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## Trabajo Fin de Grado

“White Niggers” and Middle-Class Slaves:  
The Race Metaphor at the Service of  
Anglocentrism in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane*  
*Eyre*

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## Resumen

Las novelas *Jane Eyre* (1847) de Charlotte Brontë y *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) de Jean Rhys tienen en común, a pesar de haber sido escritas con más de cien años de diferencia, algunos aspectos en la descripción de sus heroínas que, no sin ciertas ambivalencias, muestran su conformidad con el discurso del Imperio. Este trabajo analiza el uso de un elemento, la metáfora de la raza, en la reivindicación de ambas heroínas, así como las implicaciones de racismo en otros personajes de cada novela. Las protagonistas, Jane Eyre y Antoinette Cosway, una institutriz y una criolla blanca respectivamente, representan el estado intermedio y la falta de arraigo de diferentes grupos sociales en la metrópolis y en las colonias, ambos privilegiados y oprimidos al mismo tiempo. Cada autora emplea analogías raciales para describir la lucha de sus heroínas y sacarlas de entre los márgenes sociales, pero en el proceso estas maltratan terriblemente a otros personajes que han sido históricamente oprimidos. A pesar de algunos elementos más compasivos, la ceguera de ambas autoras frente a realidades racistas las sitúa dentro de los márgenes de la tradición narrativa anglosajona.

## Abstract

Despite having been written more than one hundred years apart, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) share some common features in the depiction of their heroines that, not without certain ambivalences, show their compliance with the discourse of the Empire. This dissertation analyses the use of one device, the metaphor of race, in the vindication of both heroines, and the implications that racialism has for other characters in each novel. The protagonists, Jane Eyre and Antoinette Cosway, a governess and a white creole respectively, epitomise the in-betweenness and lack of belonging of different social groups in the metropolis and in the colonies, both privileged and oppressed at the same time. Each author uses racial analogies to depict their heroines' struggles and to bring them out of the margins of society, but in doing so they terribly mistreat other characters historically oppressed. Despite sympathetic elements in both novels, the blindness of their authors' efforts towards racialised realities locates both authors within the tradition of Anglophone fiction.

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## Introduction

The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were two centuries of profound changes in the lives of the British, both in the metropolis and the colonies. The development of the industrial revolution that had already begun in the previous century, together with the expansion of the colonies and their subsequent claims for independence, marked a period that changed both domestic lives and the course of history. In between the economic progress of the colonising elites and the exploitation suffered by colonised peoples and the working classes remained a mass of outsiders that saw in those years an opportunity to claim a better place in society, at the same time as they were forced to question their privileges and alliances.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the heart of the Empire, the in-betweenness of the British bourgeoisie was epitomised by the figure of the governess. Charlotte Brontë dedicates her efforts in *Jane Eyre* to vindicate the individuality and agency of the educated women who inhabited the houses of the rich, women who were one step above household servants but never part of the family. Peterson defines the role of these women who became commodified as a sign of their employers' status as follows:

She was a lady, and therefore not a servant, but she was an employee, and therefore not of equal status with the wife and daughters of the house. The purposes of her employment contributed further to the incongruence of her position. She was hired to provide the children [...] with an education to prepare them for leisured gentility. But she had been educated in the same way, and for the same purpose, and her employment became a prostitution of the values underlying it, and of her family's intentions in providing it. (15)

Brontë published her vindications in 1847, a period during which a slightly more oppressed figure had also seen significant improvements: the slave. The Slave Abolition Act of 1833 had brought to the public agenda sympathy for those exploited overseas, but also offered a recurring metaphor for the middle and working classes abused as ‘slaves’ at home. Slavery was figurative in the metropolis, but very real in the West Indian colonies, where this act changed the rules of the business game for many former wealthy colonisers who saw their companies plummet to end up in bankruptcy. The consequences were not only economic but also social, as the emancipation of the slaves in the colonies prompted a disruption of the relationship between the former slaves and the white elites.

In-betweenness in the West Indies was represented by the white creoles, the descendants of once-powerful colonial slave-owners, now impoverished and with a problematic relationship both with their homeland and the Empire. The socioeconomic changes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century dismantled these expats’ way of life and even their whole identity, forcing them to reconsider their place in the world.

Once in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the West Indies took increasing steps towards self-governance, till they finally managed to achieve their independence in the second half of the last century. This was also the time for the birth of a West Indian literary tradition that embraces their multicultural uniqueness while striving to define itself in opposition to the mainstream British canon. Jean Rhys published *Wide Sargasso Sea* (WSS) in 1966, but it is known that she had already started writing it by 1945. The question of whether the white creole woman, the main issue under analysis here, belongs to this Caribbean tradition has been questioned by a number of postcolonial critics. Brathwaite reflects on why white creoles should not be considered to be part of Caribbean culture, arguing that “white creoles in the English and French West Indies have separated themselves by too wide a gulf and have contributed too little culturally, as a *group*, to give credence to the

notion that they can, given the present structure, meaningfully identify or be identified, with the spiritual world on this side of the Sargasso Sea” (in O’Callaghan, 76; emphasis in original).

Brathwaite also argues that the wide ideological distance between white creoles and the non-white majority prevents white creole’s experience from being representative of West Indian culture. O’Callaghan admits Brathwaite’s depiction of white creoles as outsiders but, notwithstanding the privileges of their whiteness, vindicates their unique perspective as yet another important voice of the multicultural Caribbean, and thus a driving force for the development of the West Indian literary tradition (77). She goes as far as to argue that, within the paradoxical position of the West Indian creole, “distanced from, yet bound up in the cultural emergence of the “broadly ex-African base” – the white creole woman writer can make a valuable literary contribution to the developing tradition” (77).

White creole’s conflict was not only with their tropical homeland, but also with their ancestors: “white creoles are strange to the English, who are not prepared to accept and tolerate what they cannot comprehend” (O’Callaghan 82). Look Lai (in O’Callaghan 82), much more sympathetic to the Creole’s experience than Brathwaite, sees in *WSS* “the existential chasm that exists between the white West Indian and his ancestors, and the tragical fate which awaits any attempt to bridge this chasm.”

Both white creoles and governesses were an in-between social group, both privileged and oppressed at the same time. In this dissertation I would like to explore how Brontë and Rhys ambivalently use the metaphor of race to show their characters’ struggle, always within the tradition of Anglophone fiction, and never far from the discourse of the Empire.

# 1. The Purpose of Defining Oneself as the “Other” in the Quest for Wholeness

Both authors construct their respective narratives in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a quest for wholeness, for identity. Both Antoinette and Jane have to fight their own inner demons and rebel against imposed expectations. However, whereas Antoinette struggles for identity, Jane tries to preserve her agency. Their quest for wholeness depends on knowing how to navigate external forces and an alienating status quo as impersonated by Rochester. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* race is represented in terms of a dichotomy and, in this narrative, Antoinette is forced to choose colour. For her part Jane, in her claim for self-sovereignty, finds in race a contentious approach to depict her own oppression.

The term ‘diaspora’ has been commonly understood as a displacement mainly caused by “the supremacy of national paradigms,” as James Procter (151) has put it. In contrast to this, I would like to explore a different approach to the term by taking social class as a basis. In both novels, there is some subversion of the connection between race, social class, and oppression. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the defining trait of the figure of the outcast in the colonies is no longer race, but class. It is Antoinette and her family who are impoverished, despised, mistreated and oppressed. In *Jane Eyre*, the result is the same but the process is somehow inverted: it is class that matters in England, but the young governess paradoxically becomes ‘black’ in her oppression.

## *Jane Eyre*: The Race Metaphor as a Literary Strategy for the Defence of the Middle-class Woman

Jane Eyre is a character that has been defined on account of the multiple sources of her oppression. She is an independent woman in the very conservative Victorian society; she

is well-educated and comes from a wealthy family, but is also an orphan in need of employment. Her in-betweenness emerges from her female subordination and her oppressive social status as a lower-middle-class working woman. In an attempt to dramatise her heroine's struggles, Brontë recurs to the epitome of oppression: the figure of the slave.

From the very beginning of the novel, an old Jane narrates in retrospective the vicissitudes of her childhood, describing it as a period of constant oppression and mistreatment, and finding in her rebelliousness an attitude similar to that shown by many slaves. The span of time she spends with the Reeds, who take her in on blood duty but never cease to make her feel inferior, triggers off a rebellious attitude that will eventually help her to become an adamant survivor in Lowood. In the description of her resistance to authority in the early years of her life, there are also some subtle references to the French Revolution, which clearly contributes to emphasising the depiction of Jane's younger self as a victim.

I resisted all the way [...] The fact is, I was a trifle beside myself; or rather *out* of myself, as the French would say: I was conscious that a moment's mutiny had already rendered me liable to strange penalties, and, like any other rebel slave, I felt resolved, in my desperation, to go all lengths. (Brontë 13)

This comparison of white women with blacks was not coined by Brontë as, according to Meyer, it was a common "analogy in nineteenth-century British texts that compares white women with blacks in order to degrade both groups and assert the need for white control." What makes Brontë's narrative interesting is the subversion of this analogy to suit her own agenda, namely, "to signify not shared inferiority but shared oppression. This figurative strategy induces some sympathy with blacks as those who are also oppressed, but does not preclude racism" (251).

In tune with this figurative strategy, everything regarding race in the context of *Jane Eyre* is ambivalent, in so far as the novel recognises oppression but the racist use it makes of it is on the whole fairly disappointing. Brontë acknowledges black oppression in linking it with her heroine. Yet, her rather trivialising approach to a scourge whose consequences can still be felt today proves that Brontë had no real interest to denounce racism. To quote Meyer's words:

Brontë makes class and gender oppression the overt significance of racial 'otherness,' displacing the historical reasons why colonised races would suggest oppression. [...] What begins then as an implicit critique of British domination and an identification with the oppressed collapses into merely an appropriation of the metaphor of 'slavery.' (250)

When Brontë appropriates racial oppression to signify social oppression in the context of white British England, she does so with a very specific target group in mind. At a time when the working classes, especially in northern England (where the author was born), lived in subhuman conditions, Brontë's unsupportive focus only falls on the relative struggles of the low middle classes, in particular those of the governess. The degradation underwent by people holding such a position is explained by Rochester himself: at some point during their engagement, he tries to cover Jane in fine clothes, and she insists on going on with her duties, to which he replies: "“You will give up your governessing slavery at once”" (Brontë 243). The enslaving nature of Jane's job does not lie in the hardness of the employment, but in the social implications of her status. As Meyer points out, in Jane's vindication for a better social position, the novel

pays scant attention to the working class. Instead it draws parallels between slavery and Jane's social position as one of the disempowered lower-middle class.

Both Jane and the narrator draw these analogies, not in response to the work Jane

has to perform but in response to the humiliating attitudes of her class superiors.  
(258)

There is a clear example of this lack of empathy for the working classes in the voice of Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper of Rochester's estate. When touring Jane around the house, she complains about her loneliness in a house full of servants:

(Thornfield) it is a respectable place; yet you know in winter-time one feels dreary quite alone in the best quarters. I say alone—Leah is a nice girl to be sure, and John and his wife are very decent people; but then you see they are only servants, and one can't converse with them on terms of equality: one must keep them at due distance, for fear of losing one's authority. (Brontë 89)

Given the fact that *Jane Eyre* only focuses on the middle classes, it cannot be regarded as a revolutionary manifesto, as social changes are by no means the novel's main contention. Its interest is limited to the heroine's fate, thus proving an individualistic approach to class struggle: Jane's commitment is with herself, as she only questions the social norm for her own benefit: "The question is not whether the novel supports or subverts class ideology, but rather how it deploys the languages of class in order to confront a series of social situations, each of which threatens to delimit Jane Eyre's social agency" (Bossche 47).

This commitment with one's self, at the expense of social reform, is clearly seen in the ending of the novel. However progressive in feminist terms *Jane Eyre's* closure might be, it is quite conservative from a class point of view. Jane embraces the upper classes she has despised throughout the novel, and in so doing betrays her alleged defence of the middle class. Eagleton sees in *Jane Eyre* a conflict between the hegemonic aristocratic mores and the individualistic bourgeois values, which forces the heroine to

“negotiate passionate self-fulfilment on terms which preserve the social and moral conventions intact” (in Meyer 256), while embracing a social system that has been her utter oppressor throughout the novel.

Although Bossche sees the ending as favouring satisfying closure, it is a fact that all that Jane has rebelled against throughout the novel is in the end reversed, and the social status quo has by no means been altered. “*Jane Eyre*['s] [...] heroine rebels against social exclusion yet ultimately does not seek to overturn the existing social order; her narrative begins with her rebellion against the Reeds [...] and ends with her social inclusion as a cousin of the Rivers siblings and wife of Edward Rochester” (47).

### *Wide Sargasso Sea*: The White Creole as a Double Outsider in a Quest for Assimilation

The dichotomy between white and (oppressively) black as represented in *Jane Eyre* has already been discussed. Bertha Mason’s racialism in the context of Brontë’s novel will be discussed further on in this dissertation, but her complexity as a white creole, the questioning of the purity of her whiteness, and the implication of a degree of blackness are also present in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Jean Rhys’s novel explores racial doubleness in the figure of the Caribbean creole. In *WSS*, the in-betweenness that characterises white creoles forces Antoinette to wish for English assimilation and Rochester’s acceptance, at the same time as she longs for a Caribbean culture and way of thinking that she cannot claim as her own.

As was briefly argued in the introduction, the white creole is a problematic figure, both for empire narratives and postcolonial ones. The identity of British descendants in the Caribbean, highly related to their whiteness, is put into question by the Empire, by the

emancipated new non-white forces, and by the white creoles themselves. The figure of Antoinette is described as a native in *Jane Eyre* and as a white creole in *WSS*, two descriptions that can be considered to be opposites, and yet put together in order to render a highly unique reality.

Spivak delves into this double characterisation in a rather contradictory approach that has been contested by a number of scholars, such as Meyer. Spivak defends Brontë's Bertha Mason as a native, "a figure produced by the axiomatics of imperialism. Through Bertha Mason, the white Jamaican Creole, Brontë renders the human/animal frontier as acceptably indeterminate" (247). At the same time, she regards Antoinette as white, and Rhys's narrative as "a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native" (253). Although she acknowledges that Antoinette is "a white Creole child growing up at the time of emancipation in Jamaica, [...] caught between the English imperialist and the black native" (250), this is not enough for Benita Parry, who condemns Spivak for "not pursue[ing] the text's representations of a Creole culture that is dependent on both yet singular, or its enunciation of a specific settler discourse, distinct from the texts of imperialism" (37).

In keeping with Brathwaite's argument, Spivak contends that white creoles remain too far from the black Caribbean tradition as they are too involved in its imperialist exploitation to be considered part of it. Therefore, she sees Antoinette as only white. However, in contrast to *Jane Eyre*, an even whiter character in the eyes of the Empire, Bertha Mason darkens. Spivak is separately acknowledging the two sides of what Parry sees as the same coin, the creole, who navigates in between different shades of white and black. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette perfectly epitomises this inner conflict, caused by external causes and worsened by the social and moral limitations of her sex.

The white creole woman is an outcast, a sort of freak rejected by both Europe and England, whose blood she shares, and by the black West Indian people, whose culture and home have been hers for two generations or more. In the English-speaking Caribbean these women must bear the guilt of the horrors of slavery inflicted by their own white ancestors upon the people whose country they now call their own. (Nunez-Harrell 282)

In the novel there are constant references to this duality in Antoinette's personality. In the first part of the narration, when there are no white men in Antoinette's life, she freely goes exploring Coulibri with Tia, and yet, she is always reminded of the status of people like her as "white cockroaches" (Rhys 9), because "old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger" (Rhys 10). It is interesting how Tia reverses Brontë's metaphor of race; both Jane and Antoinette become black in their poverty, but Jane uses it to defend herself and Tia to insult Antoinette.

In Antoinette's challenge for identity, once native assimilation appears to be impossible (or rather unpreferred) the nostalgia for the British motherland seems more attractive. Throughout the novel, there is constant nostalgia for a land she has never seen. Rochester recognises this idealised concept of Britain as a myth: "She often questioned me about England and listened attentively to my answers, but I was certain that nothing I said made much difference. Her mind was already made up. Some romantic novel, a stray remark never forgotten, a sketch, a picture, a song, a waltz, some note of music, and her ideas were fixed" (Rhys 58).

This idealisation of white "snowy" Britain encapsulates this search for belonging that she cannot find in Jamaica. When she finally arrives in England, and more particularly at the third floor of Thornfield, the reality is so different that Antoinette refuses to accept that this is the England she had imagined: "'When we went to England',

I said. ‘You fool,’ she said, ‘this is England.’ ‘I don’t believe it,’ I said, ‘and I never will believe it’” (Rhys 119).

Unaware of her idea of England as mythical, Antoinette’s efforts in building her identity aim at white assimilation in her marriage to Rochester. This, however, proves to be an impossible task because, once again, her ‘doubleness’ is imposed from the outside. The blackness of Antoinette, which Tia perceives as a loss of power, is depicted in Rochester’s narrative as both fear and attraction, in accordance with Bhabha’s well-known notion of the fetish in his seminal work *The Location of Culture* (1994). Rochester’s idealisation of Antoinette goes from attraction to fear as he becomes increasingly aware of Antoinette’s blackness, consciously arisen by Daniel Cosway, who openly points to Antoinette’s impurity (both racial and sexual) when he says to Rochester “‘give my love to your wife – my sister, he called after me venomously. ‘You are not the first to kiss her pretty face. Pretty face, soft skin, pretty colour – not yellow like me. But my sister just the same...’” (Rhys 80).

Daniel’s meddling attitude causes Rochester to distance himself from Antoinette. In an attempt to prevent this estrangement between the spouses, Antoinette asks Christophine to practice *obeah* on Rochester so that she can gain his love back. This will become a turning point in the conflict between white and native cultures, because turning to *obeah* to achieve white acceptance has been understood by critics, such as Drake, as Antoinette both betraying and condemning herself (198).

When her efforts for assimilation end up in failure, Antoinette turns back to her Caribbean latent identity. This change is also noticeable in the structure of the novel. Antoinette’s narrative appears to have finished once she marries Rochester –in the 19<sup>th</sup> century women’s agency came to an end at the very moment they married. However, in the last part of the novel Antoinette recovers the control of the narrative, but only to burn

Thornfield just as the natives burnt the colonisers' plantations back at home. According to Lee Erwin, the return of Antoinette as narrator "ironises the novelistic conventions of *Wide Sargasso Sea's* generic forebears: that is, the 'ending' of part I, namely marriage, didn't work out, to say the least, and so the 'second moment' of Antoinette's narrative will enact the other endings that Rachel Blau DuPlessis has argued close nineteenth-century narratives about women, that is, madness and/or death" (153).

Once in England, Antoinette finally comes to terms with the suppressed part of herself that belongs to the Caribbean as symbolised by the red dress. Spivak argues that, when Antoinette recognises the imposed 'other,' Rochester's Bertha, she loses her sanity. Spivak sees Antoinette's "development" as reinscribing the "thematics of Narcissus. [...] In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Narcissus' madness is disclosed when he recognises his Other as his self. Rhys makes Antoinette see her own self as her other, Brontë's Bertha" (250). On the other hand, it could also be argued that when Antoinette burns Thornfield she is recovering her sanity and reappropriating her narrative by accepting her Caribbean self. I would suggest that admitting Bertha as the other does not turn her mad, but actually frees her, as she finally understands that her identity is Caribbean, no matter how problematic this might be. According to Nunez-Harrell, "the white creole woman can find a sense of belonging, her identity, only in her Caribbean homeland. But the price for such a choice is high" (282).

The idea of Antoinette freeing herself in the fire can be inscribed in the Caribbean concept of life as mirroring death. As Drake explains:

'death is only another name for life,' Antoinette's life and death, in the context of Afro-Caribbean belief, acquire a far different significance from that accorded them from a Western perspective only. And this is why she is *not* dead at the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea* [...] In achieving this clarity of decision and action, the

novel reads as victory over death itself by changing the cultural and belief system from a European to an Afro-Caribbean one. (205)

Among the multiple readings of the ending of *Antoinette*, Fayad quotes Davidson to explain the motif of vengeance, because “in her action she reappropriates fire from patriarchy, reversing the witch-burning syndrome. On a practical level, she ‘hits (Rochester) where it will hurt him the most, in his quintessential Englishness’ by robbing him of Thornfield, his English heritage” (238). Although there is certainly some justice in the possibility that by freeing herself she also punishes her oppressors, I would say that the novel’s main concern is the heroine’s liberation, and that the main merit of *WSS* lies in the fact that Rochester is merely accessory to this purpose.

## 2. Consequences to the Real “Others”

In both novels, it is what the protagonists regard as the ‘other’ that ultimately saves them. By vindicating Jane’s and Antoinette’s narratives, other characters are consequently disregarded and sacrificed in order to highlight these novels’ respective heroines’ quests. Jane needs Bertha to represent her darker inner self because, by projecting upon Bertha what she does not like about herself or what she fears to be, Jane can become the person she ends up being. Antoinette’s quest for identity makes her have an ambivalent relationship with both black and white characters in the novel, and uses characters such as Christophine in her efforts to reach white assimilation. In a way, it could be argued that Jane is saved by Bertha, and Bertha is ‘saved’ by the *obeah* tradition.

In this abuse of historically oppressed characters, both novels ambivalently connect with colonialist politics. Although their narrative tradition lies ultimately within the discourse of the Empire, their position towards race and oppression is not static as it incorporates the doubts and concerns that both authors might have had at the time they wrote their novels.

### The Complexity in Bertha and the Ultimate Defence of the Empire

In the previous section, I have explored the manipulation of the race metaphor for Jane’s own benefit. However, the extent of this white and black dichotomy is not limited to the heroine, as Brontë applies it to other characters of the novel with multiple purposes.

In *Jane Eyre*, the most obvious character to function as the recipient of black analogies is, without doubt, Bertha Rochester. The madwoman in the attic is much more than just Thornfield’s ghost, and in this part of the dissertation I would like to briefly

bring up two main aspects of this character's function in the novel: as a subtle critique of the Empire, but mostly as Jane's dark double.

As was previously argued, Spivak considers Bertha Mason to be "a figure produced by the axiomatics of imperialism. Through Bertha Mason, the white Jamaican creole, Brontë renders the human/animal frontier as acceptably indeterminate" (247). Meyer delves even more into this and regards Bertha as "the novel's incarnation of the desire for revenge on the part of the colonised races." Moreover, she goes as far as to claim that "Brontë's fiction suggests that such a desire for revenge is not unwarranted" (254).

If there is some subtle critique of the Empire in Brontë's narrative, this is clearly seen in the figure of Bertha. It is rather curious that a character that suffers such an unsympathetic destiny should embody the little humanity that Brontë reserves for non-whites. "The story of Bertha [...] does indict British colonialism in the West Indies as 'stained' wealth that came from its oppressive rule" (255). A number of positive connotations notwithstanding, a multitude of critics have insisted that Bertha's depiction, and by extension that of the white creole in *Jane Eyre*, has been terribly unfair. Its role as a symbol of the colonised oppressed at the service of the Empire is clearly revealed in her destiny. In Spivak's words:

She must play out her role, act out the transformation of her 'self' into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction. I must read this as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the coloniser". (251)

Bertha saves Jane from patriarchy because, without her, she would have entered marriage as inferior. On the contrary, with Bertha's existence and death Jane is forced to leave Thornfield and come back once she can actually control her narrative. Bertha does a lot more for Jane than just facilitating her future: she embodies her darkest thoughts, which turns Bertha's blackness into a reflection of Jane's own dark subconscious. Gilbert and Gubar associate this role of Bertha as "Jane's dark double" to Jane's suppression of anger.

What Bertha *does*, for instance, is what Jane wants to do. Disliking the "vapoury veil" of Jane Rochester, Jane Eyre secretly wants to tear the garments up. Bertha does it for her. Fearing the inexorable "Bridal day," Jane would like to put it off. Bertha does that for her too. [...] Bertha, in other words, is Jane's truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days in Gateshead. (360)

In her role as Jane's dark side, it is only natural that when Jane breaks free from oppression – by the real Bertha – Bertha-as-Jane's blackness also disappears. In the context of the rigid religious morality of the novel, it is paradoxical that Jane should overcome her darker side precisely like this.

Bertha's narrative arc of questioning and reaffirming imperialism (Meyer 252) can be extrapolated to Brontë's narrative as a whole. Brontë takes the metaphor of race one step further and subverts it in order to defend the Empire. In the novel, black features are used to characterise, not only Bertha as a dark double of Jane, but also other characters and attitudes that appear to be 'darkened' by colonial policies. In this way, the Empire is a disease that infects the British but that has nothing to do with them. Once again, the white British is depicted as a victim:

The use of the word “imperious” to describe Blanche’s ruling-class sense of superiority evokes the contact between the British and their dark-skinned imperial subjects. In that contact, it was not the dark people who were “imperious,” that is, in the position of haughty imperial power, but the British themselves. By associating the qualities of darkness and imperiousness in Blanche, Brontë suggests that imperialism brings out both these undesirable qualities in Europeans – that the British have been sullied, “darkened,” and made “imperious,” or oppressive by contact with the racial “other,” and that such contact makes them arrogant oppressors both abroad, and, like Blanche, at home in England. (Meyer 260)

I find it very interesting that, of all the characters that could be infected with this “imperiousness,” it is Blanche Ingram who embodies it. Some parallels can be drawn as regards Bertha’s and Blanche’s darkness, both in relation to Jane’s subconscious. Bertha does all that Jane cannot do, just as Blanche is all that Jane cannot be. The characteristics that Jane finds dark and imperious in Blanche could also be easily found in Rochester, whose arrogant attitude seems to be forgiven in his role of Byronic hero.

Brontë subverts the historical depiction of non-whites as oppressed in order to conversely turn them into oppressors. “By assimilating these two contradictory meanings to the signifier of ‘non-white,’ the novel follows this logic: oppression in any of its manifestations is ‘other’ to the English world of the novel, thus racial ‘otherness’ signifies oppression” (Meyer 261).

Brontë’s narrative proves that, whatever sympathy she may hold for Bertha in particular or non-whites in general, it is merely anecdotic as it lacks any acknowledgement of historical responsibility. As Meyer contends: “The opposition to colonialism arises not out of concern for the well-being of the ‘dark races’ subject to

British colonisation but primarily out of concern for the British who were, as the novel's figurative structure represents it, being contaminated by their contact with the intrinsic despotism and oppressiveness of dark-skinned people" (261).

The reactionary views upheld by the novel can also be understood as a necessary evil for the heroine's success in her quest for wholeness. Brontë's defence of imperialism is implicit in the fact that it allows for Jane's freedom. Whereas Rochester loses his estate and his wealth when Bertha burns Thornfield, which can be read as both him paying for his colonial sins and purifying himself in his new role as a plain – crippled – man, Jane follows the opposite path when she becomes Rochester's equal by accepting her uncle's fortune, which is once again directly related to colonialism.

#### Christophine as the Subversive Other and Rochester as Protector of the Status Quo

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is a novel about a very complex character at a very challenging time. Rhys's work has been widely questioned and debated as an example of both favouring and criticising the Empire. Her literature does not prove clear alliances with the West Indian tradition that was developing at the time of *WSS*'s publication, but Antoinette's ambivalence towards her own identity shows some discomfort in following the imperialist narrative. Among the aspects that make this novel too conservative for postcolonial vindications, I would like to focus on two: the neglect of Christophine as a subversive character, and the relevance of Rochester as a narrator.

Despite the fact that most critics agree to Christophine's importance, there has been an extensive debate on how mistreated Christophine really is within the narrative. According to Spivak, "*Wide Sargasso Sea* marks with uncanny clarity the limits of its own discourse in Christophine, Antoinette's black nurse. [...] Taxonomically, she

belongs to the category of the good servant rather than that of the pure native. But within these borders, Rhys creates a powerfully suggestive figure” (253).

Spivak sees in Christophine some evidence of Rhys’s imperialist discourse, and yet recognises the importance of a character that defends the black tradition and speaks her mind to the white elites when judging Rochester’s actions. However, Spivak concludes that, whatever importance Christophine may have, she

is tangential to this narrative. She cannot be contained by a novel which rewrites a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native. No perspective critical of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self. (253)

This belittling of Christophine’s character on the part of Spivak has been strongly criticised by Parry: “While allowing that Christophine is both speaking subject and interpreter to whom Rhys designates some crucial functions, Spivak sees her as marking the limits of the text’s discourse, and not, as is here argued, disrupting it” (38). Parry goes on to affirm that Spivak ignores “Christophine’s inscription as the native, female, individual Self who defies the demands of the discriminatory discourses impinging on her person” (38). Parry concedes a more significant role to the black nurse, arguing that “Christophine subverts the Creole address that would constitute her as domesticated Other, and asserts herself as articulate antagonist of patriarchal, settler and imperialist law” (38). Spivak’s well-known argument is based on the idea that natives cannot have a voice in a narrative that implements colonialist structures, but Parry’s counterargument is that “Spivak in her own writings severely restricts the space in which the colonised can be written back into history” (39).

As regards the construction of the character, Rhys in her letters comments on the difficulty of creating Christophine: “The most seriously wrong thing with Part II is that I’ve made the *obeah* woman, the nurse, too articulate. I thought of cutting it a bit, I will if you like, but after all no one will notice. Besides there’s no reason why one particular negro woman shouldn’t be articulate enough, especially as she’s spent most of her life as a white household” (145). Even if Christophine is allowed some agency in the novel, I would not regard her as disruptive of the colonialist discourse, as Parry suggests. Instead, it could be stated that, in her treatment of Christophine, Rhys misses a valuable opportunity to contribute a more progressive approach to the incipient West Indies literature. Her decision to constrain the narration to the white characters of the story may be explained out of nostalgia for a colonial and more benign past for the creoles; or out of respect, as if trying to impossibly avoid the orientalist attitudes put forward by Edward Said in his well-known book *Orientalism* (1978). Nunez-Harrell draws parallels with Rhys’s contemporary writer Shand Allfrey, a politically committed author who, in her novel *The Orchid House*, finds a way to tell “the white creole woman that her place is in the Caribbean and that her quest for belonging can end only when she assumes responsibility with the rest of Caribbean people for ending corruption in her native land” (286). Although Antoinette ends up with a similar desire for a Caribbean identity, hers is more of an epiphanic revelation than a political statement on behalf of her author.

Mardorossian stands up for Rhys’s commitment to the Caribbean tradition by focusing on the differences between narration and focalisation. She opposes Spivak arguing that the novel “constantly thwarts an easy identification with the white Creole protagonist, showing her as ensnared by colonialist assumptions which she unsuccessfully and often grotesquely attempts to replicate” (1071). Mardorossian

describes Rhys's commitment to black resistance in what I would regard as a too politically correct method:

*Wide Sargasso Sea* foregrounds black resistance without, however, offering unmediated access to alternative "negro traditions" or to a counterdiscourse to an imperialist way of knowing. The novel neither celebrates an unproblematic articulation of the West Indian world from the black creole point of view nor puts the resilient Christophine in the role of the self-determining individualist Antoinette failed to become. (1078)

Mardorossian's idea of black resistance in *WSS*, however legitimate, has been considered insufficient by critics such as Spivak and Brathwaite. While Spivak's tangential conception of Christophine might be too simplistic, Mardorossian's or Parry's argument of Christophine as disruptive appears to be excessively optimistic. Regardless of her narrative, what ultimately resonates is her lack of presence in the structure of the novel.

It must also be noted that Rhys chooses as narrators the only two main white characters of the novel, in spite of the fact that she had been notably outraged by "the real cruelty of Mr. Rochester" (Rhys 139). When describing the reasons that led her to write the novel, Rhys comments on the need to give "the reason why Rochester treats her so abominably and feels justified, the reason why he thinks she is mad and why of course she goes mad" (136). She finds Rochester's actions towards Bertha abominable, and yet she gives him half the novel to justify himself. Staley finds this "an attitude different from her earlier novels and one especially more understanding and comprehensive of male behaviour and feeling" (100).

Although there are some attenuating aspects in Rochester's part of the story—he is denied a name throughout the whole narrative—the importance of the patronymic for the aristocracy seems to be a trifle in comparison with the fact that he is given a whole part of the novel as narrator. In opposition to *Jane Eyre*, in *WSS* there is some acknowledgement of Rochester as a victimiser, because in Rhys's version, "It is not Rochester who is the innocent party; it is not he who is deceived and trapped in an alliance with a mad heiress, but she who is sought out by a fortune hunter and his family, sexually exploited for a time, and when once she has grown dependent on his love and his lovemaking, rejected" (Porter 534). This being said, it is also true that Rochester is somehow humanised throughout the novel: he is depicted as a child of his time, as an impoverished aristocrat and second son sent to a foreign land to make a match with a rich heiress. The context of the Caribbean land and culture, antipodean to British stiffness, has been seen by some critics, such as Staley, as an excuse for Rochester's attitudes:

It is important to observe carefully Edward's initial emotions, because they explain if not condone his later behaviour toward Antoinette. From the beginning he finds himself in a world at once seductive and hostile, so far distant from his English roots that there is little in his past which has prepared him to understand much of what he observes. (108)

Although Rochester is certainly approached in a benevolent way, I would always regard Antoinette as the most complex character of the novel, as she undergoes a most significant progression from the naivety of her childhood and clumsy attempts to fulfil Rochester's expectations to her final quest for agency through madness. However, some critics like Staley insist on showing more sympathy towards Rochester than Antoinette:

My point is [...] that the reader is left with a conceptual problem in his final judgment of Edward. If it were simply a question of his taking advantage of a

young innocent, there would be no problem, but the denouement of the novel implies in its description of Edward's loss that somehow he and Antoinette could have formed a vital union had only been more open and generous. But if I understand Antoinette, a mature union would have been impossible because of her own limited capacity for understanding. (116)

Other critics have accused Rhys of whitewashing the Caribbean reality. I would agree that her depiction of non-white struggles is certainly mild, as she mainly focuses her efforts on the defence of the white creole. Her lack of empathy for Christophine, so often criticised by postcolonial critics, together with her magnanimity towards Rochester, appreciated by early critics such as Staley, no doubt blur and put to the test Rhys's investment in Antoinette's story.

## Conclusion

Charlotte Brontë and Jean Rhys drew a long and complex path for their heroines and, in one way or another, both provided some closure for their main characters. It could be concluded that, in their heroines' problematic quests, both Brontë's and Rhys' positioning towards race and colonialism is ambivalent, rather disappointing, and above all highly influenced by both authors' personal and socioeconomic backgrounds. Although neither of the novels can be considered to be autobiographical, there are hints that allow for some connection between the authors and their respective characters and that, innocuous to the understanding of the narration, could add a new layer of meaning to the aforementioned ambivalence that has earned both Brontë and Rhys some negative criticism.

It is relatively easy to see the connection between Jean Rhys and her character Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It is unsurprising that Rhys should have felt so outraged when reading Brontë, and should have thus tried to vindicate a character that felt too close to home in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. According to Laguarda Bueno, "the alienation experienced by [Rhys'] characters could perfectly well reflect the writer's own troubled situation as a fourth-generation creole. Born and raised in the Caribbean but an adopted Londoner, Rhys never managed to feel at home in either of these places or to show an unfailing attachment to either of these cultures" (170).

Leaving aside Rhys's personal life, it is nonetheless true that she managed to give some closure to Antoinette's quest for identity while playing within the limitations of Brontë's cards. Antoinette's progression clearly shows that cultural identity is "not an essence but a positioning" (Hall 226), a painful struggle against social conventions and inner assumptions that results in a frustrating, sometimes unsatisfying, self-understanding. The question of reconciliation with one's self is not foreign to Caribbean

authors; on the contrary, the problematics of hybridity have been addressed by poets such as Derek Walcott, who offers some hope in his poem “Love After Love” when he promises himself and his fellow Caribbean countrymen that “You will love again the stranger who was your self” (328).

The threads that link Charlotte Brontë to her heroine, however subtle, are nonetheless present in her narrative. Jane’s quest is not for identity like Antoinette’s, but rather agency. Her main trait is her ambition to prevail in a world that does not accept her, while trying to remain truthful to herself at the same time. Her struggles are not romantic or economic but social, she wants acceptance, but only on her terms: she aims to find a place in society without losing herself in the process. Besides the most obvious resemblance between Brontë and Jane – Charlotte worked as a governess and is said to have fallen in love with her Belgian schoolmaster Constantin Héger –the author, who had to navigate a conservative society and had to publish her novels under a pseudonym, had an in-depth knowledge of the misfortunes of being an ambitious woman in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Just as Jane thought that she had been granted an unfair position in the world, Brontë saw herself and her talents undervalued: “am I to spend all the best part of my life in this wretched bondage, forcibly suppressing my rage at the idleness, the apathy and the hyperbolic and most asinine stupidity of those fatheaded oafs, and on compulsion assuming an air of kindness, patience and assiduity?” (411). Brontë gave Jane the successful ending she would later claim for herself when she managed to publish her work, notwithstanding the fact that she had to do it under a pseudonym: Currer Bell.

As has been argued in this dissertation, both authors’ aim at vindicating their heroines – and in turn a part of themselves – is certainly problematic, however satisfactory it may at first sight seem. As was previously stated, both authors use racialism to put Jane

and Antoinette at the centre: Jane imposes blackness on others, and others impose whiteness on Antoinette. Bearing in mind the timing of each text, it could be said that both Brontë and Rhys miss the opportunity to address social conflicts, which are thus absent or rather diminished in their novels. Of course, had they chosen to be politically braver, the social and critical impact on their careers might have made us not to regard their works as canonical today.

Regardless of the disappointment that their decision may cause to contemporary readers and scholars, social activism should not be considered to be mandatory in literature, nor in any kind of art for that matter. Their works should be valued for what they are, their impact on society notwithstanding. However, should they have found a way to fulfil their quest for wholeness without neglecting others, they would have in addition managed to remove any trace of selfishness from their writings. Yet, in vindicating themselves they did to others what they had painfully suffered themselves. To conclude, there is some tragedy in their journey from victim to victimiser when they try to redefine their in-betweenness.

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