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## Women Making Progress?: a Study of Wide Sargasso Sea as a Response to Jane Eyre

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Women Making Progress?: A Study of Wide Sargasso Sea as a Response to Jane Eyre

Kaitlin Gangl

Fall 2006



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**Introduction:**

I have always had a love for Victorian literature. Growing up I read Jane Austen, Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Gaskell, and many more Victorian female writers I could get my mother to recommend. Reading and writing has been a passion of mine since I was young, and female writers (Victorian in particular) were always a particular favorite of mine. Despite my interest in this genre, I found myself reading Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847) for the first time just two years ago while studying in London. I was taking a Nineteenth-Century British Literature course, and while I appreciated the works of Charles Dickens and Sir Walter we read, I found myself somewhat troubled by the female characters in their works. Having heard so much about Charlotte Brontë's novel, I was eager to see what it was all about and what it had to offer me as a reader, as a woman, and as a writer, and for me, Brontë's novel stood out among the novels I read for my course. Jane seemed to be particularly unique to me in comparison with the other heroines I studied. In attempting to understand her story, I found myself stuck in awe of Brontë's novel, unable to form any concrete thoughts about the novel. When it came time to write an essay for my London course, I purposely avoided Jane Eyre despite my interest in it because I found myself struggling to look at the text objectively. I found myself unable to articulate my admiration. The only thought I could formulate about Brontë's text is that Jane seemed particularly progressive relative to the other heroines in the Nineteenth-Century literature I have studied.

This project is an attempt to understand my own response to Jane Eyre by considering Jean Rhys's text Wide Sargasso Sea. As I set out to understand my response to Jane Eyre, I recognize that my analysis seems to focus more heavily on Brontë's text, but an initial, independent analysis of Jane Eyre will allow me to determine the model of

progress Jane offers. Thus, when I turn to Wide Sargasso Sea, I will be able to evaluate the two texts in relation to one another and understand what Jean Rhys might have seen (or not seen) in her revision of Brontë's text.

## Jane Eyre

### **Introduction: Charlotte Brontë's Celebrated Heroine**

Virginia Woolf's 1916 The Common Reader contains a reading of Jane Eyre (1847) that exemplifies the terms in which Charlotte Brontë's novel has been celebrated. Woolf emphasizes Brontë's modernity; noting that though readers may expect the "antiquated" from a writer who led such a secluded life, readers are immediately drawn in to Jane Eyre and get the "exhilaration" of spending time in the presence of Brontë's "vehemence" and "indignation" (par. 2; par. 4). Woolf finds in Brontë "some untamed ferocity perpetually at war with the accepted order of things" that "allies itself" with readers' "inarticulate passions" (par.5). Critics often read Jane's voice as exemplifying a protest against and imparting a critique of Victorian femininity and the expectations for women during the Victorian period<sup>1</sup>. Joyce Carol Oates emphasizes the strength of Jane's voice and narrative authority in "*Jane Eyre: An Introduction.*" Oates finds Jane Eyre "remarkable for its forthright declaration of its heroine's passions and appetites" and reading it "always a surprise, in the very authority, resonance, and inimitable voice of its heroine" (par. 13; par. 1). Critics often praise Brontë for her protagonist's unique voice, which seems to question the power structure that sanctions and institutionalizes the oppression she endures as a woman and as an orphan in a patriarchal society.

Woolf's praise of Jane Eyre is not, however, unequivocal. She deems Brontë fundamentally "self-centered" and finds her lacking "speculative curiosity" (par. 5; par. 4). While I largely agree with Woolf's reading of Brontë as presenting a limited vision of

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<sup>1</sup> Critics such as Shirley Foster, Sandra M. Gilbert, and Jane Millgate offer such praise of Jane and read Brontë's representation of female subjectivity and autonomy despite the oppressive social structure as particularly innovative.

life for women, I do so in terms that might suggest that Woolf, too, is somewhat complacent in terms of her criticism. Woolf finds the characterization of Jane Eyre to be one-dimensional: “Always to be a governess and always to be in love is a serious limitation in a world which is full, after all, of people who are neither one nor the other” (par. 4). Woolf seems to find Jane’s expression of passion as “self-centered” because Jane overlooks the social and political issues facing Victorian women and focuses only on her emotional life. Jane claims to be representative of women, but in actuality she represents a very limited group of women. Yet in her reading, Woolf focuses only on the central character, Jane Eyre, seeming to overstress the romantic and sexual themes, thus overlooking important aspects of Jane Eyre. While Woolf finds that Brontë “does not attempt to solve the problems of human life; she is even unaware that such problems exist” (par. 4), Woolf overlooks the themes of imperialism and colonialism in Jane Eyre that may not be resolved by Brontë, but do demonstrate Brontë’s awareness of the “problems of human life.” Brontë’s “indignation” may dominate the novel primarily in Jane’s emotional progress and not as much in the material world, as Woolf suggests, but there is more to the novel than Jane’s emotions. Recent criticism focuses on the aspects of colonialism and imperialism in Jane Eyre, and particularly on Brontë’s treatment of Bertha Mason, Rochester’s first Creole wife locked in his attic. Yet such criticism is only more recent and Woolf’s reading of Jane Eyre resonates with many critics who found themselves taken over by Brontë’s novel.<sup>2</sup>

It was Woolf, after all, who made infamous the concept of the domestic angel, the Victorian presumption that a woman’s place was in the home while the man occupied the

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<sup>2</sup> Firdous Azim, Gayatri Chakravorty, and Susan Meyer all focus on Jane’s relation to and Charlotte Brontë’s treatment of colonialism and imperialism, suggesting Jane achieves her power in relation to white men by collaborating in the disempowerment of women of color.



larger, social world (the world Woolf accuses Brontë of not engaging with). The concept of the “domestic angel” (otherwise known as the “angel in the house”) was held up as the feminine ideal during the Victorian period. And Woolf, writing over half a century after Charlotte Brontë, is known for killing this ideal. In “Professions for Women,” a speech she read to The Women’s Service League, Woolf discusses her struggle with the figure of the domestic angel and her need to ‘kill’ this figure in order to continue writing. Woolf’s definition of this ideal female in her speech clearly outlines the model of womanhood expected of women during the Victorian period:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily... in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all... she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty- her blushes, her great grace. In those days- the last of Queen Victoria- every house had its Angel. (par. 3)

Brontë was writing during this Victorian era, when, as Woolf says here, “every house had its Angel.” Coventry Patmore’s poem “The Angel in the House” (1854) is famous for its portrayal of this ideal woman and the woman’s confinement to the home. Jane Eyre was published eight years before Patmore’s poem, therefore Brontë was likely aware of these ideals and expectations of womanhood<sup>3</sup>.

Consequently, Jane Eyre’s demands for more than what is expected for women, her demands for a purpose and her effort to get out of the house seem particularly unique.

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<sup>3</sup> Charlotte Brontë published Jane Eyre under the pseudonym Currer Bell, suggesting she herself may have been influenced by these female expectations of the Victorian Era.

Considering the Victorian ideals of femininity and limited vision for female occupations, Jane's faithfulness to herself seems particularly heroic. Ultimately Jane is able to discover a place for herself in society, to financially support herself, to find family and a place within that family. In the following pages I will examine Jane Eyre's progress. I recognize that my analysis may seem to focus more on Charlotte Brontë's novel, but it is important to understand Jane's progress and the model of progress she offers in order to understand Jean Rhys's critique of it.

### **Childhood: Recognition of and Rebellion Against the Patriarchal Structure**

The nineteenth century society Jane Eyre lives in upholds the traditional familial values of the time which privileged the father (or men in general) by placing him in the position of power (the patriarch) and allowed the father absolute power over the family (representative of society). This patriarchal structure that governs Jane's society devalued women, expecting them to be merely "domestic angels." As a woman in such a male-dominated society, Jane Eyre has no power or value in the world, and as an orphan she has no place in the family structure and an inferior place in the larger social order. Consequently, Jane finds herself treated unfairly throughout her life, told that she does not deserve the love and companionship she sees her Reed cousins enjoy.

What Virginia Woolf calls Brontë's "indignation" draws us in and takes us over the moment Jane Eyre opens, as a young Jane fights for herself and in doing so recognizes the politicized injustice she experiences as an orphan who is dependent on her affluent relatives, the Reeds of Gateshead, her childhood home. The Reeds seem to represent to larger patriarch structure here, therefore when Jane refuses to accept the

Reed's oppression on her she seems to be challenging the larger, male-dominated social structure. Jane's sudden awareness of and subsequent rebellion against the patriarchal structure that subjects her to the Reed's cruelty because of her social and gender status exhibits Jane's sense of self and empowers her as an individual at Gateshead.

As readers we care for Jane instantly because we recognize there is something at stake for this young girl. Throughout her childhood, Jane struggles with being unwanted by, unloved by, and dependent on the Reed family because of her social and gender status. She is excluded from the domestic bliss and maternal love she observes her cousins enjoying: "Eliza, John, and Georgiana were now clustered round their mama in the drawing-room: she lay reclined on a sofa by the fireside, and with her darlings about her... looked perfectly happy" (7). Jane is "dispensed from joining the group" here just as she is "excluded" from the "usual festive cheer" of the holidays (28). What she is denied is the love and support of a family- she does not even seem to have a companion. Yet as readers we do not desire acceptance for Jane because she seems to define her individualism against this oppressive social structure.

Jane seems to believe she is inferior to the Reeds (and essentially those in the male position of power) because of her 'unnatural' femininity and her orphan social status, which renders her emotionally and financially dependent on the Reed family. Although Mrs. Reed explains to Jane that she must be excluded from the family "until she... could discover... that I was endeavoring in good earnest to acquire a more sociable and child-like disposition, a more attractive and sprightly manner,- something lighter, franker, more natural as it were" (7), no matter how 'good' Jane is, it never seems good enough. Mrs. Reed seems to hold Jane to the nearly unreachable standards of Victorian

femininity, and Jane seems to believe physical beauty could warrant her better treatment. An older Jane, the reflective narrator, offers an explanation for how she is regarded at Gateshead: “I was a discord in Gateshead Hall: I was like nobody there” and she recognizes that “if she were a nice, pretty child... at any rate a beauty” she might be accepted by the Reeds (15; 26). Jane’s insight here demonstrates her understanding of and explanation for the Reed’s treatment of her; she seems to suggest that because of her ambiguous social status and because she is not the traditional, angelic “good girl” of Victorian society, she deserves her treatment. Jane interprets her difference between herself and the Reeds on racial terms, though they are her blood relations, and she does not seem to blame Mrs. Reed for her exclusion, which exhibits Jane’s belief in the social structure: Jane wonders, “How could she really like an interloper not of her race?” (16). This comment helps us understand Jane’s passive acceptance of the Reeds treatment of her; Jane seems to believe her inferiority is because of a biologically inherent difference such a race, a difference she cannot change.

Despite her belief in childhood that she deserves her treatment, Jane recognizes the imbalance in this patriarchal power structure that excludes her. As a child Jane draws “parallels in silence” between her and the oppressed slaves she reads about (11). The constant reminder that she is “under obligations to Mrs. Reed” and the threat of being sent “to the poor-house” if she misbehaves keeps Jane submissive (13). Even the Gateshead servants advise Jane “not to think yourself on an equality” with her cousins because “they will have a great deal of money, and you will have none” (13), further emphasizing Jane’s inferior social status. Jane fears the Reeds because of her dependence on them and the power that consequently gives them over her, but she seems

able to imaginatively escape Gateshead through reading. The threat of the “poor-house” coupled with Jane’s ability to emotionally escape from the oppressive Gateshead through literature seems to keep her obedient and trying “to make [herself] agreeable to them” as Miss Abbot advises (13), yet once this escape is taken from her and she is told directly that she has no claim to anything in this patriarchal world, something in Jane changes.

Everything changes for Jane the day Brontë’s novel opens. When John Reed takes Jane’s book from her, claims it as his own, and turns it in to a weapon which he uses to knock her down with, Jane, unable to grasp any image of herself outside of the home because even her escape has been claimed by John as his property and used against her, is no longer afraid. The sight of her own blood, drawn from John Reed’s blow, seems to wake or change Jane, and she is “sensible of somewhat pungent suffering” (11). Here the patriarchal structure, represented by the physical structure of the house, weakens Jane and draws something from her as John’s blow makes her fall, “striking [her] head against the door and cutting it” (11). As she realizes her cut “bled” and feeling “sharp” pains, Jane’s “terror had passed its climax: other feelings succeeded” (11). Previously passive, Jane now calls John “a murderer... a slave-driver” (11), linking his patriarchal role to the cruelty and violence of such oppressors, and consequently linking Jane with oppressed slaves subject to their masters’ tyranny.

When Jane reacts to John’s abuse she seems to be reacting to the larger social hierarchy that smothers her and compels her to be submissive to her cousin. John Reed seems to represent a future patriarch here, claiming all Jane’s world as his own: “I’ll teach you to rummage my book-shelves: for they *are* mine; all the house belongs to me, or will do in a few years” (11). In patriarchal tradition, John asserts his right to absolute

power, his right to rule, and his right to define the world on his own terms. It is when she is pigeonholed in to the position of merely a dependent with no reflection of herself and no view of the world outside the patriarchal home- “out of the way of the mirror and the windows” (11)- Jane instinctively defends herself.

From this moment on, Jane exhibits her recognition and realization of the unjust and unwarranted manner in which she is treated because of her social and gender status, and she challenges the social structure that alienates her because of this status. Her resistance continues to empower her and as readers we are on Jane’s side- we recognize that John Reed’s violence is unjust and her subsequent punishment unwarranted. When dragged to the red room, her impending prison, she declares she is treated “like any other rebel slave” (12), Miss Abbot tells Jane, “What shocking conduct, Miss Eyre, to strike a young gentleman, your benefactress’s son! Your young master!” to which Jane responds “Master! How is he my master?” (12), thus directly challenging the man’s position of power that sanctions John’s treatment of Jane. Locked in the red room and trying unsuccessfully to understand why she could “never please” and “why it was useless [for her] to try to win any one’s favour” (15), Jane realizes Mrs. Reed’s handling of her has nothing to do with Jane’s behavior, what she experiences is something else. Jane , who “dared commit no fault” and “strove to fulfil every duty” requested of her, is “termed naughty and tiresome, sullen and sneaking, from morning to noon, and from noon to night” regardless of her efforts (15). This infuriates Jane who is well aware that her cousins go unpunished for the very behavior Jane is punished for.

What Jane exhibits in her childhood is her awareness of her individual rights, her understanding that she is not inferior to other human beings because of social and gender

status, and this demonstrates her sense of selfhood and empowers Jane as an individual. Jane's sudden awareness of and subsequent rebellion against the patriarchal structure that subjects her to the Reed's cruelty because of her social and gender position exhibits Jane's sense of self and empowers her as an individual at Gateshead. Therefore when Mrs. Reed tells Jane she will free her from her imprisonment in the red room "only on condition of perfect submission and stillness" (18), behavior that not natural for Jane, Jane complies in the only way she knows how- she fall unconscious, thus meeting Mrs. Reed's requirements for liberation, but not conforming as she wishes.

Beginning Jane's story on this particular day highlights the moment Jane recognizes her individualism is at stake and defends herself against the forces that try to oppress her and seems to place this realization as the central event of Jane's life, the event that sets the rest of her life in motion. Her recognition of the Reed's treatment of her as unfair empowers Jane to rebel, to defend her individualism, which also empowers her as a character to readers. Jane's reaction to this oppressive society also sets up a narrative structure that sets Jane against society, which emphasizes her much admired individualism. Patriarchal society expects Jane to be the "domestic angel" and accept her inferior social status, but Jane refuses to accept this arrangement.

As readers we may admire the strength of Brontë's young heroine and the model she presents here. We may question others' right to define our own world for us just as Jane refuses to allow the Reed family limit her opportunities for occupation, devalue her purpose, or define her identity for her. In refusing to accept such treatment, the injustice and Jane she suffers because of her status as a woman and as an orphan is revealed. Jane's progress towards emotional wholeness seems to begin with her childhood

recognition of and rebellion against the patriarchal structure that attempts to limit her individualism, and follows her development from a lonely orphan to the individual she ultimately seems to be. This sense of individualism seems to be what liberates Jane from Gateshead: her strong sense of individual rights, her expression of her indignation at the injustice she experiences there, and her refusal to allow anyone to impose an identity on her ultimately frees her of the Reed family.

### **Education: Lessons in Conformity and Restraint**

Although Jane frees herself from the oppressive arrangement of Gateshead, she faces a similar power structure at Lowood Institution. Lowood offers a stark contrast to the domestic comforts of Gateshead; the school is run less like a home where children need nurturing and more like a reform school with a war-like atmosphere, as teaching is called “business” and girls are “marshaled and marched” from one place to another (45). Jane is sent to Lowood Institution to be “trained in conformity to her position and prospects” as a lower class woman by Mrs. Reed (34), and the rigid, formal manner in which the school is run seems to have the potential to destroy Jane’s newfound individualism. As readers we recognize that in this place where “discipline prevailed” Jane’s individualism is once again at stake to larger structural forces (45).

The head of Lowood Institution, Mr. Brocklehurst, represents an even more powerful patriarch than John Reed and poses a greater threat to Jane’s individualism, forcing her to conform to his rules of appearance, deportment, and spirituality. The Lowood dress code stifles the girls femininity and de-individualizes them, imposing a more androgynous physical identity on them: “the eighty girls sat motionless and erect: a



quaint assemblage they appeared, all with plain locks combed from their faces, not a curl visible; in brown dresses” (46). Mr. Brocklehurst finds any deviance from his dress code to be “in defiance of every precept and principle of this house,” and when he sees a girl with naturally curled hair, he questions, “Does she conform to the world so openly- here in an evangelical, charitable establishment- as to wear her hair one mass of curls?” (63). Ironically, though, his own, more affluent family enjoys the “habits of luxury and indulgence” he denies the girls at Lowood (63); Mr. Brocklehurst’s wife and daughters enter the school “splendidly attired in velvet, silk, and furs” with hair “elaborately curled” (64), which greatly contrasts the drab appearance Brocklehurst forces the girls to conform to. Brocklehurst claims that he is serving God in his “mission... to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh; to teach them to clothe themselves and shame-facedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel” (64).

Mr. Brocklehurst’s position of power allows him to define every aspect of Jane’s person and world for her; he even puts limitations on her future by attempting to prepare Jane and the other students for the employment of socially inferior women. The lessons Jane learns are those Mr. Brocklehurst thinks are relevant for Lowood’s “charity children” to learn. The lessons and rules of Lowood are meant to prepare students for the limited occupations society offers lower class women: “the girls... were all called by their surnames, as boys are elsewhere” (53); in addition to likening the girls to boys by calling them by their surname, Mr. Brocklehurst also identifies the girls with their lower-class family status. He intends to impart lessons of humility and conformity on the students of Lowood so the girls are “hardy, patient, self-denying” beings (62); there is no room for Jane’s individualism in his plan. Every aspect of Mr. Brocklehurst’s training

works to prepare his students for their working-class life. The dresses he requires the girls wear have “little pockets” that are “destined to serve the purpose of a work-bag” (46), which clearly exhibits that Brocklehurst is preparing these orphans for a life of labor, and he is discouraging the cultivation of individuals.

While all the girls are subject to Mr. Brocklehurst’s oppressive rules, Jane’s individualism, which as readers we admire, is particularly at risk. Previously alienated and marginalized, Jane finds friendship and emotional comfort and support at Lowood, which Mr. Brocklehurst threatens in his branding of Jane. For the first time in her life, at Lowood Jane finds herself “treated as an equal by those of [her] own age” (68). She endeavors “to be so good” at Lowood in effort “to make so many friends, to earn respect, and win affection” (68). Therefore Jane feels doomed by Mr. Brocklehurst’s public accusations of her and warnings to the other students to distance themselves from her. Though Jane knows he is wrong about her character, she recognizes his power and influence over society (which in this case is Lowood) and assumes her teachers and peers will take his word for granted. With her physical appearance conformed to Lowood’s standards, Jane now finds her integrity at risk. Jane has been at Lowood for several months by the time Mr. Brocklehurst visits to expose her as a “liar” and when calls Jane forth she fears how accusations will change her experience at Lowood (66). Brocklehurst challenges Jane’s integrity when he tells the school that Jane is “not a member of the true flock, but evidently an interloper and an alien” (66). Lowood seems to be a fresh start for Jane who tries to behave- “I had meant to be so good, and to do so much at Lowood, to make so many friends, to earn respect, and win affection” (68)- but Mr. Brocklehurst’s denouncement seems to squander Jane’s efforts. Finding herself defined and rejected by

the patriarchal structure despite her endeavors to be accepted, Jane “lay crushed and trodden on” (68), believing she has lost the respect and equality of her peers just as at Gateshead she believed Mrs. Reed was not necessarily wrong for her treatment of her.

What allows Jane to overcome Brocklehurst’s oppression and the idea that she is not inherently a “bad” girl is the strength her female relationships seem to offer her. Jane learns she only needs the appearance of conformity or goodness to function in society, and Miss Temple and Helen each present an example of how to handle the oppression at Lowood that Jane learns to model. Miss Temple and Helen seem to function as surrogate mothers to Jane, offering her a model of how to handle her emotions. Miss Temple and Helen help disrupt Mr. Brocklehurst’s absolute power by offering Jane the opportunity to defend herself against the allegations made. Miss Temple teaches Jane that justice does exist, telling her “when a criminal is accused, he is always allowed to speak in his own defense” and offers Jane the opportunity to tell her side of Gateshead (71). This lesson in justice seems to empower Jane, as she realizes that her efforts to be ‘good’ can warrant respect and affection. The first time Jane observes Helen punished for her behavior Jane expects Helen to “show signs of great distress and shame” but finds that “she neither wept nor blushed: composed, though grave, she stood” (52). Although Jane disagrees with many of Helen’s philosophies, she does learn from her example. When Mr. Brocklehurst brands her as a bad child, Jane must stand “exposed to general view on a pedestal of infamy” where, oppressed and unwarrantedly punished as she is throughout her childhood, Jane’s rebellious feelings resurface (67). A glance from Helen empowers Jane to endure her punishment: “It was as if a martyr, a hero, had passed a slave or victim, and imparted strength in the transit. I mastered the rising hysteria, lifted up my

head, and took a firm stand on the stool” (67). Recognizing she is not alone in here and that she is not actually a “bad” child allows Jane to bear (not accept) her unwarranted punishment. When Miss Temple tells Jane, “continue to act as a good girl, and you will satisfy me” (70), she teaches her that Jane needs only to appear to be good to be accepted at Lowood; her emotions are free to be her own, therefore freeing Jane to dream for more and to progress towards emotional wholeness.

Previous obstacles for Jane are resolved before she leaves Lowood for Thornfield, and the elimination of these obstacles seems to empower Jane as she heads out in the world on her own. When Jane leaves Lowood Institution for Thornfield, she is ‘free’ or independent in the sense that she is no longer economically dependent on the Reeds or Lowood’s affluent benefactors and she is able to economically support herself through teaching. Her choice to leave also exemplifies her personal autonomy as she is the one who makes the decision that she should leave and she is also the one who secures the governess position. As Jane prepares to leave, the authority the Reeds had over Jane is no longer a material obstacle for Jane’s independence as Mrs. Reed “relinquished all interference in [Jane’s] affairs” (84). Mrs. Reed’s renouncement of her authority over Jane allows Jane the power to leave Lowood Institution on her own accord. And Jane, who enters Lowood of afraid of Mr. Brocklehurst’s denouncement of her character, leaves Lowood with “a testimonial of character and capacity signed by the inspectors of that institution” (89), finally free from forces that previously dictated her life.

### **Adulthood: Marriage, Morality, and Sexuality**

As she enters adulthood and leaves Lowood Institution behind her Jane seems better equip to function as an individual in the patriarchal society because of the lessons and skills she learns at Lowood, yet despite her personal independence and integrity, Jane's sense of self, her independence, continues to be threatened by oppressive forces. As an adult, Jane seems independent as she is out on her own and working to financially support herself, though at times many critics argue that this seems to be more of a sense of superiority that Jane seems to convey than Jane's personal triumph<sup>4</sup>. Freed from her previous constraints, Jane seems individual and self-sufficient, but her quest for autonomy and emotional wholeness is complicated by love- her love for Rochester and her love for St. John Rivers as her brother. Love and the sense of obligation that seems to come with it threatens Jane's individualism, as both men are dominating and controlling in their relationship with Jane, and threaten to stifle Jane's progress.

Jane's expression of her desire for freedom from Lowood articulates her wish for something more, for a purpose beyond the educating she does at Lowood. While Lowood seems to stifle the freeness and 'ire' of Jane, it is no longer necessary for Jane to conform to Lowood's expectations. Jane seems to behave in order to warrant Miss Temple's approval, but with Miss Temple and the motherly role she seems to fill for Jane suddenly gone, Jane is "left in [her] natural element" and begins "to feel the stirring of old emotions" (84). Once again Jane finds herself almost helped by her orphan status, the lack of sense of duty and expectations that comes with familial relationships.

Although Jane expresses her desire for freedom and for a purpose other than her position at Lowood, she struggles to realize this dream. The words "Liberty, Excitement,

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Meyer considers Jane's presumed superiority in Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction.

Enjoyment” are “delightful sounds” for Jane, yet these freeing words are “no more than sounds for me; and so hollow and fleeting that it is mere waste of time to listen to them” (86). What Jane desires as she leaves Lowood and settles in to her governess position at Thornfield is... But Jane’s inability to imagine a world where she might be free and settlement for just “a new servitude” demonstrates the limitations for Jane as a woman (85). Having achieved a sense of self but unable to directly challenge material obstacles, Jane seems to be working towards emotional tranquility as she enters in to adulthood.

While Jane’s own individuality might offer a model, the novel points away from gender and offers a more de-gendered model of progress. When Jane argues that women should do more than “confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags” (109), she means women should seek a more emotional equality, not necessarily that women should seek a new vocation. Throughout the novel Jane is separated from traditional Victorian notions of feminine beauty and behavior, but she is also often described as having more masculine characteristics or an androgynous appearance. She does not criticize the feminine appearance; Jane herself wishes that she was not so plain: “I ever wished to look as well as I could, and to please as much as my want of beauty would permit. I sometimes regretted that I was not handsomer: I sometimes wished to have rosy cheeks, a straight nose, and small cherry mouth” (98). Jane does not specify her progress as feminine; rather it seems Jane’s progress is to become more masculine. St. John tells Jane “you have a man’s vigorous brain, you have a woman’s heart” (408), likening her emotions to masculinity rather than femininity.

While Jane seems secure with her individualism, once again she faces two men who presume the position of power and pose a threat to Jane's progress. Both Rochester and St. John attempt to impose different identities on her, stifling the Jane the reader knows, because her resistance to this oppression is complicated by Jane's love for each man. Jane's autonomy and personal integrity seem to help her maintain her emotional individualism as well as to help her resist what would likely be oppressive romantic relationships for her- she resists becoming Rochester's mistress and rejects St. John's proposal of a loveless marriage. Jane wants passion and love, but she insists on mutuality and equality between her and her lover. Her sense of individualism enables her to believe she is equal to more dominating figures such as Rochester and St. John and allows her to remain committed to what Jane Millgate defines "an active, free existence" in her article "Jane Eyre's Progress" (xxiv). Jane's selfhood empowers her to pursue such an existence regardless of what she may lose in the pursuit of her personal happiness and fulfillment.

Jane continues to challenge the patriarchal power structure that governs her material world and tries to stifle her emotional self. Initial interactions between Jane and Edward Rochester seem to exhibit Jane's continual struggle with the power structure as well as exhibit her strong sense of self and personal integrity. Jane challenges Rochester's position as a patriarch in the domestic sphere directly as she does with Mrs. Reed, yet in challenging him in a more rational manner she demonstrates the restraint she learns at Lowood. When Rochester asserts his "superiority" to Jane and asks her, "do you agree with me that I have a right to be a little masterful?" (133), Jane responds, "I don't think, sir, you have a right to command me, merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have- your claim to superiority depends

on the use you have made of your time and experience” (133- 134). Not only does Jane disagree with Rochester, but in questioning his authority she also questions the power structure that sanctions and institutionalizes the oppression she endures as a woman and as (now) a governess. Jane Millgate finds that Thornfield presents more complex emotional obstacles for Jane than she has previously faced, and that in Jane’s “commitment to an active, free- existence she will have to prove that she can resist Rochester in other ways than by naively pert rejoinders, for the non-submission of the free-born spirit is precisely the novel’s major theme” (xxiv). Jane’s conversations with Rochester seem more like amicable disagreements than actual challenges to the structure that enables Rochester to assume his position of power, and as Millgate recognizes, Jane will need to do more than just verbally challenge Rochester to achieve the emotional wholeness she progresses towards.

The resistance Jane Millgate argues Jane needs to prove becomes quite clear when Jane and Rochester become engaged. Once Rochester’s equal (or so Jane thought), engaged she faces the oppression she experiences at Gateshead and Lowood to what seems a more severe extent because the oppressor is someone she loves and respects. Suddenly Jane cares about someone’s love and respect, something she never worried about as an orphan and that as an adult she wants to maintain. In the month leading up to their marriage, Jane’s individualism seems particularly threatened by this: “My future husband was becoming to me my whole world; and more than the world: almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun. I could not, in those days, see God for his creature: of whom I had made an idol” (274). Jane finds her world, her ability to see and define the



world on her own terms, slipping from her as Rochester now dominates her ability to see the world. Wanting to maintain Rochester's love and to please the man she loves, Jane finds herself struggling with the oppression she strongly fought against previously. Rochester attempts to impose an identity on Jane, something she is able to resist at her prior homes, but struggles with as her wedding day approaches. Jane resists Rochester's attempts to dress her, name her, and confine her throughout their engagement; he is suffocating her sense of herself by imposing identities on her that she has not yet consented to: "Mr. Rochester had written himself the direction, "Mrs. Rochester,- Hotel, London," on each: I could not persuade myself to affix them, or to have them affixed. Mrs. Rochester! She did not exist" (275). While prior to their engagement Jane and Rochester seem to relate to one another honestly and as equals, once engaged, Rochester threatens Jane's sense of selfhood by attempting to affix an identity on her.

Jane's emotional strength guides her when she is tempted to remain with Rochester despite his being already married to Bertha; such a relationship threatens Jane's individualism as Jane believes it would take on the power dynamic of the patriarchal structure. Jane seems to be guided by an inner voice that demonstrates her emotional strength and her personal integrity in staying true to herself. Rochester loves her, and Jane is tempted to stay because this love is something she has never experienced before; she asks herself, "who in the world cares for *you*? Or who will be injured by what you do?" (317). Though she is tempted by his love for her, her love for herself trumps his as she responds to her own question, "*I care for myself*" (317); she knows that "the more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself" (317). Jane finds herself empowered by her individualism here, finding that her

inner voice supports her: the “voice within [her] averred that [she] could do it” (297). Jane wrestles with her desire to be with Rochester and her conscience that seems to recognize staying with Rochester would put her in an unequal position because she would be giving in to her sexual desires. Jane finds that her “conscience, turned tyrant, held passion by the throat, told her, tauntingly, she had yet but dipped her dainty foot in the slough, and swore that with that arm of iron, he would thrust her down to unsounded depths of agony” (297). Jane’s inner voice, her emotional strength, seems to empower her to resist Rochester’s licentious advances and her own desire for him: “I felt an inward power; a sense of influence, which supported me” (302). Thus, Jane maintains her individualism, she is able to continue her personal progress towards emotional wholeness because she does not succumb to Rochester’s power.

In Jane’s rejection of Rochester’s offer to live with him knowing he is married, she seems to portray herself as morally and spiritually superior to his previous mistresses. Although Jane claims to leave Rochester to maintain her personal integrity and because of the unequal power dynamic their relationship would take on, her explanation seems to be rooted in her morality and spirituality. Therefore, by contrasting herself with Rochester’s former mistresses, Jane seems to assert her moral superiority to the women who were previously his mistresses (and who are all marked as racially different). Rochester desires in a wife is “the antipodes of the Creole” (311), which he believes he finds in Jane. He tells Jane that “hiring a mistress is the next worse thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior; and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading” (311-312). Jane hears these words and fears she might “forget myself and all the teaching that had ever been instilled into me... to become the

successor of these poor girls” (312). The threat of staying with Rochester is clearly laid out in front of Jane. If she does not leave him, she will be no more than another one of his mistresses, and Rochester’s own definition of his mistresses is the very life Jane has fought against her entire life.

Jane’s financial independence seems to free her and allows her to obtain many aspects of life (social position, family, indulgence) she has previously been denied. St. John Rivers emphasizes the societal power will give Jane: “you do not know what it is to possess, nor consequently to enjoy wealth: you cannot form a notion of the importance of twenty thousand pounds would give you; of the place it would enable you to take in society; of the prospects it would open to you” (387). Previously marginalized to the affluent society because of her social class, represented in Brontë’s novel by the Reeds, Mr. Brocklehurst, as well as Rochester, Jane’s inheritance raises her position in society. In learning about her new wealth, she also learns that the Rivers, who have taken her in when she had no place to go, are in fact her cousins on her father’s side of the family. Learning her relation to the Rivers, Jane immediately decides to split her fortune between the four of them. St. John attempts to dissuade her from sharing the money, but Jane cannot conceive of their equality otherwise: “Brother? Yes; at the distance of a thousand leagues! Sisters? Yes; slaving amongst strangers! I, wealthy- gorged with gold I never earned and do not merit! You, penniless! Famous equality and fraternization! Close union! Intimate attachment!” (387). When deciding to share her fortune with her cousins, she tells St. John Rivers, “I must indulge my feelings; I so seldom have had an opportunity of doing so” (387). Jane has had to control her feelings in order to function

in society, something she learns to do at Lowood Institution, and her sudden, unexpected wealth seems to free her to “indulge” herself.

When Jane ultimately returns to Rochester, she has demonstrated her ability to provide for herself both economically and emotionally- she discovers a family for herself and briefly supports herself by teaching before receiving a sizable inheritance from her uncle. Therefore when she returns to Rochester she can tell him honestly, “I am an independent woman now... I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress” (434- 435). Jane is now able to give her “heart” to Rochester, to tell him “it belongs to you” because she has mastered it herself (444), she has become her own “mistress.” Previously Jane had not achieved the emotional wholeness she exhibits in her return to Rochester. Her heart, which spoke so loudly when she left Rochester, does is “mute” when St. John proposes to her (402), offering her a loveless marriage; when she cannot hear her heart, St. John offers to “speak for it” (402), which defies Jane’s personal nature- she has continually fought to alone speak for her heart. St. John does not excite Jane’s emotions as Rochester does; when he proposes she is “sensible of no light kindling- no life quickening- no voice counseling or cheering” (403). Although when Jane rejected Rochester’s proposal of a life as his mistress merely on “principle,” when St. John proposes a life fundamentally based on the principles and religion Jane calls on to help her resist Rochester, Jane cannot accept his offer because her “spirit” is “absent” (405). Thus in her refusal of St. John, Jane exhibits the progress she has made; no longer must she depend on religious or societal principles to make her decision, she is now autonomous and able to base her decisions on her own principles: “I was tempted to cease struggling with him- to rush down the torrent of his will into the gulf of his

existence, and there lose my own... To have yielded then would have been an error of principle; to have yielded now would have been an error of judgment” (418).

Dependency is something Jane struggles with throughout, and when she returns to Rochester it is entirely by choice and on her own terms. Jane does not need Rochester’s wealth because she has her own, and his love is not her whole world, which it was when the two were initially engaged. Rochester also seems weakened by the fire, which seems to give Jane a purpose in caring for him; she can now be “his prop and guide” (448). Thus Jane seems to achieve what Jane Millgate defines as an “active, free existence” (xxiv); Jane progresses towards this emotional wholeness over the course of Brontë’s novel, and when she achieves her goal readers are excited for her, drawn in to her story from the first moment, we are thrilled when Jane ultimately achieves her dream.

### **Conclusion: Jane’s Model of Progress**

Through her emotional development and her maintenance of her autonomy, Jane is able to liberate herself from patriarchal confines and meet her husband as an emotional equal. She is able to find more for herself, emotionally, which seems to be what she is working towards. While Jane’s own individuality might offer a model, the novel points away from gender and offers a more de-gendered model of progress.

Jane’s progress is complicated, though, when you consider the colonialism and imperialism aspects Virginia Woolf neglects to acknowledge in her criticism. As an adult, Jane seems to take on the role of educator, teaching (or claiming to teach) a variety of women, all whom Jane views as inferior to her in some way. Firdous Azim notes that Jane “contrasts herself... to other women whose subject-position can be seen to have

been determined by the process of imperialism” in his book The Colonial Rise of the Novel (180). The women Jane claims educate all have one thing in common- they are *not* English. Although the girls Jane teaches at Morton-school are British, Jane exhibits her belief that she is superior to these girls because they are peasants. Jane finds “half-dozen... best scholars” are “as decent, respectable, modest, and well-informed young women as could be found in the ranks of the British peasant” (389), limiting the social sphere for these girls even as she praises them. She continues on, exhibiting her Eurocentricism, to say “the British peasantry are the best taught, best mannered, most self-respecting of any in Europe: since those days I have seen paysannes and Bäuerinnen, and the best of them seemed to me ignorant, coarse, and besotted, compared with my Morton girls” (389).

Throughout Jane Eyre, Jane seems to exemplify the colonized status of all women; she struggles to live in a society governed by a strict, hierarchal structure that sanctions and institutionalizes the oppression Jane endures because of her gender. Jane’s emotions and occasional actions challenge this power structure throughout Brontë’s novel, but when she is an adult, she finds herself struggling more as marriage complicates her strive to remain independent. Rochester reduces Jane’s position to a powerless sex slave when he maintains he prefers his “one little English girl” to the “grand Turk’s whole seraglio” (269), but Jane’s response asserts her power as an English woman as she declares she will become “a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved- your Harem inmates amongst the rest” (269). Although Jane includes racially and ethnically ‘other’ women in the vision of her quest for freedom from the oppression Jane believes they share, she ultimately reveals her Eurocentric understanding of the enslaved she

compares herself to. Jane seems to claim a moral and spiritual superiority over the racially and ethnically 'other' women by suggesting she could "preach" to the 'other' women. This complicates Jane's progress. Jane, who portrays herself as a model who other women can follow, seems to obtain her superiority not through her personal achievements, but by claiming moral superiority over racially 'other' women. This complication of Jane's progress, as well as Bertha Mason's marginal status and beastly portrayal, are important to keep in mind as we consider Jean Rhys's response to Brontë's text. What women respond to in Jane Eyre is the presumed centrality of the heroine- Jane never allows us to doubt her confidence or her progress for a second.

### Wide Sargasso Sea:

Jean Rhys's descriptions of her motivations for writing Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) as a response to Jane Eyre surprisingly echo Virginia Woolf's mixed response to it. Where Virginia Woolf saw both Brontë's modernity and her neglect of "the problems of human life" in her vision of Jane Eyre's life (par. 4), Jean Rhys sees the presumed centrality and universality of Jane Eyre's vision and the limitations of Brontë's heroine's dream. Personal letters from and interviews with Rhys offer insight into her motivations for writing Wide Sargasso Sea. The novel's boldness makes it surprising that many of Rhys's letters exhibit hesitation about taking the first Mrs. Rochester out of Thornfield's attic and providing her with a voice in Wide Sargasso Sea. In April 1964, seeming to echo Woolf's praise of Charlotte Brontë's expression of her "vehemence" and "indignation" (par. 4), Rhys wrote to Francis Wyndham, "The Brontë sisters of course had a touch of genius (or much more)... So reading "Jane Eyre" one's swept along regardless" (139): Rhys's admired Brontë greatly and loved being taken over by Jane Eyre, even as she condemned as false and degrading its portrait of the West Indies, especially Bertha Mason. Several months later Rhys wrote again to Wyndham, revealing her difficulty with writing Bertha Mason's story because of her "great and deep admiration for the Brontë sisters... How then can I of all people, say she was wrong? Or that Bertha is impossible? *Which she is*" (144). Rhys struggled with her wish to revisit Bertha Mason's story, wondering if she should tamper with Brontë's text. So sharp was Rhys's revision of Brontë's text that at times she wondered if she should detach her story from Jane Eyre entirely so as not to seem to criticize Charlotte Brontë.



Although Rhys presents herself as humble in the face of Charlotte Brontë's genius, her novel Wide Sargasso Sea ultimately offers a strong critique of Jane Eyre. Rhys objected strenuously to the ways that Brontë's novel presumes the contextuality and universality of English values and ways of life, and felt compelled to write this book because she need "the Creole's "I" [to] come to life" (137). A Creole herself, Rhys wanted to write the story of the Creole girls lost to England, the young Creole women who were married off to Europeans, torn from the people and land they loved, and reduced to mere property. In 1966 Rhys wrote to friend Diana Athill regarding this inadequate vision of the world Brontë presents in her novel:

Of course Charlotte Brontë makes her own world, of course she convinces you, and that makes the poor Creole lunatic all the more dreadful. I remember being quite shocked, and when I re-read [Jane Eyre] rather annoyed. 'That's only one side- the English side' sort of thing. (144)

Rhys could not accept the limited vision of life and progress the central text, Jane Eyre, seems to offer. By placing both Bertha Mason (renamed Antoinette Cosway) and Edward Rochester (unnamed in Rhys's text, but clearly Rochester<sup>5</sup>) at the center of her novel, Rhys attacks the relationship of colony to metropole in Jane Eyre, which frees readers of Jane Eyre to realize their own complicity with the presentation of Jane as "heroic woman." In Brontë's novel, Jane is the sole narrative speaker; readers see Jane's world through Jane's eyes, with Jane interpreting her world for readers. Even as Brontë's

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<sup>5</sup> Referring to Jean Rhys's unnamed male protagonist in Wide Sargasso Sea is an established literary practice, many critics have done so in their analysis of Rhys's and Brontë's texts. Teresa F. O'Connor demonstrates this in Jean Rhys: The West Indian Novels, writing "Section Two... opens with the voice of Antoinette's husband, the Mr. Rochester of *Jane Eyre*" (144).

handling of point of view intensifies the reader's experience of Jane's personal desires and anxieties, it sharply curtails what readers see of both England and the West Indies.

No outside narration, no other point of view interrupts Jane's vision, and Brontë seems to offer a model of progress for all women. Rhys critiques Brontë's limited view by including multiple points of view in attempt to tell a more collective story.

Antoinette's story does not transcend time as Jane's seems to for Woolf and many other readers because Antoinette's story is intertwined with the cultural and familial history.

Narration in Wide Sargasso Sea is divided between the Creole woman, Antoinette, and the English man, Rochester, but Rhys seems careful to include voices other than the two central narrators, which helps offer insight in to the narrator's often bias vision. The inclusion of multiple voices seems to refrain from the presumed universality of Jane Eyre, but while Rhys seems to give voice to the freed slaves, the voice she gives them is more one-dimensional. In Jane Eyre, Bertha Mason is seems beastly and unhuman; her rage and madness is unexplained and seemingly unwarranted, and Rhys responded strongly to Bertha's (untold) story, writing to Wydham, "I believe and firmly too that there was more than one Antoinette. The West Indies was (were?) rich in those days *for* those days and there was no "married woman's property Act". The girls... would soon once in kind England be *Address Unknown*" (143). While Rhys tells the story of the wealthy Creole girl affected by this historical time, she does not accurately give voice to the freed slaves. She alludes to the freed slaves' anger with the wealthy Englishmen and their blindness to the black community, but ultimately Rhys seems to fall short of giving the black community a voice. The burning of Coulibri Estate expresses the freed slaves'

anger, but Rhys focuses more on the effect the fire has on Antoinette and her mother than the black communities motivation for burning the Estate.

Ultimately the effect of reading Jane Eyre after reading Wide Sargasso Sea is that Jane's once compelling vision of life and progress come to seem not universal but specific to her circumstances as a female English orphan living in the home of wealthy relatives. Jane's fairy tale orphan status allows her individualism to seem unambiguously good; she does not have the obstacles of parents or a familial past to constrain her, and Victorian readers are spared a challenge to the "family values" that saw parents as universally loving and protective. As a family member, Jane might be expected to conform to the thoughts, ideas, and expectations of that family, and she would feel their pain, suffer as they suffered. Thus Brontë's absence of family enables the novel to deviate from material reality. The clarity of her orphan status makes conformity seem oppressive and Jane's individualism heroic.

While Jane's orphan status seems to work for her, Antoinette's seems to work against her. Antoinette is an orphan in the sense that her father is deceased and her mother often absent from her life, but lack of parental presence in Antoinette's life does not make her individualism seem admirable or particularly good. Rather, Antoinette seems lonely and isolated, in need of love and inclusion. Where Jane found no obstacle in her familial past, Antoinette finds herself haunted by her familial past, unable to escape the indiscretions of her parents and stand on her own as Jane does.

In Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys shows us a world that is more complex than in Jane Eyre, a world in which race and gender have historically specific meanings and where individuals cannot be separated from their worlds. Antoinette's story is deeply grounded

in the historical and political issues of the time, which are emphasized by Rhys's intentional change of the timeframe in her novel. While Jane Eyre was published in 1847, Jean Rhys begins Wide Sargasso Sea just after the Emancipation Act is passed in 1833. Although Brontë's novel seems able to transcend time and modern readers find themselves able to relate to Jane's story, Rhys's deliberate time change locates Antoinette's story in a specific historical period, just after the Emancipation Act was passed which legally stated the freedom of slaves in all British colonies, and demonstrates how history and culture affect her heroine. Laura E. Ciolkowski emphasizes the importance of this historical shift in her essay, "Navigating the *Wide Sargasso Sea*: Colonial History, English Fiction, and British Empire." Ciolkowski stresses the historical limitations of Jane Eyre that Rhys's time shift sheds light on:

By foregrounding the West Indian racial and social divisions, Rhys does to her own protagonist Antoinette what she has been acclaimed for doing to Brontë's Jane Eyre, i.e., shows her as constituted within and by the processes of colonization and imperialism. Instead of extolling the unified and autonomous (feminine) subject Jane had- and Antoinette could have- come to embody, *Wide Sargasso Sea* calls forth a model of reading that scrutinizes the negations and devaluations which such a definition of identity might involve. (1072)

By locating Antoinette's story in a historically specific time, Rhys exhibits the limitations of Brontë's narrative as she forces readers to recognize the circumstances that allow Jane her "heroic" individualism and keep Antoinette's isolation from seeming unquestionably good.

Wide Sargasso Sea follows a similar plot line to Jane Eyre- Antoinette's story begins in childhood, readers follow her into the convent school and later into a marriage that is erratically blissful. As part three opens, Grace Poole's voice locates us within Brontë's text and Antoinette's story merges with Bertha Mason's in Thornfield's attic. Yet while the two novels follow a similar sequence, Rhys's handling of time sense and point of view in the novel complicates and confuses these events. Although Wide Sargasso Sea follows Antoinette's progress from childhood through adulthood, the fragmented sense of time keeps the plot from seeming as linear as Brontë's novel. From the first line of Wide Sargasso Sea, we might infer Antoinette is black- "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks" (9)- but we soon learn that she is not. It is also difficult to tell when she is writing, for at times Antoinette seems to be writing in the present, almost as a sort of diary, but at other times her narrative seems to be a reflection. This narration particularly baffles readers because of Antoinette's expected death. Rhys's fragmented narration and sense of time confuses the reader, which keeps the reader from identifying with Antoinette or the text, something that seems to happen so naturally in Jane Eyre.

What works for Jane- her orphan status, her education, economics- seems to work against Antoinette. Antoinette is unloved, isolated, and lonely, but this does not empower her to define herself as an individual. Rather, it seems what Antoinette needs is love, acceptance, and security. What Jane dreams of (individuation) is exactly the opposite of what readers hope for in Wide Sargasso Sea (de-individuation). Antoinette is not *the* Creole woman; many Creole women had happy marriages during this time and integrated well in to English society. In writing Antoinette's story and remaining faithful

to Brontë's plot line, Rhys exhibits the differences between the two sides of the Atlantic, the differences across the Sargasso Sea. Rhys foregrounds similar issues of family, education, economics, and society that Jane faces, but in a way that stresses that what works for Jane- her orphan status, Englishness, family history (or absence of)- works against Antoinette. Thus while Antoinette is not *the* Creole woman, Rhys exhibits how Jane is not *the* woman. Rhys's stress on the differences between these two heroines and the worlds they live in, Jane seems fortunate for her situation, almost lucky. While some read Rhys's text as alternative, I read Jean Rhys's strong revision as a supplement to Jane Eyre. The two novels have a shared purpose for me personally.

### **Childhood: The Women of Coulibri Estate**

Jane Eyre is able to fashion her dream from the world around her, but Antoinette Cosway has nothing to dream with, no material or models to fashion her dream from, and it's harder to even dream of progress when a vision of progress is difficult to conceive. While Jane allows readers to think about progress for her because she has a tangible structure she can resist and the forces that oppress Jane are quite clear, progress for Antoinette, or what progress might look like for her, is more difficult to imagine. As readers we care for Jane the moment Brontë's narrative begins because we realize that there is something at stake for and recognize the forces that threaten her, yet Antoinette's world is more difficult to grasp, the forces she struggles with more difficult to define. The structure of Antoinette's world is less clear and Rhys's narrative techniques confuse the reader, keeping us from identifying with Antoinette. We begin to care for the unloved and impoverished Antoinette because we identify something is at stake; a sense

Rhys intensifies through her handling of point of view, setting, and time. The various points of view, multiple settings, and fragmented sense of time of Wide Sargasso Sea makes Antoinette impossible to identify with. She seems lost in the world Rhys lays out in Wide Sargasso Sea, which forces readers' attention not upon the portrait of progress but the obstacles to it, mental and psychological. In neither her childhood nor her marriage does Antoinette receive love or even support, and Rhys stresses Antoinette's isolation. She does not belong to any of these groups around her: her Creole mother, the white Englishmen, the black former-slaves, or the women of the convent school. These kinds of isolation build upon a foundation of trauma- her rejection from her beloved mother, the burning of her childhood home, rejection from her only friend, and a familial and cultural history she cannot separate herself from.

Nothing in Antoinette Cosway's world is merely individual. She seeks solace in nature, as Jane Eyre does in literature, but the land surrounding Coulibri Estate seems just as unstable and unsafe as the social world within: "I went to parts of Coulibri that I had not seen, where there was no road, no path, no track. And if the razor grass cut my legs and arms I would think 'It's better than people.'" (16). This physical sting of nature is less painful than the often irreparable emotional damage Antoinette experiences from the people in her life. Called a "white nigger" by the freed slaves who live nearby and excluded on the basis of her mother's French nationality from the white, fortune-seeking English community of the English colony of Jamaica (13), the Cosway family truly is "marooned" (10). In Antoinette's Jamaican society, the structure is more difficult to define than in Jane Eyre. While Jane seems to personalize her oppression, seeing the Reeds, Mr. Brocklehurst, Rochester, and St. John as figures that make her feel repressed,

there is no one to blame personally for Antoinette's situation. Therefore while Jane Eyre personalizes social structure, Wide Sargasso Sea de-personalizes it, and this unstable social structure is what initially individualizes Antoinette, but her individualism means isolation and loneliness for her, rather than happiness as in Jane Eyre.

It is useful to consider the women of Coulibri Estate when considering questions of Antoinette's progress because we can then understand the women Antoinette has to model her dream after. While Jane pieces her dream together from the women she observes, Antoinette's relationships seem unstable and the racial, gender, and social differences Rhys foregrounds are particularly crucial to understanding Antoinette's relationships to the women in her life. Each of the Coulibri women seem to suggest that mere survival is all Antoinette can hope for, but the models of survival each woman presents are difficult for Antoinette to identify with and none seem to offer the happiness and security she ultimately wants. Antoinette lacks confidence because of her mother's preoccupation with her brother and the Cosway's social and economic decline and Annette's rejection of Antoinette, her uneasy relationship to Christophine, and her lack of friends. Unconfident and isolated, progress for Antoinette seems to be survival and she seems to dream of love.

While as an orphan Jane does not have to challenge the Victorian "family values" that saw parents as universally loving and protective, Antoinette seems to view her mother in this idealized way and therefore continues to seek her mother's approval and love despite Annette's rejection of her. Early in the novel Antoinette wakes from a nightmare to find her mother, Annette, by her side, and she immediately feels "safe" (16). The safety she experiences with her mother here seems to be what Antoinette longs for



throughout the novel. Nancy R. Harrison discusses Antoinette's dream of progress and how this dream is formed in her book Jean Rhys and the Novel as Women's Text.

Harrison's consideration of Annette's role in Antoinette's dream is particularly useful to my argument:

Antoinette's relationship with her mother seems to exacerbate the uncertainty in Antoinette that allows the dream-text to surface, the mother's role in this sense confirming the ontological uncertainty that is the result of, as well as a central fixing place for, the interracial incident with Tia: the hurtful, perhaps truthful, name-calling. Nevertheless, in the child's mind, she remains in her mother's keeping, "safe" from strangers. She is not safe, however, from her bond with her mother, from an identification with her for good or ill. (174)

Regardless of the unease of the world Antoinette is able to feel "safe" in when with her mother, the lack of mother-love is stressed. As readers we seem to want only for Antoinette to be loved and held, for her to discover a safe place, but the one person who seems able to offer Antoinette this rejects her and seems preoccupied with a world Antoinette cannot discover a place for herself in- the English world. The rejection Antoinette experiences from her mother seems to arrest the effect that produces identification and caring in a child.

Thus with no bond between mother and daughter and a lack of mother love stressed, Antoinette turns inward. While Jane Eyre seems empowered by her realization of her alienation from society, Antoinette seems to internalize her mother's rejection

rather than challenge it, which further isolates Antoinette. Rhys emphasizes this internalization in a conversation between Antoinette and Rochester:

I said I was always happy in the morning, not always in the afternoon and never after sunset, for after sunset the house was haunted, some places are. Then there was that day when she saw I was growing up like a white nigger and she was ashamed of me, it was after that day that everything changed. Yes, it was my fault, it was my fault that she started to plan and work in a frenzy, in a fever to change our lives. Then people came to see us again and though I still hated them and was afraid of their cool, teasing eyes, I learned to hide it. (79)

As readers we understand that there are historical and political factors that are largely responsible for the Cosway's decline, but young Antoinette cannot recognize these factors because she is unable to identify with any identity or structure which would then give her a background from which she could form her view of the world. She internalizes and individualizes her mother's rejection of her mother's reaction in this particular incident seems to confirm Antoinette's individualism as a "white nigger."

Antoinette does not recognize that she has no control over certain factors such as her familial history or larger political and historical issues. Antoinette does not understand that the "white people" do not "approve" of Annette because they view her as impure and as sexual excess (9); being Martinique, she is from a French colony and Rhys's stress on Annette's physical beauty here suggests the English see Annette as a sexual being. This family history is out of Antoinette's control and is much of the reason for the Cosway's isolation. If Antoinette could identify with her mother, she might

recognize this. Rhys conveys the history of the Cosway's social and economic decline through a conversation between two English women:

...Why should he marry a widow without a penny to her name and Coulibri a wreck of a place? Emancipation troubles killed old Cosway? Nonsense- the estate was going downhill for years before that. He drank himself to death. Many's the time when- well! And all those women! She never did anything to stop him- she encouraged him. Presents and customs for the bastards every Christmas. Old customs? Some old customs are better dead and buried... As for those two children- the boy an idiot kept out of sight and mind and the girl going the same way in my opinion- a *lowering* expression. (17)

Here Rhys conveys the English community's view of the Cosway's history of slavery abuse and sexual transgressions that the new English criticize, seeming to believe themselves morally superior to such behavior (which we learn they are not when Rochester seems to repeat Mr. Cosway's sexual abuse of his slaves). While knowledge seems to be freeing in Jane Eyre, in Wide Sargasso Sea it seems the more you know about Antoinette's past, the worse the world is for her and her mother. Antoinette longs for is connection with her mother, and we want Annette to nurture her so she experiences the effect of identification and caring and the feeling of safety that goes along with it.

What Antoinette sees in her mother's model of marriage is loneliness. Annette marries Mr. Mason not for love, but for survival. Isolated, impoverished, and unable to provide for her children, Annette seems to sacrifice herself for her children; she seems to prostitute herself by marrying Mr. Mason the wealthy and religious Englishman who can

offer the economic support the Cosway women desperately need. Antoinette recognizes her mother would have died if she had not married Mr. Mason:

Then I looked across the white tablecloth and the vase of yellow roses at Mr Mason, so sure of himself, so without a doubt English. And at my mother, so without a doubt not English, but no white nigger either. Not my mother. Never had been. Never could be. Yes, she would have died, I thought, if she had not met him. And for the first time I was grateful and liked him. There are more ways than one of being happy, better perhaps to be peaceful and contented and protected, as I feel now, peaceful for years and long years. (21-22)

Rather than feeling infuriated at the English who neglect her family until they want something from them- something sexual like Annette, though they believe themselves superior to the Mr. Cosway's moral transgressions- Antoinette feels grateful to the English man who saves them from death.

Although Christophine seems to act as a sort of surrogate mother for Antoinette in Annette's absence, their racial differences make their relationship uneasy, which prevents young Antoinette being comforted by Christophine. Their cultural and racial differences (Christophine is from Martinique) complicates Antoinette's understanding of her. The comforting songs Christophine sings to her are Martinique "patois songs" that Antoinette cannot understand (11). Christophine seems to survive because of others' fear of her and more specifically of her power of obeah. An older Antoinette reflects her awareness of her dependence on Christophine: "It was Christophine who bought our food from the village and persuaded some girls to help her sweep and wash clothes. We would have

died, my mother always said, if she had not stayed with us. Many died in those days, both white and black, especially the older people, but no one speaks of those days now” (79). Christophine provides Antoinette and her mother with essentials, serving them as a slave though now legally freed, yet despite Christophine's seemingly inferior position, Antoinette and her mother are dependent on a woman who both the black community and the white Englishmen fear. Antoinette’s awareness of this fear and her own fear of Christophine prevents her from being comforted by and identifying with Christophine.

Antoinette’s relationship to Christophine is further complicated by Antoinette’s racism. Rhys seems to make her lonely, suffering young heroine also racist to further alienate the reader from Antoinette, which effectively isolates Antoinette further. Antoinette’s racism also alienates her from Christophine, her one ally in her childhood. Although Christophine seems aware of what Antoinette needs and is able to comfort her to an extent, Antoinette fears the this comfort because of the perception of Christophine as rather taboo. Antoinette overhears both the girls who help Christophine with the wash and white Englishwomen talking about Christophine. After Mr. Mason repairs Coulibri Estate, Antoinette hears two white women saying, “‘It’s evidently useful to keep a Martinique obeah woman on the premises.’ She meant Christophine. She said it mockingly, not meaning it, but soon other people were saying it- and meaning it” (18). When she returns to the repaired Coulibri Estate after her mother’s marriage, Antoinette finds it changed not by Mr. Mason’s actual presence, but for Antoinette it is new servants and “their talk about Christophine and obeah that changed Coulibri, not the repairs or the new furniture or the strange faces. Their talk about Christophine and obeah changed it”

(18). Suddenly Christophine's room that Antoinette knows so well and used to go to for comfort frightens her:

...One day when I was sitting there I was suddenly very much afraid... I was certain that hidden in the room (behind the old black press?) there was a dead man's dried hand, white chicken feathers, a cock with its throat cut, dying slowly, slowly... No one had every spoken to me about obeah- but I knew what I would find if I dared to look. Then Christophine came in smiling and pleased to see me. Nothing alarming every happened and I forgot, or told myself I had forgotten. (18)

After hearing white women talk about Christophine, Antoinette begins to look at her differently. Antoinette is afraid of Christophine, of her power, and therefore unable to identify with her despite her role in Antoinette's life. She loves Christophine, who serves as a surrogate mother to her, yet she is aware of the fear others have of Christophine because of her power of obeah. This fear prevents Antoinette from experiencing the love and safety feeling she needs from a mother figure.

Rejected by her mother and uneasy with her relationship to Christophine, Antoinette only experiences psychological and physical hurt from the children she interacts with, which emphasizes Antoinette's isolation and lack of confidence. From the black community, Antoinette experiences rejection on the basis of her socioeconomic status and familial past as she does from both her mother and the white Englishmen. Her first interaction with someone of a similar age demonstrates the taunting she experiences: "white cockroach, go away, go away. Nobody want you" (11). After observing

Antoinette's reaction to this taunting, Christophine brings Tia to Coulibri Estate with the intention of providing Antoinette with a companion.

Tia initially seems offer Antoinette comfort through their companionship as well as a model with which Antoinette could support herself, albeit alone in nature. Tia seems to present a model of basic, essential survival skills to Antoinette. Together, reliant on Tia's ability to provide food and warmth for them in nature, which has always been Antoinette's solace. The two girls seem able to survive on their own- "Tia would light a fire... we boiled green bananas in an old iron pot and ate them with our fingers out of a calabash" (13). Antoinette seems to focus on Tia's ability to provide for herself, which emphasizes her inability to do so: "fires always lit for her, sharp stones did not hurt her bare feet, I never saw her cry" (13). Yet this friendship and comfort is short lived. Rhys gives us no sense of how long the two girls are friends or the closeness they feel, but rather emphasizes the rejection. Tia never actually seems to like Antoinette, taking her money and clothes shortly after they become friends. Although Tia offers Antoinette companionship and comfort in their ability to live together, Tia also reminds Antoinette of her inferior racial and social position and rejects Antoinette's attempt to identify with her. As Antoinette's home and former life burns before her, she makes one last attempt to cling to her life as she knew it, recognizing in Tia something she can identify with. In Tia Antoinette sees "all that was left of my life as it had been" (27); Tia is what Antoinette can identify with, having been rejected by her mother and unable to be comforted by Christophine. Antoinette's view of the situation emphasizes her interpretation of the differences as social class specific, rather than racially different- "We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I

thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. Not” (27).

Antoinette turns to Tia, the last thing she feels she can recognize and identify with, and therefore Tia’s rejection both emotionally and physically harms Antoinette. When Tia throws the “jagged stone” at Antoinette’s face Antoinette “did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on her. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass” (27). Once again Antoinette does not recognize the historical past that drives this whole incident, she just views the destruction of her home, one of the last things in her life that offers her comfort.

If Tia were the protagonist of a novel she might be more like Jane Eyre, able to view her position in society relative to the white Englishmen who enslaved her and her family for years and suddenly able to fight for herself. Although in throwing the rock at Antoinette her actions seem to mirror John Reed’s, she would not be an oppressive protagonist because her actions would seem more justified than his. Therefore we can still respect Tia despite her rejection of Antoinette. Tia is part of something greater, part of the black community, and she views Antoinette more as her oppressor than her friend.

### **Education: An Education in English Femininity**

The contrast between Jane Eyre and Antoinette Cosway’s desires and their road to “progress” is clearest in the two novel’s descriptions of education. Jane Eyre’s educational experience at Lowood Institution provides her with the skills and tools to



support herself economically in the world outside of Lowood and allows her to seek purpose and self-autonomy in the outside world. Where education offers Jane support in the world beyond Lowood, Antoinette's lessons do not prepare her for the outside world she seeks refuge from within the convent. Where Jane learns to read, write, draw, etc. (skills that prepare her to be a governess), Antoinette learns to sew, to be tidy, and is taught the lessons of female deportment and chastity. The nuns impart lessons of Christianity and female deportment to the girls at the convent, seeming to teach Antoinette how to behave as a woman; Antoinette learns to practice "cleanliness, good manners and kindness to God's poor" and that "chastity, that flawless crystal that, once broken, can never be mended" (32). The nuns present angelic female saints as models for Antoinette and her peers. The nuns are women who turn down sex, love, and marriage to devote themselves to Christ, and the saints are all virgin martyrs. The nuns and saints are almost fairy tales... Antoinette notes, "The saints we hear about were all very beautiful and wealthy. All were loved by rich and handsome young men" (32). Imparting notions of chastity on the young girls, the nuns do not prepare the girls for marriage, which is inextricably linked to sexuality and reproduction. These Catholic lessons seem to offer Antoinette nothing for the outside world. She does not seem to learn the reasoning or faith that Jane exhibits.

Jane experiences a continuation of oppression at Lowood, but for Antoinette the convent is a refuge in the sense that the racial, gender, and social issues that complicate her world are no longer problems for her. The orderly world of the convent seems to offer Antoinette the much needed stability and comfort missing from her childhood. While Rhys emphasizes the comfort Antoinette seems to find in this stability, she does

not allude to Antoinette's future until the end of part one. In stressing the comfort Antoinette experiences, Rhys keeps us readers from questioning Antoinette's progress at the convent and what progress might look like for her afterwards. Although Antoinette seems comforted, she is not learning to support herself or how she might achieve her eventual goal of happiness. The convent does not even prepare her for Jane's ultimate and seemingly natural role of educator, wife, and mother, as girls are taught about the value of chastity and sexuality and reproduction are never mentioned. Rhys portrays the convent as a world of female nurturers where Antoinette seems able to exist unharmed by patriarchal forces and racial hatred of the outside world and finds comfort in a world of nurturing women. Men seem to have no authority in this space, as Mother Superior governs the world within the convent. The nuns offer her the mother-love and nurturing she longed for from her mother. Within the convent is a world of clear binaries which enable Antoinette to navigate for herself rather easily in this world "That was how it was, light and dark, sun and shadow, Heaven and Hell" (34). This is a world both Antoinette and readers can understand, and Antoinette finds this reassuring, admitting, "I find it very comforting to know exactly what must be done" (34). With the rules and schedule at the convent, she has a position for herself and somewhat of an identity, albeit restricted and not individual. For Antoinette the school is her "refuge, a place of sunshine and of death" (33). What seems to matter is that she belongs to something here.

Rhys's stress of the comfort Antoinette finds in the nurturing nuns and the stable world within the convent foregrounds Antoinette's hunger for maternal care and a stable world, which seems to suggest that progress for Antoinette might mean being held or merging with something greater than her, something like the convent. Wide Sargasso

Sea seems to be a dream of finding home. Jane Eyre dreams a masculine dream of leaving the home while Antoinette seems to want to find a place within it. Rhys foregrounds the difference between the world outside and the world inside the convent, and giving Antoinette a structure to define herself against inside as Jane has throughout Brontë's text. Rhys emphasizes the harsh violence of the 'outside' world by having Antoinette taunted on her walk to the convent. From the moment Antoinette enters the convent, Rhys contrasts the world outside to the world inside the walls of the convent. Walking to the convent from Aunt Cora's house, Antoinette knows that trouble is waiting for her; she sense trouble without yet knowing... Once Antoinette walks out of sight of Aunt Cora's house, the two children (who seem to be white, but it is a bit unclear?) begin to taunt Antoinette, "'Look the crazy girl, you crazy like your mother'" and physically knock her down (29). The comfort Antoinette experiences seems particularly emphasized as this cruelty is met by a nun who comforts Antoinette and cleans the wound Antoinette receives when she is knocked down. In washing off her wound and her tears the nun seems to perform a sort of purification: "When she saw my hand she asked if I had fallen and hurt myself. I shook my head and she sponged the stain away gently" (30). The nun washes off the "stain" of Antoinette's family past, of the racial and social issues that complicate her life, leaving them in the outside world as she enters the convent. Once this "stain" is washed off Antoinette is finally able to identify herself to both the nun and the reader, responding only "Antoinette" when the nun asks her name (31).

At Lowood Institution Helen Burns presents Jane with her Christian values and ideology which later enables Jane to reason and resist a threatening union with Rochester; although

the de Plana sisters seem to offer Antoinette similar companionship and guidance, the model these sisters present is one of effortless female beauty. Such a model does not offer Antoinette the emotional strength she needs to support herself outside of the convent. What Antoinette admires in her friend, Louise de Plana, is her beauty: “she was very pretty and when she smiled at me I could scarcely believe I had ever been miserable” (31). This seemingly effortless and natural beauty is nearly impossible for Antoinette to replicate. No matter how hard she tries to replicate H el ene de Plana’s “coiffure” (32), Antoinette can never quite get it right. This beauty H el ene achieves “without a looking-glass” (32), and a looking glass seems to be what Antoinette is looking for. She wants to see her reflection in something greater than herself, something she can identify with. The de Plana sisters present model quite similar to the female saints, both of which are unrealistic for Antoinette and offer her no defense against or skills to overcome the obstacles she will face.

Although at the convent Antoinette has the de Plana sisters, the nuns, and female saints to model herself after, to fashion her dream together from, the model they present does not include “happiness,” which is what Antoinette hopes to achieve. The nuns seem to accept the Catholic rules and laws unquestionably, and while Antoinette learns “to say very quickly as the others did, ‘offer up all the prayers, works and sufferings of this day’” (34), the prayers are merely words to Antoinette and do not offer her emotional comfort. She finds herself troubled by what she is not praying for- “But what about happiness, I thought at first, is there no happiness? There must be. Oh happiness of course, happiness, well” (34). In this world of women where girls are taught the ideals of female deportment, Antoinette finds her wish for happiness missing and cannot conceive of how

to obtain it. Despite what Antoinette does *not* learn at the convent and her inability to dream of how to achieve her dream of happiness, Rhys still allows us to hope for her:

...I soon forgot about happiness, running down the stairs to the big stone bath where we splashed about wearing long grey cotton chemises which reached our ankles. The smell of soap as you cautiously soaped yourself under the chemise, a trick to be learned, dressing with modesty, another trick. Great splashes of sunlight as we ran up the wooden steps of the refectory. Hot coffee and rolls and melting butter. But after the meal, now and at the hour of our death, and at midday and at six in the evening, now and at the hour of our death. Let perpetual light shine on them. This is for my mother, I would think, wherever her soul is wandering, for it has left her body. Then I remembered how she hated a strong light and loved the cool and the shade. It is a different light they told me. Still, I would not say it. Soon we were back in the shifting shadows outside, more beautiful than any perpetual light could be, and soon I learnt to gabble without thinking as the others did. About changing now and the hour of our death for that is all we have (34).

Antoinette seems to find a place, to be able to consider her future and even consider “changing” it here. The words of the Catholic prayers do not apply to her, but she finds herself able to move past this and in this passage Rhys seems to suggest that Antoinette is able to navigate life (albeit within the convent) for herself.

By emphasizing Antoinette’s contentment and her ability to navigate life for herself within the convent, Rhys makes Mr. Mason’s intrusion that much more

disruptive. As a man, his presence upsets the female harmony of the convent- the nuns are no longer in charge of Antoinette. Mr. Mason has the power to remove Antoinette from the place where she feels “bolder, happier, more free. But not so safe” (34). We might see his intrusion as the end of the psychoanalytic pre-oedipal stage in which a child finds comfort in his bond to the mother. The convent seems to provide Antoinette with a home and with the motherly comfort associated with the pre-oedipal stage, but Mason disrupts this harmony. His visits remind Antoinette of and bring her in to the outside world the convent protects her from, and it seems he might be the reason Antoinette feels “not so safe” (34). Rhys emphasizes the blindness of this fortune-seeking Englishman through his oblivion to the rules of the convent, buying Antoinette presents she cannot wear or use at the convent, although she tells him, “I can’t wear all these things you buy for me” (35). Mason’s response, “You can wear what you like when you live with me” (35), ignores the fact that the presents he gives her are his choice, not hers. He seems to have no sense of what might be best for Antoinette and his English ideals come across as painfully ironic here. Antoinette finds him humorous when he asks, “How would I like to live in England? Then, before I could answer, had I learnt dancing, or were the nuns too strict?” (35), but he is not joking. Mason is trying to “arrange” her happiness and her security for her (35), but he never asks Antoinette what might help her achieve those things; as readers of Jane Eyre we are aware that what he is arranging is Antoinette’s marriage to Rochester. His questioning is insincere, though, as he seems to have already decided Antoinette’s fate for her, as the English gentlemen have already been invited to Jamaica; Mr. Mason’s past tense- “I’ve tried to arrange” (35)- supports this. Mason’s oblivion to Antoinette’s life within the convent emphasizes his greater blindness to her

wants and needs as an individual being. The arrogant blindness of this Englishman does great harm to Antoinette, which Rhys conveys just as he leaves her at the convent on what seems to be his last visit before he removes her from it:

As we were going out of the convent gate he said in a careless voice, 'I have asked some English friends to spend next winter here. You won't be dull.'

'Do you think they'll come?' I said doubtfully.

'One of them will. I'm certain of that.'

It may have been the way he smiled, but again a feeling of dismay, sadness, loss, almost choked me. This time I did not let him see it.

It was like that morning when I found the dead horse. Say nothing and it may not be true.

But they all knew at the convent. The girls were very curious but I would not answer their questions and for the first time I resented the nuns' cheerful faces.

They are safe. How can they know what it can be like *outside*? (35)

Thus the safety of the convent, the security of the pre-oedipal, is disrupted by the intrusion of the father. Mr. Mason's influence overrides Mother Superior's power, removing Antoinette from the one place she feels safe and secure in. Suddenly, Antoinette feels resentful towards the world where she found comfort, but where she has no power to keep herself in.

### **Adulthood: Finding a Home, Antoinette's Progress Towards De-Individuation**

Antoinette carries into adulthood an abundance of unacknowledged psychological wounds and unmet emotional needs. She seems unable to fashion together a dream of how she might move forward and achieve the happiness and security she longs for, and she has no means or skills to support herself economically or emotionally. The comfort she experiences in the convent is no more, though this comfort is what Antoinette seems to need most. It seems progress for Antoinette might mean regression, she might need to go back to the pre-oedipal time when she felt safe and secure in order to move forward towards her dream for happiness and security.

While time is difficult to follow in Wide Sargasso Sea, there is a clear omission of narration in Rhys's novel between parts one and two of Rochester and Antoinette's entire courtship that distances the reader even further from Antoinette. Rochester's narration of part two seems to intrude upon Antoinette's own story and distances readers from Antoinette. His narration begins after their marriage has taken place, and by omitting the courtship and marriage ceremony Rhys eliminates possibility for Antoinette as her fate is already decided for her. As readers we never have the opportunity to hope Antoinette might get out of the marriage Mr. Mason 'arranges' for her at the end of part one because it has already taken place when part two begins. The opening line of Rochester's narrative emphasizes the decisiveness of their marriage: "So it was all over, the advance and retreat, the doubts and hesitations. Everything finished, for better or worse" (38). Antoinette seems to dream of de-individualization, merging with a greater force that will overwhelm and define her, and perhaps Rochester can offer her the comfort and security she dreams for by allowing her to merge with him. On her own she feels merely rejected, unloved, and excluded. Thus Antoinette seems lost to us and as readers we seem to wish



she could remain in the convent, but with her marriage already legal in part two, we can only hope for a happy marriage.

Rhys's sympathetic portrayal of Rochester is interesting because he is ultimately the one who locks Antoinette away. As readers we sympathize (at least initially) with Rochester because he seems different from the other fortune-seeking Englishmen in Rhys's novel. Although Rochester travels to Jamaica to marry Antoinette and thus obtain 'his' fortune, Rhys suggests Rochester is also a victim, a victim of the Victorian familial values that expect him to obey his father's wishes and inheritance laws that bequeath an entire family fortune to the first born. This marriage is also arranged for Rochester; he does not want to leave his home country and move to Jamaica, but he does so out of a sense of filial piety, which emphasizes the power the English system has over him:

I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks... Dear Father. The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. No provision made for her (that must be seen to). I have a modest competence now. I will never be a disgrace to you or to my dear brother the son you love. No begging letters, no mean requests. None of the furtive shabby manoeuvres of a younger son. I have sold my soul or you have sold it, and after all is it such a bad bargain? (41)

In allowing the reader to empathize with Rochester because he too is subject to the expectations of this historically specific time, Rhys demonstrates how filial piety can be hurtful to younger generations- an obstacle Jane never has to face because of her orphan status. Rhys also criticizes the laws, expectations, and values of this British Victorian society, something we realize Brontë never does.

A sympathetic Rochester figure also allows us to hope for Antoinette's dream; perhaps she will be able to connect with Rochester, merge with him. Initially he seems to empathize with her and wants to arrange for her to legally have some of her own money, something the Mason men fail to do. Rochester understands Antoinette was forced in to the marriage just as he was: "I'd remembered her effort to escape. (*No, I am sorry, I do not wish to marry you.*) Had she given way to that man Richard's arguments, threats probably, I wouldn't trust him far, or to my half-serious blandishments and promises?" (53-54). Although his perception of Antoinette's world is a distinctly English perspective and his judgment of her world is seems harsh and unwarranted, Rhys leaves room for us to hope that he might change in the secluded Granbois. Just as the newlyweds approach Granbois, their honeymoon home which is removed from society, Rochester observes Antoinette smile: "It was the first time I had seen her smile simply and naturally. Or perhaps it was the first time I had felt simple and natural with her... Looking up smiling, she might have been any pretty English girl" (42). Despite their cultural differences, when the newlyweds are removed from society there seems to be hope for Antoinette's dream. Perhaps the two can create the home Antoinette dreams of at Granbois.

While in Charlotte Brontë's text marriage is, for Jane, a dream of continuing her privacy, her autonomy, of separateness, which seems emphasized by the absence of sexuality from the final pages. Jane never doubts her marriage, therefore not allowing readers to question her progress; her marriage does not seem to threaten her individualism, and therefore as readers we too celebrate Jane's triumph. This marriage works for Jane, but Antoinette is not looking for individualism.

Antoinette seems to need more of a bodily connection, bringing her back to the pre-oedipal relationship between mother and child. She needs to connect and to be overwhelmed, and initially she seems to find this need through her sexual relationship with her husband. What Antoinette seems to both want and need is a return to a time before she could recognize a separate sense of self, a time when there was no clear distinction between Antoinette and the rest of the world, and sex allows her to physically merge with another being, therefore de-individualizing her, albeit only briefly. Her relationship with Rochester seems to be therapeutic for Antoinette, as he seems to meet her physical and emotional needs (or at least Antoinette seems to think he meets them). The connection Antoinette believes she has with Rochester seems somewhat healing initially. The comfort she experiences as a result of their physical relationship allows her to go back, to revisit the pain she experienced in her childhood.

Although Antoinette seems able to regress through her sexual connection with Rochester, her happiness seems unstable because he has the power to take this pleasure from her. As readers we are uneasy with their relationship. Rochester seems to recognize her needs, but he does not love her:

‘You are safe,’ I’d say. She’d liked that- to be told ‘you are safe.’ Or I’d touch her face gently and touch tears. Tears- nothing! Words- less than nothing. As for the happiness I gave her, that was worse than nothing. I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love. I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did. (55)

Rochester lusts for Antoinette, but that is not love. He seems able to provide her with a bodily connection, but he cannot love her. Although Antoinette seems to mistake sexual pleasure for love, she is aware that Rochester has the power to take this pleasure and the safety she feels away from her. She is financially, physically, and emotionally dependent on Rochester and she is somewhat insecure with this dependence because since he provides it, he also has the power to take it away:

‘Why did you make me want to live? Why did you do that to me?’

‘Because I wished it. Isn’t that enough?’

‘Yes, it is enough. But if one day you didn’t wish it. What should I do then? Suppose you took this happiness away when I wasn’t looking?’ (55)

Antoinette’s own recognition of and her uneasiness with her dependence on Rochester makes readers apprehensive about Antoinette’s happiness, about the de-individualization she seems to achieve through her physical relationship with Rochester.

As readers we want Rochester to love Antoinette because there seems to be no other possibility for her to achieve her dream; thus, David Cosway’s letter to Rochester disrupts this dream, bringing Antoinette’s family history (with her own history now included) back in to Antoinette’s life. Previously Rochester knew nothing of Antoinette’s past, but his reaction to David’s letter exhibits his ethnocentrism and his fear of miscegenation. David writes:

it seems to me that it is my Christian duty to warn the gentleman that she is no girl to marry with the bad blood she have from both sides... I hear you young and handsome with a kind word for all, black, white, also coloured. But I hear too that the girl is beautiful like her mother was

beautiful, and you bewitch with her. She is in your blood and your bones... but you, an honourable man, know well that for marriage more is needed than all this. (58)

David's letter raises Rochester's own fears, and afterwards Rochester and Antoinette's marriage is never the same. Calling upon the Christian values and morality that empowers Jane to resist Rochester in Brontë's novel, Daniel raises Rochester's fear of miscegenation. This letter confirms Rochester's suspicions of his marriage, his unease with the culture and lifestyle that is so distinctly not English.

Consequently Antoinette seems to suffer a sort of sexual crisis and attempts to regain her connection that Rochester now denies her. In refusing Antoinette the sexual pleasure that seems to comfort her, Rochester emphasizes her individualism. Aware of her mother, Annette's past, Rochester renames Antoinette to separate her from her mother. What he does not realize is that in detaching her identity from her mother's he moves her further from the pre-oedipal state she dreams of getting back to: "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name" (88). Therefore Antoinette turns to Christophine, seemingly the one part of her past life she can recognize, to help her. Christophine's advises Antoinette to do what Jane does- to leave Rochester, but in leaving him Antoinette would separate herself from him, and he is all she knows of her dream. Although Christophine tells Antoinette "If the man don't love you, I can't make him love you" (67), Antoinette is desperate and believes her obeah can help her, responding "Yes you can, I know you can. That is what I wish and that is why I came here. You can make people love or hate. Or.... Or die," (67). This crisis in their marriage seems somewhat similar to Jane's crisis of learning Rochester is

already married. Where in Brontë's novel Jane turns to Christian reasoning and values to guide her, such Christian justice does not seem to exist in Antoinette's world. It is on the basis of "Christian duty" that Daniel Cosway warns Rochester and subsequently disrupts Antoinette's world.

The third section of Rhys's novel opens in Grace Poole's voice, which locates her story within Brontë's text. Antoinette's fate is already determined, as readers of Jane Eyre we know she will burn down Thornfield. While Rhys stays true to Brontë's plot, she sheds a different light on the incidents that lead up to Antoinette/Bertha's end. As readers we now understand Antoinette/Bertha's behavior. Jane seems to view her as inherently mad because of her racial difference, whereas now readers empathize with Antoinette. All she really needs is love and to belong to something.

Reality seems too difficult for Antoinette to bear and she seems psychologically removed from Thornfield. Brontë's text asserts Bertha's behavior is madness, but in Rhys's text it seems to be more of a defense mechanism; she cannot accept this reality because it has nothing to offer her. Throughout her life, England has been a dream for Antoinette, and the narrative takes on a dream-like state in part three. Rhys seems to emphasize this sense by offering an even more fragmented point of view and sense of time. England, Thornfield, and Rochester are not reality; Antoinette just needs to wake up. Once again Rhys notes the absence of a "looking-glass" and Antoinette's inability to see herself, her place in the world she is in (107).

When young Antoinette returns to Coulibri Estate wearing Tia's dress, Annette demands it be burned, seeming to want to destroy the identity of the "white nigger" the dress seems to represent. As section three leads up to the eventual destruction of

Thornfield, Antoinette becomes more and more preoccupied with a red dress. This dress seems to represent her Caribbean home: “The scent that came from the dress was very faint at first, then it grew stronger. The smell of vetivert and frangipani, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering. The smell of the sun and the smell of the rain” (109). Antoinette holds this dress up to herself and feels afraid that “they had *changed* it when I wasn’t looking. If they had changed it and it wasn’t my dress at all- but how could they get the scent?” (110). The “they” she refers to here is the English, and Rhys seems to be alluding to their history of imperialism. Rhys emphasizes the coldness of the attics as the coldness of England, and Antoinette seems to draw a connection between her red, Caribbean dress and the warmth of the fire: “I let the dress fall on the floor, and looked from the fire to the dress and from the dress to the fire... it was as if the fire had spread across the room. It was beautiful and it reminded me of something I must do” (110). Thus, Bertha’s burning of Thornfield no longer seems to be the actions of a madwoman, but rather Wide Sargasso Sea helps us see is as one woman’s attempt to identify with something, to de-individualize her place as an alien isolated from society and to reclaim her Caribbean heritage and the warmth and comfort this identity seems to give her, which she recognizes in the fire.

### **Conclusion: Antoinette’s Progress**

In Jane Eyre’s progression towards emotional wholeness she does not seem to experience the psychological wounds Antoinette does. Jane’s individualizes herself by defining herself *against* the relationships in her life, *against* the structure that defines her world. Alternatively Antoinette, who experiences psychological pain from her

individualism throughout her life because of her inability to belong to something, looks towards de-individualization; she wants to belong to something, be a part of something rather than excluded from it. In Jean Rhys and the Novel as Women's Text, Nancy R. Harrison explores Wide Sargasso Sea as a dream text, and her praise of Jean Rhys's work seems particularly relevant to my understanding of her text:

Rhys's achievement is that she writes the dream collectively without sacrificing the compelling narrative device of an individual protagonist, that single voice we are accustomed to "trust," with whom we conventionally identify as we read. The only sure dreamer is given us, however, in our realization that in Rhys's dream, as described by Freud's general description of our dream-work, the full expression of the narrator and of the narration can be found only in the process of relationships that constitutes this woman's text. This process includes all the women in Antoinette's world and, by extension and example, all of us. (165)

Antoinette's dream can only be realized by achieving de-individualization by merging with the women of her childhood. I read Antoinette's burning of Thornfield as her return to the pre-oedipal state she longs for. Quite like Rhys's historical text, Antoinette's story cannot be separated from the "process of relationships" that seem to comprise her life and the people who hurt her.



**Conclusion:**

When I embarked on this project, I perceived Charlotte Brontë's central character, Jane, as a sort of feminist icon, but I could not articulate my reasoning for thinking so. This project was motivated by my personal response to Jane Eyre and my inability to understand why I seemed to admire Jane. Looking back, I have come to see that what I was responding to was Jane's voice, her ardent declarations of her desires, and I owe this perspective to Jean Rhys and her revision of Brontë's text, Wide Sargasso Sea.

The strength of Jane's voice and her ardent declarations drew me in to Jane's world and kept me there as she struggled to achieve a purpose, emotional tranquility. In Jane I saw a character who could articulate her wants, her needs, quite clearly, and who remained faithful to them despite the outside pressures and obstacles of the world around her.

While I now recognize my admiration for Brontë's heroine as responding to primarily Jane's articulation of her desires, I am able to still admire Jane as in my personal life I am struggling to remain faithful to my own desires and personal expectations, to challenge the obstacles- both material and emotional- that present themselves, even when those obstacles include relationships with family, friends, or lovers. As I prepare to graduate from and to enter the world outside of Colby College, find my as yet undecided future looming. With a degree from a prominent college and a promising resume, I am aware of what my family, friends, and even society seem to expect of me- a promising career, financial independence, health benefits. Although I am eager to burst the Colby College bubble and enter the 'real' world (the working world), I find myself struggling with my personal dreams and desires, particularly my dream of

being a writer. While my family and friends are all supportive of this dream, I am well aware that I need to be able to support myself financially while I pursue it. I am excited to enter the working world, having enjoyed the corporate internship I had this past summer, but I worry that I might forget about my dream of writing. As I attempt to understand and articulate my own desires, I find Jane's individualism and her commitment to herself particularly admirable.

As a writer myself I have found my analysis particularly interesting in ways I did not expect. Jean Rhys's revision emphasizes the importance of point of view and has called my attention to the point of view in my own writing. I recognize a rather limited focus in my own work now, and believe my ability as a writer is strengthened by this recognition.

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