

\*Note before reading: this is an abridged version of a longer paper, adapted for a conference presentation. The sections in italics are the parts which were shortened/edited for this presentation. This is especially important in the literature review, as you might be shortening yours as well. I have highlighted important parts, and explained them in bold in parentheses.

## **Introduction**

While Antoinette (Cosway) Mason is typically accepted as the schizophrenic heroine, whose inherited madness is her downfall, Rochester's sanity is more or less universally accepted, or at least never brought into question. This assumption is problematic due to the fact that a majority of the evidence contributing to the case against Antoinette's sanity is provided from Rochester's point of view. In analyzing the frequently over-generalized and over-looked narrative of Rochester in comparison to the narrative of Antoinette, it becomes clear that the women of the novel are ultimately not the only characters who are mentally unsound. Antoinette remains relatively sane until the final segments of the novel; rather, it is Rochester who plays the role of the madman throughout most of the story. By looking closely at Rochester's perception of his environment in comparison to the other characters, as well as the way other characters perceive him, Rochester's mental instability becomes apparent. Despite his bride commonly being read as the schizophrenic, Rochester displays several traits of schizophrenia throughout his narrative. His projected madness eventually moves beyond the scope of his environment and is finally projected upon his new bride.

## **Abridged Literature Review**

*Because Wide Sargasso Sea is an adaptation/pastiche of Jane Eyre, I was not surprised when I found many critics who assumed the insanity that Antoinette possessed in Bronte's novel. I looked at three critics in particular whose works revolved around Antoinette's madness; however, I found many more who were making similar assumptions. Kathy Mezei and Mona Fayad both account for Antoinette's*

*madness through the patriarchal oppression of marriage, while M.M. Adjarian places the blame on the post-colonial environment of Antoinette's childhood. Many of these critics based their assumptions on narrative information gathered from Rochester's view point and believe she is mad before she is locked away. I found this to be problematic since Rochester seems to be a less reliable, and a less sane narrator than is generally assumed.*

According to Michel Foucault, "madness, as simple delirium, is projected onto others; as perfect unconsciousness, it is entirely accepted" (Foucault 263). A mad person is unaware of the manifestation of madness in themselves, but sees madness in everything that surrounds them. This is particularly true in schizophrenia in which "patients do not consider themselves to be initiating their acts or thoughts. Instead, the object itself is thought to be leading or triggering the experience" (Chung 36).

Schizophrenics therefore do not see how they are connected to their perceptions of the reality that surrounds them and they often interpret their emotions as being caused by unrelated environmental stimuli. Since a mad person cannot reflect upon themselves and recognize their own madness, the narrator then becomes an unreliable source from which to ascertain mental stability. Rochester's view of Antoinette's descent into madness cannot be taken at face value. By observing the literary spaces through the narrator's perceptions, the reader is able to see the manifestations of that character's mental state. (Here is where I transition from my literature review into my own argument, explaining how the two are linked and restating my thesis).

### **Main Argument**

In the novel, the character who is experiencing mental instability has limited objects on which to project their madness. Literary space is one of these objects. Literary space can be seen in several different ways. Richard Gullón explains, literary space is "a space that is not a reflection of anything, but rather, an invention of the invention which is the narrator, whose perceptions (transferred to images)

engender it” (Gullón 12). The spaces represented in a novel can therefore be perceived differently by each character who encounters them. Although space in the novel may be similar to something that exists in the real world, because of the filter provided by the characters in the novel, it is never truly identical to its real world counterpart. Once viewed through the eyes of a character, “space... is filled with memories and hopes which in some way allows it to be personified, felt as a reality whose consistence varies according to who observes it or experiences it” (Gullón 12). Literary space, then, becomes the perfect canvas onto which the madness of the characters can be projected. The inherent neutrality of literary space makes it a reliable medium through which to interpret the mental state of multiple narrators. Because of the abundance of perspectives, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* provides a text rich with the possibility to untangle the mental state of its characters through their perceptions of the spaces that surround them.

*Rochester’s narrative sections provide evidence of his schizophrenia, such as persecutory delusions, sensory overload, misinterpreted stimuli, memory loss and subject/object split. In comparison to Antoinette’s narrative, and the brief glimpses of minor characters’ perceptions, Rochester seems to be the most mentally unstable character in the novel. I will go over some of the symptoms Rochester displays. (Creating a map for the listener)*

Rochester’s narrative begins in the second part of the novel. On the journey with Antoinette to Granbois, as Rochester is observing the space around him he thinks “everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near” (Rhys 63). Rochester sees his new surroundings vividly. They are all perceived in unpleasant excess. This is the first manifestation of Rochester’s madness in his surroundings. According to Jay Neugeboren, “one of the salient traits of schizophrenia [is] the inability to filter out stimuli—especially sights and sounds” (115). The overload of visual stimulation on the ride

to Granbois is not felt by the other characters in the novel. In fact, the groundskeeper even comments on the beautiful weather, perceiving not on an over-stimulating environment, but rather a pleasant one.

Another symptom of schizophrenia is “a tendency for ambiguous stimuli to be misinterpreted as threatening” (Phillips et al. 518). This becomes apparent when Rochester wanders off into the forest of Granbois Estate. He thinks, “I had reached the forest and you cannot mistake the forest. It is hostile” (Rhys 94). Rochester is projecting human emotion onto the inhuman forest, perceiving it as a threat. While there is nothing inherently threatening about this forest, Rochester nonetheless views it as having a negative personification. Antoinette often explored similar places as a child “where there was no road, no path, no track” (Rhys 25), much like the hostile forest that Rochester gets lost in. Instead of feeling threatened by her environment, Antoinette views, even the dangerous parts of nature, as “better than people” (Rhys 25). Unlike the people who surrounded young Antoinette, her natural environment had no negative intentions, no hateful feelings. Rather, the environment merely existed around Antoinette and she perceived it as neutral.

Rochester has had persecutory delusions previously in the novel as well. Like diagnosed paranoid schizophrenics who “complain that they are being watched, followed, [and] poisoned,” (Chung 31) Rochester feels targeting in these ways throughout the novel. The afternoon that Rochester got lost in the “enemy trees” (Rhys 95), he displayed signs of paranoia in regards to his environment. Rochester narrates, “I stood still, so sure I was being watched that I looked over my shoulder” (Rhys 94). Of course there was nothing there. Not a soul was following him in the forest, and yet Rochester displays these signs of paranoia. Rochester does not own his paranoia, believing it to stem from his own mind. Instead, he projects its source onto his environment, certain that it is the forest that is the source of his negative emotions.

Finally, when Rochester begins to truly think that his new wife is mad, when his delusions are at their worst, he begins to self-medicate. According to a study done on schizophrenics, not only are these patients twice as likely to abuse alcohol as the normal population, “the presented data indicate that coping with negative symptoms by means of alcohol is possible in up to 42% of the comorbid patients” (Hambrecht and Häfner 1161). This form of self-medication is seen in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rochester is wholly projecting his madness upon Antoinette, and despite the views of others he is pitying his perceived situation. Rochester states, “I listened to the ceaseless night noises outside, and watched the procession of small moths and beetles fly into the candle flames,” (Rhys 115). The noises are too much for him to bear, again the manifestation of sensory-overload. To remedy this, and ease his mind he “then poured out a drink of rum and swallowed. At once the night noises drew away, became distant, bearable, even pleasant” (Rhys 115). After his brain is unable to properly filter out the sounds of the bugs that are attracted to his candle, Rochester takes a drink. Instantly he perceives that he can better manage his surroundings. The alcohol acts as a means by which Rochester copes with his schizophrenic perception of his environment. **(Note how I use evidence to support my argument, but I am not arguing exactly what the other research papers I use to back up my claims are).**

*Although there is plenty of evidence that Antoinette does go mad, it does not appear until after Rochester has locked her away. Other characters recognize that Antoinette is not as mad as Rochester perceives her to be. Christophine tells Rochester “it is in your mind to pretend she is mad. I know it” (Rhys 145). She does not believe that Antoinette is truly mad yet. Rather, Christophine recognizes that Rochester is projecting his own madness (unbeknownst to him) onto his bride. The other servants in the house avoid Rochester by the end of his narrative, looking at him as though he is mad. Rochester, being a white male, is the one in power and is able to lock away a sane Antoinette based on his delusions, without being questioned by society.*

As Foucault quotes Pinel, “‘Citizen, I am convinced that these madmen are so intractable only because they have been deprived of air and liberty’” (Pinel qtd in Foucault 242). Thornfield Hall is the prison that deprives Antoinette. It is her own private cell, much like those that Pinel’s madmen were locked away in before the rise of the asylum. Antoinette recognizes that it is her imprisonment that is driving her mad. One afternoon when she is taken out of the attic, she marvels, “there was grass and olive-green water and tall trees looking into the water. This, I thought, is England. If I could be here I’d get well again and the sound in my head would stop” (Rhys 165). After being locked inside at Thornfield Hall, the outside world of England seems, to Antoinette, that it would cure her. She is even lucid enough on this trip to buy herself a knife while Grace Poole is sleeping. Antoinette feels as though her well-being is threatened and needs something to protect her. She was not kept under lock and key in the West Indies, and displayed more traits of sanity than insanity. It is this same freedom that would bring Antoinette back into the realm of the sane.

Antoinette’s narrative, in comparison to Rochester’s had been rather unified, up until the final section in which she is locked in the attic. According to Mezei, “in contrast to her earlier narration, she now speaks in the present, digresses in to the past (analepsis), and into the future through a dream (prolepsis)” (207). Her narrative moves rapidly between the room in which she is locked away currently, memories of the past on the island and in England, and her predictive dream like state. It is this lost concept of time and self in Antoinette’s narration that truly points to her madness. Antoinette asks Grace Poole, her care taker, “when was last night?” (Rhys 163). She can no longer distinguish time and has trouble with her memory, much like the trouble Rochester experienced on the island.

Although Antoinette’s memory seemed relatively stable up until this point, her working memory stops functioning properly, and recent events become impossible for her to recall. While she is on the island with Rochester, she tells him “I am not a forgetting person” (Rhys 121), and up until her imprisonment in the attic, the reader had no reason to disbelieve her statement based on her narrative.

Once in the attic however, she cannot even remember the events of the previous day. Antoinette is painfully aware of her memory loss saying “[my dress] reminded of me something I must do. I will remember I thought. I will remember quite soon now” (Rhys 168). Eventually through her dreams she does remember what she had set out to do, but her task is that of a madwoman, one of destruction and suicide.

### **Conclusion**

*With this evidence in mind, it is not Antoinette’s childhood or patriarchal oppression through her marriage to Rochester that drives her mad, although these are present in the novel. Instead, it is Rochester’s projected madness that urges him to lock her away, leading to Antoinette’s ultimate insanity. (Your conclusions will likely be longer than this)*