

Bought and Beloved: Economic Agency in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*

In the Victorian-era novel, *Jane Eyre*, readers are introduced to Jane, an orphaned girl forced to navigate a hostile aunt, the harsh conditions at Lowood School, and the eventual moral dilemma presented by her feelings for her employer. Throughout the novel, Jane is presented as a passionate person who is confident in who she is and what she wants from life; she refuses to allow her agency to be compromised. In contrast, Bertha Antoinette Mason *née* Cosway, who is a secondary character in *Jane Eyre* and Mr. Rochester's "mad" wife, had little autonomy to begin with and it is stripped from her entirely upon marrying Mr. Rochester. This history of this "madwoman in the attic" is laid out by Jean Rhys in her novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which expounds on the childhood and eventual marriage of its main character, Antoinette Cosway. By looking at each novel side-by-side, we can observe how the marriages of Antoinette and Jane to Mr. Rochester are fundamentally shaped by the social and economic imperatives of the era; in the former, the need to accumulate wealth and social standing through marriage, in the latter, the ability to pursue a romantic relationship when wealth and position are secure. For Jane and Antoinette, their self-identity and conflicting social positions create divergent capacities for agency: Jane's self-knowledge and lack of male kin allow her autonomous control of herself and her finances, while Antoinette struggles with her identity and her agency is denied by the Masons and Mr. Rochester.

Historical and Economic Context for the Victorian Era

At the time *Jane Eyre* was published, women held little to no economic power in British society. Women of elevated social standing were still considered to be the property of their male relatives, who held control over their finances as well as their ability to marry. The practice of primogeniture made it nearly impossible for women of the gentry to own property and made

marriage into a pursuit of wealth, land, and increased social status rather than romance. For upper-class women, the only way to secure wealth was to marry a wealthy man – and even then, they had no rights to their spouse’s money and whatever assets they brought into the marriage became their husband’s property by law. For men and women of the aristocracy, this often made marriage an act of capitalism rather than one of love.

Another important historical element in Antoinette’s story is the Slavery Abolition Act, passed by Great Britain in 1833, which outlawed slavery throughout most of the British empire (The National Archives). While enslaved young children were immediately released, older children and adults became “apprentices” and did not receive full emancipation until 1838-1840. The law stipulated that these “apprentices” were entitled to basic rights, such as food, clothing, and shelter; in the British West Indies, however, many planters chose to ignore the requirements for working conditions as set forth by the new law. In response, many “apprentices” simply abandoned the plantations at which they were formerly enslaved, causing the production of the plantations to drop precipitously (Bielawski). With the context of the Emancipation Act as a recent development before the events in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the reader can understand the delicate and tense dynamic between the white Creole planters and the native Caribbean and African peoples in the book.

Rochester’s Marriage Motivations

For a second son like Rochester who would not inherit, it was his duty to improve his family’s situation by marrying a rich heiress, thereby increasing the family fortune while securing his own wealth. This is expressed in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, when Rochester thinks: “I have not bought her, she has bought me” (70). This assertion of being bought or sold is also expressed in *Jane Eyre*, when Mr. Rochester is telling Jane the truth behind his first wife: “My father and

brother knew [about the family history of madness], but they thought only of the thirty thousand pounds, and joined in the plot against me” (291). Mr. Rochester sees himself as a victim in his marriage to Antoinette and Ola Abdalkafor seems to agree with this perception, arguing in their book that Rhys portrays Rochester as a “victim of a patriarchal law of inheritance [primogeniture]... forcing the younger son to ‘buy an heiress’ from the colonies” (82). This is supported by the letter Rochester composes mentally as they journey to Granbois: “Dear Father. The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition...I have a modest competence now. I will never be a disgrace to you or my dear brother the son you love...I have sold my soul or you have sold it” (70). This portrays Rochester as a man seeking the approval of his father and older brother, but not without a certain amount of resentment. The bitterness underlying his words along with the assertion of “selling his soul” make it clear that this marriage is nothing more than a financial transaction to him and highlight the negative feelings he already associates with Antoinette due to his caustic familial relations.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, once he has married Antoinette and gained control of her fortune, the couple has a brief honeymoon at Granbois. Despite the absence of love, Rochester enjoys sexual intimacy with Antoinette: “I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love” (93). Antoinette has little choice regarding intimacy – not only her fortune, but her physical body have become the property of her husband. This inequality creates a power imbalance, where Rochester is the dominant partner and Antoinette has no recourse but to submit. In *Like Subjects, Love Objects*, Jessica Benjamin describes true erotic union as “the sense of simultaneously losing the self and retaining wholeness...the ultimate point of erotic union” (184). This kind of union is only possible through mutual and subjective recognition of one’s partner and represents the idea of Eros and creation. However, Rochester thinks of Antoinette as an object, a means to an end, a

dynamic which Benjamin describes as leading to the opposite of Eros – death and destruction. Antoinette’s lack of agency and Rochester’s inability to recognize her subjectivity creates an insurmountable obstacle to a happy and equal relationship.

In contrast, when Rochester meets Jane, it is in a neutral setting and situation. She is walking to the nearby village – he is on horseback, returning to Thornfield after a long absence. After falling from his horse and becoming injured, Rochester must rely on Jane’s assistance to get back on his mount and move on. The circumstances of this first meeting foreshadow Jane’s upper hand in her future interactions with Rochester. In their formal introduction at Thornfield, she is not intimidated by his rough demeanor but responds to his questions and comments calmly and assertively, revealing her strong personality. Over the course of several weeks, as Rochester gets to know her better during their evening conversations, she not only holds her own – she has Rochester on the defensive. After asking Jane whether she thinks him handsome, she bluntly responds in the negative; when he calls attention to his forehead (insinuating his intelligence), she makes a comment in feigned innocence about whether he is a philanthropist, noting the phrenological lack in the area indicating benevolence. To her comment, Rochester responds: “There again! Another stick of the penknife, when she pretended to pat my head” (123). While realizing her equal (if not superior) intelligence and her lack of deference despite his social status, he falls for her. However, he is only able to indulge these feelings and pursue a relationship with Jane due to his secure social standing and the fortune he has received not only from his deceased father and elder brother, but from his disenfranchised wife, sequestered in the attic of Thornfield.

Antoinette and the Struggle to Belong

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's confusion about her identity and where she belongs contributes to her demise as much as her lack of agency in a patriarchal society. Born to a wealthy white Creole family on the Caribbean island of Jamaica, Antoinette and her family are part of a minority group that has also participated in the enslaving of the native and African people that make up the greater share of the population. When her father dies, Antoinette, her mother Annette, and her younger brother Pierre are left destitute and exposed to the derision of their white peers and people of color alike. Rose Kamel speaks to this in her article, "Before I Was Set Free", saying: "within the context of slavery the status of white Creole women remained peculiar...after Emancipation in 1833, they were even more isolated from the women of color they had colonized" (3). We see this in how Antoinette is rejected and despised by the black and native people outside of their plantation. When Christophine brings Tia, a young black girl, to be a companion for Antoinette, they seem to become friends. However, both girls have unconsciously or consciously absorbed the racial tension of the time, and their "friendship" quickly deteriorates, with Tia eventually joining in the attack on Antoinette's family. As a single woman with little power and no money, Antoinette's mother does the only thing she can do – she uses her most valuable assets (her beauty and charm) to attract and marry the wealthy Mr. Mason, who becomes owner of Coulibri (their plantation) through his new wife.

Knowing and fearing the existing animosity towards white people of their status on the island, Annette begs her new husband to relocate the family, which he steadfastly refuses. Kamel states of Mr. Mason, "he cannot comprehend that the Cosways, formerly unthreatening to ex-slaves because they were expected to die poor, are now rich, visible reminders of plantocratic horrors neither forgotten nor forgiven" (4). Like his future son-in-law, he is blissfully ignorant and unconcerned by the lives of anyone outside his own. After the plantation is burned to the

ground and Pierre is killed in the fire, Antoinette is sent to a convent and her mother is institutionalized, apparently driven mad in her grief and anger. Antoinette is adrift, left without her only surviving kin, but still considered to be the property of her stepfather and stepbrother. At the convent, she receives an education and learns to “gabble without thinking as the other [girls] did” (57) but seems to exist in a purgatorial fog; she feels safe within the confines of the convent but has no power over whether she will remain. When her stepfather comes to visit and informs her that she will be leaving the convent and rejoining him, her stepbrother, and her Aunt Cora, he mentions the impending visit of English friends – including one implied to be Rochester. Antoinette says: “It may have been the way he smiled, but again a feeling of dismay, sadness, loss, almost choked me” (59). That night she has a dream about following a man (again implied to be Rochester) into the trees at Coulibri, saying: “I follow him, sick with fear but I make no effort to save myself...he turns and looks at me, his face black with hatred” (59-60). Upon waking, she tells Sister Marie Augustine, “I dreamed I was in Hell” (60). The dream foreshadows her inevitable marriage to Rochester and how he leads her down the path to her own demise, as well as her inability to resist or avoid that fate.

Once married to Rochester, Antoinette does her best to please him and make him happy, but every effort is doomed. He already resents being forced into marriage by his father; and he does not make any attempt to truly know or understand Antoinette or the land and culture in which she was raised. She already struggles to know who she is and where she belongs; when he renames her “Bertha,” he strips her of her identity as a Creole raised in the vibrant landscape of the Caribbean and reinvents her as a sober Englishwoman. Knowing Antoinette’s backstory from *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it is easier to understand why, in the events of *Jane Eyre*, she attempts to burn Rochester to death in his sleep; why she attacks her stepbrother Richard Mason, one of

the architects of her demise; and why in the end she chooses to burn Thornfield down and commit suicide in the process. Her imprisonment went far beyond the confines of Thornfield's attic – everything in her married life was an assertion of dominance, fueled by Rochester's hatred. Her final, violent act was her way of claiming herself back and finally escaping from the physical and mental prison Rochester created for her.

Jane, a Pillar of Strength

In contrast to Antoinette, Jane is born into what could be considered a cautionary tale for the Victorian era. Jane's mother, an upper-class woman, falls in love with and marries Jane's father, a poor clergyman. For this choice, Jane's mother is abandoned and disowned by her wealthy family - reinforcing the impetus of marrying for wealth and status - and both parents die of typhus when Jane is a young child. At the request of her dying uncle, Jane is taken in by her Aunt Reed, who treats Jane with hostility and contempt, encouraging (or not discouraging) her cousins to do the same. Jane's calm, somber demeanor does not endear her to her Aunt Reed, who excludes her from socializing with the family until Jane adopts "a more sociable and childlike disposition, a more attractive and sprightly manner" (1). Jane is a quiet, but passionate child who has a keen sense of justice but who, at that age, lacks the discretion to apply it strategically. After Jane fights back against her cousin John's physical abuse, her aunt arranges for her to go to Lowood School, an institution for poor and orphaned girls.

At Lowood, Jane retains her passion and strong sense of justice but learns self-control through the connections she makes with Helen Burns (a fellow student) and Miss Temple, a teacher at the school. After Lowood's harsh conditions are exposed during a typhus outbreak in which Helen Burns dies, the positive changes that occur within the school help to create a good environment for Jane - especially regarding her relationship with Miss Temple. Jane says: "to her

instruction I owed the best part of my acquirements; her friendship and society had been my continual solace; she had stood me in the stead of mother, governess, and, latterly, companion” (76). It is when Miss Temple marries and leaves Lowood School that Jane begins to feel restless and look for a new adventure. As an educated young woman who must work to support herself and without male relatives to direct every decision she makes, she has an unusual amount of autonomy for women of the era. She decides to post an advertisement offering her services as a governess and soon receives an answer from Mrs. Fairfax at Thornfield Hall. Jane eagerly embraces this change of setting and circumstance and soon arrives at Thornfield. She enjoys her new pupil, Adèle, and the warm camaraderie of Mrs. Fairfax, but after three months pass she finds herself once again becoming restless and thinking of finding another situation. This is when Mr. Rochester enters the picture.

While Jane is aware of the inadvisability of falling for Rochester, she cannot help herself. He is someone who can share a deeper, intellectual connection with her and she enjoys engaging with someone who challenges her. She has no close friends or family members who could observe her growing attachment and caution her, and she is able to interact with Mr. Rochester beyond the conventions of the time. As Lucia Garcia Magaldi states in her essay “Sexuality and Gender Relationships in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*”, Jane is “considered a dangerous woman of questionable morality because she had the character and self-determination to assert her will over predominant Victorian conventions regarding what women should feel and how they should live” (126). Jane has no guardrails in her situation. Not only does she not have family or friends to give her advice; her social circle is limited to Thornfield Hall, where the master himself refuses to adhere to conventions. When she finally learns of Rochester’s prior marriage and the truth behind the mysterious specter haunting the halls of Thornfield, she

displays her self-knowledge, critical thinking, and strong will in the face of his continued manipulations by refusing to become his mistress, no matter how tempted she is. When Rochester tries everything he can to cajole her into staying, asking who will care for her, she says: “*I care for myself...Laws and principles are not for times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour; stringent are they; inviolate they shall be. If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth?*” (302). Rochester holds much more social and financial power than Jane; her refusal to run away with him as his mistress shows her incredible strength of will and how deeply she values herself and her principles. Even though she has no safe place to go for refuge, she knows she must remove herself from the situation and she simply jumps into a carriage and rides as far as it will take her, even though her future is completely uncertain.

After she has left, nearly dying before being taken in by the people she would later discover to be her family, she is able to think about the situation from a distance and with a more critical lens. She questions and examines her decision to leave, wondering “whether it is better...to be a slave in a fool’s paradise...fevered with delusive bliss one hour – suffocating with the bitterest tears of remorse and shame the next – or to be a village schoolmistress, free and honest” (343). She knows that had she chosen to become Rochester’s mistress, she would have become dependent on and beholden to him for the rest of their lives. She desires to meet him as an equal and could not have accepted anything less. Upon discovering both her familial connection to the Rivers family and her inheritance from John Eyre, she shows her moral strength and autonomy by choosing to share it with her cousins. In receiving the inheritance, she has also gained the final element that allows her to meet Mr. Rochester on equal ground – her financial independence allows her even more freedom to make her own choices. When she

returns to Mr. Rochester, who is humbled by Jane's refusal, the loss of his sight and hand, and the loss of Thornfield Hall, the circumstances for each have changed in a way that allows them to meet on equal standing. Jane can love Rochester and marry him without compromising her personal autonomy and values; they are able to marry without the need or desire to increase their wealth or social standing.

Conclusion

The parallel stories of Jane Eyre and Antoinette Cosway reveal how profoundly the intersection of economic need, social standing, and self-knowledge shaped their capacity for agency in the Victorian era. Antoinette's tragic circumstances strip her of autonomy at every turn: her identity as a white Creole, her stepfather and stepbrother who only value her as a vehicle for increased social status, and her transactional marriage to Rochester. Without a solid self-identity or financial independence, she becomes an object to be possessed, renamed, and imprisoned—her final act of destruction representing the only agency left to her. Jane, by contrast, demonstrates how self-knowledge and economic independence create an opportunity for genuine autonomy even within Victorian constraints. Her childhood experiences and education led her to develop strong principles and to trust her own judgment, leading her in turn to refuse Rochester when accepting him would mean compromising her values. Ultimately, both novels illustrate how Rochester's social status and the wealth secured through exploiting Antoinette are the very things that allow him to pursue Jane for love rather than money, and how marriage in the Victorian era was more often directed by financial rather than emotional imperatives.

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