

Spring 2003

## Edward Rochester and the English Ideological Empire

Kristyn Bales  
*College of DuPage*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai>

---

### Recommended Citation

Bales, Kristyn (2003) "Edward Rochester and the English Ideological Empire," *ESSAI*: Vol. 1, Article 7.  
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol1/iss1/7>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in ESSAI by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact [koteles@cod.edu](mailto:koteles@cod.edu).

Edward Rochester and the English Ideological Empire

by Kristyn Bales

(Honors English 103)

The Assignment: Students were assigned to write 2 researched papers totaling at least 12 pages based on their careful study of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* from interdisciplinary perspectives.

Following the rescinded marriage ceremony, Jane Eyre meets Bertha Rochester for the first time, presenting the reader with a vivid first impression:

In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (Brontë 250)<sup>1</sup>

The mad Creole wife of Edward Rochester turns out not to be Jane's rival, but merely a subhuman, unintelligible creature, an "impediment," to a valid and holy marriage (246). Through the eyes of a proper English woman the reader identifies the character of Bertha only as the mad ghostly "impediment" in the attic. In rebuttal to this popular and marginalized perception of Bertha, Caribbean novelist Jean Rhys wrote a sympathetic prequel to the story of *Jane Eyre*, renaming the madwoman Antoinette Cosway, and transplanting her back to the West Indies. Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* is an account through Bertha's perspective of her life and marriage to Edward Rochester before her tragic demise in England. In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester claims he has been victimized not only by his family, who forced him into the marriage, but also by Bertha who was heathen and mad; Rochester claims that his victimization thus absolves him of any responsibility for his callous and hateful attitude and actions towards his first wife. Some literary critics argue that both Antoinette and Rochester are manipulative of each other and it is their lack of personal development that dooms their relationship. In brief, there are two victims and two victimizers. However, it is key to legitimate interpretation to take the imperial structure of English ideology into consideration; upon examination of English ideology, the theory of two victimizers and two victims does not sustain credibility. An analysis of the three sections of intense familial and marital relations in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* will prove that it is in fact Rochester's compulsion to adhere to his English ideological principles that destroys his marriage to Antoinette; namely, Rochester refuses to form a relationship with anything and anyone who could not, or would not, be English.

Rochester's refusal to form a relationship with a non-English other may be understood against the imperialistic ideology of nineteenth-century England, a doctrine of superiority. When the English empire expanded across the seas, the English superiority complex also extended to England's colonies in a type of social empire: "In fact, British imperial power was understood in no uncertain terms to be the moral right of a morally righteous English people" (Ciolkowski 345). Thus, those outside of English ethnicity were still expected to follow the ideology of a superior state. Those who could not, or would not, required special attention as they were not only simply mad, but a threat to the English empire:

...Because the healthy nation that embraces the values of the patriarchal family in order to reproduce itself also criminalizes the behaviors of overproductive subjects, the unchaste Creole woman must be the object of sustained legislative attention and state control. (343)

Seemingly, Englishmen such as Rochester became a type of foot-soldier for the expanding English ideological empire; it was not only their duty to cultivate a foreign and inferior land for monetary profit, but also to cultivate the people of that land in order to make it a proper English commodity. Consequently, *Wide Sargasso Sea* demonstrates how women like Antoinette became the victims of such oppression by the English empire because of their cultural and ethnic differences.

This oppression which presents itself as Part I of *Wide Sargasso Sea* simultaneously establishes the importance of English ideology in the West Indies and the precedent of destruction caused by adherence to it in the lives of the Cosway women. The social struggles and symbolic defeats of Antoinette's mother, Annette, construct Antoinette's legacy of social illegitimacy, thus causing the two women to "resemble each other both physically and psychologically" (Adjarian 204). Annette violates the doctrines of English ideology by her race, class, and sexuality: "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks" (Rhys 17).<sup>2</sup> It is obvious through this tone-setting opening sentence that the Cosway family is amongst the social outcasts; they are part of the white Creole group that exists "in-between" the worlds of the English and the Negroes: they have mobility between the two groups but are "scorned" by both (Adjarian 204). While the Negroes refer to the Cosways as "white cockroaches," the English refer to the Cosways as "white niggers" and deride Annette for numerous reasons (Rhys 23-24):

...They despise the poverty she has fallen into; they resent her attractiveness and think her vain ("The Jamaican ladies never approved of my mother, 'because she pretty like pretty self' Christophine said" [465]); they disapprove of her sexuality ("She was my father's second wife, far too young for him, they thought" [465]); and they consider her an outsider because of her French heritage (as Daniel says, "French and English like cat and dog in these islands since long time" [515]). (Madden 162)<sup>3</sup>

Social estrangement and destitution force Annette to seek acceptance into English society through marriage to an Englishman. Encouraged by English ideology, Mason seeks a financial benefit and marries Annette, an action that increases his wealth and property, establishing him in the English upper class. This action is later revisited by Rochester, proving that neither man has any interest in the actual woman, only the support her capital would provide to their place within the domain of English ideology. After Mason's ignorance leads to the burning of Coulibri, the death of Annette's son, and the destruction of Mason's marriage, Annette expresses intense grief at her loss and oppression, an act that challenges the validity of Mason's views and actions. According to English ideology, the way to deal with "the existence of marginal, but powerful women figures like Antoinette and her mother is to incarcerate and isolate them from others" (Barnes 156). Thus, this challenge prompts Mason to deem Annette mad in order to retain his ideological position of patriarchal authority and sets a precedent for proper behavior by future patriarchal authorities within the English ideological empire.

This precedent is fulfilled by Edward Rochester in Part II of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as he compulsively adheres to English ideology and consequently destroys his marriage to Antoinette. Rochester finds everything about the West Indies offensive because it conflicts with what he finds acceptable by English standards; Rochester finds the West Indian landscape "unnatural" and "extreme" when compared to the orderly and familiar scenery of England (Ciolkowski 344):

Edward associates the wilderness of his surroundings with excess and danger, because he constantly contrasts it with England's landscape: "Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near" (1982, 70). England is the landmark against which he measures the Caribbean place and its people. (Mardorossian 82)<sup>4</sup>

Rochester makes a clear distinction between the value of the English and the native Creole and Negro

populations; their “debased” language, the indolent and brainless ex-slaves, and the unrestrained sexuality of the West Indies offend his English morality (Rhys 67). Rochester’s need to think only in terms of English ideology does not allow him to “respect” or “understand” West Indian “customs, as when he carelessly tramples the frangipani wreath that has been made to welcome him” (Madden 166). Rochester criticizes Christophine’s language, laugh, and manner of dress because they are not English; Christophine lets her dress drag on the floor, which Rochester condemns as an “unclean” habit even though Antoinette explains that it is for “respect” (Rhys 85).

Rochester continues to utilize this critical attitude in his perception of Antoinette; her island, feelings, and customs are not important because she must adhere to Rochester’s ideology. To Rochester, Antoinette is only a possession that will make him legitimate according to English ideological standards. Therefore, any imperfection in Antoinette constitutes a threat to Rochester’s legitimacy, a threat which prompts him to begin “criticizing” Antoinette immediately, as when he describes her as having “Long, sad, dark, alien eyes” (Rhys 67). Unlike a proper English wife, Rochester finds Antoinette to be provocative and masculine: “She threw like a boy, with a sure graceful movement” (Rhys 88). Antoinette does not follow English patterns of logic: she is “uncertain” about facts and does not have valid conclusions to her stories (Ciolkowski 342; Kendrick 241). Antoinette also shows unrestrained passion in her fight with Amélie and her sexual “thirst” for Rochester: “very soon she was as eager for what’s called loving as I was...” (Rhys 100, 92). Rochester is horrified at Antoinette’s sexuality; while she does not separate lust from love he recognizes his feelings of lust as “shameful” and “inferior” (Madden 167-68). In fact, the only time Rochester does not criticize Antoinette is when she temporarily looks as if she “might have been any pretty English girl” (Rhys 71; Mardorossian 82).

Through his critical and compulsively ideological view, Rochester comes to see Antoinette as the embodiment of the West Indies and hence something that is alien, overwhelming, and offensive. Consequently, Rochester’s “wish to possess Antoinette” is symbolical of his wish to control the aspects of West Indian culture that conflict with English ideology (Adjarian 206). As the relationship between Rochester and Antoinette evolves, he sees that he cannot control her, or the West Indies, thus beginning the climax of the destruction of their marriage:

By attempting to imagine Antoinette into the role of a proper English wife, he is forced to recognize her ultimate inability to conform to the discourses which constitute the normal within the frame of English upper class subjectivity. She is neither English nor a properly Anglicized Creole, and the possibility of madness and alcoholism in her family further distances her from Edward’s imagined normal. (Kendrick 241)

Once Rochester recognizes that Antoinette has substantial imperfections that threaten the English ideological empire, he attempts to deconstruct her into his imagined normal, and “...like the slavemaster who assigns to his slaves ‘new and often ridiculous names’ (Bush 24) in an attempt to separate them from their exotic cultures and dangerously alien social structures, Rochester renames Antoinette ‘Bertha’” (Ciolkowski 349)<sup>5</sup>: “an ugly English name, a name that is sexless, colorless, joyless...” (Madden 169). Emasculated by Antoinette’s refusal to be a submissive English wife Rochester becomes abusive and rapes her; when she is silent he calls her a “marionette,” or “doll,” to “force her to cry and speak” (Rhys 151, 154). His sexual abuse constitutes, for him, “his status as master, confirms his place, safe within the upper ranks of colonial hierarchy” (Neck Yoder 197); by calling her a “marionette” at her most vulnerable moment, Rochester has turned Antoinette into a lifeless object that “he can control” (Friedman 122). Rochester has sexual intercourse with the servant Amélie while knowing that Antoinette can hear; he feels empowered by the ability to cause Antoinette pain (Rhys 139). English ideology instructs Rochester to refute “the value of what he cannot master, by calling it ‘madness’ and locking it away” (Friedman 122); thus, if Rochester can classify what Antoinette says and does as mad, then his actions will make him a “legitimate” and respectable English subject (Kendrick 242):

Her overwhelming love for him leads to devastation at his rejection. By her reactions she

seems to confirm his idea that she is mad, because his idea of sanity (like Mason's before him) is based on male definitions about proper Victorian English female behavior. Thus, the very excess of her emotion is seen by him as evidence of madness—the fact that she lacks restraint. He also categorizes sensuality and eroticism as a sign of madness: 'She'll moan and cry and give herself as no sane woman would-or could'...Antoinette's drinking, her attempt to bite him, the obscenities she screams at him—all these are for him further proofs of her madness since they represent unfeminine behavior. (Madden 171)

Rochester transplants his irrepressible wife to England in Part III of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, where he feels he will finally retain authority over her madness, an act which finalizes the destruction of their marriage. Like her mother before, Antoinette is isolated when she cannot be controlled and is consequently locked in the attic of Thornfield Hall. From her attic prison, Antoinette "exposes the flimsy facade of English society and the hollowness that underlies it...it is built on greed and hypocrisy, revenge and exploitation..." (Barnes 157), through such telling statements as "gold is the idol they worship" (Rhys 188) or her belief that the walls are "made of cardboard" (180). Antoinette's epic final dream connects her to the "strong Jamaican women figures" that did not conform to English ideology of her past (Barnes 158). In the final moments of her dream Antoinette hears Rochester call out to her:

He does not call out 'Antoinette,' but 'Bertha,' indicating that he does not wish to save his wife, but the wife that he has created. ...it is the final and complete demonstration of his own lack of patriarchal power. Mrs. Rochester does not acknowledge his hailing of her as 'Bertha' and jumps to her death. This refusal to answer is, in a sense, the final negation of the 'authoritative' Edward Rochester. (Kendrick 252-53)

The novel concludes with Antoinette's epiphany; she finally knows what she must do to free herself from the oppressive constraints of the English ideological empire and her failed marriage to Rochester.

By the time I examined Rhys's rebutting fiction, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I had already fallen in love with the romantic story of Rochester and Jane Eyre. Once I was engrossed by the erotic and violent story of Antoinette Cosway, I could not view Rochester as the same romantic man. Like so many other critics and readers have come to find out, "Rhys's fiction permanently alters one's understanding of *Jane Eyre*" (Magill 434). *Wide Sargasso Sea* tells the story of the silent madwoman in *Jane Eyre* with such passion and sympathy that the reader comes to have a new understanding of the social history of the English in the West Indies. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not only a narrative, but also a text of social and political implication; Antoinette's story happened to so many women, Creole or otherwise, and may still be happening to women today. Rochester's compulsory need to adhere to English ideology, at the expense of his wife, forces the reader to contemplate English society as a whole and the impact the English ideological empire has had on our contemporary world.

---

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from the novel are indicated by page numbers in the Norton Critical Edition of the novel.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the novel are indicated by page numbers in the Norton Edition of the novel.

<sup>3</sup> All sub-quotations are documented from the text of Madden's "Wild Child, Tropical Flower, Mad Wife: Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*" and page numbers do not correspond to the Norton Edition of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as are the direct quotations cited elsewhere in this paper.

<sup>4</sup> All sub-quotations are documented from the text of Mardorossian's "Double [De]colonization and The Feminist Criticism of *Wide Sargasso Sea*" and page numbers do not correspond to the Norton Edition of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as are the direct quotations cited elsewhere in this paper.

<sup>5</sup> Sub-quotations from Bush are documented from the text of Ciolkowski's "Navigating the *Wide Sargasso Sea*: Colonial History, English Fiction, and British Empire."

Works Cited

- Adjarian, M.M.. "Between and Beyond Boundaries in *Wide Sargasso Sea*." College Literature 22.1 (February 1995): 202-09.
- Barnes, Fiona R.. "Dismantling the Master's Houses: Jean Rhys and West Indian Identity." International Women's Writing: New Landscapes of Identity. Eds. Anne E. Brown and Marjanne E. Goozé. Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1995. 150-61.
- Brontë, Charlotte. Jane Eyre. Ed. Richard J. Dunn. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2001. 5-385.
- Ciolkowski, Laura E.. "Navigating the *Wide Sargasso Sea*: Colonial History, English Fiction, and British Empire." Twentieth Century Literature 43.3 (Fall 1997): 339-59.
- Friedman, Ellen G. "Breaking the Master Narrative: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*." Breaking the Sequence. Introduced and Edited by Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989. 119-28.
- Kendrik, Robert. "Edward Rochester and the Margins of Masculinity in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*." Papers on Language & Literature 30.3 (Summer 1994): 235-56.
- Madden, Deanna. "Wild Child, Tropical Flower, Mad Wife: Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*." International Women's Writing: New Landscapes of Identity. Eds. Anne E. Brown and Marjanne E. Goozé. Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1995. 162-74.
- Magill, Frank N., ed. Great Women Writers: The Lives and Works of 135 of the World's Most Important Women Writers, from Antiquity to the Present. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994.
- Mardorossian, Carine Melkom. "Double [De]colonization and The Feminist Criticism of *Wide Sargasso Sea*." College Literature 26.2 (Spring 1999): 79-95.
- Neck-Yoder, Hilda van. "Colonial Desires, Silence, and Metonymy: "All Things Considered" in *Wide Sargasso Sea*." Texas Studies in Literature and Language 40.2 (Summer 1998): 184-208.
- Rhys, Jean. Wide Sargasso Sea. Introduction by Francis Wyndham. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1966.