

Identity, Sensuality, and Sociopathy in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Allison Green 12/8/16

In the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, the main character Antoinette loses her sanity due to issues with identity and sexuality that her husband, Rochester, ultimately exploits. Due to cultural and racial divisiveness, Antoinette never developed an identity or sense of self, but she forms a pseudo-identity in being sexually attractive to Rochester, and she gives him everything that she has. Rochester, filled with unfounded suspicion and paranoia, destroys this through manipulation, taking away all she has left and making her into his “marionette.” His refusal to accept blame for these actions and their consequences suggests sociopathic tendencies.

As a child, Antoinette receives conflicting images about which culture she belongs to, and this prevents her from forming a proper sense of self. She spends her days running wild on the grounds of her childhood home in Jamaica, where she lives with her mother, brother, and a servant named Christophine, who serves as a surrogate mother for Antoinette. Antoinette plays primarily with the black children of her town, but she doesn't really belong to that group because she is white. Antoinette and her family are white but poor, however, so they are looked down upon by both other white people and by black people. Once her stepfather, Mr. Mason, arrives, Antoinette says, “we ate English food now...I was glad to be like an English girl but I missed the taste of Christophine's cooking” (Rhys 35). Antoinette instinctively thinks that Mr. Mason's arrival and the influx of English culture this brings is better, perhaps because she hopes it will mean more acceptance from other white people. Despite this, her heart belongs to the ways of the native people, as she misses the way things were before.

Antoinette is unable to win anyone's acceptance, and her identity issues clearly carry over into adulthood. In “An/Other Side to Antoinette/Bertha: Reading ‘Race’ into *Wide Sargasso*

Sea,” Carmen Wickramagamage argues that Antoinette is victimized in the novel because of a combination of her race, the location, and the time period, and not because of who she is. She states that “there is very little doubt in Antoinette’s mind where she belongs: the white Creole plantocracy...Antoinette is not a woman who is troubled by a lack of cultural identity; she is a woman who perceives herself troubled by others on account of her cultural identity”

(Wickramagamage). In doing this, she is arguing that Antoinette has a very concrete knowledge of her identity as a white Creole woman, and that her only problem is that other people give her a hard time about the way she perceives herself. This is clearly incorrect when one considers the evidence present in the novel. In response to a cruel song sung by a maid, Amélie, Antoinette explains to Rochester, “It was a song about a white cockroach. That’s me... And I’ve heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why I was ever born at all” (Rhys 102). In this quote, Antoinette spells out that she has no idea what her cultural or racial identity should be because she has never had a country or a people to which she feels like she belongs. This lost and purposeless feeling is intense enough to make her question her very existence, and it lasts from when she was a child straight through into adulthood.

It is this lack of identity that causes Antoinette to latch on desperately and unhealthily to her sexual relationship with Rochester. On one of their first nights together, Antoinette tells Rochester, “I never wished to live before I knew you. I always thought it would be better if I died” (Rhys 91). She is saying that she was so adrift before she met Rochester that she literally did not see the point to life, but her words display an unhealthily high level of attachment and trust placed in Rochester. As Elgin Mellown states in her essay “Character and Themes in the Novels of Jean Rhys,” Antoinette “gives herself body and soul to [Rochester], Richard (her step-

father) having already given her money to him with no settlement made in her behalf.”

Antoinette has nothing to lose and nothing to fall back on. In admitting that being married to Rochester is her only reason for wanting to be alive, she reveals again how little she has in the way of identity as well, and she also tilts the scales of power in their relationship terribly out of balance in Rochester’s favor because he does not feel anywhere near the same way that she does.

As her sexual relationship with Rochester develops, Antoinette finds new purpose in her life, not only in being married to Rochester but also in being sexually attractive to him. It is indicated that the couple have a lot of sex in this honeymoon period of their marriage, and it is also clear that Antoinette’s main focus is keeping Rochester happy, and that she enjoys it. She says to him, “‘I’ll wear the dress you like tonight...I was thinking, I’ll have another made exactly like it,’ she promised happily. ‘Will you be pleased?’” (Rhys 94). This shows that Antoinette is choosing something as personal as her own clothing based on Rochester’s preferences, and she is even going out of her way to have a copy of the dress made so she can do so more often. She is thinking of his desires and his happiness first and foremost, and having this purpose in turn is what makes her happy.

This is further supported by Antoinette’s reaction when Rochester seems to lose interest in her and stops sleeping with her. This “throws Antoinette into a sexual panic” (Mellown), and she runs to Christophine to beg her for a love potion, saying, “If he...could come to me one night. Once more. I would make him love me” (Rhys 113). Antoinette has become so consumed by this pseudo-identity of being sexually attractive to Rochester that the only thing she can think to do to win him back is to get him to have sex with her one more time. Appealing sexually to Rochester is all Antoinette thinks she is good for, but it is already too late. Rochester observes that Antoinette “was wearing the white dress I had admired, but it had slipped untidily over one

shoulder and seemed to large for her” (Rhys 127). Her sex appeal for Rochester no longer fits her; it has ceased to serve the purpose she needed it to, and she is left with nothing. As Elizabeth Abel points out in her essay “Women and Schizophrenia: The Fiction of Jean Rhys,” the result for Antoinette is “psychic as well as physical annihilation” that “coexist[s] with life, as it does in the zombi, ‘a living person who is dead.’” Antoinette is left physically and mentally hollowed out by her ordeal, and she ends up embodying the obeah figure of the zombi.

A large part of the reason that Antoinette’s sexual relationship with Rochester fails her is because it is dysfunctional, and this in turn is mostly because of Rochester, who openly admits that he “was thirsty for her, but that is not love” (Rhys 93). In other words, he desires Antoinette sexually, but he does not love her. This is personified in the dark nature of their sexual relationship, which the text hints has elements of sadomasochism. The first of these is when Rochester says the following:

I wonder if she ever guessed how near she came to dying. In her way, not in mine. It was not a safe game to play—in that place. Desire, Hatred, Life, Death came very close in the darkness. Better not to know how close. Better not think, never for a moment... ‘You are safe,’ I’d say to her and to myself. (Rhys 94)

Since it was previously expressed that Antoinette’s way of dying is death in the literal sense, this quote indicates that sex and death are closely linked in their relationship. It is clear that this is Rochester’s doing, as it is also indicated that Antoinette may not be fully aware of it. This may be because Antoinette trusts Rochester completely, and he tells her that she is safe, despite admitting only a few sentences before that what he was doing to her was not safe. Rochester not only willingly does things to Antoinette that he knows to be unsafe, but he does so without her full understanding and therefore without her full consent. This is even more disturbing when one

considers that Antoinette cannot know what a normal sexual relationship looks like, never having had one before her marriage, so Rochester could tell her absolutely anything is normal and she would believe him. This is yet another way in which he has complete control over her.

The other textual hints of this dark side to their sex life are less subtle. Rochester mentions seeing Antoinette's torn shift on the floor after a night of love making, indicating that he ripped it roughly off of her (Rhys 138). Christophine also makes note of the physical toll Rochester's sexual tastes takes on Antoinette's body. After helping Antoinette get ready for bed, Christophine says to Rochester, "I undress Antoinette so she can sleep cool and easy; it's then that I see you very rough with her" (Rhys 151). This suggests that Antoinette has visible marks of Rochester's abuse, most likely bruises or cuts of some kind to provide physical evidence of his dangerous proclivities. What is more, sexual deviancy is a common trait of sociopaths, as they lack feelings of remorse or guilt and are therefore far less likely to question their desires than those who are mentally normative.

All of this certainly contributes to Antoinette's loss of identity, which is highlighted by the parallel drawn between Antoinette and her mother. Antoinette recounts sneaking away to visit her mother, only to find her being given rum and forcibly lifted and kissed by the man who was supposed to be taking care of her (Rhys). Antoinette herself compares this to her relationship with Rochester when she tells him about seeing this "black devil kissing her [mother's] sad mouth. Like you kissed mine" (Rhys 147). Christophine later tells Rochester that the man repeatedly raped Antoinette's mother, and that he was not the only one who did so (Rhys). According to Christophine's testimony, this abuse directly contributes to the mother's loss of identity and therefore her madness, and it mirrors what Rochester does to Antoinette.

To make the situation still more disturbing, Rochester is obviously aware that his activities are taking a toll on Antoinette, but he does not change his behavior. He says, “I watched her die many times. In my way, not in hers... Very soon she was as eager for what’s called loving as I was—more lost and drowned afterwards” (Rhys 92). Rochester’s way of death, contrary to Antoinette’s, is likely an orgasm, which is sometimes referred to as a “small death.” The implication of using the word “die” is still a likely indicator of sadomasochism, however. What is more, Rochester recognizes that their sexual relationship is making Antoinette feel sad and disconnected, but he does not seem to care. In fact, his behavior seems to escalate after this observation, as in when he says, “One afternoon the sight of a dress which she’d left lying on her bedroom floor made me breathless and savage with desire. When I was exhausted I turned away from her and slept, still without a word or a caress” (Rhys 93). Instead of trying to help Antoinette, Rochester is bringing in more disconnection to sex, seeming to use her for sexual gratification without touching her in any loving way or even talking to her at all. In doing this, he is displaying a manipulative, cold, and calculating nature, all of which are traits commonly exhibited by people with a sociopathic personality disorder.

His manipulation is obvious enough for Christophine to pick up on it, as she says to Rochester, “You fool the girl. You make her think you can’t see the sun for looking at her...you make love to her till she drunk with it...till she can’t do without it. It’s *she* can’t see the sun anymore. Only you she see. But all you want is to break her up” (Rhys 153). Christophine thinks that Rochester is using sex to control and “break” Antoinette on purpose, and he does not deny it, perhaps because he is unable or unwilling to take responsibility for his actions. When Rochester’s sexual mistreatment finally drives Antoinette over the edge, he says, “She thirsts for *anyone*—not for me...She’ll not care who she’s loving. She’ll moan and cry and give herself as

no sane woman would” (Rhys 165). Instead of admitting that he is guilty of what Christophine accuses, he says that Antoinette doesn’t want him so much as she just wants sex, and that she wouldn’t have cared who she was with. He even goes so far as to blame Antoinette herself for giving so much up to him, essentially shaming her for imagined promiscuity in an attempt to deflect blame from himself. Overall, all of these factors are indicative of a deeply dysfunctional sexual relationship, and Rochester’s attitude of thinking he can do as he likes without taking Antoinette’s feelings or wellbeing into account is chilling.

This is not the only example of Rochester’s behavior that is chilling, however. His paranoia about Antoinette and her inherited Dominican estate, Granbois, not only draws a distinct parallel between them, but also highlights yet another characteristic of sociopathy that he exhibits. When Rochester first arrives in Dominica, he describes the servants as seeming to be “malignant perhaps, like much else in this place” (Rhys 65). His diction here is extremely indicative of paranoia, as the word “malignant” is linked to intent. He is characterizing Granbois and the people in it as not only harmful, but also wanting to cause harm, despite the fact that he has no apparent reason to believe this to be true. Rochester further describes Granbois by saying, “It was a beautiful place—wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I’d find myself thinking, ‘What I see is nothing—I want what it *hides*—that is not nothing” (Rhys 87). Rochester also describes Antoinette as both “alien” and “wild” at different points in the novel, and the fact that she was virginal and therefore “untouched” by other men at the time of their marriage suggests that Rochester is talking about both Antoinette and Granbois in this quote.

This is further supported by the fact that Rochester becomes fixated on the thought that Antoinette knows the secret of Granbois, but that she refuses to tell it to him. Even after

Antoinette has been driven mad, Rochester is still thinking about that secret. He says of Granbois, “I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness” (Rhys 172). Rochester is stating that he has come to equate Granbois with Antoinette. His sociopathic paranoia won’t let him fixate on anything else but the supposed secret they share, and he comes to hate both his wife and her home for keeping it from him. After Rochester sleeps with the maid, Amélie, to hurt Antoinette, Christophine accuses Rochester of calling Antoinette a “marionette...because she don’t speak. You want to force her to...But she won’t. So you think up something else. You bring that worthless girl to play with next door and you talk and laugh and love so that [Antoinette] hear everything. You meant her to hear” (Rhys 154). Rochester admits that this is true: he absolutely meant for Antoinette to hear him with Amélie, and Christophine’s phrasing also makes it seem like he slept with Amélie out of spite because Antoinette would not “speak” and tell him the secret. This is made all the more sad because there is no real evidence that there is actually a secret. It is made up entirely by Rochester’s paranoia.

In addition to being paranoid, Rochester is an excellent liar and very charming, and yet has shallow emotions and is unable to relate properly to others. For example, when describing his courtship of Antoinette, Rochester says, “I played the part I was expected to play...I would listen to my own voice and marvel at it, calm, correct but toneless, surely. But I must have given a faultless performance” (Rhys 76). In other words, he views the courtship as a kind of play and himself as an actor in it, rather than a process for finding and marrying a woman he loves and cares for, as it should be. His trouble relating to Antoinette is clearly displayed when he says things like, “I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not

think or feel as I did” (Rhys 93). This statement not only shows that Rochester views his wife as a stranger, but it also dehumanizes her, as he does not even view her as having thoughts or feelings on the same plane as himself.

Separately, all of these traits could be indicative of a person who is simply cruel or distant, but when put together, they paint a picture of a man with a severe mental disorder. When one looks at the big picture and takes into account all of Rochester’s idiosyncrasies and disturbing behaviors, there can be no doubt that he is a sociopath. Rochester himself even recognizes this in some small way, stating, “There are blanks in my mind that cannot be filled up” (Rhys 76). These blanks are the thought patterns and emotions that healthy people experience, but which Rochester lacks. For the most part, he is unable even to recognize that his behavior is wrong. Rochester effaces his wife’s identity in part by refusing to call her by her own name, preferring instead to rechristen her “Bertha” despite her protests. When Antoinette breaks down sobbing and says, “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name” (Rhys 147), Rochester has no emotional reaction. He truly does not seem to understand why refusing to call Antoinette by her own name is wrong, even though in doing so, he robs her of the last scraps of identity she had left. He accuses everyone but himself of being responsible for the situation he alone created, and despite the fact that Antoinette has completely unraveled, he still feels no remorse. He thinks to himself, “Pity. Is there none for me? Tied to a lunatic for life—a drunken lying lunatic—gone her mother’s way” (Rhys 164). Rochester is the one who forced Antoinette into going “her mother’s way;” she is the one deserving of pity, but despite it all, Rochester can only ever think about himself.

In conclusion, Antoinette’s lack of cultural or racial identity leaves her feeling adrift and purposeless in life, so she is left to find a purpose only in being sexually attractive to Rochester.

Their sexual relationship is unhealthy, abusive, and dysfunctional, however, and it can only end badly for Antoinette. She gives him too much of herself and is swallowed up by Rochester's overpowering paranoia, manipulation, and overwhelming indifference to her feelings or wellbeing. As Antoinette says, "There are always two deaths, the real one and the one people know about" (Rhys 128). Antoinette's "real" death is a direct result of Rochester's mental illness, and she is ultimately left alone and broken, a lifeless shadow of her former self in the cold care of the very person who destroyed her.

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