because they did not have the same circumstances of Brownell and Mettler, their reasons differed dramatically as they were not concerned with how to overcome domesticity. The losses which these men experienced drove them to find a scientific answer to the afterlife, which could then connect them to the metaphysical. Overall, these characters are explored in the terms of emotions and empiricism.

As a whole, spiritualism rose in the nineteenth century because the religious culture was intensely muddled, thus causing an anxiousness in the hearts of Americans to what and where the afterlife was. As the nineteenth century featured a high death rate, Americans were soaked in grief over the loss of their loved ones. While traditional religion could not remedy this, they looked to the Victorian death culture to fulfill the need for both closure and an assurance that the

souls of their deceased family members were immortalized in death. The Victorian death culture then ultimately led to the urge to contact the spirits of the dead when the elements of the Victorian death culture were absent. However, when these events are examined through gendered experiences, this examination reveals that although the overall reason that spiritualism rose in the nineteenth century because it offered comfort both men and women in their grief, men and women attributed different meanings behind spiritualism, thus adding another dimension to the argument that spiritualism arose out of a changing culture that ignored the needs of individual and focused on the institution of the church as a whole. Gender answers the question of how men and women solidified themselves into a spiritualist camp rather than just why.

As discussed in a previously, death and grief within a family was a primary draw of spiritualists within the nineteenth century. However, when gender and religion are focused within the larger context of American religion, it can be seen that not all women ascribed to the idea that orthodox Christianity provided sensible answers to why such an evil, such as the death of a child or an infant, was possible when the god they believed in was so gracious and wonderful. The domesticity that facilitated such exposure to the death of their children also gave women the opportunity to become a major part of the spiritualist religion in that many Americans believed that the spirits were more apt to speak to and through a female mother figure. This was precisely the case in the story of Samantha Mettler.

First, a word about the source. The story of Samantha Mettler comes from a biography written by Frances Harriet H. Green, an abolitionist, poet, a medium, and a staunch advocate of women's rights. Although Green was most known for her biographies, such as her 1838 biography entitled *The Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge*, Green was also a contributor to Andrew Jackson Davis's publication *The Univercoelum and Spiritual Philosopher*. In writing about

Mettler, Green placed Mettler in a gendered lens to represent that within spiritualism, women are not only involved more than in traditional religion but can also be instrumental within spiritualism as a whole. Green's purpose for this specific biography on Mettler was to "show the most important developments of the present age, are, in fact, the property of the world." Moreover, within the life of Mettler, Green was an "intimate personal acquaintance" who could attest to "the divine and immortal energies which have long slumbered in the human soul," which were believed to have manifested within Mettler.⁴ The importance in this biography, as well as in Mettler herself, is to represent a gendered aspect that focused on how women were involved in spiritualism and how they both discovered and established themselves within the religion. Mettler is an exceptional case because not only did she share the experiences of a typical woman within the nineteenth century, but her story shows how a woman used her femininity to create a place for herself within spiritualism.

Semantha Mettler, born as Semantha Beers in the mid-nineteenth century, was raised with a fairly normal childhood and had six siblings. Her father, Samuel Beers, was the keeper of a local jail in Fairfield County, Connecticut, while her mother, Hannah Judd, kept the home and was known as "an impersonation of charity—a universal friend of the poor and-suffering [*sic*]."⁵ Growing up within a religious household which held close ties to the Presbyterian church they attended, Mettler was not without disagreement, however. She constantly struggled with the tension of a god who was supposed to be good and righteous while mankind struggled with a natural inclination of maliciousness and selfishness and then sentenced to eternal punishment. Mettler would constantly question

⁴ Green, *Biography of Mrs. Semantha Mettler, the Clairvoyant; Being a History of Spiritual Development and Containing an Account of the Wonderful Cures Performed through Her Agency*, v-vi.

⁵ Green, *Biography of Mrs. Semantha Mettler, the Clairvoyant; Being a History of Spiritual Development and Containing an Account of the Wonderful Cures Performed through Her Agency*, 8.

how it *could* be that God had made all inferior beings so happy in their several conditions and the exterior world so beautiful, while, at the same time, Man, his highest and greatest work...should be punished eternally for sins which he had been led to commit, through the errors of a man and woman, who lived and died more than five thousand years ago!

Mettler would frequently return to the question which haunted her during her upbringing as she asked, “Why has God made the birds so happy, without care or trouble, and me, a little child, that has a living soul, and knows more than a thousand birds, with this terrible fear...casting its black shadow athwart the cheering sunshine?”⁶

As Mettler grew, these questions never subsided, and her struggles only grew deeper. In the midst of this, her father died of cholera, and the Beers were completely uprooted from their previous life. The Presbyterian church “set aside” Mrs. Beers “for playing violin at balls,” and they never returned to that church. They joined an Episcopalian church afterwards, although it is not clear why the family switched denominations. When the family removed to Bridgeport when Mettler was only thirteen years old, they severed ties with the Episcopalian church which they attended regularly. With the ability to choose a new church that may fit their beliefs better, the Beers were able to join the North Congregational Church in the town while Mrs. Beers was able to earn a living by taking in boarders. As the family had no servants, Mettler held the primary duty of keeping the house up for both the family and its boarders. Even so, Mettler “was a regular and zealous attendant on the external ordinances of religion; she sang in the choir, and was much beloved in the church.”⁷

In 1832, Mettler married J.R. Mettler of New Jersey and soon after moved to New York to be with her husband. In 1840, Mettler was forced to do business in Philadelphia for four

⁶ Green, *Biography of Mrs. Samantha Mettler, the Clairvoyant; Being a History of Spiritual Development and Containing an Account of the Wonderful Cures Performed through Her Agency*, 16.

⁷ Green, *Biography of Mrs. Samantha Mettler, the Clairvoyant; Being a History of Spiritual Development and Containing an Account of the Wonderful Cures Performed through Her Agency*, 22.

months, but upon returning made it known that he spent most of his time in a debtor's prison for business debts.⁸ In the years that followed, the Mettlers only suffered more trials, such as sickness, unemployment, and relocation and still attempted to cling to their Christian values that seemed to be crumbling. Semantha was also confined to what seemed to be a helpless domesticity as she watched her husband struggle to find employment, which was limited by a fever which he contracted. One summer not long after, Mettler stayed with her mother while Mr. Mettler was unemployed. During this time, Mettler retained her domesticity and helped with the "whole care of her three little children, two of them helpless—Semantha assisted her mother in household affairs."⁹ When Mettler traveled back to her husband, they lived in New Jersey once again, and Mettler still struggled in her domesticity in which "her dependent position and the situation of her husband...was a continual source of trouble," which caused her both "sorrow and anguish which did not seem to be hovering in darkness of the miserable Future."¹⁰ Now with four children, Mettler yet struggled with her disbelief that such a good god could submit her to such mental anguish while her current church did not do anything to curtail these feelings. After attending the First Universalist Society of Bridgeport, Mettler began to cling to the Universalist doctrines because they fundamentally removed the fear of an eternal punishment.

At this point in Mettler's story, it becomes clear that Mettler did not have the typical circumstances of a woman in antebellum America. Her struggles were deeper than lack of women's rights, domesticity, and theological disagreements, although she did struggle with those. Mettler's husband was consistently either absent or unemployed. There was a lack of a

⁸ Green, *Biography of Mrs. Semantha Mettler, the Clairvoyant; Being a History of Spiritual Development and Containing an Account of the Wonderful Cures Performed through Her Agency*, 24.

⁹ Green, *Biography of Mrs. Semantha Mettler, the Clairvoyant; Being a History of Spiritual Development and Containing an Account of the Wonderful Cures Performed through Her Agency*, 29.

¹⁰ Green, *Biography of Mrs. Semantha Mettler, the Clairvoyant; Being a History of Spiritual Development and Containing an Account of the Wonderful Cures Performed through Her Agency*, 34.

breadwinner within the Mettler family, which had an effect on who made the decisions of the household. Mettler sought to simply find a church that would help her through these struggles as well as to raise her children in. Even in this search, Mettler still assisted her mother in her business and household. Mettler's circumstances deemed that she was the one who was to both provide for her family and assist her mother. It is because of these circumstances combined with the lack of guidance from her husband that Mettler took the lead in finding a new religion that suited her individual needs, could answer the questions which haunted her for years, and fulfill her innate religiosity. Her story shows how a woman, nearly abandoned by her husband and her church, could cope with struggles. Universalism, and later spiritualism, were able to create within Mettler a feeling of content and understanding over the world that seemed to do nothing but wrong within her life. This situation is also revealing of the separation of experience within genders. While the man was attempting to find a job and fulfill his duties as husband, the woman would seek to fulfill the spiritual and emotional needs of both her and her children. Universalism, to Mettler, was able to provide for this. However, Universalism alone did not fully fulfill these needs, but spiritualism did.

Mettler's new belief in Universalism eventually led her to her exclusion of her current friends and a removal from her current church. When Mettler and her husband made the decision to become Universalists, her previous church's leaders held a private meeting with her in which they had "not called to condemn [her] for [her] faith." The minister, when discussing the decision to become Universalists, told Mettler that they were "afraid that [she] will wake up in eternity with disappointed hopes." The minister also informed Mettler that this particular Congregationalist church was not "the only denomination who oppose Universalism in this way;

but that all denominations do the same.”¹¹ After this conversation was over, Mettler was then expelled from the church and all of her friends abandoned her. However, after listening to Andrew Jackson Davis in Bridgeport, a Universalist and spiritualist, she found herself “impressed with the wonderful truthfulness of his delineation, but at the same time, being unable to account for it on any known principles...but ascribed the power to an evil origin,” in which the author of the biography claims that “this shows that she had not then come out of the slough of Orthodoxy so entirely as she thought.”¹² Yet Mettler still set out to find more about what Davis was teaching. To do this, she sent for Dr. Lyon, who was accompanied by Davis, to discuss how Semantha possessed a type of “magnetism” which effectively drew the spirits toward her, enabling her to become a clairvoyant as well as having the power to heal physical ailments using the spirits directions.¹³ As she developed this “power,” Mettler became well known around the town as she would allegedly heal the ailments of others including Davis himself. In an instance where Davis suffered an illness which caused an intense fever, he called upon Mettler for an inspection so that a remedy could be found. After the inspection, Davis recalled:

[Mettler’s] diagnosis of the symptoms was exceeding accurate. Out of the several medicines which exist in the world, her discriminating perceptions selected, for my case, two simple vegetable remedies. Of these a tea was made and administered according to her directions. Through the agency of this simple tea, the applicability of which to my complaint the wisdom of a clairvoyant only could discover, my fever was subsided.¹⁴

¹¹ Green, *Biography of Mrs. Semantha Mettler, the Clairvoyant; Being a History of Spiritual Development and Containing an Account of the Wonderful Cures Performed through Her Agency*, 49.

¹² Green, *Biography of Mrs. Semantha Mettler, the Clairvoyant; Being a History of Spiritual Development and Containing an Account of the Wonderful Cures Performed through Her Agency*, 42.

¹³ Green, *Biography of Mrs. Semantha Mettler, the Clairvoyant; Being a History of Spiritual Development and Containing an Account of the Wonderful Cures Performed through Her Agency*, 58; Davis, *The Great Harmonia*, 286-87.

¹⁴ Green, *Biography of Mrs. Semantha Mettler, the Clairvoyant; Being a History of Spiritual Development and Containing an Account of the Wonderful Cures Performed through Her Agency*, 85.

The interactions between Mettler and Davis are also worth consideration within itself. What these interactions show is that spiritualism is essentially attempting to remove gender boundaries in that Mettler did not rely upon Davis, one of the leading figures of spiritualism, for her talents as a clairvoyant nor spiritual healer. Rather, it was Davis who saw this within her and educated Mettler on this talent. He assisted her to a position that could lead her to further involvement within the spiritualist community. This would open up possibilities for Mettler to become a leader in the movement with such a brief discipleship from Davis or even just become a healer and help those around her. Her options within spiritualism were open. While Davis saw within Mettler the ability for a literal spirit “magnetism,” the consequences to Mettler were that she was able to contribute to the community in a way that orthodoxy would not allow her, but also have authority over the spirits. What this shows is that Mettler was able to use her gender and be put in a position where her femininity did not limit her options.

Within Semantha Mettler’s life, it is clear her perpetual questioning of the nature of god and his relation to evil and suffering was at the base of her doubts on the truthfulness of orthodox Christianity. Being raised as an active church member as a Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and later Congregationalist, Mettler’s doubts were never resolved. Coupled with a negative experience within an orthodox church, Semantha’s domesticity facilitated her spiritualism in that she mastered, much like most other housewives of the nineteenth century, the domestic environment, albeit with a little more baggage. Not only did she take care of her own home along with raising three children, Mettler also assisted her mother in her business and housekeeping “and had to work very hard.”¹⁵ Her circumstances, however, such as her husband’s lack of stable employment leading to economic hardship, her “alienation of friends, and the loss of her former

¹⁵ Green, *Biography of Mrs. Semantha Mettler, the Clairvoyant; Being a History of Spiritual Development and Containing an Account of the Wonderful Cures Performed through Her Agency*, 29.

social influence and position” led Mettler to believe that she “could only look forward to the disheartening prospect of almost hopeless poverty, which was too truly shadowed forth in the bitter sufferings of the present.”¹⁶ It was her work as a spiritualist and a medium that got her through these struggles:

[W]hen we look at the mother surrounded by her five children, whose very hunger she could not always have means of appeasing, and see her devoting herself so determinedly to a remote, and at best, uncertain good, her resolution [to spiritualism] becomes in itself truly miraculous; and we can only believe that she was continually inspired, and sustained, by a super-sensuous Spirit, Will, and Power.¹⁷

It was when Semantha’s mother died that she began to commit herself to spirit communication because one day while “in a very melancholy mood, thinking of her mother... suddenly the thought came into her mind, as if some one had spoken to her; ‘You do not know but your brothers are in the cars,’” only to turn her head and find that this was true.¹⁸ It was the failure of orthodoxy, her domesticity, and death which brought her into spiritualism in which she finally felt a resolution of her religious doubts.

Lucia Brownell, likewise, experienced a domesticity with religious doubts that could not be resolved without guidance from the spirit of her dead son, Clarence. Even though Brownell was not a medium, she was still a mother that had multiple children and was acquainted with grief due to the death of two of her children within their childhood. Additionally, the rest of her family lived out of range of immediate contact. Brownell, although she experienced an empty nest, did not work outside of the home. The only respite from such domesticity was her Congregationalist denomination and visits from her family members. After

¹⁶ Green, *Biography of Mrs. Semantha Mettler, the Clairvoyant; Being a History of Spiritual Development and Containing an Account of the Wonderful Cures Performed through Her Agency*, 59.

¹⁷ Green, *Biography of Mrs. Semantha Mettler, the Clairvoyant; Being a History of Spiritual Development and Containing an Account of the Wonderful Cures Performed through Her Agency*, 59.

¹⁸ Green, *Biography of Mrs. Semantha Mettler, the Clairvoyant; Being a History of Spiritual Development and Containing an Account of the Wonderful Cures Performed through Her Agency*, 70.

Clarence's death, orthodoxy would no longer comfort her while her letters show no evidence of support from her fellow congregants. Brownell was alone and in grief the death which seemingly surrounded her. Following a gendered experience of spiritualism, Brownell also reveals why women were drawn to the religion. Moreover, Brownell shows how a woman who was interested in spiritualism yet could not ask questions without being judged as a heretic in an orthodox denomination was able to communicate and relate to other believers of spiritualism. Brownell also shows how exactly a woman could learn more about the religion and seek out and hire a medium if they themselves did not have such a gift through the means of publications and periodicals.

Although much of Brownell's story has already been told through the previous chapters, her limitations and by what means she came to the religion are also important. Brownell was dependent, even at a distance, on her son, Charley, for goods that she could not get herself. For instance, Brownell was happy, and wrote to Charley: "[The] case came all right and I am perfectly satisfied with it. It is just the right size inside, being thick, it would probably have been too small if the outside had been like the pattern."¹⁹ Presumably from her family and her late husband, Brownell was economically stable and was able to afford precious items although she did not retrieve them herself. Being both confined and away from her family, Brownell still clung to her role as mother as she constantly worried about the state of her children's health. Brownell would often worry over a fever or a cold in which Charley would have but then rejoice when he became healthy again. Brownell would write: "[It is] marvelous how soon you got fixed. You say nothing of your cold, so I suppose it does not trouble you."²⁰

¹⁹ Lucia Emilia Brownell to Charles DeWolfe Brownell, 26 January 1862, Box 1, Folder 23, BFP.

²⁰ Lucia Emilia Brownell to Charles DeWolfe Brownell, 16 November 1862, Box 1, Folder 23, BFP.

When Clarence passed away as a result of an illness that he contracted in Egypt, she was in a state of grief that orthodoxy could not fix. With only a select few to speak to of an unknown relation, she began to inquire about the possibility of the reality of a letter “written in pencil, apparently with rapidity, and spelt backwards, going from right to left.”²¹ After such letter, Brownell began to deeply probe spiritualism to provide her a relief from the grief that she had no resolution to. With spiritualism, she could resume in her motherly role rather than using the spirits to answer questions regarding a cultural movement or a political stance.

As her curiosity was piqued, Brownell began to see a medium that was presumably advertised in *The Banner of Light*, a popular spiritualist periodical which recounted many instances of spirit communication and affirmed the spiritualist belief by expounding on the truthfulness of the religion with both experience and theology. Publications of this sort are telling of how spiritualists were able to communicate with others who shared the same beliefs. Because spiritualism was an individualistic religion that catered to the one person who requested to speak with in a belief system which had no institutionalization, these publications were necessary for the communication of the beliefs to other believers. Not only that, but it was a major source of publicity for mediums who were seeking out clients who wanted to contact the spirits but had no way of doing it themselves. Within the years of 1857 to 1907, there were 206 spiritualist periodicals published, and only 25 percent of these lasted ten years or more. What this represents is that most of these periodicals were formed and then ended within a short period of time. The *Banner of Light*, however, was both the first and the last spiritualist publication that was ever published in America.²² Looked at as a whole, these publications, as Anne Braude makes clear,

²¹ Lucia Emilia Brownell to Charles DeWolfe Brownell, 18 November 1862, Box 1, Folder 23, BFP.

²² Ann Braude, *News from the Spirit World: A Checklist of American Spiritualist Periodicals, 1847-1900* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1989), 402.

“printed accounts of the progress of Spiritualism in specific communities, described the movements of speakers, provided a list of mediums, printed advertisements from mediums offering a variety of services, described séances, and printed messages received from spirits through specific movements.”²³ They also went in-depth regarding spiritualism’s leaders and the proceedings of meetings and stated a more uniform set of beliefs fellow spiritualists could adhere to. The *Banner* also helped the publication of minor periodicals as it advertised them, such as Andrew Jackson Davis’s own periodical, *The Univercoelum*. Most of these periodicals, however, are considered unsuccessful as a result of a lack of readership and the lack of pay of the writers and editors.²⁴

For most women who could not enjoy fellowship with other believers due to distance, a fear of religious exile, such in the case of Semantha Mettler, or a lack of opportunity to leave their domesticity, these periodicals were helpful because they let them join in a larger group of spiritualists, even if it was only in print form. Such was the case of Lucia Brownell. Both before and after Brownell’s turn to spiritualism, Brownell was led to the *Banner* at an attempt to discover the religion of spiritualism and explore the possibilities of spirit communication without leaving the house or even letting others know. As Brownell became more devoted to her spiritualism, she would read *The Banner* and spread what she learned to her children. In one instance in writing to Charley, her son, she told him, “I have begun to take *The Banner of Light* and will send the one I have received to you, as there are some interesting things in it, especially the letter of the Spirits to the Unitarian clergyman, about his wife—the letter of Mr. & Mrs. Noble to Mr. Anderson... Do not let it soil’d or torn as I intend to keep them.”²⁵ This specific

²³ Braude, *News from the Spirit World*, 400.

²⁴ Braude, *News from the Spirit World*, 404.

²⁵ Lucia Emilia Brownell to Charles DeWolfe Brownell, 20 December 1862, Box 1, Folder 23, BFP.

issue in November of 1862 reveals a great deal of Brownell's search to find that spiritualism was an answer to give her hope regarding her son's death along the Nile. In the letter from the spirit of a Unitarian clergyman, this clergyman had a wife that suffered from what they considered insanity and was said to be a "domestic sorrow" upon him. To get to the root of her insanity, this unnamed man took to the spirits to find out what could heal her of this ailment. In a reply, the "spirits" told him that there was an "organ of veneration" that was causing an inharmony within the other organs of the body, thus creating within her mind an imbalance appearing as insanity.

The "spirits" further explained:

[T]he remedy is as apparent as the disease to us; and the remedy is a simple one. It lies not in the mineral, vegetable, or animal kindoms [sic], but in the spiritual kingdom... We would advise that the patient be immediately removed from the asylum, where she is at present confined, and taken to her home. We would further advise, that our friend engage the services of some powerful magnetizer, whose magnetism is in harmony with that of the patient's.²⁶

Furthermore, the letter of Mr. and Mrs. Noble in regard to Mr. Anderson's spirit photography piqued Brownell's interests because now that the spirits could provide an answer for the cause of Clarence's death, it was now possible to get a photograph of Clarence from beyond the grave.

This address discussed how the Nobles

cannot express the joy and satisfaction we experienced when we received [the photographs], to find an exact likeness of the dear little girl that we lost over eleven years ago. Her eyes, her hair, her features, expression, and everything are so natural and life-like that it seems as though we had got her back again... The bird in one hand, and the basket of flowers in the other, represent her exactly; she was passionately fond of both... yet Mr. Anderson knew nothing at all about any of these things.²⁷

Within the days that followed her reading of this, Brownell sought precisely these things. She found a medium who could contact Clarence's spirit and look for a photographer to photograph the spirit of her son whom she just lost.

²⁶ "Replies to a Unitarian Clergyman," *The Banner of Light* no. 13, Dec. 20, 1862.

²⁷ "Spirit Portraits," *The Banner of Light* no. 13, Dec. 20, 1862.

The domesticity of women put them in a place of confinement, where their home and their children were at the center of their world. Not only were the spirits fond of these women because of their motherly affections and pleased to speak through them, but if a woman lost a child or a loved one close to her, her grief and lack of orthodox resolution led her to spiritualism while periodicals helped her toward this goal. Men, however, were not confined to such a life. Their work was outside of the house, education was available for them, and they had political and religious rights that were not available to women at this time. Therefore, the meaning behind spirit communication for men within spiritualism had a different draw, and that was toward the scientific advancement of communications which provided them empirical evidence of a religious truth. A man could then unite the logic and reason of the Enlightenment with orthodox Christianity, which aimed to be a purely faith-based religion that transcended science. Such was the case in the familiar figure of Tilghman Swaim.

The historiography of this subject stifles certain aspects of gender within spiritualism because it places women's purpose of contacting the dead into an almost purely political realm while neglecting the personal aspects of spiritualism, such as the above cases of Mettler and Brownell. Moreover, these histories nearly miss the masculine draw of spiritualism. For instance, the title of Ann Braude's seminal work on the topic gives the book away. *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* places women within spiritualism to have been fighting the battle of women's rights, abolitionism, and temperance within the century. Claiming that "spiritualism held a special attraction for activists...who felt oppressed by the traditional roles assigned to men and women, found the entire social order in need of revision, and condemned the churches as perpetuators of repressive conventions," Braude limits spiritualism's appeal to women who sought reform. Not only that, but Braude also

believes that even though “not all feminists were Spiritualists, but all Spiritualists advocated woman’s rights.”²⁸ Although women held a special place within spiritualism because the majority of mediums were women in the religion, Braude’s interpretation downplays the original draw and continuance of their spiritualism. Men, on the other hand, receive little to no attention, however, even though many writers within the religion, such as Isaac Post and Andrew Jackson Davis, were men.

In the previous chapter, the focus was on how Swaim contacted the dead to reunite him and reestablish a relationship with his deceased father, Jehu Swaim. However, when compared with characters such as Lucia Brownell and Samantha Mettler, gender separates both the means and the motivations, with the overarching theme of grief and the failure of orthodoxy, to bring them to spiritualism. Men, on the other hand, flocked to spiritualism because it was the next logical technological advancement in an age where devices and communications were advancing to such a level that spirit communication was seen as a part of such an increase in technology. As Swaim explained, “Man, in his desire for more rapid communication, has invented several devices. We have the telegraph and the telephone, followed by the wireless, sending its brief messages over land and sea. We are but entering the ‘Wireless Age,’ with its many yet unthought of possibilities. Now comes the wireless radio, the most wonderful invention that has ever been discovered.”²⁹ Before Swaim even believed that spirit communication is possible, he fully subscribed to the notion that “[m]ental telepathy, the direct exchange of ideas between mind and mind, is now being gradually recognized and used by a few people.” He began a metaphysical communication first with the living, even though he thought that “this cannot become universally used in man’s present stage of evolution, but is quite possible with a large part of humanity,”

²⁸ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 2, 3.

²⁹ Swaim, “Biography of Colonel Jehu B. Swaim of Parke County, Indiana,” 1923, S1276, THSC.

while recognizing that for the larger community to employ this communication, one must “awaken a[nd] develop these inherent powers within them, if they will employ the spiritual law necessary to do so.”³⁰

As technology and man continued to evolve into something greater with the ability to reach to a higher spiritual plane, it became a “fact that a highly developed spiritual person can communicate with another person’s subconscious mind and receive an intelligent reply regardless of distance,” which led Swaim to believe that “it is only a matter of time and development, when two individuals equally evolved spiritually, and in harmonious vibration, will be able to communicate intelligently, and with perfect ease, regardless of distance, any place around the World.”³¹ The ability to do this, regardless of the current state of man, led Swaim to believe that they lived in a new era where the physical and spiritual worlds could meet because “all of men’s spiritual faculties are governed by the higher spiritual laws,” which pertained ultimately to all material things in one’s life. Being aware of this spiritual realm, Swaim believed that this opened up the possibility of reaching the “‘Great Beyond,’ and to learn from reliable [spirit] sources the conditions, activities and social life on the various planes above us...which should be of great benefit to us.”³²

This led to Swaim’s continual practice of “Spiritual telepathy,” which in its most simple form can be explained as the typical spiritualism just without a hired medium. Swaim thought of himself as fully aware of the spiritual realm, and because of the natural evolution of man, this was something that he could do by himself in which his family has “employed by us here in our home for years, communicating with those ‘beyond.’”³³ Swaim, along with his family, found this

³⁰ Swaim, “Biography of Colonel Jehu B. Swaim of Parke County, Indiana,” 1923, S1276, THSC.

³¹ Swaim, “Biography of Colonel Jehu B. Swaim of Parke County, Indiana,” 1923, S1276, THSC.

³² Swaim, “Biography of Colonel Jehu B. Swaim of Parke County, Indiana,” 1923, S1276, THSC.

³³ Swaim, “Biography of Colonel Jehu B. Swaim of Parke County, Indiana,” 1923, S1276, THSC.

to a great benefit, not just to gain religious truths regarding the reality of Christ and the afterlife, but because they were able to communicate with others who were deceased. Considering his conversations to be with those from “beyond,” the family

[f]ound for a truth that the so-called dead, are even more alive than in the earth life, and retain their love and interest in those left behind. And as to our conscious contact here on this plane with those beyond...it is possible for our friends who have laid aside their physical or natural bodies to come in their spiritual bodes and communicate with us as naturally and intelligently as when in the flesh. Paul said, “There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.”³⁴

This led Swaim to have the ability to communicate “at the Christmas season” to communicate not just with Jehu, but with “who have passed beyond.”³⁵

Likewise, in an article entitled “The Essential Weakness of Christianity” in *The Banner of Truth*, Reverend Edward B. Freeland explained how the heart of Christianity is flawed because of its lack of adherence to scientific truths with a heavy focus on emotional impulses that guide the mind into religious subjectivities regarding the nature of god and the afterlife. To reach to this conclusion, Freeland uses three principles which are contained in the nature of the world to show how the orthodox Christian religions are flawed due to their opposing factors within Christianity as a whole. The first, Unism, is the “Principle of agglomeration, conjunction, togetherness; simple aggregation, without regard to the nature of the parts or the law of their correlation... a state of mixed or confused interblending, wherein all elements of an object are present... It is simple unity.”³⁶ The second, Duism, “is the Principle of diversity, difference, separation; and is the exact opposite and counterpart of Unism. It destroys the primitive or simple Unity, and exhibits an object as to the relations of the parts of which it is composed, without reference however to their conjunction as a whole.” The final aspect of Freeland’s theory

³⁴ Swaim, “Biography of Colonel Jehu B. Swaim of Parke County, Indiana,” 1923, S1276, THSC.

³⁵ Swaim, “Biography of Colonel Jehu B. Swaim of Parke County, Indiana,” 1923, S1276, THSC.

³⁶ Edward B. Freeman, “The Essential Weakness of Christianity,” *The Banner of Light* no. 13, Dec. 20, 1862.

is that of Trinism, being “the integration of these divergent drifts into a composite or harmonious whole, making a new Unity, which embodies the Principles of Unism and Duism.” Trinism, however, is essential because it fundamentally unites the Unism and Duism to create a perfect harmony within the universe. However, the church is flawed at its core because “Religion and Science, the one Unismal, the other Duismal, have been sworn foes from the foundation of the world... Either [Unismal or Duismal] alone is a practical error, and it is in such half truth errors that the whole world has blundered on up to this time...so well illustrated as in the Church of the past.” This ultimately led Freeman to the conclusion that the weakness in Christianity which therefore broke the unity of the church with the universe was “its exclusion of Science or exact knowledge.”³⁷

As a unity of both principles is necessary with Trinism, the complete disregard of the intellect makes this impossible to achieve within orthodox Christianity. Because “the Christian Religion is eminently one of Faith,” it must ignore the intellect because its “divine origin...are not only not susceptible of Intellectual demonstration, but which are expressly stated to be without the pale of human comprehensibility, and to be taken upon Faith alone.”³⁸ By ignoring the intellect, or the principle of Duism, it cannot unite with Unism, the guiding principle of Christianity. The intellect, a prime source of knowledge for man, is “the separating, dividing, discriminating, selecting faculty. It views, balances, and chooses after judgment. It takes nothing on trust, is not partial, tests all assumptions to the last degree and accepts or rejects, according to fact, and not in accordance to feeling.”³⁹ By ignoring the objective to focus on the subjectivism of an emotional faith, Freeman believed that Christianity will never achieve a correct unity

³⁷ Freeman, “The Essential Weakness of Christianity.”

³⁸ Freeman, “The Essential Weakness of Christianity.”

³⁹ Freeman, “The Essential Weakness of Christianity.”

within the universe and will fail mankind. Science and religion must be united to achieve perfect unity which would serve man with a religion that is effective in their everyday lives. The answer, Trinism, or the unifying factor between the opposing Unism and Duism, is achieved with an absolute truth. Freeman believed that this was only possible through the spirits because they could confirm an absolute truth since they had a direct connection to the metaphysical, saw and could attest to the scientific nature of a harmonial universe that could affirm or deny the claimed truths of Christianity. Not to mention, the spirits themselves were of a scientific and empirical nature since they could be seen and touched, which therefore could unite the Unism of Christianity with the Duism of the sciences, or the absolute, and the intellect. Freeman saw spiritualism as a key component to heal the religious environment that was so out of sync with the universe and therefore unite the principles of the universe within a perfect harmony of nature.

Using these four characters, it is apparent that gender differences are a major factor in determining the motivations to become spiritualists. This signals an overall reflection of why both genders within America may have been easily convinced that spiritualism would remedy the problems within the overall culture of America. The heavily gendered culture facilitated the need for a religion that could remove contemporary limitations of womanhood while men did not have such a struggle and could focus on finding empirical evidence of the metaphysical. Spiritualism fulfilled that need by utilizing the spirits of the dead for the respective purposes of both men and women. In the nineteenth century, America was going through transitions, and even while these transitions were happening, many were reluctant to adapt to the changes which the century experienced. Sexuality was evolving with the invention and further evolution of contraceptives, women were gaining employment more often, and the number of children that were being produced was fluctuating. Because of the changes in the culture, mainstream

religious leaders sought to counteract the changes in sexuality and focused on retaining the conservative domesticity of women while the men left the home and earned money for the household. What this bred was the rise of advocacy and reform groups in which some sought to further the movements which advanced women's rights and sexual freedom while some fought to retain the old ways. While the American people could not agree on which viewpoint was correct, many were confused and felt they were being led into different directions. The belief in an absolute truth, or an unmovable truth, began to be seen as an abstraction and a remedy was needed. This remedy was found within the spirit realm as the dead which spiritualists came in contact with held the answers that came not from a human or fallible source, but a metaphysical source that could be seen as a source of immeasurable knowledge by having contact with the divine. Women could then become the main conduit for the spirits they were contacting, thus placing them into relevance for the religion.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, women's rights were limited. The primary duty of women was to get married, have and educate children, and tend to the domestic duties of the household. However, in the 1830s, the limitations of women were beginning to be noticed by more and more individuals, and a feminist viewpoint was beginning to take place as the subordination of women to their husbands, or even men in general, was becoming intensified. While men were controlling nearly every aspect of their lives, such as religion, economic standing, education, and land ownership, women were essentially a silent aspect of the American community. In this particular decade, however, women were beginning to enter the workforce and such subordination and lack of formal education were affecting their choice in careers and the pay they received, and their rights to allow them to voice their concerns were stripped. Not only that, as Nancy Cott makes clear, when the property limitations were removed from male

suffrage, “women’s political incapacity appeared more conspicuous than it had in the colonial period.”⁴⁰ The pay women received was then reduced to approximately a quarter of what men were being paid, and because many schools would not accept women to educate, their career choices severely limited.⁴¹

With the disadvantages of working being apparent in their lives, women were strongly encouraged to marry and make childbearing, the raising of the children, and tending to the household their primary duties. With the pervasive belief that tending to the children was “the most task-oriented of all” jobs,⁴² women were placed in the sphere of domesticity as their husbands were out providing the financial stability of the family. This belief was also advertised by the church which strongly believed that women were the “more delicate” of the sexes who should not be a part of “the world,” or secular society, but should be separated and therefore protected from evil. Furthermore, it was believed that women were innately more religious than men. In fact, it became known that women formed the majority of congregations during the Second Great Awakening and even after.⁴³ Because of this, religious literature was frequently published that stressed the importance of women within a domestic environment. The “Cult of True Womanhood,” or also the cult of domesticity, arose and stressed four principles: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.⁴⁴ Within literature, the focus was typically on how women were actually the bulwark of society in that they were able to restrain the evils of male sexuality and greed: “[T]he purity of women is the everlasting barrier against which the tides of

⁴⁰ Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 6.

⁴¹ Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 6.

⁴² E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past & Present*, no. 38 (1967): 79.

⁴³ Johnson, *A Shopkeepers Millennium*, 108.

⁴⁴ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 152.

man's sensual desire."⁴⁵ By using this logic, women were encouraged to believe that their domestic role was of extreme importance and they should retain their role of a domestic servant and child-bearer who educated and trained the children of the home.

As these beliefs persisted, the domesticity of women became imperative, and thus, they placed the heart of their work within their children. Because medical science at this time was not quite as developed as it would be in the future, however, as rate of childbearing fluctuated, the risk of death during childbirth remained just as deadly as it had been in the past. This caused a deep psychological effect as women would often begin to question their own soul's salvation and when the child they worked so hard to raise, educate, and foster an unconditional love for died unexpectedly or of disease, the grief was deep. Religion was the only thing that could explain such evil and devastation in the world. As Nancy Cott explains, "For women at home...Christian belief had a self-perpetuating force that would provide alternative and equally satisfying explanations" when tragedy entered the domestic sphere as compared to any secular alternative.⁴⁶ However, when orthodox Christianity failed these women, spiritualism was seen to be an answer to these struggles and could soothe the vast emotions of grief and oppression.

Although the overarching theme of grief in a culture of religious confusion united all spiritualists together, the reasons and the means of communicating with the dead were separated by the clear gender roles of the nineteenth century. Being placed in a culture in which gender was evolving, women were still largely placed into the realm of domesticity where their children and the upkeep of their home was their main duty. This placed a heavy burden on women because they could rarely leave the house except for religious gatherings, so their family became the center of their universe. In a time where the mortality rate remained high, many of the ones

⁴⁵ Eliza W. Farnham, *Woman and Her Era*, vol. 2 (New York: A.J. Davis & Co., 1864), 95.

⁴⁶ Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 136.

they lost were a part of their own family, and the grief that accompanied their loss overtook their lives. In some cases, this caused them to question the theology and systems of Christianity as a whole and sought other means to soothe their grief. Such was the case of Samantha Mettler, who struggled with the question of why a god who was supposed to be loving and in control of the entire world could condemn so many people to damnation when the total depravity that supposedly took over mankind was not actually to any fault of their own while the immensity of death was making the possibility of conversion slim. To settle these questions, Samantha found that the spirits could not only help to heal her own soul of confusion of grief but also give her the powers to help the world through her clairvoyance and spiritual healing powers. By doing this, she no longer needed to submit to the orthodox religion with all the confusion that came with it because she had a source that could not fail. This source was the intimate knowledge of the metaphysical through the spirits who lived in it. Not only that, but she no longer had to rely on faith to heal sickness and disease. She had a “magnetism” which the spirits provided to be able to heal on her own. This provided a resolution to her doubts while her place in the home was able to accommodate the spirits through her motherly figure. Likewise, Lucia Brownell did not have the opportunities to communicate with others about her grief over the loss of her son, Clarence. Rather, she subscribed to *The Banner of Truth* to read about more sure ways to gain closure to the relationship of her son. What she found were answers to why orthodox Christianity could not soothe her emotions, as well as a way to contact her son. She found mediums to contact the dead as well as testimonials to the “truths” behind these mediums and the spirit photographs, which could provide her with a line to her lost son.

Men, on the other hand, did not have such limitations. What they saw, however, was that orthodox religion was flawed because of the lack of science and empiricism that it

contained. In the age of the science during a post-Enlightenment mindset, spiritualism provided what orthodoxy was missing: an objective truth. Combined with the science, the nineteenth-century was also becoming more technologically advanced, which brought to question the evolution of man's intellect and communicative qualities, thus bringing the question of spiritual contact to the surface. In the case of Tilghman Swaim, the loss of his father brought him to state where spiritualism seemed like a plausible way to contact the spirit of his father. However, because technology was evolving and due to the increase communicative possibilities, Swaim was a believer of mental telepathy between the living. This was made possible by having a knowledge of the metaphysical and using it to one's advantage. Naturally, this would lead into the possibility of spirit communication because if man could use the spiritual world to communicate with other living souls, then the spiritual world itself must contain souls of the dead and be able to communicate back to the physical. To Swaim, this created the opportunity to communicate with his lost father and even other family members. Furthermore, other men believed that orthodox Christianity was flawed because of its ignorance of science. Reverend Edward Freeland believed, in a very complicated series of beliefs, that Christianity was out of sync with the universe by ignoring logic, and thus fact and empiricism, and was based on the subjective notion of "faith" in which fact and logic was encouraged to be left behind. The spirits would remedy this notion of subjectivity by uniting fact with faith. This was of course made possible by the communication of the spirits who could testify to the truths of orthodoxy while completely denying what was false.

As spiritualism was essentially a response to the changing religious, social, and political cultures within the nineteenth century, including radical changes in how Americans viewed sexuality. Spiritualism shows just how genders handled specific situations as they both resided in

two radically different environments: that of the logical working man who fought for scientific advancements and that of the domestic housewife who had very limited opportunities in her life to grow and learn as a person. Thus, these different lifestyles defined how they handled grief and loss or even the changing religious culture that placed the afterlife into a strange ambiguity with a few different options. Spiritualism came as a remedy to both male and female and was seen to be an antidote to each struggle which either male or female had to cope with. As the twentieth-century blurred these gender roles with the advancement of spiritual theatrics and the growth of female employment, spiritualism continued to evolve. However, the question still remains of how effective spiritualism in the larger context of America was as spiritualists seemed to either return to the orthodox religion or just stop believing entirely.

Conclusion

“That the inventors of an infamous fraud should deal to it its death-blow, is the poetic justice of fate...The creators of Spiritualism abjure its infame. They decree its death.”¹ In 1888, these words were the introduction to the book *The Death-Blow to Spiritualism*, containing a signed interview from the Fox sisters which contained their confession to fraud. The infamous rappings in Rochester were staged. By admitting that they produced the rappings in a “manner in which the joints of the foot can be used without lifting it from the floor,”² Margaret Fox began the decline of American spiritualism. Even previous to this instance, P.T. Barnum, the famous showman who wrote *The Humbugs of the World* in 1866, devoted a large portion of his book debunking the tricks and spirit communications of spiritualists. For instance, Barnum explained that “the mediums produce ‘blood-red letters on the arm’ in a very simple way. It is done with a pencil, or some blunt-pointed instrument, it is necessary to bear on hard while the movement of writing is being executed.” By clenching the fist in one arm and writing on it with the blunt instrument, when the medium was set to perform a communication with a spirit, he or she would then rub the arm in such a way that the writing appears on the arm.³ He then explained that the purpose for his writing of this “humbug” in America is ultimately because they performed their trickeries for money and Barnum wished that “the credulous portion of our community should be saved from the deceptions, delusions, and swindles of these blasphemous mountebanks and imposters.”⁴ Thus began the declination of spiritualism in America leaving Americans to return to the search for an absolute truth in a culture that was filled with different truth claims.

¹ Reuben Briggs Davenport, *The Death-Blow to Spiritualism: Being the True Story of the Fox Sisters, as Revealed by Authority of Margaret Fox Kane and Catherine Fox Jencken* (G. W. Dillingham, 1888), 13.

² Davenport, *The Death-Blow to Spiritualism*, 38.

³ Phineas Taylor Barnum, *The Humbugs of the World: An Account of Humbugs, Delusions, Impositions, Quackeries, Deceits and Deceivers Generally, in All Ages* (Carleton, 1866), 67.

⁴ Barnum, *The Humbugs of the World*, 71.

Religious movements have always formed in response to the belief that orthodox religion could no longer serve their needs. As Martin Luther believed that Roman Catholicism was not only insufficient to truly connect the believer to god, he sought to reform the church and return the believer to the only true path to god: the scriptures and faith alone. As the culture kept evolving, this form of Christianity again became insufficient and more believers split off into other denominations, put their faith in other preachers, and left orthodoxy for what they saw was a more reliable path to religious enlightenment. Aided by the evolving culture, antebellum America was no different. Before spiritualism began to materialize into an actual system of beliefs, the Shakers, Mormons, and the Millerites, just to name a few, sought to purify the religious culture from the variety of beliefs which held varying doctrines, which only created mass confusion within America. Additionally, as social and economic circumstances changed, the needs of Americans which these denominations formed their beliefs around changed. However, they likewise contributed to the confusion. The American Revolution altered not only the politics of America, but also the minds of Americans by forming beliefs that authority did not come from education, but experience, and in the religious environment, revelation. As this mindset led into the nineteenth century, more people were had different revelations from the divine which all claimed different solutions, theological beliefs, and even different forms of the afterlife. Antebellum America became a “marketplace” of religion, where anybody could choose the belief system which felt most comfortable to them as individuals. However, as some saw this as a positive thing in the country, some actually believed that this further proved that all of these different beliefs were based on subjectivity rather than an empirical objectivity.

The purpose of this thesis is to answer the question of why spiritualists believed that communication with the dead would provide a remedy for such a muddled religious system

while fulfilling the needs of the individual rather than that of the many. What specifically led these Americans to question the religious culture of America and search for physical evidence of an absolute truth through spirit communication? Using sources from Americans who were not leaders within spiritualism, it is shown that spiritualism arose out of grief and used the Victorian death culture to soothe their emotional wounds from the loss of somebody close to them.

Orthodoxy sought to place death in the periphery of the American mind as it was considered to be the consequence of sin, which was innate in every human, and believed that this was reason to focus on the living and perfectionism. However, in a culture where death was frequent, many Americans lost their loved ones prematurely caused by illness and sudden death, which was only to increase in 1862 with the Civil War, Americans were left with intense grief which orthodoxy could not soothe. However, with such a high rate of death in America, it was not always possible to fulfill the rituals of this death culture because oftentimes family members would die in war, away from home, or in an instance of sudden death. To remedy the lack of dissolution of Victorian death culture elements in these cases, many Americans, such as Lucia Brownell and Lucy Tuck, sought mediums to breach the distance between the physical and spiritual to gain a closure to a relationship that ended from death. These Americans were able then to utilize mediums to gain a good death scenario while having the ability to seek out a spirit photographer to capture a picture of the spirit of their deceased loved one, thus earning a personal relic as deemed necessary from the Victorian death culture.

The contemporary religious environment of America in the nineteenth century also led to the rise of spiritualism because as contemporary religion was so muddled, it was very difficult for certain Americans, such as Brownell and Tilghman Howard Swaim, to find an answer to where their loved ones were in the metaphysical while also gaining an intimate knowledge of

god. This was necessary because traditional religion was further scattering its theological and eschatological beliefs. Americans believed that religion was therefore subjective if so many contradictory truth claims existed within the country. Furthermore, as Christianity was becoming more mystic, such in the writings of Horace Bushnell and Andrew Jackson Davis, preachers were claiming that knowledge of the metaphysical was made apparent by human nature and personal revelation. By this logic, combined with advances of science within the century, people would often search for proof of these claims demanding empirical and scientific evidence. This caused more people to question the accuracy of the biblical record and their beliefs became more scattered. A remedy to this was spirit communication in that the spirits were able to confirm or deny certain beliefs having been provided with physical evidence through a repeatable scientific process. In turn, spirit communication comforted grieving family members because they could have proof that their deceased were in an afterlife that was good and the bereaved would be able to join them immediately after death.

While the Victorian death culture cured the grief connected to loss, spirit communication provided the remedy to a faith-based culture that seemed to be based on subjective principles. However, while these encapsulate the main draw to spiritualism, it was also experienced from a gendered perspective. As both men and women in antebellum America had drastically differing experiences, their motivations differed as well. As the domestication of women was limiting their choices of careers which rendered them financially dependent, their main focus was to tend to their household while raising their children. Thus, the bond between a mother and a child was incredibly strong, and death in the family was extremely devastating. Spiritualism catered to these women in their grief by filling the void which a lost child, for instance, would cause. Moreover, women were able to be placed into important positions in the

religion as their domesticity created a matriarchal figure which the spirits could flock to and communicate through as in the case of Semantha Mettler. While women were banned from leadership and barely had a voice in orthodox Christianity, spiritualism put them in a place of importance since they could have a voice and were relied on for spirit communication. Men, on the other hand, were not confined to such limitations and therefore sought spiritualism as response to the continuing evolution of science. Men, such as Swaim, sought to find empirical data to prove the metaphysical and began to believe that a faith-based religion negated important facts that only scientific research could provide. Spiritualism, to men, was an answer to the lack of logic and reason within orthodoxy.

Lucia Brownell is a clear case of these three elements working concurrently. As Brownell suffered the loss of her son, Clarence, while he was in Egypt, she had little to no closure from his death when the news of it came too late. The religious environment did not soothe this grief because it only provided her with an ambiguous idea of the afterlife, thus causing anxiety because she did not know where Clarence was, or what his last words were, and she had no personal relics to remember that his soul was immortalized. By reading *The Banner of Truth*, she found out that spiritualism may be the remedy she was seeking to provide relics, last words, and a knowledge of where he resided in the afterlife through a medium. As Brownell's domesticity limited her options of exploration in the spiritualist community and fear of rejection from her orthodox Christian church was pressing, Brownell found that *The Banner* could provide her with a sense of involvement a community that seemed distanced from her. Spiritualism provided Brownell with an emotional fulfillment that traditional religion failed to provide.

By showing that spiritualism's popularity grew out of more than what the current historiography can offer through a focus on its followers rather than its leaders, this thesis offers a commentary of the larger culture of antebellum America in that circumstances in the country left American's feeling confused and anxious in their evolving country. Thus, they pursued different avenues to find an absolute truth which would be unchanged by time. Although spiritualism remedied these circumstances to certain Americans for a time, it did not last in this form for very long. At the turn of the twentieth century, more changes in the country occurred thus altering beliefs even further while more and more mediums were proved to be frauds. Spiritualism then became folklore, an attraction for local entertainment, and a continuing belief that spiritualism focused on heretical doctrines that would only lead the believer astray in a proper faith. Furthermore, spiritualism provided an opening for even more beliefs to form around the assumption that a spiritual world was active and present within the world of the living. There was then an emergence of hauntings, ghost stories, and even forms of entertainment that revolved around the possible presence of spirits. This continuation of the desire to reach to the spiritual world thus begs for further examination. Why do Americans continue to both believe in and search for certain avenues to communicate with spirits? What does this say about the culture as a whole? What does this say about the individual American who searches for spirits when the culture becomes more scientifically accurate, features a lower death rate, and gains religious freedom to explore any form of theology that suited their needs? America has not, nor will it ever, cease to evolve in its ideals. Within the religious culture, denominations have always sought to fill the needs of believers while the culture around them shifted. Spiritualism is only part of the larger context of American history. By examining more individuals who sought communication with spirits in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the results will reveal

how Americans continued in a country that ideologically split further when more issues arose out of new discoveries in the religious, scientific, political, and economic arenas. Not only that, but a continuance of the spiritualist's belief and the perceptions surrounding the spiritualist will show what the individual would do when their proposed remedy to their individualized needs ultimately failed and drifted into another belief system.

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