

Wide Sargasso Sea (Jean Rhys)

Why was Rochester never named as such?

The book comes hampered by its reputation. It was, I believe, rather a *cause célèbre* amongst the nascent second wave feminists of the late 60s. And well it might be. It contains all the elements that would appeal. A thorough-going Patriarchal villain and a wife robbed, tyrannised and ultimately incarcerated. Any feeling of sympathy for Rochester's plight that the reader of *Jane Eyre* might have entertained is discredited by this back-story.

Of course it is impossible to sympathise with Rochester. He turns against Antoinette because he believes, perhaps all too readily, the tale that Daniel has told him: that she was sexually experienced before their marriage, that she may be racially tainted, and that she harbours hereditary insanity. These are the very things that would most play upon a Victorian's prejudices. So he punishes her in Patriarchal fashion. Having already taken her money, he now takes away her freedom.

But the book is more nuanced.

Antoinette was no innocent. It is made clear eventually that she was indeed having an affair with Sandi after her marriage, and so presumably also before, as Daniel asserts. That being so adds credibility to Daniel's claim, which we initially take to be bravado, that he also has known her. After all, what reason has Daniel to bad mouth her unless motivated as a rejected lover? The cocks do a lot of crowing, and one crows specifically for Antoinette when she prepares to betray Rochester by slipping him the love potion. Innocent she was not.

Add to this the ambiguity about her madness. Was she actually so floridly mad that incarceration was the only option - if not at Thornfield Hall then somewhere worse? And if so, are we necessarily to believe that Rochester was to blame for that too? With madness and mental deficiency in the immediate family, and with the pervading suggestion of inbreeding, there is every reason to believe (within the ethos of the book) that the insanity was organic.

On behalf of women everywhere, Antoinette's guardian angel, Christophine, gets her revenge in first. Says he, "*I would give my eyes never to have seen this abominable place.*" Says she, "*You choose what you give, eh?*". *She began to mutter to herself. Not in patois.* Yup, that's "Reader, I blinded him". Nice.

The writing is spare and precise. The impression is that each sentence was crafted with care, revised and polished, and ditched if found wanting. The result is brevity and density. It is not easy on the reader. Key issues hinge on a single phrase. It is a long time since I read a book in which sex, whether of the loving or the violent kind, is only hinted but not stated. The modern reader might easily miss the intended meaning. Is it safe to assume these days that the reader will know that "the little death" means "orgasm"? (And what neuroses does that archaic terminology expose?).

Is Antoinette a reflection of Rhys herself? Rhys was an alcoholic, sometimes violent, at one time a prostitute, and had been in both prison and in various asylums - and, of course, she was a white Creole. Did she perhaps consider herself a prisoner of men? Certainly she relied on a succession of men financially. Oh, those patriarchal swine, giving her money all the time! She was not an easy person. Her husband (the second

of three) typed an early draft of *Wide Sargasso Sea* from Rhys's chaotic notes. But after an argument she burnt the typescript, Medea-like, to punish him.

Was it forward looking of the 60s feminists to take to their hearts the invented back-story of an early Victorian Gothic romance? Clearly not. But it was welcomed as a confabulation which coincided with their own. For it was not the Patriarchy that gave us Mr Rochester, but Mr Rochester that gave us the Patriarchy, an invented composite of many such fictional characters. The lives of the vast bulk of men of the Victorian era differed from the brutal lives of their wives only by being even more brutal still.

So why *was* Rochester never named? It is because we are invited to interpret "that man" as "any man" in best feminist tradition, and damn the whole gender. This is the Great Lie which continues to do so much harm.

There was something of a vogue for getting your relatives shut away as mad people in the Victorian era. But the victims were predominantly men rather than women. The reason is that, at that time, being declared mad would disqualify the victim from property ownership. The next of kin would inherit, as if you were dead. This made an opportunity for younger siblings to grab the family wealth from their older brother by having him committed. The victims were mostly men because they generally held the property.