

Her Masterpiece, Jean Rhys and the Caribbean Island of Dominica

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for the Conference of the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars, April 20-24, 2010,
Lousiana University, Baton Rouge, Lousiana, USA.

Jean Rhys' best known novel, *The Wide Sargasso Sea*, had a gestation period of over half a century (1907-1966). When it was published, it won the W.H. Smith prize and contributed no small part to her receiving the CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) for her contribution to literature.

In this paper, I shall explore what motivated her to write this novel, why it was extremely challenging and how it was accomplished.

Motivation

In a letter to Diana Athill, dated 20th February 1967,(7) p296 Jean Rhys looks back:

"I came to England between sixteen and seventeen a very impressionable age (the year was 1907), *Jane Eyre* was one of the books I read then. Of course Charlotte Bronte makes her own world... she convinces you, and that makes the poor Creole lunatic all the more dreadful. I remember being quite shocked, and when I reread it rather annoyed. That's only one side—the English side."

Diana Athill was the editor at Andre' Deutsch, publisher of the *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Young Jean, a white Creole, like Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, was hurt and angered by what she perceived as Charlotte Bronte's blatant one-sidedness. Bronte's narrative of the journey of Bertha Mason, the first Mrs Rochester, from Jamaica to Thornfield in England, Jean saw as false. Bronte's description of Bertha Mason she felt was unpardonable. That this be put right stirred Jean to write. *The Wide Sargasso Sea* was her fulfilment of this.

Here are extracts of Charlotte Bronte's description of Bertha Mason, confined to the attic:

"This was a demonic laugh, low, suppressed and deep, the goblin-laughter... something gurgled and moaned" (4) p147

"I heard... a snarling, snatching sound, almost like a dog quarrelling."(4) p208

"What creature was it, masked in an ordinary woman's face and shape, uttered the voice, now of a mocking demon, and... of a carrion seeking bird of prey?" (4) p210

Charlotte Bronte wrote with an exclusively Western audience in mind. Her readers mainly from the British Isles, would not have disputed what they read in 1847, since both author and readers accepted British Imperialism. Its vision, its self promotion, its *raison d'être* were based on bringing civilisation to its overseas possessions. In his book '*Culture and Imperialism*,' (3) p367 Edward Said noted that "Books are consumed in what Kenneth Burke calls a framework of acceptance".

Jean Rhys, born and brought up in Dominica, her mother a white Creole, was not within that frame of acceptance. She was in a position to question what she was reading about the West Indies.

We should remember that Jean Rhys, was reading this novel in London, England, a place that was cold, strange and bewildering to her, infused with the imperial culture of the great metropolis, its snobbish middle class, sure of its innate superiority and intolerant of differences. 'What a really nasty voice you've got' (2) p40 came from one of the girls at Perse school in Cambridge, which she attended on her arrival from Dominica. In such a climate, she could sympathise, if not identify, with the Creole outcast Bertha Mason. This was likely for at the time she was herself emotionally vulnerable. Before her arrival in London her family had become part of a rapidly diminishing white middle class, declining into financial misery, no longer at ease with itself.

Her feelings of displacement were increased by her not having middle class accomplishments such as being able to play hockey or ride a bicycle which could have assisted her in becoming part of a team. (2) p40 Her ill fitting clothes exacerbated what the self assured English saw as an unappealing manner. The better fitting, more expensive, fashionable ones preferred by Jean were beyond her Aunt Clarice's reach.(2) p39

All this weighed heavily upon her physical frailty and her personality, which was sensitive, stubborn and impractical. Yet underlying all this was a strong flow of an irresistible, teenage ambition, the desire to be a success on the stage, to be famous, to be loved and cared for by a wealthy gentleman. The possibility of this fairy tale life had been fed in part by perceiving from the distance of Dominica 'an idyllic England, represented on chocolate boxes, biscuit tins, Christmas cards and in part by her romantic Great Aunt Jane, for whom England was a place where romance and chivalry, curtsies, and quadrilles, lace and finery were the order of the day.' (8) p26

This complex, alluring mix of her inner feelings in a harsh, practical, class ridden, snobbish, middle England would not have been easy to carry. When ambitions to have a career on the stage proved impossible with her Dominican accent, she would have been open to alternatives. The idea to write was not Jean's, it came from her aunt Clarice who preferred it to the stage and felt Jean's ability and disposition were suited to it.

Challenge & Accomplishment

One of the first things a reader notices in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is that Jean Rhys has changed the call name of the first Mrs Rochester. The name Bertha had been tainted by association, it being Charlotte Bronte's mad woman in the attic. Jean Rhys chooses Antoinette which offers her the opportunity to portray another side of this White Creole, christened by Charlotte Bronte herself as Bertha Antoinetta Mason. A carriage also wheels that name, suggesting a tragic end to come, 'Marie Antoinette' the 14 year old executed on the guillotine. This choice heralds what is to come.

The second alteration fascinates. It is that though Mr Rochester is very much present in the 'Wide Sargasso Sea', he is not addressed by name at any time, either by the narrator or the characters, yet we, the readers, know it is he. This strategy leaves our imagination open, ready to be formed anew. Yet it is plausible for in the 'Wide Sargasso Sea' Mr Rochester is amongst his social inferiors who speak simply and directly. The dialogue is natural, suited to this new rustic environment.

Jean Rhys' main motive for writing the 'Wide Sargasso Sea' is to put things right. She does not waver from this intent. First, she offers us a most moving account of Antoinette's sad family life. With the death of Antoinette's father, we see her mother pulling herself together against the odds, the stresses of a middle class woman coping with dire poverty attempting to look presentable to the wealthy Mr Mason. Her mother succeeds and the marriage brings much needed financial respite, comfort and assurance to mother and daughter from their state of near destitution.

As the narration of Antoinette's youth unfolds, we live through her deeply troubled experiences. The vicious neighbourhood and the frailty of her mother hasten the falling apart of this marriage. Her mother's rapid demise comes with her worsening mental instability. We see her sexually abused in a home meant to care for her. Such is the background of the young, trusting Antoinette that we feel for her.

On learning that Antoinette will not marry him, we hear Mr Rochester's thoughts:

'This would indeed make a fool of me. I did not relish going back to England in the role of rejected suitor jilted by this Creole girl. I must certainly know why.

She was sitting in a rocking chair with her head bent..... I spoke gently:

'What is the matter, Antoinette? What have I done?'

She said nothing,

'You do not wish to marry me?'

'No.'

'But why?'

'I'm afraid of what might happen.'

'But don't you remember last night I told you that when you are my wife there would not be any more reason to be afraid?'

'Yes.' She said, 'but then Richard came in and you laughed. I didn't like the way you laughed.'

'But I was laughing at myself, Antoinette.'

She looked at me and I took her in my arms and kissed her.

'You don't know anything about me.' She said.

'I'll trust you if you'll trust me. Is that a bargain? You will make me very unhappy if you send me away without telling me what I have done to displease you. I will go with a sad heart.'

'Your sad heart,' she said and touched my face. I kissed her fervently, promising her peace, happiness, safety.'

This communication between Antoinette and Mr Rochester is very different in mood and intent from Mr Rochester's version of the character of Bertha Mason to Jane Eyre in that novel.

"I had, (he says) marked neither modesty nor benevolence nor candour nor refinement in her mind or manners... I found her nature wholly alien to mine, her tastes obnoxious to me; her cast of mind common, low, narrow and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher." (4) p305-308

It is this innate difference in the perceptions of Mr Rochester by these two authors which is built upon as the couple ascends the Morne in Dominica, to the honeymoon house. The very structuring of the novel enhances Jean Rhys' purpose. What readers first hear is not the dialogue before the marriage which I have read, but instead Mr Rochester's thoughts when the marriage has already taken place, i.e. during the honeymoon 'I have not bought her she has bought me or so she thinks...' (5) p70 and then in a letter to his father a willing accomplice to the marriage "Dear Father, the thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. No provision made for her (that must be

seen to) I have a modest competence now... no begging letters, no mean requests. None of the furtive, shabby manoeuvres of a younger son.”(5) p70

It is eight pages later, after this letter to his father that we see and hear Mr Rochester’s manoeuvrings which I have read. His elevated financial position has been secured by cunning. This he will not acknowledge. He is disingenuous.

I come now to other alterations that enable the 'Wide Sargasso Sea' to stand on its own while not alienating it from Charlotte Bronte’s 'Jane Eyre'.

Bertha Mason is a White Jamaican Creole, but Jean Rhys is not familiar with Jamaica. What she understands well is the mountainous landscape of her place of birth, Dominica, its people and culture. And so it is to this island that Antoinette and Mr Rochester go for that fatal honeymoon, fatal for it is where Jean Rhys chooses to bring about that crucial change to Antoinette’s future.

As Mr Rochester, on horse back slowly climbs to the honeymoon house on wooden stilts in Granbois, we hear his disaffections with everything 'Everything is too much. I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much green. The flowers are too red; the mountains too high, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger. Her pleading expression annoys me.(5) p70

Jean Rhys tolls the bell for Antoinette’s demise to come, but it is not hastened; it is postponed by a trickle of hope that comes in the path of the ascent to Granbois “She dismounted quickly, picked a large shamrock-shaped leaf to make a cup, filled it with water coming from a cliff and brought it to me. ‘Taste. This is mountain water.’ Looking up smiling, she might have been any pretty English girl and to please her I drank. It was cold, pure, and sweet.”(5) p71

The knowledge of this mountainous terrain is common to all ascending, except Mr Rochester. Antoinette knows the exact spot where the sudden drop of temperature would be felt in the ascent, where warm clothes are worn; she informs Mr Rochester with affection, wishing to bring him the comfort of knowing, so that he be at ease. She wishes to take him to Granbois, believing that the joy of her past happiness are held there, and will embrace them both.

However, for the first time in his life, Mr Rochester is disoriented, enveloped by the unfamiliar; it is an uncanny strangeness, one he does not understand, nor wishes to make the effort to understand. Instead he sees himself a victim of deception, caught in an invisible web.

His restless mind flaps like a fish caught in a net with the two poisoned letters he receives from Daniel Boyd, the coloured man who hopes to dupe him by pretending to be Antoinette’s illegitimate brother. Jean Rhys uses a coloured man for this role, aware there was little love lost then between 'Coloured folks' and 'Whites'.

Daniel tells Mr Rochester in a most spiteful, hateful way that he has married someone who will inherit the madness of her mother, that he has been caught in a trap set by Richard Mason, her brother. But when Daniel says, ‘If I keep my mouth shut it seems to me you owe me something. What is five hundred pounds to you? To me it’s my life.’ Mr Rochester says to himself. Now disgust was rising in me like sickness. Disgust and rage.(5) p125 Yet these poisoned barbs have struck bull’s eye. On his return, Antoinette senses she is not loved, and there and then to save her marriage presents her family history to Mr Rochester truthfully and at length; but no avail.

Jean Rhys shows us that Mr Rochester’s assurance to Antoinette before she consents to marry him “I’ll trust you if you’ll trust me,”(5) p79 was a ploy to calm her fears, to gain her trust.

And what of his other promises? 'When you are my wife there would not be anymore reason to be afraid.'(5) p78 Antoinette, you recall had with courage and unusual honesty alerted him to her fragile mind "You don't know anything about me.(5) p79 His promises have proved to be mere sounds carried by the wind but once challenged are dissembled. There is nothing left for this young, trusting, naïve, parentless, lonely girl; once there was the security of her inheritance but she exchanged it for his promises of trust and goodwill. He pulls this apart and with it her measure of equilibrium. Insanity can be inherited, Jean Rhys is saying to us, but one can also be driven to it by unkindness, by overwhelming emotional betrayal. To be loved is to have the oxygen of life, the emotional impact of being in and out of another's affection was well known to Jean.

Mr Rochester feels ensnared not by his father who had arranged it or Richard Mason who complied or Daniel, the cruel impostor but by the unprotected, vulnerable Antoinette, now a financial dependent which he once was. She senses his coldness, his indifference.

Later, his careless, adulterous play with the ambitious, crafty servant, Amelie, in the room next door to his wife's, knowing she was awake to what was happening, leads to a distraught Antoinette hurrying on horse back to her confidante, childhood family houseservant and loyal friend, the upright and forthright Martiniquen Woman, Christine. She has the added status of being an obeah woman. Antoinette asks her for a love potion to regain Mr Rochester's love. Instead, Christine offers her sound rational reasons to leave Mr Rochester, explaining how to go about it. Antoinette protests that she cannot do this and pleads for a love potion.

As the dark tragedy of Antoinette's life encroaches, Jean Rhys now has Mr Rochester calling her Bertha. It is artful. When Antoinette protests, 'My name is not Bertha. Why do you call me Bertha?' Mr Rochester replies, 'Because it is a name I'm particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha.' (5) p134 It is duplicitous for he knows Bertha is the name of her insane mother. Jean Rhys is preparing us for Antoinette's journey to the attic in Thornfield, England.

The marriage has become loveless. The love potion has not worked. Now Christine approaches him, of her own accord, on Antoinette's behalf. She presents him with a humane case to return to Antoinette half of her £30,000 dowry so she can be released from the marriage and look after herself. Mr Rochester declines, feels affronted and threatens her by reading a letter from Mr Fraser, the Jamaican magistrate from Spanish Town, who is looking for Christine, because of some past mischief.

Mr Rochester holds on to her entire dowry. Now a wealthy man he brings her to Thornfield Hall, England. Here he regains himself and in Bronte's novel, Jane Eyre, he tells Jane "My plans would not permit me to remove the maniac elsewhere — though I possess an old house Ferndean Manor, even more retired and hidden than this, where I could have lodged her safely enough, had not a scruple about the unhealthiness of the situation, in the heart of the wood, made my conscience recoil from the arrangement. Probably those damp walls would soon have eased me of her charge..."(4) p300

This decision of his not to take her there harkens to the letter to his father in 'Wide Sargasso Sea' "No provision made for her (that must be seen to)" Here the Wide Sargasso Sea echoes the novel Jane Eyre.

It is done. It has been put right. Jean Rhys has offered Antoinette another path to the attic in Thornfield Hall; another path to her becoming Bertha.

As we reach the last pages of 'Wide Sargasso Sea', we know that our Antoinette, now Bertha Mason, will soon be hurling herself over the battlements. We can feel for her. Jean Rhys has returned her humanity to her, has returned her to the human fold.

The end has come. The 'Wide Sargasso Sea' is a book that shows we see what we see by where we stand, while simultaneously enlarging Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre. It holds its own, yet meshes with it. Jean brought together her childhood memories, a love for the Dominican landscape and an understanding of its people. We see that her beginnings, her inheritance has walked beside her, though her adult life was spent in an imperial, self assured metropolis.

Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea shows that an individual's voice can open rooms historians have long ignored. Her courage, determination and talent brought to fulfilment a formidable work. She had set out to put things right; it was the way she did it that has made it her masterpiece.

I leave the last words to Diana Athill's letter to Jean Rhys in 1966:

"No one is ever going to know what labour and torment has gone into the years of writing this book. It's going to alight in their hands as complete and natural as a bird on a bough, as though it had just come into existence by itself. Does that make you feel better, after all the bold sweat, toil and tears? It ought to make you feel so proud – a rare and splendid creator."(2) p524

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