

A defense of rochester in wide sargasso sea



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* comes to a tragic end where the protagonist, Antoinette, is left as a mad woman in an attic. Rochester asks "Have all beautiful things sad destinies?" (Rhys 51). It is clear that Antoinette is a beautiful thing with a sad destiny, and that Rochester cannot do anything to control it. The circumstances of the situation and each of their backgrounds is what causes their tragedy. Rochester is not a tyrant who ruthlessly seeks out to destroy her, but a victim with his own dilemmas who tries to make his way in the world. Rochester is often seen as untrusting and selfish, but he is justified in many ways. He is hopeful in his situation, he tries to live up to the English standard, and he is given no other option but to attempt to love a madwoman. Although Rochester speaks to Christophine and calls Jamaica an "abominable place", that is because Jamaica is a reflection of the demented mind of Antoinette. She appears normal to begin with, but as she progresses further into a state of insanity, Jamaica becomes more menacing. When Rochester and Antoinette first arrive to their honeymoon house, Rochester smiles at a little boy and the boy begins to cry. The town is called "massacre" which already has a connotation of death. The man called The Young Bull tells Rochester "This a very wild place-not civilized. Why you come here?" (38). Jamaica is unwelcoming towards Rochester, and the hostility of the country does not come from his imagination. Even after being thrust into a shocking new culture, Rochester manages to open his eyes to the beauty of Jamaica. While he is walking through the village and observing the activity of the town, he says "I felt peaceful" (39). He describes the sea as serene, and when Antoinette asks him to taste the mountain water he says "it was cold, pure and sweet, a beautiful colour against the thick green leaf" (40). In his letter to his father he mentions that it is very beautiful there.

“ Standing on the veranda I breathed the sweetness of the air. Cloves I could smell and cinnamon, roses and orange blossom. And an intoxicating freshness as if all this had never been breathed before” (41). He does not criticize everything about Jamaica, and he stops to acknowledge and admire beauty in the strange area he has been placed in. He tries to find some reassurance in his situation. The foreignness of Jamaica adds distrust to Rochester’s wide range of emotions because he does not know exactly how to handle himself. “ Not night or darkness as I know it but night with blazing stars, and alien moon- night full of strange noises” (53). This passage describes how Rochester perceives the island and how it is not what he is used to. Clara Thomas writes that “ Antoinette’s familiar treatment of Christophine and Antoinette’s whims, which to Rochester are so exotic and therefore troubling, bring distrust and suspicion into their idyll” (344). When the environment is so new, one is not going to feel comfortable and at ease. He does not understand the customs of the country, and even the natural order of the moon and the stars seems strange to him. Clara Thomas writes, “ There is the constant menace of the strange exotic land, the people he distrusts, and something secret that he cannot fathom in Antoinette” (344). After being put into such a bizarre village, surrounded by its mysterious inhabitants, of course he would have doubts and suspicions since the island and his wife are keeping secrets from him. Much of Rochester’s removed feelings towards Jamaica are reinforced by his loyalty to England. Rochester finds his identity in England, and being taken out from his homeland affects him deeply. “ The two women stood in the doorway of the hut gesticulating, talking not English but the debased French patois they use in this island. The rain began to drip down the back of my neck adding to my feeling of

discomfort and melancholy” (Rhys 37). Rochester is very distant with Antoinette and that is because they come from different cultures. Silvia Capello writes, “ Antoinette’s husband is not depicted as a demonic tyrant but as a victim himself belonging to a patriarchal society, a victim of prejudices, incapable of understanding and acknowledging the ties linking his wife with the black culture and community, thus unable to appreciate and understand the complex personality of Antoinette” (51). It is all a big cultural misunderstanding. Robert Kendrick writes that “ Because Antoinette cannot fulfill the role of a proper English wife, that fact reflects on Rochester’s role as a proper English husband. She is neither English nor a properly Anglicized Creole, and the possibility of madness and alcoholism in her family further distances her from Edward’s imagined normal”(235). Being in an alien world, Rochester desires to keep a grasp on his identity. Laura Ciolkowski writes that “ His identity is left uncertain by the English laws of primogeniture that leave the younger son with nothing to inherit. Only the English tastes and aversions that shape it continue to remind him of his cultural heritage and the colonial power to which it is linked. He defines himself by English tastes to help secure his identity” (348). Rochester is not in the wrong by being unable to conform to the ways of Jamaica, because none of the islanders can even comprehend the English culture. Antoinette and Christophine go so far as to mock the English culture, when they cannot even understand what it is like. Rochester attempts to compare the red earth in Jamaica to the earth in England and Antoinette mocks him. “ Oh England, England, she called back mockingly, and the sound went on and on like a warning I did not choose to hear” (Rhys 40). When Christophine is serving coffee to him, she says “ Not horse piss like the English madams drink, I know them. Drink, drink their

yellow horse piss, talk, talk, their lying talk" (50). It is interesting how she says that she knows them when she really does not at all. On page 69 she contradicts herself by saying " I don't say I don't believe, I say I don't know, I know what I see with my own eyes and I never see it". The women ridicule Rochester for his English heritage. The two very different cultures are unable to understand each other. This confusion, and not Rochester's actions, is what causes the dysfunction between Rochester and Antoinette. Rochester is a victim of his circumstance. He entered into the situation not because he wanted to drastically change his life, but because he had no other option. As the second-born son to his father, Rochester was left with no inheritance and agreed to marry Antoinette so that he would be able to survive financially. Clara Thomas writes, " He has been duped by Mr. Mason, married to a girl who perhaps has a taint of colour and perhaps madness in her blood. He also has to deal with his own self-contempt, the recognition, that following his father's instructions, he married for money—he was bought"(343). The act of marrying Antoinette for financial gain was actually selfless in a way. He is trying to please his father. In the letter to his father he writes, " I will never be a disgrace to you or to my dear brother, the son you love. No begging letters, no mean requests. None of the furtive shabby maneuvers of a younger son" (Rhys 39). In another letter he writes, " All is well and has gone according to your plans and wishes" (43). Notice he does not include the word " my" or the word " our". He tries desperately to find legitimacy and acceptance in his father's eyes, and in doing so he puts aside his plans and wishes in order to avoid being a disgrace to the family name with no means of support. Rochester simply has to make decisions according to his birthright. The way that Antoinette treats Rochester is a signal to the fact

that she is undeniably going insane. Antoinette went crazy before she even met Rochester. " I never wished to live before I knew you. I always thought it would be better if I died. Such a long time to wait before it's over" (54). Even while she is married, in the present tense she says " say die and I will die. You don't believe me? Then try try, say die and watch me die"(55).

Rochester says, " I watched her die many times. In my way, not in hers" (55). Rochester reads that " a zombie, is a dead person who seems to be alive or a living person that is dead" (66). Many times Rochester tries to kiss her fervently, touch her face gently, but she gives no response. Rochester watches Antoinette as she sleeps and he notices how inanimate she looks. On page 88 he says " I drew the sheet over gently as if I covered a dead girl". He describes her as cold in several passages. Antoinette is hard to love because she is unresponsive and she is dead on the inside. While Antoinette is walking through the garden at Coulibri she says " The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living ones" (4). This foreshadows and symbolizes Antoinette's world as she is caught between the living and the dead (Huebener 19). There is a lot of truth in Daniel Cosway's letter to Rochester when he writes " there is madness in that family" (Rhys 58). Antoinette is following in the footsteps of her mother. When Christophine instructs her to leave Rochester, Antoinette replies with, " Go, go where? To some strange place where I shall never see him? No, I will not, then everyone, not only the servants, will laugh at me" (67). Antoinette's mother was always worried about people laughing at her. Clara Thomas says " She cannot forget the causes of her mother's ruin and degradation though she does not completely understand them. She dreads the same fate for herself but at the same time, in a doomed way, she

expects it" (358). The pattern according to the family history was inevitable, and Rochester is not to be held accountable for the fact that he was assigned a bad bargain. It is impossible to put the "blame" of the tragedy on a single person or event, due to the fact that every factor contributed to the demise of Antoinette in the end. Rochester is often put to blame, but he was also a victim of a tragedy that they could not foresee. An interesting image tells the story of Antoinette and Rochester. When they are sitting in the dining room, a moth flies into the candle and falls to the floor. Antoinette has been burned throughout her life, but for a brief moment she is taken away from her past, she becomes rescued, and she is still. In the same way that he examines the soft brilliant colors of the wings, just a page before Rochester notices that he can see the red and gold lights in her face. For a moment he can see her beauty, until she is gently disturbed with his handkerchief and she flies away. Antoinette is a fragile zombie, leaning towards death or life at any given moment Rochester is a victim who has tried to prosper with the conditions he was given, but could never succeed. Works Cited Cappello, Silvia. "Postcolonial discourse in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: Creole discourse vs. European discourse, periphery vs. center, and marginalized people vs. White Supremacy." *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 6. 1 (2009): 47-54. Literature Resource Center. Web. 6 Oct. 2013. Ciolkowski, Laura E. "Navigating the 'Wide Sargasso Sea': colonial history, English fiction, and British empire." *Twentieth Century Literature* 43. 3 (1997): 339-359. Literature Resource Center. Web. 11 Oct. 2013. Huebener, Paul. "Metaphor and madness as postcolonial sites in novels by Jean Rhys and Tayeb Salih." *Mosaic [Winnipeg]* 43. 4 (2010): 19. Literature Resource Center. Web. 6 Oct. 2013. Kendrick, Robert. "Edward Rochester and the margins of masculinity in 'Jane Eyre'" <https://assignbuster.com/a-defense-of-rochester-in-wide-sargasso-sea/>

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