

Material loss



How fragile is identity? “ Wide Sargasso Sea” by Jean Rhys challenges this question through the eyes of two characters, Antionette Cosway and Edward Rochester. Set in post-emancipation Jamaica, the novel follows the story of young Antionette, a girl born onto a deteriorating plantation. Despised by the locals for her Creole heritage, and her slave-owner father, Antionette struggles for her sanity in an unfair and patriarchal society. Many readers can relate to the coming-of-age concept of the novel. Yet “ Wide Sargasso Sea” differs from other narratives in that it involves complicated and subjective topics. Rhys writes to make the reader think, to question all aspects of the novel, and, on the next level, his or her own existence. Most importantly, the reader must examine the delicate pieces of character that connect a person to sensibility. Throughout the book, Rhys describes the motif of fire to show how loss of identity can tear one away from their family, themselves, and reality.

Antionette’s mother, Annette fears harm at the hands of the locals, and those fears become a reality when she loses her son, her home, and her faith in the destructive fire at Coulibri, proving that her insanity was fueled by loss of identity. Annette pleads with Mr. Mason to leave Spanish Town but he does not understand the extent of her despair. The night of the fire at Coulibri, the Cosways rush out of the house leaving behind Annette’s parrot, Coco, “ everybody was looking up and pointing at Coco on the glaxis railings with his feathers alight. He made an effort to fly down but his clipped wings failed him and he fell screeching. He was all on fire”(24). The imagery in this scene serves to enhance the effect that Rhys expects her reader to gather from the text. The bird seems to be just another insignificant object

destroyed by the fire. However not only was Coco a pet, beloved by Annette, but he represents the fragile balance between reality and insanity. Birds are known for their wings and after his are clipped, Coco loses use of them, and is consumed by the fire. Similarly, Annette loses her identity when everything she cares about is destroyed and as a result, she is slowly consumed by her own madness. After the fire, Antionette wakes up under the care of her Aunt Cora. She learns that her mother was relocated to the country, and there she must stay. Before the inevitable meeting with Annette, Antionette comprehends as much as her young mind can handle, “ I remember the dull feeling as we drove along for I did not expect to see her. She was part of Coulibri, that had gone, so she had gone, I was certain of it”(28). Coulibri was lost in the fire, and not only was it a part of Antionette, but a part of Annette as well. It is shocking how much one depends on material to identify themselves, but the proof is there when Antionette’s broken mother doesn’t recognize her own daughter, and forces her away. Although Coulibri is mentioned by name, the fire took so much more of Annette’s identity. Pierre was the only child she truly loved, and his already deteriorating health was weakened as a result. When her world is ripped so suddenly away, Annette cracks, which eventually lands her in an asylum. Although fire destroyed so much at Coulibri, it had next to no emotional power, Annette was the one who forced Antionette away and drove herself truly insane.

Bound by a loveless marriage, Antionette finds herself seeking an absent romance all the while losing more of her own ethics, signifying that Rochester is the flame that is slowly consuming her identity. Although he is

still unsettled by the foreign environment at Granbois, Rochester enjoys a candlelit dinner with Antionette, “ a great many moths and beetles found their way into the room, flew into the candles and fell dead on the tablecloth”(73). Antionette finds herself attracted to the one thing that will lead to her loss of identity, and eventually death. Who is that? Rochester, of course. Rochester is Antionette’s flame, and while the moths are burned alive, Antionette’s predetermined fate is not far off from this. She does indeed leap from a burning roof, but not before the husk of her former self descends into lunacy. The moths continual return to the flame, despite its destructive nature, represents Antionette’s loss of integrity and persistent dependency on Rochester. Emotional torment expectedly upsets Antionette, so she makes the audacious decision to drug Rochester with an obeah “ love potion.” Angered and self-pitying, Rochester sleeps with Amelie, and even after regretting his decision, Antionette flies into a rage, “ it was like a dream in the large unfurnished room with the candles flickering and this red-eyed wild-haired stranger who was my wife shouting obscenities at me”(77). One of the first glimpses through the façade of Antionette Mason is cast under flickering flame and red eyes. Red is a recurring color of misery, and “ red-eyed” Antionette is a close portrayal of the madwoman in the attic. Through Rochester’s view, Flickering flame is a metaphor for Antionette’s reality, and her violent state of mind. Additionally, the surrealism of Antionette’s entire identity is heightened when Rochester describes his wife as a stranger, not the woman he married. As seen metaphorically by the moth and flame, and the flickering candle, Antionette finds herself straying further and further from her reality and ideals.

Antionette descends into a hazy existence, where the fire at Thornfield haunts her lost life as well as her new one, proving that her irretrievable identity is the factor that concludes her grip on reality and herself. Locked away in the attic, Antionette is slowly consumed by the madwoman. One night, she roams Thornfield carrying a candle, and is shocked when she sees a mirror for the first time in ten years. “ It was then that I saw her – the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her. I dropped the candle I was carrying and it caught the end of a tablecloth and I saw flames shoot up”(111). Antionette refers to herself in third person, because she doesn't recognize the girl she sees in the looking glass. She also labels Bertha Mason as “ the ghost,” giving the sense that her new self is but a shell of her old self, stripped of all identity. In astonishment, Antionette drops the candle, igniting the hall, and a tie is made back to the original fire at Coulibri. Soon after this episode, Antionette is caught in a dream where she describes herself setting fire to Thornfield. Once on the roof of the manor, her dream sky is depicted in fiery detail, “ It was red and all my life was in it. I saw the grandfather clock, and Aunt Cora's patchwork, all colors, I saw the orchids and the stephanotis and the jasmine and the Tree of life in flames” (112). The color red is also a concept of significance, as it is often described alongside fire as a symbol of loss, and alongside flora as a symbol of renewal. In this case, Rhys refers to the former, the haze of sky and flame separates Antionette from the identity she once knew. The timeless “ tree of life” was grown in Antionette's her old garden at Coulibri. It is a strong part of her Caribbean identity, as described earlier in the book. The tree in flames takes the reader back to the fire at Coulibri where so much was lost, and simultaneously symbolizes loss of

childhood. Thus, Antionette's final declination into madwoman is stalked by the destructive shadow of fire, serving a reminder of the shell she has become.

In the novel "Wide Sargasso Sea," Fire is a powerful motif, written with the power to make or break someone. Rhys uses it to show how loss of identity can tear one away from reality and drive them insane. Anette displays proof of this when she loses everything, including her mind, after the fire at Coulibri. Likewise, Antionette exhibits deteriorating identity at Granbois, which is exemplified through the moth and the flame as well as her candlelit manic episode. Lastly, Antionette's transitions into madwoman are spent in England, where the fire at Thornfield and the flaming tree of life are constant metaphors for the life she lost. These are just a few ways that Rhys ties down her main ideas surrounding character. Whether it is large and destructive, or trivial, the motif of fire represents how fragile identity is.