

EXTINGUISHING THE FIRE OF CULPABILITY: THE FIRST FIRE IN  
*WIDE SARGASSO SEA*

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There is unanimous critical accord that an enraged native populace ignites the fire that destroys the family home Coulibri in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Jean Rhys herself summarized Part One of the novel: "It's the story of an old West Indian house burned down by the negroes [sic] who hated the ex-slave owning family living there" (*Letters* 214). She maintains the credibility of the plot, and historical sources indicate that in fact, her ancestors' estate was similarly burned.<sup>1</sup> However, a careful reading, which I outline below, may indicate another interpretation of the events that night, and the reader is compelled to ponder whether to trust the "tale or the teller."

That fateful night, as Antoinette waits in bed for Christophine to wish her good-night, she is aware of noises outside her room. Frightened by those same noises of unrest, her mother Annette suddenly enters the bedroom and directs Antoinette to get dressed. However, Antoinette doesn't respond immediately; here's what she says she does:

I lay there half-asleep, looking at the lighted candle on the chest of drawers, till I heard a noise as though a chair had fallen over in the little room [Pierre's room next door], then I got up and dressed. (38)

*In other words, she leaves a burning candle in her room.* Antoinette then goes downstairs and overhears the agitated adults discussing the group outside. Mr. Mason, Antoinette's stepfather, has unsuccessfully attempted to reason with them and they have pelted him with stones: It is at this point, after stooping to pick up Annette's wedding ring, that Mannie, one of the servants, sees smoke. Antoinette reports Mannie's words:

"Oh my God, they get at the back, they set fire to the

back." He pointed to my bedroom door which I had shut after me, and smoke was rolling out from underneath. (39)

As this quote attests, the blaze is contained at the back of the house, in the bedrooms that belong to Antoinette and Pierre. When the two servants Mannie and Sass attempt to douse the fire, Antoinette further specifies its location: "They threw the water into the bedroom and it made a black pool on the floor. . ." (40).

We must also examine the noise Antoinette hears, "as though a chair had fallen over" (38). The sound may be Myra, the servant left in charge of guarding Pierre, knocking over a chair as she escapes through a window, allying herself with the people outside. Or it might be a burning candle-falling over, as Elaine Savory suggests (255). Regardless, the candle is not extinguished when Antoinette leaves.

After speaking to Christophine, Aunt Cora announces that the blaze had spread to Antoinette's mother's bedroom, and she hastily concludes that the natives are responsible. While it may appear that this is a second, disparate fire, we must consider the lay-out of Coulibri, which Rhys clearly describes: Antoinette's bedroom is on one level and her brother Pierre's is a small room next door. Outside Pierre's room is a clump of bamboo. While their mother's bedroom is at the other side of the house, there is also a *glacis* that according to Antoinette is "a paved roofed-in terrace which ran the length of the house and sloped *upwards* to a clump of bamboo" (19).

Since Pierre's and Antoinette's bedrooms are *up* three steps from the dining room and a few more from the rest of the house, the *glacis* may extend in front of the house and *up* to the clump of bamboo outside their bedrooms. Thus the fire may have jumped from Antoinette and Pierre's bedroom and to the other bedrooms. Aunt Cora herself seems unconvinced of this fire's origin, which Rhys may have indicated through her selection of words [my italics]: "It *seems* they have fired the other side of the house," said Aunt Cora. "*They must* have climbed that tree outside" (40).

The group then escapes through the servants' rooms, and when they exit

the house, Antoinette sees flames coming from the bamboo outside her brother's room: "I had not seen any flames, only smoke and sparks, but now I saw tall flames shooting up to the sky, for the bamboo had caught" (41). We may interpret these flames as the fire she herself set earlier.

Subsequent references to the fire are vague but seem to indicate the natives are surprised, even bewildered by the fire's existence and innocent of any blame. One man threatens the family because, as he explains he fears they "would go to police and tell a lot of damn lies" (43). His companion argues that no one lit the fire intentionally. "All this an accident," she says (43). But he retorts that no one will believe in their innocence, and ironically, that's precisely what has ensued through subsequent readings of the text.

My interpretation of the fire leads inevitably to the question of when the "riot" actually commenced. Here are the facts: a "handful" (38) of people—according to Antoinette—gathered outside Coulibri and pelted Antoinette's stepfather. Despite the small number of people, there are noises of a gathering outside and again, according to Antoinette, "Horrible noises swelled up" (38). However, even after the fire is discovered and the family is fleeing the burning house, Antoinette, the narrator, makes no allusion to rioting; in fact, she reports there is only silence. Although there had been noise before, once the fire starts, there is none.

Eventually, however, "somebody" yells: "Look the white niggers!" (42) and then an uproar begins in earnest. When the family attempts to reach the carriage and the horses, Antoinette reports that people were "pressed too close. . . Some of them were laughing and waving sticks, some of the ones at the back were carrying flambeaux" (42). (Flambeaux would have been used for illumination since the action was at night, and this *of itself* would not indicate sinister intent.) The potential for danger obviously existed, but the waving of sticks was the most threatening gesture that occurred that night. When the parrot Coco is visible burning on the *glacis* railings, the crowd is silenced and disperses quickly (43).

It must be remembered that we view the happenings at Coulibri and, indeed, all of Part One, through Antoinette's eyes, and she blames an angry crowd for the destruction of her home by fire. In retrospect, she refers to the silent God who "made no sign when they [the natives] burned Pierre as he slept" (42) indicating her notion of culpability. She also morbidly prophesies: "When they had finished, there would be nothing left but blackened walls and the mounting stone" (45).

In Part Two, which is narrated by her husband, Antoinette relates the details of the fire to him. Twice Antoinette refers to a collective "they"—the natives—as the culprits who burned Coulibri. Yet, her husband is skeptical and pointedly undercuts her credibility.<sup>2</sup> While acknowledging some historical basis, he comments, "I began to wonder how much of all this is true, how much imagined, distorted" (133).

He has good reason to distrust her, for Antoinette, it must be noted,<sup>1</sup> is an unreliable narrator for Part One and equally unreliable as a recorder of the past in Part Two. She is a woman who grows increasingly insane as the novel progresses and one whom Rhys intended to portray as insane from the outset. Rhys repeats this in her *Letters*; in one example, when discussing the manuscript of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1963, she argued that it would be distracting and confusing if Antoinette were the sole narrator: "A mad girl speaking all the time is too much" (*Letters* 233).

In addition, while Antoinette's creole ancestry seemed to suffice for marginalization and madness for Charlotte Brontë, Rhys sought other explanations. She wrote in a letter about Antoinette, referring to Brontë's character, Mrs. Rochester: "She must at least be plausible with a past. . . the *reason* why he thinks she is mad and why of course she goes mad, even the *reason* why she tries to set everything on fire, and eventually succeeds. . ." (156-7).

The burden of blame that she was responsible for her brother's death, the destruction of Coulibri, and her mother's ultimate madness would certainly function as a foundation for burgeoning mental instability, the "reason" Rhys

sought. While we cannot expect Antoinette to admit culpability, Rhys may have expected her readers to draw the conclusion themselves.

When weighing this interpretation, it is necessary to consider that Antoinette is undeniably responsible for the second fire in *Wide Sargasso Sea* which ends the novel; no ambiguity exists there. Her actions are carefully delineated, and the description of her leap to her death patently parallels the death of the parrot Coco at Coulibri. "The wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings," the narrator/Antoinette tells us immediately before she jumps (189-90).

It would, therefore, be thematically appropriate for Antoinette to set the first conflagration because it foreshadows and balances with the second; Tia, the black child, also appears in connection with both fires. This also balances with the two fires in *Jane Eyre*, the first, smaller fire and the second cataclysmic one that destroys Thornfield Hall, maiming and blinding Rochester. Furthermore, Antoinette, as the typical Rhys woman as identified by Francis Wyndham and other Rhys critics, symbolizes light and color, in opposition to the dark, colorless European male. As Jan Curtis points out, Antoinette is directly associated with fire: She discovers happiness in the "blazing colours of flowers" (48) in a "place of sunshine and death" (47) and finds her identity in the "colour of fire and sunset. The colour of flamboyant flowers" (48).

Fire may also be seen as a symbol of her Caribbean home; Antoinette talks about flame and fire in such imagery at the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The very last line in the novel refers to her candle that will "light [her] along the dark passage" (190). When she sets the fire then, she clearly imagines she is back at Coulibri, recalling furnishings and artifacts from the home. It would appear a recreation of the earlier fire, a symbolic return to the Caribbean.

In *Jane Eyre*, as well, the pursuit of warmth and light may be seen as partial motivation of the crazed Mrs. Rochester in setting the fire. Jean Rhys assumed this, but saw it pragmatically and probably read herself into the character as well. She wrote in a letter, "Personally, I think that one [the question

of why she sets the fire] is simple. She is cold—and fire is the only warmth she knows in England" (157).

Fire is a curiously ambivalent symbol in general, representing the hearth and home while at the same time possessing the power to destroy it. Interestingly, it is the fire at Coulibri that so drastically alters Antoinette's life. The fire essentially destroys her domestic realm; it signals the end of the marriage between Mason and Annette as symbolized by the loss of the wedding ring. Henceforth, Antoinette will be controlled by her stepfather and husband until the end of the novel. Then she regains control, discovering what it is that she must do: "Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do," (190) she says, declaring her intention to set fire to Thornfield Hall.

We are thus left with the intriguing and, I think, credible supposition that Antoinette had some degree of culpability for the first fire in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This balances the other fires from both novels and would justify and explain her madness. We must weigh this against Rhys's statements from 1962, quoted earlier, which indicate her intention to make angry natives responsible. I would posit that in subsequent-revisions of the novel Rhys purposely obscured the fire's origins. At the very least, this would augment the complexity and ambiguity, the dream-like state that she strove to evoke in the novel.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Louis James writes of a riot in 1844 in Dominica, where the Lockhart's house is burnt down. "It was a night the like of which Jean Rhys was to recreate in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the leaping red flames in the dark, menacing black faces, the screams of the horses. . . "(47). Rebuilt, the house was burnt down again in 1932. "The young Gwen William's [Jean Rhys] visited the plantation and was fascinated by its story" (47). See Veronica Marie Gregg's *Jean Rhys's Historical Imagination: Reading & Writing the Creole* (University of North Carolina Press, 1995), page 94 for a discussion of this.

<sup>2</sup>Here may be a clue as to how the reader should interpret Part One, but as readers we are so hostile to the speaker that we may miss the validity of his reasoning.

## BOOK LIST

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