

A Critical Evaluation of Jean Rhys's the 'Wide Sargasso Sea'

Important: The complete material has been taken with some minor but necessary emendations and changes at certain places from Volume VIII of the 'Egar Journal of English Studies'

The title of Jean Rhys's novel exudes an instinctive awareness of endless expanse and space and thrives in the possibility of hidden meanings as well as the intense feeling of the unknown and the inexpressible, which runs through the whole story and, in turn, becomes an important source of the novel's sublimity. This feeling, in fact, arises from the paradox inherent in Charlotte Brontë's novel 'Jane Eyre', published in 1847: One of its most important characters is given only a marginal and scant attention. It is Rochester's first wife Bertha who enables the author to develop the plot, evoke a mysterious atmosphere and create an **"objective correlative"** for the main heroine's anxiety of otherness. Nevertheless, the characterization of this disquieting figure is reduced to the unconvincing description of an evil inhuman monster.

The incongruity between the intensity of the suggested mystery and the incompleteness of explanation: **"she came of a mad family; — idiots and maniacs through three generations!"** has resulted in innumerable discussions of this figure in literary criticism. The likes of Richard Chase, Elaine Showalter, Judith Weissman, Susan Gubar, Adrienne Rich, and Sylvie Maurel, have inspired a strong echo in creative literature. Both the body of the critics and Jean Rhys have striven to find a more satisfactory interpretation of the questions arising from the tension between Brontë's schematic image of a madwoman, the role of an imprisoned wife in the Gothic novel and a suggestive demand for freedom and justice as voiced by Bertha's counterpart, Jane Eyre.

According to her own words, Jean Rhys was vexed at Brontë's portrait of **"the 'paper tiger' lunatic, fighting mad to tell"** Bertha's story. Brontë's silent prisoner, whose opportunity for self expression is suppressed by the inability to master language, is given a voice by Jean Rhys. **The "off**

stage” protagonist is taken **“on stage”**.

Drawing on her own experience of the West Indies, Jean Rhys shows the fate of a young, unhappily married Creole heiress in a wider context of cultural differences, colonial conflicts and racial hatred. Born in Dominica as the daughter of a Welsh doctor and a white Creole mother, Jean Rhys came to England at the age of sixteen. Like her heroine, she had to undergo a complicated search for identity and Antoinette’s story reflects her own sense of alienation and displacement.

When Charlotte Brontë’s Rochester tries to explain his inability to comprehend the manners of his wife Bertha, he describes her tempestuous nature against the background of a stormy West Indian landscape: **“The air was like sulphur-steams... Mosquitoes came buzzing in...; the sea... rumbled dull like an earthquake — black clouds were casting up over it; the moon was... broad and red, like a hot cannon- ball...”**

According to Rochester, it is the exotic origin and Creole blood that causes Bertha’s lunacy and, accordingly, her propensity towards sin and crime. The emotional intensity connected with the feeling of the sublime is linked to **“unconscious fears and desires projected on to other culture, peoples and places”** and insanity is viewed in terms of racial prejudice. To emphasize the virtues of his beloved bride Jane, he finds it necessary to point out her English origin: **“I would not exchange this one little English girl for the grand Turk’s whole seraglio; gazelle-eyes, houri forms and all!”** In such remarks we can observe touches of what becomes obvious at the end of Brontë’s novel. The dark and mysterious distance-driven hero, seeming to embody Gothic and Romantic passions, undergoes the process of **“domestication”** and, following Jane’s example, turns into a defender of self-control, moderation and order.

It is the fate of Bertha that continues to evoke a gloomy, subliminal atmosphere. Her story of an imprisoned wife draws on the Gothic theme of victimhood, developed, for example, by Horace

Walpole in his 'Castle of Otranto' or by Anne Radcliffe in 'Sicilian Romance'. At the same time, her function in Brontë's novel, like the function of Gothic villains in the likes of the Monks of M.G.Lewis is to represent the character of the other, of an estranged and weird being whose presence challenges the moral consciousness of other protagonists, violates their conception of goodness, unity and coherence and turns the narrative into a tale of Gothic horror. Her final removal from the novel allows the author to resort to the idyllic model and **"superimpose it upon romantic aspirations"**. However, despite the calm and conciliatory mood of the conclusion, the Gothic undertones remain disturbingly vivid and burst out with a new intensity in the story of Wide Sargasso Sea.

In Jean Rhys's novel, the conflict between European and West Indian consciousness is worked out through the same fatal relationship but from various points of view. As in Jane Eyre, on a surface level it is a conflict between conventional attitudes and emotional excesses. In contrast to Jane Eyre, it becomes the crucial subject of the narrative and its psychological, social, historical and geographical aspects are employed without suppressing the effects of the irrational and the mysterious. The "projective method" of landscape description, which is an important device of characterization in the novel, contributes to the escalation of the conflict.

Contrary to the wintry landscapes forming the setting of Jane Eyre, the summery clime of the West Indies in Wide Sargasso Sea is typical of Romantic topography and evokes the space of the traditional Gothic romance. The heroes' response to the surrounding environment reveals much of their own nature: Antoinette's or Bertha's love of the Caribbean landscape corresponds with her passionate emotions, while Rochester's sobriety reflects his fear of passion and a dependence on the security of the civilized world. Moreover, the heroes' changing attitudes to particular places reflect the development of their mutual relationship, especially the shift from confidence and identification: **"This is my place and everything is on our side"**, to estrangement: **"I feel very much a stranger here, I said. I feel that this place is my enemy and on your side. You are quite mistaken... It is not for**

you and not for me. It has nothing to do with either of us. That is why you are afraid of it, because it is something else...”

This feeling of uneasiness, which originates in experiencing a particular environment as something else, results in the tragic inability to accept the other: the other landscape, the other culture and the other individual: **“Is it true... that England is like a dream?... Well... that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream”**.

The physical and spiritual distance between the worlds of England and the West Indies and, implicitly, the unfulfilled desire and the failure of communication between the two main protagonists is implied by the image of the sea, suggesting a notion of vastness and emptiness. Moreover, the motif of the sea is put into a close connection with the nightmarish atmosphere and becomes a metaphor for the mystery and the hidden threat **“the sargassos”** that are foregrounded in the plot of Jean Rhys’s as well as Charlotte Brontë’s novel. It is a symbolic space where the external reality mingles with the reality of an internal world and where the deepest desires and anxieties of the soul are mirrored: **“When I woke it was a different sea. Colder. It was that night, I think, that we changed course and lost our way to England”**. Thus the image of sea is used to approximate the mental state of the heroine and the theme of hidden irrational and subconscious forces reappears in many crucial scenes, e.g, in the description of a bathing pool with flowers on the surface and the **“monster crab”** in its depths.

The atmosphere of hostility is intensified by the images of the forest: **“I found that the undergrowth and creepers caught at my legs and the trees closed over my head”**; and **“an alien moon”**. Rochester’s anxiety seems to spring from his awareness of the uncontrollable powers of nature which force their way into the civilized world and threaten to conquer it. It is the same fear of the unknown and the invisible that makes him distrust his beautiful exotic wife: **“she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did...”** and leads him to the denial of her right for an

equal, independent existence: **“She was only a ghost. A ghost in the grey daylight...”**

The image of the forest concealing a sinister stranger appears in recurring dreamy visions of the heroine: **“It is still night and I am walking towards the forest... We are under the tall dark trees and there is no wind”**. As one critic, Anthony Luengo puts it, **“the dense tropical forest”**, symbolizing **“the increasing gloom and confusion”** of Antoinette’s and Rochester’s mind should be seen as **“a latter-day descendent of the many dark woods that appear in the novel’s late eighteenth and early nineteenth century literary ancestors”**. While in *Jane Eyre* the disquieting notion of gloominess and danger is, in accordance with the tradition of the English Gothic novel, centered around an ancient house and its secret chamber, the impressive descriptions of the forest in ‘*Wide Sargasso Sea*’ reflect the influence of neo-Gothic fiction, especially as it developed in America.

Among the significant attributes of Antoinette’s dreams is the subliminal effect of silence, darkness and loneliness. The fear of the other person, who gradually appears to embody Rochester, is communicated through the reference to his face **“blank with hatred”**. Almost the same words are used by Rochester describing Antoinette’s **“blank hating moonstruck face”**. Thus, the repeated images of a **“blank face”** turn into a synonym of ultimate isolation, the loss of human touch and a terrifying nothingness permeating and destroying the relationship. The link between the motif of a stranger and the motif of a ghost is completed.

The spectral images permeate the heroine’s view of herself: **“I went into the hall with the tall candle in my hand. It was then that I saw her — the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a guilt frame but I knew her”**; and suggest the notion of an othered self, which is reflected also on the level of grammar, as for example the use of the specific pronoun **“her”**. The mention of a guilt frame suggests the image of a looking glass, which, as in *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*, accompanies the theme of the divided personality. A similar experience is described in the

following recollection: **“There is no looking-glass here and I don’t know what I am like now. I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us — hard, cold and misted over with my breath.”**

What Rochester may call vanity in that: **“She’ll not dress up and smile at herself in that damnable looking-glass... vain, silly creature; is rather an expression of Antoinette’s “impossible desire for self-completion”**. According to Helen Tiffin, Antoinette, as well as Jean Rhys’s other heroines, is **“obsessed by mirrors and the need for outside opinion”**, which determines her sense of identity and self-worth. It is this dependence that predestines her to the position of a mad person: Her supposed madness is discussed by the people around her, such as hateful neighbours and relatives, long before her conflict with Rochester begins. It also predestines her to the victimized, ghost-like position, mentioned above: **“Someone screamed and I thought, Why did I scream?”** In another context, the word **“ghosts”** is used instead of the word **“rumours”** and reflects Rochester’s transitory recognition of the fatal consequences of hatred and envy: **“We are letting ghosts trouble us. Why shouldn’t we be happy?”**

Jean Rhys, transforming conventional machinery of the so called **“terror Gothic”**, manages to exploit the supernatural element as an inseparable part of the characterization and setting. Moreover, she chooses a number of Ghost motifs to suggest the power of a hidden, subversive life undermining existing social and psychological orders. Her ghosts, exciting and increasing the disruptive atmosphere of the novel, are rather mental phenomena, the expressions of anguish of the main characters.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the feeling of the sublime is increased by the motifs of houses, which, as in *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*, function as organizing symbols for the novel. Thus Part One is connected with the country house Coulibri, the honeymoon cottage Granbois, which is **“a very wild,**

cool and remote place”, creates the setting for the Part Two, and the final incidents take place in Charlotte Brontë’s *Thornfield*.

According to another critic, Elaine Campbell, Rhys’s portrait of Coulibri is primarily a Gothic device but at the same time it gains in importance because of its socio-historic context. She considers Coulibri as the double for Brontë’s *Thornfield*: **“It is an almost cynical doubling for Rhys to see Antoinette’s burning of Thornfield Hall as a double exposure of the freed slaves’ burning of Coulibri”**.

In the destruction of Coulibri Jean Rhys reverts to the Gothic mode through the theme of ruins, symbolizing the end of the aristocratic authority that the building was to represent. The repeated employment of ruins in *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be also seen in terms of **“a romantic statement of deeper, more universal significance of the kind made by Radcliffe”**. The ruins represent both the world of the past and the world of the sacred, as the place, suggesting the notion of a religious cult and magic rituals, has all attributes of a pagan temple. This circumstance helps to create a tension between the **“civilized”**, represented by Rochester’s Christianity, and the **“wild”**, represented by the natural religion of the West Indies, which is impressively employed also in *Wuthering Heights*.

Jean Rhys’s novel opens with the Gothic image of a haunted interior: **“Mr Luttrell’s house was left empty, shutters banging in the wind. Soon the black people said it was haunted, they wouldn’t go near it.”** As in the traditional Gothic tales, this motif is connected with a mysterious incident like the disappearance of the owner and with reference to the haunted past permeating the house. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, however, the author does not indulge in describing fantastic crimes and demonic villains. Instead, she makes her haunted house an emblem of the historical consequences of slavery and racial confrontation in British colonies.

The plot of *Wide Sargasso Sea* revolves around the Gothic theme of an imprisoned wife.

Though the crucial motifs concerned with the imprisonment, as well as with the model story of Charlotte Brontë, appear in Part Three, from the very first sentence of the novel there is a number of hints suggesting the reality of exclusion and restriction: **“They say when trouble comes close ranks... But we were not in their ranks.”**

The heroine is introduced as an orphaned daughter of a West Indian plantation owner, whose family was impoverished by the liberation of the slaves after the Emancipation Act in the early nineteenth century. But emancipation for some means bondage for others. The heroine’s widowed mother is trapped in isolation, belonging neither to the black community nor to the dominant class. Accordingly, Antoinette becomes a double outsider: **“white nigger”** for the Europeans and **“white cockroach”** for the Blacks.

Having experienced the tragic consequences of wild, irrational hatred, even the death of her brother Pierre and her mother, the loss of home, young Antoinette turns to a nun: **“Such terrible things happen ... Why?”** The answer is, as in all other cases, suspended: **“We do not know why the devil must have his little day. Not yet.”** The mystery of evil, in Gothic tales usually associated with the figure of a villain, is further complicated in ‘Wide Sargasso Sea’. Jean Rhys connects it with thoughts and deeds of ordinary people. Even Rochester, fatally wounding the heroine, is considered as **“not the best, not the worst”**. The violence marking mutual relationships in the novel often seems to be motivated, as is in Coleridge’s Rime of the Ancient Mariner or in Golding’s Lord of the Flies, quite irrationally: **“They (black neighbours) are children — they wouldn’t hurt a fly... Unhappily children do hurt flies,’ said Aunt Cora”**.

The nun’s words **“not yet”** contain, however, a promise of the answer. It seems to be hidden behind the lines of Daniel Cosway’s letter: **“they are white, I am coloured. They are rich, I am poor... of all Antoinette’s father’s illegitimates I am the most unfortunate and poverty stricken”**.

It is the concern with money and possessions that leads Tia to betray Antoinette. It kindles the hate of the black neighbours and makes Rochester marry an unloved woman. Even Amélie's betrayal and Grace Poole's silent approval of the Thornfield crime are bound up with money. Finally, Antoinette's complete dependence on her husband and, consequently, her ruin, is sealed by the fact that after the marriage her fortune is taken by Rochester.

Critics detected similarities between Antoinette's fate and that of black slaves in the West Indian world. According to Helen Tiffin, **"in the marriage between Antoinette Cosway and Rochester, the imperial/colonial relation is clear"**. As C.A. Howells puts it, **"the drama of Rhys's novel is the drama of West Indian history focused through the figure of the mad wife in Jane Eyre"**.

The money initiates Rochester's metamorphosis in the direction of the Gothic villain. Being introduced as a romantic suitor reminding us of the gentle young heroes as Walpole's Theodore or Radcliffe's Valancourt, he quickly turns into a Faust-like figure: **"I have sold my soul or you have sold it, and after all is it such a bad bargain?"** The fatal role of money in Antoinette's life is repeatedly suggested throughout the novel and the recognition of its power is voiced in Part Three, where the mad heroine is, in fact, the only person capable of understanding the reality of Thornfield: **"Gold is the idol they worship"**.

To sum it up, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* the Gothic theme of otherness is worked out through the conflict between European and West Indian consciousness. Responding to Charlotte Brontë's description of insanity in terms of racial prejudice, much like as in *Jane Eyre*, Bertha's lunacy originates in her exotic origin and Creole blood, Jean Rhys offers a reconstruction of causality and shows that it is racial prejudice that violates order and eventually drives the heroine to madness. Moreover, the sin of greed and dependence on luxury, as Bertha embodies in *Jane Eyre*, is connected

rather with the cultured Christian society. Thus the traditional motifs of horror fiction in the form of ghosts, nightmares, haunted places, dark forests, ruins or boundless ocean horizons, are all incorporated into a complex, inward account of alienation and misunderstanding. The novel's sublimity stems less from the conflict between the moral order and an evil influence than from the tension between the familiar and the other, and from the difficulty to cope with the reality of cultural, religious but also differences at the individual level.