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### Abstract

'How many islands are mentioned in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*?'<sup>1</sup> It is a question which I sometimes ask when teaching the novel, to catch out the lazy ones. 'One', chorus those who have only seen the film, which is set in Jamaica. The more observant ones point out there are two, the Jamaica of Spanish town and Coulibri; and the 'honeymoon' island, where Antoinette spent her childhood at Grandbois. 'And then there's the island of England, of course,' note the thoughtful.

LOUIS JAMES

## How Many Islands Are There in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*?

'How many islands are mentioned in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*?<sup>1</sup> It is a question which I sometimes ask when teaching the novel, to catch out the lazy ones. 'One', chorus those who have only seen the film, which is set in Jamaica. The more observant ones point out there are two, the Jamaica of Spanish town and Coulibri; and the 'honeymoon' island, where Antoinette spent her childhood at Grandbois. 'And then there's the island of England, of course,' note the thoughtful.

Yet the question is more than an observance test. For the novel, as I will show, is not about one, or even three, but of several islands, – geographical, racial, imagined. Firstly, geographical. The story begins with the Cosways 'marooned' on the Coulibri estate on the English-dominated island of Jamaica. Their isolation is intensified by the fact that Antoinette's mother and their family servant, Christophine came from Martinique, an island predominantly French and Catholic. Christophine's friend Maillotte, 'not from Jamaica', is perhaps from still another island (p. 18). Baptiste was born on the 'honeymoon island', but has spent most of his life on St. Kitts (p. 75).

The 'honeymoon island' where Grandbois is situated is another island again, and not Martinique. Christophine tells Antoinette to leave Grandbois and 'visit your cousin in Martinique' (p. 91). The family stay at Grandbois, presumably, after they have come to Jamaica. Christophine is given to Antoinette as a wedding present after they have arrived in Jamaica (p. 18), yet when Antoinette has her vision of the rats at Grandbois – 'In that little bedroom', as she tells 'Rochester' (p. 69) – it is Christophine who warns her not to sleep in the moonlight.

A clue to the identity of the Cosway's 'honeymoon island', may be given in the name of the fishing village where they land, Massacre. For Massacre is a fishing village on the leeward coast of Dominica, lying below the long climb to the holiday cottage Jean Rhys's father built in the mountains, a house surrounded by a verandah where, as in the story, stood a telescope. Jean Rhys used similar clues elsewhere, as when she uses the geographical coordinates of the island to establish Anna Morgan comes from Dominica in *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) (p. 15).<sup>2</sup>

At this point, geography shifts into the symbolic, for the name 'Massacre' refers not only to a specific island, but to the ominous presence of forgotten historical disasters as to a specific place. As the night-long crowing of the cock foretells betrayal. Jean Rhys also sets Coulibri Estate set near Spanish Town in Jamaica. Jean Rhys never visited Jamaica, and the landscape she portrays is totally alien to that part of the island. The description rather indicates her lush childhood island of Dominica. So does the name. Though there may be several 'Coulibris' (the name means 'humming bird'), Jean Rhys knew well the Coulibri Estate in Dominica, situated on Grand Bay next to Genever, the ancestral home of her great grandmother. It was the destruction of Genever by a mob of emancipated slaves in 1844 that Jean Rhys remembered when describing the burning of Coulibri in the novel.

Imaginatively and descriptively, then, Coulibri and Grandbois at times appear to be on one island, and many readers, as the film, confuse the two. Yet in the narration, Jean Rhys is careful to distinguish between them. For the 'honeymoon island', Grandbois, is a Caribbean Eden, the world of childhood innocence. Although Christophine was 'given' to Antoinette as a slave, there is no sense of the slave relationship; Christophine is Annette's closest support and Antoinette's surrogate mother. For Antoinette, Grandbois is an unfallen world, 'sacred to the sun' (p. 109). On her return to it Antoinette behaves with the confidence and sense of belonging attributed in Jamaica to her black friend Tia, 'for whom fires lit, stones did not cut, who never cried' (p. 20). Antoinette swims in the pool at Grandbois, unafraid of the monster crab, of snakes, or red ants. 'This is my place, and everything is on our side,' she declares (p. 62).

The world of Jamaica, on the other hand, is a paradise lost. It is an Eden fallen through the horrors of slavery, colonialism, class, and the materialist worship of money. Antoinette says, 'Our (Coulibri) garden was large and beautiful as the Garden in the Bible – the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild' (p. 16). Its exotic beauty is ominous; the wonderful, sweet-smelling octopus orchid menacing. 'I never went near it' (p. 17). In Jamaica Antoinette is aware of herself as an alien, and she envies Tia her natural affinity with the place. Obeah, too, turns threatening. In early childhood it was so close to her she understood it instinctively. But in a Coulibri being put in British order by the newly arrived Mr. Mason, its magic bursts menacingly into her self-consciousness.

I was certain that hidden in the room (behind the old black press?) there was a dead man's dried hand, white chicken feathers, a cock with its throat cut, dying slowly, slowly. Drop by drop the blood was falling into a red bason and I imagined I could hear it. No one had ever spoken to me about obeah – but I knew what I would find if I dared to look. Then Christophine came in smiling and pleased to see me. Nothing alarming ever happened and I forgot, or told myself I had forgotten. (pp. 26-7)

The portrayal of place elides with the question, what is 'real'? The film version of the book is surely wrong to portray the objects of obeah ritual here as *physically* present in the room. Their reality is in the mind. Later, after receiving the fatal letter from Daniel Cosway impugning Antoinette, Rochester wanders into a ruined house haunted, it is said, by a dead priest (pp. 86-7). He feels a strange peace in the green light, and stands motionless. But is there a house? Returning, he tells Baptiste that he has followed an old paved road. Baptiste is insistent. There is no such road. When a girl carrying an offering of flowers sees him, screams, and runs, it is intimated what has happened. Just as Antoinette empathetically entered for a moment the world of obeah, so Rochester, in his alienation from Antoinette, has entered the dimension of the zombi. As he reads, 'A zombi is a dead person who seems to be alive or a living person who is dead ... sometimes to be propitiated with sacrifices or offerings of flowers and fruit' (p. 89).

If the novel explores psychically determined dimensions of reality, it questions the very meaning of 'place'. Thus, when Antoinette and 'Rochester' arrive at Grandbois, they debate the reality of their respective worlds:

'Is it true,' she said, 'that England is like a dream? Because one of my friends who married an Englishman wrote and told me so. She said this place London is like a cold dark dream sometimes. I want to wake up.'

'Well,' I answered annoyed, 'that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream.'

'But how can rivers and mountains and the sea be unreal?'

'More easily,' she said, 'much more easily. Yes a big city must be like a dream.'

'No, this is unreal and like a dream,' I thought. (p. 67)

And this debate is repeated elsewhere. Later, for instance, when Antoinette visits Christophine seeking the potion that will recover 'Rochester's' love, she muses about England, 'rose pink in the geography book map ... Exports, coal, iron, wool ... I must remember about chandeliers and dancing, about swans and roses and snow. And snow.' 'England,' asks Christophine sharply. 'You think there is such a place?' (p. 92).

The question returns with tragic insistency when Antoinette has crossed the Atlantic. Imprisoned in Thronfield Hall, she finds herself in a strange, 'cardboard' world:

As I walk along the passages I wish I could see behind the cardboard. They tell me I am in England, but I don't believe them. We lost our way to England. When? Where? ... (p.147)

(That afternoon we went to England. there was grass and olive-green water and tall trees looking into the water. This, I thought, is England.) (p. 150)

'Rochester' in turn, while entranced with Grandbois, has had a sense that he is enclosed, shut out from 'reality'. As he says:

It was a beautiful place – wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I'd find myself thinking, 'What I see is nothing – I want what it *hides* – that is not nothing'. (p. 73)

Both Antoinette and 'Rochester' 'thirst' for another level of reality behind the 'mask'. The extraordinary fiction of the Guyanese writer Wilson Harris is different in many ways to that of Jean Rhys, but both centrally important Caribbean writers continually explore the interplay of place and self. Thus, at the centre of Harris's best-known work, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960),<sup>3</sup> the narrator stutters that the expedition into the interior is held back by 'fear of acknowledging the true substance of life' (p. 59). The debate about the 'true substance of life' is also the key to *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

The nature of this reality, in both writers, is neither static nor single. It exists in contraries. Rochester is wrong in thinking there is a simple 'It' behind the mask. The child Antoinette empathises with the intense beauty of Caribbean nature as a child at Grandbois. But for her too, it is not the only reality. It is at the idyllic Grandbois, as we have noted, that she has her first terrifying intimation of evil, the spectral rats in the moonlight. Rochester destroys but also creates. 'I never wished to live before I knew you,' Antoinette tells Rochester (p. 76), and if this is a lover's hyperbole, it is wrong to dismiss the 'real' happiness that both of them share. The 'reality' is both benevolent and hostile. On the first night at Grandbois, a beautiful 'gentleman' moth (signifying 'Rochester?') is singed in the candle. Rochester saves it, and Antoinette, to prevent it coming back, extinguishes the candles, 'It's light enough by the stars,' says Antoinette (p. 68). After the catastrophe, the moth image returns, pessimistically: "'It doesn't matter,'" she answered calmly, "what I believe or you believe, because we can do nothing about it, we are like these." *She flicked a dead moth off the table*' (my italics) (p. 105). The 'reality' of beauty where 'it's light enough by the stars', and the dark world lit only by destructive fire co-exist, in constant interaction.

A central image of the novel is fire. 'Fires always lit' for Tia, and the phrase returns to mind when the blacks fire the great house, and the Cosways flee for their lives, Pierre and their pet parrot killed in the blaze. The image is one of destruction. Yet on another dimension, it is the slaves' resistance to the continued oppression of the whites – the cause for the riot, it is suggested, is Mason's plan to give the blacks' livelihood to imported Indian workers (p. 30).

The burning of Coulibri mirrors the Heraclitian fire in the tragic cycle of Caribbean history, both destroying and creative. Throughout the novel, the conscious progress of the story has been shadowed by Antoinette's sequence of three dreams, and as the book's climax approaches, the final

vision brings together all the elements in the book, no longer intimated, but sharp with the brilliant intensity of flame:

Then I turned round and saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it. I saw the grandfather clock and Aunt Cora's patchwork, all colours, I saw orchids and the stephanotis and the jasmine and the tree of life in flames. I saw the chandelier and the red carpet downstairs and the bamboos and the tree ferns, the gold ferns and the silver, and the soft green velvet of the moss on the garden wall. I saw my doll's house and the books and the picture of the Miller's Daughter. I heard the parrot call as he did when he saw a stranger, *Qui est là? Qui est là?* and the man who hated me was calling too, Bertha! Bertha! (p. 155)

The image of the parrot, which fell to its death in flames because Mason had clipped its wings, links with Antoinette, who in Charlotte Brontë's novel is fated also to fall burning from the battlements of Thornfield Hall. But Antoinette in her newly discovered passion is no longer 'clipped' by Rochester. 'The wind caught my hair,' she dreams, 'and it streamed out like wings' (p. 155). The name Coulibri itself means 'humming bird', the flash of light suspended on invisible wings.

Just previous to this Antoinette has recovered her dress, red – the colour of fire and passion. It is scented with the Caribbean – 'the smell of vetivert and frangipanni, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering. The smell of the sun and the smell of the rain' (p. 151). But there is a final twist. Magically, the image of a world in flames focuses into that of controlled light and meditation, the candle that she carries to perform 'what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burnt up again to light me along the dark passage' (p. 156). It is a brilliant image of her own survival, and also of the human spirit; an echo of St. John 1, v – 'the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended [overcame] it not.'

There are many islands in the novel – geographical, social and mental – and the complexity of the Caribbean region is used by Rhys to intimate the fragmentation of West Indian experience. But it is also a stage for the search for 'the substance of life', resolved in the profoundly ambivalent image of fire, and Antoinette's discovery of her one true self. There are many islands in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. There is one island, the creative human spirit.

#### NOTES

1. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968).
2. Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (London; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).
3. Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (London: Faber, 1960).