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Mad or Misunderstood?

A Study of the Different Portrayals of Mr. Rochester's First Wife in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract

Jane Eyre (1847), written by Charlotte Brontë, remains a classic, 170 years later. Mr. Rochester's secret wife locked away in an attic, Bertha Mason, is the antagonist in the novel. However, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) written by Jean Rhys around a century later, the character has been rewritten as Antoinette Cosway. This essay examines how Bertha and Antoinette are written and investigates the aspects that come into play in the authors' different portrayals. This research is combined with biographical and historical criticism. The authors' lives and own words are discussed in relation to their works, while at the same time carefully separating biography from fiction. The essay also discusses how *Wide Sargasso Sea* is written as a response to the racial and colonial themes in *Jane Eyre*. The changing conception of mental illness from the 19th to 20th century is also considered, as are the responses of various critics. The essay will illustrate how the characterization of Bertha and Antoinette responds to the cultural contexts from which the novels arose.

Table of Contents

Introduction

"What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell" (Brontë 321). The "it" referred to here is Bertha Mason, Mr. Rochester's mad wife in the novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). In *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), written by Jean Rhys, Bertha Mason is rewritten as Antoinette Cosway. She is given a background and her own story. While Bertha is an antagonist in *Jane Eyre*, Antoinette is the protagonist in Jean Rhys's novel. The reader gets to see how Antoinette's mind deteriorates along with her marriage to Mr. Rochester. Antoinette and Mr. Rochester are two very different people with different cultures. Drobot argues that Mr. Rochester cannot handle the inevitable culture shock so he projects his fears onto her since she symbolizes what is foreign to him (52). She states that Mr. Rochester cannot understand Bertha and decides to confine her when they return to England.

The character of Bertha and the character of Antoinette are two different characters written by two different authors who had different views. Charlotte Brontë wrote the original character and Jean Rhys decided to use Brontë's work to rewrite the story in her own prequel. Jean Rhys came up with her own ideas of what Bertha's past could have been like. Biographical criticism can provide interesting and viable information in order to understand the background behind these two novels and their portrayal of Bertha and Antoinette. By looking into the authors' biographies, the reader will be able to see the connections or similarities between the novel and the authors' lives, all the while being aware of that they are not their characters. According to Lynn, biographical criticism points out the significance in learning about the author to understand his or her work better (147). However, the author's intentions do not determine the meaning of his or her novel.

It is also essential to understand that these novels were published in two very different times, in two different centuries. While the novels take place around the same time, in the 19th century, they were published in two separate times where the understanding of mental illnesses would not have been the same. Applying historical criticism is therefore necessary. Historical criticism is the "natural ally" of biographical criticism; the historical context of a text might help us to understand it better (Lynn 148). According to Bennett & Royle, "literary works can help us to understand the times in which they are set" (138). I will also bring in a New Historical perspective. According to Lynn, New Historicism encourages the reader to be imaginative in how he or she makes connections and focuses on how "particular documents participate in, or help to create, systems of assumptions and meanings" (163). This will serve as a starting point since it provides a deeper understanding of how the historical context would

have played a part in how the novel was written. Understanding why the character is written in a certain way will become easier by taking the different historical settings and the views on mental health into account.

Whereas previous research on these novels focuses on individual aspects such as, for instance, the postcolonial and psychological themes, I will be combining several themes and perspectives in order to carry out a wider analysis. When investigating Bertha's and Antoinette's character, I will be looking at the two novels from a biographical perspective and a historical perspective. I will also discuss how *Wide Sargasso Sea* is written as a response to *Jane Eyre* while keeping the colonial and racial themes in mind. These themes need to be discussed since there is a very clear underlying racism in Charlotte Brontë's novel. The aim of this essay is to examine the different portrayals of Bertha/Antoinette. How are these characters portrayed and why? How was mental illness viewed in the authors' respective times? I argue that these two perspectives go hand in hand; the authors' lives and their historical contexts shaped the two portrayals of Bertha/Antoinette to a great extent. Before I discuss the historical and biographical aspects, I will discuss Bertha and Antoinette's character separately, focusing on how they are portrayed in the novels. In order to make my argument and trail of though as clear as possible, I will analyze and discuss the novels separately and call Mr. Rochester's first wife Bertha when I analyze *Jane Eyre* and call her Antoinette when I analyze *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

The character of Bertha

The first time the reader encounters Bertha in *Jane Eyre,* she is not actually seen. Instead she is the malicious laughter on the other side of Jane's closed door, lighting a fire in Mr. Rochester's bedroom. Jane believes her to be one of the servants and Mr. Rochester keeps the truth away from her. The fire is set during the night, adding to the eerie feeling of something not right going on. Strovas argues that the author uses the common notion that crime is a nighttime activity (387). If Bertha is reduced to running around the house during the night it makes her seem more dangerous since that is when everyone else is asleep. As a reader of this novel at this point, the reader suspects that there is someone at Thornfield Hall who does not belong there, someone nearly inhuman: "This was a demoniac laugh- low, suppressed, and deep-uttered as it seemed, at the very keyhole of my chamber door" (Brontë 179). By directly dehumanizing this "creature", the reader learns to fear it. If it is feared, it is a threat, an antagonist.

The dehumanizing descriptions of Bertha continue later on in the novel. Jane can hear sounds coming from the room Bertha is in, once again describing them as non-human, animalistic. In this quote the reader gets to hear Jane's thoughts about Bertha:

> To listen for the movements of the wild beast or fiend in yonder side-den. But since Mr. Rochester's visit it seemed spellbound: all the night I heard but three sounds at three long intervals- a sharp creak, a momentary renewal of the snarling, canine noise, and a deep human groan (Brontë 239).

What is interesting here is the contrast between how Bertha and her noises are described. First Jane refers to her as a "wild beast" and shortly after as "canine". These are all animalistic terms. But then she realizes that Bertha is in fact "human". This would suggest that Jane is completely bewildered by Bertha; she does not know who or what she is. However, she does realize that Bertha is contained for a reason and that she is dangerous.

About halfway-through the novel, Jane finds Bertha in her bedroom in the middle of the night. She believes it to be a dream at first. Jane sees Bertha picking up Jane's wedding veil to put it on her own head. Bertha then looks at herself in the mirror before tearing the veil into pieces. Jane describes this encounter of Bertha to Mr. Rochester as:

> Fearful and ghastly to me- oh sir, I never saw a face like it! It was a discolored face- it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments! (Brontë 311).

Once more, Bertha is active during the night but this time she actually enters Jane's room while Jane is sleeping. Gilbert and Gubar argue that Bertha tears the veil since that is what Jane wants to do due to her underlying fear of marriage (389). This description of Bertha is once again animalistic and represents the stereotypical "madwoman". Bertha functions as a negative role model for Jane since she holds all the traits of femininity that would be deemed as inappropriate. She represents something Jane should never become and something she should avoid at all cost.

The truth comes out at Mr. Rochester's and Jane's wedding. Bertha is revealed to be Mr. Rochester still living, first wife. Jane gets to see her up in the attic and this is both the first and last time she sees Bertha knowing fully who Bertha is. Once more, Bertha is described as an animal: "The clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind-feet" (Brontë 321). However, she is not just an animal here, she is animal in human clothing. She is further dehumanized by giving her "hind-feet." By being continuously likened to an animal, she truly becomes a monster, driven by its primal urges. Lerner argues that Bertha is a figure in the story, although not a character since she is used for suspense and does not speak a single word (280). Bertha is later revealed to have jumped to her death from the roof of Thornfield Hall. Her death

marks the end of the problem in the story. She was the problem that hindered Mr. Rochester and Jane from marrying.

Bertha is written as the mystery in the story since it takes quite some time for the reader to learn about her character and her connections to Mr. Rochester. Initially, she is the antagonist that the reader cannot identify. She is both mysterious and dangerous, that much is clear, but her true identity remains hidden for so long. Not even everyone at Thornfield knows about her before the wedding incident. Therefore, Bertha is in some sense a minor character in the novel. She is not seen in many scenes at all, but her presence is made known throughout the majority of the novel. Even though her scenes are kept to a minimum, she still fills the role as the antagonist in Jane's and Mr. Rochester's relationship. They will inevitably marry but Bertha's existence is partly written with the purpose of hindering the marriage for at least some time. Her existence puts distance between them. Jane, being everything that Bertha is not and cannot be, needs to listen to her morals and leave Mr. Rochester because it is the right thing to do. Bertha is needed to highlight Jane's moral character and to illustrate the contrast between the good/sane woman and bad/insane woman. However, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys rewrites Bertha's character as the main character, Antoinette.

The character of Antoinette

Part One of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is written from Antoinette's perspective and in most of it she is still quite young. She reflects that she got used to a solitary life in her home. It is hinted early on that her mother, Annette, has mental health issues. Antoinette notices her mother drawing away from her more and more, which is clear from this quote:

> I hated this frown and once I touched her forehead trying to smooth it. But she pushed me away, not roughly but calmly, coldly, without a word, as if she had decided once and for all that I was useless to her (Rhys 11).

Antoinette, being a just a child at this point, is greatly affected by her mother's cold behavior. Antoinette and her family are outsiders since they are Creole. Antoinette is neither black nor white and her struggle with identity becomes clearer and clearer throughout the book. No matter where she turns, she does not fully belong: "so between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why I was ever born at all" (Rhys 61). The black people hate her and her family, calling them "white cockroaches" (Rhys 13). Antoinette's deceased father was a slave-owner and owned a fortune until the Emancipation Act. Therefore,

it is not peculiar that the black people look down on Antoinette's family. However, it escalates into severe harassment.

The second part of the novel is written from Mr. Rochester's perspective, which enables the reader to see Antoinette from someone else's point of view. Antoinette is a complete stranger to him, an alien from a different culture that he cannot begin to understand: "she never blinks at all it seems to me. Long, sad, dark alien eyes" (Rhys 39). As time goes by, Antoinette's nervous tendencies make themselves known. She expresses how she is afraid of everything, yet nothing at the same time. He does not understand her and becomes annoyed. "'I'm not used to happiness', she said. 'It makes me afraid.' [Rochester speaks:] 'Never be afraid. Or if you are tell no one'" (Rhys 55). Basically, what Mr. Rochester is telling her here is to avoid showing any kind of weakness. That attitude will not work well with someone who is obviously in a fragile state of mind.

Mr. Rochester is told in a letter that Antoinette and her family are insane. The suspicions Mr. Rochester already had, and in a sense wanted to have, are confirmed. Antoinette feels his change in behavior and attitude towards her and is desperate for him to love her again. Christophine who has been her servant since she was a child takes care of her. Mr. Rochester is taken aback by her change: "When I saw her I was too shocked to speak. Her hair hung uncombed and dull into her eyes which were inflamed and staring, her face was very flushed and looked swollen" (Rhys 87). Before they leave for England they have one final confrontation: "I saw the hate go out of her eyes. I forced it out. And with the hate her beauty. She was only a ghost. A ghost in the grey daylight. Nothing left but hopelessness" (Rhys 102). She has become his belonging, no longer capable of speaking for herself. In this time, she does in fact belong to him since all her belongings and funds become his as her husband. Öztop argues that Antoinette is silenced twice in her life, first by her mother and later by her husband (175). He has broken her and she is just a shell of who she used to be. He has made her become no one, just a mad girl. A ghost.

Antoinette's time at Thornfield Hall is briefly described before the novel ends. She catches sight of herself in the mirror at one point: "I went into the hall again with the tall candle in my hand. It was then that I saw her- the ghost. The woman with streaming hair" (Rhys 111-112). Having been confined for so long, she truly has become mad, with no offer of real treatment in sight. She has become Bertha, the madwoman locked away in the attic. Antoinette's story is marked by tragedy and loss of identity. She does not have a mother to look up to and instead the only mother figure she has ever had is Christophine, her childhood nurse Her family's dark past and the gossip about her mother's madness ruins their reputation. She is

socially alienated from a very young age and what little identity she has is taken away from her in her marriage. However, Antoinette still has some of her identity left before they leave her home to go to England. Mr. Rochester, on the other hand, does not know who he is in her unfamiliar culture. He feels completely out of place and he is therefore the one to be fully socially alienated. Antoinette is also an outsider, but she still has a place to call home. Mr. Rochester's return to England symbolizes a sort of reversal of these roles. He is now in control again and Antoinette is stripped of all identity and freedom. Jean Rhys decided to portray Antoinette's character in this manner after getting inspiration from Charlotte Brontë's work. By looking closer into Jean Rhys's own words and her experiences, the question of why she wrote Antoinette the way she did can be discussed.

Biographical criticism: Charlotte Brontë and Jean Rhys

Biographical criticism can provide an interesting point of view where it is not just the work that is studied, but also the author. Naturally, one should not be confusing the author with his or her work. The purpose is to see potential connections or similarities between the work and the author while remembering that an author's intentions do not set the meaning of his or her text. It is essential to know exactly what biographical criticism is and how it should be used. Jackson argues that it is impossible to ignore biography when we look at literary history (357). Readers often want to know more about the author. Jackson claims that this has more to do with the psychology of reading more than with the psyches of writers" (366). Biography fills the gap of what the reader wants to know. The reader benefits from reading more than just one biography about an author since they will then spot probable differences in their information. The reader will then be aware of other possibilities (Jackson 370). Lynn argues that even though the writing and the life of an author are never the same, some authors do express themselves truthfully (147). If we know key facts about an author's life, we might understand his or her work better. However, it is important not to liken the author directly to a narrator or a character. Biographical criticism should be done carefully while solidifying the arguments with evidence from the text itself and not just about the author (Lynn 163).

According to Barker, Charlotte Brontë was growing very restless and depressed while working as a governess in 1836. She felt isolated in the house and she wrote in Roe Head Journal: "Must I from day to day sit chained to this chair prisoned with in these four bare-walls…" (39). She had continuous issues with depression. One more example of this is when she was studying in Brussels. She started to have feelings for her professor, Monsieur Heger,

that were unrequited and when she returned to England she kept writing him love letters. He was also married which complicated the situation further (Barker 124). She did not like the stillness which was typical for the small town she grew up in. In a letter to Monsieur Heger, Charlotte Brontë wrote: "there is nothing I fear more than idleness- unemployment- inertia- lethargy of the faculties- when the body is idle, the spirit suffers cruelly" (121). Evidently, Charlotte Brontë battled with some inner demons. What she fears the most- idleness, isolation- is also what identifies Bertha's character. Perhaps, Charlotte Brontë could sympathize with Bertha and to some extent identify with her.

Charlotte Brontë wrote many letters to William Smith Williams. He was employed at the British publishing company Smith, Elder & Co and was the first one to discover her talent. He later became her close friend. She directly addresses Bertha's character and her madness in a letter from 4 January 1848:

> I agree with them that the character is shocking, but I know that it is but too natural. There is a phase of insanity which may be called moral madness, in which all that is good or even human seems to disappear from the mind and a fiend-nature replaces it. The sole aim and desire of the being thus possessed is to exasperate, to molest, to destroy, and preternatural ingenuity and energy are often exercised to that dreadful end. The aspect in such cases, assimilates with the disposition; all seems demonized. It is true that profound pity ought to be the only sentiment elicited by the view of such degradation, and equally true is it that I have not sufficiently dwelt on that feeling; I have erred in making horror too predominant. Mrs. Rochester indeed lived a sinful life before she was insane, but sin itself is a species of insanity: the truly good behold and compassionate it as such (Brontë, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: With a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends*: 1848-1851, 3).

In this quote, Charlotte Brontë brings up moral madness. This was a term presented by James Cowle Prichard in his work *A Treatise in Madness* from 1835 (Atherton). The Brontë family was familiar with this work since it was published in their medical encyclopedia called *Modern Domestic Medicine*. Moral madness/insanity was, as presented by James Cowle Prichard, "a morbid perversion of the natural feelings, affections, inclinations, temper, habits, moral dispositions, and natural impulses, without any remarkable disorder or defect of the intellect, or knowing and reasoning faculties, and particularly without any illusion or hallucination" (Showalter 29). The term "moral" in this case would suggest "emotional insanity". It is interesting that she wrote that she knew that it was "but too natural", indicating that she believes her characterization to be very realistic. She seems to firmly believe that if a person is mad, he

or she is inhuman since his or her nature has become "fiend-like". She likens it to being something supernatural, something evil that wants nothing else than to destroy. That is exactly the way in which Bertha is portrayed, as a demon with only evil intentions.

Since this is what Charlotte Brontë learned from James Cowle Prichard's work, it is not peculiar that she chose to depict Bertha in the way that she did. However, she realizes that she deliberately wrote Bertha in a certain way to put the emphasis on horror, and not on a deeper portrayal of her character. Charlotte Brontë also refers to Bertha's past which Mr. Rochester hinted at being full of sin because of her sexual nature. Charlotte Brontë's religious views become apparent in her last statement in the quote, saying that sin itself is directly connected to insanity and that this is obvious to good people. The problem with this statement is that sin could mean a lot of things, but can they all be linked to insanity? Like Showalter argues, this definition of "moral insanity" includes really any type of unusual behavior that is not accepted in society (29). The same goes for sin, a lot of things or actions could be counted as sin, but surely, we all "sin" without going mad or being classified as insane?

Charlotte Brontë's views on madness, or "moral insanity", and her somewhat religious views could indicate that she was simply a woman of her time. She lived in the early to mid- 19th century when a mad woman would have been more connected to sin than to something more psychologically complex. Her own struggles with mental health and her fears of isolation and idleness are, to some extent, reflected in how Bertha is depicted and what defines her as a character.

In her autobiography from 1979, Jean Rhys brings up certain stories from her childhood. She was, just like Antoinette, born in the Caribbean. She was born on the Caribbean Island of Dominica in 1890. Her mother was "a white Creole", like Antoinette, and her father was Welsh (Rhys ix). Emery discusses what it means to live in-between two cultures like this. A person with this experience might feel close to a black culture, a culture that they cannot be a part of since it resents them. They might still look to the mother country that abandoned them and considers them inferior (12). This feeling of not belonging anywhere was very much present in Jean Rhys's life, as well as in that of her fictional character Antoinette. Naturally, Jean Rhys is not her character but their backgrounds are indeed very similar. Jean Rhys writes in her autobiography that she did not dare to be friendly with the colored kids as a child since they hated her because of her own color. They called her a white cockroach, just like in her novel. Mary Lou Emery writes, "her novels portray an absence rather than a loss of identity and the homelessness of one who never had a home" (13). Jean Rhys seemingly felt very lost in terms of her identity and family and this type of homelessness is something we can find in

Antoinette's story as well. Her struggles with identity become even more apparent in this quote where she talks about her mother and their relationship:

> Once I heard her say that black babies were prettier than white babies. Was this the reason why I prayed so ardently to be black, and would run to the looking-glass in the morning to see if the miracle had happened? And though it never had, I tried again. Dear God, let me be black (Rhys 42).

These distraught feelings she had as a child complicated her relationship to her mother, making her feel disconnected from her. As Trivedi argues, Jean Rhys always felt the pain of being an outsider (61). She had a nurse as a child called Meta who strongly disliked her and was generally very mean to her: "Meta had shown me a world of fear and distrust, and I am still in that world" (Rhys 32). Many of Jean Rhys's hardships in life are reflected in her portrayal of Antoinette and they also have similar outlooks on life. Jean Rhys saw the darker sides of her surroundings, as did Antoinette who is not accustomed to feeling happy at all. Jean Rhys's own struggles in life might have inspired her to write Antoinette's character. With this in mind, it is still important to separate the author from the character, as the reader cannot assume that she is directly writing about herself.

Wide Sargasso Sea as a response to *Jane Eyre*: the colonial and racial themes

One cannot deny the racial undertones of Charlotte Brontë's portrayal of Bertha. The post-colonial themes are there and must be discussed in order to understand the work and its characters. According to Nygren, Bertha's colonial subject position must be considered for a true reading of her character (117). She is characterized as the colonial Other, a dark and savage woman. This is contrasted with "Jane's own pale, Anglican countenance" (Nygren 117). Meyer discusses the ambiguity of Bertha's race. Readers have for a long time believed her to be a white West Indian woman (252). Mr. Rochester describes her as being a very beautiful woman before they were married. He does however say: "Her family wished to secure me, because I was of a good race" (Brontë 332). This would insinuate that he considers Bertha to not be of "a good race", or at least not as good as his. Meyer argues that Bertha becomes black in the way she is constructed in the narrative (252). The ambiguity in her race is also marked by her mother being called Creole. This term in itself can be quite ambiguous as it was used in the 19th century to refer to both black and white people born in the West Indies (253). When the truth is revealed during the wedding in *Jane Eyre*, Mr. Rochester says: "Her mother, the Creole, was both a

madwoman and a drunkard!" (Brontë 320). Meyer argues that Mr. Rochester in this line uses these two common stereotypes associated with black people in the 19th century. Bertha is continuously described as a savage, dark, discolored woman with a swollen black face. These descriptions are not just dehumanizing in the efforts in making her appear as a wild animal; they are undoubtedly racist, though of course not atypical of nineteenth century racial discourse. These remarks come from both Mr. Rochester and Jane but ultimately it was Charlotte Brontë who put them on paper.

There are, as stated above, some aspects of Charlotte Brontë's life that could be considered to have inspired the writing of Bertha's character. However, Bertha's background, social status and ethnicity would not have been familiar to Charlotte Brontë. It could be argued that these elements of Bertha's character were created in order to make her a villain. Not just any villain, but a villain that a reader of the time would not have had a problem in grasping. If Bertha was written with a background and ethnicity similar to Jane, chances are readers of the time would not have had the desired reaction. The purpose of Bertha was to complicate events and to add an element of danger and this is done by giving Bertha a mysterious, foreign background. Mr. Rochester desires pity from both the reader and Jane in his retelling of his failed marriage. He feels cheated and considers himself to be the victim. Had Bertha been more like Jane, the situation would probably have been rather different.

The colonial themes also become apparent in Mr. Rochester's way of speaking about the West Indies. He feels a lot of contempt and, in many instances, disgust for the place. Everything is alien to him and he feels utter discomfort just by retelling his story to Jane. He hated his time living there and describes the relief he felt when he realized that he should bring his insane wife back to England. He speaks of "the sweet wind from Europe" (Brontë 336). England is the salvation for him and it is also the superior country. By going back home, he will be in control again. The imperialist aspect is therefore very much present in the novel. Back when the novel was published, these themes were perhaps not dwelled upon since they would not have stood out. In more modern times, however, the novel raises some discussion. Jean Rhys who had a similar background to that of Bertha decided to revise Charlotte Brontë's work and to write her own interpretation of the character's story.

In several letters, Jean Rhys talks about her writing of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The complete writing and publishing process of the book took 21 years. She talks about how she perceived Bertha's character in *Jane Eyre*, saying that she is necessary to the plot but that she is constantly portrayed as a stereotypical evil character. Jean Rhys argues that Bertha at least has to be plausible with a past so that the reader will know why she is the way she is and why

Mr. Rochester talks about her in the way that he does (Rhys 136). Jean Rhys is careful to point out that she admires Charlotte Brontë and her work and that her character Antoinette is not the same as Charlotte Brontë's Bertha. She explains that she wanted to tell Antoinette's story since she was not given a voice in *Jane Eyre*. She also wanted to dig deeper and unveil the real cruelty of Mr. Rochester. The character of Bertha clearly caught Jean Rhys's attention and inspired her to write the backstory of this character but at the same time she wished to create a new character of her own. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha's past was only discussed from Mr. Rochester point of view. Since there was not a great deal of information about her, Jean Rhys might have felt a need to make the character more justice and depict a backstory that was not as biased and stereotypical. It is also possible that Bertha being Creole could have sparked Jean Rhys's interest, especially considering the way Bertha was written.

Historical criticism: Mental Illnesses in the 19th Century

As with biographical criticism, it is essential to understand the basics of historical criticism and what it entails. Lynn argues that we cannot understand someone's life without having some knowledge about the time in which he or she lived (148). Historical criticism includes how "military, social, cultural, economic, scientific, intellectual, literary" aspects might help us interpret a work or an author (Lynn 148). According to Lynn, the reader needs to know the relevant history and use it in order to do historical criticism. The problem could be that it is hard to decide exactly what is relevant and what is not. If the reader asks him or herself if the history makes him or her understand the work better is a good solution for this. If the answer is yes, then it is relevant (163). The connection between literature and history is undeniable. Lynn argues that "if history and literature are both texts, then literature is potentially as much a context for history as history is for literature" (154).

New Historicism is slightly different since it questions the critics' position and how they have interpreted a work. According to Bennett & Royle, new historicism "distinguishes between the need for the interpretation of literary texts on the one hand, and the transparency of history on the other" (140). According to Hickling, new historicism emphasizes how historical value changes over time. Old historicism prioritizes: "the immutable and unchangeable notion of historical facts" (56). Old historicists are also more "traditional" and they focus on scholarly research in a slightly different way than new historicists do. As I apply historical criticism to the two novels, I will be focusing on the 19th and 20th centuries since that is when the two novels were published. *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847 and *Wide Sargasso*

Sea was published in 1966. These two separate times would have influenced how the authors decided to portray madness.

According to Showalter, the relationship between women and madness has been constructed in two ways. The first one is that madness was seen as one of the wrongs of a woman. The second one involves madness as "the essential feminine nature unveiling itself before the scientific male rationality (3). Madness is a female malady because more women than men were considered to experience it, and it is represented as feminine even when men experience it (4). This stereotype that was forced upon women came to be after the so-called first psychiatric revolution at the end of the 18th century. The symbolic gender of the insane changed from male to female. What made this a revolution was the view of lunatics themselves. Previously, lunatics had been viewed more as monsters who had to be locked up and were treated like animals; now they were instead seen as sick human beings (8).

Throughout the 19th century, it was very common for women's reproductive system to be seen as the cause of mental health problems. Women were stigmatized as more prone to insanity than men since their reproductive system made them unstable. It was also believed that it interfered with their sexual, emotional and rational control. (Appignanesi 91). According to Appignanesi, menstruation, childbirth and menopause had always played a part in the assessment of mental health (119). Essentially, anything related to the feminine was suspicious for the male doctors of that time. They thought that their conclusions based on their own science were the truth, excluding the female voice and reason completely. As Showalter argues, "uncontrolled sexuality seemed the major, almost defining symptom of insanity in women" (74). The question in this case would be how exactly to define "uncontrolled" is. Does this imply any sexual behavior considered immoral and happening outside of marriage? In this time, there was no sexual freedom for women and the expectations for how they should behave were not made by them. In asylums, any deviational behavior, behavior that was not lady-like, was severely punished. In Bethlem Hospital, a psychiatric hospital in London, female patients would be put in solitary confinement in the basement (81).

According to Showalter, the majority of the inmate population in public asylums by 1850 were women (17). A physician named William Black listed the causes of insanity in patients in 1810. Grief, religion and Methodism, love, jealousy, fevers and heredity were a few of the ones listed (Appignanesi 54-55). These terms are very broad and do not show any real understanding of psychology. Like Appignanesi argues, "generalizing across the spectrum of mental illness and its treatment is hazardous (56). Surely, the causes of insanity are a bit more complex than to just summarize them with a very broad term but at this time this was the

conclusion that was made. Insanity is a term with many definitions and it is a complex concept. In a time where science was not as established the way it is today, this really affected "insane" people in a bad way. It became very easy for anyone with deviant behavior to invoke suspicion in their surroundings, whether they could be classified as insane or not. Ultimately, sanity became harder to prove than madness: "conversely, for the individual named insane, it was sanity that became all but impossible to prove" (Appignanesi 96).

Class played a big role in the treatment of the insane. The rich could avoid the stigma by keeping them at home or in private care (Showalter 26). The middle class generally thought that the public asylums were a disgrace but when institutionalization became inevitable they preferred the cheaper private asylums. Insanity was an expensive disease so the class you were a part of really mattered if you had mental health issues. For the poor, public asylums might not have been the best option, but perhaps sometimes it was the only option. Treatments in the Victorian era involved refusing to discuss the feelings of the patient and his or her wishes were completely disregarded. This was standard for treatments in this era, instead they wanted to divert the mad individual's mind through "physical activity and communal recreation" (Showalter 61). This dismissal of the real need to actually talk about the problem in order to solve it is very likely to have hindered a potential recovery, if not even excluding it altogether.

How can these historical facts be applied to *Jane Eyre*? Bertha's character is defined by her flaws, the characteristics that portray her as insane. All these characteristics are directly related to femininity and femininity as a female malady. According to Showalter, Charlotte Brontë's explanations for Bertha's madness are all taken from the discourse of Victorian psychiatry. The transmission of madness was considered to be carried out by the mother since women were the prime carriers of madness. They were supposedly twice as likely to transmit it than men (67). This hereditary aspect is very much present in the novel since Mr. Rochester states that Bertha is mad and that her mother was too. Showalter argues that Bertha's madness is linked to female sexuality and "the periodicity of the menstrual cycle". Her worst attacks in the novel occur when the moon is blood red and broad and red" (67). Strovas states the same thing, saying that Bertha's attacks all align "with the monthly full moon" (390). This might have been a conscious choice on the author's part, connecting Bertha's madness to her reproductive system. Strovas further argues that Mr. Rochester "likens Bertha's insanity to her sexual enthusiasm and dark sexual immorality" (388). Showalter describes Bertha becoming "a monster of sexual appetite" (67). The connection here to the understanding of insanity in women in the 19th century is very clear. A woman's sexuality was one of the most immoral and sinful traits. Especially an "uncontrolled" sexuality. This extract of a review by Elizabeth Rigby

from 1848 is an example of a negative response to *Jane Eyre* because of its, at that time at least, controversial themes. It expresses some indignation towards Charlotte Brontë and her work:

> For the sake of disguising the female pen, there is nothing gained; for if we ascribe the book to a woman at all, we have no alternative but to ascribe it to one who has, for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of her own sex. (Rigby 185)

Elizabeth Rigby clearly thought *Jane Eyre* to be very immoral. Even though this review was written by a woman, she was still very upset about how Charlotte Brontë portrayed women, even saying that she had abandoned her own sex. She evidently believed that *Jane Eyre* defied all the ideals of what a woman should be like in that time. This sort of response might have been more expected from a man at that time but this shows that even some women thought that this novel was immoral. It demonstrates that many critics were a product of their time, regardless of their sex.

According to Showalter, the portrait of Bertha's character describes a time when it was common for women believed to be insane to be kept away hidden at home or to behave and be treated like animals in asylums with poor conditions (67). Bertha's violence, rage, her inhuman characterization and her isolation became a powerful model for Victorian readers and psychiatrists. According to Showalter, the characterization of Bertha even influenced medical accounts of female insanity. In *Treatments of the Insane Without Mechanical Restraints* (1856) John Conolly argued that insane women should be treated in asylums rather than at home and Bertha's character supported his argument (68). It is interesting how this conclusion was made and that the novel had that much of an impact.

In the conversation when Jane hears Mr. Rochester's account of his marriage to Bertha, he says that she was shut up in a lunatic asylum after their honeymoon. He says that he wishes to spare Jane the details but reveals that he lived with Bertha for four years and doctors eventually stated that she was mad. It seems as though she was locked up during their time in the West Indies and then they went to England. Mr. Rochester states that he had an epiphany of sorts one night. He sensed that "Hope" was talking to him, telling him to go back to England and to bring Bertha with him. He is also "told" to "see that she is cared for as her condition demands" (Brontë 336). When they come to England he chooses not to give her any treatment. Therefore, he does not care for her as condition demands. Mr. Rochester chooses to lock her up at Thornfield and to have someone else guard her. After all it was not uncommon for rich people to keep their insane relatives at home in this time. Nygren argues that if Bertha was mad before she came to England, staying at Thornfield definitely made it worse (119). The portrayal of Bertha's madness might be based on Victorian psychiatry, and its treatment is similar in the

sense that no one talks to her about her feelings. She does not, however, get to do any physical activity. Her treatment consists mainly of simple containment, keeping her in one place and never letting her out. The attic is her prison. The question that arises is whether she would have been better off in a public asylum. Some might argue that Mr. Rochester did the right thing by keeping her at home instead. However, it would also be possible to argue that Mr. Rochester's decision was not made with Bertha's best interests at heart. He is instead looking out for himself. By keeping her hidden he is protecting his reputation and his pride. To have a wife who has been deemed insane would have been, especially in these times, a very shameful thing. If she is locked away no one will know she exists and he will remain protected. It is of course impossible to know for sure what would have happened to her if things had been different. A public asylum would most likely not have offered an efficient and humane treatment. The ignorance and lack of medicinal skills of the time would possibly still have made her a prisoner.

Thorpe argues that re-reading *Jane Eyre* after reading Jean Rhys's novel might make Charlotte Brontë's work seem more dated due to the "coarse assumptions about madness" (101). He also claims that it was easier for Charlotte Brontë to write Bertha as a means to an end since she was just a figure in the novel. Thorpe further discusses how the depiction of Bertha's character was also a way to raise sympathy for Mr. Rochester: "Of course, the blackening of the dehumanized creature from the West Indian past readily serves Brontë's purpose of winning sympathy for the deceived and deluded Rochester from both Jane and those of the Victorian audience prone to racial prejudice" (101). What Jean Rhys did, according to Thorpe, was to "write clear of" these racial prejudices (105). Thorpe argues that Bertha and *Jane Eyre* as a novel are the products of Charlotte Brontë's imagination and time. The views on madness in her novel are therefore rather different from the views found in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Bertha, in terms of her madness, is depicted in the way that she is because of the attitudes of the time. People were not familiar with psychology or proper treatments for certain conditions.

Historical Criticism: Mental Illness in the 20th century

According to Showalter, the term "hysterical" had become almost interchangeable with "feminine" in literature by the end of the 19th century. It stood for all extremes of emotionality (129). Sexual frustration was a significant cause of hysteria, according to traditional thinking. Women were more liable to hysteria than men because "the woman is more often under the

necessity of endeavoring to conceal her feelings" (Showalter 132). This proposes that men never feel that necessity. But why would women? In this time, women were still supposed to be the quieter sex and what they were expected to talk about was definitely not their feelings. Appignanesi argues that hysteria took on a supernatural shape due to Christianity. It became a sign of demonic possession and was directly associated with the devil (162). In this case, religion interfered with supposed science. This would mean that it became quite easy for people to start pointing fingers and saying that he or she is conspiring with the devil just because that person acted in a perhaps deviant way. This can be likened to other stages in history, for example the witch trials of the 17th century. It was a time when fear and ignorance made people blame each other for what they did not understand.

Psychoanalysis was introduced in the 1920s. According to Showalter, this "offered the twentieth century's most influential theory of femininity and female sexuality" (195). Women had in some respects of social position actually benefitted from the war. Women had to step in and work in a way that had not been acceptable before. It was believed that since women had experienced a real crisis with the war, they had grown stronger and would be less prone to mental breakdowns (196). This attitude is rather degrading towards women since it implies that their minds can handle very little. Several years after the war, the frequency of female hysteria kept decreasing. However, Showalter argues that the war continued to be fought in the psyche for many women after the war since they had to readjust (197).

The turn of the century was a period where the definitions of both masculinity and femininity had been revised. The postwar period, however, was one of renewed conservatism about sex roles and gender issues (Showalter 197). During the postwar period, the female malady no longer had connections to hysteria, but a new clinical term was introduced instead: schizophrenia. Four symptoms for schizophrenia were considered to be: "lack of affect, disturbed associations, autism and ambivalence" (Showalter 204). The three most common treatment methods for schizophrenia in England were insulin shock, electroshock and lobotomy. There have been debates about whether these methods actually work but they have never been fully discredited. In the 1960s, madness "entered the mainstream" and patients stayed in the psychiatric wards of general hospitals (Showalter 248). Women came together and challenged "both the psychoanalytic and the medical categories of traditional psychiatry" for the first time in the 1970s (Showalter 250).

Jean Rhys wrote her novel around one hundred years after *Jane Eyre* had been published. In terms of Antoinette's state of mind and deteriorating mental health, Jean Rhys offers a completely different perspective from than Charlotte Brontë's portrayal of Bertha. This

is mainly because there are actually two perspectives involved in Rhys's novel: both Antoinette's and Mr. Rochester's. Mr. Rochester is, like Antoinette, an outsider in this story since he is not a part of her culture and cannot understand it at all. He is hostile towards this change and in turn also towards her. He is superior to her and does not consider her an equal, even remotely so. Their marriage is what destroys her and leaves her without a voice. Emery criticizes this portrayal, saying that Jean Rhys portrays women with no ambitions. They always seem uncapable of overcoming difficulties and they always seem weak and lacking in courage (10). Trivedi has a different opinion, saying that Antoinette was vulnerable and in the end showed what it felt like to be a rebel (60). Antoinette is probably more a symbol of the inferior woman in that time, a woman who is forced into a marriage that cannot survive the culture shock that defines it. She is probably not a rebel either, instead a symbol of a woman with mental health issues who does not get the help she needs in a time where psychiatry was still very limited. The stereotypical gender roles would still have been very much present when Jean Rhys lived and this is evident in her writing. Women were still inferior to men.

Just as hysteria was associated with devil worship, Antoinette's madness is hinted to have connections with Obeah and voodoo. According to Muste, Obeah is an Afro- Caribbean black magic (73). Christophine, Antoinette's childhood nurse, is known for being involved in these practices and Mr. Rochester claims that it is her fault that Antoinette's mental state is rapidly falling apart. Christophine does not have a problem telling him off and tells him that "you want her money but you don't want her. It is in your mind to pretend she is mad" (Rhys 96). Christophine is essentially telling him that he can call her mad because he is a man. By oppressing Antoinette this way, he has the power. Mr. Rochester blames Christophine for Antoinette's madness and Christophine blames him for it. It is up to the reader to decide for him-or herself how he or she wants to see it. Christophine cares about Antoinette deeply since she has known her for so long and tries to treat her. She lets Antoinette sleep a lot, she gives her alcohol and some medicine which she will not name. In that sense, there is some suspicion around what the treatment actually does to Antoinette. There are other hints at supernatural connections, for example when Antoinette tells Mr. Rochester about how she fell asleep outside in the moonlight. Christophine had told her off in the morning, saying that it is very bad to sleep in the moonlight when the moon is full since it can cause madness (Rhys 49).

Mr. Rochester cannot be given the full blame for Antoinette's madness, although he is definitely a big factor. It is hinted early on that Antoinette's mother had mental health issues so in a way the hereditary aspect has to be taken into account, just like in *Jane Eyre* with Bertha. Jean Rhys gives Antoinette a dark past with a secret that Mr. Rochester eventually finds

out. Antoinette's background is supposed to keep the reader wondering whether there might be any truth in what Daniel's letter told Mr. Rochester. In many ways, Antoinette's madness is defined by the different identities given to her, the identities she cannot keep since she cannot fit in. She is neither black or white, she loves her culture but she cannot be a part of it. Mr. Rochester gives her a new identity by calling her Bertha. She questions him, saying: "Bertha is not my name. you are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeah too" (Rhys 88). Muste states that Mr. Rochester redefines her identity and in turn contributes to her madness (75). Her name, Antoinette, is the true identity she has left and he takes that away from her too in the end. She is aware of what he is doing but cannot stop it. She never identifies with the name Bertha in the end, but she has been broken by Mr. Rochester's control over her. Even in the last part of the novel when she is locked away, she reflects on her name: "Names matter, like when he wouldn't call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking glass" (Rhys 106-107). She has been broken by the patriarchy and the power that Mr. Rochester holds over her. Since they are married, he gets to own what she previously owned. She no longer has a voice. A woman of that time became their husband's belonging. It would take some time before these stereotypical gender roles would change.

Conclusion

The stories of Bertha and Antoinette are rather different, but they both meet the same end. Both of them live isolated lives where they essentially have no one to trust or to confide in. Bertha, being in the possession of a rich man, is locked up in his home simply because he can. Antoinette, once rich, becomes someone else's property and her fortune is no longer hers to keep. In both these stories, the characters are portrayed as mad. However, the difference between Bertha and Antoinette is that the reader is given information about Antoinette's past that explains her madness. This is not exactly the case with Bertha since she does not have her own voice. In both of the novels, it would be safe to say that captivity was a defining factor for making the characters' mental health issues significantly worse. It also becomes clear how *Wide Sargasso Sea* is written as a response to *Jane Eyre* and its racial and colonial themes. Bertha's character is an undoubtedly racist portrayal of a West Indian woman. The history behind the different views on madness and the history of the authors' lives combined with accounts of their own words provide a deeper insight into the characters. It clarifies, at least to some extent,

how the characters were created and why they were created in that particular way. It also shows that a biographical and a historical perspective go hand in hand when analyzing a novel.

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