
Deconstructing the Mad Wife's Character

According to Jean Rhys, “The Creole in Charlotte Bronte’s novel is a lay figure—repulsive which does not matter, and not once alive, which does” (Kimmey 113). In Bronte’s novel, *Jane Eyre*, the Creole character and Rochester’s deranged wife, Bertha Mason, is described as “purple face[d]” (Bronte 342), a “demon” (Bronte 351), and a “clothed hyena” standing on “its hind feet” (342). Additionally, Bertha is described by Rochester to have a “mask” instead of a face, “red balls” for eyes, and a body of “bulk” in comparison to innocent Jane Eyre’s humanly “form” (Bronte 343). While Bronte depicts her Creole woman character solely as a ravenous madwoman at “the mouth of hell”, Rhys chooses to take Bertha Mason out of the confinements of the attic of Thornfield Hall and depict her as an individual with a background, a narrative, and, most importantly, a life (Bronte 343). Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* deconstructs the stigma that is associated with Bronte’s Bertha Mason and shows another side to Rochester’s mad wife through the character of Antoinette, a girl who descends into madness because of her life-long isolation and destructive marriage to the Rochester figure. As a response to the demon-like and “not once alive” Creole character that Bronte construes in *Jane Eyre*, Rhys’ uses Antoinette as a means to give Bronte’s Bertha an identity; this humanizing process is done through defining Antoinette’s self through fire and light imagery, which signifies Antoinette’s passion as a Creole woman. Furthermore, Rhys creates this identity (that is fully matured and realized at the end of the novel) in order to emphasize Rochester’s role in Antoinette, or Bertha’s, descent into madness.

While Bronte chooses to omit the events that led to Bertha’s downfall, Rhys creates a novel that is both explanatory and empowering as it allows the madwoman in the attic a humanly representation. In other words, Antoinette’s personal narrative states and explains the events that lead to her fate as a mad woman confined in the attic of her husband’s English home. Additionally, Rhys places a focus on the issue of identity and how important it is to the overall plot surrounding the Bertha Mason figure. As a girl of European descent growing up in post-Emancipation Jamaica, Antoinette suffers isolation from society and her family. The first line of the novel expresses this feeling of isolation: “They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks” (Rhys 9). Although Antoinette is from a white European family, her mother, Annette Cosway, is a “Martinique girl” (from a French colony), which distances the family from the English colonists living in Jamaica (Rhys 9). Additionally, due to the Emancipation Act, Antoinette’s parents are no longer successful slave owners. In fact, according to Tia, the family is “poor like beggar” (Rhys 14) which leads the black community of Jamaica to despise them and call them “white cockroaches” (Rhys 13). As a member of a poor white family who had once owned slaves, Antoinette is not only isolated from her surrounding community, but she invokes shame in her mother; in Annette’s eyes,

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Antoinette is the proof of the downfall of the Cosway family. Due to the fact that she is never able to truly belong to any particular group, Antoinette does not know how to define herself—she is constantly looking outwards to the people around her. This method is problematic, however, because many of the people in Antoinette’s life distance themselves from her. Antoinette’s inability to obtain a sense of belonging in regards to her community, family, and, later, husband, leads to her eventual downfall. As Maritza Stanchich states, Antoinette “wrestle[s] with [her] identit[y] to the point of madness” (Stanchich 454).

Although Antoinette struggles with her identity throughout her shamed and isolated childhood, through her personal narrative, she is able to define herself through associations with various images concerning sun, fire, and light. For example, Antoinette tells her new husband, Rochester, “I was always happy in the morning...never after sunset, for after sunset the house was haunted” (Rhys 79). While Antoinette feels safe and happy when the sun rises, she is fearful of night, the time when darkness takes over. Additionally, Antoinette seems to be the happiest and in the best form when she is in the light. During his portion of the narrative, Rochester states that “the light changed her” and that he had “never seen her look so gay or so beautiful” (Rhys 82). Even after Rochester believes himself to have been poisoned by Antoinette, he describes her face as “smooth and very young again” (Rhys 83). He then adds, however, that this beauty of Antoinette’s must be a “trick of the light” implying that Antoinette’s beauty is deceiving and only visible in the light (Rhys 83). Rochester’s suspicious perspective of Antoinette’s association with light is important as it opposes Antoinette’s perspective. Antoinette associates herself with light in her narrative in order to define herself; Rochester’s suspicion of this definition that concerns his wife’s identity leads him to grow extremely weary and spiteful of Antoinette.

Rochester’s distrust of Antoinette’s happiness and beauty is what leads to the downfall of their relationship. As soon as Rochester hears of the madness that runs in Antoinette’s family, he views Antoinette’s passion (love, happiness, beauty) as threatening for its excessive nature. In this novel, excess is what Rochester fears above all else in terms of his relationship with his wife. According to Sylvie Maurel, “excess is naturally indigenous to the universe of *Wide Sargasso Sea*” (Maurel 159). Rochester’s uneasiness in an excessive environment is made clear during the newlywed’s journey to their honeymoon home: “Everything is too much...Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger...I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks” (Rhys 41). After hatefully considering the excess nature of the Windward Islands, Rochester thinks immediately of his new wife; the association of excess to Antoinette is expressed in a way that focuses on the threat of Antoinette’s assertiveness and dominance in her loved and natural environment. In other words, Rochester is fearful of Antoinette’s belief that she has “bought” him—that, through the fiery identity that Rhys has given her, Antoinette will become dominant in one way or another.

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Excess in association with Antoinette is also emphasized later on in the marriage through the character of Christophine: “It’s she won’t be satisfy. She is Creole girl, and she have the sun in her” (Rhys 95). Not only is Christophine explaining to Rochester that Antoinette has a passionate and excessive nature that will never be satisfied, Christophine is associating this idea of excess with what makes up Antoinette’s identity—the sun. While Antoinette is desperate for love as a consequence of her isolated childhood, Rochester will never be able to love her as much as Antoinette is willing to love him. Compared to Antoinette’s warm and emotional personality, Rochester’s identity is based upon a cold and hard surface. In other words, Rochester does not know how to love which creates a feeling of dissatisfaction within Antoinette. As a result, according to Maurel, Rochester “put[s] a check on excess” and “cause[s] tragedy to prevail over the idyllic world of romance” (Maurel 159).

Susan Lydon states that “Jean Rhys...deflate[s] the Victorian cult of domesticity by suggesting that Bertha’s madness in *Jane Eyre* is due to abuse from an English patriarch” (Lydon 26). Rochester, the English patriarch, is threatened by Antoinette’s bright Creole identity. As a consequence of this threat, Rochester creates a home that is “presented as [a] dangerous place that threaten[s] the female protagonist” (Lydon 23). Rochester’s threat comes in the form of an attack on Antoinette’s identity as a whole. Just as Rochester tires from the sunset, which illustrates “the distant sea on fire” and “huge clouds” that “shot with flame”, he tires of Antoinette’s own passion and identity. To cope with his disgust for the woman, Rochester renames his wife and gives her the name Bertha. In doing so, Antoinette’s fragile identity is “now under assault” with Rochester being the attacker (Stanchich 456). Additionally, Rochester is not only trying to stamp out her identity and the light imagery that accompanies it, he is trying to place his own identity on to her—an identity that associates itself with darkness. Throughout his narrative in the second part of the novel, Rochester is constantly “longing for night and darkness” (Rhys 102). In renaming Antoinette and insisting on the name Bertha, Rochester is making an effort to vanquish Antoinette’s identity all together; Rochester states, “She’ll not laugh in the sun again. She’ll not dress up and smile at herself in that damnable looking-glass. So pleased, so satisfied” (Rhys 99). In this passage, Rochester is directly relating Antoinette’s happiness and confidence with her tendency to “laugh in the sun”, or her ability to flourish in a bright, passionate, and excessive condition. More importantly, Rochester aims to hinder Antoinette’s ability to identify herself as an individual: “Here’s a cloudy day to help you. No brazen sun. No sun...No sun...The weather’s changed” (Rhys 100). While a “cloudy day” identifies the character of Rochester due to his hatred for the sunny and excessive climate of the Caribbean (the one place that Antoinette loves and understands), Rochester’s figurative removal of the sun implies a removal of Antoinette herself.

While Rochester is forcing his own identity onto Antoinette in order to “help” her (in other words, in order to extinguish any powerful sense of self that she has gained), Rhys is criticizing this imposing move as one of betrayal. As Rochester symbolically states that “the weather’s

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changed”, he is thinking of what Baptiste has recently told him: As Rochester angrily asks the reason for a cock’s excessive crowing, Baptiste replies, “Crowing for change of weather” (Rhys 98). However, earlier in the novel, Antoinette explains that a cock’s crow signifies “betrayal” by a “traitor” (Rhys 71). At the end of the novel, Antoinette seems to fully realize the vulnerability of her identity in the hands of her traitorous husband. In the attic where she is confined in Rochester’s home in England, Antoinette focuses on her red dress that Rochester had deemed “intemperate and unchaste” (Rhys 110). For Antoinette, the red dress serves as an externalization of her identity and reinforces her existence as an individual. Antoinette sees the dress as a distinguishing trait of her identity that is easily recognized by others; Antoinette tells her caretaker, Grace Poole, “If I had been wearing my red dress Richard would have known me” (Rhys 110). As a symbol of passion, sexuality, and love, the red dress invokes the same feelings in Rochester that Antoinette does—bitterness and resentment. Understanding how Rochester copes with these negative feelings, Antoinette, in her questionable state of mind, is paranoid that Rochester and his accomplice, Grace Pool, “changed it” when she “wasn’t looking” (Rhys 110). In other words, Antoinette is fearful that her identity is being compromised once again by an outsider. While Rhys leaves this idea of betrayal ambiguous throughout the novel, Rochester’s eagerness to completely erase Antoinette’s identity indicates his role as a traitor in terms of his marriage to Antoinette. This act of betrayal is significant in identifying Antoinette and, later, Bertha Mason, the mad woman in the attic, because it places blame on the Rochester figure.

Lydon describes Rochester and Antoinette’s home as a “menacing place” that “serve[s] as [a] catalyst for female agency” (Lydon 25). Due to Rochester’s betrayal of Antoinette’s identity, Antoinette is forced to either “suffer abuse or leave home, abandoning [her] role as angel of the hearth” (Lydon 23). Antoinette, a vibrant girl from the tropics, surely never fit Rochester’s idea of an “angel of the house” figure. Consequently, by the end of the novel, Antoinette does not have any kind of ideology to bind her to Rochester’s home. In fact, Rochester and Antoinette’s marriage is so dismantled that Antoinette only refers to her husband as “that man” (Rhys 110). Although *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not present a protagonist who prevails against adversity in a typically heroic way, at the end of the novel, Antoinette is able to “conjure her own destiny” and “take control for the first time” (Stanchich 457). In the last scene of the novel, Antoinette’s “beautiful” red dress that “spread[s] across the room” like fire reminds her of something that she “must do” (Rhys 111).

Antoinette’s dream emphasizes and further explains this necessary act: in order to regain control of her identity and assert “female agency”, Antoinette must set Rochester’s home on fire, or dominantly assert her identity onto the antagonist (Lydon 25). Additionally, Antoinette must escape the cold English home and find refuge in an afterlife based on her tropical childhood experiences. In order to achieve this dominance and escape to an “ideal world” and a “modern Eden”, Antoinette must be sure of her identity, existence, and purpose (Maurel 157).

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Out of the attic and armed with a lit candle, Antoinette states, “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage” (Rhys 112). In this instance and for the first time, Antoinette is able to find enough strength to shield herself from a “draught”, or anything that aims to extinguish her fiery identity. Also, Antoinette is finally comfortable with who she is and she is willing to use her identity as a “light” that guides her through adversity.

For the majority of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette is a “product of a childhood that has robbed her of capacity for strength, allowing Rochester to break an already broken spirit” (Stanchich 457). At the end of the novel, though, Antoinette finds strength through the discovery and acceptance of an identity, or a reinforcement of existence. For the first time, Antoinette is not reliant on outside perspectives to define who she is. Through an acceptance of her passionate yet “broken” self, the protagonist of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is able to find meaning in an isolated life and an abused identity in order to assert dominance over her own destiny. Antoinette’s final act of “agency” parallels Rhys’ aim to define the mad woman in the attic (Lydon 25). Just as Antoinette validates her existence through fire and light imagery, Rhys validates Brontë’s Bertha Mason as a human and as a woman through personal narrative. While Brontë defines Bertha through her husband and through *Jane Eyre* (a complete outsider), Rhys gives Bertha a voice and the chance to gain a fleshed-out identity. Taken out of the dark, Bertha Mason’s character is revised and given a bright identity that has the ability to earn understanding and validation. Because of this revision, the grotesque figure imprisoned in the cold and dark attic of Thornfield Hall is given an explanation; Brontë’s narrative, in terms of the character of Bertha, is then seen as one-dimensional and restricting. In other words, Brontë confines women to a very specific set of behaviors while Rhys provides a sympathetic justification for the passionate Caribbean woman in the attic.

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