

# Significance of bertha's name in wide sargasso sea



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In the novella *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, the idea of cultural identity is explored through the symbolic significance of names. Although his name is never stated, it is assumed that the man that Antoinette marries is Rochester based upon the context clues pulled from *Jane Eyre* into *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Since the name of this mysterious man is now known, the real question is: why does Rochester rename Antoinette “Bertha?” (Rhys 88). I wish to argue that the man we refer to as Rochester calls Antoinette “Bertha” because naming places the power of the relationship in his own hands; in this way, Rochester is ‘othering’ Antoinette (Tyson 420). Rochester refers to Antoinette as “Bertha” as a way of ensuring that she surrenders into his idea of a woman, as opposed to who she truly is. When Rochester and Antoinette are on their honeymoon, Rochester begins to see a side to Antoinette that is far different from the personalities of the ladies that he is accustomed to in England – quiet, civilized and refined – he is frightened by this unknown side of ‘femininity.’ Rochester begins to refer to Antoinette as “Bertha” to try to bury her personality and beliefs under a separate name. When Rochester calls Antoinette a name separate from her own, she takes a very strong, defensive stance against it. As a response to her new name, Antoinette replies: “‘Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into something else, calling me by another name. I know, that’s obeah too’” (88). Antoinette tries to brush it off by saying that whatever he calls her doesn’t matter to her. However, Rochester has already caught on to the intensity of her outburst and knows that a person’s name is connected to their very identity. The alteration of Bertha’s name changes her identity, because without a name, how do humans introduce themselves? This proves the necessity of names, so if somebody were to begin to designate someone a

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different name than what is their own, they may feel as though they have a conflicted personality; it is enough to drive a person mad. Rochester thinks that he has the power to transform Antoinette into whatever he wishes her to be because he grew up instilled with patriarchal ideology. It was instilled in him from the time he was a small child that women are under men, and they should be used to serve their husbands. It is told to him that women should behave in a civilized, domesticated manner, and anyone who behaves outside of these norms is a savage animal. However, when Rochester meets Antoinette, he is taken aback because Antoinette was brought up in the home of an independent woman. Therefore, she is not as familiar as Rochester is with the rules of the patriarchal society that he hails from. This is certainly not the well-mannered, civilized type of women he had grown accustomed to in England. Because of this, Rochester thinks of her as a wild, uncivilized creature. Rochester also refers to Antoinette as "Bertha" because he wants to distance her from her mother. It is no accident that Jean Rhys made the names Antoinette and Annette so similar. Rochester is frightened that the likeness of the names may lead to a likeness of breakdowns; he is scared that Antoinette will follow in her mother's footsteps and go down a path of madness. He thinks that if he modifies her name, he can separate Antoinette from her mother and her French roots. He thinks that by disconnecting Antoinette from her mother, he can ensure that there will be no lasting connection between her and her mother. However, by attempting to sever some of the last ties between Antoinette and her mother, Rochester may have sped along the process of Antoinette's imminent unhinging. It would have created an even stronger "desire of the mother" because Antoinette would've found that her cultural ties had been

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severed through the changing of her name (Tyson 27). Her mother is now gone, and one of the only connections that Antoinette has to her is her heritage; much of that heritage is connected to her name, since it is of French descent. The loss of many of these connections strengthens her desire to be with her mother and to feel closer to her. Rochester is Antoinette's "objet petit a" because he is the person that puts her in touch with her repressed desire for her lost mother (Tyson 28). In addition, "Bertha" is a bland name, especially when compared to the exotic title of Antoinette. While Antoinette has a flash about it—you can almost see red flames dancing around the name—Bertha is a traditional English name as mundane as Rochester wishes Antoinette to be. The blandness of this name is a cover-up for Rochester to hide Antoinette's true erratic personality from everyone, which includes himself. His train of thought is that if he can get her to believe that she is not who she thinks that she is, she may just lose herself altogether. When hiding her behind a name no longer works, Rochester has to resort to hiding her in his attic in England. It is proven throughout the text of *Wide Sargasso Sea* that "names matter" by the consequential name change of Antoinette to "Bertha" (106). Despite Antoinette's defensive attitude towards Rochester, she transforms into someone she herself doesn't recognize because she is referred to as "Bertha." When she begins to lose herself more, Rochester brings Antoinette to his manor in England to stay in the attic. The people who stay in Rochester's abode are frightened by a ghost that haunts the manor. Little do they know that Antoinette is the ghost to whom they refer. In fact, even she thinks that there is a ghost, for she hears whispers of a ghost from the guests of the house and does not reach the logical conclusion that it is her.

In response to the ghost, she thinks, “ I did not want to see that ghost of a woman who they say haunts this place” (111). This goes to show that she does not recognize the woman she has become; she sees herself differently than everyone else in the house. By the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette has become this entirely new person; she has become “ Bertha.” She has the feeling of being domesticated but dead on the inside. The people around her have not recognized her behavior for a while now, but she now no longer recognizes herself. She too is confused on her true name, her true identity: There is no looking-glass here and I don't know what I am like now. I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us – hard, cold, and misted over with my breath. Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I? (107). Now that Antoinette has finally lost herself, nobody can answer her question. Not one person can really tell who she is anymore. She used to be Antoinette, a woman of freedom and independence. She had the beauty of a goddess but was still humble about it, as she came from fairly humble beginnings before Mr. Mason arrived. Now however, as far as she or anyone else can tell, she is “ Bertha.” She has lost her identity through the loss of her name, for the name carried with it so much more than she had imagined: it carried away with it her sanity. This ending scene is also reminiscent of Lacan's “ Between the Two Deaths” theory. The point at which she spiritually dies is when she gives up control of her own name. This represents a breaking point for Antoinette, and it is where she truly loses herself and follows her mother into madness. At this point she loses all desire and is only focused on the “ death

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drive" (Tyson 22). This means that she is not herself anymore; she has the body of her former self, but none of that person is left inside. Whatever is inside is just waiting for the second death. The second death is when her death drive finally comes to a culmination and she kills herself by tossing herself out of the burning manor. Early on in the novella, Antoinette knows who she is and knows that she wants to stay true to her identity: " I will write my name in fire red" (31). She wants to leave her mark on the world with her own name and her powerful personality. This goes against Rochester's idea that he can simply mold her into the lady that he so desperately wants her to be. This quote is meant to sound rebellious and fiery; it is meant to give the reader a sense of empowerment. In the novella, fire is a symbol for rebellion such as the fire that Antoinette uses to burn down the manor at the end, much like the ex-slaves burn down Coulibri in an act of defiance and power. Red is a symbol for power like the red dress that Antoinette sees in her dream in contrast to the white dress. Although the red could also mean a sort of bad or soiled quality, in this case it's all about the power that those qualities imply; being bad makes her feel a power that she is scared of. Because of this symbolism, this quote is one of power and rebellion; it is Antoinette saying that she will not let anyone change her, and she will make her mark on this world in any way that she can. Jean Rhys uses several different critical theories in *Wide Sargasso Sea* to show that the man we refer to as Rochester calls Antoinette " Bertha" because naming places the power of the relationship in his own hands. We know that Rochester needs the power in his hands because he is brought up in England, where the patriarchal ideology is very much alive. The grasping of all the power out of the hands of Antoinette causes her to fall into madness and lose her true

identity. Essentially, her madness comes into play simply because someone gave her a new name. That is the true power that names have, specifically in the world of this novella.