1. Introduction

As a work of postcolonial fiction, *Wide Sargasso Sea* captures the pathos of a society undergoing deep and bitter change. Jean Rhys chooses to relate the essence of this conflict through the relationship of the white Creole heiress Antoinette Cosway, and her English suitor Edward Rochester. Their relationship is set against the backdrop of extreme racial tension in nineteenth-century Jamaica: the harrowing animosity that grows between white plantation owners and newly liberated black slaves, and the suspicion and hatred felt for natives of different Caribbean islands. Even more complex is the position of people of mixed race within this ethnic crucible, people such as Antoinette, who is European to the eye, but who identifies with the culture of black Jamaica. She will never be accepted by the people who view her as a “white cockroach,” a remnant of colonial cruelty, and she stands even less chance of acceptance into the sphere of elitist British society. Her birthplace dually condemns her.

As a postmodern novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* exemplifies the literary ideals of the period. Rhys’ use of varied narrative voices is one of the most striking aspects of the novel, and this in turn promotes a beautifully expository style, capable of disclosing the personal perspectives of both central characters. This feature becomes of paramount importance as we analyse the relationship between Antoinette and Rochester, two characters who come from diametrically opposing cultures, and yet who exhibit many biographical parallels. As Rhys allows us into the minds of Antoinette and Rochester, we see that they struggle with a sense of belonging, both culturally, as well as within their families. In a sense, they are each islands, each a representative of the island culture that they consider theirs, and each a lonely body adrift in a sea of strangers.

Rhys employs a lush palette of imagery to bring the Caribbean to life, and the metaphorical implications within the text create a direct and indelible bond between the geographical world and its human inhabitants. It is this connection to place, to the landscape and to the natural world that will be explored in this essay—the fundamental interconnectedness of biology and the reflection of humanity upon it. Through luxurious descriptions of tropical beauty and sinister desire, Rhys creates a vibrant and vital counterpoint between the natural world and elemental human sexuality; this juxtaposition is expressed through natural imagery and setting,
character psychology and themes of colonization and cultivation. These aspects intermingle to accentuate the fragile connection between Antoinette and Rochester, and their relationship with the world around them.

2. Natural Parallels

Two central pillars of Rhys’ narrative foundation focus on the connection between people and their natural environment. The first of these is the metaphor of island topography and human isolation, and the second is the significance of skin colour and the prevalence of colour in Rhys’ depiction of the natural world. The first theme is expressed through the comparison of the geographical and cultural features of England and Jamaica with the characters Edward Rochester and Antoinette Cosway, respectively. From a theoretical standpoint, the roles that Rochester and Antoinette play serve to impress Glotfelty’s point that “all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (qtd. in Cohen 14). The interplay between environmental and cultural elements exposes the conflict that Rochester and Antoinette experience, both individually and as a couple. Their physical and psychological attributes can be real or simply perceived, but nevertheless, these characteristics greatly affect how each views the other.

2.1 Island Topography – Landscape of the Soul

Rochester is depicted as an almost stereotypical English gentleman, greatly at odds with the Caribbean islanders at this period in time; he is cool, emotionally remote and insufferably formal. He refuses island hospitality and has a degrading view of local customs and behaviour. He is the embodiment of the English colonizing spirit. Rochester’s sense of superiority and disdain grows because he “associates the wilderness of his surroundings with excess and danger, because he constantly contrasts it with England’s landscape” (Mardorossian 82). Rochester’s increasingly chill and distant demeanour certainly seems to mirror the literally cold, isolated shores of Britain that haunt Antoinette’s thoughts throughout her marriage to him. Rhys foreshadows Antoinette’s discovery of the drastic difference between England and Jamaica through Rochester’s behaviour, but also through subtle comments woven into
her memory. Somewhere in Antoinette’s mind is Aunt Cora’s sentiment that “another English winter will kill her” (Rhys 58). Has this instilled the grain of an idea – the cold that kills? Antoinette struggles with Rochester’s behavioural and cultural climate; his inability, or unwillingness, to understand her culture makes it impossible for him to understand her heart. Antoinette’s idealized notions of life in England are destined to dissolve into disillusion. She cannot thrive in the conditions Rochester creates, and if she goes with him to England and is transplanted there, it will signify her end. Friedman explains that for Antoinette, “geographic allegorization, is … a central constituent of [her] identity” (Friedman 18).

Rochester is never actually called by the name Rochester in Wide Sargasso Sea, and as a character with almost no physical description dedicated to him, it is conceivably perilous to try to link English geography with his physiology. However, Rochester helps to define himself through his own thoughts and actions, and it is his estrangement from his family that presents him as a metaphorical “island” within his own culture. He bitterly imagines the letter he will write to his father in England, thinking: “I will never be a disgrace to you or to my dear brother the son you love” (Rhys 70). Such a phrase encapsulates Rochester’s emotional anguish and deep personal shame, and the exclusion he feels from his family is further compounded by his physical removal to Jamaica. Rochester struggles as Antoinette does with a sense of belonging. In her case, it is that “hybridity sometimes configures identity as the superposition of different cultures in a single space often imagined as a borderland, as a site of blending and clashing” (Friedman 20). Antoinette is caught in this borderland, and although she is ostracized within it, it is the only cultural “home” that she knows. For Rochester, a “migration through space materializes a movement through different cultures that effectively constitutes identity as the product of cultural grafting…such grafting often takes the form of painful splitting, divided loyalties, or disorienting displacements” (Friedman 20). Problematically, Rochester finds himself unable to “graft” or integrate himself with Caribbean culture, and so the isolation he feels is not remedied by the adoption of a new life with Antoinette. It seems that after feeling unloved by and extraneous to his family, the pride that he has left will not allow him to accept a life that he considers culturally inferior. It does not help when his fears seem to be confirmed by the residents themselves: “This is a very wild place – not civilized. Why you come here?” (Rhys 68).
Both Antoinette and Rochester can be strongly identified with their respective island nations, although it is the internal expression of cultural identity that links them thus. Antoinette is an outsider on many levels, and Friedman’s proposal that the idea of identity exists at the intersection of a variety of cultural constructs such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity shows how an identity can actually be formed through multiple perceptions, rather than a singular definition. Despite being disadvantaged by her race, class and gender, Antoinette is able to feel a connection to her land deep within herself, and this is perhaps the way in which she escapes the torments of social isolation. She is a child of nature, and Rhys reveals this to her readers through Antoinette’s affectionate observance of the world around her. Even in times of turmoil, Antoinette is able to take notice of subtle details, mentioning: “there was a smell of ferns and river water and I felt safe again” (Rhys 33). It is no coincidence that “the first time [Rochester sees] her smile simply and naturally” (Rhys 71), she is standing in the jungle at the perimeter of Granbois, about to drink pure mountain water out of a leaf-cup. Antoinette is at home in the very wilderness that makes Rochester uneasy. It could be that the natural world, although indifferent to human suffering, provides her with a place to belong, a place to merge into the profusion of flora and fauna and disappear. In contrast, Rochester’s refusal to merge with the world around him causes psychological friction that eventually prevents any mutual understanding between him and Antoinette. Both characters struggle in the emotional climate of the other, as they are each so attached to the landscape and customs that they are familiar with. The significance of an island metaphor ultimately transcends geography and reveals the reality that both Antoinette and Rochester are “‘adrift’ between two or more worlds ... they have little to anchor them either socially or economically” (Adjarian 205).

2.2 Colour and Colouredness - The Surface of the Skin

The literary utilization of colour and colouredness is of primary importance in a novel that is focused on racial strife. Despite the superficial nature of the colour of the skin, in Rhys’ novel it is nonetheless condemnatory. The conflict between black and white is part of the universal clash between opposites, and in Wide Sargasso Sea “Rhys produces a text that questions the very oppositions that structure it” (Winterhalter 215). Antoinette discovers this polarization at the convent school:
“everything was brightness, or dark. The walls, the blazing colour of flowers in the
garden...That’s was how it was, light and dark, sun and shadow, Heaven and Hell…”
(Rhys 57). Even when the similitude of humanity is acknowledged by a character in
the novel, it is with cruelty: “So black and white, they burn the same, eh?” (Rhys 44).
Such a comment by a black labourer in light of Pierre’s horrific injury and subsequent
death in the Coulibri fire shows that although the underlying bond of humanity cannot
be denied, personal prejudices can be dangerously entrenched. This hatred is
indicative of what Anderson describes as “conflicting inner states…exacerbated by
the forces of poverty…and violence” (Anderson 60). To the black labourer, white
skin is representative of years of colonial cruelty, abuse and oppression. To a British
“occupier” like Rochester, black skin denotes an inferior race; a source of ethnic
contamination. Antoinette’s psyche, however, dwells on either side of the colour
boundary, creating a complicated ethnic overlap that she is unable to escape or deny.
This hybridity means that “physical and psychic ambivalence is [her] natural dualistic
state” (Anderson 60).

Antoinette has an inherent attraction to colour – partly based on her upbringing
amidst rich Caribbean wildlife, but also because she is acutely aware that she lacks
the skin colour that would admit her into Jamaican society. She “establishes her
distinct Creole heritage by placing herself outside the white colonials” and relies on
“Christophine’s analysis of the motives for her cultural rejection” (Winterhalter 218).
Antoinette is so conflicted that only Christophine’s wisdom rings true for her.
As a child, Antoinette responds sensitively to the beauty of bright natural colours. She
notices the fine nuance of various hues as she “[lies] in the shade looking at the pool –
deep and dark green under the trees, brown-green if it had rained, but a bright
sparkling green in the sun” (Rhys 23) and recollects fondly that “the water was so
clear that you could see the pebbles at the bottom of the shallow part. Blue and white
and striped red. Very pretty” (Rhys 23). Antoinette relies on a spectrum of colours to
express herself, perhaps because she feels that she is so obviously white against a
bright canvas. She identifies herself as “coloured”; that is, as Jamaican, and in reality,
much of the meaningful affection she has received in her life has been from people
like Christophine and Tia. Despite the discrimination she suffers, it could be that
Antoinette has only ever been able to truly rely on the affection of a very few black
people. Antoinette’s character reflects the life experience of Rhys herself, whose
“closest and most influential [childhood] relationships were with black servants.
Through them she learned that women could be strong, active and powerful…She learned to see a weak, idle world of white women through the eyes of these servants” (Ochshorn 28-29).

Paradoxically though, Antoinette’s unacknowledged racist feelings prevent her from entirely devoting herself to a “coloured” culture. Both learned prejudice and a distinct self-hatred contribute to her feelings of disgust when, for example, she describes one of her childhood tormentors: “...he had a white skin, a dull ugly white covered with freckles, his mouth was a negro’s mouth and he had small eyes...most horrible of all, his hair was crinkled, a negro’s hair, but bright red...” (Rhys 48-49). The boy’s features give evidence to racial blending, and this seems most repugnant to Antoinette. Although she herself exists in a sort of ethnic statelessness, she reveals a visceral opposition to miscegenation. Is it the racial impurity she objects to so strongly? Perhaps it is difficult for her to see a physical representation of her own blended soul, knowing that both she and this bully will always share the experience of being outsiders, no matter where they are. Adjarian suggests that both Antoinette and the boy will “mingle with those who live in each culture, though not without being scorned by both groups for [their] difference” (Adjarian 204).

Colour is also a strong factor in Rochester’s experience in the Caribbean. He is introduced to a wider spectrum of colour than he has ever experienced before, both in the humanity he sees around him, and in the island’s landscape. While initially appreciative, and perhaps even awed by the natural beauty he sees, he cannot help exclaiming: “what an extreme green...” as if nature has somehow unwittingly exceeded the boundaries of decorum (Rhys 69). He continues the journey to Granbois noticing “too much blue, too much purple, too much green...the flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near” (Rhys 70). Such self-talk can hardly be dismissed, and seems indicative of a mentally unstable person undergoing a sensory overload. As Adamson points out, an individual’s response to the natural world is “intrinsic to human life, regardless of culture – and such responses contribute in profound ways to our identities as individuals and communities” (Adamson 10). Rochester’s response reveals his obsession with control, no matter how illogical it may be in this situation. He seems to be systematically noting the elements of his surroundings that are especially foreign, that are exaggerated and overdone, like Antoinette’s disconcertingly large eyes. His impressions of the island are tainted by his preconceived prejudice, and Antoinette is simply lumped together with the rest of
his unfamiliar surroundings: “and the woman is a stranger” (Rhys 70). The ominous sensation Rochester evokes with his comment about the hills which are “too near” feeds into his overall suspicion and mistrust of an environment which is fundamentally neutral as well as fundamentally natural. This mistrust carries over to Antoinette, who like the forest around her is simply in her natural state. Rochester’s disoriented response to the “foreign” habitat he finds himself in clashes with Antoinette’s affection for the wilderness at Granbois, and gives more evidence of the contradiction between the two characters. This theme of basic and universal opposition is revealed beautifully in Rhys’ explication of the natural hues that colour both skin and landscape.

2.3 Fire and the Phoenix: The Symbolism of Birds and Caged Women

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is permeated with natural imagery, and Jean Rhys very effectively uses elemental opposites to emphasize the psychological experiences of her main characters Antoinette and Rochester. The role of fire in the novel is the most arresting example of Rhys’ use of an elemental force. It represents destruction, foreshadows tragedy, and yet offers purification. Interestingly, Rhys links the all-consuming power of flame with airy avian imagery at key points in the story, and this combination adds a deeper meaning beneath the surface of the narrative. The Coulibri fire is the first instance of Rhys’ literary warning – her metaphor for what awaits Antoinette both physically and emotionally. Coulibri represents Antoinette’s root structure; as her childhood home, it provides her with a room of her own, a garden to hide in and a centre for the tenuous family life of her youth. Unfortunately, it cannot shield any of its residents from the wrath of the former slaves who come to burn it down.

With the importance of fire in mind, Rhys makes a significant connection between Antoinette, Annette and the family parrot Coco. Antoinette remembers that the “parrot was called Coco, a green parrot. He didn’t talk very well...After Mr. Mason clipped his wings he grew very bad tempered...” (Rhys 41). This recollection mirrors Mr. Mason’s relationship with Annette, who, after her marriage to him, finds herself earthbound and feeling trapped in Coulibri. “You have lived alone far too long, Annette. You imagine enmity which doesn’t exist” (Rhys 32) he laughs dismissively. Annette is not deterred despite her “clipped wings”, and continues to
“speak about going away...Persistently. Angrily” (Rhys 33). The subsequent trauma she endures in the Coulibri fire drives Annette to a mental breaking point. Her sense of foreboding is proven correct, and her fears are realized as she loses everything she cares for in the fire. Her horror is shared with household and attackers alike when they see “Coco on the glacis railings with his feathers alight. He made an effort to fly down but his clipped wings failed him and he fell screeching. He was all on fire” (Rhys 43). Coco’s death symbolizes Annette’s fate, trapped and grounded by the disregard of an English man. Anderson claims that “Antoinette’s mother is Rhys’ portrait of the person who has seen the apocalypse, the changing of an era, a world and a society. Our – and Antoinette’s – last vision of her is one of mental decay and sexual abuse” (Anderson 61). Annette lives at a decisive period in history, and she is destroyed by the dissolution of the social and economic institutions she is accustomed to. Sadly, her torment is met with indifference by those around her, and she becomes “‘mad’ at the moment her grief was transformed, via rumor, into mental illness…her experience is transformed by the name she receives” (Winterhalter 227).

In much the same way, Antoinette has her “wings clipped” by Rochester’s derogatory treatment and she is emotionally crippled long before she is physically imprisoned by him. Antoinette suffers deeply, emotionally and psychologically, and Rhys seems to draw comparisons between women and birds in her narrative in an effort to contrast the inherent innocence of the natural world with the deceitful machinations of foreign colonizers – that is, colonizers of a fertile country, and colonizers of the heart. As Antoinette watches her home being consumed in flames, she realizes that she will “never see Coulibri again. Nothing would be left, the golden ferns and the silver ferns, the orchids, the ginger lilies and the roses…the jasmine and the honeysuckle...” (Rhys 44-45). She mourns not only for the house itself, but for the garden and plants that made Coulibri so especially beautiful. Most significantly, though, Antoinette realizes that in the loss of Coulibri, she has also effectively lost her mother: “She was part of Coulibri, that had gone, so she had gone” (Rhys 47). Both Annette and Antoinette prove Rhys’ point that the human connection to the landscape and to the spirit of a place is a deep and vital one.

The image of a burning home appears again at the end of Wide Sargasso Sea, a conclusion that is as dramatic as it is heart-rending. Rochester’s ancestral home is destroyed by fire, and Winterhalter argues that by creating parallels between the fires at Coulibri and Thornfield as well as between the deaths of the parrot Coco and
Antoinette, Rhys shows that both Jamaican and English landscapes can be hostile (Winterhalter 221). Winterhalter continues with the idea that despite the fantasies of perfection that Antoinette and Rochester have about their respective homelands, the aligned imagery of fire proves that neither character will find respite where they had hoped they would (Winterhalter 221). The balance of destruction is shared by Antoinette and Rochester, but whereas “fire was once purely a destroyer, in the blacks’ burning of Antoinette’s early island home” (Anderson 59), Antoinette now chooses to use its catastrophic power to gain her own freedom. Adjarian believes that Antoinette “employs the fire imagery and its associations to express the rage she feels at having been used” (Adjarian 204) and in the implied burning of Thornfield, Rhys gives Antoinette the opportunity to rid herself of her mental torment and helplessness and obtain release from her physical and psychological prison. In a final, proactive act, Antoinette sails from the roof of the inferno like a Phoenix reborn from the ashes of her former pain. At the end, she dreams of Coulibri, and Rhys makes it clear that

Antoinette’s choice is finally that between death by fire and the non-life which is in such painful opposition with that life of freedom, pantheistic union with luxuriant, even lush, nature, a life of total participation in all the dualistic continuities of existence. Hers is no act of despair – but a final aggressive act of assertion, reaffirmation, and self-liberation. (Anderson 60)

With flame in hand, Antoinette has written her name in the “fire red” colour that has always reminded her of home. Although the fire kills her, it also resurrects her, and her spirit as a Phoenix finds liberty at last.

3. The Intoxicating Exotic

The natural parallels that have been discussed thus far include the metaphor of humans as islands, the role of colour in Rhys’ narrative and the symbolism of fire and birds in connection with the experiences of Annette and Antoinette in literal and figurative captivity. Turning to Rochester’s relationship with Antoinette, an analysis can be formed using the continued idea of fire as a textual undercurrent. Three distinct aspects of this unhappy union can be established; the first is the natural but ultimately destructive sexual desire that grows between Antoinette and Rochester. Second is the transformation of Rochester’s desire into feelings of fear and suspicion, which
intensify into loathing for all things he deems strange and exotic. The third stage focuses on Rochester's response to this drastic change in sentiment and the effect his mental state has on Antoinette. His initiation of psycho-sexual warfare is the beginning of a battle that Antoinette can never hope to win. As their sexual relationship carries them into dark and perilous psychological territory, the ravaging effects of the “intoxicating exotic” become painfully clear.

3.1 Love and Lust: Destructive Appetites

In this essay’s previous section, Rochester and Antoinette’s arrival at Granbois is discussed, and it is at Granbois that the newlyweds experience their first night together as man and wife. According to custom, frangipani wreaths have been left for them in their bedroom, reflecting “the symbolic boundaries that persist between their cultures” (Winterhalter 224). The disregard Rochester shows for the ceremonial aspect of the flowers is highly symbolic; “in destroying the wreath he claims right over the names that are applied to cultural symbols” (Winterhalter 224). Rhys uses this incident to foreshadow Rochester’s symbolic “crushing” of Antoinette through his misunderstanding of her character and all the cultural differences that comprise her ethnic “history”. However, in crushing the flowers, an intoxicating scent is released - the incarnation of lust which, as Winterhalter describes, “[overpowers] them both with a heady and sensual fragrance” (224). It is clear that Rochester does not enter into his marriage with deep feelings for Antoinette, but for a moment it seems that the power of his lust might actually tip him over an emotional edge into a real state of love. He admits that Granbois “[is] a beautiful place – wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness” (Rhys 87), and it seems most likely that Rhys intends this statement to refer to Antoinette as well. Antoinette’s “secret loveliness” allures Rochester. Rochester in turn has made Antoinette “want to live” (Rhys 92), but as their relationship progresses, she begins to realize that his lustful desires simply mask the emptiness of his heart. Slowly, the fire of their lust becomes damaging instead of enjoyable. Rochester remarks that he “watched her die many times” and that “she was as eager for what’s called loving as [he] was” (Rhys 92). With distorted logic, Rochester brushes off the consequences of allowing Antoinette to mistake his lust for love, easing “his guilt for the destructiveness of his desires for Antoinette because her desire for him exceeds the
bounds of flattery” (Winterhalter 224).

Antoinette loses doubly in the impossible situation Rochester has created within their marriage. If she were to refuse his sexual advances or play a disinterested part in their lovemaking, Rochester would doubtless have grounds to complain about her as a frigid and unaffectionate wife. Antoinette avoids this potential situation only to be condemned by the natural pleasure she takes in sex as a young newlywed. This frustratingly incongruous state of affairs is directly caused by Rochester’s prejudice and all too-willing suspicion. Aizenberg argues that “sexuality and miscegenation play an essential role in this incendiary mix, since Rochester comes to perceive Antoinette’s honeymoon pleasure-in-sex as the crazy nymphomania of a ‘dark alien’, a ‘white nigger’ too dangerously imbued with an eroticized Caribbean Africanness” (Aizenberg 464). The colonial and racist attitude Rochester carries in his heart applies to sexual possession as well. Although he knows he does not love Antoinette, his patriarchal and colonizing inclinations drive him to claim this “untouched” woman for his own. Winterhalter claims that his “relentless need for categorical sexual exclusiveness urges the wildness of his narration” (Winterhalter 223), and this is evidenced by Rochester’s increasingly suspicious and disjointed narrative voice. In a short time, the fractures within Rochester’s marriage to Antoinette become evident, and the letter that arrives from Daniel Cosway cements Rochester’s already unbalanced assumptions. Rochester uses this unreliable information to project his anxieties onto Antoinette and turn her into someone altogether different in his mind. With encouragement from Daniel Cosway, Rochester paints his own misperceptions across Antoinette’s psychological landscape with wide strokes, only to later condemn the image he is responsible for creating.

3.2 Fear and Loathing

Rochester’s narrative voice never disguises the unease and apprehension he feels as he journeys into the foreign world of Antoinette’s Caribbean life. His willingness to believe the untruthful letter from Daniel Cosway is not a testament to Cosway’s persuasive power, rather it is an indication of the deep-seated fear that rests in Rochester’s heart, making him overly eager to accept any form of justification for it. Much of Rochester’s insecurity springs from the cultural disjunction between his English world and the Caribbean one he comes to inhabit. Winterhalter suggests that
“because Martinique does not capitulate to his preconceptions, he remains committed to, although tormented by, his persistent beliefs about gender and cultural difference … [and] his beliefs are inadequate to explain his present experience” (Winterhalter 223). Rochester is also unable to escape his discriminatory views, at one point considering the servant Hilda’s braided hair “savage” (Rhys 72) and greatly underestimating Christophe’s sagacity. He even admits to Antoinette that if Christophe “were taller…one of these strapping women dressed up to the nines, I might be afraid of her” (Rhys 74). Rochester feels threatened both by the wilderness and the perplexing islanders. Cosway’s letter finally tips Rochester’s mental balance, causing him to flee distractedly into the forest around Granbois, where he eventually discovers he is “lost and afraid among these enemy trees” (105). He has become completely vulnerable to the forces of nature and magic that the islanders fear themselves. This unfamiliar vulnerability is one of the instigating factors behind his vindictive anger. Just as he “must denigrate the topography when the exotic landscape does not fulfill his sensuous preconceptions” (Winterhalter 220), Rochester finds that he must also disparage what he does not understand about Antoinette. His idealism is frustrated by her “otherness”, and this extends to her sexuality as well. Fear, in Rochester’s case, evolves into a hatred for all things beyond his control, and his relationship with Antoinette encapsulates this with grim perfection.

Winterhalter argues that Rhys has purposely structured Wide Sargasso Sea “upon a potential geography of sexual difference, in which…the civilized world of England is symbolized as masculine and the island paradise of the Caribbean aligns as feminine” (Winterhalter 220). Indeed, the sexual dynamic between Rochester and Antoinette adheres to the polarized gender structure described by Winterhalter, and quickly becomes so oppositional that despite other fundamental conflicts, it is Rochester’s ingrained sexism that effectively destroys Antoinette. As Rochester loses control of his gentleman’s façade, he can no longer hide the discriminatory beliefs that reside within him. In particular, Daniel Cosway’s insinuation that Antoinette is a less than “pure” woman only strengthens Rochester’s mistaken conviction that “she thirsts for anyone – not for me” (Rhys 165). This is a surprisingly un gallant attitude from a member of the English upper class; where is the chivalry that ought to accompany his social rank? In reality, Rochester is willing to believe the aspersions cast on Antoinette simply because his own prejudices anticipate them. Laura E. Ciolkowski explicates Rochester’s internal struggle thus:
The exotic excess Rochester records in his narrative promises to spill over into and infect the innocence of the English body. Rochester must, therefore, not only enter into the struggle to fix the commonsense logics of Englishness on the terrain of an utterly maddening colonial intransigence…he must also attempt to manage the danger to English cultural identity that is introduced by a degenerate past. (Ciolkowski 344)

As Rochester’s narrative reaches a close, it attains also a fevered intensity, and although he claims that “all the mad conflicting emotions had gone and left [him]…sane” (Rhys 172), it is evident that he has instead become frighteningly disturbed. The disjointed quality of the narrative at this point shows an almost crazed internal dialogue as Rochester decides how Antoinette will be dealt with. “They’ve got to be watched” he thinks, “for the time comes when they try to kill, then disappear”(172). Rochester’s equilibrium is in serious doubt as his section of the novel comes to an end, and Rhys lends perspective to the nature of madness by allowing Rochester to expose his wild thoughts. He has succumbed to some form of psychosis brought on by disappointed dreams and an insular mind; but although he professes: “above all I hated her”(172), it is clear that he will remain haunted by the love he “had lost before [he] found it” (172).

3.3 Corruption of Nature

While Rochester undergoes a serious personal crisis in the exotic jungle of Granbois, Antoinette likewise struggles to find her bearings in the psychological wilderness of her mind. Her tragic naïveté has laid her open to Rochester’s mercenary intentions, and much like the uncharted territory she lives in, she is innocent, misunderstood, and vulnerable to capture. Her inexperience leads her to internalize the European ideal of “femininity-as-passivity”, causing her to “[drift] blindly…and fatalistically, into an obviously ill-fated marriage” (Anderson 61). “Her innocence is her excuse” (Anderson 61), and it is also her downfall. As she tries to comply with what she believes are Rochester’s wishes, she proceeds to lose touch with her source of strength – her connection to the land. Winterhalter elaborates upon this, explaining that “Antoinette’s fantasy of untrammeled lands cannot create a sanctuary for her. She too must recognize that values are projected upon, not discovered within, landscapes” (Winterhalter 221). Antoinette begins to see her surroundings differently through her
relationship with Rochester, and she realizes that her perception of a once sacred landscape has been corrupted by Rochester’s projected fear and ignorance. The damage that Rochester has done is made clear when Antoinette says: “but I loved this place and you have made it into a place I hate” (Rhys 147). Granbois, for her, is now a place of intense sorrow - her thoughts of it hereafter will be dominated by memories of heartbreak. How painful it must be for her to lose emotional ownership of Granbois, the place that she has loved for so long. Her loss is a heartbreaking repetition of her mother’s loss of Coulibri, and we see that as Antoinette’s emotional bond with the country around her is shaken, she becomes a distinctly lost soul. Antoinette has relied all her life on the mysterious beauty of the Caribbean to comfort and hide her, and she has always been able to trust this attachment to the natural world. Her relationship with Rochester changes this, however, and it seems that as he disinherit her financially, he is able to alienate her from her only safe haven, emotionally and then physically as well.

Rochester achieves the corruption of Antoinette’s natural, spiritual self by his assertion of a hypocritically dual morality and a sexual patriarchy which functions without respect to emotion. It would be difficult for him to deny that his intentions have always been driven by financial greed, and therefore it is grotesque that he tries to disguise his manipulation of Antoinette’s heart with English propriety and animalistic lust. Christophene says scathingly: “Everybody know that you marry her for her money and you take it all. And then you want to break her up, because you jealous of her...you make love to her till she drunk with it...till she can’t do without it” (Rhys 153); Rochester knows that this is the truth. It is fairly plain then, that Rochester is able to endure a considerable level of his own hypocrisy. Knowing that he has seduced Antoinette and created in her an appetite for sex, he mocks her for her willingness to join him in their marital bed, thereby implying that the very desire he fostered in her is an abnormal one. Even worse is the way in which he reviles her in his mind for sexual impropriety, and then vindictively beds Amélie in a room right next to Antoinette’s. Anderson’s analysis of Rochester reveals a man who

Notices that his wealthy wife’s eyes are too large only after he has married her and inherited her land, and who minds how negroid are the features of Amélie, the servant girl with whom he has laughing sex...only after he has used this black woman in callous revenge against the white woman whom he can neither fully hate nor truly love. (Anderson 61)
Rochester and Antoinette’s relationship “has consequently been re-examined as the enactment of a colonial as well as a sexual encounter” (Mardorossian 81), and it seems that since he discovers himself incapable of fully possessing Antoinette, he sexually claims Amélie to maintain his white masculine dominance and bolster his ego. He knows that while Antoinette may be beyond his understanding, he can still inflict pain upon her, and his dalliance with Amélie is specifically intended to deprive Antoinette of the physical intimacy he knows she longs for. Although Rochester goes so far as to hurt and humiliate Antoinette out of spite, he refuses to leave her behind in the Caribbean to her own devices. He feels proprietarily compelled to take her with him to England against her wishes, and against the desires of his own heart as well. Strangely, Rochester’s only strategy to deal with the inconvenience of his wife is to have her sealed away in the attic of his grand ancestral home. This idea seems all the more monstrous because of the sense of fateful inevitability that accompanies it – as if neither Rochester nor Antoinette can subvert the predestined course of action that will assuredly torment them both.

Carson claims that Rochester wishes to defy the universality of “the ecological complexity of nature, the impossibility of its control by human beings” (qtd. in Cohen 11). Rochester’s efforts to destroy the bond between Antoinette and her land is proof of this need for control, and shows how far removed he is emotionally from the natural world. Corruption of nature can occur in the context of literal destruction of the landscape, but it also occurs here on a primal human scale, where Rochester’s emotional abuse of Antoinette disfigures her psyche and permanently “corrupts” her natural state of being. Aizenberg proposes a compelling idea which adds perspective to this issue, stating that “to gain control over her – as masters gained control over slaves – Rochester “zombifies” Antoinette: covering her face with a sheet as though she were dead, renaming her, defining her as mad, transporting her overseas, keeping her under lock” (Aizenberg 464). This concept not only reflects the colonial/racial tensions barely hidden beneath the surface of their relationship, it also refers to obeah, and the way Rochester unconsciously assumes this power to neutralize Antoinette psychologically. “Bertha is not my name” Antoinette weeps, “You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that’s obeah too” (Rhys 147). “Zombification” it seems, can be carried out by anyone with power over another’s heart.

In order to become “zombified”, however, Antoinette as the victim has first to
submit to the process of “zombification”. As Ochshorn has shown earlier\(^1\), Rhys’ personal experience led her to view the world of aristocratic white women as “weak and idle”, and although Rhys’ main character Antoinette has always associated herself with black Caribbean culture, it becomes evident that she still values a version of formal European femininity and the luxury of idleness. Antoinette enjoys a degree of aristocratic leisure in her marriage, but it is somehow merely a distasteful semblance of “whiteness” to Rochester, and a show of self-indulgence to the other characters around her. In this sense, Antoinette is vulnerable to Rochester’s criticisms, as she desires to please him with her sophistication and feminine charm. Sadly, Antoinette lacks the grit of black women like Christophene who would walk out on a man who treated her badly. She urges Antoinette to leave, saying: “A man don’t treat you good, pick up your skirt and walk out… Go from the house, I tell you” (Rhys 110). Antoinette simply cannot apply Christophene’s advice, and, as Herman suggests, she “escapes from her situation not by action in the real world but rather by altering her state of consciousness” (qtd. in Linett 441). Antoinette makes herself an accomplice in her own “zombification” by choosing to remain helpless at crucial points in her life. She should have refused to marry Rochester, refused to accept his infidelity, refused to go to England and refused to ignore her own heart. The fact that she chose otherwise supports Linett’s interpretation of Antoinette’s behaviour as “a helpless acceptance of the repetition of trauma” (Linett 458). Antoinette has not been able to come to terms with the trauma she has experienced in her life, and this has led her to expect abuse because she sees it as part of the pattern of not only her own life but her mother’s as well. Linett claims that “helplessness is a condition of trauma in that the fewer means a victim has to try to save herself from a life- or body-threatening experience, the more likely she is to be traumatized by that experience” (Linett 439). This definition is relevant to Antoinette’s situation specifically because her early life has left her so bereft of the skills and psychological means necessary to combat abusive treatment. Antoinette’s relationship with Rochester is therefore the climax in a life full of exceedingly traumatic events. His corruption of her reveals how perfectly positioned she is for her downfall.

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\(^1\) Ochshorn as quoted on pg.6.
4. Cultivation and Colonization

The previous chapter outlined the progression of Rochester’s emotional and psychological imbalance, and the effect his growing psychosis has on Antoinette’s own frame of mind. As Rochester’s feelings turn from indifference to lust, and from fear to aggressive hate, Antoinette blossoms and then quickly withers as her own psyche disintegrates under the weight of extreme emotional trauma. As each reels from the effects of their traumatic experiences, a new phase in their relationship develops. Rochester adopts a proactive hatred towards Antoinette, and his attempt to cultivate what he sees as Antoinette’s “primitive” nature forms the basis of this chapter. Also central to the theme of cultivation and colonization is the way in which both Rochester and Antoinette represent and are symbolized by invasive species in the Caribbean environment. Finally, the use of gardens and cultivated nature to represent social status and sexuality in England and the Caribbean is contrasted with the wider social reaction to plantation owners in England in the nineteenth century. The development of new moralities in nineteenth century England conflicts with deeply ingrained prejudices and a social hierarchy that struggles to maintain relevance, and these issues provide a wider cultural backdrop for the strife between Antoinette and Rochester. The microcosmic details Rhys provides about their relationship are symbolic of the global scope of imperial domination and the struggle between commerce, politics and national identity in England and its empire.

4.1 Psychological Cultivation

In Adjarian’s words, Rochester sees Antoinette as “a beautiful and exotic player in a drama of barter and exchange” (Adjarian 203). He is unable to accept the loss of his marriage, not because of sentimental attachment, but because he views Antoinette as part of his property, and her liberty would mean both failure and emasculation for him. Instead, Adjarian argues, “he controls what Antoinette comes to represent for him – the island, its inhabitants and the threat they pose to him and his self-conception as an all-powerful, all-knowing European” (Adjarian 206). Rochester’s insistence on calling her Bertha is his attack on the centre of Antoinette’s “foreign” identity, and he continues to use the name in reference to her despite her protests. He clearly wishes to sanitize the aspects of Antoinette’s character that seem
Ciolkowski explains that Rochester is determined to resolve Antoinette’s ambivalence first into the singular tones of English womanhood, and second, once his failure to cast Antoinette as the chaste mother of English sons is totally clear, into the equally singular tones of a savage Otherness. (Ciolkowski 343)

Conflict only arises because Rochester’s schemes meet with resistance from Antoinette and Christophene. Although it has been established that Antoinette resorts to helpless indecision when faced with bitter choices, she nonetheless possesses within her a core of defiance and justified indignance at the suffering her family has experienced. The embers at her core continue to burn though she is dulled by heartbreak, giving evidence to Ciolkowski’s belief that Antoinette “has come to stand for a form of ‘native’ resistance to English patriarchal power” (Ciolkowski 340). It is strange that after finding himself unable to fit into Caribbean society, Rochester attempts to force Antoinette into an English image, knowing from personal experience how difficult (if not impossible) this might be to accomplish. Antoinette has simply ceased to be a person in Rochester’s eyes, and his actions give evidence to the fact that he feels he must neutralize her in order to deal with his own existential confusion. Anderson consequently remarks

Equally and horribly clear is the final revenge which the colonizing husband will enact upon his innocent wife whose only crime has been to be a part of an overwhelmingly beautiful environment, an overwhelmingly sensuous sensibility. The victim of her own naïveté, Antoinette becomes her husband’s victim for committing a sin she cannot comprehend – the sin of being herself. (Anderson 61)

Rochester finally achieves dominance through capture, dealing with Antoinette like a safari hunter might treat wild prey. Instead of literally killing her, though, or abandoning her to her misery in the jungle after the thrill of the hunt, he chooses to keep her like an exotic trophy animal in captivity. Antoinette becomes a wild woman “on display” in a foreign country, “a zombie in conjunction with enslavement by a villain” (Aizenberg 464). While one option might have been to allow her some freedom in England and have her treated as a kind of peculiar objet, Antoinette is instead imprisoned in Thornfield’s attic. She is, in a sense, placed in a museum
archive, where she can gather dust and die forgotten as a relic of past conquests. There is unmistakable injustice in Antoinette’s imprisonment in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Anderson criticizes “the ‘rightness’ of a man’s being free to incarcerate on one floor of his house, the wife who he judges as crazy, on some nebulous basis” (Anderson 58). Rochester’s own words add tragedy to Antoinette’s situation, as he broods: “She’ll not laugh in the sun again…she’ll have no lover, for I don’t want her and she’ll see no other” (Rhys 165). This dialogue can only be seen as abusive in the most insidious sense. To wish an end to another’s happiness, to keep someone separate from any chance to move on from their suffering can only be interpreted as selfish and hateful. However, as victimized as Antoinette has been throughout the novel, Rhys does not make her a martyr. Instead, she gives Antoinette the strength to change the direction of her fate in a bold, final way. Rhys offers the possibility that Antoinette’s suicide is in fact, as Anderson says, “an aggressive act of self-assertion and will, the affirmation of the claims of the self in the face of the life-in-death of solitary confinement in Thornfield Hall” (Anderson 59). The way in which Antoinette dies allows her to escape the fate of a “sexualized, hybridized zombie woman” like her mother (Aizenberg 464), rejecting once and for all Rochester’s psychological conditioning and the prejudicial, cultivated image he propounds.

### 4.2 Invasive Species

Along with aspects of familial exclusion and a struggle for identity, Antoinette and Rochester also share in common the fact that they represent colonizing forces. Although Antoinette’s place of birth and her psychology identify her as Jamaican, her European genes foster the resentment of native black islanders. Her complex situation means that although Antoinette is technically a native of Jamaica, she can only claim a limited familial history in the Caribbean. She is essentially a transplanted European, and no length of residence in the West Indies will ever prove her to be otherwise. In this case of racial territorialism, identity is much less about psychological connection to the land and assimilation into the culture; rather, identity becomes proprietary, and those who exhibit genetic variation are summarily excluded from the cultural group. Friedman explains that
There is … the erection of boundaries between people, ever more intent on difference, on distinction between selves and others, whether based on history or biology or both, as a form of dominance or resistance. (Friedman 15)

The social climate in the Caribbean in the late nineteenth century shows a reversal of fortune for wealthy white plantation owners, and the weakening of their status gives former black slaves the opportunity to revenge themselves. As Anderson observes, “the whites, once powerful, now become unpleasant reminders to the blacks of their own horribly powerless past; as such they are contemptuously termed ‘white cockroaches’” (Anderson 60). Antoinette and her family experience the hatred and resentment of the black islanders around them and are forced into an inferior social role precisely because they represent a formerly dominant, invasive breed of people. A small girl once taunted Antoinette, singing “go away white cockroach, go away, go away” (Rhys 23), and the insult places painful focus on the actuality that biological facts are stronger than emotional ties. Antoinette learns from a young age that her society does not accept her. The nature of Antoinette’s family’s settlement in the Caribbean can be seen as part of a calculated political attempt by European colonial powers to supplant the native residents who already inhabit the island, placing emphasis on what Hayashi describes as “the ‘historical link between the social and the natural realms’ in relation to such processes as ‘immigration and acculturation’” (qtd. in Adamson 10). It is Rhys’ intention to compare the cultural differences between Antoinette and Rochester against a natural backdrop, while especially taking into account how immigration and acculturation (or the lack thereof) affect their responses to the natural world. Vital reminds us that none of this analysis can be carried out independently of the “economic barriers inherited from worlds influenced by European colonial activity” (Vital 89), and these multiple levels of intersecting influence create a convoluted web that Antoinette and Rochester must try to navigate, all the while searching for their true selves.

In the eyes of islanders in Jamaica and Martinique, Rochester’s image is perhaps a simpler one than Antoinette’s. Whereas Antoinette knows the land and the language, and is by birth part of the islands, Rochester is from the start a figure of colonial aggression – a white man with an air of superiority and sense of disapproval for non-English culture. Antoinette is attacked because she has grown up amongst Jamaican people like a noxious weed, embodying the political trickery of European domination. Rochester, though, is recognized as an enemy from the moment he
arrives. His biology is easily determined. As opposed to Antoinette’s image of a type of European vegetation transplanted to the Caribbean, Rochester seems distinctly to be an invasive species of another kind. Rats are well known denizens of watery locales, of ports, harbours and islands, and they are known for their ingenious survival skills. Although Rochester ultimately fails to thrive in the Caribbean, he shows considerable similarity to another character with unsavoury intentions. Ciolkowski smartly points out Rochester’s parallels with the Iago-like Daniel Cosway, explaining that “the gentleman and the rat of Wide Sargasso Sea may appear to occupy the opposite poles in a spectrum of segregated colonial bodies but they ironically share the same fixations and dream the same dreams” (Ciolkowski 348). Although Rochester’s disgust with Cosway is evident throughout their communications, he nonetheless accepts what Cosway says about Antoinette as the truth. Does this then reflect some form of mutual understanding? Does Rochester see his own financial desperation in Cosway’s scheming interference? Interpretations may vary, but Ciolkowski’s point draws an uncanny resemblance between the two men while also lending support to Rhys’ use of natural symbolism and imagery. It is interesting to consider the role of rats as a natural metaphor that Rhys uses to link Rochester and Cosway to their environment, but ultimately what she explains to her readers is that a hatred of difference exists within the hearts of all people, from the victimized to the dominating. Even the persecuted Antoinette, remembering a confrontation with her childhood bully reflects: “it was then that hate came to me and courage with the hate” (Rhys 49). Perhaps Rhys is saying that personal experience does not always mitigate personal prejudice.

4.3 Cultivated Natures

The importance of cultivated nature in Wide Sargasso Sea is profound. The duality of meaning inherent in this concept permeates Rhys’ entire novel and allows for considerably deep interpretation. Both Antoinette and Rochester appear at times as cultural puppets, hung stiffly on strings of gender stereotype, social etiquette, and national identity, but their manufactured behaviour is a superficial performance that fails to conceal the dark and very real desperation each character feels. Social convention can also be evidenced through cultivation of the natural world, and the comparison of the green spaces at Coulibri and Granbois with nineteenth century
English morality exposes a variety of insights into the status and sexuality of the novel’s main characters.

A point central to the relationship between nature and morality is Alston’s comment that “both postcolonial theory and environmental criticism acknowledge that Western notions of ‘nature’ or the ‘natural’ have been conceived as the antithesis of culture and civilization” (qtd. in Adamson 9). This idea is fundamental to understanding how an Englishman like Rochester might view Caribbean culture, and how a former colonist like Antoinette might be received into English society. Throughout Wide Sargasso Sea, “Antoinette is most identified with the early nineteenth-century Caribbean setting of gardens, pools, and wildlife” (Ochshorn 32). She revels in luxuriant nature, feeling most at home in the garden at Coulibri and in the forested surroundings of Granbois. Antoinette’s ease amongst nature is noted by Rochester, who slowly begins to formulate the idea that because she is so comfortable in a natural setting, she herself must be of a particularly primitive character. His private doubts about Antoinette’s lineage have bothered him since they were married. As he recalls her large, dark eyes, he thinks: “Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either” (Rhys 67). Rochester is convinced on a deep, subconscious level that Antoinette is somehow genetically contaminated – somehow she has been infused with the “blackness” that he so despises. Mardorossian adds perspective, stating that “Coulibri’s Edenic garden grown wild…displaces one of the West’s founding myths by portraying what stands for the idyllic setting of paradise as wild and corrupted” (Mardorossian 81). This allusion to Eden makes Antoinette into an Eve-like figure, helplessly defined by Rochester’s suspicions. The biblical story of Eve, the weaker, more susceptible person who is corrupted by an element of nature and who in turn becomes a corruptor, provides the filter through which Rochester views all of Antoinette’s actions. In his mind, she is not an innocent creature living in harmony with her surroundings; rather, she is a tool used by menacing supernatural forces to attack his moral purity.

Antoinette’s description of the garden at Coulibri contains an ominous note, one that foreshadows the advent of Rochester’s suspicion. She says: “our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible – the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell” (Rhys 19). Even Antoinette is sensitive to the idea that the wildness and decay have a sinister implication, but for her, the interpretation of decay more likely
refers to that of mental decline and the frequent insinuation that her mother’s “insanity” might be hereditary. She is thrilled nonetheless to go to Granbois, and her affection for the place is perhaps an indication that Granbois, once her mother’s property, has become an emotional replacement for Coulibri. Contrarily, Rochester’s impressions of Granbois seem unnecessarily belittling, as he thinks to himself that it “looked like the imitation of an English summer house... at the top a badly cut, coarse-grained lawn and at the end of the lawn a shabby white house” (Rhys 71). Would he have been more forgiving if the lawns had been perfectly manicured? Would a superficial semblance of control over the vegetation have convinced Rochester of the moral quality of the people living there? Clearly, Rhys compares each character’s response to Granbois to emphasize how emotional attachment to nature, or lack thereof, polarizes them psychologically. It seems though that an objective viewpoint is difficult to find. Rhys’ own experience of England is reflected in her writing, and as Ochshorn notes, her “England is cold, sordid, full of hypocrites” (Ochshorn 29).

Adjanian points out that “the way Rhys depicts Thornfield Hall also serves to suggest that the green and tranquil English landscape of which the mansion is part holds its own share of dark secrets about its inhabitants” (Adjanian 206). There is, in reality, no ideal place for either Antoinette or Rochester. In every location and natural space, some hostile spirit can be discerned, if only because the psyche of the character seeks it out. The natural world in Wide Sargasso Sea is essentially neutral, and the interplay between Antoinette, Rochester and the environment serves to illuminate the terrible power of disturbed minds.

Although the connection between unrestrained wilderness and a lack of moral principle has been touched upon, it is appropriate to analyze this contrast in relation to the expectations of women in nineteenth century England. Wide Sargasso Sea is arguably autobiographical, and Ochshorn believes that

Rhys’s Dominica girlhood permeates [her] novels, which involve rejection of the traditional role of white women and a nostalgia for a sensual and vibrant past full of emotional vitality. Rejecting proper British society, she recalls the knowing, passionate black women of her youth who were alive to the world of sex and love. (Ochshorn 30)
As a product of this more liberal, passionate society, it is understandably hard for Antoinette to accept that her loving and affectionate nature has been so bitterly misinterpreted by her husband. But as Rhys herself experienced, a woman’s sexuality is treated quite differently in nineteenth century England versus the Caribbean. Rochester is disturbed by the openness of Antoinette’s sexuality, her absence of shame and her obvious enjoyment of lovemaking. His attempt to change her into a mad, primitive oddity is a consequence of his masculine need to retain control over sexual enjoyment and reproduction. Ciolkowski’s interpretation goes even further, suggesting that

Rochester’s reinvention of Antoinette as the ‘red-eyed, wild haired stranger who was my wife’ attaches the local interests of an English domestic economy that is dependent on the stigmatization of female self-indulgence and sexual appetite to the global interests of an English empire that is dependent on the very same elements of female bodily management for the successful reproduction of power. (Ciolkowski 343)

In addition to the political manipulation suffered by women in England’s colonies, ignorant condescension also had a damning effect on the way women of differing ethnicities or cultures were perceived. England’s early feminist movement failed to accommodate the rights of non-English women, and according to Burton, “most [late nineteenth-century English] feminists believed in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race, frequently citing possession of empire as evidence of a superiority that was not just racial, but religious and cultural as well” (qtd. in Ciolkowski 353). Evidence of these widespread beliefs in the population of a global power provides Rochester with a minor excuse for his misguided behaviour. Though public opinion in the late nineteenth century began turning against wealthy Caribbean plantation owners, “Rochester …repeats the sexual vices of the very plantocrats who he claims to despise” (Ciolkowski 349). Clearly, the prejudicial and dualistic beliefs that he carries into his relationship with Antoinette have been cultivated for a long time, and are part of his cultural heritage. This same strain of racial intolerance appears in Antoinette from time to time, referencing her family’s European background.

Sadly, Antoinette is unable to distance herself from Rochester’s idea that she is a woman of unrestrained urges, influenced only by the voodoo spirit of her jungle home. The time she spends imprisoned in England is devoid of compassion, and she is not only discarded as a woman, but is dehumanized altogether due to the stigma of
her island roots.

5. Conclusion

Wide Sargasso Sea is an astute work of post-colonial fiction that encapsulates many complex and large-scale issues. Jean Rhys presents these issues within a text of startling beauty and disarming honesty, weaving into her narrative metaphors for the struggle between man and nature, and between the differing natures of people. Rhys’ central arguments are concentrated into three core issues as analysed in this paper. These main points as discussed are the metaphorical connections between man and nature, especially in conjunction with natural imagery and ethnicity, the changing nature of love and fear in light of differing cultural values, and finally the traumatizing effect of cultivation and colonization on personal and cultural identity. The interplay of sexual politics and psychological deterioration adds an additional layer of complexity to Rhys’ juxtaposition of humanity with the natural world.

Jean Rhys addresses in Wide Sargasso Sea the compelling link between humans and their environment, and what she reveals in her novel is an unsettling picture of acceptance and denial of identity. The experiences of Antoinette and Rochester show how deeply affected humans are by their natural and urban surroundings, and even more so by the societal beliefs and expectations that grow out of different geographical locations. Both Antoinette and Rochester are shocked by the drastic cultural differences they encounter within each other, but Rhys shows that the ingrained beliefs and expectations that neither character is willing to compromise are even more extreme. Rhys creates within the novel’s conflict a disturbing duality that leaves a sense of lasting irresolution. Her work emphasizes the inherent compulsion of nature to resist control, both in the wild and within the human soul.
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