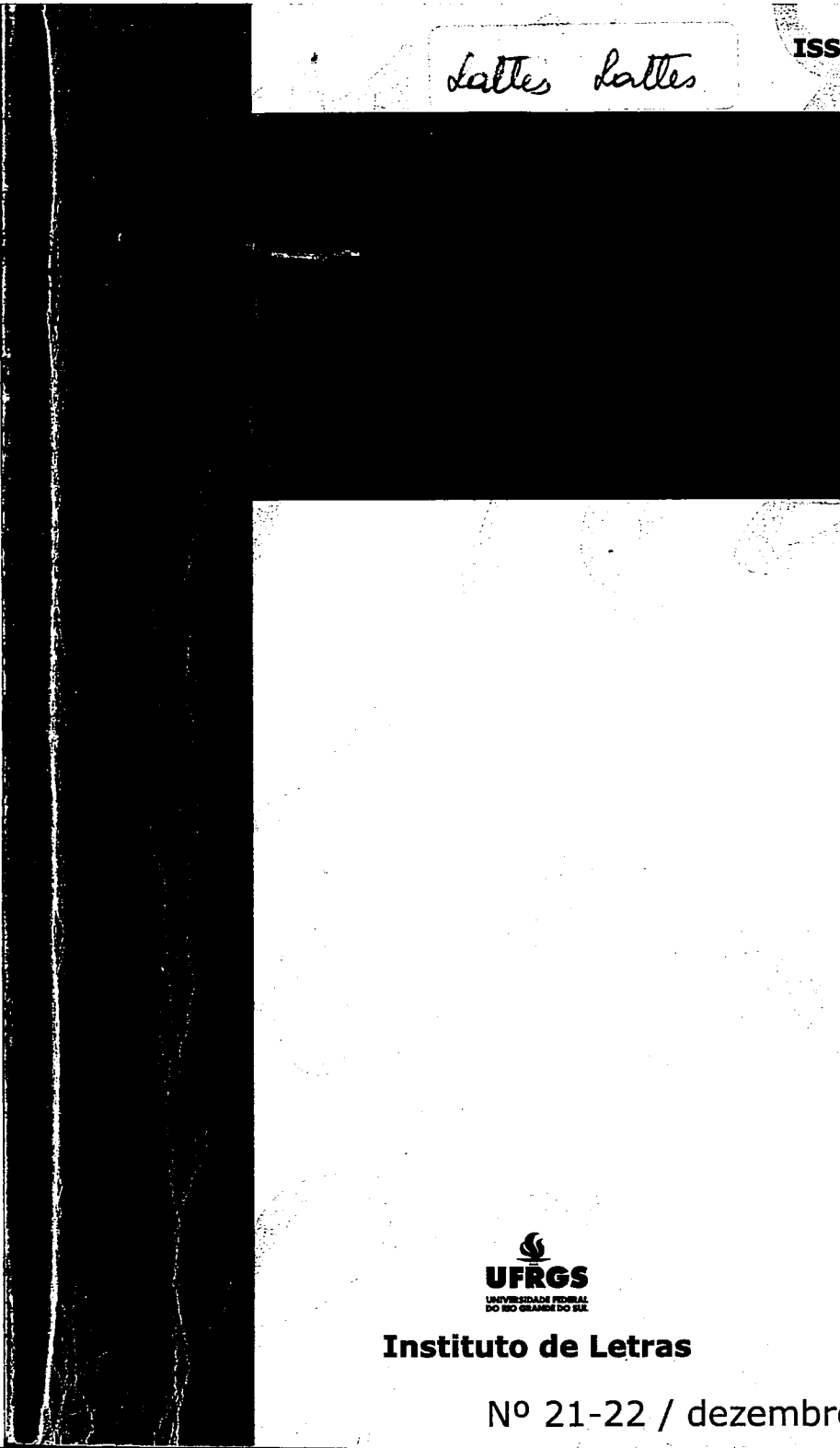


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## A word on *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Sandra Sirangelo Maggio\*

**Resumo:** *Jean Rhys nasceu e cresceu na Jamaica. Talvez por isso tenha-se sentido tão fascinada pela personagem Bertha Mason do romance Jane Eyre, de Charlotte Brontë. Já adulta, vivendo na Inglaterra, Rhys escreve Wide Sargasso Sea, uma resposta ao preconceito involuntário que transparece na obra de Brontë com relação a tudo quanto seja diferente, amedrontador ou 'estrangeiro.' Wide Sargasso Sea dialoga com Jane Eyre ao abordar a mesma história, porém agora através do ponto de vista do Outro. Seu romance se apresenta em três partes, cada qual com um narrador próprio. A primeira mostra a visão da jovem Antoinette antes da chegada do noivo inglês; a segunda traz a percepção de Rochester, na Jamaica, aos dezenove anos; por fim, retornamos a Thornfield Hall e assistimos ao último dia de Bertha Mason, percebido de dentro de seu delírio. Sua loucura passa a ser atribuída, então, à colisão entre culturas e mundos tão diversos.*

Jean Rhys was born and grew up in the West Indies. This is probably the reason why Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* exerts, from childhood, such a powerful influence on Rhys' imagination. Differently from most readers, however, she identifies with Bertha Antoinette Mason, Rochester's mad Creole wife, rather than with Jane Eyre, the rightful protagonist of the story. Some decades later, living in England and recognized as an acknowledged author, Rhys writes *Wide Sargasso Sea*, her personal statement that may work as an 'answer' to the involuntary prejudice displayed in *Jane Eyre* against her country and her people.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is divided into three parts, and each part has a different first-person narrator. Part one is narrated by young Antoinette, and stresses the symmetry between her and Jane Eyre's personal experiences. Part Two is narrated by young Edward Fairfax Rochester, who is simultaneously appalled, fascinated and horrified with the wild, colorful and different new world he has allowed himself to be thrown into by his family. Part Three is set in Thornfield Hall, in England, and presents mad Bertha's perception of what is going on in

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\*Professora de Literatura Inglesa do Instituto de Letras da UFRGS.

Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*.

This work aims at stressing the 'nightmarish atmosphere' of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The cultural gap that parts the two protagonists, Edward and Antoinette, stands at the root of this nightmare, and represents the lost meeting-ground for the establishment of a real and consistent personal relation. Had they managed in overcoming the shame of being thrown together by the economic concerns of their families, had they been able to understand the several circumstances which cause them to feel the way they do, they might be able to reach each other and build a satisfactory life together. But this is exactly what is impossible for them to do. This is especially visible in Section II, narrated by Rochester, who has had a fever since he reached that different land, too hot, too colorful, since he was given this wife that is too big, too sensual, too threatening. And here we come to the taboos of gender -- a further barrier to prevent their interaction. Significantly, the way both characters behave agrees with the traditional representation, in which the female character thinks and the male character acts. Thought and action never mix. Bertha (maybe because she is at home, and he is the foreigner) seems to see farther, but she never interferes; whereas Rochester steps beyond his constant feelings of guilt and remorse, and deforms reality by reducing it to a very small and safe equation. He ends up by half-deceiving himself into believing that he is entitled to behave the way he does because he has been deceived into marrying an insane wife. The horror depicted in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the horror of utter isolation, springing directly from a place which resembles Paradise after the fall.

The formal aspect of the novel is traditional, and this serves well to indicate its connection with Victorian narrative, reminding us of its bond with Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

We are not so much interested, here, in the analysis of the abundant similarities in the trajectory of these two heroines, Jane Eyre and Antoinette Mason. We are concerned, rather, with the elements *in absentia*. The stress lack, the strength and presence of what is *not* there. Jane's and Antoinette's courses are symmetrical and inverted, as if they represent the mirror inversion of the same reality. Both women are exposed to a series of similar experiences. Both protagonists move through five different places. Jane lives in Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield, Moor House and Ferndean; Antoinette in Coulibri, Spanish Town, Massacre, Jamaica and Thornfield. Jane's movements lead her towards identity, Antoinette's towards disintegration.

The emphasis on the difference in the outcome of Jane's and Antoinette's stories takes us to considerations concerning the relation between these two novels and the circumstances of their creation. *Jane Eyre* is the story of a Victorian woman, written by a Victorian author during Victorian times. Narrative devices are also Victorian, the story is emotionally coherent, passionate, partial, personal. Only

one point-of-view is presented. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, however, narrative is fragmented, with different characters holding very different ideas about reality, and this forces us to realize that here the apparently traditional narrative form is merely a delusion.

If we push this parallel a little further and consider the two authors, we will acknowledge that *Jane Eyre* is born within the best possible context: it is the English product of an English author written at the highlight of the British Empire. This adds up to a sense of identity, and makes it very easy for the novel to travel well and to fit the requisites of the literary canon. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the Colonial product of a decadent England. More than that, it is a West-Indian novel written not in Patois, but in English! Brazilian critic Antonio Candido,<sup>1</sup> in his essay about the role of the intellectual in South America, reminds us of the onerous choice authors such as Jean Rhys are bound to make: either they write to a very short reading public in their own language or dialect, or they address a wider audience which, however, does not partake of the same interests and difficulties.

This sums the essence of the problems experienced by Antoinette and Edward in their frustrated attempt at establishing a successful relationship, their first difficulty coming from the fact that their cultural environment differs so much. They reach a point of not even agreeing as to what is real and what is not:

It is true," she said, "that England is like a dream? Because one of my friends who married an Englishman wrote and told me so. She said this place London is like a cold dark dream sometimes. I want to wake up.

Well," I answered annoyed, "that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream.

But how can rivers and mountains and the sea be unreal?

And how can millions of people, their houses and their streets be unreal? More easily," she said, "much more easily. Yes a big city must be like a dream.

No, this is unreal and like a dream, I thought.<sup>2</sup>

Along with the strong attraction to what is new and different, we also have the fear of losing one's own identity. On psychological terms, this is a difficulty experienced by any couple starting a life together. The problem with Antoinette and Edward, because of this cultural distance, is on its own huge as the wide Sargasso Sea. And it is also further intensified by the fact that both of them

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Candido: "Literatura e subdesenvolvimento". In: *A educação pela noite*. (São Paulo: Editora Ática, 1989. pp. 140-162)

<sup>2</sup> Jean Rhys: *Wide Sargasso Sea*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988. p. 67). All further quotations from *Wide Sargasso Sea* refer to this edition.

are very fragile and demanding, eager to take but not able to give, still too insecure to cope with the heavy demand of their new situation. This kind of impediment, -- treacherous enough to undermine many a maturer sort of relationship -- in their case stands as a minor hindrance, if we consider the weight of the other circumstances leading towards their separation. Both feel rejected by their families, both are ashamed of being used as instruments in this heavy economic transaction. In fact, they are very much alike, but are unable to find that out. They end up seeing each other as enemies, not so much because each feels a victim of the other, but rather because of the horror of seeing themselves as the agent of the other one's tragedy. As a consequence, so as not to rationally recognize themselves as evil, they project the image of the enemy onto their partner. The outcome of this series of mistakes is the establishment of a sad allegory of the traditional relations of gender and of power. Intimidated by her sexuality, Edward labels Antoinette lascivious, and preserves in his own eyes his own sense of manhood. In Thomas Staley's words,

Throughout the narrative, Edward presents his values as the normative ones, and from this point on he sees Antoinette as forever savage and given to self-abandonment in lust. (...) He can at best feel pity, an emotion far less costly than love. And his pity justifies his sense of honor. His male hubris not only limits the quality of his responsibility, it enfeebles his reason.<sup>3</sup>

As a consequence, he affects the attitude of the civilized man over the natural element of wilderness, underestimating the local culture as something to be dominated by more enlightened people. Repressing any instances of self-criticism, Edward refuses to move beyond the limits of his own rationalization: identity and what is right are equated with his own views, otherness and what is wrong are imposed on Antoinette and the natives of the place. This denial closes the door to any further approach, preventing the union of the feminine elements of thought and the masculine elements of action, that might represent the fulfillment of the dialectic synthesis proposed.

Once the conflict is established, the relationship between Edward and Antoinette is turned into a literal impersonation of the conflict between their two countries, each reproducing the roles inherited from their parents. The difference in strength between England and the West Indies can be illustrated in the clash of the two religious conceptions. On the one hand we have Christianity and the spirit of the English adventurer, who possesses the money, the power and the instruments of domination. On the other hand, the hidden mysteries of the jungle and the

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<sup>3</sup> (3) Thomas F. Staley. *Jean Rhys: a critical study*. (Woking: MacMillan, 1979. p. 111)

psychological influence exerted by the voodoo ritual of Obeah, which apparently can do little more than try to scare the enemy out of their land. Antoinette's attempt to bewitch Edward through Obeah triggers the element of horror in the story, not because of the effect of the drug he takes, but because he feels manipulated again, in a repetition of what happened as he was pushed into marrying her. It is perhaps out of fear, and not out of malice, that he becomes, from then on, the most malevolent character in the novel. According to Teresa O'Connor,

The devils incarnate, so to speak, are neither, as Christophine describes Rochester, the best nor the worst, but rather, like Rochester, simply self-righteous and blind, insecure and unprepossessing men who can bring misfortune as much upon themselves as upon their victims. Like Rochester and Daniel Cosway, those who commit "evil" are often victims of family, history, and patriarchal systems -- as is Antoinette Cosway, the most deeply wounded of all.<sup>4</sup>

What transforms Edward in this "devil incarnate" is, basically, his fear to recognize his ideological subjection to The Imperial rules of Western Culture. According to Althusser, people who are subjected to a specific sort of ideological guidance do not allow their minds to go beyond certain limits; a constant censorship must operate, allowing what can be thought and repressing the unthinkable.<sup>5</sup> It is as if the realization that he is being ideologically manipulated would destroy Rochester's precarious sense of identity, so it is easier to deceive himself into believing he does not see what he sees and believe Daniel Cosway's insinuations, putting the blame on Antoinette.

Edward and Antoinette react in identical ways. One of the reasons why they are unable to reach each other refers to their own personal scruples. They are both enraged because they have been used to manipulate the other, and they are also tormented and ashamed because they lack the strength to handle the situation.

As a consequence of their weakness, Antoinette loses her name and her identity, and is then taken to England -- the unreal place of dreams --, where she is buried alive in a nightmarish room in the attic of a very respectable ancestral English manor house. As for Rochester, he is also imprisoned within the narrowed limits of his own mind, arrested in the inherited prejudice he has proved incapable of overcoming, and doomed to flee from the remorse he keeps telling himself he does not feel.

The most scaring element in this story of people abused by people

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<sup>4</sup> Teresa F. O'Connor. *Jean Rhys: the West Indian novels*. (New York: New York University Press, 1986. p. 145)

<sup>5</sup> Louis Althusser, quoted in: Fredric Jameson, "On interpretation: literature as a socially symbolic act." In: *The political unconscious*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974)

deformed by circumstances is the desperate attempt to force the problems to disappear simply by closing one's eyes, an attitude well represented by Antoinette's reaction as she finds her mother's horse dead: *Say nothing and it may not be true.* (WSS: p. 49)

This impossibility of dealing with one's own ghosts is the tragic flaw in the narrative, allegorically symbolized by the fire which destroys the two ancestral homes of Coulibri and Thornfield Hall. The representation of this impossibility is represented by the variety of different narrative voices that never get together so as to form a dialogue. The disagreement lies in the excess presented here, where the several monologues are constant and simultaneous, so wordy that they operate as a parody of the annihilation of personality. Ideas grow distorted, emptied out of a meaning, to a point they can signify anything, even their own opposites.

Although the formal appearance of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is traditional in its outward aspects, there are moments in which a break in the spatial and temporal dimensions of the narrative can be experienced, especially when Antoinette's story is presented. As she dreams of being taken to Thornfield, for instance, and tries to resist the man with hatred in his eyes who forces her into the door, (*Still I cling and the seconds pass and each one is a thousand years*, WSS, p. 50), we are never sure whether this dream is to be taken as a premonition or as the distorted memory of a mentally deranged (fourth) narrator. If this is the case, the whole novel must be reread and much of its meaning will be transformed. We will possibly get to a very frightening conclusion: that, with the enfeebling of the frontier between fiction and reality, the horror of fiction may be sneaking into real life.