

Sasha and Antoinette:
Jean Rhys's orphans in the patriarchy

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INTRODUCTION

They sought to be lifted out of "their class as women without the power to hold onto the ones with power: their father, their brothers, the boss" (Abbott 112). "They" are novelist Jean Rhys's characters, women who, like Rhys herself, lived in London and Paris between the World Wars. During this era Rhys published four novels: Postures (published in 1928; published in the United States under the title Quartet), After Leaving Mr. MacKenzie (published in 1931), Voyage in the Dark (published in 1934), and Good Morning, Midnight (published in 1939).

Each of these works depicts a woman struggling to make her way in an indifferent, at times openly hostile, society, alienated even from those closest to her, particularly the men. With them she participates in a skirmish for money and power; each battle she loses brings her closer to the brink of economic ruin. Quartet is the story of Marya, a young woman who accepts a couple's invitation to stay with them until her husband is released from jail. Alone in Paris, penniless, she feels compelled to accept their invitation, just as she feels compelled to enter into an affair with the husband, Mr. Heidler. In the end she is rejected by both men: Mr. Heidler, because she goes back to her husband, and her husband, because of her affair with another man. The main character in After Leaving Mr. MacKenzie, Julia, is receiving money from her ex-lover. She rejects Mr. MacKenzie's final check to her in a moment of pride, but her story ends with her going back to beg money from him. Voyage in the Dark contains much the same theme: Anna has a relationship with an older man who leaves her, but after a time she returns to ask him for money, in this case to get an abortion. Good Morning, Midnight is the story of Sasha, a middle-aged

woman visiting Paris. Many, but not all, of her skirmishes with men are in her memory. The gigolo she meets now may offer her a chance for a positive relationship, but we'll never know, because Sasha won't allow herself that possibility. Instead, she opens her door to the ominous man in the hotel room next to hers, choosing what she is familiar with even though it is the worst choice she can make.

Unfortunately, World War II interrupted Rhys's career, and after Good Morning, Midnight was published in 1939 she sank from public sight. She resurfaced in 1966 with her most critically acclaimed novel, Wide Sargasso Sea, a story set in the nineteenth century, of Bertha Rochester (Antoinette in Sea), the "mad" first wife of Edward Rochester in Jane Eyre.

Although Wide Sargasso Sea served as a catalyst for scrutiny of her earlier works, most critics tend to divide Rhys's literary career down its thirty-year gap, defining the first four novels in term of their commonalities, and limiting analysis of Wide Sargasso Sea to comparison to its nineteenth-century sequel, Jane Eyre. Similarly, Bertha is compared primarily to Jane (for instance, Baer writes Rhys purposely made similarities between the two characters to show them as "doubles, sister, orphans in the patriarchy" 133). One need not revisit Jane Eyre, however, to appreciate and understand Wide Sargasso Sea. Sea is, indeed, a culmination of Rhys's career. Not only does Antoinette, Sea's main character, share many traits of the "Rhys woman," but the social realities of her era are remarkably similar to those of her twentieth-century "sisters." Put another way, the characters in Rhys's contemporary novels find themselves in much the same predicament that plagues Antoinette, struggling in a society where men have the monopoly on money and power. Rhys's final novel blends the elements

of her earlier works into a piece whose truths are as valid for Sasha in Good Morning, Midnight as they are for Antoinette in Wide Sargasso Sea, for Rhys's era as they were for Brontë's.

Writers in Brontë's era, the Victorian age, kept the spheres of men (public) and women (domestic) carefully separated, mirroring the social norm of the day. Darwin's theory of the evolutionary scale, which surfaced in the mid-Victorian period, set the tone for social theory in the latter half of the century: white races were higher than "primitive" peoples, upper classes higher than lower, men higher than women. European men occupied the highest point on the evolutionary scale. They were considered to be physically and intellectually superior to all others, the developers and refiners of culture. Lyn Pykett asserts that the focus of Darwin's Descent of Man deals not so much with exploring the superiority of humans over animals, as it does with the differences between human males and females, "making the case for the superior development of the (white) male" (26).

In this culture, women were obviously limited--their "rightful place" was in the home. Mary Lou Emery writes that a Rhys character in a nineteenth-century novel would undoubtedly be arrested and confined to either a workhouse or an asylum. "Thus the Victorians attempted to control the potential ambivalence created by women who ventured alone onto public territory; an independent woman could only be a prostitute and was most likely mad" (424). Similarly, in Rhys's world, as Todd Bender writes, "the female is given by society a limited number of roles to play. She is paid or rewarded only when she plays these roles to perfection" (100). As in Victorian times, in Rhys's world being independent was neither encouraged nor rewarded by society.

The feminist movement of the late nineteenth century began opening many doors for women, as they fought to change political, legal, and social arenas that, for too long, had afforded power exclusively to men. A continuing evolution of technology enticed more women to join the work force, and later, during World War I, even more job choices opened up for them. As the roles of women expanded, female gender boundaries were challenged, and the New Woman had her share of both public attention and outrage because she addressed what had of course been taboo during the Victorian era: women's sexuality.

The New Woman also brought about changes in literature (a continuing cause for concern in the latter part of the nineteenth century, for many felt surely women were diluting and disrupting the "high art" of writing). New Woman fiction often was from a different point of view, that of the woman-as-outsider. It rejected the Victorian idea of the stable, fixed identity of a character. Literature about the New Woman "consistently problematized, deconstructed, demystified, or rethought 'womanliness'" (Pykett 57), calling into question traditional women's roles. "Marriage, the destination of the plot of the mainstream Victorian novel, and the resolution of all of its (and supposedly the heroine's) problems, became, in the New Woman novel, both the origin of narrative and the source of the heroine's problems" (Pykett 57).

Unfortunately, with the turn of the century, the notion of the independent woman was still very much an ideal rather than a reality. As Joan Acocella reminds us:

With the move to the city and the loosening of ties to family and class, women were thrown into a new situation--one in which [some] found themselves wholly abandoned, both by

the system that had formerly hemmed them in, and by the new one, which still had no place for them.... Even after women began to make their way economically in twentieth-century culture, they were still left with an ages-old inheritance of emotional dependency, the thing that marriage and the family, having created, once ministered to and now did not. If in the old days women were enslaved by men, they nevertheless had legal claims on them. Now they had no legal claims, so all the force of their dependency was shifted to an emotional claim--love. (81)

It is into this world that Rhys's characters (or the "Rhys woman," for her characters bear so many similarities that many critics assert she created essentially one character and simply introduced her to different settings) are thrust. Good Morning, Midnight is perhaps the most poignant reminder of this because it offers us a look at the "Rhys woman" at middle age.

GOOD MORNING, MIDNIGHT SUMMARY

Good Morning, Midnight takes place in 1937. It begins, as it ends, in Sasha Jansen's hotel room in Paris. It is not a fancy room; it is not even particularly clean. But it is, as Sasha tells us, a defining element in her life. She has spent much of her life in hotel rooms, so much so that she decides, "all rooms are the same.... A room is a place where you hide from the wolves outside and that's all any room is" (Midnight 38). (Grace Poole, Antoinette's caretaker, says much the same thing in the last section of Sea.)

This particular room has been her residence for five days. Sasha is in Paris on vacation based on the advice of, and funds from, a friend who has decided Sasha needs a change of pace from the "rooms on Gray's Inn Road," her home in London. And so Sasha finds herself alone in a dingy room on the fourth floor of a nameless hotel.

The "Rhys woman" has not fared well since the last novel in which she appeared. She is significantly older, and we know from our reading of the "Rhys woman" she has had many unsuccessful love affairs, and, most probably, even more pernodes.

Sasha has her trip planned out: where to go for lunch, to have an afternoon drink; which places to avoid because of memories they evoke or the looks she may receive; what things she might, on her limited budget, buy for herself. She carefully arranges her days.

What she hasn't planned for, but cannot avoid, is other people. She meets two Russian men on the street one evening, and they go out for drinks. Their initial approach to Sasha is to inquire why she is unhappy. One believes she is rich but not happy; the other, that she is happy but not rich. She tells them that she is very happy, and is in Paris on a shopping

spree buying clothes to impress her many friends back home. She goes out several times with one of the men, but eventually stands him up, not because of any emotional ties they may or may not have made, but because he insists on paying for her drinks, and she knows he disapproves of her drinking.

She also meets Rene, a man she immediately recognizes as a gigolo. She suspects he attaches himself to her because of her appearance: he thinks she has money. (She is wearing a fur coat given her by a former lover--she keeps it because she knows she wouldn't get what it is worth if she were to hock it.) She watches Rene taking the role she so often has taken with men, and experiences conflicting emotions. Her first instinct is cruelty--to lead him along, and then drop him--but she is charmed by him in spite of herself, and is unable to assume this role. She is always suspicious of but amused by his actions. When he takes her hand and tells her she has brought him luck, she assumes he is really assessing the value of her ring, and she responds with, "No good.... Only worth about fifty francs--if that" (Midnight 152).

Just as Sasha encounters people, so must she, inevitably, meet her memories on the streets she walks. We learn of her past: of her desire to leave London after the war, of her marriage in Holland, when she and Enno, her husband, did not even have enough money to get to Paris. "I haven't any money. He hasn't any either. We both thought the other had money. But when we get to Paris the good life will start again" (Midnight 114-115). The "good life" is tied inexorably to money, a commodity to be obtained at any price. Of course, it does not materialize in Paris, and after Sasha gives birth to a son, the need for money becomes even more serious.

Sasha is alone when she gives birth, and alone when the baby dies only a few weeks later. Her husband eventually leaves, promising to send money. She tells herself, "it's only for a time. We'll be together again when things go better. Knowing in myself that it was finished.... it was after that that I began to go to pieces. Not all at once, of course. First this happened, and then that happened..." (Midnight 142-143). After a suicide attempt she goes home to England, to a male relative (her father?) who asks her, "Why didn't you drown yourself in the Seine?" and begrudgingly hands over her inheritance, which is just enough to allow her a room and a few basic necessities.

Now Sasha has come full circle. Her friend makes it possible to escape from England again (although this time much more temporarily). Her illusions about what she will find are greatly changed, so much so that her relationship with the gigolo, which seems to transform her into a happier, witty person (perhaps the image of a younger Sasha), ends in disaster. Ironically, this is the one relationship where she can truly be herself, because he is the one who is willing to adapt himself to please her. Nevertheless, she continues to resist the gigolo's repeated advances, in spite of his insistence that his motives are pure. He assures her that she doesn't need to fear him; on the contrary, he would be good for her. On their last night together, he promises he can change her life. "'I could do this with you'--he makes a movement with his hands like a baker kneading a loaf of bread--'and afterwards you'd be different. I know. Believe me'" (Midnight 175).

They return, finally, to her hotel room, but she cannot believe that his motives are anything more than to obtain money. So she offers it to him.

"I'm just trying to save you a whole lot of trouble...a whole waste of time. You can have the money right away, so it would be a waste of time, wouldn't it" (Midnight 183). He takes a small amount of the money from the dresser--much less than she has offered him--and leaves. Sasha is alone on the bed, willing him to come back to her; she imagines every step of his return. The door opens, and she knows immediately who it is: the repulsive man next door, whom we have seen throughout the novel, leering at her as she returns to her room, yelling obscenities at her when he finds the gigolo waiting for her. She has rejected what may have been a good match for her, and embraces what we know is the familiar for her--the man who called her a whore, who sees her as nothing more than a sexual object.

Thus ends the final of Rhys's first four books, all casting the "Rhys woman" in a setting in which the outcome seems inevitable.

WIDE SARGASSO SEA SUMMARY

Wide Sargasso Sea seems to be a departure from Rhys's earlier works, as she not only changes the setting, but also has the mold of her protagonist cast for her. Rhys cannot change Antoinette's fate; she can and does only present a defense of Brontë's character that was, she felt, long overdue. As Rhys told one interviewer, "When I read Jane Eyre as a child, I thought, why should she think Creole women are lunatics and all that? What a shame to make Rochester's first wife, Bertha, the awful madwoman, and I immediately thought I'd write the story as it might really have been. She seemed such a poor ghost. I thought I'd try to write her a life" (Vreeland 235). The "story as it might have been" takes place, for the most part, in exotic Jamaica in the 1800s. The novel is divided into three parts. In the first Antoinette narrates her childhood on the island. Her father, a plantation owner, dies about the time of the Emancipation Act (1834), leaving Antoinette, her white Creole mother, and an invalid son to fend for themselves.

Antoinette's brother, Pierre, is perhaps the most vivid foreshadowing of Antoinette's life, for his malady is both progressive and fatal. In our introduction to Pierre, Antoinette says he "staggered when he walked and couldn't speak distinctly" (Sea 1). The last view we have of him makes it clear he will not survive. Antoinette says "he slept more and more, nearly all the time. He was so thin that I could lift him easily" (Sea 36). His very existence provides the young Antoinette a lesson on the relative value of men and women, for her mother spends all of her energies on the ailing Pierre, and not only ignores but actively pushes Antoinette away. After the doctor examines Pierre, her mother changes. "Suddenly. Not gradually.

She grew thin and silent, and at last she refused to leave the house at all" (Sea 19). When Antoinette attempts to comfort her mother, she is rejected: "...she pushed me away, not roughly but calmly, coldly, without a word, as if she decided once and for all that I was useless to her. She wanted to sit with Pierre or walk where she pleased without being pestered..." (Sea 20).

Rejected by her mother, shunned by others because she is neither black nor white (her father was white, her mother, Creole), Antoinette spends most of her time alone. She wanders the island, exploring the jungle around her home. "And if the razor grass cut my legs and arms I would think, 'It's better than people.' Black ants or red ones, tall nests swarming with white ants, rain that soaked me to the skin--once I saw a snake. All better than people" (Sea 28). (Sasha echoes Antoinette when she says to the gigolo, "You want to know what I'm afraid of? All right, I'll tell you.... I'm afraid of men--yes, I'm very much afraid of men. And I'm even more afraid of women. And I'm very much afraid of the whole bloody human race.... Who wouldn't be afraid of a pack of damned hyenas?" Midnight 173).

Antoinette's mother eventually remarries, a Mr. Mason who brings with him many English customs. Antoinette is pleased with the new ways but also wary, for their relations with the island blacks, always troubled, become even more strained with the wealth Mason brings.

The tension finally erupts when the enraged blacks set fire to the plantation house; the family escapes the burning house, but Pierre dies from the fire. Rage spews from Antoinette's mother as well, for she has repeatedly tried to warn Mason of the growing unrest, but he refused to leave, or even take her warnings seriously. She blames her husband for Pierre's death, and threatens to kill him. Mason sends her to a private

home in the country to "recuperate." (Antoinette later visits her mother and sees that her "treatment" includes alcohol and sexual abuse.)

Antoinette is sent to school at the local convent. After several years Mason takes her out, for he has found a husband for her: Edward Rochester. Mason doesn't live to see her marry, but his son--Antoinette's step-brother--makes the marriage arrangements.

Here begins the second section of the book, with Rochester and Antoinette starting off to her family's summer estate, Granbois, where they are to spend their honeymoon. Rochester narrates this section, and we see the tropical setting through his eyes. He clearly considers himself taken advantage of, sold to a woman he hasn't had the time to court (most of his time in Jamaica has been spent in bed with a fever). Already he resents both parties he feels are responsible for this set of events: his father and Antoinette. "I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks.... Dear Father. The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition.... I have a modest competence now. I will never be a disgrace to you or to my dear brother the son you love" (Sea 70).

When they arrive at Granbois, Antoinette turns to her new husband and says, "Don't you like it here? This is my place and everything is on our side" (Sea 74). Of course, everything is not on her side, because it is no longer her property--it now belongs to her husband, as does her dowry. Antoinette has to trust that at least her husband will be on her side.

Rochester's initial feelings seem to be rather suspicious. He doesn't trust the black servants of Granbois. Unlike Mason, he considers them crafty, laughing at him behind his back. He recalls, as well, seeing Antoinette's relatives at their wedding. "I thought I saw the same expression

on all their faces. Curiosity? Pity? Ridicule? But why should they pity me. I who have done so well for myself?" (Sea 77).

As time goes on it becomes apparent to the reader and to Rochester that his feelings for Antoinette are little more than lust. Oblivious to this, Antoinette tells him more and more about herself, of the fears she faced alone throughout her childhood, of the power he has over her. She asks him, "'Why did you make me want to live? Why did you do that to me?'" He replies, in true British male form, "'Because I wished it. Isn't that enough?'"

'Yes, it is enough. But if one day you don't wish it. What should I do then? Suppose you took this happiness away when I wasn't looking...'
 'And lose my own? Who'd be so foolish?
 'I am not used to happiness,' she said. 'It makes me afraid.'
 'Never be afraid. Or if you are tell no one.'
 'I understand. But trying does not help me.'
 'What would?' She did not answer that, then one night whispered, 'If I could die. Now, when I am happy. Would you do that? You wouldn't have to kill me. Say die and I will die. You don't believe me? Then try, try, say die and watch me die.'
 'Die, then! Die!' I watched her die many times. In my way, not in hers. (Sea 92)

In this poignant scene we see clearly the gulf between the two characters. Antoinette is dependent on Rochester, as she tells him, for her very happiness. She recognizes that he could choose to take this away from her, and is afraid. He, too, realizes the power he has over her, and uses it to his advantage.

It is only after Rochester tells us that Antoinette's desire for sex matches his own that their sexual relationship begins to deteriorate. He sees one of her dresses--ironically, the red dress that later, when she is shut in the attic room in England, reminds her of her tropical home--and it drives

him wild with desire. He has sex with her and immediately turns away to sleep, "without a word or caress" (Sea 93).

Their relationship is strained even more after Rochester receives a letter from Daniel Cosway, who claims to be Antoinette's half-brother. He tells Rochester about the madness in Antoinette's family. Rochester says he "felt no surprise. It was as if [he'd] expected it, been waiting for it" (Sea 99). Rochester eventually goes to see this man, and although he clearly abhors Daniel, he believes what the man says. Daniel alludes to an affair Antoinette may be having with another man, and Rochester believes this as well.

In a panic, for their sexual relationship has abruptly ceased, Antoinette seeks out an old family servant and friend, Christophine, for both advice and a love potion to bring Rochester back to her. Christophine's advice is to leave him. "But look me trouble, a rich white girl like you and more foolish than the rest. A man don't treat you good, pick up your skirt and walk out. Do it and he come after you." Antoinette replies, "He will not come after me. And you must understand I am not rich now, I have no money of my own at all, everything I had belongs to him.... That is English law" (Sea 110).

Christophine reluctantly gives her a potion, although she warns Antoinette that it is not for "beke"--not for outsiders, strangers to the island culture. "Bad, bad trouble come when beke meddle with that" (Sea 112).

That same evening Rochester reveals to Antoinette his visit with Daniel. "I know what he told you. That my mother was mad and an infamous woman and that my little brother who died was born a cretin, an idiot, and that I am a mad girl too" (Sea 128). Rochester admits that is what

Daniel has claimed, then immediately tries to drop the subject--he does not want to hear what Antoinette has to say. Antoinette reveals the truth about her mother: declared insane by Mason, she was locked up in a private house. When Antoinette was allowed to visit, she sees the caretakers sexually abusing her mother.

After this revelation, Antoinette offers Rochester wine laced with Christophine's love potion. Rochester drinks it and follows Antoinette into her bedroom, a room he has not shared with her for many nights. He later tells us, "that is all I remember. All I will remember of that night" (Sea 137). The implication is, of course, that this is the final in a series of increasingly violent sexual encounters between Rochester and Antoinette. Obviously he has done something he is not proud of. Nevertheless, when he wakes early the next morning, feeling dizzy and sick, he is sure he has been poisoned by his wife, thereby exonerating himself of any guilt for his actions the previous night. The next night he takes one of the servants to bed where Antoinette, in the next room, can hear their lovemaking.

Antoinette seeks refuge with Christophine but, in the end, returns to her husband. As Rochester plans to take Antoinette to England with him, he once again dons his cloak of English superiority. He has conquered her world, and so takes her, the vanquished, back to his own. At the end of part two, as Rochester looks back at the wilderness of Antoinette's home one last time, he thinks:

I hated the place. I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. 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. (Sea 172)

The final section of the novel takes place at Thornfield Hall, Rochester's inherited home. Antoinette lives in the attic, under the care of Grace Poole. Antoinette dreams of setting fire to the house, and she awakes to realize "at last...why I was brought here and what I have to do" (Sea 190). The novel ends with Antoinette setting off into the darkened halls with her lighted candle.

This last section most closely resembles the realities of Jane Eyre, and Rhys has taken care to drop clues linking the two books. Grace Poole is mentioned, as are the housekeeper Mrs. Fairfax ("Mrs. Ef") and Leah, one of the maids. Rhys takes up the story the day after the memorable scene in Brontë's novel in which Antoinette attacked her step-brother. Rhys has also meticulously reconstructed Thornfield Hall down to the tapestries hanging outside Antoinette's locked room, recreating the epitome of the nineteenth-century gothic novel. In spite of a much different setting and a predetermined ending, however, the character Antoinette is the offspring of twentieth-century Sasha Jansen, just as Sasha is the progeny of Rhys's Marya and Julia and Anna.

DISCUSSION

Perhaps one reason Wide Sargasso Sea is seldom compared to Rhys's earlier works is the idea that linking Sea to twentieth-century settings would imply that it is not valid as an historical story. However, Rhys did not merely change the props for her contemporary character and label the story "gothic." The depth and breadth of critical comparison of Wide Sargasso Sea to Jane Eyre demonstrates that the former is recognized as a plausible fleshing out of the latter. Dennis Porter writes, "in order to comment effectively on Jane Eyre and extend its meaning in previously unperceived ways, Jean Rhys had to create a novel that would be largely contiguous with Charlotte Brontë's work in terms of style and period and would stand comparison with the original" (541). Porter asserts that Rhys has done this. Other critics have called Wide Sargasso Sea and Jane Eyre complementary texts. Freya Johnson, for example, writes that both novels deal with a woman character gaining her voice: "Wide Sargasso Sea can in actuality be seen as an extension of Brontë's original character that defines herself-- apart from the patriarchy. Both the form of the struggle and the woman's means of resistance are common to both texts as both heroines struggle for self-definition within the dominant patriarchy" (22).

This is an overriding theme for Rhys. Still, one might wonder what more specific commonalties Sasha, in 1937 Paris, would share with Antoinette in Jamaica in the mid-eighteen hundreds.

One of the most obvious is that both Sasha and Antoinette were married. As with the New Woman writers' idea of marriage, in Rhys's novels it often is (particularly for Antoinette) the "source of the heroine's problems" (Pykett 57).

Wide Sargasso Sea begins after the death of Antoinette's father. As Antoinette's mother says, they are "marooned," trapped on the estate with no money and no one to plant or gather the crops. They are, as well, without a class, former slave owners, but not in the same social sphere as the English colonizers. Marriage would give Antoinette's mother a place in society, and could solve her financial problems as well.

Of course, her marriage serves as a tragic foreshadowing of Antoinette's own, for while the marriage to Mr. Mason spares them starvation, they do not gain any freedom. When Mr. Mason moves into their home it becomes more English, changing to suit his wishes. Instead of Christophine's spicy cooking they eat English food, "beef and mutton, pies and puddings." A picture of "The Miller's Daughter"--an English girl with blue eyes--hangs in the dining room. Mr. Mason is the decision maker, and he chooses to ignore his wife's repeated warnings about the danger of remaining at their home with resentment building among the blacks around them. He laughs at her fears, and refuses to take the blacks seriously, saying "they are children--they wouldn't hurt a fly" (Sea 35). His vague promise to take Pierre to where he might be cured comes to nothing, and because he insists on staying they are caught when their house is burnt down. Pierre dies in the fire. Antoinette's mother's anger and grief are treated as mental weakness, and she is removed from Mr. Mason, to "recuperate." She spends the rest of her life locked away in the country.

Sadly, Antoinette's own marriage is a mirror of her mother's. Once she marries Rochester, he becomes the decision-maker, to the extent that Antoinette loses even her own narrative voice (the middle section, beginning with their honeymoon, is narrated by Rochester).

Rochester, on the other hand, gains much, for everything is on his side. Like Mr. Mason, he is unfamiliar with the island, but is infused with the masculine certainty that he will master his surroundings. Disturbed by the first letter he receives from Daniel Cosway, Rochester wanders into the forest. He stumbles over a stone and becomes convinced that it is part of a paved road, now in ruins. He follows this track to a clearing and a house, also in ruins. But when he tries to return home he cannot find the path. "After I had walked for what seemed a long time I found that the undergrowth and creepers caught at my legs.... I was lost and afraid among these enemy trees..." (Sea 105). Baptiste, one of the family servants, comes to find Rochester and lead him home. When Rochester questions him about the road, Baptiste insists that there is no road, there never had been a road. Rochester has created civilization where there is none, imposing his expectations on the wilds around him. And he does succeed, eventually, in mastering his surroundings, for the next time he ventures into the forest he does not get lost, but finds his way back almost without thinking.

As he becomes more and more familiar with the island, he needs Antoinette's knowledge less and less. In the end, of course, he is returning to his own island, where Antoinette will have to make her way without his assistance.

The reader knows what Rochester is thinking, but Antoinette does not. Rochester consciously decides what he is going to tell her and what will remain unsaid. He allows Antoinette to make decisions when they first reach Granbois; for instance, she says that Baptiste is a good overseer, and he agrees, "keeping my opinion of Baptiste, Christophine, and all the others to myself. She trusted them and I did not. But I could hardly say so. Not

yet" (Sea 89). He obviously has an agenda which he does not share with Antoinette.

Throughout the middle section he gains power, from the knowledge that Antoinette generously shares, from Daniel Cosway, and from his own observations. Rochester never doubts his right to act as he does, to lock Antoinette away, to keep her dowry. As Antoinette says herself, "That is English law" (Sea 110). Erika Smilowitz writes, "While Rochester views himself as alienated and vulnerable in the mysterious West Indies, he is at least able to feel superior by virtue of his English birth. Rochester's self-righteousness and superciliousness would have been commonplace because of his birth and his sex" (100).

Of course, in Wide Sargasso Sea Rhys is drawing not only from the character Rochester in Brontë's novel, but from British culture of the nineteenth century as well. Perhaps that is why Rochester, unlike most of Rhys's male characters, narrates a section of the story.

In comparison, we know much less about Sasha's husband--he does not have the luxury of his own narrative, but since he is long gone from her life, we must gather the truth from Sasha's memories.

After marrying, they set off from Holland to Paris without even enough money to make the trip. Sasha believes that everything will be good once they arrive in Paris--she believes, like Antoinette, that "everything is on our side"--but of course that is not the case. Like Antoinette, Sasha trusts her husband to provide for her; like Antoinette, she is disappointed. Again and again we see Sasha alone in the room of some nameless hotel, waiting for Enno to return. Eventually he abandons her altogether, just as Rochester abandons Antoinette to the attic room at Thornfield.

Marriage, the Victorian "happy ending," is ideally the outcome of love. For Rhys's characters, however, finding a man is not so much an issue of love, but of an even more basic need. Antoinette and Sasha are involved in a struggle for survival, the major requirement for which is, of course, money. To find money one must find a man. And not only find one, but somehow keep him. So attracting a man is, in fact, an investment. Sasha says to herself:

Money now, for the night is coming. Money for my hair, money for my teeth, money for shoes that won't deform my feet (it's not so easy now to walk around in cheap shoes with very high heels), money for good clothes, money, money. The night is coming. (Midnight 144)

This theme is so prevalent in Rhys's books that many speak of her characters in terms of economics. Pearl Hochstadt, for example, says that in Rhys's world a woman's body is a "purchasable commodity--for some women their only bargaining chip in the power game" (3) and physical attractiveness is a "woman's ambiguously valuable resource" (5). Helen Tiffen writes that the main characters' thoughts and actions are based on "a complex and painful mixture of their own undervalued resources and the usually low (and indiscriminating) opinions held of these resources by men" (329). Todd Bender describes Rhys's theme as the "indignity, the personal damage, which flows from a woman's financial and emotional dependence on men in an alien world" (99). And Elgin Mellown unsympathetically writes that Rhys's characters "know they are alive because they suffer and because money passes through their hands" (464).

Molly Hite goes one step farther. She contends not only that "the defining characteristic of the 'Rhys woman' is her financial dependency on a

man..." but also that "her dependency is inherently unrespectable" [emphasis mine] (23). Indeed, both critics and readers may find it difficult to empathize, or even sympathize, with the "Rhys woman." For the "Rhys woman" cannot easily be labeled "good"--one who needs a man emotionally, and whatever financial need she may have must remain secondary--or "bad"--one who simply uses men for their money. The result is that many critics simply thrust the character into the category of "bad" (for instance, Elgin Mellown calls Antoinette a "frustrated nymphomaniac") or, at best, label her a "victim," feeling little sympathy for one who so passively waits out her own ruin.

This seeming passivity is problematic for many. The "Rhys woman's" story does not fit into our idea of what a novel should be, where the main character is ultimately responsible for her own fate. "Rhys continually places a marginal character at the center of her fiction and in doing so decenters an inherited narrative structure and undermines the values informing this structure" (Hite 25). As E.M. Forster quotes French critic Alain in Aspects of the Novel, "there is no fatality in the novel; there, everything is founded on human nature, and the dominating feeling is of an existence where everything is intentional, even passions and crimes, even misery" (46); i.e., the characters are responsible for what happens to them.

In searching for an explanation for the "Rhys woman's" fate, many critics attempt to find blame, so as to fit Rhys's novels into this conventional mold. Elizabeth Abel, for example, uses schizophrenia to explain the "Rhys woman's" "perversely self-destructive reactions" to her situation, meticulously pointing out similarities between the character and the textbook schizophrenic. Dennis Porter claims the Rhys character's downfall

is self-hate that makes her choose men who are bad for her (551). And Keith Abbott cannot quite concede that Rhys's characters are victims. He writes, instead, that they "can barely take up a position before they cast themselves in the role of the victim of that position and abandon it" [emphasis mine] (113). They are victims of their own making.

In fact, Rhys's characters don't have the luxury of being "good." In the societies in which they live, men have established the rules, and women must follow them. Rosalind Miles writes:

Women are permanent and perpetual victims of masculine society. Not only will they be oppressed by individual male bullies; they are everywhere confronted by institutionalized masculine hostility in the shape of the law, the professions, the police, the bureaucrats, of every country. They need money to survive, and they live with whatever consequences that entails. Jean Rhys is thus one of the few women writers to make explicit the link between the sex war and the class struggle. To be female is to inhabit, without hope of escape, the lowest class of all in a sexist structure. Men may work, singly or in units...to improve their own position on the social scale.... Women, denied any such recourse, flit about on the edges of the "real" world, dependent on men for maintaining even the most unsatisfactory of existences within it. (99)

For Antoinette's mother, the way of survival meant marriage. She knew the necessity, and suffered condemnation for her actions. At the wedding reception Antoinette overhears people talking about her mother and new stepfather: "A fantastic marriage and he will regret it. Why should a very wealthy man who could take his pick of all the girls in the West Indies...marry a widow without a penny and [the estate] a wreck of a place? ...Her new husband will have to spend a pretty penny before the house is fit to live in" (See 28-29). She paid a high price for the marriage, as well, by losing her right to make decisions, and later by losing even her sanity.

Antoinette's marriage was arranged by her step-brother, based on her dowry. She has no choice in the marriage, and has to trust that Rochester, a man she does not even know, will take care of her. And whether Rochester may feel himself used, taken advantage of, bought, his lot in life is not so bad, for at a snap of his fingers his wife is taken from his presence (unless, of course, he chooses to visit her), and, as the sole survivor of his family, his assets include Antoinette's dowry, Thornfield Hall, and the inheritance that was to go to his older brother.

The issue of money, the problem of survival, is much more tenuous for Sasha. Even her marriage did not offer the promise of financial security. Her relationships with other men don't seem to fare any better: at one point she's so destitute she's been living on one meal a day (bread and coffee) for three weeks. She decides to go out one afternoon and get a bottle of wine. She meets a man and he invites her for a drink. Over the drinks he tells her about a woman he has been seeing, who has sent a letter asking him for money for a pair of shoes. He thinks she is just asking him for money to give to her pimp, but it pains him to think of the possibility of her without a good pair of shoes. Sasha, of course, can relate to this, being penniless herself, and tells him how miserable it is to have to walk in the rain in shoes with holes in them. He does not pay much attention to what she tells him-- he is concentrating on what to do about his lover. When they get outside, suddenly she is so drunk she can't stand up. He calls for a taxi, and while they are waiting at the side of the street, she tells him she's had nothing to eat for the better part of a month. He recoils at this, and when the taxi arrives slams the door in her face and drives off. She expects this to

happen, is not surprised, says she does not blame him. She has obviously been left by the side of the road before.

If Sasha's attempts at survival via a man are unsuccessful, likewise her few attempts at work are all very short-lived for, just like the main character of Quartet, "she doesn't have a job because she doesn't have a skill that anyone wants to pay for, except the usual pleasures for which a woman is paid" (Berger 141).

This is why the whole notion of financial dependency is so unrespectable: it goes along with the issue of women's sexuality. Of course, in Victorian times a woman's sexual nature was never openly discussed--most, particularly men, pretended it did not exist. Bertha, in Jane Eyre, was condemned for having "giant propensities," for being "intemperate and unchaste," and of course her sentence was to be labeled insane and locked in the attic (this also neatly negates the idea of Bertha-as-victim, for it thrusts responsibility for her madness onto her). Rhys has given Antoinette a taste for both of Bertha's "giant propensities" as well (although we do not know that Antoinette is having an affair outside her marriage, in spite of the accusations Daniel makes to Rochester). We do know, however, that she enjoys the sexual relationship she has with her husband, and we know that Rochester is rather disgusted by her enjoyment of it. It finally becomes a tool of power for him, for she is driven to desperation when he stops coming to her bedroom at night. The final insult comes the day after she gives him the love potion, when he takes one of the servants to bed with him.

As unrealistic as it is, a sexless woman, or the ideal of the virgin/angel watching over her home, is not unexpected in a Victorian novel. It is much more surprising to read of the distaste Sasha's modern male

acquaintances have for the thought of women as sexual beings. (Lest we believe that women have at last been emancipated from this Victorian morality, we need only read the explanation Mellown gives of the "Rhys woman": she "is always a victim of love because she is at the mercy of her uncontrollable desires" 464.) The idea of the sexual woman as (considered) prostitute is prevalent throughout Rhys's works. In Good Morning, Midnight, a painter tells Sasha about a woman he met while living in London. This woman, a Creole, lived on the attic floor of his apartment building. One night she came to his door, drunk and crying, asking for a glass of whiskey. She told him she was living with a man she'd met in Paris. She felt everyone, not only the residents of the building, but the people she met on the street as well, hated her because she wasn't married to this man, but even more because she wasn't white. Her lover didn't believe it; he told her she was imagining everything.

Because of the cruelty she'd encountered, she hadn't been out of the apartment during daylight for two years. That afternoon, however, she had been in a good mood and decided to go out. A little girl stopped her on the stairs and said, "I hate you and I wish you were dead" (Midnight 97). The woman was so upset she drank a bottle of whiskey and ended up outside the painter's apartment.

At this point the painter tells Sasha, "Well, what can you say to a story like that? I knew all the time that what she wanted was that I should make love to her and that it was the only thing that would do her any good. But alas, I couldn't" (Midnight 97). The painter does not hear her painful story; he merely considers her sexuality, and rejects it immediately.

Rhys, throughout her novels, was consistent in her disapproval of

English culture, especially that it favored the English male. And, as Nancy Hemond Brown writes, Rhys considered English women who went along with the system "calculating, preoccupied with social status, cruel, and often foolish--dupes too insensitive to understand the consequences of their behaviour, namely, the perpetuation of a system which at its heart despised them" (8). Not surprisingly, women who didn't go along with "the system" were, as Antoinette's mother claimed, "marooned," or, as Sasha said about herself, "at an impasse," a dead end. The Creole woman in Good Morning, Midnight stayed with her lover because she had nowhere to go (he stayed because he liked her cooking). Antoinette and Sasha face similar predicaments and meet with similar prejudices. Like the Creole woman, they have little sense of belonging to a group.

Hite asserts that this is because the "Rhys woman" is "outside the machine," marginalized. She doesn't fit cleanly into her own story.

The Rhys woman lives in a world where powerful and privileged people treat other people as if they were minor characters, born into and summed up by the supporting parts they play in the main drama. (27)

This describes Antoinette's existence, for she grows up isolated, belonging neither to the British colonizers nor to the island blacks. As a child she plays with a black girl named Tia, but the friendship even at this level is marred by the girls' awakening awareness of the differences between them. Each, inevitably, conforms to the strictures of her culture. It is hardly surprising when, after Tia claims to win a bet they made, Antoinette calls her a "cheating nigger" (Sea 24). This is the last time they play together, but Antoinette does not really comprehend that their bond has been broken

until the night the island natives burn Antoinette's home. As her family is leaving the burning building, jostling through a crowd of blacks, Antoinette sees Tia and runs toward her. "As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her" (Sea 45). As she gets near, however, Tia throws a rock that hits Antoinette in the head. "I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass" (Sea 45). She identifies with Tia, but cannot belong with her.

Her separation from those around her continues as she grows up. In the convent the de Plana sisters are held as models for the other girls to emulate. Antoinette attempts to be like the de Planas, even asks one of the sisters to help her style her hair. But of course she does not succeed, no matter how she tries.

After her marriage Antoinette tries to tell Rochester of her life-long feelings of isolation.

Did you hear what that girl was singing?...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 I was even born at all. (Sea 102)

Rochester, of course, has a clear identity--she includes him as "you." (It would seem that already she has begun to doubt whether he is really on her side.)

The final section of the book shows us how completely Antoinette is cut off from her home, her culture, even her husband, as she spends her final days locked up with Grace Poole.

Sasha, likewise, seems to belong to no one. She is estranged from her family (we never even learn exactly her relationship to the male relative who hands over her inheritance, nor are we told the identity of her benefactress). Neither does she seem to fit into any location. Her family is in London, and we learn she married to get away from London; since then she seems to have been circling Europe, looking for a place to light. There is no home--there are only hotel rooms. She admits--a foreshadow of Antoinette's lament--that "I have no pride--no pride, no name, no face, no country" (Midnight 44).

Sasha is a minor character, surrounded and used by major characters. One of her memories of Paris, an encounter with the owner of the dress shop where she worked, vividly exposes the gulf between her as a minor character and those around her, who consider themselves major characters. When Mr. Blank arrives at the shop he asks her several questions, and because she cannot decide exactly what he wants to know, her answers displease him. He wants to know how many languages she speaks; she says "one," although we've seen French sprinkled throughout her story, and she mentally recites some textbook German while she is waiting for the next customer. Later Mr. Blank asks her to take a note to the "kise." He means "La caisse," the cashier, but his French is so bad she does not know where to deliver it, and finally returns with note in hand to Mr. Blank, admitting that she has no idea where he wanted her to go. Moreover, she takes the blame, not wanting to appear rude by telling him it

was because of his pronunciation. Mr. Blank says, "You're just a hopeless, helpless little fool, aren't you?"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes. Oh, yes" (Midnight 28). She says this and bursts into tears. In the end Sasha quits, an arrangement that Mr. Blank "agrees is best."

In the years since her employment there, probably over many pernodes, Sasha has perfected a rebuttal to the Mr. Blanks of her culture:

You, who represent Society, have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month. That's my market value, for I am an inefficient member of Society, slow on the uptake, uncertain, slightly damaged in the fray, there's no denying it. So you have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month, to lodge me in a small, dark room, to clothe me shabbily, to harass me with worry and monotony and unsatisfied longings till you get me to the point when I blush at a look, cry at a word. We can't all be happy, we can't all be rich, we can't all be lucky--and it would be so much less fun if we were. Isn't that so, Mr. Blank? There must be the dark so that the others may be able to laugh the more heartily. Sacrifices are necessary.... Let's say that you have this mystical right to cut my legs off. But the right to ridicule me afterwards because I am a cripple--no, that I think you haven't got. And that's the right you hold most dearly, isn't it? (Midnight 29)

Whether or not she actually said these words aloud is moot, for, as a marginalized character, she is without a voice. "To be outside the machine is to be without language, condemned to emit sounds that inside interlocutors interpret as evidence of duplicity, infantilism, hypocrisy--or simply madness" (Hite 28). We see evidence of this again and again throughout Rhys's novels. When Sasha has a drink with the man whose lover wants money for a pair of shoes, he uses her simply as a sounding board for his own thoughts. Anything she says--up until the time she tells

him she is starving--goes by unheard. Likewise, the painter does not really listen to the Creole woman's story.

After Rochester's visit to Daniel Cosway he confronts Antoinette, but then tries to keep her from responding to the accusations. Even as he reluctantly allows her to speak, he tells the reader, "I began to wonder how much of all this was true, how much imagined, distorted" (Sea 133). Her words, her story, are, finally, interpreted as madness.

As marginalized characters, both Antoinette and Sasha lose their very identity. After their marriage, Rochester begins to call Antoinette Bertha. When she begs him to call her by her own name, to recognize who she really is, he refuses, insisting on the "good English name."

Sasha has changed her name, Sophia, at a young age in an attempt to change her life, to establish a sense of her own identity. However, her male relative refuses to call her anything but Sophia. In his presence, like Antoinette when she is with Rochester, her identity is defined by him; it is no longer her own.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy in these two novels is the extent to which both women allow external forces to define them. Sasha is constantly aware of those around her, of their judgments. She imagines what others are thinking. We see how accurate her thoughts are when a young English woman enters the bar where Sasha is having lunch and asks loudly what "that old woman" is doing here. Sasha is both embarrassed and hurt, but she is not surprised. She expects that whenever the focus is on her that this will be the reaction.

Of course, her paranoia may be exacerbated by her addiction to alcohol. One afternoon she stops into a bar, really wanting a drink, but she

lies and tells them she is looking for a movie theater. She is struggling for respectability, expecting to be found out at every turn.

'...This is my attitude to life. Please, please, monsieur et madame, mister, missis, and miss, I am trying so hard to be like you. I know I don't succeed, but look how hard I try.'
(Midnight 106)

Antoinette's life, as well, is one of trying to meet expectations. When her mother marries Mr. Mason, Antoinette tries to adapt to the new lifestyle. "I was glad to be like an English girl" (Sea 35), but she admits she misses the taste of native food. In the convent, again, she tries without success to live up to the standards of the de Plana sisters.

As an adult, Antoinette is very concerned about what other people think of her. She is distressed when one of the servants sings the song about the "white cockroach." Later, when Christophine advises her to leave Rochester, she refuses. "No, I will not [go], then everyone, not only the servants, will laugh at me" (Sea 109).

Likewise, both Antoinette and Sasha believe that forces outside themselves can improve their lives. Antoinette, of course, tries to win back her husband with Christophine's magic potion. At another point she says that she would be a "different person" if she lived in England. "I have been unhappy...it cannot last, being so unhappy, it would kill you" (Sea 111). If only she were in England, she thinks, things would be better. Ironically, her incentive for "escaping" to England is her unhappy marriage to Rochester. She also believes that Christophine's love potion will bring Rochester back to her.

Sasha lives with the ongoing illusion that her physical appearance will make her a different person--a perception that actually has quite a bit of validity in her society. At the dress shop where she works with Mr. Blank, she has had a colorful dress put aside until she can afford to buy it. Unfortunately she is forced to quit before she is able to save up enough money. She believes that the dress would have changed the incident with Mr. Blank. "If I had been wearing it I never should have stammered or been stupid" (Midnight 28). Her last day at work, when she is sitting in the room where the dress is stored, she thinks, "Now I shall never have that dress. Today, this hour, this minute I am utterly defeated" (Midnight 28).

She is as concerned with her appearance in the present as she was as a young woman. Now, however, her motivation is attracting a man rather than standing up to him. She is here in Paris to buy new clothes, a hat, makeup, to have her hair done. Over all this she dons the old fur coat that isn't worth pawning. She tries to convince the gigolo of this, but he cheerfully refuses to believe her; her efforts at respectability, again, don't have the effect she intended.

Likewise, Antoinette could not foresee what her appearance would come to mean to Rochester. During their honeymoon the sight of one of her dresses makes Rochester "breathless and savage with desire" (Sea 93). Later Antoinette promises to wear the dress he likes, and expresses a desire to have another made like it to please him. Presumably this is the red dress, the same one Antoinette clutches to her in the attic of Thornfield as the only reminder of her home, of herself. She asks Grace Poole, "'Does it make me look intemperate and unchaste? That man told me so'" (Sea 186).

Perhaps that red dress, as the catalyst for Antoinette's act of burning Thornfield Hall, shows us that Wide Sargasso Sea is truly the culmination of Rhys's writing, for she reveals that the "Rhys woman" will not merely wait out her own ruin. The colorful dress which Sasha could only imagine would change her life is the same dress that Antoinette saw on the floor, and "it was as if the fire had spread across the room" (Sea 187). It is Antoinette's call to action, her way of leaping from marginality to the center of her own story. Kathy Mezei writes that it is not her "passive silence" that drives Antoinette to madness, but rather the "act of being silenced" (199). Given that, she calls Antoinette's attempt to speak, to tell her own story, "heroic." Antoinette is, indeed, heroic not only for telling her own story, but for telling Sasha's story as well, and for representing all of Rhys's characters who struggle for center stage.

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