

# Fire: destruction and creation

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Scorching flames, conflagration, burning. The imagery of fire has long been linked to power and passion. Fire can enact complete obliteration, and yet can also forge a new beginning where only scattered ashes of the past remain. The symbolic motif of fire figures prominently in many works of great literature, including Charlotte Brontë's canonical *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's revised *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Fire actually functions conversely in these two novels, representing creation in *Jane Eyre* and symbolizing destruction in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In this paper, I will analyze the fire set in Mr. Rochester's bed in *Jane Eyre* and the burning of Coulibri in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, two key scenes centered schematically around the framework of fire. Despite serving seemingly opposing metaphorical capacities, both of these moments reveal key symbolic themes central to their respective plots. Jane's rescue of Rochester from his flaming bed contrasts supernatural, evil forces with the holy will of God, and highlights an interpretation of Jane as the sacred rescuer of Rochester from his tainted past. Rochester first views Jane as an elf, an otherworldly creature, represented here when his first response to her presence is to call her 'witch, sorceress' (Brontë, 169). Yet, Jane is not the witch he first imagines, as she, herself, has earlier commented on an evil presence in describing 'a demoniac laugh,' an 'unnatural sound,' and questions if Grace Poole, who she suspects to be the perpetrator of the fire, is 'possessed with a devil' (Brontë, 168). Mr. Rochester soon realizes, however, that Jane is not the embodiment of the evil source who has 'plotted to drown' him. Rather, she represents a higher, more holy influence that essentially rescues him from the demonic influence of his first wife, who has tried to murder him through the use of fire, an image intrinsically tied to

devils. However, the fire only succeeds in symbolically killing any ties to Rochester's past with her, allowing Jane to be seen as the role of a sacred savior. Brontë casts Jane's heroic act in a highly religious light, describing how she extinguishes the fire and 'baptized the couch' with 'God's aid,' (Brontë, 168), and later having Jane implore Rochester to arise from bed "in Heaven's name' (Brontë, 169). Through the fire and rescue, Rochester realizes that Jane is, in reality, his 'cherished preserver,' (Brontë, 171) rather than an unnatural creature. This serves to represent Jane as the savior who can extinguish the sinful fire of his past with his first wife, which portrays her, and ultimately their relationship, in a holy, reverential manner. In addition to sanctifying Jane's role as Rochester's savior, the fire demonstrates how Jane's persistent, unapprehensive agency allows her to play this role. Jane is a quick thinker and actor, and her rescue of Rochester from his burning bed underscores this capacity. Her agency is all the more apparent in contrast to Rochester's passivity and inactivity, where Rochester, 'lay stretched motionless, in deep sleep' in his bed because 'the smoke had stupefied him' (Brontë, 168). Being stupefied and motionless suggests he is immobilized, perhaps unable to pull himself out of the sin of his past. On the other hand, standing in sharp opposition to Rochester's motionlessness, Jane is in the room working to put out the fire 'in an instant' (Brontë, 168). All of her actions, such as 'rushed,' 'heaved,' 'flew,' 'flung,' and 'run,' emphasize the quick action and strength she employs in this intense moment, which allows her to conquer the equally swift and powerful force of fire. Through her actions, she 'rouses,' (Brontë, 169) as well as rescues, Mr. Rochester. This scene foreshadows her later success in healing

Mr. Rochester both emotionally and physically after he is alone and handicapped at the end of the novel. Despite the danger and destructive nature of fire, it provides a medium for Jane to show her bravery and perseverance in saving Rochester. It allows for the creation of their relationship, functioning literally as the spark that lights the passion of their affection. Jean Rhys refocuses the symbolic function of fire from that of creator to that of destroyer in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the story of the mad woman who causes the significant fires of *Jane Eyre*. In contrast to Brontë's novel, the pivotal fire scene in Rhys's story betrays an utter lack of agency among the characters, primarily through their inability to see or hear. At first the characters try to believe they are in control of the situation, and that the revolting slaves cause, 'no reason to be alarmed,' as Mr. Mason tries to assure himself (Rhys, 38). However, as Aunt Cora soon realizes, 'This place is going to burn like tinder and there is nothing we can do to stop it' (Rhys, 40). Unlike Jane, these characters lack the capacity and the means to avert the destruction of the fire. The fire overpowers Antoinette so much that she is unable to see her mother, 'I did not see her, nothing but smoke' (Rhys, 39). Terms of the visual dominate this section, as there are in total thirty forms of 'look,' 'see,' or other references to the visual, such as 'recognize,' 'stare,' and 'eyes.' Yet this preoccupation with the visual is largely a question of not seeing. Antoinette mentions in a few instances how she shuts her eyes, refusing to see the transpiring horror. Her Aunt Cora urges this effort, asserting, 'Don't look! Don't look,' to which Antoinette 'hid' her face (Rhys, 43). Even the image of her dying, injured brother focuses on a description of the visual, as 'his eyes were rolled up so that you only saw

the whites' (Rhys, 39). Yet even when Antoinette does try to see, she 'recognized no one' among the native blacks as 'they all looked the same, it was the same face repeated over and over' (Rhys, 42). In a novel characterized by the impossibility for characters to effectively communicate with each other, the inability to see within the contextual framework of the fire is representative of the inevitable destruction of every relationship. Yet, this quote must also be read as the inability of the white members of her family to see the blacks as possessing any individuality or subjectivity, which ultimately leads to the breakdown of their own societal institutions. This scene of fire foregrounds the destruction of any notion of white superiority among the Masons and Cosways, and the idea that the baseness of character transcends racial difference. The institution of marriage becomes symbolically devastated when Antoinette's mother Annette wrings her hands and, 'her wedding ring fell off and rolled into a corner near the steps' (Rhys, 39). Although Mr. Mason and the servant Mannie both reach to retrieve it, their efforts are thwarted in the realization that the back of the house is in flames. The wedding ring is the physical object that best encapsulates the idea of marriage, and its loss symbolizes the loss of the institution of marriage. Marriage, and its association with monogamy, is often thought to be one of the distinguishing lines between man and beast, and so the loss of marriage represents a descent into chaos and animalistic behavior, physically enacted by Annette when she is 'twisting like a cat and showing her teeth' (Rhys, 41) when she cannot rescue her parrot. Any remaining illusion of white supremacy is destroyed when Antoinette realizes that all the color of the 'golden ferns and silver ferns' and other flowers would be

reduced to ‘blackened walls’ (Rhys, 44-45). Thus, when all the outside frivolities are destroyed, in the end all that is left is blackness, showing that stripped to their bare essentials whites are the same as blacks. This is cemented in the final image of this scene where Antoinette looks into black Tia’s face to realize, ‘It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass’ (Rhys, 45). The visual metaphor returns, with the ability to see translated into a realization that she is essentially the same as Tia despite their racial differences. The blacks, who are referred to as “brute beasts” (Rhys, 41) and ‘animals howling’ (Rhys, 38) are the ones who start the fire, and are certainly not saints themselves. The important point is that all characters seem to possess base and ugly natures, regardless of skin color. In moments of crisis, it is often said that one’s true character emerges. Bravery, cowardliness, and myriad other traits surface in the moment when one must confront a disaster, such as a fire. In the case of Jane Eyre, Jane’s her bravery, sheer determination, and savior role become markedly apparent in her rescue of Rochester from his bed. Following the same pattern, although manifested in a completely opposite way, Wide Sargasso Sea’s characters inability to communicate and base natures are revealed in the burning of Coulibri, revealing the fallacy of racial superiority. However, one cannot merely juxtapose these two texts without considering that the narrator of one novel becomes the wicked demon of the other. While Wide Sargasso Sea does not seek to counter the narrative of Jane Eyre, it does allow readers to begin to understand what debasement and horror must occur in order to result in a character that willfully commits arson. Through the revisal of Brontë’s classic text, readers can question whether Antoinette’s use of fire

with Rochester is an effort to undermine his sense of authority over her, despite her status as a prisoner in his home. Yet, in the end the impossibility of communication prevails, as her attacks only serve to cement Rochester's view of her as the devil, especially in contrast to his new, angel-like Jane.