

Another single story in jean rhys' wide sargasso sea

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Wide Sargasso Sea is the story of Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Rochester, narrated in first-person, depicting the life of Antoinette in three sections: early years in Coulibri, marital life in Massacre, and trapped mansion life in England. Charlotte Brontë wrote from an imperialistic point of view, which silenced the crazy, vain liability of a foreign woman, haunting Thornfield Hall. At the time readers already associated "whiteness and goodness... and blackness and badness (Blum 108), but the stereotype was perpetuated with works like *Jane Eyre*, which failed to give the marginalized "Berthas" an identity in order for individual cases to transcend typecasts. In her TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story", Chimamanda Adichie argues that one has to understand that there is never a single story, and having imbalanced versions of people's stories to favor one side perpetuates the idea that the single story is the only story. She states that reiterating a single stereotype "shows people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what (the group) becomes".

Adichie also brings to light that it is those in power who are telling the definitive story of a people. Another significant part of the single story, is that the single story tends to begin where the storyteller wants it to begin, to favor their own nation. Once again, those who have power decide to manipulate the story to stir their reader into believing that theirs is the only story, for example starting the story "with the arrows of Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British" (Adichie 3) favors the latter and antagonizes the former. Adichie's argument addresses the effect of *Jane Eyre*'s Bertha had on readers of the era. That is to say, the stereotypes in

British literature had been amassing as new land and its people were colonized.

The “single-story as the only story” paradigm matches up to the relationship between British and colonial literature, which in turn allows one to recognize that Brontë's *Bertha* is merely pigeonholed, an intention that is discarded with Rhys' “humanized” *Antoinette*. Unlike Adichie, Edward D. Said argues that it is significant for a reader to go through all works of the Western Canon and perform “contrapuntal reading”, which Said defines as “reading a text with an understanding of what is involved when an author shows” a particular scene (Said 66). The reading would take into consideration both the Euro-centric imperialism, and colonial resistance. The author also stresses how all works of European literature participate in imperialism even when it is not the main focus of a narrative, to the extent that colonizing characters relate everything back to their motherland, exploiting the difference in power they have over the colonized. Moreover, Said brings forth Eric Wolf's notion of “people without history” (Said 64), the secondary characters who are “take for granted but scarcely ever more than named... rarely studied... or given density” (Said 63).

These characters act as catalysts for the protagonists: their actions are only relevant and relation to its effect on the lives of the colonizing people. *Wide Sargasso Sea* participates in this phenomenon, as secondary Jamaican characters are a collective voice without an identity, whose overarching opinions only matter to highlight *Antoinette's* response to them and growth as a character because of them. Jean Rhys gives *Bertha* a voice, and by

proxy an identity, which takes away from the longstanding stereotype of Creoles which emerged in *Jane Eyre*. Nonetheless, in bringing the protagonist Antoinette into the spotlight, the author fails to create unique secondary characters, who would not blend together in their likeness as a group, thus creating another single story of the emancipated slaves and other Jamaicans. Jean Rhys gives Bertha a voice, and by proxy an identity, which takes away from the longstanding stereotype of Creoles which emerged in *Jane Eyre*, one of weakness and irrelevance. Nonetheless, in bringing the protagonist Antoinette into the spotlight, the author fails to create unique secondary characters, who would not blend together in their likeness as a group, thus creating another single story of the emancipated slaves and other Jamaicans.

Jean Rhys's intention, as stated in her letters to Selma Vaz Diaz, was to let the "Creole's "I" come to life" (Rhys 136) and destroy the "devil" which Charlotte Brontë created with understanding of Antoinette's characteristics. Rhys creates Antoinette by the standard of the "natural, basic self-centeredness" of all human beings to take away from the longstanding Bertha-esque stereotype, by making Antoinette's narration "so immediate, urgent, real" (Wallace), thus discrediting the single story of white Creoles in the West Indies. Unlike many female protagonists of the time, who are portrayed static characters whose principles and ideas remain entrenched in the idealism of the British society, Antoinette undergoes development as a character from a culturally and physically isolated point of view. As a white Jamaican, she is not accepted into any community in the West Indies, in her youth she becomes scared of strangers, stating that "if the razor grass cut my legs and arms, I would think "It's better than people"" (Rhys 16).

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Antoinette is therefore perpetuating her fears of strangers and isolating herself from the outside world even when opportunity for communication appears.

Being isolated from other people enables Antoinette to be in existential confusion as to where she belongs and who she is, by questioning "What am I doing in this place and who am I?" (Rhys 107). However, the protagonist does understand who she is as an individual, which allows her to recognize when her unnamed husband is "trying to make (her) into someone else" (Rhys 88). The narration of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is seized by the British neo-colonizer who takes form in Antoinette's husband. In order to strip away his wife's identity, he manipulates the only safe space she has, which is the beautifully mysterious nature of the West Indies. Antoinette then proves to be the stronger by taking back the narration, and in her awareness of her deprivation, stating to her husband that "If everything else went out of my life I would still have this" (Rhys 88). In this recognition, Rhys depicts the typecast protagonist as understanding of the colonizer's invasive effects on her livelihood.

Nonetheless, Rhys creates Antoinette modeled after a real person in true complexity of feelings and understanding, without distinctly good or bad traits. This is demonstrated in Antoinette's inability to know what her relationship should be with the community that does not accept her, in the face of her childhood friend Tia and nanny Christophine. Rhys demonstrates that as an outcast and a child, Antoinette tests whether if what is acceptable behavior in her situation, in the example with Tia, Antoinette lashes out after

losing a game, saying "Keep them then, you cheating n*****" (Rhys 14). Although the narrator attributes the inappropriate comment to tiredness (and for the reader, the reason is evidently immaturity), this experience with testing the limits is a formative experience for Antoinette as a character, who learns from her mistake and is more aware of necessary respect needed during interactions. Another example is of Antoinette projecting her rage from a situation with her mother's servant to Christophine, calling the latter a "devil, damned black devil from Hell" (Rhys 81).

Once again, this experience is significant in that Antoinette comes to realize that as an outcast in society, she is much more vulnerable and cannot afford to disrespect people, as no one truly accepts her. This resonates with the fact that Antoinette's mother has always stated that "(she and Antoinette) would have died if (Christophine) turned against us" (Rhys 12). In her unique circumstances, Antoinette is a character who does not represent a group of people and is dissociated from an existing literary stereotype. Rhys created a character who in her complexity does not tell Adichie's "single story" of white Creoles. Even though *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not a single story of white Creoles, Rhys had to portray secondary characters as stereotypes to establish Antoinette as the unique "one" and not the "other". The first example is of British males, Mr.

Mason and (what one can assume to be) Mr. Rochester, typecast as dominant and wanting of subordinates. The two resemble one another in their relationships with Annette and Antoinette, respectively. Mr. Mason, "so sure of himself, so without a doubt English" (Rhys 21) comes into the life of

Coulibri estate to save Annette and Antoinette from poverty and a bad reputation.

Like a whirlwind, he transforms their lives into what he wanted, enforcing British food and a servant-filled lifestyle (Rhys 21). Additionally, Mr. Mason is demonstrated to be disrespectful towards black Jamaicans, pre-emancipation ideas still lingering on his mind, as he states "Black people I must say" (Rhys 19) in response to Annette's correction of the right way to address people. Antoinette in turn recognizes that "in some ways it was better before (Mr. Mason) came though he'd rescued us from poverty and misery" (Rhys 20), exhibiting the gratitude she must feel, though she may be unsure whether if her step-father was a blessing or a curse.

Thus, Rhys perpetuates the stereotype that British colonizers seem to have the intentions of "improving" the colonized land and its people, but in the end tarnish both the land and the culture, after which they can safely return to the English motherland. Antoinette's husband is also typecast as a character who desires dominance and subordination from the people around him. This is confirmed firstly by his taking over the narration in tandem of taking Antoinette's life and surroundings. Mr. Rochester was displaced from his usual English surroundings, to which he responds with a "fever of three weeks" (Rhys 39), which demonstrates how unyielding he is in adapting to new situations. Everything in *Massacre* seems "extreme in color" (Rhys 41), and "alien" in nature (Rhys 52).

Instead of trying to adapt to a new, albeit foreign, lifestyle, Mr. Rochester desires to "know what (the land) hides" (Rhys 52). This demonstrates his

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innate desire to appropriate instead of adapting, a desire to know in order to control. Even though Mr. Rochester “ruins” Antoinette for his wife emotionally (Rhys 88), he is affected by its people, whose voices seep into his narration.

When the character is no longer able to be in control of what he thinks, he decides to sail back home. Mr. Rochester's arrogance is demonstrated in full force when in being defeated by the West Indies, he takes home hostage: Antoinette, claiming that “(he doesn't) want her and she'll see no other” (Rhys 99). This juvenile attempt to objectify and appropriate his vulnerable wife demonstrates the stereotype Rhys had to create in order to portray Antoinette as a the “one”: the victim, the most vivid and unique character; and her husband as an abusive, possessive “other”. Throughout Antoinette's narration, collective voices recur to scrutinize her and her mother's state, which portrays a large group of people as one opinion. One voice represents a whole community, gossiping about the family and centers around Antoinette's condition, in order to depict her evolution as a character.

However it perpetuates a Jamaican community single story of unfair judgment towards white Creoles. The people are not named, they are not distinguished in their unique identities: “they stared, sometimes they laughed” (Rhys 11), demonstrating how inconsiderate and not welcoming “these people” are. Rhys characterizes the black community as mocking and uncivilized, as they “stood about in groups to jeer at Annette” (Rhys 10). Overall, this community is portrayed as one voice, it is used as a catalyst for Antoinette identity to flourish, which marginalizes the community in Coulibri and Spanish Town as “people without History”. As Adichie stated in her TED

talk, the dominant group begins a story where they want to in order to benefit their own version of the story, in this case Rhys begins narration with Antoinette, not with Antoinette's slave-owning ancestors who scarred the history of the community. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys attempts to eliminate the single story of Creoles, created largely in the face of Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, by allowing Antoinette to grow as a character in true humanly complexity.

However, the result of highlighting just one individual identity is other characters having to become stereotypes and collective voices. The danger of not telling a single story of one group of people, is the typecasting of other groups of people, which according to Adichie, can be solved as more and more stories are told by all groups, instead of strictly groups with power.

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