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Hiding in Plain Sight

A Gynocritical Reading of Rochester's Narrative in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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2022

Student thesis, Bachelor degree, 15 HE
English

English (61-90)

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Examiner: Marko Modiano

Abstract

This essay is the result of a close-reading of the male protagonist's narrative in Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). His narrative was examined through an interpretive lens layered with a combination of several critical onsets that form the pillars of Elaine Showalter's theory of a metaphysical female crescent outside of male consciousness. With a combination of gynocriticism, postcolonial feminism, cultural theory and psychoanalysis, this essay charted the inner expedition of the male protagonist as he travels to the Caribbean and marries his new wife. The findings showed how his inner journey takes him to the borderlands of his consciousness and language. On the other side of the border is the female crescent, the wild zone, where women and wilderness taunt him and hide from him in plain sight. Stretching himself to the limits of his conscious mind, the male protagonist Rochester loses his grip on reality and gets overwhelmed by feelings of fear and anger.

Key words: Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Elaine Showalter, gynocriticism, psychoanalysis, postcolonialism, feminism, cultural theory, Edward Rochester, consciousness, narrative.

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1. Introduction

From being most commonly known as a prequel to Charlotte Brontë's classic novel *Jane Eyre* Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* has since its first publication in 1966 come a long way towards becoming a classic of its own. Rhys's postmodern novel might be full of intertextual links to *Jane Eyre* but it stands strong as a complex literary work in itself, fitting into genres ranging from postcolonial works to gothic novels and magical realism. This essay will be a close reading of the part of *Wide Sargasso Sea* narrated by the male protagonist, a character not mentioned by name in the novel but who will henceforth be referred to as Rochester. In the words of Annette Kolodny every interpretation is merely a "turn of the lens" and in this essay the feminist and postcolonial lens that has hitherto been focusing on the silencing aspect of power will be turned to the other side. This essay will come to show how Rochester's narrative in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is an exposé on the experiences of deafness and disorientation when confronted with the silence from a metaphysical place "beyond the screens of the dominant structure" (Showalter 200). The novel centers on a journey to the Caribbean but, with the help of different critical approaches that come together in Elaine Showalter's theory of a "female crescent", we will discover Rochester's inner expedition to the outer borders of his consciousness and language.

2. Critical Approach

The theory section of this essay will merge together parts from different critical onsets in an attempt to create a deeper understanding of the implications of Elaine Showalter's theory of a metaphysical "wild zone" of women's culture on how we examine literature. In order to investigate the main pillars of Showalter's theory that "men do not know what is in

the wild" we will be looking at what it is to know, who are men and what is the wild. This will lead us to psychoanalytic theories of consciousness, cultural theories of gender and feminist examinations of the wild.

2.1 Psychoanalysis: Consciousness, Experience and Language.

As previously mentioned, the theoretical basis of this essay will be a merging together of different critical onsets that form the pillars of Showalter's theory of "the female crescent" as a realm outside of male consciousness. In order to define what is meant by consciousness, the unconscious and its relationship to language, we will turn to psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis was first developed by the Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud in late nineteenth century Vienna and has since been thoroughly examined and developed by many other critical thinkers. Within the framework of this essay the focus will be on the broader strokes of psychoanalysis in order to paint a picture of the fundamentals of Freud's theory and how it has been subjected to post-structuralist and feminist reworks in attempts by Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva to map out the human mind, experience and its relationship to language.

Freud's theories on the human mind are dependent on the supposition that "we are dominated by a desire for gratification and an aversion to anything which might frustrate it" (Eagleton 139). Our constant striving for gratification, which Freud terms "the pleasure principle", starts when the infant suckles the mother's breast. The human infant, unlike most other animals being very dependent on its parents for its biologically fixed needs, turns to the mother for nourishment and discovers that the breastfeeding is not merely a means to an end but also pleasurable. According to Freud, this is the dawning of sexuality. A pivotal point where the infant's mouth turns into one of the "erotogenic zones" that will later be accompanied by several more during different stages of the child's life. This leads Freud to

assert that sexuality is "a ’perversion ’- a ’sweeping away ’of a natural self-preservative instinct towards another goal" (Eagleton 133). For human beings to be able to labor, which is fundamental for human society to function, we have to repress these tendencies towards the pleasure principle in favor of the reality principle, Freud argues.

At the very core of Freud’s theories is the Oedipal complex. During the Oedipal process, the child manages to suppress unwanted instincts and desires. This is the time when we transform into moral, conscientious and law-abiding citizens by "opening up" our unconscious for the forbidden desires to be stored in. However, the unconscious is not a vault and "the human subject who emerges from the Oedipal process is a split subject, torn precariously between conscious and unconscious; and the unconscious can always return to plague it" (Eagleton 136). Also, according to Freud, if we repress too much, we fall sick from "neurosis". In order to stay sane, we unconsciously "sublimate" our desires and find outlets for our frustrations, oftentimes sexual in nature, by doing something socially acceptable instead of merely acting on our forbidden desires. According to Freud, this sublimation is the source of all human creativity, culture and civilization. As Eagleton puts it: "the paradox […] on which [Freud’s] work rests is that we come to be what we are only by a massive repression of the elements which have gone into our making" (132).

According to Freud, one way in which the unconscious makes itself known to the conscious mind is through our dreams. He believed that we can decipher our dreams as a symbolic text sent from the unconscious. However, the symbols are not easy to decode since they "condense" and "displace" meaning, much in the same way as linguist Roman Jakobson’s "metonymy" and "metaphor" (Eagleton 137). This similarity led the post-structuralist psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan to his famous conclusion that the unconscious must be structured like a language.

According to Lacan, the pre-Oedipal child exists in "the Imaginary": a realm where "we lack any defined centre of self" and are unable to discern where "the Self" ends and "the Other", primarily represented by the mother's body, begins (Eagleton 142). Reflecting itself in everything else around it, the infant finds nothing lacking, no difference, no death. It is at one, in harmonious co-dependence, with the outside world. However, this is a transitory state of being, because during its first couple of years the child enters into "the mirror-stage". Launched by the appearance of the father, which Lacan terms "the Law", the small child begins to develop a self-center and starts to define borders between itself and other objects. The law in this sense is mainly the social taboo on incest that the child must adhere to by overcoming the Oedipal complex, but also a prescriptive law of society on what role to play in an already existing gendered and social order. As the name suggests, the small child looks in the mirror and sees a coherent psychical object supposed to encapsulate its whole being. However, this is impossible since the child is a subject and can never be fully made up of just its parts. This is further complicated as the child enters language and learns the term "I", realizing that it can never both be the one uttering the "I" and at the same time be everything that the "I" entails. This is the beginning of a traumatic process of leaving a place of "'full', imaginary possession into the 'empty' world of language" (Eagleton 145).

Both the Oedipal complex and the mirror stage are instigated by the introduction of the father. The complete dyadic pair of mother and child is interrupted by the emergence of this third figure. At the root of the Oedipal complex is the drama played out as the father enters the scene. The pre-Oedipal child "is not yet what we might call a 'gendered subject': it surges with sexual drives, but this libidinal energy recognizes no distinction between masculine and feminine" (Eagleton 134). As the child enters the Oedipal stage it starts to discern gender difference, and "the parent of the same sex will come to figure as a rival in its affections for the parent of the opposite sex" (Eagleton 134). The boy-child fears that his rival

might castrate him like he did the mother, and therefore represses his incestuous desire for his mother. This is when he succumbs to the reality principle and ”opens up" his unconscious as a place to tuck away these forbidden desires. The "castrated" female child tries but fails at seducing her father and turns back to her similarly "castrated" mother for identification. Like her mother, she unconsciously desires a baby with her father in order to fill the void of the non-existent penis. Since the girl is already castrated, it is unclear however what would motivate her to resolve her complex, which shines a light on the male focus of this theory.

Accrediting much importance to the father and holding at the very center of their theories a polarized view of gender, Freud and Lacan have received much feminist examination and critique. One of the most known feminist critics to have re-examined their theories is French/Bulgarian philosopher Julia Kristeva. Introducing "the semiotic" rather than Lacan’s symbolic or imaginary Kristeva adds another dimension of language that in contrast to his focus on the phallus and the Law of the father is instead "closely connected with femininity" (Eagleton 163). Stemming from the pre-Oedipal phase where the main focus of the infant is on the mother’s body, the semiotic is a "pulsional pressure within language itself, in tone, rhythm, the bodily and material qualities of language" (Eagleton 163). It has been argued that Kristeva’s take on Lacan’s theories is a "return to Freud" (Barzilai 294). Eagleton reminds us that

> […] by reinterpreting Freudianism in terms of language, a pre-eminently social activity, Lacan permits us to explore the relations between the unconscious and human society. One way of describing his work is to say that he makes us recognize that the unconscious is not some kind of seething, tumultuous, private region ’inside’ us, but an effect of our relations with one another. The unconscious is, so to speak, ’outside’ rather than ’within’ us – or rather it exists ’between’ us, as our relationships do. It is elusive not so much because it is buried deep within our minds, but because it

> is a kind of vast, tangled network which surrounds us and weaves itself through us, and which can therefore never be pinned down. The best image of such a network, which is both beyond us and yet is the very stuff of which we are made, is language itself; and indeed for Lacan the unconscious is a particular effect of language, a process of desire set in motion by difference. (150)

Kristeva finds this linguistic focus lacking and wants to add "an experiential dimension" that cuts “through language, in the direction of the unspeakable" (Barzilai 294, Kristeva qtd. in Barzilai 294). In addition to the imaginary and the symbolic, Lacan’s theories depend on the notion of what he refers to as "the real". The real is a realm of existence that is exclusively non-linguistic. Therefore, when we enter language, we are severed from the real and can never encounter it again except filtered through the screen where we project images from the imaginary and the symbolic. Kristeva’s semiotic might be seen as "a mediation between the real […] and the symbolic, between what is ineffable and what is articulated through language", virtually a wormhole through the screen of perceived reality into the psychic black hole that is the real (Barzilai 297). As a "residue of the pre-Oedipal phase", the semiotic stems from a pre-meaning existence where the drives and wants, e.g. for nourishment, were unarticulated and closely connected to the bodies of the infant and the mother (Eagleton 163). Before these drives are put into words, Kristeva suggests that they are instead like unorganized rhythmic patterns that "pulsate through" the body of the infant "as a form of language, though it is not yet meaningful" (Eagleton 163). As the infant enters the structured law binding existence of the symbolic order it represses the semiotic to where it can only be "discerned as kind of a pulsional pressure within language itself […] in contradiction, meaninglessness, disruption, silence and absence" (Eagleton 163). These properties of language or being or experience remind us that there is something beyond

language. The semiotic being a "process rather than a system", it is a process that is able to transport us to these "borders of language" (Barzilai 297, 300).

2.2. Feminist criticism: Gynocriticism, the Female Crescent and The Wild

The fight for justice between the sexes has been carried out by women for centuries. However, the "women's movement" of the 1960s is often seen as a starting point for much of current day feminism and this is also the case for feminist literary criticism (Barry 123). The decade following the start of this movement is saturated with a "combative and polemical" spirit to expose and break down the existing order of patriarchy (Barry 124). Moving into the 1980s feminism is broadened by several new perspectives and most prominent is the turn from attacking male ideology towards a search for a female one founded on the uniqueness of female experience. One of the leading voices in this third wave of feminism is Elaine Showalter. Most known for her emphasis on the need for a new canon of women's writing and her coining of the terms "gynotexts" (as opposed to "androtexts") and "gynocriticism" she has been "both praised and derided as one of the mothers of American feminist criticism" (Griffin 371). American, or often merged together into Anglo-American, feminist literary criticism is known as a quite traditional school with focus on close readings of individual texts and viewing literature as portrayals of women's reality and lives.

The previously mentioned psychoanalyst, linguist and philosopher Julia Kristeva is often put at the forefront of the French school of feminist critical thought. As opposed to the Anglo-American feminists, the French embrace theory. For them "the literary text is never primarily a representation of reality" but needs to be siphoned through complex theories such as post-structuralism, psychoanalysis and psychology (Barry 127). However, Showalter has criticized this "aura of caricature that has characterized a central 'split' [between] the theoretically naive ('New Critical') and essentialist founding mothers versus a generation of

daughters, whose allegiance to male- (and French-) dominated ’theory’ makes them politically suspect" (Griffin 371). Instead, as Griffin puts it, "Showalter appropriates the voice of moderation and reason as her own" and continues to expand her complex theory of gynocriticism (371). As Barry cautions, gynocriticism is a "broad and varied field" that will not be described in any simplified terms (125).

Showalter herself describes the multiple subjects of gynocriticism as "the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution or laws of a female literary tradition" (Showalter qtd. in Barry 125). Furthermore, "having suggested in ’Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness’ (1981) that women's writing is best studied in the context of ’women's culture’, Showalter […] updates gynocriticism still further by recognizing the diversity of women's culture" (Griffin 372). Dividing men and women into cultural groups was previously put forward mainly as a way of examining women’s writing as a specific genre, e.g. Hélène Cixous’ *écriture féminin*è. However, using the theories of anthropologists Shirley and Edward Ardener, Elaine Showalter broadens this discussion by emphasizing the importance of experience and how "women’s culture forms a collective experience within a cultural whole" (Showalter 197).

Through the words of historian Gerda Lerner, she stresses how women’s culture cannot be considered a subculture because women form the majority. Instead, Showalter adopts the terminology used by the Ardeners to explain how "women constitute a *muted group*, the boundaries of whose culture and reality overlap, but are not wholly contained by, the *dominant (male) group*" (199). Ardener suggests that though both groups unconsciously form their own collective social reality, the dominant group "control[s] the forms or structures in which consciousness can be articulated" (Showalter 200). Showalter refers to

Ardener's diagram with intersecting circles to further explain the relationship between these two groups, see figure 1.

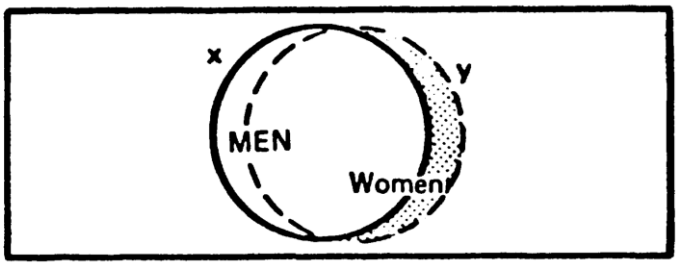

Fig. 1. Ardener's diagram with the muted (y) and dominant (x) group

Introducing the importance of experience, consciousness and the unconscious to this gynocritical theory, Showalter opens a window to her French feminist sister Kristeva. This connection is even more evident as she continues to explain:

> Much of muted circle Y falls within the boundaries of dominant circle X; there is also a crescent of Y which is outside the dominant boundary and therefore (in Ardener's terminology) "wild." We can think of the "wild zone" of women' culture spatially, experientially, or metaphysically. Spatially it stands for an area which is literally no-man's-land, a place forbidden to men, which corresponds to the zone in X which is off limits to women. Experientially it stands for the aspects of the female life-style which are outside of and unlike those of men; again, there is a corresponding zone of male experience alien to women. But if we think of the wild zone metaphysically or in terms of consciousness, it has no corresponding male space since all of male consciousness is within the circle of the dominant structure and thus

> accessible to or structured by language. In this sense, the "wild" is always imaginary; from the male point of view, it may simply be the projection of the unconscious. In terms of cultural anthropology, women know what the male crescent is like, even if they have never seen it, because it becomes the subject of legend (like the wilderness). But men do not know what is in the wild. (200)

This way of understanding "the wild zone" or "female crescent" metaphysically and outside of male consciousness is what ties together gynocriticism and psychoanalysis. Expanding outside of the pragmatic framework of traditional American feminist criticism, Showalter meets up with the theory-oriented French feminists in an attempt to tie their elusive post-structuralism to the reality of women's life. Lived experience is what creates the borders of these cultural groups, but the implication on our psyche and perception is at the core of explaining the fundamental difference between belonging to the muted or dominant group respectively; of being part of the wilderness or not.

In her essay "Woman/Wilderness" (1986) Ursula K. LeGuin adds a postcolonial perspective to Showalter's theory. She explains how the wilderness of the female crescent is "utterly other – that is, to Man, unnatural […] animal, bestial, primitive, undeveloped, unauthentic" and that those within the dominant group have a "fear of it [that] is ancient, profound and violent" (LeGuin 163). This fear is what we find in Rochester's experiences of his new wife and the Caribbean islands in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

2.3 Previous Criticism of Rhys's novels

Looking back on previous Rhys criticism, feminist criticism in particular, Carine Melkom Mardorossian notes in her article "Double [De]Colonization and the Feminist Criticism of '*Wide Sargasso Sea*'" (1999) that it has been marked by polarization. She

attributes this to variations in reading processes, both diachronic and synchronic. She brings up examples from the 1970s when the difference between "mainstream" critics and feminist critics was how they viewed Rhys's connection to her characters. Where the former mentioned admired her distance to them whilst the latter read her characters as "authentic" reflections on her own life as well as women's lives and experiences in general. Another example Mardorossian mentions of how Rhys's works polarized its critics is also from the same period and has to do with whether the greatest strength of her works was how she highlighted a specific "West-Indianness" or if the focus should be more on her as a general feminist writer in a broader sense. These discussions mirror the progression in feminist literary theory at large and perhaps reflect how Rhys's novels in general, and *Wide Sargasso Sea* in particular, have been an integral part of the feminist literary movement. It is very likely that not only have the trends in feminist theory marked the criticism of Rhys's works but also the other way around; her works have left marks on feminist critical theory.

It is not farfetched to claim that *Wide Sargasso Sea* brought intersectionality to the feminists' table decades before the term was even coined. Mardorossian notes that

> when white Anglo-American feminists took up Rhys's West Indian novel as a successful corrective to the imperialism of their cult feminist text *Jane Eyre*, a new page was effectively turned whereby they realized that any claim to totality and representativeness – including their own – could inadvertently result in the exclusion of some groups from that totality. […] The interpretation of feminist novels as the struggle of a heroine against oppressive patriarchal forces was soon scrutinized and criticized for positing a distinctive and essential female condition and ignoring the varied circumstances of women's oppression. (79-81)

Rhys's complex writing drew the attention of great thinkers such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who spearheaded the postcolonial screening of Western-centered feminism. Today the intersectional and postcolonial aspects of feminism are inextricable parts of its theoretical basis. It would be worthwhile to note at this point, as is discussed recently among feminist thinkers, the possible hazards of a much too anti-essentialist standpoint in feminist theorizing where its very foundation is lost in post-structuralist subjectiveness. If we are not able to categorize women and men respectively, what is the role of feminist theory? If we do not believe that women and girls all over the world in some sense have a common agenda because of their one common denominator of being female, then there is no point of feminist politics and criticism. That being said, during the decades of the late 1900s, texts like Rhys's were eye-openers and invited the previously excluded non-Western women to enter the feminist framework making it more inclusive and thereby more powerful. In this manner *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a pioneering and, irrespective of Rhys's intentions when writing it, activist feminist novel.

3. Analysis

3.1 Rochester's Narrative

Wide Sargasso Sea is a complex novel that invites the literary critic to explore many different meaningful types of readings and angles of interpretations. There are plenty of interesting themes and motifs in the novel, but perhaps most noticed is the relationship between Rochester and Antoinette. As man and woman they are often examined as "a sexual encounter" but much to the same extent they are viewed as representatives of their cultural heritage from a postcolonial perspective (Mardorossian 81). Furthermore, the multiplex postmodern style of writing has also received a lot of attention and has generated a multitude of different types of readings. The narrative style in the novel has also been examined to great

extent, e.g. how the narratives give voice to different characters and how the narrations are interrupted by an unknown narrator and what the meaning of that might be. The suggestive, sometimes stream-of-consciousness type of narrative is reminiscent of a feverish dream. The narrators' personal descriptions of scenes that often have loose connections to one another take the reader on regular deep dives into the text just to barely come up for air before the next one. This makes a close-reading of the narratives very alluring when attempting to gain a deeper understanding of the novel and its characters.

Applying the theoretical framework of gynocriticism in a close-reading of Rochester's narrative, the analysis will rely on the basic concept of a difference between male and female language. However, by adding a cultural and a metaphysical layer to this, it will become clearer how this might be viewed as a difference rooted in cultural gendered experience rather than biological sex. The difference is also through this merging of theories connected to consciousness and how it effects the characters' understanding of the world around them. The choice to focus on Rochester's narrative within the scope of this essay has mainly to do with the fact that it has hitherto not received as much focus from literary criticism as Antoinette's. Furthermore, when it has been examined, it has mostly been in connection to his, chiefly unappealing, effect on and relationships to others. When we turn the lens from the ones he (or the repressive forces he gets to represent) is accused of silencing to the other side we are able to see what this does to him and try to understand why. This presents the opportunity to add another dimension to the monster he is oftentimes portrayed as.

Wide Sargasso Sea is divided into three parts. The middle part takes up more space than the first and last one put together. Rochester narrates almost all of the second part except for one scene. The novel is often celebrated for giving a voice to Bertha Mason, the silenced Caribbean "madwoman" from *Jane Eyre*. However, the majority of the space in the novel is

in fact given to the voice of a western white male. As Robert Kendrick notes in his paper "Edward Rochester and the Margins of Masculinity in ’*Jane Eyre* ’and ’*Wide Sargasso Sea*.’" (1994), Edward Rochester might not be a central figure in either of the novels but "he nevertheless occupies a crucial position in each text" (235). His importance is, however, often connected to his effects on the lives of the women in the novels. This is of course highly relevant and a big part of understanding important gender and power aspects in both *Jane Eyre* (JE) and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (WSS). Furthermore, this aspect of the Rochester character in WSS is not a flattering one and has rightly so received much focus as an example of a stereotypical oppressor at the top of the food chain of gender and culture. Nevertheless, this essay will not be focusing on the effects on the silenced woman or silenced other but rather on the Western male character that from within the dominant structure is experiencing the silence outside of it. When we turn our attention to Rochester’s narrative, we are able to examine the "hysteria" or "psychic disordering" caused by his experience of this silence (Winterhalter 220, Kendrick 238).

3.2 Rochester’s Hysteria

My intention in this analysis is to highlight how Rochester’s mental discomforts expressed throughout his narrative in WSS might very likely be a result of his encounter with the borders of his own mind. The silence of what he is not able to conceive within the scope of his consciousness generate[s] feelings of deafness and powerlessness that installs fear and hatred in him, much like the ancient reactions LeGuin mentions. If we imagine that the white male onset is something akin to how LeGuin describes it from a postcolonial feminist viewpoint:

> Civilized Man says: I am Self, I am Master, all the rest is Other – outside, below, underneath, subservient. I own, I use, I explore, I exploit, I control. What I do is what matters. What I want is what matter is for. I am that I am, and the rest is women and the wilderness, to be used as I see fit. (161)

When so many aspects of these concepts escape his mind, "hide" from him and "keep secrets" from him, Rochester is unable to conquer women and wilderness in this preferred manner. This inability will then inevitably generate a frustration that manifests itself as fear and hate. When Rochester is "unable to deal with the ’threat ’presented by an environment which cannot be contained within the narratives of self-definition in which he participates, he becomes violently defensive" (Kendrick 236). Although Kendrick’s focus in his article is on the margins of masculinity, by adding a metaphysical perspective this analysis will come to show that the periphery of masculinity where Edward Rochester resides on his journey to the Caribbean is also the outer border of dominant (male) language and by extension the consciousness of its father-tongue speakers. On the other side of the translucent curtain at the borderline is the wild of the female crescent – hiding from him in plain sight.

A corresponding term to Kendrick’s "margins of masculinity" is Teresa Winterhalter’s "middle space, "which she introduces in her article "Narrative Technique and the Rage for Order in ’*Wide Sargasso Sea*’" (1994). According to Winterhalter, this middle space is found in the intersections of different discourses and is the place where we find the "insufficiency of [the characters’] preconceived notions of order" (220). In the case of Rochester these preconceived notions have mostly to do with Antoinette and the island. His insufficiency lies in the inability to render them, or the objects of desire that he lets represent them, into his conceptual world to be realized. When he is not capable of doing so, Winterhalter argues, he experiences a trauma of defeat having to give up on reigning them in

and bring about order. Kendrick has another explanation of Rochester's insufficiencies, namely that it has to do with his failures as a male subject where he struggles with not being manly enough or successful enough for someone of his stature. However, both interpretations of Rochester's insufficiencies seek to explain the effects on his psyche. Whether we call them margins or middle spaces, these might just as well be places within the metaphysical female crescent – lost (to Rochester at least) in the wilderness of a female realm beyond his consciousness. Just out of his mental reach, it taunts him and eventually drives him mad.

Recurring in different interpretations of the character Rochester is his fear and anger. I set forth in my analysis that these feelings are connected to three main themes: women, place and language (particularly in relation to reality). In the following text, we will be looking closer at each of these and how his experiences of them manifest in the text of part II of the novel where Rochester is the narrator. These three are all things that escape Rochester's grasp and "hides" from him beyond the borders of his language and conscious mind. Consequently, he experiences a silence in the void where meaningful concepts should reside. This drives him mad, which is not only evident by his own expressions of his feelings of "discomfort and melancholy" and how it felt like it "all […] was a nightmare" but also in the way his narrative follows a "stream-of-consciousness, 'insane' narrative flow", particularly by the end of his narrative (47, 91; Kendrick 245).

3.3 Rochester and Women

In his narration Rochester's comments on and experiences of women have mostly to do with his new wife Antoinette, but also the servants Christophine and Amélie as well as the little girl Hilda to some extent. In general, in Rochester's descriptions, all the women blend together with one another and with their surroundings. When he recollects his wedding in Jamaica, he describes the female guests as "all look[ing] alike" and with "the same expression

on all their faces" (55). He even ponders whether Antoinette and Amélie might be related because he thinks it is not only possible but "probable in this damned place" (98). Rochester describes the women in the household in terms reminiscent of wild animals: "savage appearance", "bare feet running", "teeth […] bared", "[a] lovely creature but sly, spiteful, malignant perhaps, like much else in this place" (51, 74, 47). Women in general seem in Rochester's mind to blend together with each other, with animals and with the natural surroundings. Unable to fully grasp the entirety of their being the women around him lose specificity and meaning as separate subjects, but also as objects since they seem to melt together physically with the natural world around them.

How very connected Rochester's experiences of silence and secrecy are to Antoinette is clear in the text, and he even describes her at one point as being "silence itself" (133). The way he views her as a doll in many different situations and calls her "Marionette" because "she ha[s] a marionette quality" might not be as straightforward, but with a closer look it is clear that this is also because of him experiencing her as silent (117). This is for example obvious to the servant Cristophine who has taken care of Antoinette since she was a little girl. She confronts Rochester and accuses him of calling her a doll "[b]ecause she don't speak" and maintains that he provokes Antoinette in order to "force her to cry and speak" (121). This is later proven to be true when Rochester watches his wife to see "one tear, one human tear" and "listen[s] […] if she says good-bye" because "[i]f she says it […], smiles or weeps or both" he will take her in his arms and she will be his. But he adds, with emphasis, that she has to do it for him. However, to his big disappointment the doll is nearly nothing but silent and her mouth is merely a "doll's smile […] nailed to her face" suggesting that it can't talk or express a genuine emotion (136). It is possible to interpret this as him stripping away her humanness, however, if we think of it as his experience of not understanding much beyond her physical shell, it is easier to be sympathetic. He wants her to speak to him but when

Antoinette does speak he describes it as "a doll's voice, a breathless but curiously indifferent voice" (135). This makes it clear that the problem stretches beyond her being silent in the way of not uttering words. The words are not enough for him since he is unable to understand them fully from outside of the realm of her reality. It seems that when confronted with, what he experiences as, her silence he longs for her to come to life. However, even more frequent than his doll-descriptions of her are the ghostly ones, the ones that reveal his fear of the silent creature he married. He fears her but still longs for her.

Throughout Rochester's narrative his wife is described as scary, alien and living dead. Her hands are "cold as ice in the hot sun", and when he covers his newly wedded wife who has fallen asleep on the bed he feels "as if [he is] cover[ing] a dead girl" (55, 108). He describes scenes befitting any conventional horror movie, such as when "one of the candles flared up and [he] saw the hollows under her eyes, her drooping mouth, her thin, strained face" (99); furthermore " her hair hung uncombed and dull into her eyes which were inflamed and staring, her face was very flushed and looked swollen. Her feet were bare. However, when she spoke her voice was low, almost inaudible" (114). The descriptions are quite dissimilar in the way that her face is either thin and pale (one might presume because of the darkness around her eyes) or fat and red. However, regardless of the difference in these descriptions of her appearance both of them reveal a great sense of fear. If he is not able to understand her as a full human being, maybe it is no wonder he views her as a ghost or something else non-human. Confronted with the utter otherness of Antoinette he is terrified both of her and his shortcomings when he is unable to explain it.

The other women at Coulibri seem to turn up out of nowhere in Rochester's narrative of different scenes in the house, as if they were mushrooms popping out from the floor or walls, suddenly standing in a doorway or leaning against a wall. They all seem to enhance his feeling that there is a secret hidden from him. He even describes on more than one occasion

how someone of the female servants covers her mouth with her hands, as if he thinks they are trying to physically stop anything from coming out of them. Their silence is part of the silence of the house. When Rochester first arrives at Coulibri "the doors opened into silence and dimness" (46). The silence is the first thing he encounters, and it seems to be something that continues to haunt him not only inside the house but also outside of it. Waking up in the house one afternoon Rochester looks out the window and reflects on how "[t]he silence was disturbing, absolute. […] Nothing. Silence. Heat." (77). Traveling to the borderlands of his dominant circle of white male culture he finds himself surrounded by the silence of what he cannot conceive; sounds and language that belong to the wilderness of the female crescent and that escape his senses.

3.4 Rochester and Place

Despite the silence, his new surroundings in the Caribbean are far from a calm silent void but rather something threatening that scares Rochester. It is not a fear of something specific and realistic such as animals that are dangerous for humans or deadly dangers in nature like a steep cliff or deep water. Instead, he just describes the place as menacing and hostile. The hills "close in on" him and the mountains "challenge" him, like an obscure adversary (49, 77). He reflects one night when he returned from getting lost in the woods and is recovering on the porch that "everything around [him] was hostile. The telescope drew away and said don't touch me. The trees were threatening and the shadows of the trees moving slowly over the floor menaced him" (117). It seems what scares him is not a physical fear but the inability to grasp, to understand his surroundings. The things around him, like the telescope, literally escape him by moving away from him. The way he describes how the shadows of the trees move over the floor of the veranda suggest a fear of being swallowed by them. He later describes it as a "black snake-like forest [that] always wins" suggesting that it

lures on him just to swallow him whole, like a snake in the grass waiting on its prey (132). However, his fear is not to disappear physically into the dark forest never to return but to mentally do so. His fear of his surroundings is not physical but psychological, threatening his mental health. Throughout his narrative there is a "growing fear of the limits of his epistemology", where he is unable to "bring the unpredictable world under the signs of his control" (Winterhalter 224). Returning to LeGuin's description of the "Civilized Man", we are reminded that control is what he does. Without control Rochester's feelings of insufficiency and impotency grow into hatred. By the end of his narrative, when he is leaving the island, his hate is outspoken and unmistakable as he tells the reader:

> And I hated the place.
> I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, 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. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it.
> So we rode away and left it – the hidden place. (136-7)

The secrecy of the hidden place is something Rochester reflects on from the very beginning of his stay on the island. He tells the reader about the beauty of the place but adds instantly that it is "an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness" and that he "want[s] what it hides" because "what [he] see[s] is nothing" but what it hides "is not nothing" (64). One might interpret this experience of discrepancy between what he sees and what he believes is there as a manifestation of something escaping his cognitive grasp. Furthermore, this feeling of a nothingness lingering somewhere might be seen as the wilderness hiding from his

consciousness in the female "wild zone" together with all things utterly other to him and his conscious mind. This feeling of exclusion takes an emotional and psychological toll on him. Perhaps more so because of his previous experience of feeling excluded from his family by his father who leaves his whole estate to his older brother forcing Rochester to travel to the Caribbean and marry into a wealthy family. He does not feel that he lives up to the family's demands on him and finds himself inadequate. When he travels to the home of his new wife and is not able to assert himself and his position as a ruling patriarch there either it becomes too much for Rochester. Moreover, "his inability to realize himself along the lines of the dominant narrative results in his violent withdrawal from the environment and people which make his successful reflection impossible" and makes sure that he fulfills his own prophecy of being insufficient and excluded (Kendrick 252).

3.5 Rochester and Language/Reality

As Winterhalter puts it, there is a gap "between his frameworks and his experiences" which cannot be bridged over no matter how hard Rochester tries (224). His journey to the Caribbean islands becomes his inner journey through his own mind, transported by the semiotic language of the wilderness that surrounds him to the very borders of his language and reality. He tries to cross the border into the realm outside of his consciousness but fails to "perceive beyond the screens of the dominant structure" (Showalter 200). Rochester puts this inability into words when he reflects on how he never writes to tell his father more about his experiences. He refers to how his "confused impressions will never be written" because "there are blanks in [his] mind that cannot be filled up" (54-5). These holes in his reality take a toll on his mental health and by the end of his narrative he seems disoriented and is rambling about how he "suddenly, bewilderingly […] was certain that everything [he] had

imagined to be truth was false [and] [o]nly the magic and the dream are true – all the rest's a lie" (133).

Following this rambling part from Rochester there is a break in his narrative with the voice of someone else stating that the secret is lost and that "those who know it cannot tell it" (133). If we imagine that this is Antoinette from the other side of the border, inside the wild zone, this might be her way of trying to tell him that those who know it are not able to mediate the reality of the female crescent to those who do not have access to it. This is why it can never be told. Furthermore, there is no secret for those who have access to the wild zone and the experiences of female culture and the femininity of language and place, therefore it is lost on them. They have lost the secret as soon as they become a part of it. As Rochester reminds us at the very end of his narrative, all memories become legend or lie. Since only the tales of the male crescent become legend because it exists outside of the female circle but still within the collective consciousness of the dominant male circle, the experiences of the female crescent are the ones viewed as lies. Outside of the male scope it cannot be considered part of reality. Because it hides and slips away from their reality inside the dominant structure of culture and language, it is considered false if not non-existent.

Antoinette, being an inhabitant of the wild zone, exists in two realities for Rochester; the one that is also his, where he can see her, marry her, live with her, but also the reality where she escapes him. The latter being a reality where she resides in a metaphysical space impenetrable to him. They both come back to how words are insufficient to successfully communicate between them. Perhaps this is due to the words being anchored in different realities. Keeping in mind that Antoinette's words in part II are told through Rochester, we are nevertheless told that she expresses to him how "words are no use" and how she has tried using them "to make [him] understand", but to no avail (105). Rochester concludes about Antoinette's words that they are "less than nothing" (69). The complete otherness of her

reality to his is perhaps most prominent when he reflects on death being different for them. Even though death is such a fundamental part of all life and reality he refers to her "dying […] [i]n her way, not in mine" and that "reality might disconcert her, bewilder her, hurt her, but it would not be reality" (70). A line from the novel that is very often cited and interpreted in many different ways is Antoinette saying, "there is always the other side, always" (99). Yet another interpretation of this would be that she is referring to the other side of the border of the dominant structure of consciousness. The metaphysical wild zone that is always present for her simultaneously alongside their shared reality.

4. Conclusion

The use of a unique combination of theoretical onsets in a close-reading of Rochester's narrative in Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* allows for a turning of the lens of interpretation from the silenced Caribbean woman to the frustrated Western male trying to hear her. Besides trying to hear his new wife, he also struggles to understand his surroundings and incapsulate his impressions into the framework of his limited language and mind. Language fails to construct a bridge over the gaps that separate him and his wife, other women and his new surroundings. A focus on Rochester and his narrative as conveyor of his experiences' impact on himself brings another layer to the male protagonist. From this viewpoint it is perhaps easier to have a more sympathetic understanding of his thoughts and feelings. However, focusing only on his narrative within the scope of this essay, this does not vindicate Rochester in terms of the actions he takes towards his wife in *Wide Sargasso Sea* or *Jane Eyre*. Instead, these new findings might be used to understand WSS as an exposé of an inner journey inside Rochester's mind as a complement to the story of his physical traveling to the Caribbean islands. An inner journey where he finds his own limitations as he reaches

the borders of his consciousness but discerns that there is something beyond it – hiding in plain sight.

In extension, this new understanding of the Rochester character might lead to a new understanding of the relationships between people of different cultures and genders in a larger sense. With no intention whatsoever of diminishing the destructiveness or horrors of oppression this might at least give an explanation to the feelings of complete otherness that oftentimes lead up to it. At the core of xenophobia and misogyny there might be a real limitation of understanding. A limitation that is not intellectual or clouded by strong emotions of fear and hate but created by experience and culture in the structuring of our consciousness. The aspect of power is fundamental to all social activity and in this case it is what builds up the walls around the cultural circle of the dominant structure. Domination is a prerogative that comes with a limitation of the mind.

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