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"A DISTORTING MIRROR": WIDE SARGASSO SEA AND JANE EYRE

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Ford Madox Ford said of his protégée Jean Rhys that she had a "passion for stating the case of the underdog." Nowhere is this more apparent than in her fifth and last novel, Wide Sargasso Sea (1966). Having brooded for years over Charlotte Brontë's figure of the Creole madwoman Bertha Mason, Rhys determined to give voice to what is silent in Jane Eyre: as her heroine Antoinette declares, "there is always the other side, always." Rhys allows Antoinette (her name for Bertha Mason) to tell her own story and paints a convincing portrait of the "other side" of Brontë's narrative: what really might have happened in the years preceding and immediately following Mr. Rochester's first marriage in Jamaica.

One critic declared that she wished Rhys had returned to writing "with an aspect of life she has observed and experienced rather than by annotating Charlotte Brontë." This statement quite misses the mark, for the genius of Wide Sargasso Sea lies precisely in the way Rhys is able to transform the stuff of her own experience of childhood in the West Indies and adulthood in England to mesh perfectly with Brontë's experience of Victorian England: once written the novel seems an inevitability. As a West Indian writer working from a twentieth-century perspective, Rhys was able to throw into relief assumptions and values underlying Brontë's work which Brontë herself perhaps accepted unconsciously: attitudes of imperialist England towards her colonies, for instance.

In this study I examine the similarities between the novels: both authors use Romantic imagery and adopt a Romantic style of writing in which the natural world is a reflection of inner states of being and feeling, a commentary upon the novel's characterization and action. This apparent similarity masks a vast difference in outlook between the two novels: Rhys takes Brontë's Romantic symbols and turns them upside down. Unlike Jane Eyre, with its impulses toward the Romantic and the Victorian, Wide Sargasso Sea has an outlook neither Victorian nor ultimately Romantic, but more modern.

Rhys's most original contribution to the Jane Eyre story lies in her characterization of Edward Rochester; in this thesis I focus in particular on his reaction to his West Indian surroundings and his relationship with Antoinette as it typifies the gulf between "England" and the "West Indies" in Rhys's symbology.
"You imagine the carefully-pruned, shaped thing that is presented to you is truth. That is just what it isn’t. The truth is improbable, the truth is fantastic; it’s in what you think is a distorting mirror that you see the truth." (Jean Rhys, Good Morning, Midnight)

Like her heroine Sasha Jansen in Good Morning, Midnight, Jean Rhys was concerned with the deceptive nature of appearances: truth is a multi-faceted, enigmatic quarry. Upon reading Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre when she first arrived in England at the age of sixteen, Rhys admitted to being quite shocked and annoyed at Brontë’s literary treatment of Mr. Rochester’s first wife, the Creole madwoman Bertha Mason. The improbability of the figure, Rhys believed, resided not in the fact of Rochester and Bertha’s ill-advised marriage, which was entirely too probable at that time, but in Brontë’s depiction of the bestial Bertha (who Rhys renames Antoinette, her middle name in Jane Eyre) and her cruel incarceration. As Rhys declared to Francis Wyndham,

...I, reading it later, and often, was vexed at her portrait of the "paper tiger" lunatic, the all wrong creole scenes, and above all by the real cruelty of Mr. Rochester. After all, he was a very wealthy man and there were many kinder ways of disposing of (or hiding) an unwanted wife--I heard the true story of one--and the man behaved very differently....

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 (very tiresome no doubt) would soon once in kind England be Address Unknown. So gossip. So a legend.
Having brooded over *Jane Eyre* for years, Rhys felt compelled—"I had to write the book" (*Letters* 262)—to offer her version of the story as it might have been. Her attempt to redeem "lost Antoinette" resulted, of course, in her last and most powerful novel—the haunting, elliptic *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966).

Critics have questioned whether Rhys’s work can exist in its own right or solely as a dependent of *Jane Eyre*. Background knowledge of Brontë’s novel is undeniably useful but not essential, as an uninformed reader may read the whole of *Wide Sargasso Sea* without realizing any such link and still appreciate its literary merit. More to the point is the surprising effect *Wide Sargasso Sea* has on its predecessor. Discussing the relation between the two novels, Ellen Friedman quotes Maurice Blanchot in his essay "Littérature et le droit à la mort" ("Literature and the Right to Death") in which he declares that a "work exists only when it has become [a] public, alien reality, made and unmade by colliding with other realities." Upon publication *Wide Sargasso Sea* irretrievably altered Brontë’s text: *Jane Eyre* could never be the same, as any reader who re-reads that work after finishing Rhys’s will attest.

Rhys holds up a "distorting mirror" to Brontë’s carefully shaped world of Victorian England to proclaim the truth of her own fictive world—a wild and sometimes sinister reflection of Brontë’s. Where *Jane Eyre* is written within a Christian framework of ultimate order and benevolence, Rhys’s mirror universe is one of indifference and even cruelty. *Jane Eyre* and Mr. Rochester live happily ever after in a world that provides restitution for their suffering, but Antoinette
and Rochester’s legacy is only a sense of unassuagable loss. In their world nothing can be known for certain, and they exist in a dream-like confusion of what is real and unreal—endlessly, futilely searching for truth. Imprisoned in Thornfield’s attic, Antoinette cannot reconcile her version of reality with what others tell her: "As I walk along the passages I wish I could see what is behind the cardboard. They tell me I am in England but I don’t believe them."

Like Antoinette, Rhys searches for the truth behind appearances, for the real story behind Brontë’s world "made of cardboard" (180)—a clever allusion, perhaps, to the physical book *Jane Eyre*, as one critic has noted (Friedman 118), but more relevant to Rhys’s desire to expose *Jane Eyre’s* hidden assumptions.

A study of *Wide Sargasso Sea* throws into relief values and assumptions underlying Brontë’s Victorian mores which Brontë herself perhaps accepted unquestioningly: attitudes of imperialist England towards her colonies, racial prejudice, or the extreme polarization of Victorian sexual roles and ideals, for example. Just as importantly, Rhys deflates Brontë’s romanticism with a masterful touch and shows the truth of what could happen when a Byronic hero runs astray: when man’s desire to possess and dominate is unrestrained. In Brontë’s England order and moral responsibility temper Romantic energy: Jane is Mr. Rochester’s "good angel" who, he believes, is the "instrument for his cure."

Rhys’s West Indian world is correspondingly one of Brontëan intensity and passion but devoid of any checks on these qualities.
For Rhys, her Dominican home upon which she modelled the island in *Wide Sargasso Sea* remained above all a place of violence: "a lovely, lost and magic place but, if you understand, a violent place. (Perhaps there is violence in all magic and all beauty--but there--very strong)" (*Letters* 269). The West Indian islands in *Wide Sargasso Sea* are a curious mixture of violence and overwhelming lassitude. After the Emancipation Act of 1833, Antoinette tells us, her childhood home had gone into decline: "All Coulibri Estate had gone wild like the garden, gone to bush. No more slavery--why should anybody work?" (19). This sense of lassitude permits the events of the novel to escalate until their tragic conclusion.

Rhys is drawn to Brontë’s Romantic imagery and philosophy but, conditioned by her childhood experience in Dominica and later adult life, she must question the Romantic and Victorian themes which inform *Jane Eyre*. Rhys does this by using the same Romantic symbols as Brontë; *Wide Sargasso Sea*, however, turns *Jane Eyre*’s Romantic symbols upside down: in her West Indian mirror, Brontë’s depictions of the sun, moon, Nature and Eden-like garden lose their benevolence. Remaining true to her life experience, Rhys explores the same Romantic and Victorian themes of *Jane Eyre*--concentration on the idea of "home," the search for a lost Eden, the importance of one’s childhood and past--but ultimately affirms neither outlook.

Rhys consciously chooses to adopt Brontë’s Romantic style of writing to her art because she had quite early developed a predilection for that period in literature. Like her predecessor, Rhys grew up reading Romantic literature; her
father's library contained works by Byron, Shelley, Keats and Scott. Of her tastes in reading David Plante said that "...she admitted, with no sign of great regret, that she hadn't read Balzac, Proust, Fielding, Trollope, George Eliot, James, Conrad, Joyce. She couldn't read Austen, she had tried. She had read a lot of Dickens. She had read, and remembered in great patches, the English Romantic poets, and Shakespeare." It is not surprising, then, considering her liking for that period and the tenor of Wide Sargasso Sea, that the only books mentioned by name at Granbois are "Byron's poems, novels by Sir Walter Scott, and Confessions of an Opium Eater" [sic] (75).

Jean Rhys like Brontë utilizes Romantic symbols such as the moon, Nature and garden in which the natural world is a reflection of inner states of being and feeling—a commentary upon the novel's characterization and action. Both heroines, very sensitive to place, project their feelings onto the external world and see Nature as a mirror of their own thoughts. As David Lodge has pointed out, speaking of the Romantic elements in Jane Eyre,

It is inconceivable that Jane Eyre could have been written without the Romantic Movement. The "gothic" elements so often noted by commentators on the novel—the Byronic hero-with-a-past, the mad wife locked up in an attic, and so on—constitute only a small part of Charlotte's debt to Romantic literature. Far more important is the characteristically Romantic theme of the novel—the struggle of an individual consciousness towards self-fulfillment—and the romantic imagery of landscape, seascape, sun, moon, and the elements, through which this theme is expressed.
It was Rhys's childhood in the West Indies that impelled her to write *Wide Sargasso Sea* and challenge Brontë's assumptions in *Jane Eyre*. More than anything, Rhys believed, her childhood in beautiful, exotic Dominica shaped the formation of her aesthetic sensibility and her adult self. "I think it does something to one to be brought up in such a beautiful place, to know nothing but that," she said in an interview. As a child she experienced a typically Romantic love of and wish for identification with Nature, as she explains in her unfinished autobiography *Smile Please*:

> It was there...that I began to feel I loved the land and to know that I would never forget it. There I would go for long walks alone. It's strange growing up in a very beautiful place and seeing that it is beautiful. It was alive, I was sure of it. Behind the bright colours the softness, the hills like clouds and the clouds like fantastic hills. There was something austere, sad, lost, all these things. I wanted to identify myself with it, to lose myself in it. (But it turned its head away, indifferent, and that broke my heart.)

> The earth was like a magnet which pulled me and sometimes I came near it, this identification or annihilation that I longed for.

Like Brontë, Rhys invests Nature with life, but her home is indifferent, uncaring—only acted upon, not reacting—and never the sometimes soothing maternal presence or sometimes admonitory but always active force in *Jane Eyre*. The identification or annihilation for which Rhys longs is never realized.

Antoinette, like her creator, loves her West Indian home--"because I had nothing else to love" (130)—but she also realizes its fundamental indifference. "It is not for you and not for me. It has nothing to do with either of us. That is why you are afraid of it, because it is something else" (130), she tells Rochester.
Though Antoinette feels alienated from her environment, as a Creole she understands it in a way Rochester cannot. It is not insignificant that Edward repeatedly associates his wife with the honeymoon island—Dominica, as Rhys mentions in her letters but never by name in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Ingeniously, Rhys plays upon the ambivalence in Victorian attitudes toward Nature and the feminine, specifically the concept of "Mother Nature." One of her most original contributions to the Jane Eyre story lies in her characterization of Edward Rochester and his relationship to Nature and the feminine as embodied in Antoinette and her island.

In Victorian iconography, side by side with the domestic ideal of womanhood—the "angel in the house"—lies its subversive opposite—the image of the demonic woman. In his essay "Woman Red in Tooth and Claw" James E. Adams discusses the effects of the claims of evolutionary science on the perceptions of Nature and femininity, as figures in the poetry of Tennyson:

In personifying nature, Tennyson envisions the subversion of the maternal archetype as an act of feminine betrayal. When Nature's maternal solicitude gives way to indifference, the male poet regards the withdrawal as an act of open hostility toward mankind....

Tennyson’s meditation upon early Victorian science thus draws much of its intensity from the exotic significance latent in the conception of nature as a feminine being....the figure of Nature identifies a new conception of the natural world with the enigma of a femininity that withdraws from, or openly defies, male desire....

She mysteriously withdraws the care the poet has come to expect, leaving him baffled, abandoned, and fearful: clearly this Nature incarnates that strangely tenacious and central theme of nineteenth-century literature and art, the demonic woman.
Rhys plays upon such a conception of Nature; in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as in some Victorian literature, "Mother Nature" is not maternal, not nurturing and thus is perceived by Rochester to be actively hostile. Antoinette justly tells Rochester that he is afraid of the place and even senses the genesis of this fear: a fear of the "annihilation" of self that Rhys longed for as a child. His fear is marked both by attraction and repulsion to Nature in its guise of enigmatic, alluring temptress. What he cannot understand and fears he attempts to possess and conquer--this failing, he must escape the island to regain his sense of control.

Both Rhys and Brontë accept this Victorian and Romantic identification of nature and the feminine and use it as an assertion of power. For Brontë, however, this entails no conflict between Jane and Rochester, between the roles of the masculine and feminine. Rhys, on the other hand, uses this identification of women with nature as one of the few sources of power left for Antoinette, as well as the basis for Rochester’s characterization in her novel; with great insight she anticipates recent feminist literary criticism and depicts Rochester’s cruelty to his first wife as motivated by desire to keep his masculine self autonomous at all costs.

Dismissing the conventional reading of nature poetry in the Romantic era as that of harmony between man and nature, feminist critics call into question this amiable relation between the male poet and the natural world and suggest that fear and mistrust is the cornerstone of their relationship. In her essay "Old Father Nile: T.S. Eliot and Harold Bloom on the Creative Process as Spontaneous Generation," for example, Elisa Kay Sparks discusses Bloom’s reading of English
Romanticism. She examines at length Bloom’s statement in *The Ringers in the Tower* that "Most simply, Romantic nature poetry, despite a long critical history of misrepresentation, was an antinature poetry..." (19). According to Sparks,

Through Bloom’s work there is a consistent opposition between nature, the body, and the senses (all traditionally and explicitly associated with the female) and the absolute imaginative autonomy he associates with the masculine strength of true poetic vision....the central choice of the Romantic imagination is between ‘either sustaining its own integrity or yielding to the illusory beauty of nature’ (*Ringers* 16)....The poet quests for a unity of self, not of self and other....

For Sparks, Eliot and Bloom’s emphasis on the autonomous nature of poetry--their "rage for purity"--only slightly disguises a "fear and hatred of the female/feminine as traditionally associated with nature and with emotions" (Sparks 70).

Rhys dismisses Brontë’s version of Rochester as commanding and strongly sexualized and paints her own portrait of a Victorian male uncomfortable with his own and particularly his wife’s sexuality. The young Edward Rochester is sometimes fearful, weak, petty, paranoic and, above all, avaricious and possessive. His mistrust of the feminine as associated with nature and the emotions is, Rhys suggests, at least a partial result of the strict demarcation of male/female attributes in Victorian England on the young Rochester. Priding himself on masculine logic and reason, he tends to suppress his emotional life. "How old was I when I learned to hide what I felt?" wonders Rochester. "A very small boy. Six, five, even earlier. It was necessary, I was told, and that view I have always accepted" (103). Rochester must keep his sense of self intact at all costs, and that necessitates rejection of what he finds alien and "un-English." Rochester is able to lock away
his wife because, Rhys implies, he finds hate much easier than love, which would
involve opening himself up for union with another. Surprisingly, for one
determined to defend Antoinette against Brontë's text, Rhys shows pity for Roches-
ter, Antoinette’s captor, as well as his victim; Wide Sargasso Sea shows his loss to
be almost as great as Antoinette’s. "Poor Antoinette and poor Mr. R." (Letters
261) she wrote to Francis Wyndham.

By rejecting Antoinette and what she stands for, Rochester destroys one part
of himself. Rhys is implicitly suggesting, perhaps, an androgynous ideal--male and
female as one; in Jungian terms, one would say that Rochester needs to accept his
anima. In Jane Eyre Rochester likens himself to the "old lightning-struck chestnut-
tree in Thornfield orchard" (391); the symbol of the chestnut tree--the
"favourite Romantic image of organic life"11--is an important one for him. Brontë
describes this tree--"black and riven," with its trunk split down the center--as
follows:

The cloven halves were not broken from each other, for the firm base and
strong roots kept them unsundered below; though community of vitality was
destroyed--the sap could flow no more...as yet, however, they might be said to form
one tree--a ruin, but an entire ruin. (243)

This tree is split into two halves, yet still one: an entire ruin. Gazing at the tree,
Jane personifies it and addresses the splinters as living things, offering them hope
in their desolation, just as there is still hope for Rochester at the end of Wide
Sargasso Sea, fulfilled by Brontë’s narrative.
Wide Sargasso Sea is a novel defined by such division: opposition of sexes, cultures, races, and world views. Antoinette describes the convent where she went to school in this manner:

Everything was brightness or dark. The walls, the blazing colours of the flowers in the garden, the nuns’ habits were bright, but their veils, the Crucifix hanging from their waists, the shadow of the trees, were black. That was how it was, light and dark, sun and shadow, Heaven and Hell... (57)

In The Masks of God Joseph Campbell states that the patriarchal, anti-androgynous view is marked "by its setting apart of all pairs of opposites--male and female, life and death, true and false, good and evil." One of Rhys’s primary contributions in Wide Sargasso Sea is her examination of these pairs of opposites that according to Campbell are characteristic of the patriarchal, anti-androgynous world view--especially the polarized roles of "masculine" and "feminine" in the Victorian period, which Charlotte Brontë challenges but in some respects never questions. Though Brontë was unquestionably feminist in her concerns, her treatment of the matter differs in degree from that of Rhys. Brontë balances her heroines’ assertion of independence and demand for equal, "unfeminine" expression with an undeniable yearning for submission and idolization of her male characters (evident in Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe, for example, who declares of Paul Emanuel that "He was my king...to offer homage was both a joy and a duty"). Her heroes have their clear origin in the figures of her juvenilia, in which masculinity is equated with strength and power. Brontë’s men tend to be possessive and dominating towards her heroines, and at the same time they see
them almost as children in the need for protection. Rhys's heroines also feel the need to idolize their lovers, but her male protagonists are distinctly unworthy of such admiration; they are just as weak and fearful as her heroines and are incapable of looking after anybody but themselves.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rhys questions these oppositions she finds troubling in Brontë's patriarchal England, but even in her novel, where the power of the feminine in nature is celebrated, the distinctions remain. Even in the exclusively feminine refuge of the convent, "a place of sunshine and of death" (56)--the oppositions engendered within a patriarchal society still exist. The nuns can achieve a temporary victory over masculine dictates--the Bishop never stands a chance against the Mother Superior--but it is only one battle and not the war. "We do not know why the devil must have his little day. Not yet," Sister Maria Augustine sadly tells Antoinette. The latter recognizes that the convent is only a temporary stay against the forces outside; even there she has her dream foretelling the coming of Rochester, the man whose face is "black with hatred" (60). Such a place is not right for her: like Jane Eyre she longs for a more active life and other, more vivid kinds of happiness. "But what about happiness, I thought at first, is there no happiness?" (56). At the same time, however, she realizes that relinquishing the convent means giving up her sense of security: "...I did not pray so often after that and soon, hardly at all. I felt bolder, happier, more free. But not so safe" (57). For the first time she resents the nuns' cheerful demeanor: "They are
safe. How can they know what it can be like outside?" (59). Outside she will find that evil is stronger than good, and that the power of the masculine world, represented by Rochester, cannot be overruled.

Rhys sets the forces of good and evil in conscious opposition: the "good," represented by Christophine's voice, and the "evil," represented by the voice of Daniel Cosway, battle for Rochester's soul. In a dream-like passage towards the end of the novel Rochester hears the words of both echoing in his thoughts, but it is Daniel's words that he hears last, and Daniel's victory. In Smile Please Rhys tells us of her conviction that good and evil were wholly disparate things: "I finally arrived at the certainty that the Devil was quite as powerful as God, perhaps more so. An unconscious Manichee. I didn't believe, as I read, that it was two faces of the same thing. It was a fight between the two and the Devil was responsible for everything that had gone wrong" (82). In this novel "the devil prince of this world," (18) in the servant Godfrey's words: even Christophine (the overtones of "Christ" in her name are unmistakable) must give up the battle.

Antoinette and Rochester stand at the nexus of these oppositions because they are part of a larger opposition: that of England and the West Indies. There can be no reconciliation between husband and wife, each shaped by and identified with their home island, in part because the gulf between the two places is too wide. For Rhys place was very important ("The place I live in is terribly important to me, it always has been..." (134) she writes in Smile Please) and figures obsessively in her art. Of her heroine in After Leaving Mr. MacKenzie Rhys writes that "It
was always places that she thought of, not people" (239). Likewise Rhys had said that "People have always been shadows to me, and are more and more" (Plante 269); "I see them [others] as trees walking" (Smile Please 131). Like Charlotte Brontë, whose first and last novels revolve around the clash of disparate cultures (Brussels/England), much of Rhys's art evolved under the impetus of the shock of the move to England from Dominica.

Rhys could never reconcile place and identity; for her changing the place where she lived was almost like a rebirth, like becoming someone else. Her heroine Anna Morgan (Voyage in the Dark), Antoinette's precursor and spiritual sister in many respects, describes her move to England and abrupt feeling of disassociation in one simple sentence: "A curtain fell and then I was here" (9).

It was almost like being born again. The colours were different, the smells different, the feeling things gave you right down inside yourself was different. Not just the difference between heat, cold; light, darkness; purple, grey. But a difference in the way I was frightened and the way I was happy...

Sometimes it was as if I were back there and if England were a dream. At other times England was the real thing and out there was the dream, but I could never fit them together. (Voyage in the Dark 3)

These words of Anna might well have been those of the novel's author, who shared Anna's feelings about her West Indian childhood home and adult life in England. In an interview in The Paris Review Rhys described the difficulty of reconciling her memories of the two places, and especially of painting an "objective" picture of reality for her autobiography. "Reality is what I remember. You can push onto reality what you feel. Just as I felt that I disliked England so much. It was my
feeling which made me dislike it. Now I make a lot of the nice part of the Indies, and I've sort of more or less forgotten the other part...."¹³

In her last novel "the other part" comes into play with disturbing force. Her description of Antoinette's childhood at Coulibri dismisses the Romantic notion of childhood as a time of innocence, wisdom and belonging. Despite her nostalgia about her childhood, Rhys could not be otherwise than honest in her writing. "When you are a child you are yourself and you know and see everything prophetically. And then suddenly something happens and you stop being yourself; you become what others force you to be. You lose your wisdom and your soul." (ALMM 325). This sanguine view of childhood wisdom is followed by a passage detailing childhood terror, of being "afraid about nothing," as if Rhys could not leave such a statement unqualified. In Wide Sargasso Sea even this degree of optimism is dispelled. As a child Antoinette is not certain of who she is: "Watching the red and yellow flowers in the sun thinking of nothing, it was as if a door opened and I was somewhere else, something else. Not myself any longer" (28).

"The child is father of the man" Wordsworth wrote, and in this environment it is not surprising that Antoinette possesses a fragmented sense of identity; she lacks the firm sense of self necessary to resist Rochester's manipulation of her. In this respect she is manifestly different from Jane Eyre who, though she occasionally experiences a strange dislocation of identity, adamantly resists all forces seeking to make her what she is not. We can see very strongly the child in
the adult: both are passionate and guided by feeling, but the latter has learned that passion must be tempered with reason and judgment. Even as a child, Jane had found, ungoverned passion left her with a bitter taste. After an encounter with Mrs. Reed, she compares her mind under the stimulus of passion and desire for vengeance to a "ridge of lighted heath, alive, glancing, devouring"; afterwards, the "same ridge, black and blasted after the flames are dead" (32) would have represented as fittingly her subsequent condition.

Antoinette’s passivity, fears, and introversion as an adult result in part from the unnaturally secluded existence she lives as a child before her mother’s second marriage. "I cannot have stressed the poverty and isolation of that family at Coulibri (round about 1834--Emancipation time etc) enough. They would not be able to get to Spanish Town--far less to Grandbois..." Rhys writes to Diana Athill (Letters 232). Antoinette and her mother remain isolated in the midst of two cultures and two races, neither identified with nor wholly excluded from either. They are resented and hated by the blacks and shunned by the English as not being one of them. Even the other Jamaican Creoles exclude them because Antoinetta is from Martinique and far too beautiful. "The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother," Antoinette tells us, "‘because she pretty like pretty self’ Christophine said" (17). Antoinette attempts to explain her position to her husband after overhearing Amélie’s mocking remarks:

It was a song about a white cockroach. That’s me. That’s what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I’ve heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I
often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all. (102)

The young girl lives in a constant state of fear, uneasily aware of the ex-slaves’ hatred—a fear which is justified when Coulibri goes up in flames (an event drawn from Rhys’s memory of her own grandfather’s estate house fired by freed slaves in the 1830’s).

In this atmosphere it is not surprising that images of betrayal predominate in Wide Sargasso Sea, beginning with the rock thrown by Tia, her childhood friend, and Antoinette’s dreams of the stranger who hated her, a premonition of Rochester’s ultimate betrayal of her love and confidence in him. "I am safe," she would lie in bed trying to convince herself, "There is the corner of the bedroom door and the friendly furniture. There is the tree of life in the garden and the wall green with moss. The barrier of the cliffs and the high mountains. And the barrier of the sea. I am safe. I am safe from strangers" (27). Rhys ironically takes this image of the sea from Brontë’s novel: ominously she echoes Jane’s regret (at the thought of her proposed voyage to Ireland) that the sea will be a barrier. "From what, Jane?" asks Rochester. And she replies "From England and from Thornfield: and...From you, sir" (Jane Eyre 220). Unfortunately for Antoinette, the sea will not prove an obstacle for her future husband. The young Antoinette realizes the next morning that her sense of security was false: "...nothing would be the same. It would change and go on changing" (27). Menace lurks even in the familiar surroundings of Antoinette’s home; in the
understated manner in which she excels, Rhys draws images that obliquely suggest that the face of the unknown and threatening and the face of the familiar are sometimes identical. The author links in the minds of her protagonists objects that have no logical or obvious association to heighten the atmosphere of danger and betrayal: the episode of the letter and the false teeth in *Voyage in the Dark*, for example, or Antoinette's description of Christophine's room. Despite the room's familiar trappings, the pictures of the Holy Family and the prayer for a happy death, the bright patchwork counterpane, the broken-down clothes press and old rocking chair, Antoinette tells us:

Yet one day when I was waiting there I was suddenly very much afraid. The door was open to the sunlight, someone was whistling near the stables, but I was 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. (31)

Rhys cleverly alludes to Emily Brontë's mention of a black press in Catherine's episode of delirium in *Wuthering Heights*; Antoinette's fear is very much akin to Catherine's fear of the unknown in the guise of the familiar.

Danger lurks in Nature's bounty as well, though its origin is not immediately ascertainable: the octopus orchid in their garden, Antoinette tells us, was a "bell-shaped mass of white, mauve, deep purples, wonderful to see. The scent was very sweet and strong. I never went near it" (19). Rhys uses this symbol of the garden to contrast Antoinette's family with the Victorian idea of home and order which
runs throughout *Jane Eyre*, also epitomized by the garden of the Rochester estate; she depicts Coulibri’s "Garden of Eden" in conscious opposition to Thornfield’s "sheltered and Eden-like" (*JE* 217) orchard. Brontë’s garden is fragrant with the scent of "sweet briar and southernwood, jasmine, pink, and rose" (218); partly enclosed, it is orderly, tame, and pleasant to stroll in. Antoinette says of their garden, on the other hand, that it

...was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible--the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell. Underneath the tree ferns, tall as forest tree ferns, the light was green. Orchids flourished out of reach or for some reason not to be touched. One was snaky looking, another like an octopus with long thin brown tentacles bare of leaves hanging from a twisted root. (19)

Rhys’s garden is exotic, lush, fecund, and intensely alive, with a serpentine, convoluted life that threatens to reach out and ensnare its observer.

Despite this suggestion of danger, Rhys infinitely preferred this uncontrolled wildness over a landscape more docile. Her heroine Anna Morgan in *Voyage in the Dark* echoed Rhys’s impressions of England as she describes her first glimpse:

...This is England Hester said, and I watched it through the train-window divided into squares like pocket-handkerchiefs; a small tidy look it had everywhere fenced off from everywhere else...I had read about England ever since I could read--smaller meaner everything is never mind--this is London--hundreds thousands of white people white people rushing along and the dark houses all alike all stuck together--the streets like smooth shut-in ravines and the dark houses frowning down--oh I’m not going to like this place I’m not going to like this place I’m not going to like this place.... (*Voyage in the Dark* 9)

Thornfield’s grounds are similarly described as "laid out like a map" (93). Gazing upon the view from the hall’s battlements, Jane finds the scene pleasing if not
remarkable: Brontë balanced a Romantic taste for the wild and sublime with a very Victorian love of order.

Charlotte Brontë was not immune to the pleasures of the domestic hearth; in *Jane Eyre* moments of domestic happiness appear sporadically amidst the general travail and are all the more valued because of their rarity. Brontë includes this quintessentially Victorian tableau-like family scene in Jane’s stay at Thornfield:

> When tea was over and Mrs. Fairfax had taken her knitting, and I had assumed a low seat near her, and Adèle, kneeling on the carpet, had nestled close up to me, and a sense of mutual affection seemed to surround us with a ring of golden peace, I uttered a silent prayer that we might not be parted far or soon...as we thus sat, Mr. Rochester entered, unannounced, and looking at us, seemed to take pleasure in the spectacle of a group so amicable.... (216)

Later, Jane relates with anticipatory pleasure her intention to clean Moor House from top to bottom, bake Christmas cakes, and keep up fires in every room in preparation for Diana and Mary’s arrival, much to St. John Rivers’ disapproval:

"I trust that when the first flush of vivacity is over you will look a little higher than domestic endearments and household joys," he remarks. Her reply: "The best things the world has!" (344).

In *The Garden in Victorian Literature* Michael Waters discusses in detail the significance of the Victorian concept of the garden as it relates to such Victorian themes of family, home, order and nature. To some extent, the Romantic taste for nature in its wild and untamed state declined and cultivation of orderly, enclosed gardens grew popular. In Victorian poetry, Waters states, landscapes
distinguish between "'antisocial' landscapes of isolation and retreat--'the great primeval wildnesses of mountain, sea, and forest'--and 'social landscapes'--gardens and other landscapes expressive of commonality and social values" (Waters 154). Gardens came to be viewed in relation to the domestic realm: as Waters tells us, "Since it is generally cognate with the domestic world--the sphere of paramount interest in nineteenth-century fiction as a whole--'garden' discursively associates with words like 'house', 'home', 'leisure' and 'marriage'." (Waters 149).

William Morris, for one, an advocate of the formal garden, believed that the garden should be an extension of the home: the union of house and garden should stand as a metaphor for the ideal relation between people and nature. Under ideal conditions, he thought, men are in control and "won't stand any nonsense from Nature in their dealings with her"; the best adjective to describe this state, Morris believed, was "trim," which can apply to the home as well as the garden (Waters 17-18). In Victorian literature only well-kept gardens could provide the backdrop for family scenes, Waters declares: unkempt gardens resist the picturing of the family group within them (Waters 233).

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* there are no such domestic tableaus: the dissolution of the Cosway family is emblematized by their wild, uncared-for garden--the garden of Eden after the fall. As a child Antoinette runs wild, under no guidance from her indifferent mother and deceased father. Man has no mastery over nature on her island but is controlled by it: Antoinette never goes near the overgrown garden. This garden, "large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible" (19), is an
unruly, sinister reflection of Thornfield’s Edenic orchard; it is Eden after the introduction of evil in the presence of the snake, when there could no longer be a complete instinctive harmony between man and nature.

Like Rhys, Brontë was preoccupied with the idea of "home": Jane, feeling like a "wanderer on the face of the earth" (JE 200), is always searching for what she can call home. She will find it, unlike Antoinette, in what she terms the "paradise of union" (JE 224) with Rochester. "Wherever you are is my home--my only home" (216) Jane tells him. Though Brontë and her heroine respect the creed of Helen Burns, Jane must reject it as unsuitable for her and find a home in earthly, domestic happiness. For Helen "Eternity" is a "mighty home": "I live in calm, looking to the end," (JE 51) she had confided to Jane.

One reason that Jane finds a home and the happiness that eludes Antoinette, whose circumstances are in many respects similar to Jane’s, is summed up in a single statement which elucidates the difference between them: "No net ensnares me," Jane declares to Rochester, "I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you" (223). "Your will shall decide your destiny" (233), Rochester tells her in agreement, and his words prove correct.

Antoinette, on the other hand, believes there is no connection between her individual will and her destiny: "It doesn’t matter" she fatalistically tells Rochester, "What I believe or you believe, because we can do nothing about it, we are like these" (127) and flicks a dead moth off the table. She is powerless to leave Rochester when she has the chance, as Christophine urges her, and is drawn as
inexorably to her fate as the moths to the candle. Like all of Rhys’s neurasthenic heroines, Antoinette is sometimes paralyzed by a nameless fear that has no explicable origin and is part of what she feels it means to be a woman: a "vague and shadowy fear of something cruel and stupid that had caught her and would never let her go. She had always known that it was there...Always. Ever since she was a child...with that fear you couldn’t argue. It went too deep. You were too mysteriously sure of its terror" (Marya, Quartet). Antoinette says simply, "I am so afraid...I do not know why, but so afraid. All the time" (116). This fear has one probable foundation in her mother’s imprisonment and sexual abuse at the hands of her caretakers, which would have impressed Antoinette deeply as a child.

Part of the reason, then, that Antoinette’s fate is so different than Jane’s (besides the fact, of course, that her destiny was predetermined by Brontë a hundred years before Rhys’s resurrection of her) lies in a fatal weakness in her character. But the roots of the problem, Rhys suggests, go deeper. Jane and Rochester can cross the "wide ocean of wealth, caste, and custom" (JE 221) that Jane said separated them, but Rhys’s sargasso sea of cultural prejudice is wider, impenetrable. As a West Indian writer living in England, Rhys was particularly sensitive to differences of place and culture. In Wide Sargasso Sea she picks up on certain assumptions of Brontë’s which the vast majority of Brontë’s audience would perhaps have taken for granted. Antoinette, for example, dislikes the sense of self-confidence and cultural superiority she sees in her English step-father ("so sure of himself, so without a doubt English" (36))--the attitudes of the colonizer towards
the colonized. Brontë had a certain sense of English superiority, evident in Villette, for example, and in Jane Eyre: to pick only one instance, Jane says of her pupil Adèle that "As she grew up a sound English education corrected in a great measure her French defects" (396).

As a West Indian Rhys did not miss the frequent negative allusions to the West Indies and tropical climates in Jane Eyre; Rochester’s description of the West Indies in Brontë’s novel, for example, is of a nightmarish landscape:

The air was like sulphur-streams—I could find no refreshment anywhere. Mosquitoes came buzzing in and hummed sullenly round the room; the sea which I could hear from thence, rumbled dull like an earthquake—black clouds were casting up over it; the moon was setting in the waves, broad and red, like a hot cannonball—she threw her last bloody glance over a world quivering with the ferment of tempest. (271)

"This," Rochester cries, "is hell! This is the air--those are the sounds of the bottomless pit!" He is only delivered from this hell when "a wind fresh from Europe" (271) blows in and brings him hope. What is hell for one is heaven for another: Antoinette also dreams of hell, but in her dream of being led from a forest, which symbolizes her home, to an enclosed garden, which strongly suggests Thornfield’s orchard, it is the latter, England, which is the nightmare. Like Rochester, Jane also draws unflattering pictures of warm climates as compared to England, her home. As she looks back on her decision to leave Rochester, for example, she wonders

Which is better?--To have surrendered to temptation; listened to passion; made no painful effort...but to have sunk down in the silken snare; fallen asleep on
the flowers covering it; wakened in a southern clime...to be a slave in a fool’s paradise at Marseilles—fevered with delusive bliss one hour—suffocating with the bitterest tears of remorse and shame the next—or to be a village schoolmistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the healthy heart of England?

(316 Emphasis added)

Similarly, to go to India with St. John, Jane believes, would have been equivalent to committing suicide.

Brontë must have had something against the West Indies, Rhys once stated, to have made the first Mrs. Rochester the dreadful figure she is. "Why should she think Creole women are lunatics and all that?"¹⁷ she wondered. For obvious reasons making Bertha almost sub-human lessens our sympathy for her and makes Rochester an object of pity, still worthy of Jane’s love for him. "This is what I wished to have," Rochester declares (laying his hand on Jane’s shoulder), "this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon" (258). Jane and the wedding spectators’ first glimpse of Bertha, this "demon," is described thus:

In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (257-58)

Who can blame Rochester? Rhys did, and places the full weight of his crime back on his shoulders by asserting in Wide Sargasso Sea that Rochester drove Antoinette mad, just as her mother was driven insane before her. He rejected Antoinette, moreover, because of elements in her nature akin to his own:
Rhys exposes the double standard of Victorian mores by making Rochester and Antoinette more alike than dissimilar. In Wide Sargasso Sea both drink large quantities of rum and both are passionate; the adjectives Rochester applies to his wife ("intemperate and unchaste" (270)) are equally applicable to him. Yet Rochester is not comfortable with Antoinette’s sexual appetite, which matches his own, once he has awakened it. This desire would not be seemly in proper white English women. Rochester is driven into a frenzy of jealousy by her beauty and, repelled by his own desire, tries to convince himself that she is promiscuous: "She thirsts for anyone—not for me...She’ll loosen her black hair, and laugh and coax and flatter (a mad girl. She’ll not care who she’s loving). She’ll moan and cry and give herself as no sane woman would--or could. Or could" (WSS 165). Antoinette’s "unnatural" sexuality makes her demonic, and propels her almost beyond the edge of sanity. "No sane woman" would so give herself. Rhys was impatient with the Victorian either/or mentality: either an angel or a fallen woman. "If there’s one hypocrisy I loathe more than another it’s the fiction of the "good" woman and the "bad" woman" (Rhys, "Vienne").

Rhys likewise develops hints of racial prejudice in Jane Eyre in Brontë’s assigning the role of the sexually abandoned madwoman to the West Indian Creole, and in her insanity coming down from her mother’s line, the Creole side. In Jane Eyre Bertha is described as dark-skinned; in Wide Sargasso Sea Rochester wonders about the possibility of her having mixed blood: "For a moment she [Antoinette] looked very much like Amélie. Perhaps they are related, I thought.
It's possible, it's even probable in this damned place" (127). He describes Antoinette's eyes as "long, sad dark alien eyes." "Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either" (67).

Jane Eyre and Rochester's marriage succeeds whereas her heroine's doesn't, Rhys implies, largely because of this one facet of their relationship that Brontë never questions: despite the difference in social standing and wealth between Jane and Rochester, they are of a kind because they are both English. Given a choice between the fair, grave English girl with her English virtues of self-control and chastity, and the dark, emotionally and physically unrestrained Creole, Brontë accepts as a given Rochester's preference for the former.

Rhys similarly underscores attitudes in Brontë's text that the casual reader might overlook by making the reader question more closely Brontë's glossing over of Rochester's faults and past sexual escapades. Brontë had obliquely suggested that the only reason behind Rochester's first marriage was sexual desire, and never love. (In Brontë's version he is even ignorant, at first, of her dowry of 30,000 pounds). He tells us that Bertha

...lavishly displayed for my pleasure her charms and accomplishments. All the men in her circle seemed to admire her and envy me. I was dazzled, stimulated: My senses were excited...she allured me: a marriage was achieved almost before I knew where I was...I never loved, I never esteemed, I did not even know her. (268-269)

Rochester then goes on to detail the history of his three mistresses, who he expeditiously got rid of after quickly tiring of them.
Rhys palliates the details of Bertha’s family history in her narrative (in *Jane Eyre* Bertha was the "true daughter of an infamous mother," Rochester declares,"...she came of a mad family--idiots and maniacs through three generations!" (257)) and underneath Rochester’s hyperbole underscores his self-pity and self-rationalization. In *Jane Eyre* both Rochester and Jane lay the blame for his faults on others or on outside forces: his faults of morality had their source in some "cruel cross of fate" (124), Jane believes, and Rochester similarly declares that "fate wronged me" (119). He attempts to trivialize his faults, calling himself a "trite commonplace sinner hackneyed in all the poor petty dissipations..." (119). His situation is anything but commonplace: it’s another human life that’s hanging in the balance, and his imprisonment of Bertha eventually leads to her death.

Despite her professed dislike for the character of Edward Rochester, Rhys gives him the chance to tell his own story, perhaps motivated by Brontë’s injustice in silencing Antoinette’s. "That’s only one side--the English side" she had said of *Jane Eyre* (Letters 297). In a departure from her previous novels she allows a first-person narration from a male character: in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Part Two, Rochester’s narrative, comprises almost two-thirds of the novel, with the other two sections, Part One and Three, devoted to Antoinette. The originality of the novel lies in Rhys’s explanation of why Rochester acted as he did: she shows his uneasiness and fear at being in the alien tropical island and details the effect the place and what it represents has on him. "I have tried to show this man being magicked by the place," she writes, which can have a "very disturbing kind of
beauty." He is also, Rhys suggests, "magicked" by Antoinette as well as the place--"the two are mixed up perhaps to bewildered English gent, Mr. R" (Letters 262, 269). Rhys takes him out of England's comfortably patriarchal society and sets him in the midst of her West Indian island, which in her symbology is female and Mother-identified. In her system England is represented by the male, Father, law, order, repression, cold and the color grey, while the West Indies are associated with the female, Mother, disorder, sexuality, warmth, and the color "fire red."

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* the emphasis is always on the mother: Antoinette associates her mother and her home in her mind ("my mother...was part of Coulibri and if Coulibri had been destroyed and gone out of my life, it seemed natural that she should go too" (133)) and when both prove indifferent, she seeks a succession of mother surrogates (Christophine, Aunt Cora, Sister Marie Augustine). Rhys identifies Antoinette with her mother by the same images (a frown between the eyebrows, sitting in a chair with head bent) as well as similar names and eventual retreat into madness. The honeymoon place, significantly, is property owned by Antoinette's mother, not father. Even its name, Granbois ("High Woods") suggests the female, the forest being an archetype of the feminine (Nebeker 147).

Helen Nebeker has persuasively discussed the implications of the name "Antoinette" for Rhys's heroine. In her study *Woman in Passage* she examines the transition from ancient female-centered myths to myths dominated by the
masculine, and the significance of this transition for Rhys’s art. In Nebeker’s words,

Rhys...has penetrated the dark, unconscious racial memory of a long-forgotten time. A prehistoric time when the Female Principle dominated. A time when the Sun-Moon-Sea-Mother goddess in all her manifestations was worshipped. A time when the Judaic-Christian patriarchal myth (which permits no goddesses) had not yet subdued the Graeco-Olympian mythology, which itself had absorbed or destroyed the more ancient Celtic religions of goddess worship. (Nebeker 78)

The name "Anna," which Rhys uses for one of her heroines (Anna Morgan) and which is a close relation to "Antoinette", figured prominently in ancient mythologies: in Celtic myth, she was the Sea-Moon goddess; in Hebrew myth, Anna (Earth-Sea-Moon-Mother-goddess) goes through various permutations to emerge only in the guise of temptress, the "mistress of fleshly corruption" (Nebeker 79), an attitude prominent in Judeo-Christian thought. Nebeker quotes Robert Graves on the importance of the name Anna in pre-Judaic-Christian myth: "indeed if one needs a single, simple, inclusive name for the Great Goddess, Anna is the best choice." 18 Much has been written about the existence of an early matriarchal society,19 and this idea of a prevalent female power has been very tenacious in the literature and myth of various cultures.

Wide Sargasso Sea has resonances of an earlier pre-Christian time when the feminine was celebrated for its creative power in fertility rites and goddess worship and not subdued by patriarchal constructions. The island is represented in images of fecundity, female sexuality, mystery and feminine power. The Christianity of the white European colonizers overlays something more primitive; in Rhys’s description
of Christophine's room the veneer of Christianity ("the pictures of the Holy Family and the prayer for a happy death" (31)) is displaced by the power of obeah, the native term for a form of black magic. The natives of the island are more attuned to the rhythms of the natural world: Antoinette's young black friend, Tia, is not alienated from nature's world ("fires always lit for her, sharp stones did not hurt her bare feet" (23), Antoinette enviously declares). As a child Rhys was jealous of the blacks around her, who did not labor under the necessity of following European societal conventions, especially the necessity of getting married:

They were more alive, more a part of the place than we were.... Black girls...seemed to be perfectly free. Children swarmed but Negro marriages that I knew of were comparatively rare. Marriage didn't seem a duty with them as it was with us. (Smile Please 40-41)

Rhys bequeaths this envy to her heroines: Anna Morgan, for example, says that she had always wanted to be black--"being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad" (19). Though Antoinette is educated in the convent in Christian piety and how to be "lady-like," the natural elements in her world take on tremendous, even religious overtones, and are almost a greater part of her world than the religious creeds she has been brought up with. "The sun at home can be terrible, like God," declares her predecessor Anna, who is very much similar to Antoinette. As a child Antoinette says that the smell of ferns and river water made her feel safe again, as if she were "one of the righteous" (33). The expressions of Christianity in Wide Sargasso Sea are glib and overly pious (Mr. Mason, Rochester) or focus on its vengeful aspect (Daniel Cosway's creed of "Vengeance is mine"); Rhys prefers
Christophine’s philosophy, whose attitudes are truly "Christian" in their New Testament emphasis on love and charity.

Rhys’s Rochester is peculiarly sensitive to these natural elements of Antoinette’s West Indian island which make up such a large part of her world and concept of religion, and finds them particularly alluring. Coulibri’s garden, as noted earlier, is lush, fecund, wild, and unmistakably dangerous and enticing. Its plants and flowers are peculiarly twisted and "snaky looking" (19). The association of Eve and the serpent in the garden of Eden is an obvious one. In a patriarchal world woman is the temptress, and sexuality equated with something evil and threatening. Snake imagery is predominant in Wide Sargasso Sea, associated with Antoinette as well as nature.

Rochester is both allured by and fearful of what Nina Auerbach calls the "mysterious, broadly and evocatively demonic powers of womanhood in general," embodied in the figures of the mermaid and her ancestor the serpent woman (Auerbach 94). Unwittingly, Rochester even describes Antoinette in an image with serpentine associations: "I watched her holding her left wrist with her right hand, an annoying habit" (127). To him it may be merely an annoying habit, but Rhys unconsciously, perhaps, portrays her heroine in a pose with deeper resonances. Her stance is precisely the same as that found in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s "Prosperine" - - a painting of a woman holding her left wrist with her right hand. In Rossetti’s paintings, Auerbach tells us in her persuasive Woman and the Demon, "these twining female hands move to the center of the composition, often giving the still
paintings their only movement.... Rossetti's "Prosperine" (1874) would be a virtual still life of woman with fruit were it not for the serpentine grasp of wrist with hand, then fruit with hand, that creates a gyre along which we move up to the face and hair" (48).

Antoinette’s primary association, however, is with the moon, with all its connotations of mystery, deception, and, from the name of the Great Goddess "Anna," with the matriarchal or female principle. "Do you think I have slept too long in the moonlight?" she asks Rochester (83). This same use of the symbol of the moon is found in one of Brontë’s novels: in Shirley the moon presides over Shirley’s vision of the appearance of a mermaid, as she describes it to Caroline:

...something is to rise white on the surface of the sea, over which that moon mounts silent, and hangs glorious: the object glitters and sinks. It rises again. I think I hear it cry with an articulate voice...a human face is plainly visible; a face...paleness does not disfigure...I see a preternatural line in its wily glance: it beckons. Were we men, we should spring at the sign, the cold billow would be dared for the sake of the colder enchantress; being women, we stand safe, though not dreadless....Temptress-terror! monstrous likeness of ourselves! (249)

In this passage the mermaid’s preternatural power is only potent over men; the women stand safe, though not unmoved. In Wide Sargasso Sea, similarly, it is only Rochester who fears the alluring beauty of the exotic island; Antoinette loves it because she senses the kinship between them and because she has nothing else.

The symbol of the moon in Jane Eyre, however, takes on an entirely different function--one of a myriad of possibilities in Brontë’s fiction for, as Robert Heilman has remarked, at times in her work the moon is almost a character. As in Wide
Sargasso Sea, the moon stands in a position of supreme importance in Brontë's symbology: a "symbol of the matriarchal spirit and the 'Great Mother of the night sky,'" as Adrienne Rich so termed it. The moon is consistently mother-identified: at Lowood, for example, the clouds part and the light of the moon, "streaming in through a window near" (6) shines full on the arrival of Miss Temple, a nurturing mother substitute, who to some degree had made the school a home for her. In Jane's well-known dream the night of her disastrous aborted wedding, she sees a light similar to that of the moon breaking forth from the clouds:

She broke forth as never moon yet burst from cloud: a hand first penetrated the sable folds and waved them away; then, not a moon, but a white human form shone in the azure, inclining a glorious brow earthward. It gazed and gazed and gazed on me. It spoke to my spirit: immeasurably distant was the tone, yet so near, it whispered in my heart--"'My daughter, flee temptation!'"

"'Mother, I will.'" (281)

This figure of the Mother/moon is protective of Jane, benevolent, and advises her in accordance with Victorian mores: a completely opposite approach to Rhys's association of the moon with the matriarchal spirit. The moon had similarly acted as a sign of warning on several previous occasions: on the night of Bertha's attack on Mason, for example, Jane awakens to see the moon "beautiful, but too solemn" (181)--at that moment Bertha's fearful shriek rents the air.

In another scene the moon functions as a disapproving commentary on Rochester and Jane's intended wedding in light of the first Mrs. Rochester's living presence. On the eve of the wedding, as Jane in her restlessness seeks the sanctuary of the orchard, the moon makes her appearance: "'her disk was blood-red and half
overcast; she seemed to throw on me one bewildered, dreary glance, and buried herself again instantly in the deep drift of cloud" (243). Jane does follow the motherly advice, does avoid temptation, and is rewarded by the "paradise of union" with Rochester, an earthly Eden. Brontë makes a similar association in Villette after Paul Emanuel's proposal of a life together, a Victorian happy ending: "We walked back to the Rue Fossette by moonlight—such moonlight as fell on Eden—shining through the shades of the Great Garden..." (Villette 591).

Brontë, moreover, uses the moon as an "objective correlative" of Jane's inward state; on the night before her wedding, excited and troubled by Bertha's nocturnal visit, Jane is seized with "hypochondriac foreboding." As she gazes the moon then "shut herself wholly within her chamber, and drew close her curtain of dense cloud" (244). At the heart of Brontë's Romantic style of writing, in which the pathetic fallacy and use of objective correlatives figure prominently, lies the image of the moon.

In Jane Eyre "signs may be but the sympathies of Nature with man" (193), as Jane suggests; Nature repeatedly comments on the action of the story (a storm sweeps over them after Rochester's proposal, for example) and mirrors the emotional states of the characters, particularly the heroine (a storm again matches Jane's inner turmoil on her pre-wedding night). After Jane leaves Thornfield and wanders distraught and penniless on the moors, she finds solace in the "universal mother, Nature" who seems to Jane benevolent and good. "I thought she loved me," said Jane, "outcast as I was; and I, who from man could anticipate only mistrust,
rejection, insult, clung to her with filial fondness" (284-285). In Rhys's distorted mirror image of Brontë's world, Nature is "something else," not for Antoinette or for Rochester: Antoinette, like Jane, associates Nature with her mother, but both are "indifferent as this God [Rochester] calls on so often" (130). This outlook is very different indeed from Jane's Romantic reading of God's presence--"His infinitude, His omnipotence, His omnipresence" (285)--in the night sky.

Rhys adopts this Romantic mode of writing in which there is a close affinity between the natural and psychological landscapes; her characters project their feelings onto the natural world and give it life, perhaps to counter the uneasy feeling that Nature is indifferent to their human affairs. In surely a sympathetic touch, Rhys gives Rochester something of herself: she invests him with the same Romantic sensibility and longings that she (and by implication Antoinette, her creation drawn largely from herself) experienced. Like Antoinette he is very sensitive to his surroundings, to feelings of places. In an exercise book Rhys wrote of her childhood in Dominica, of the inextricable union of the beautiful and the sad: "it was so intolerable this longing this sadness I got from the shapes of the mountains, the sound of the rain the moment just after sunset that one day I spoke of it to my mother and she at once gave me a large dose of castor oil."21 "Have all beautiful things sad destinies?" (86) muses Rochester? Rhys saw something in her home that she felt as a child: "There was something austere, sad, lost, all these things" she writes in Smile Please. She invests her island with her own quality of "lostness":
even as a child, she wrote, she had a "vague, persistent feeling that I'd always be lost in it [the real world], defeated" (Smile Please).

With great insight Rhys depicts Rochester's state as it might have been upon arriving in Dominica, at the beginning of Part Two. A stranger in an alien place, he is lonely, insecure, suspicious and completely dependent on his wife as a guide. Rochester projects these feelings onto natural and inanimate objects: as they ride along the road to Granbois,

A bird whistled, a long sad note. "What bird is that?" She was too far ahead and did not hear me. The bird whistled again. A mountain bird. Shrill and sweet. A very lonely sound. (70)

Rochester is uncomfortably aware that the woman he has married is a stranger to him, from a remote place. He only feels at ease when she offers him mountain water and, "looking up smiling, she might have been any pretty English girl" (71). His ethnocentrism is important in Rhys's re-reading of Brontë's novel and a crucial factor in the gulf separating husband and wife. Upon arrival at Granbois, Rochester identifies with the house as he first perceives it: "Perched up on wooden stilts the house seemed to shrink from the forest behind it and crane eagerly out to the distant sea. It was more awkward than ugly, a little sad as if it knew it could not last" (71-72). Rhys prefigures Rochester's getting lost in the forest, among the "enemy trees," and his wish for escape in this early description of the house.

Even then, upon his arrival, Rochester had felt the allure and menace of the island, experiencing a sensuous overload: "Everything is too much," he says wearily.
"Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near" (70). This is the Rochester of Jane Eyre who declares his preference for the winter world: "I like this day: I like that sky of steel; I like the sternness and stillness of the world under this frost, I like Thornfield...its old crow-trees and thorn-trees; its grey facade, and lines of dark windows..." (125). A wild place, Rhys's Rochester thinks of the honeymoon island. "Not only wild but menacing. Those hills would close in on you" (69).

The interest of Wide Sargasso Sea lies precisely in this twist on Jane Eyre's story of "enclosure and escape," as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have so termed it. Rhys's novel is not just another story of a woman confined and trapped in a patriarchal society: it is this, certainly (Antoinette's imprisonment is literally, most terribly, real), but Rhys's emphasis is on the character of Rochester. Like the walls of the room which earlier close in on Voyage in the Dark's Anna Morgan, the hills on the way to Granbois threaten to close in on Rochester, to suffocate him. Rochester is imprisoned within a feminine, matriarchal world. To keep his masculine self autonomous, he must reject integration with what is alien, "other,": Nature, the body, and all that is traditionally associated with the feminine.

Yet for a time Rochester is able to dispel his misgivings and revel in the midst of the sensuous and sensual. "Cloves I could smell and cinnamon, roses and orange blossom. And an intoxicating freshness as if all this had never been breathed before" (73). The couple drink a toast "to happiness." Rochester and his new wife share confidences (mostly on Antoinette's part), tell stories, and sing songs together.
Rhys shows that even Rochester can be gentle, can exhibit "feminine" traits of empathy and tenderness. Antoinette's eyes "were so withdrawn and lonely," he tells us, "that I put my arms round her, rocked her like a child and sang to her. An old song I thought I had forgotten:

"Hail to the queen of the silent night,
Shine bright, shine bright Robin as you die." (83)

This song to the moon is an appropriate one for them, for Rochester at this point has given himself up to the night, to the allure of nature and the feminine in all its mystery and enticement, as emblematized by the moon in the night sky. He scarcely listened to Antoinette's stories, he tells us, because he was "longing for night and darkness and the time when the moonflowers open" (169).

Fair weather succeeds on the island and lasts for week after week after week. "My fever weakness left me, so did all misgiving," Rochester declares. He spends hours at the bathing pool, loathe to leave its exotic, elusive beauty that is different from anything he has ever known:

It was a beautiful place--wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I'd find myself thinking, "What I see is nothing--I want what it hides--that is not nothing." (87)

Rochester wants the secret of the place, but only at the end of the novel will he come close to finding such an answer.

In a letter to Francis Wyndham, Rhys writes that Wide Sargasso Sea only "clicked" into place when her friend Diana Athill suggested those few happy weeks
for the ill-fated couple, before Rochester receives any letters arousing his suspicion about his wife's past and supposed deception of him. This was a happy suggestion on Athill's part, for it helps the events of the novel (and its preordained outcome) to ring true psychologically; Rhys recognized that hate or love can easily spring from shared intimacy, and that they are two sides of the same coin: love can change easily into hatred. Only if Rochester felt strongly about Antoinette could he have done what he did: his actions are not those resulting from indifference, especially in one who is not portrayed as an evil man. The Rochester of Wide Sargasso Sea is not the best or the worst of men, but somewhere in between. "If you imagine that when you serve this gentleman you are serving the devil you never made a greater mistake in your life," Mrs. Eff tells Grace Poole. "I knew him as a boy. I knew him as a young man. He was gentle, generous, brave. His stay in the West Indies has changed him out of all knowledge" (177-178). Once she allowed the couple a peaceful interlude, Rhys wrote, "I realised that he must have fallen for her--and violently too. The black people have or had a good word for it--"she magic with him" or "he magic with her." Because you see, that is what it is--magic, intoxication. Not "Love" at all" (Letters 262).

Though Rhys treats Rochester with as much understanding as any of the men in her previous novels (detailing his vulnerabilities in the face of the unknown), she soon returns to assigning him many of the qualities she associates particularly with being English and male. From the very beginning Rochester's materialism is evident; he thinks of everything in economic terms, including love and marriage.
"And the woman’s a stranger...I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks" (70). His careful concern with money is contrasted to the liberal, easy manner in which Antoinette dispenses the servants’ wages. The very first words of his narration, moreover, are in militaristic terms, which contrast oddly with the subject of his speech. "So it was all over, the advance and retreat, the doubts and hesitations" (65) he says after the marriage. "I’d remember her effort to escape. (No, I am sorry, I do not wish to marry you)....In any case she had given way, but coldly, unwillingly, trying to protect herself with silence and a blank face. Poor weapons, and they had not served her well or lasted long" (90-91). Rochester is reserved, secretive, ungiving of himself while Antoinette opens up her soul to him in an undeserved confidence.

Worst of all, for Rhys, is Rochester’s substitution of and satisfaction with physical lust instead of the reciprocal love that Antoinette imagines as part of their relationship. Rochester is quite explicit about his feelings for Antoinette:

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. (93)

Once having abandoned himself to the pleasures of the flesh, he abandons himself completely, careless of the pain he might inflict on his wife, with her romantic delusions. "Here I can do as I like," Antoinette says, and then he repeats it. "It seemed right in that lonely place. ‘Here I can do as I like’" (92). In his voice, though, the words take on a sinister overtone. In that place there is no restraining
influence such as Jane's "duty" or "reason" to stop what will eventually occur. Rochester and Antoinette abandon themselves to sensual pleasure until she has lost herself in him: "Only the sun was there to keep us company. We shut him out. And why not? Very soon she was as eager for what's called loving as I was--more lost and drowned afterwards" (92). Christophine recognizes what he's done and accuses him with it: "...you make love to her till she drunk with it, no rum could make her drunk like that, till she can't do without it. It's she can't see the sun any more. Only you she see" (153). Antoinette loves Rochester as passionately as does Jane, who like Christophine speaks of her love in imagery of an eclipse: "He stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun" (241). Antoinette longs for the kind of relationship her mother had briefly with her second husband. Antoinette's stepfather, Mr. Mason, was capable of loving his wife and uniting with her; as a child Antoinette watches unseen on the balcony the night they came home from their honeymoon and "danced on the glacis to no music. There was no need of music when she danced" (29). Seeing them in a moment of grace dancing to their own music--her mother leaning "backwards over his arm, down till her black hair touched the flagstones--still down, down" (29)--attuned to themselves and the natural rhythms of the island, Antoinette wishes for this same experience with her husband.

Just as Mr. Mason's complacent, restricted English viewpoint precipitates the trouble at Coulibri, however ("I wish I could tell him that out here is not at all like English people think it is" (34), Antoinette says), Rochester's dogged rejection of
everything un-English negates any chance of success for his marriage. In this failing he is joined by his wife, whose world is bounded by her own experience of life on her island; she is unable to conceive objectively of any other. "She was undecided, uncertain about facts--any fact" (87) Rochester observes, and indeed her perceptions of reality are shaped by haphazard associations and vague emotional prejudices. He is in some measure correct when he says that she thinks as a child:

If she was a child she was not a stupid child but an obstinate one. She often questioned me about England and listened attentively to my answers, but I was certain that nothing I said made much difference. Her mind was already made up. Some romantic novel, a stray remark never forgotten, a sketch, a picture, a song, a waltz, some note of music, and her ideas were fixed. About England and about Europe....Reality might disconcert her, bewilder her, hurt her, but it would not be reality. It would be only a mistake, a misfortune, a wrong path taken, her fixed ideas would never change. (94)

Rochester's observation is substantiated later in the narrative as Antoinette herself describes the manner in which she imagines England: "...England, rosy pink in the geography book map, but on the page opposite the words are closely crowded, heavy looking. Exports, coal, iron, wool." She wants nothing to interfere with her ideas about the place on which she pinned so much hope: "I must remember about chandeliers and dancing, about swans and roses and snow. And snow" (111). When she finally arrives in England, she will reject that which does not accord with her fixed idea of reality: "They tell me I am in England but I don't believe them" (181). Rochester's feelings about places, incidentally, have the same emotive associations, but he portrays himself as thinking rationally and logically--everything threatening to his viewpoint is "unreal": "If these mountains challenge me, or Baptiste's face,
or Antoinette's eyes, they are mistaken, melodramatic, unreal" (103). Antoinette had hoped to be a different person when she lived in England; instead, her fragile sense of identity collapses when her home, which she had loved "more than a person" (89), is taken away from her.

Rochester, on the other hand, though the island seems equally "unreal and like a dream" (80), recognizes all too well its very real danger. He is afraid of his own sensuality and the power of the passions unleashed, unrestrained. "It was at night that I felt danger and would try to forget it and push it away" (93), he tells us.

It was not a safe game to play--in that place. Desire, Hatred, Life, Death came very close in the darkness. Better not know how close. Better not think, never for a moment. Not close. The same..."You are safe," I'd say to her and to myself....Then I'd listen to the rain, a sleepy tune that seemed as if it would go on for ever...Rain, for ever raining. Drown me in sleep. And soon. (94)

Rochester recognizes the close proximity of love and hate and senses the primitive cruelty of the island beneath its beautiful surface. Like Antoinette, and all of Rhys's heroines, he tries forgetting and an unthinking passivity as a weapon: "Drown me in sleep." "The secret of life was never to go too far or too deep," declares Mr. Mackenzie in After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie (248). With great perception Antoinette understands his fear--in some respects she understands him as well as does Jane. As they talk in the house after he receives Daniel's letter, Rochester declares his intention of opening the window to cool the room. "It will let the night in too," she says, "and the moon and the scent of those flowers you dislike so much" (147). These same flowers--the "moonflowers" by the river--are the ones he had earlier
expressed his preference for, in his state of intoxication with the place and with Antoinette, again associated with the moon. Unlike his wife's passive weapons of "silence and a blank face" (91), however, he combats his fear with a male aggressiveness, determined to possess and control that which he cannot understand.

Rochester recognizes that he is quickly losing his power in this West Indian world, symbolized by the forest: the force of the unconscious, of a governing primitive "femaleness." Rhys details his helplessness in the face of "that green menace" (149) in his account of his trip to the forest:

...the light was different. A green light. I had reached the forest and you cannot mistake the forest. It is hostile. The path was overgrown but it was possible to follow it. I went on without looking at the tall trees on either side...How can one discover truth I thought and that thought led me nowhere. No one would tell me the truth. (104)

Rochester happens upon the remains of a paved road through the forest, leading to the ruins of a stone house overgrown by gigantic trees. Under a wild orange tree he sees bunches of flowers tied with grass. In this place he meets a little girl with a large basket on her head who screams and runs away when she sees him. Only when he returns to the house can he make sense of this event; picking up a book called The Glittering Coronet of Isles, he turns to the chapter "Obeah":

"A zombi is a dead person who seems to be alive or a living person who is dead. A zombi can also be the spirit of a place, usually malignant but sometimes to be propitiated with sacrifices or offerings of flowers and fruit." I thought at once of the bunches of flowers at the priest's ruined house. (107)
In *Wide Sargasso Sea* obeah is the West Indian counterpart of *Jane Eyre*'s tame English version of magic; once again the elements of Brontë’s story take on a more sinister aspect in Rhys’s hands. *Jane Eyre* makes reference to "elves," "fairies," and "men in green"; Rochester teasingly calls Jane "witch, sorceress" (131) and declares that "she comes from the other world--from the abode of people who are dead" (215). In Rhys’s novel Christophine tells Antoinette also that she looks like a zombi, one from the abode of the dead: "Your face like dead woman and your eyes red like souciant" [women who came at night and sucked their victim’s blood] (116). In *Jane Eyre* Antoinette is transformed literally into a vampire: she tries to suck Mason’s blood. Rhys’s Rochester is no longer in control of the situation, as he is with Jane; he is "magicked," as Rhys suggests in her letters, with Antoinette and with the place. In *Jane Eyre* Rochester asks Jane if, fairy that she is, she can give him a charm to make him a handsome man; Antoinette literally gives him an obeah love potion (prepared by Christophine) that makes him deathly ill.

The little girl Rochester encounters on his trip to the forest was bringing offerings to propitiate the spirit of the place, we must infer, and mistakes Rochester for a zombi. His state at the end of the novel is indeed a kind of death-in-life; he has the same kind of marionette quality he attributes to Antoinette. Rochester has no more control over the forest than did the priest; the forest and obeah triumphed over the priest and his Catholic religion. "I was lost and afraid among these enemy trees," (105) he tells us.
Rochester can only regain his power by returning home, to be among "English trees":

I drew a house surrounded by trees. A large house. I divided the third floor into rooms and in one room I drew a standing woman—a child’s scribble...But it was an English house. English trees. I wondered if I ever should see England again. (163)

He will see his homeland again, of course, and very shortly. It is only by invoking English "law and order" (160) that Rochester can leave the island and take Antoinette (and her dowry) with him, defeating Christophine, his last obstacle, who is determined to oppose him. "'No police here,' she said. 'No chain gang, no tread machine, no dark jail either. This is free country and I am free woman'" (160). Brave words, but ultimately untrue—Rochester then pulls out his letter from the magistrate: "I have written very discreetly to Hill, the white inspector of police in your town. If she [Christophine] lives near you and gets up to any of her nonsense let him know at once. He’ll send a couple of policemen up to your place and she won’t get off lightly this time..." (160). Relenting a little, Rochester asks Christophine if she would like to write to Antoinette. "Read and write I don’t know. Other things I know" she replies (161).

In Antoinette’s island reading and writing—especially the written word—are associated with power, with the patriarchal "Letter of the Law," as Christophine puts it. "A refuge," Rochester calls his dressing-room equipped with "a small writing-desk with paper, pens, and ink" (74). Only the English males in the story communicate by writing letters—Rochester, Daniel Cosway, Mr. Fraser, the English
magistrate—but even they have difficulty expressing themselves through writing on the honeymoon island; the effect of the place is apparent. It takes Daniel one week to compose his letter to Rochester; he describes his method of writing thusly: "I sit at my window and the words fly past me like birds—with God's help I catch some" (98). Rochester writes frequent letters to his father; his character is defined by his resentful relationship with his father just as Antoinette's is by her relationship with her indifferent mother. To his father Rochester writes of his arrival at Granbois: "It was difficult to think or write coherently. In this cool and remote place it is called Granbois (the High Woods I suppose). I feel better already and my next letter will be longer and more explicit" (76). His next letter is similarly brief, however, and the narrative makes unclear whether his letters even get mailed. "And I wondered how they got their letters posted. I folded mine and put it into a drawer of the desk" (76), Rochester tells us. He then declares that "As for my confused impressions they will never be written. There are blanks in my mind that cannot be filled up" (76).

If feminist critics have seen women's discourse as characterized by silence, gaps, and confusion, then Rochester's story is like women's previously. Imprisoned within a feminine text, his narrative grows more disordered, more irrational, and more like Antoinette's as the novel progresses. Elliptic, poetic phrases replace his more ordered, prosaic earlier statements in a dream-like soliloquy at the end of the novel, in which he struggles to decipher the "truth" that has proved so elusive. Rochester tells us that
Under the oleanders...I watched the hidden mountains and the mists drawn over their faces. It's cool today; cool, calm and cloudy as an English summer....

The hurricane months are not so far away, I thought, and saw that tree strike its roots deeper, making ready to fight the wind. Useless. If and when it comes they'll all go. Some of the royal palms stand (she told me). Stripped of their branches, like tall brown pillars, still they stand--defiant. Not for nothing are they called royal. The bamboos take an easier way, they bend to the earth and lie there, creaking, groaning, crying for mercy. The contemptuous wind passes, not caring for these abject things. *(Let them live).* Howling, shrieking, laughing the wild blast passes. (164)

Rochester, like Antoinette earlier, ponders the meanings of words, the tools of a poet's craft (as did Rhys, their creator: "Favourite words, and words I loathed" she writes in *Smile Please*): "Yet I think of my revenge and hurricanes. Words rush through my head (deeds too). Words. Pity is one of them. It gives me no rest. Pity like a naked new-born babe striding the blast" (164). Rochester must deny the values traditionally associated with the feminine--pity, compassion, empathy, nurturing. Though he succeeds and locks away Antoinette and what she represents, like Macbeth he has a conscience: "It gives me no rest." "I hate poets now and poetry" (164) he tells us. Reading and writing are losing their hold on Rochester; like Antoinette he believes that words mean nothing and "are of no use" (135), and those who know [the secret] cannot tell it. Shakespeare, an English poet, can give him no comfort here, where the passions are expressed on a more elemental level: the spirits of the place "cry out in the wind that is their voice, they rage in the sea that is their anger" (107).

Brontë similarly associates the passions with the elements of the natural world: Rochester declares of Jane that "Reason sits firm and holds the reins, and
she will not let the feelings burst away and hurry her to wild chasms. The passions may rage furiously, like true heathens, as they are...but judgment shall still have the last word" despite the "strong wind, earthquake-shock and fire" (177) that may pass by. Rhys cleverly draws on Brontë's statement that Rochester disliked the burning heats and hurricanes of Jamaica; her Rochester as a Victorian man is afraid of what will happen when the elemental forces are unrestrained. There is no "Reason" to guide the characters of WideSargasso Sea; when Antoinette gets angry she does so "Like a hurricane. Like a Creole" (Letters 263). The hurricane months are not so far away, Rochester thinks, and sees the trees making ready to fight the wind. "I tell you she loves no one, anyone," he says of Antoinette. "I could not touch her. Excepting as the hurricane will touch that tree--and break it. You say I did? No. That was love's fierce play. Now I'll do it...The tree shivers. Shivers and gathers all its strength. And waits" (165). Rhys gives back Antoinette some of her dignity by associating her with the royal palms that stand defiant in the face of the hurricane. "I'll say one thing for her, she hasn't lost her spirit," says Grace Poole. "She's still fierce. I don't turn my back on her when her eyes have that look" (178).

Rochester's voice in the above passage is almost identical to that of his predecessor in Brontë's novel, who speaking of Jane declares

...what good would it do if I bent, if I uptore, if I crushed her?...Whatever I do with its cage, I cannot get at it--the savage, beautiful creature!...Conqueror I might be of the house; but the inmate would escape to heaven before I could call myself possessor of its clay dwelling place. And it is you, spirit...that I want.... (280)
Rochester wants to possess the spirit of the place and of Antoinette, and when he cannot get at either she will literally die. At the end of the novel he is left with an irretrievable sense of loss: he hates Antoinette as he hates the island, for both are part of something he can never have. "Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it" (172).

Rhys suggests that it didn’t have to happen that way; as they prepare for departure, Rochester is seized with a sudden sense of sadness:

But the sadness I felt looking at the shabby white house—I wasn’t prepared for that. More than ever it strained away from the black snake-like forest. Louder and more desperately it called: Save me from destruction, ruin and desolation....But what are you doing here you folly? So near the forest. Don’t you know that this is a dangerous place? And that the dark forest always wins? Always. If you don’t, you soon will, and I can do nothing to help you. (167) (Emphasis mine)

Rochester’s feeling of danger and encroachment is at a peak here, as evinced by his urgent tone and complete projection of his feelings onto the house. He is talking, of course, about himself, and associates Antoinette with the "snake-like" forest. (Ironically, Rochester will end up at the manor house Ferndean, with its "dank and green" walls--"deep buried in a wood" (Jane Eyre 378-79).)

For one moment Rochester realizes the enormity of what is hanging in the balance:

...suddenly, bewilderingly, I was certain that everything I had imagined to be truth was false. False. Only the magic and the dream are true--all the rest’s a lie. Let it go. Here is the secret. Here...let’s make the most and best and worst
of what we have. Give not one-third but everything. All-all-all. Keep nothing back....

No, I would say—I knew what I would say. "I have made a terrible mistake. Forgive me." (167-169)

For Rochester the secret is giving completely of himself—the death of the self that would make possible the union of male and female as one. Though Antoinette’s world is still less real to him than his own ("magic and a dream"), Rochester has a vision of the possibility of true love between them. For an instant the allure of the "other," of Nature, wins out: "Yes, I will listen to the rain. I will listen to the mountain bird. Oh, a heartstopper is the solitaire’s one note—high, sweet, lonely, magic" (168). Yet looking at Antoinette’s hate-filled eyes he feels the "sickening swing back to hate" (170).

Wide Sargasso Sea doesn’t end in union like Jane Eyre; opposites are never reconciled. For Rochester there can be no union of self/Other. There is a victory of the symbolic in Wide Sargasso Sea, heralded by a change in Nature herself: after Rochester symbolically imprisons Antoinette (a stick figure in a room of an English house), the weather changes to "English" weather, accompanied by a cock crowing, presaging the change. "It’s cool today; cool, calm and cloudy as an English summer....No sun...No sun" (164, 166). Yet the triumph of his world is a Pyrrhic victory for Rochester, accompanied by the loss of one part of himself. The last words of his narrative are of "nothing" and of the "nameless boy" leaning his head against the clove tree and sobbing. This boy is Rochester as he might have been, weeping for what he had lost, before he learned to hide his feelings. "Who would
have thought that any boy would cry like that," Rochester says. "For nothing. Nothing...." (173). So ends Part Two.

Rhys wrote in a letter that she wanted Antoinette’s end in a way triumphant (Letters 157), and this is exactly how she tried to portray it in the very brief concluding section of the novel. In Part Three Antoinette, insane and imprisoned in Thornfield’s attic, wonders why she was brought there and who she is. "What am I doing in this place and who am I?" (180) she asks. Rhys’s victory for her heroine consists of a simple reclaiming of her identity—not allowing others to fashion who she is. Rochester had attempted to make her only a "ghost in the grey daylight" (170). "My hate is colder, stronger, and you'll have no hate to warm yourself. You will have nothing," he declares. "I did it too. I saw the hate go out of her eyes. I forced it out. And with the hate her beauty. She was only a ghost" (170). He is, of course, mistaken: Antoinette will warm herself with memories of her island and affirm her identity forged in the intense, tropical beauty of her childhood home. "I will write my name in fire red," she declared in Part One: "Antoinette Mason, née Cosway, Mount Calvary Convent, Spanish Town, Jamaica. 1839" (53). She realizes that "Names matter, like when he wouldn’t call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass" (180). Everywhere flames are suggested as the antidote to the cold grey oppressiveness of England. (Rhys wrote that the reason why Antoinette tries to set everything on fire is easy—"She is cold--and fire is the only warmth she knows in England" (Letters 157).) "Dear Richard please take me away from this place where
I am dying because it is so cold and dark" (183) Antoinette says in a letter to her step-brother. If she had only been wearing her red dress--"the colour of fire and sunset" (185)--Antoinette believed, her brother would have recognized her. Like Jane Eyre, who in her wedding finery looked in the mirror and saw almost the image of a stranger, Antoinette believes that clothes have the power to shape identity. In the "grey wrapper" they try to force her to wear she will be someone else.

Jane justly declares of Thornfield's third story that it has the aspect of a "home of the past: a shrine of memory" (92). Through memory Antoinette will recapture her childhood and her sense of self that had its roots there. "I am not a forgetting person" (133) she told Rochester. To Antoinette her home was "a sacred place. It was sacred to the sun!" (132-133). She has more than a romantic nostalgia for her past--the "desire to rediscover, or to create in one's mind, the lost home of one's childhood is typical of the Romantic imagination," as Donald Stone tells us (145)--it is all she has, all that she will admit as real. In her last dream foretelling the burning of Thornfield Antoinette appeals to the fire and sun of her home and sees that she has been helped:

I dropped the candle I was carrying and it caught the end of a tablecloth and I saw flames shoot up. As I ran or perhaps floated or flew I called help me Christophine help me and looking behind me I saw that I had been helped. There was a wall of fire protecting me.... (189)

Christophine is able to help her here, instead of being rendered ineffectual by Rochester and his English law. Looking at the flames--"they are beautiful" (179)--
helps orient Antoinette and reminds her of the something that she must do. After she realizes her purpose and sets the house on fire, past and present merge into one large kaleidoscope of sensuous detail—images, sights and sounds from all her young life:

Then I turned round and saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it. I saw the grandfather clock and Aunt Cora’s patchwork, all colours, I saw the orchids and the stephanotis and the jasmine and the tree of life in flames. I saw the chandelier and the red carpet downstairs and the bamboos, and the tree ferns, the gold ferns and the silver, and the soft green velvet of the moss on the garden wall. I saw my doll’s house and the books and the picture of the Miller’s Daughter. I heard the parrot call as he did when he saw a stranger, Qui est là? Qui est là? and the man who hated me was calling too, Bertha! Bertha! The wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings. It might bear me up, I thought, if I jumped to those hard stones. But when I looked over the edge I saw the pool at Coulibri. Tia was there. She beckoned to me and when I hesitated, she laughed. I heard her say, You frightened? And I heard the man’s voice, Bertha! Bertha! All this I saw and heard in a fraction of a second. And the sky so red. Someone screamed and I thought, Why did I scream? I called "Tia!" and jumped and woke. (189-190)

Now Antoinette can answer the parrot’s question of "Qui est là?": not the man’s "Bertha" but "Antoinette," written in the "fire red" of her signature. She escapes from Rochester, the man who hated her, and chooses instead Tia, her childhood friend; both have betrayed her, but the latter is part of her home of Coulibri, and is to some degree a mirror image of herself, caught also in circumstances over which she had no control. After Tia throws the stone, Antoinette says that "We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass" (45).

Rhys would claim for her heroine, then, a victory over the forces which would victimize her. Her suicidal leap is not a mindless but a purposeful act which allows
her to escape from the cold grey prison of patriarchal England. Poised on the edge of the roof, her hair streaming out like wings (Rhys is faithful here to Brontë’s account of her last moments), Antoinette stands almost as a divine figure. Yet Antoinette’s retreat into her own inner world of madness is, it should be noted, a limited victory at best. Like her mother, reverting to the past in her madness, Antoinette is forever isolated in the prison of her self. All that has meaning for her is a series of emotive, sensuous associations that will connect her to the place she loved. Antoinette’s reclaiming of the identity shaped by her home is, moreover, the only answer possible for her, for she always, to some extent, lived in a private world. Antoinette sane and Antoinette insane are two very similar people. Compare, for example, these two passages from her time at Granbois and her time at Thornfield. When Rochester asks her about the truth of her history, about what had happened to her, she answers him thus:

   I was never sad in the morning...and every day was a fresh day for me. I remember the taste of milk and bread and the sound of the grandfather clock ticking slowly and the first time I had my hair tied with string because there was no ribbon left and no money to buy any. All the flowers in the world were in our garden and sometimes when I was thirsty I licked raindrops from the Jasmine leaves after a shower. (131-132)

The passage has a certain child-like logic about it. Like a child she is totally immersed in the sensuous world--Nature, what she feels, sensations of hunger and thirst, and how these things relate to her. As she grows older her way of thinking is not noticeably altered; her insanity only intensifies her immersion in the world of sensation. Like the natives of Massacre, who are uncertain of their age, time has no
meaning for Antoinette. "But something you can touch and hold like my red dress, that has a meaning" (185). In the attic at Thornfield her dress evokes images of her home that are similarly described in terms of the senses and the natural world:

The scent that came from the dress was very faint at first, then it grew stronger. The smell of vetivert and frangipanni, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering. The smell of the sun and the smell of the rain. (185)

In her work Charlotte Brontë also recognized the importance of associating oneself with a place. One of her characters in The Professor, for example, asserts that "If your world is a world without associations...I no longer wonder that you hate England so...if Abdiel the Faithful himself were suddenly stripped of the faculty of association, I think he would soon rush forth from 'the ever-during gates,' leave heaven, and seek what he had lost in hell." Unlike Antoinette, however, the identities of Brontë's characters are not bounded by that between self and place; they are strong enough to withstand an abrupt change of environment.

In one sense, it is impossible for Rhys to retrieve "lost Antoinette" (Letters 271) because she is lost from the very beginning of Wide Sargasso Sea, fated by Brontë's novel to die a fiery death. The writing of Wide Sargasso Sea then becomes much more important for the author than for her fictional heroine. Like Antoinette, Rhys felt herself defined by her West Indian upbringing. All of Rhys's novels are largely autobiographical; even Wide Sargasso Sea, which at first glance seems the furthest removed from her own life, is in reality Rhys's culminating expression of her ambivalent feelings toward her home of Dominica. Rhys's previous novels take
place in England and in Paris: mention of the West Indies occurs only in passages of flashback and randomly triggered stream-of-consciousness. By borrowing Brontë’s premise of the madwoman in the attic and setting her novel in the West Indies, Rhys allowed herself to return to the home she always longed for. The idea of "home" was sacred to Rhys, as to many Romantics; in much of her writing the memory of Dominica is of a tropical paradise, especially when seen against cold bleak England. Curiously, though she professed a dislike of England and all things English (especially British men), Rhys only returned to Dominica once for a brief visit. Perhaps exiling herself from her beloved home enabled her to keep her childhood memories intact, to create her own myth of home and a lost Eden: a tactic not uncommon for exiles. She instinctively recognized that the only way to keep a memory forever fixed in the mind’s eye is not to supplant it with other, newer memories.

Yet one of Rhys’s trademarks was her unflinching honesty; she was rarely capable of self-delusion. Rhys was peculiarly attuned to what was disturbing beneath her island’s beautiful surface: "There is an atmosphere of pain and violence about the West Indies. Perhaps it wasn’t astonishing that I was tuned in to it," she wrote in a journal.25 **Wide Sargasso Sea** allowed her to explore her feelings about her island, towards a goal that Rhys set one of her heroines: "...yet I knew that if I could get to the end of what I was feeling it would be the truth about myself and about the world and about everything that one puzzles and pains about all the time" (Julia Martin, *After Leaving Mr. MacKenzie* p. 265). Her last novel enabled her to set at rest the ghosts of her own past, to explore in greater depth the negative as well
as the Edenic aspects of her home: the pain of her own unhappy childhood and indifferent mother, for instance.

At the end of Part Two in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rochester is seized with the conviction that Antoinette's world, her perception of reality, is after all the true one: "I shall never understand why suddenly, bewilderingly, I was certain that everything I had imagined to be truth was false. False. Only the magic and the dream are true--all the rest's a lie" (168). Yet this is only a passing thought; his and Antoinette's worlds are incapable of coexisting. *Wide Sargasso Sea* allowed Rhys, however, to affirm that the magic and the dream of her memories of her childhood home were just as real as anything in her experience of the adult world. In Charlotte Brontë's novels the moon is a "witness of truth" (*Villette*); in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rhys proclaims the truth of Antoinette's reality, the moonlit world, as well as the more prosaic reality represented by Rochester's cold, materialistic England. Yet the moon sheds a light of romance over Brontë's novel as well, and the two novels are not so far apart as their conflicting versions of the Jane Eyre story might indicate. Each is not more or less true than the other, though the two present sides of Rochester and Bertha Mason that may seem contradictory: Rhys's mirror image of Brontë's story brought to life possibilities lying dormant in *Jane Eyre*, and the two complementary novels are halves of one whole.
Notes


4 Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre (1847); (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), 192.


8 Smile Please, 81-2.


11 Lodge, 127.


14 The Victorian attitude towards Nature was, of course, a complex one and hence any discussion of Victorian gardens should not be over-generalized. While some preferred the tame, others preferred the vitality of nature in its uncultivated state, which is the reason for the positive depictions of "half trim, half wild" gardens--the ideal middle ground--in Victorian fiction, as Waters explains (184). Charlotte Brontë, with her sympathies towards both the Romantic and Victorian, would seem to favor such a garden in its compromise between two extremes.


16 William Morris, *Selected Writings* 68, quoted in Waters 18.


19 See Adrienne Rich, "The Primacy of the Mother" in *Of Woman Born* and Carolyn Heilbrun, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* for more extensive discussions of this theory.


22 *The Madwoman in the Attic* 339. According to Gilbert and Gubar, Jane's story is a "distinctively female *Bildungsroman* in which the problems encountered by the protagonist as she struggles from the imprisonment of her childhood toward an almost unthinkable goal of mature freedom are symptomatic of difficulties Everywoman in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome...."

23 See Nancy Harrison, for example: "The first step in identifying and examining a woman's writing, a woman's novelistic discourse, is thus to look for (and at) these gaps, the spaces and the holes in (male) discourse." (Jean Rhys and the Novel as Women's Text 51)
This struggle is something like the interplay between the "semiotic" and "symbolic" in Julia Kristeva's terminology. According to Kristeva, the "semiotic activity, which introduces wandering or fuzziness into language and, a fortiori, into poetic language is, from a synchronic point of view, a mark of the workings of drives (appropriation/rejection, orality/anality, love/hate, life/death)...At the same time instinctual and maternal, semiotic processes prepare the future speaker for entrance into meaning and signification (the symbolic)....Language as symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother" (Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art 136).

In order to preserve the Law of the Father, Rochester must repress the instinctual desire for the maternal (the semiotic). Interestingly, Rochester’s mother in Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea is entirely absent; Brontë and Rhys discuss him only in relation to his father and older brother.

Use of Kristeva’s terminology was suggested to me by Temma Berg’s essay "Suppressing the Language of Wo(Man)" in Engendering the Word.

See also Margaret Homans’ related discussion on the relation between women and language in nineteenth-century women’s writing in Bearing the Word.


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