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The Other Side of Madness in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) as a revision of the representation of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1947). It explores how Rhys gives a narrative history and voice to Antoinette, the woman who is reduced to the figure of the "madwoman" in Brontë's novel. The discussion focuses on Antoinette's uncertain social position as a white Creole woman in post-emancipation Jamaica, her childhood loneliness and lack of maternal affection, Rochester's colonial assumptions and emotional neglect, and his control over her money and identity. It also considers the significance of renaming and mirror imagery in the final section of the novel. The paper argues that Antoinette's distress cannot be understood only through the label of madness imposed on her; it must also be considered in relation to the social, familial, racial, and marital experiences represented in the novel. Rhys's narrative therefore invites readers to question whose perspective is authorised to define another person as mad.

Introduction

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1947) presents Bertha Mason largely through the perspective of other characters, particularly her husband, Edward Rochester. She is described as a disturbing presence in the attic, but her own history and perspective remain largely unavailable to the reader. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) revisits this marginalised figure by imagining her life before she becomes known as

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Bertha. Rhys names her Antoinette Cosway and gives her a history, a family, a cultural background, and a voice through which readers can encounter her experiences.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the "other side" of the representation of madness: the experiences and social conditions that are obscured when Antoinette is seen only through the label attached to her. The central concern is not simply whether Antoinette is mad, but how the novel encourages readers to question the assumptions and power relations through which she is judged. *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be read in relation to Jane Eyre, but it also has its own narrative structure and concerns. Rhys does not merely supply background information about Brontë's character; she makes Antoinette the centre of a story that challenges the authority of the earlier representation.

The discussion proceeds through Antoinette's social position and childhood isolation, Rochester's colonial attitudes and emotional withdrawal, the role of Daniel Cosway's letter, the control of Antoinette's money, the imposition of the name Bertha, and the mirror imagery associated with her confinement. These elements are considered as experiences that shape the way Antoinette understands herself and is understood by others.

The Other Side of the Representation of Madness

One of the important questions raised by Rhys's novel is whether the reader can accept a character's madness solely on the basis of another character's description. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is presented from outside; in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys gives her an interior life. This shift in narrative perspective matters because it allows the reader to see the person behind the figure who has been described as monstrous. The novel asks readers to consider what has happened to Antoinette and how her experiences have contributed to the condition in which she is eventually confined.

Danielle McLaughlin (2016), reflecting on the novel's effect, quotes novelist Michele Roberts's observation that Rhys "took one of the works of genius of the 19th century and turned it inside-out to create one of the works of genius of the 20th century" (as cited in McLaughlin, 2016, para. 2). McLaughlin also explains that Rhys gives Antoinette a narrative in which she can voice her thoughts. This critical observation supports the central concern of the present paper: Rhys changes the reader's access to the character by moving her from the margins of someone else's story to the centre of her own.

The novel does not require readers to conclude that Antoinette's suffering is unreal or that it has one single cause. Rather, it makes the social circumstances surrounding her distress visible. The label of madness becomes problematic when it is treated as a complete explanation and when the experiences of the

person being labelled are ignored. Mukhuba, Adedayo, and Manning (2019) similarly examine the representation of madness in Rhys's novel alongside Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, considering how women's marginalisation, self-expression, and identity intersect in literary representations of madness.

Social Position, Race, and the Search for Belonging

Human perception is shaped by the social environment, inherited assumptions, and cultural practices through which people interpret one another. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, these differences become visible in the relationship between Rochester and the Caribbean world in which he finds himself. Rochester arrives from England with assumptions about cultural and racial difference. He repeatedly interprets Caribbean people and customs through the standards of his own background, and his judgements reveal a sense of distance from the people around him (Rhys, 2001, Part 2).

Antoinette's position is also uncertain. As a white Creole woman in post-emancipation Jamaica, she does not experience an uncomplicated sense of belonging. The novel opens with her recollection that "the Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother" (Rhys, 2001, Part 1). This statement introduces the social rejection surrounding her family. Antoinette also remembers that she became used to a solitary life while her mother continued to hope for a more secure future (Rhys, 2001, Part 1). These memories suggest that alienation is part of the environment in which Antoinette grows up.

It is important, however, not to treat Antoinette's position as identical to that of Black Caribbean characters. Her experience of exclusion as a white Creole woman is shaped by the racial and historical divisions of the society, but it does not erase the different histories of those who endured slavery and its aftermath. The novel's social world is complex, and Rochester's assumptions about Caribbean people form part of the conflict that shapes his relationship with Antoinette.

Childhood Loneliness and the Need for Affection

Antoinette's loneliness is also connected to her relationship with her mother, Annette. She recalls approaching her mother and trying to touch her forehead, but Annette pushes her away calmly and without explanation (Rhys, 2001, Part 1). Antoinette interprets this rejection as evidence that her mother does not want her near. Her account suggests that she experiences a lack of affection within the family at a time when she is already socially isolated.

Christophine provides Antoinette with a more dependable source of care. Her presence is important because she offers a form of emotional support that Antoinette does not consistently receive from Annette.

Nevertheless, Christophine cannot remove the wider insecurity surrounding Antoinette's childhood. The contrast between the two relationships helps explain why Antoinette's need for affection and acceptance remains significant throughout the novel.

The dream in which Antoinette walks through a forest while someone who hates her follows is another expression of her fear. She remembers hearing footsteps approaching, struggling and screaming, and being unable to move before waking in tears (Rhys, 2001, Part 1). The dream can be read as an image of vulnerability and isolation. It does not, by itself, establish a medical explanation for Antoinette's later condition; rather, it gives literary form to the fear that accompanies her early experiences.

Rochester's Colonial Attitudes and Emotional Neglect

Antoinette's marriage to Rochester does not provide the security and affection she seeks. Her account to Christophine makes her distress clear: "Christophine, he does not love me, I think he hates me" (Rhys, 2001, Part 2). She explains that Rochester sleeps in his dressing room, responds to her anger with silence, and no longer behaves as he did at the beginning of their relationship. Her words reveal that she is deeply affected by his emotional withdrawal and is uncertain about what she can do to restore their relationship.

Rochester's response to Caribbean culture also contributes to the distance between them. His comments about Christophine's coffee, language, and clothing expose his tendency to judge her according to his own cultural standards. When he describes Christophine's language as "horrible" and criticises the way she wears her dress, Antoinette replies that not holding up the dress is a matter of respect (Rhys, 2001, Part 2). Their exchange reveals a difference in cultural interpretation: Rochester assumes that his own standards are authoritative, while Antoinette understands the practice through the customs of the place.

This scene is significant because Rochester's attitude is not limited to a private disagreement about clothing or language. It reveals how he evaluates the people and practices around Antoinette. His assumptions contribute to a relationship in which her cultural knowledge is not treated as equally valid. The novel therefore presents colonial superiority not only as a political idea but also as an attitude expressed through everyday judgements.

Daniel Cosway's Letter and the Construction of Suspicion

Daniel Cosway's letter becomes an important influence on Rochester's understanding of Antoinette. The letter presents accusations about her family and her mental condition, and it encourages Rochester to

interpret her through suspicion. Daniel's motives are not necessarily impartial, and the letter should not be treated as an objective account of Antoinette. Its importance lies in the way Rochester receives and uses it: it strengthens his distrust and affects the way he interprets her behaviour.

The letter therefore becomes part of the process through which Antoinette is judged by someone who has greater authority within the marriage. Rather than seeking to understand her experiences through conversation and care, Rochester increasingly accepts an account that confirms his growing distance from her. The novel makes the reader aware that Antoinette's identity is being shaped not only by her own actions but also by the stories that others tell about her.

Money, Marriage, and the Loss of Independence

The unequal relationship between Antoinette and Rochester is also material. Antoinette tells Christophine, "I have no money of my own at all, everything I had belongs to him" (Rhys, 2001, Part 2). She also refers to English law as the reason for this arrangement. These statements indicate that marriage has changed her relationship to her own wealth and has left her with limited financial independence.

The issue of money is important to the paper's argument because Antoinette's dependence is not only emotional. The control of property and resources affects her ability to make decisions and to act independently. Rochester's position within the marriage gives him material authority, while Antoinette's ability to challenge his decisions is restricted. The novel thus connects private marital relations with wider structures of property and gender.

It would be too simple to claim that Rochester marries Antoinette only for her wealth unless that claim is supported by further textual evidence. What the novel clearly allows the reader to examine is the unequal distribution of financial power after the marriage and the way this inequality contributes to Antoinette's vulnerability.

Renaming and the Loss of Self-Definition

Rochester's decision to call Antoinette "Bertha" is one of the clearest examples of his attempt to control how she is identified. Antoinette objects: "My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?" (Rhys, 2001, Part 2). Her protest makes clear that the imposed name does not represent the identity through which she understands herself.

The change of name is significant because it connects the woman in Rhys's novel with the figure known to readers of *Jane Eyre*. In Rhys's narrative, however, readers have already encountered Antoinette's

childhood, memories, relationships, and fears. The name Bertha therefore carries the force of an identity imposed upon her from outside. By showing Antoinette's resistance, Rhys invites readers to question the authority of the person who renames her and the narrative that subsequently treats that name as definitive.

Confinement, Mirrors, and the Question of Identity

Antoinette's removal to England and her confinement in the house associated with Thornfield bring the loss of control to its most visible point. She is separated from the Caribbean setting in which her memories and identity were formed. Rochester's letter to his father, in which he says that the less his father discusses his affairs, "especially my marriage, the better" (Rhys, 2001, Part 2), can be read as evidence of his desire to keep the marriage private. This statement raises questions about whether confinement is presented only as care or treatment, or whether it also serves Rochester's wish to conceal the relationship.

The absence of a mirror becomes especially important in Antoinette's final narration. She remembers looking at her reflection as a child and feeling that the girl in the glass was herself but "not quite myself." She recalls trying to kiss the reflection, only to encounter the hard glass between them. In the present, she says that there is no looking glass and asks, "What am I doing in this place and who am I?" (Rhys, 2001, Part 3). The mirror imagery connects her childhood uncertainty with her later loss of self-recognition.

The mirror can be interpreted as a symbol of Antoinette's desire to recognise herself and to be recognised by others. Its absence in confinement intensifies the sense that her identity has been taken from her. This interpretation is strengthened by the earlier renaming: Rochester has called her Bertha, while the mirrorless room deprives her of a familiar image of herself. The combination of imposed naming and confinement makes the question of identity central to the final section of the novel.

Antoinette's confinement should not be read as proof that she has no awareness of her surroundings. Her narration shows that she can observe the room, remember her past, and ask questions about her identity. Rhys therefore complicates the simple division between sanity and madness. The reader is encouraged to consider not only Antoinette's distress but also the actions and assumptions of the people who control her life.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the other side of madness in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* by focusing on the experiences that shape Antoinette's life and on the authority through which she is judged. Rhys gives

a history and a voice to the woman who appears in *Jane Eyre* as Bertha Mason. Through Antoinette's memories, readers encounter her uncertain social position, childhood loneliness, lack of maternal affection, need for love, and growing isolation within her marriage.

The analysis has also considered Rochester's colonial assumptions, his emotional withdrawal, the influence of Daniel Cosway's letter, his control over Antoinette's money, his decision to rename her, and her eventual confinement. These experiences do not provide a single or clinical explanation for Antoinette's condition. They do, however, show why the label of madness cannot be accepted as a complete account of her identity. The novel asks readers to consider the circumstances and power relations that shape the way she is seen.

Rhys's revision of Brontë's character is important because it changes the position from which the reader encounters her. Antoinette is no longer only the figure described by others; she becomes a narrator whose memories and questions challenge the authority of that description. The "other side" of madness, therefore, is the life and experience that remain hidden when a person is reduced to a label.

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