

# A Comparison of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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## I. Introduction

Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre*, was first published in 1847 under the pen name of Currer Bell. The novel was her first and was immediately recognized as a work of genius. This book is fiction, but is based on events that she actually experienced. The story takes place in the second and third decades of the Nineteenth Century in northern England.

Jean Rhys' novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, was first published in 1966. It was published after several earlier versions had been rejected by publishers. Now many critics call this book a masterpiece. This book is also fiction and takes place in the 1830s in the West Indies' countries of Jamaica and Dominica, and at the end, in northern England.

In this paper, this author will try to argue that although the setting of events in *Wide Sargasso Sea* are different from *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys should not be regarded as highly as an original story writer as her reputation says she is. I will show by comparing events that took place in both novels and by the fact that Jean Rhys has used some of the same characters used in Charlotte Brontë's book that *Wide Sargasso Sea* should be considered as a copy of *Jane Eyre*. Brontë introduced four characters Rhys also used and those four, Edward Rochester, Antoinette (Bertha), Richard Mason, and Grace Poole, played important roles in both books.

Leavis (1980) says, "Where Charlotte Brontë is so superior to Dickens is in

her creation of positives — the demonstration of the conditions for Jane's growth into full life and the possession of lasting happiness are entirely original and entirely convincing." This seems to be just the opposite of Jean Rhys. Her book is full of negatives and lasting sadness and misery and as will be seen in this paper her story is not really original. In *Jane Eyre*, Mr. Rochester is seen as the ideal of masculine tenderness and masculine strength of character. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Mr. Rochester is seen as a weak, greedy, no-for-good who has lost control of his life.

Religion plays a part in both books. Jane meets religion in three different forms. The first is when she goes to Lowood School and meets the teachers and Mr. Brocklehurst, who is the unlikable, strict and stingy director of the school. The second time is when she goes to the church to marry Mr. Rochester and is suddenly confronted with the fact that he already has a wife and her dilemma as to go ahead and accompany him to Europe or to shun him and live life the moral way that she believes in. The third time is when she is penniless and homeless and meets her long lost cousin, St. John Rivers, and later has to decide whether to marry or not marry him and then decide whether to accompany him as a missionary to India as either his wife or as his cousin.

Antoinette also meets religion three times. The first is when her family home at *Nelson's Rest* is burnt to the ground and she loses her little brother in the fire and she learns about the superstitions surrounding the death of the family parrot in the fire. The second time is when she goes to the convent and her associations with the nuns and other students. The third time is in her relationship with her maid, Christophine, and her plea to have Christophine use voodoo in an attempt to improve the conditions of her marriage to Mr. Rochester.

Both books also present the different places where the heroine lives. In the case of Jane, she leaves a place she hates, *Gateshead Hall*, for school, *Lowood*

Institution, which at first is intolerable but later improves, and then goes to Thornfield Hall, which is the home of Edward Rochester and is very enjoyable while he is present but dull and boring when is absent. She then is homeless for a short time until she starts living a happy, enjoyable, but unfulfilling life with her three long lost cousins at Morton and later at Moor's End. She is then able to spend the last days of her life reunited with Rochester, whom she marries and devotes her whole life to.

Antoinette is forced to leave her family home, Coulibri Estate, when it is destroyed by fire and goes to live for a short time with her Aunt Cora, before going to the convent. Then after her marriage to Rochester, she goes to Massacre in Dominica in the Windward Islands and then when the marriage sours, they go to Spanish Town in Jamaica. Finally she accompanies Rochester to England where she is kept a prisoner.

## **II. Background of the Books**

Each book consists of three sections, called *volumes* in Jane Eyre and *parts* in Wide Sargrasso Sea. In both books, the first volume (part) concerns the young heroine: Jane's childhood days and experiences that helped shape her later life and Antoinette's (later known as Bertha) childhood days and events that also contributed to her later going mad. The second part (volume) of each book is about both Jane's and Antoinette's meeting with and relationships with Mr. Edward Rochester and includes both the happy moments and the bitter moments. The third section of each book is about the results of the relationship that each woman has with Rochester. Jane has a very happy and fulfilling end, but, as first presented in Jane Eyre, Antoinette has just the opposite end.

Bronte narrates her book using the voice of Jane in all three sections of the book. Rhys narrates the first and third sections using the voice of Antoinette

and in the middle section the voice of Rochester. The early life of Antoinette is eerily similar to the early life of Jane as explained in the first section of both books. Both have an unhappy early home life. Both are from wealthy families but because of personal circumstances both young ladies are poor in both their financial situation and their hopes for any kind of a happy, meaningful future.

In the middle section, Rhys expands on what Bronte has already written about in the second section of her book about the travels of Rochester to the West Indies and his unfortunate circumstances of being basically left out of his father's will and his opportunity to not only marry Antoinette but at the same time receive a large amount of money as a result of that marriage. In both books, the second section shows the miserable plight of Rochester, the ensuing happiness that he finds, and finally the misery and woes that he meets.

Bronte, in her third section, tells about the misery that Jane faces as a result of her moral decision to not marry Rochester because he is already married to the madwoman Antoinette. But due to a voice in the air that Jane hears, she is reunited with Rochester and is finally able to live in happiness and bliss with him. Rhys, in her third section, tells about the misery Antoinette faces as a result of her arranged marriage to Rochester and her move to England with Rochester where he keeps her locked up in a room on the third floor of his house and where he not only keeps the marriage a secret from everyone, but also even keeps her very existence a secret from everyone except two or three trusted people. Antoinette ends her own life by setting fire to the house, which was first mentioned in *Jane Eyre*.

### **III. Purpose**

This author wonders if it is just a coincidence or if it is a case of one writer mimicking the other in the style that syntax is used to make certain short

sentences and/or phrases. Please compare “I was glad of it. I never like long walks…” used in the opening of *Jane Eyre* and “Reader, I married him” used in the conclusion of *Jane Eyre* with “I never went near it” referring to an orchid in the beginning of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and “But I did not stay to watch” referring to the fire Antoinette started in the last part of the book.

Jane was a young orphaned girl who was sent to stay with her uncle and aunt. The uncle died and the aunt resented having to take care of and live with the penniless Jane. Jane’s three cousins also resented her and not only would not include her in their daily routines, but actually picked on her and, especially John, physically and verbally abused her.

Antoinette was brought up by the second wife of her father and was impoverished when he died. She was resented by both the colored native people living in the vicinity and by her colored servants, who called her a “white cockroach” and even made up a song about it.

In an attempt to allow the reader to judge for yourself whether *Wide Sargasso Sea* is an original writing and should be considered in the same class as *Jane Eyre* or if it is a cleverly written book that is a copy of *Jane Eyre* and therefore does not deserve the high respect paid to it, this author will present the similarities of the events and characters of both books.

#### **IV. The Early Years**

Jane, in the book *Jane Eyre*, who was orphaned early in life, lived with her aunt, three cousins, and servants in what was once an elegant mansion, but was now becoming old and rundown, called Gateshead Hall. Antoinette, later known as Bertha, lived with her father’s second wife, her invalid little brother, and servants in what was once an elegant mansion, but was now becoming old and rundown, called Nelson’s Rest.

Jane’s aunt hated and resented the fact that she had promised her late

husband that she would take care of Jane after his death. She was either always ignoring Jane or criticizing her for her manners and attitude and she never allowed Jane to become a true member of the family. She wanted to spend all of her time and affection for her three children and eventually decided that Jane was useless to her.

Antoinette's mother was from Martinique, not Jamaica like Antoinette, and because of the way that she was treated by the neighbors and townspeople, gradually became a shut-in and never ventured out. She wanted to spend her time with Pierre, the little brother, and eventually decided that Antoinette was useless to her.

Jane spent most of her time in either her own room or in a small breakfast-room adjoining the drawing room. Antoinette spent most of her time in her own room or in the kitchen which was in an outbuilding. Jane talked mostly with Bessie, one of the servants. Bessie would sometimes sing songs to Jane while she was working in the house. Antoinette talked mostly with Christophine, one of the servants. Christophine would sometimes sing songs to Antoinette while she was working in the house. Jane was called a "bad dog" and "Rat, Rat" by John, one of her cousins. Antoinette was called a "white cockroach" by Negroes in the neighborhood.

One day Jane stood up to John and told him off. John reacted by physically attacking her and causing her head to bleed. In addition to that, Jane was confined to the dreaded and scary room where her uncle had died and was so afraid that she lost consciousness for several hours. One day Antoinette stood up to Tia, one of the neighborhood girls who had both stolen money from her and stolen her clothes. Tia later reacted by throwing a jagged stone at Antoinette's head and causing her head to bleed. In addition to that Antoinette was unconscious and in bed for several weeks.

Jane's life became even more miserable after her run-in with John. She was virtually ostracized by her aunt and three cousins and was not allowed to join

them in any excursions out of the house or even have a normal relationship with any of them. Antoinette's life became even more miserable after her run-in with Tia. The colored people of the neighborhood attacked and set fire to Nelson's Rest, her home, destroying it and causing the early death of her little brother Pierre.

Jane's aunt finally became so obsessed with her hatred and resentment of having to take care of Jane that the family doctor was called in to give advice about the problem. He recommended that Jane should be sent away to a school, a religious school, where, according to Bessie, there would be "beautiful paintings of landscapes and flowers by them executed, of songs they could sing and pieces they could play, of purses they could net, of French books they could translate" (Bronte, 1996). The school became her refuge.

Antoinette's mother and the new, third, husband of her mother, finally decided that because of the dire circumstances they were in and the mental and physical condition of Antoinette, she should be sent to a religious convent. At the convent Antoinette would be able to learn sewing and about the lives of the saints. The convent became her refuge.

## **V. Jane's Middle Years**

Jane, at her new school, and Antoinette, at her new convent, had several similar experiences. The similarities of these experiences reinforce the idea that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a copy of *Jane Eyre*. In addition, some of the experiences Jane encountered at her school were very similar to some of the things that Antoinette encountered while still living at home. In the following, let's look at some of these.

Jane met one of the teachers at her new school on the first day. She was ordinary, ruddy in complexion and of careworn countenance. Antoinette also met one of the nuns at her new convent on the first day. She had a laughing

face and her cheeks were red, and she was suffering from rheumatism.

Jane was led to her new classroom through passageways in a long irregular building. Antoinette was led to her new classroom along a path with trees and flowers on each side. Both were guided with little conversation. Jane saw her new classroom as a wide, long room with many other students hard at their study. Antoinette saw her new classroom as hot with pitchpine desks and several other students hard at their study. Jane studied the Bible in the refectory of her new school. Antoinette studied the lives of the Saints in the refectory of her new convent. Jane had a lunch of bread and cheese. Antoinette had a lunch of hot coffee, rolls, and butter.

Jane's school was in the north part of England and thus during the winter, the students suffered from the snow and cold and their clothing was insufficient to protect them from the severe winter and the lack of enough food failed to keep them healthy and nourished. Antoinette's convent was in Spanish Town in the West Indies and thus the students suffered from the heat and still air and the prejudices of the dark native peoples toward the white-skinned students.

At Jane's school, there was an incident about one of the girl's hair. The director of the school thought that although it was the envy of many, it was too red and curly and therefore had to be cut off. At Antoinette's convent there was also an incident about one of the girl's hair. Her coiffure was excellent and achieved without the help of a looking glass, and was the envy of everyone.

## **VI. Jane's Later Years**

Jane had a clairvoyant communication with Mr. Rochester. He was calling for her and she heard him in a dream and ran off to Thornfield Hall to meet him. Alas, he was not there, but Jane was informed of his new home and she

rushed there to reunite with him. Antoinette also had clairvoyant dreams. Hers were foreboding and ominous. She was following a man and trying to hold up the skirt of her white, beautiful dress. She followed him, sick with fear but she made no effort to save herself.

In both books, fire plays an extremely important role. In *Jane Eyre*, the madwoman Antoinette, now known as Bertha, set fire first to the bedroom of Edward Rochester. Jane heard the noise from her own bedroom and was able to save him. Later in the book, Antoinette set the house, Thornfield Hall, aflame, destroying it and causing Rochester to lose the sight of his eyes.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the local people and neighbors of Antoinette's family house set it aflame, destroying it and killing her younger brother Peter. A second fire occurred after Antoinette went to England and was locked up in a third story room of Mr. Rochester's Thornfield Hall. The readers are not told what happened after that fire. It was the ending of the book.

Both authors tell of a supernatural figure in their books. Bronte describes a North-of-England spirit called a 'Gytrash'; which in the form of horse, mule, or large dog, haunted solitary ways and sometimes came upon belated travelers. Rhys describes a zombie, which is a dead person who seems to be alive or a living person who is dead. A zombie can also be the spirit of a place, usually malignant but sometimes to be propitiated with offerings of flowers or fruit.

There is a beautiful garden at two of the houses of Jane, especially at Thornfield Hall, and at two of the houses of Antoinette, especially at Coulibri Estate. Mr. Rochester's garden at Thornfield Hall was described by Jane as being 'Eden-like' and the fruit of the gooseberry tree as being as large as plums. Antoinette described the garden at her family home of Coulibri Estate as being as large and beautiful as that 'garden in the Bible - the tree of life grew there' and also described the tree ferns that were as tall as forest tree ferns. Even though the garden had gone wild and was overgrown, orchids flourished there.

Jane was tormented at Gateshead Hall by her Aunt Reed and her three cousins, Eliza, John, and Georgiana. They felt that she didn't belong with them and that she was nothing more than a burden and nuisance and only a poor penniless beggar. Antoinette was tormented by her own mother, who had decided that she was useless to her and that she was old enough to look after herself. Antoinette also had an early friend, Tia, but this friend turned against her, stealing her dress while they were swimming and hitting her in the head with a stone causing blood to flow. John also used to beat up on Jane, hitting her in the head and causing blood to flow.

Food also plays a prominent role in both books. At Gateshead Hall, Jane was told by her cousins that she should not be allowed to eat the same food as the rest of the family, since she was no more than just a dependent and not on an equality with the cousins. Later at Lowood Institution, where she went to school, Jane was forced to eat nauseous porridge, often went without meals that were fulfilling, had her meals stolen by older classmates, and was delighted when the head teacher gave her 'a cup of tea with one delicious but thin morsel of toast.' When she went to Thornfield Hall, she was able to eat as much of the traditional English food as she wanted. Later in the book, when Jane left Mr. Rochester after finding out that he already had a wife named Antoinette or Bertha, she went for more than two days without eating and had no money to buy food. That was a terrible time for her.

When Antoinette was still young she 'boiled green bananas in an old iron pot and ate them with our fingers out of a calabash.' When her mother remarried, this time to Mr. Mason, she was able to eat 'English food now, beef and mutton, pies and puddings.' At the convent which was her school she was delighted to get 'hot coffee and rolls and melting butter.' After marrying Mr. Rochester and going to Massacre in the Windward Islands, they had food that though was 'too highly seasoned, was lighter and more appetizing,' at least for Mr. Rochester, than anything they had had in Jamaica. But they also began to

drink more wine and rum and started eating things like cold chicken, bread and fruit.

Even though Jane was in love with Edward Rochester, she almost ended up marrying her cousin, St. John Rivers, and going with him on his missionary trip to India. However Rivers' proposal of marriage was not for love, but to renounce love. According to Mason (1996), it does not matter in relation to her feelings for Rochester "whether she goes to India as St. John's wife, or as his assistant (her proposal). To choose life with St. John on either footing is to reject love for the sake of evangelical Christianity. Jane, we must recognize, is prepared to do this."

Antoinette married a person she does not love. Even though she had money from her mother's second marriage, she was still thought to be crazy, or insane, by the people of Jamaica and could not find a man who would love her enough to marry her. When Mr. Rochester, who had been largely disinherited by his father, arrived in Jamaica, he agreed to marry Antoinette mainly to get his hands on her money. When she then said that she would not marry him, Rochester thought, "I did not relish going back to England in the role of rejected suitor jilted by this Creole girl." They did marry and life became worse little by little for both of them. To have chosen life with Rochester on such a footing was to reject love.

Servants play an important role in both books also. In *Jane Eyre*, Bessie at Gateshead Hall often seemed cold and distracted with other things, but was the only person that Jane could really talk to and get even an iota of comfort from. At Thornfield Hall, Mrs. Fairfax treated her like a member of the household and, although older and not overly bright, was a comfort to Jane. Also the French tutor, Sophie, was someone for her to talk too, albeit in the French language. At the end of the book, when Jane was reunited with Mr. Rochester, she was able to find comfort in John and Mary, the husband and wife servants at Thornfield Hall who had now moved to Ferndean to take care

of the blind man. But Jane was far superior intellectually to meet any of these servants on a truly friendly and equal basis.

Antoinette was also surrounded by servants, or caretakers, all of her life. Christophine, who was at first her mother's servant and then became Antoinette's servant, changed positions during the book. At first she was someone who was there, but not to be fully trusted by Antoinette. Later in *Massacre*, mainly because of her unhappy marriage to Mr. Rochester and his heavy drinking, Antoinette tended to depend more and more on Christophine and her voodoo religion. The other servants, Mannie, Sass, Godfrey, Myra, Baptiste and other less important ones, were only asides in the story. Antoinette did not get comfort from them nor did she really trust them. One of the younger servants, Amelie, was thought to be good, until she slept with Mr. Rochester one night. After going to England and being locked in the third story room, Antoinette, by then called Bertha, met only one person, her caretaker, Mrs. Grace Poole. Grace seemed to sympathize with Antoinette, but she was more a jailer than a friend.

In *Jane Eyre*, Mr. Rochester was portrayed as a great person. He was well-traveled, intelligent, amusing, a good singer, a connoisseur of art, a gracious host with many rich and powerful friends both locally and in faraway places. Jane could see no fault with him until she was told on her supposedly wedding day that he was already married to Antoinette. Even then Jane did not stop loving him and when she heard his voice in a dream calling her to him, she dropped everything that she was doing to go and be with her dear Mr. Rochester. When she found him he was found to be a poor man whose life and health had been ruined by his madwoman of a wife, Antoinette.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, on the other hand, Mr. Rochester was portrayed as a weakling who made a terrible marriage in order to get money and save his family name. He did not care about other people or their feelings and he drank heavily, had sex with a servant in the room next to Antoinette's, which was

separated only by a thin wall. He was evil to Antoinette, locking her up in a small room with bad and inefficient food, and denying her of all social and moral rights of a human being.

The son of Antoinette's mother's second husband, Mr. Richard Mason, was also portrayed differently in the two books. In *Jane Eyre*, he first appeared unexpectedly at Mr. Rochester's house during a party. He intruded, saying that he had important business, and insisted on spending the night. Jane thought of him as, "For a handsome and not an unamiable looking man, he repelled me exceedingly: there was no power in that smooth-skinned face of a full oval shape; no firmness in that aquiline nose, and small, cherry mouth; there was no thought on the low, even forehead; no command in that blank, brown eye." She even thought that the friendship between Rochester and Mason must have been very curious: even a good example of the old adage that 'extremes meet.' However, during the night, Mason sneaked up to Bertha's (Antoinette) third story room and confronted her. Bertha took a big bite out of Mason's arm with her teeth and he bled profusely. After fetching the doctor, Mr. Rochester sent Mason away, hopefully never to be seen or heard of again. However, Mason returned on the day that Jane and Rochester were to be married and exposed the fact that Rochester was already married to Bertha; thus temporarily, anyway, destroying the lives and happiness of Jane and Rochester. Mason was seen as an enemy of Rochester.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Richard Mason was seen in a much different light. In a letter to his father, Mr. Rochester described Mason as, "He is a good fellow, hospitable and friendly; he seemed to become attached to me and trusted me completely." In this book, Mason burst into Rochester's room the day before his marriage to Antoinette, telling him she would not marry him. Mason was seen as knowing beforehand that the marriage would not work out. When it was known that by English law Rochester had full control over of all of Antoinette's money, the servant Christophine told her that Mason fixed it that

way for Rochester and then later when Antoinette was thinking about running away somewhere, Christophine said that Rochester or even Mason would force her back, thus attempting to show that Rochester and Mason were dear friends. Later in a conversation with Antoinette's Aunt Cora, Mason was portrayed as trusting Rochester completely and shown as willing to do anything on Rochester's behalf, even at the expense of Antoinette's interests. Mason was seen as a good friend of Rochester.

## VII. Conclusion

In his introduction to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Wyndham (1982) writes of the book, "It is in no sense a pastiche of Charlotte Bronte and exists in its own right, quite independent of *Jane Eyre*." He then goes on to write that, "But the Bronte book provided the initial inspiration for an imaginative feat almost uncanny in its vivid intensity." This author can agree with the second quote but not with the former quote.

The plot of *Jane Eyre* follows the form of a Bildungsroman, which is a novel that tells the story of a child's maturation and focuses on the emotions and experiences that accompany and incite his or her growth to adulthood. In *Jane Eyre*, there are five distinct stages of development, each linked to a particular place: Jane's childhood at Gateshead, her education at the Lowood School, her time as Adele's governess at Thornfield, her time with the Rivers family at Morton and at Marsh End (also called Moor House), and her reunion with and marriage to Rochester at Ferndean. From these experiences, Jane becomes the mature woman who narrates the novel retrospectively<sup>(1)</sup>.

The plot of *Wide Sargasso Sea* also follows the form of a Bildungsroman. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, there are four distinct stages of development, each linked to a particular place: Antoinette's childhood at Coulibri Estate, her education

(1) <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/janeeyre/context.html>

at the convent, her time married with Rochester at Massacre, and her disastrous last years at Thornfield Hall in England. From these experiences, Antoinette becomes the mature, maybe crazy, woman who narrates the novel retrospectively.

An unknown author on the Internet says, "Some critics argue that *Wide Sargasso Sea* stands by itself in the world of literature, however, proceeding my own reading I couldn't keep *Jane Eyre* out of my mind, and I think Jean Rhys wanted it that way too. After all, even if Rochester is never called by his name, we perfectly recognize him and as for most of the other characters, she has kept the same names (for instance Grace Poole, Bertha's keeper)"<sup>(2)</sup>.

As shown in the above examples of similarity between the two books, there is no way that *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be seen as anything more than a pastiche of *Jane Eyre*. There is also no way that it can be viewed as existing in its own right, independent of *Jane Eyre*.

Even in the few sections of the book that seemingly are independent of *Jane Eyre*, almost without exception they are not independent, but opposites. Let's look at the locations of the two stories. *Jane Eyre* is set mostly in the northern part of England, with its bitter cold weather and the snow. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is set in Jamaica and Windward Islands, with the heat and humidity associated with that part of the world.

Especially the characters of Rochester, Antoinette, Mason, and to a lesser extent Grace Poole, are described as having just the opposite personalities in both of the books. Bronte's book has a sad, but happy ending. Rhys' book has a hopeful, but foreboding ending. The lasting impression of *Jane Eyre* is that there is always hope and in the end everything will be good and right. The lasting impression of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is just the opposite; in the end everything will turn out bad and evil.

From the childhood experiences, almost all bad, to the school experiences, at

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(2) <http://discussingbooks.cohprog.com/dbe/English/WideSargassoSea.htm>

first bad, but then better and better; to meeting the man of their future, to the disappointments of that relationship that follow, to the hardships each woman has to endure, Jane and Antoinette share very similar lives and experiences. It is only the final part of the books that show they end up with distinct differences.

From so many similar occurrences and events in both books, this author has tried to show that at least part of the esteem given by other reviewers to Jean Rhys is due to the fact that she intelligently copied Charlotte Brontë's novel. However, this author does not deem it an original work of art based on the many examples of similarities noted above and others that were not included in this paper.

I would like to give my heartfelt thanks to my daughter, Terri, who first introduced me to *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the questions she asked comparing it to *Jane Eyre*, and thus making this paper possible.

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