Wide Sargasso Sea: Telling the Untold

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Résumé : *Le roman* La prisonnière des Sargasses *(Jean Rhys) anticipe l'action de Jane Eyre en donnant la parole et une identité au personnage précédemment marginalisé, l'épouse de Monsieur Rochester, Antoinette. On peut dire que, de cette façon, l'auteur crée simultanément un passé pour Antoinette et un avenir pour Jane. La prisonnière des Sargasses devient, donc, l'un des nombreux romans qui re-discutent les aspects présentés dans Jane Eyre, en élargissant beaucoup son champ d'interprétation et en soulignant les possibilités infinies de l'interpréter. La présente démarche se propose d'analyser Jean Rhys, sa double fonction comme lecteur du roman canonique Jane Eyre et comme auteur du roman La prisonnière des Sargasses ainsi que l'effet de son propre roman sur les lecteurs des romans discutés.*

Key words: *author, text, reader, character, woman writer*

In a time when postmodernism decreed that all art is void of originality and therefore repetitious of previous works of art, writers turned their attention to the reality of the text rather than of the external environment. They were no longer holding the mirror to the world outside them but to previously written texts. Though originality seemed an impossible aim in face of the repetition of prior symbols, metaphors and subject matter, innovation arose from the actual means and methods of revisiting canonical texts. Exemplary in this sense is Jean Rhys' novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Published in 1966, it was devised as a prequel to *Jane Eyre*, shaping a story for a character that was ignored by both readers an her author, Mr. Rochester's mad wife, Bertha Mason (renamed Antoinette). Never once is Brontë's novel mentioned in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but the latter abounds in allusions to the original novel, rewriting and remapping its metaphors to fit new purposes. Intertextuality is itself recycled in this novel as not only does Rhys revisit *Jane Eyre* so as to give voice to a previously marginalised character, she also revisits herself, overlapping her own story with that of Antoinette.

The aim of this paper is to analyse, on the one hand, Rhys' double role, as a reader of Brontë's novel and as the author of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and on the other hand, the effect the postmodern text has on the readers of the canonical one. *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been traditionally associated to postcolonialism, Caribbean literature, feminism and modernism. Though any of these is perfectly justified, the focus of this paper will be shifted towards the inner didacticism of the novel, highlighting Rhys' intention to instruct her readership what and how to read her novel and literature in general. Focus will be placed on bringing to the surface Rhys' authorial intrusions, as a means of obliquely expressing her anxieties as a person, as a reader and as a writer. From this viewpoint, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a shadowy novel, nothing being authoritatively stated but only implied, suggested and well hidden in-between the lines. Therefore, the "untold" mentioned in the title of this paper makes reference not only to taboo truths but also to the manner Rhys chooses to include these in her novel, which is never directly and always hesitant.

Jean Rhys' life paved its way in many of her writings, including *Wide Sargasso Sea.* Born in 1890, in Dominica, as Ella Gwendoline Rees Williams, she grew up in the enclave of white Anglican Roseau. The inhabitants of Dominica, who were mainly of African descent, did not look favourably on the dominance of the British in the isles, so the atmosphere was, as expected, filled with tensions. In-between these clashes were the Creoles, who were repudiated by both the native Dominicans and the British imperialists. As an alternative, when she was sixteen, Rhys went to England where she stayed with her aunt and studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Shortly after her arrival there, her father died so she could

not stay with her aunt any longer. As such, she remained alone in a place where she was constantly regarded upon as the "other". Writing became a means to escape and amend such cruel reality. As Elaine Savory notes

> the most important of Rhys's cultural placements is that of writings itself, and in that culture, the Caribbean was the original formative space. In her maturity, she belonged to a writerly culture, one she fashioned for herself, rather than a school or a community of writers. In many ways she belonged nowhere else, feeling different and alone within her family, instinctively at war with much of the tenets of the small, embattled white Anglican community in Dominica into which she was born [...] (2004: 22).

Many critics analyse Rhys' fiction only in connection to her Caribbean upbringing which they consider the main focaliser that filtered everything Rhys ever wrote. She is indeed a writer in whose case it is difficult not to consider autobiographical elements as well when interpreting her work as "it is only through an examination of Jean Rhys' Creole identity as subjectivity and location [...] that the structures of Rhys' fiction can be adequately deciphered" (Gregg 1995: 8). Though Rhys prohibited, in her will, that her biography be written, her perspectives on life and on the surrounding society are to be found in-between the lines of her novels. In an interview with Mary Cantwell, Rhys stated:

> It's hard to explain how, when and where a fact becomes a book. I start to write about something that has happened or is happening to me, but somehow or other things start changing. It's as if the book had taken possession. Sometimes a character will run away from me, like Grace Poole, the nurse in *Wide Sargasso Sea,* and get more important than I intended. It happened beyond my will. But the feelings ... the feelings are always mine (1990: 24).

Therefore, writing was a process deeply intimate for Rhys, who was convinced that it was a highly personal matter: "If you want to write the truth ... you must write about yourself. It must go out from yourself. I don't see what else you can do. I'm the only real truth I know" (cited in Gregg 1995: 49). However, elsewhere she wrote: "I guess the invention is in the writing" (cited in Gregg 1995: 49) as if she were playing with her readers' expectations about her personal life and her life as a writer. While many critics have plunged into reading Rhys' novels according to her own statements and thus, reconstruct her life out of what she wrote, Rhys, the writer behind the woman, was put in the shade. Commentaries on social injustice, the marginalising of the Creoles, the silencing of women have thrived whenever Rhys' work has been considered. The price has been marginalising Rhys' oblique statements on writers and writings, on readers and on literature.

As a revisionist novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* could be read as a forged preface (a paratext) to *Jane Eyre.* According to Linda Hutcheon, the aim of paratexts is "to make space for the intertexts of history within the texts of fiction" (1989: 86) as "knowing the past becomes a question of representing, that is, of constructing and interpreting, not of objective recording" (74). The subjectivity of representation and how it affects and transforms the present becomes obvious in this case:

> The past is something with which we must come to terms and such a confrontation involves an acknowledgement of limitation as well as power. We only have access to the past today through its traces – its documents, the testimony of witnesses, and other archival materials. In other words, we only have representations of the past from which to construct our narratives or explanations. In a very real sense, postmodernism reveals a desire to understand present culture as the product of previous representations (Hutcheon 1989: 58).

Since the preface is itself fiction, the result is the juxtaposition of different fictional worlds whose apparent contingent referent is the Victorian society; however, the "realities" depicted

in *Wide Sargasso Sea* are in fact a reflection on contemporary English society and its continual marginalisation of the "other". This is an instance when Jean Rhys, the author, is brought to surface, every criticism intended to Victorian society being as valid in the twentieth century as the nineteenth. The West is not ready yet for anything new and different, but then neither is the East, Rhys seems to be saying when structuring the dynamics between Antoinette and her husband. They both show reluctance to accept each other's "otherness":

> she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did [...] 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. About England and about Europe. I could not change them and probably nothing would. Reality might disconcert her, bewilder her, hurt her, but it would not be reality. It would be only a mistake, a misfortune, a wrong path taken, her fixed ideas would never change (Rhys 1997: 58[2]).

Furthermore, the narration is broken into three parts, each with its own distinctive narrator, so as to give more credit and objectivity to Antoinette's story. Such a technique adds to the "reality" of the fictional world but at the same time points to the subjectivity of history which in this case becomes the perfect illustration of "his" versus "her" story. The first part is narrated by Antoinette, a young Creole girl who lives with her mother in one of the West Indies isles. Her mother's mixed identity (and therefore Antoinette's as well) is emphasised as a matter of dispute from the first lines of the novel: "The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother [...] She was my father's second wife, far too young for him they thought, and worse still, a Martinique girl" (1). When their estate perishes in a fire, Antoinette's mother goes mad and she is sent to live with an aunt who quickly arranges for her to be married. What is interesting is that Antoinette's narration ends abruptly before her marriage and her own perspective on what follows is not actually included in the novel. The reader must infer and recreate Antoinette's life from her husband's account just as Jean Rhys must have done it while reading *Jane Eyre*. There is one exception, though, at some point Rochester's narration being interrupted and Antoinette resuming her role as narrator. This is an intense episode, few pages being enough to depict Antoinette's inner struggle between accepting that her marriage has failed and that she has to continue her life elsewhere and bearing an unhappy life with her husband out of a sense of duty and maybe love:

> No. And what do I care if he does? He hates me now. I hear him every night walking up and down the veranda. Up and down. When he passes my door he says, "Goodnight, Bertha." He never calls me Antoinette now. He has found out it was my mother's name. "I hope you will sleep well, Bertha" – it cannot be worse,' I said. 'That one night he came I might sleep afterwards. I sleep so badly now. And I dream (71).

This short intervention is completed with an analeptic moment describing how their marriage had been arranged (as a financial business), an explanation which comes after the alienation of the spouses and accounts, in a way, for their lack of communication and the destruction of their marriage.

The narrator of the second part is Antoinette's husband, who remains unnamed throughout the entire novel. On the one hand, this nameless character may be seen as a metaphor of England and everything it stands for; on the other hand, it is just a pretext for Rhys to leave yet again things untold. The reader is, thus, constantly teased; even though every detail surrounding this character links him with Bronte's Mr. Rochester, the overall effect remains that of uncertainty. The latter enhances the polyphonic play of the voices in the novel and challenges the reality of the fictional universe of the novel. Moreover, due to the fact that Antoinette's going mad is told through her husband's perspective, the reader does not sympathise only with Antoinette but with Rochester, too, who is seen as just a victim of the

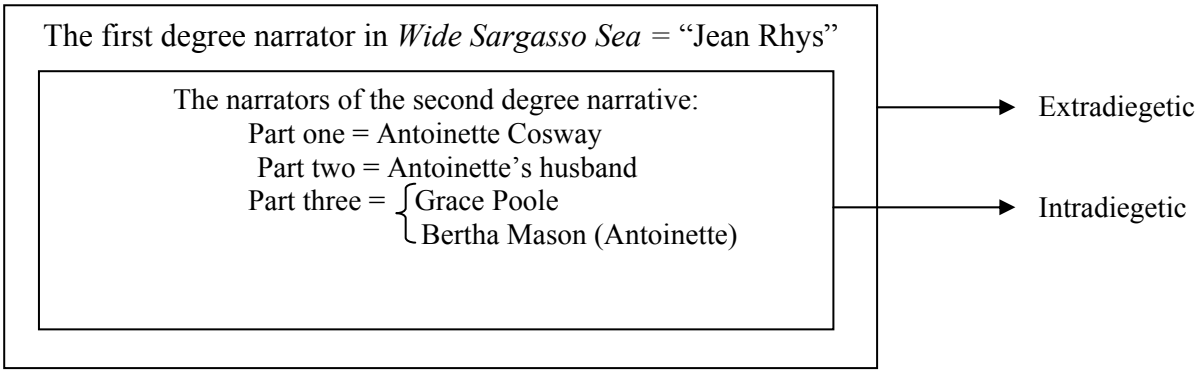
society he lives in as well. Therefore, Rhys does not create a despicable Mr. Rochester but a deeply flawed character, too weak to stand up against his father and his English upbringing and too much of a snob to accept the differences between him and his Creole wife. More than blaming him for his cruelty towards Antoinette, the reader feels sorry for him and for his ruined life which becomes obvious when considering the decaying and threatening landscape surrounding him:

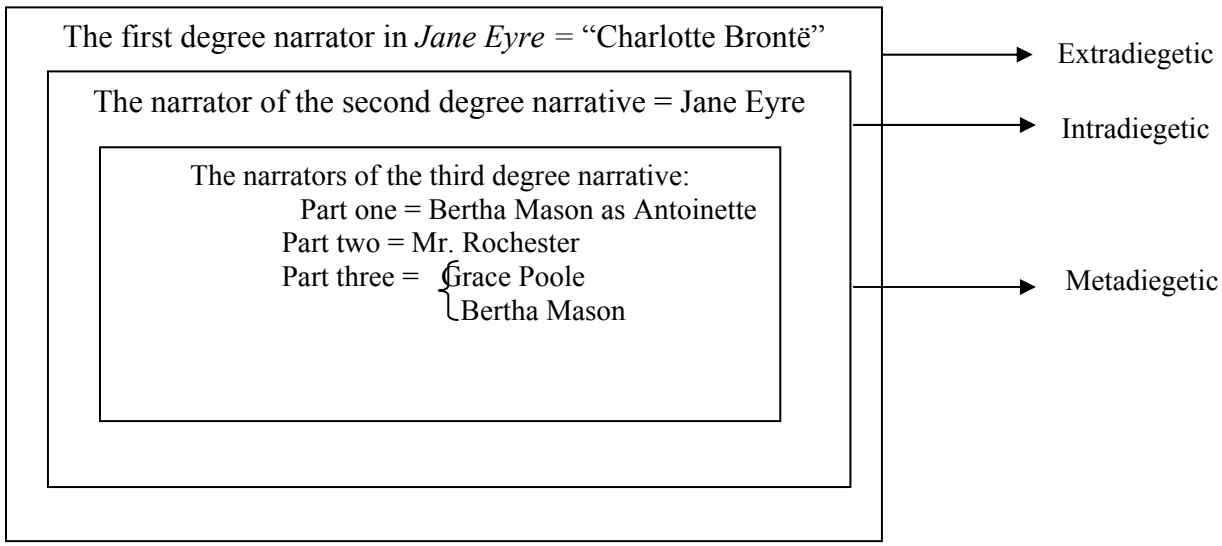
> After all I was prepared for her blank indifference. I knew that my dreams were dreams. But the sadness I felt looking at the shabby white house – I wasn't prepared for that. More than ever before it strained away from the black snake-like forest. Louder and more desperately it called: Save me from destruction, ruin and desolation. Save me from the long low death by ants. But what are you doing here you folly? So near the forest. Don't you know that this is a dangerous place? And that the dark forest always wins? Always. If you don't, you soon will, and I can do nothing to help you (108).

The last part of the novel shares two narrators, Grace Poole, the nurse who is taking care of Antoinette in England and then Antoinette again, renamed Bertha by her husband in the second part. This is the moment when the connection with *Jane Eyre* is the strongest in the entire novel, the final pages resuming, more or less, the events preceding the fire at Thornfield Hall. The reader is, once again, thrown into a maze of confusion because what is known to be a fact in the classic novel is transformed into a dream in *Wide Sargasso Sea* which provides no clear-cut ending to its readers. Moreover, Antoinette's dream may have a liberating effect not only for herself but also for readers who are left with an open ending that they may interpret according to their own will:

> I waited a long time after I heard her snore, then I got up, took the keys and unlocked the door. I was outside holding my candle. Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage (124).

Furthermore, the fact that all three narrators (Antoinette/Bertha, Mr. Rochester, Grace Poole) have transgressed the boundaries of their original novel to write and "act" into another one reflects on the postmodernist dilemma concerning the concept of truth and its limitations. Rewriting previous canonical texts under the guise of historical truth translates the "postmodern desire to claim that history is over, that nothing original can be said, that the Real is an illusion" (Toth 2010: 128). Gérard Genette's narratological model, for example, once applied to the novels, foregrounds the discussion about the subjectivity of history and about what is real and what is not. If the connection with *Jane Eyre* were not considered, then Rhys' novel could not be seen as such a complex novel, with an elaborated narrative. However, once one takes into consideration the previously written novel, the latter instantly becomes a frame for the new novel. Thus, the illusory world of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is broken when one realizes that the characters from *Jane Eyre* and the internal homodiegetic narrators in Jean Rhys' novel overlap:





The narrative form also forwards the idea of a multifaceted truth, playing with readers' expectations in that it engenders multiple interpretations and perceptions of the same event, symbol, character or metaphor. If Antoinette symbolically prefigures Jane's fate (which is obvious once the connection with Brontë's novel is made) she also retraces her mother's destiny. Annette also married an English man whose incapacity of accepting his wife's Creole origin and therefore the differences between them led to Annette's spiritual and later real death (as she appeared in Antoinette's recollections of her childhood): "She did die when I was a child. There are always two deaths, the real one and the one people know about" (81). Such symbolic repetition enhances the effect Rhys meant her novel to have: to make readers aware that there are always hidden "truths" about any "truth", that no story is ever complete or completely objective. Any hint of happy-end readers might find in *Jane Eyre* is forever shattered when Antoinette's fatal pattern is applied to Jane or when Mr. Rochester's deeply flawed and weak character is revealed.

Not only Antoinette is subject to various interpretations; the practice of "obeah" enters the same realm of different perceptions. What is traditionally known as a sorcery able to "turn people into zombies through spirit theft, leaving them as the living dead" (136) is first distorted when Christophine is depicted. She is another instance of hasted and preconceived judgement against the "other":

> I couldn't always understand her patois songs – she also came from Martinique […] Her songs were not like Jamaican songs, and she was not like the other women. She was much blacker – blue-black with a thin face and straight features. She wore a black dress, heavy gold ear-rings and a yellow handkerchief – carefully tied with the two high points in front. No other negro woman wore black, or tied her handkerchief Martinique fashion. […] The girls from the bayside who sometimes helped with the washing and cleaning were terrified of her. That, I soon discovered, was why they came at all – for she never paid them" (7).

More than a malign witch, which everyone assumes she is, Christophine is a protector against such evil practices; the only moment when she performs witchcraft (which is not actually witchcraft but the effect of some plants), she does it to help Antoinette win her husband's love back: "You don't have to give me money. I do this foolishness because you beg me – not for money" (71). Reversing the pattern works as far as "obeah" is concerned as well; as such, it is not Christophine who uses it, "obeah" being symbolically performed by Antoinette's husband who, through his actions (renaming her Bertha, refusing to accept her identity, to

listening to her side of the story), enacts her spiritual death: "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 [...] Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeah too" (93 – 94).

Moreover, one can consider Jean Rhys herself a practitioner of "obeah" since her novel denounces the universe of *Jane Eyre* and exposes it as bare fictionality. Reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* automatically casts new meanings on *Jane Eyre,* the latter being constantly considered in retrospect of the former. Ironically, thus, though written later, it is Rhys' novel that influences the canonical novel, rather than the other way round. This transfer of meaning points to Jacques Lacan's presentation of the self and the language. In this matter, the focal point was the commutability of the signified, that is "the capacity of every signified to function in turn as a signifier" (Sarup 1993: 10), which means that "any signifier can receive signification retrospectively" (1993: 11). In Lacan's view "only the last word of a utterance retrospectively establishes the full sense of each word that came before" (Sarup 1993: 11) which is why "meaning emerges only through discourse" (1993: 10). Lacan's perspective should also be taken as a reminder that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is only another facet to the story in *Jane Eyre* which is revisited and reinterpreted whenever any of these two novels is read. In one of her oblique authorial intrusions, Rhys openly discusses the same matter under the guise of a conversation between Antoinette and her husband:

> 'He tells lies about us and he is sure you will believe him and not listen to the other side.'
> 'Is there another side?' I said.
> 'There is always the other side, always.' (82)

Rhys' commentaries on how reading should be performed are also hidden in the dynamic of the relationship between Antoinette and Mr. Rochester the failure of which being induced by a traditional lack of thorough and sincere communication between the two of them. At the beginning Rochester's English cautiousness makes him "so blind, so feeble, so hesitating" (56) that he cannot bring himself to bridge the gap between him and his wife. He considers her a stranger who does not feel and thinks as he does and blames her for her having preconceived ideas about England and Englishness, not realising, thus, that his opinions of her are just as preconceived and distorted by external stories: "I was certain that nothing I said made much difference. Her mind was already made up" (58). Later on, Antoinette herself lacks confidence in her husband and instead of telling him the truth she asks Christophine to help her. Through such flawed interaction, Rhys warns her readership against insincere reading; the communication between the reader and the text should be honest and open to new interpretations and suggestions. If one reads a novel only to discover a specific pattern or technique or ideology in it, his or hers is a failed reading, Rhys seems to suggest, both by the story in her novel and the implications it has on a previously written text.

Therefore, Jean Rhys has revisited a previously written text, the practice of writing itself and her own story only through hints, allusions and oblique commentaries well hidden in-between the lines. Nothing is clearly stated but, as proved above, a single word or event engenders multiple interpretations and connections. This is why, more than a distressed woman, though well represented in the novel (Annette, Antoinette, Rhys herself), *Wide Sargasso Sea* reveals a complex thinking displayed through an intricate Chinese-box structuring which also implies the previously written novel. In the face of such an elaborate text, the social commentaries on the discrimination of the "other" and of women seem just a frame for Rhys' didactic purposes. As such, her novel may be considered a preface to *Jane Eyre,* one to alert readers and invite them to intelligently reading what follows. More

importantly, they should be aware that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is just Jean Rhys' side of the story and thus, that the possibilities of interpreting both hers and Bronte's novel are infinite.

Notes

[1] The work of both students is supported by Project SOP HRD - TOP ACADEMIC 76822.
[2] All future references from the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* are to be made to the edition of 1997 and, as such, only the page number will be marked in the text, from this point on.

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