

## A ROUND TRIP TO PARADISE: MR. ROCHESTER'S INABILITY TO SETTLE IN THE WEST INDIES

*Dolors Collellmir*

In Part One of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, (1) Antoinette Cosway captures all our interest and empathy narrating in her own voice her childhood and adolescence. We are surprised, then, when the first person voice in Part Two is Mr. Rochester's, that is, Antoinette's husband's. Mr Rochester, an English gentleman with no personal fortune, had gone to the West Indies with a pre-arranged agreement to marry Antoinette, who is a beautiful, rich, Creole girl, and settle with her on her estate. The story could remind one of the conventional tales which end in happiness for ever after. But the fact is that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a tragic novel rich in nature symbolism, cultural enigmas, and psychological complexity.

Mr. Rochester's attempt to establish himself in the West Indies fails--it turns out to be a journey rather than a settlement. He never manages to understand either the people or the culture of those islands and, after some time, he returns to his starting point in England, taking with him his wife, who has become mad. On his return, he emerges as a different person, as we learn from an apparently casual conversation between the woman in charge of the house and Antoinette's keeper. The once tender-hearted youth has become a despicable man.

"I you imagine that when you serve this gentleman you are serving the devil you never made a greater mistake in your life. I knew him as a young man. He was gentle, generous, brave. His stay in the West Indies has changed him out of all knowledge." (p.145)

The pattern of the journey, one of the most commonly used in traditional narrative normally provides the occasion for the development of the character who, because of it, becomes wiser, more mature and morally stronger. Mr. Rochester's journey could have been an archetypal 'Night Journey' since he travels to an exotic wilderness where he is confronted with perils and suffering, but unlike genuine heroes, he does not manage to liberate others and escape with a trophy. On the contrary, he fails Antoinette and does not succeed in finding the truth hidden behind the appearance of things and people. Therefore, at the end of his journey he does not come forth purified nor "reborn" as a superior being.

Mr. Rochester, during his stay in the West Indies, experiences danger and passion bordering on death and finds himself within another world which for him is incomprehensible, infernal, and deathly frightening despite its paradisiac features. The average reader is probably conditioned to expect that here once again love and nobility, and maybe even the fact that he is English, will enable the hero to overcome the difficulties and emerge triumphant, that is, Rochester will be able to cross the cultural barriers, harmonize with wild nature, save Antoinette and fathom out his inner self. But the story that we find in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is practically the opposite of such a pattern.

In this case, Rochester has not left his country and gone to tropical islands because of a strong impulse or drive to seek change, adventure, or meaning nor to accept a challenge. He is in fact escaping from an unfortunate financial situation to play, reluctantly, a role that somebody else has chosen for him, and this, in a remote and strange land which does not really interest him in the least. He explains that, since he did not want to continue being a burden to his father and elder brother any longer, he decided to break with them at any cost and thus he accepted his father's proposition. From that moment on he considers himself a hollow man, and acts resentfully. "I have sold my soul or you have sold it..." (p.59), he says sarcastically to his father. The arrangement consisted in his receiving a considerable sum of money for marrying a Creole girl, and agreeing to other conditions

that her stepfather had set for such things as the wedding and the honeymoon. This is his dismal report:

I was married a month after I arrived in Jamaica... It had been arranged that we would leave Spanish Town immediately after the ceremony and spend some weeks in one of the Winward Islands... I agreed. As I had agreed to everything else. (p.56)

After his arrival and indeed for most of the time prior to the wedding, Rochester is, significantly, in bed with fever and thus he and Antoinette have little occasion to become even well acquainted before the marriage. Just before the wedding, the young Antoinette not too surprisingly, expresses her doubts and wants to withdraw, but he comforts her by saying, "I'll trust you if you'll trust me" (p.66). He knows that he is deceiving her and himself, and thus gains more reason to feel serious guilt, but again, as proud as he is, he would do anything before going back to his family "in the role of a rejected suitor jilted by this Creole girl" (p.65). He is all the more false since he has already noticed something disturbing in her "long, sad, dark, alien eyes" (p.56) which gives him the impression that he will be unable to communicate and be comfortable with her.

Recalling their wedding, he tells us, "It meant nothing to me." He thought that he must have given "a faultless performance." He played the part he "was expected to play." But "every movement was an effort of will." And he marvelled at his own voice, "calm, correct, but toneless" (p.64). At the end of the account his foolish pride and his paranoid remarks may remind the reader of the fiction of Poe. At the wedding banquet when a Creole woman is "peering" at him, he thinks: "Do their eyes get smaller as they grow older? Smaller, beadier, more inquisitive?" And he adds:

"After that I thought I saw some expression on all their faces. Curiosity? Pity? Ridicule? But why should they pity me. I who have done so well for myself?" (p.65)

Rochester's feeling of estrangement grows when they arrive on the island where they are going to spend their honeymoon. From the very beginning he feels the atmosphere created by both the people and

nature as being hostile to him. The people gather to stare unsmiling. Rochester describes them: "Sombre people in a sombre place" (p.58). The first natives they meet talk not in English but rather a debased French patois. (2) Furthermore, everybody looks at him as if wondering what he is doing there. He feels discomfort and melancholy, though he also thinks that this may only be a first impression. Soon, however, his discomfort finds apparent justification when another non-native who is working on the island exclaims:

'This a very wild place--not civilized. Why you come here?... I tell you sir these people are not civilized.' (p.57)

Even the name of the village, which is Massacre, (3) contributes to the air of dread and mystery that he perceives in the place and the people, such as the case of the native Émile, who amiably says that he cannot remember whether he is fourteen or fifty-six, suggesting primitive innocence. Both innocence and evil are reflected at the same time on the face of the servant girl Amélie. Rochester remarks, "A lovely little creature but sly, spiteful, malignant perhaps, like much else in this place" (p.55). As evidenced by his words and the fact that he has just arrived we know that the impact on him is strong and practically instantaneous. He reacts by keeping his distance and, as a consequence, he cannot appreciate sincerity and good will, as for example when he refuses the hospitality of a native, an old friend of Antoinette's, who offers her hut as refuge from the rain.

Mr. Rochester is, however, to learn a lot about this setting, for example, during the painful climb, two thousand feet up, to Antoinette's small estate called "Grandbois." While riding up, Mr. Rochester describes the landscape and reveals the effect that it has on him. On one side of the road, there is a high wall of green trees, on the other a cleft with a blue-green sea at the bottom. Nature as wilderness is, in his own words, "too much." The hills, the mountains and the sea are impressive, but, to him, also menacing. They impose with their colouring, size, and closeness, in contrast with the people, who for him are aloof and evasive.

From his description we can also appreciate the changes that take place in nature. It is indeed alive and in constant transformation. There

are changes in colours and hues, variations in temperature and mood together with a wide range of sounds. When the party gets closer to Grandbois, nature seems to show itself as being more friendly. They find a little river of cold, sweet, and pure waters which marks the boundary of the estate. Immediately Rochester reveals why there is a change in tone: right here Rochester can compare what he sees with his native country. The earth, he observes, appears red like in some parts of England, and even one of the buildings looks like an imitation of an English summer house (p.60).

The description of Granbois contrasts with that of the road leading to it. While, during the ascent, the senses directly involved are sight, hearing, and touch, once at Granbois smell and taste become the protagonists. There is sweet fresh air, and the fragrances of cloves, cinamon, roses, orange blossoms, and the wreaths of frangipani and the river flowers are also mentioned. As for taste, there are repeated references to rum and punch and highly seasoned and appetizing food.

The exuberance of the surroundings stands in opposition to the barren, silent house at Grandbois. And it is precisely at night when the house seems really to come to life. From within he can hear the strange noises of the night, contemplate the blazing light from the moon and the stars, and perceive such strong and powerful scents from the flowers at the river bank that he grows giddy.

Antoinette, for her part, feels safe and secure there. She enthusiastically asks him his opinion about Grandbois, but she is so sure of his acceptance that without waiting for his answer, she states, "This is my place and everything is on our side" (p.62). However, Rochester does not trust his senses and the whole island seems unreal to him, as if it were a dream. He expresses his feelings towards the place later on when he writes to his father. The adjectives that he uses are "beautiful," "cool," and "remote." But we know that his description is not complete because, as he admits afterwards, his confused impressions will never be written (p.64). He does not want to analyse his emotions and sensations and above all he does not want to deliver himself completely. He cannot forget that he has been paid to perform a role and consequently he cannot become totally involved, feel master of his own destiny, nor accept his new situation as real life.

After a month at Grandbois, it seems as if his attitude has changed and he is beginning to harmonize with his environment. Sounds of the night that he once felt as strange and imposing become pleasant. He listens to the sound of the rain in its multiplicity of intensity and rhythm, but always with its particular musicality. He can appreciate nature more, although he is aware of the fact it is only its beautiful surface that he perceives and enjoys. In the long afternoons when the house is empty and there is only the sun to keep them company, they "shut him out" to make love. And at night they talk in whispers, but he is afraid: "I felt danger and tried to forget it and push it away...Desire, Hatred, Life, Death came very close in the darkness" (p.79). He suspects there is much concealed from him in this Eden-like setting:

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)

However, Rochester never makes the necessary effort nor takes a decisive step which could free him of his prejudices and bring him meaningfully into his new situation. He resents the fact that his wife can say, "Here I can do as I like," (p.77) while he is struggling to control his feelings and thoughts. He would also like to put an end to the mixed emotions and wishes which swirl in his head to the point that, approaching despair, he thinks he would like to drown in the rain (p.79).

Likewise, in his relationship with Antoinette, there is a moment in which they begin to confide in each other and they like to do things together, but, at the first opportunity, he becomes suspicious and withdraws. Sexuality has actually been the only link between them. He tells of taking her with no kiss or caress: "I was thirsty for her, but that is not love." Why? "She was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did." He adds, "Nothing I told her influenced her at all" (p.78). This is strong irony since the reader thinks that it is Rochester who should learn from Antoinette. Rochester's heart and mind are predisposed to accept practically anything which can prove that his happiness there is impossible.

He is therefore easily persuaded by a letter written by a black man who calls himself Daniel Cosway and purports to be Antoinette's half-brother. The letter accuses the Cosways of having been detestable slave-owners and Antoinette of being morally loose, having the seed of madness, and bewitching him. The letter is decisive. From this moment on Antoinette's attempts to gain Rochester's trust and love produce the opposite of the desired effect and their lives diverge more and more. Clara Thomas states, "Rochester is a victim of his own Englishness." And his "Englishness" includes such conditioning as to consider "English blood 'tainted' by black" as abhorrent. (4) Consequently, Antoinette wishes, only in vain, to belong to and be accepted by her husband. She has explained that, in her condition of "Creole," she is despised by natives who call Creoles "white cockroaches" and scorned by English ladies who call them "white niggers." She opens her heart to him and expresses her need to find an identity.

I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all." (p.85)

She is forthright and sincere, but Mr Rochester is cold to her appeal. His pride is too great. He feels excluded, mocked, and deceived. Also being completely unable to understand the milieu in which they are living, he decides to withdraw and not to run the risk of being either a fool or a victim.

He actually leaves the house to flee, to enter the mysterious woods, which is obviously archetypal. The woods, according to Vladimir Propp, traditionally represent the kingdom of the dead or the place where rites of initiation are held. (5) In the silent heat of the afternoon, Rochester ventures out to follow the path he could see from his window. He is remembering his father's "face and thin lips," his brother's "round conceited eyes," Amélie, the sly servant girl with her "blank, smiling face," and his wife's stepbrother, "the fool Richard," and he is saying to himself, "They all knew" (p.86). He walks along that path and then, like a child in a fairy tale, he finds himself lost in the thicket where he immediately senses hostility. He follows another

half-hidden path that finally leads him to a large clear space. There, instead of discovering a cottage or hut where the child in the fairy tale would shelter or go through the rituals of initiation, our "hero" only finds the ruins of what had been a stone house. While he is sitting there a little girl passes nearby carrying a large basket on her head. He calls her, but she rushes away full of terror, making us--by means of association--identify him with a potencial aggressor while at the same time we realize that he is the helpless one. He wants to get out of the woods since he is cold and it is beginning to be dark, but he has strayed from the path and tries to find his way through trees and bushes:

After I had walked for what seemed a long time I found that the undergrowth and creepers caught at my legs and trees closed over my head. (p.87)

He feels trapped and terribly frightened there, until Baptiste, the head servant, finally finds him. Thus, the woods has shown another of its characteristics, that of a barrier or a trap that holds the hero. On their way back Mr. Rochester tries to get information --who had lived in the stone house and whether there was something strange or unrevealed about that place. Baptiste is reluctant to answer and his explanations are very vague. When he inquires about the paved road that once had presumably crossed the forest Baptiste denies its existence three times. He does not want to get involved in such conversation, not even when Rochester trying to clarify his thoughts, asks him directly: "Is there a ghost, a zombi there?" (p.88). The reader suspects that Baptiste avoids the topic of black magic, of course, because he believes in it and death is involved. It has been established that from the first moments of Mr. Rochester's arrival on the island he identifies the natives with nature, noticing the mixture of innocence and evil. Narrowing the focus, a parallel between the woods, on the one hand, and Antoinette, on the other, can also be drawn. We realize that Mr. Rochester's inability to understand his wife is intimately linked with his inability to understand the culture and natural environment, because both form a whole. And if we analyse Mr. Rochester's relationship with Antoinette and then the incident of the woods we discover that when marrying Antoinette and when going into the woods, Rochester finds himself involved without having taken



a clear personal decision. Notwithstanding that, both the woods and Antoinette exert a great attraction upon him because of their beauty, mystery, and power.

But, it is as impossible to communicate with Antoinette as it is for him to feel natural in the woods. He cannot discover her secret because when he looks into her eyes they do not reveal her inner self:

Her eyes which are too large and can be disconcerting. She never blinks at all it seems to me. Long, sad, alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be but they are not English or European either. (p.56)

Likewise the wood is incredibly strange and inaccessible for him, and he is thwarted at each attempt to get satisfactory information. Also, besides this capacity to produce estrangement, the wood like her, has the characteristic of being possessive, seeming to want to hold him against his will. The wood tends to retain him with its creepers, and Antoinette uses magic. He also thinks that both the wood and Antoinette carry elements of decay and destruction: she, in her blood and in her mind; the wood, in the ruins of the house and its many dangers. Finally, he can accept neither of the two as protection or shelter.

All these factors contribute to his feeling of alienation and impotence. Seeing that he cannot penetrate the secret of nature nor unveil the mysteries of that culture in simple ways, he turns to books to get information about Obeah as, at the same time Antoinette decides to make use of it and with that purpose she turns to her former black servant and protector Christophine.

After Mr. Rochester receives another letter from Daniel Cosway, he decides to ask the servant Amèlie about this individual, but like the rest of the natives Amèlie is not willing to talk explicitly. What Amèlie says helps to confuse him more because she also mentions a relative of his wife's, Sandi, to whom, it was said, Antoinette was married. As if wanting to reassure him, she immediately adds that all this was foolishness, but she does not stop there. She then leaves Rochester disconcerted by saying, "I'm sorry for you" (p.100).

These words influence Mr. Rochester to condescend to visiting Daniel Cosway. Psychologically, he is ready to accept this man's version because he has been pondering all these contradictions and he needs to hold on to something. Daniel Cosway also insinuates that his wife and her cousin Sandi had once had an intimate relationship. Concluding what he has been telling him, Daniel says: "They fool you well about that girl" (p.103). After that visit, Rochester believes and imagines the worst. He now avoids his wife completely, also because he identifies her with the natives and, therefore, she personifies evil for him as much as the place and its people do.

"For a moment she looked very much like Amèlie. Perhaps they are related I thought. It's possible, it's even probable in this damned place." (p.105)

Antoinette, who nevertheless still has hope for their future together, tries to approach him to give her version of things. But he is in a state of excitement and anguish due to the hostility of the surroundings which he senses as being mysterious enemies watching and listening to him (p.106-107). She tries to convince him that in fact they are both insignificant and that the place is absolutely indifferent to what may happen to them. While she talks she charms him and he desires to be with her again, but she errs grievously by carrying out her previous plan and giving him a glass of wine in which she has poured Cristophine's potion. The concoction makes Rochester so sick that he thinks he has been poisoned and decides to escape from her and from the house. He begins to run and he finds himself in the woods again and in the same clear spot, with the ruins and the wild orange tree, where he once got lost. But this time after staying there and sleeping for a while he has no trouble in finding the path and in avoiding the creepers. The setting is the same as weeks before but he is not the same man. The images suggest that he has made up his mind, that there is no more hesitation.

From now on the situation at Granbois deteriorates rapidly and it is progressively abandoned by its inhabitants. The first one to leave is the cook, then Antoinette leaves, humiliated because Rochester has spent the night with the black girl Amèlie. The following morning Amèlie also announces that she is leaving the island. During this

process we see that he has become calm and practically indifferent to what is happening around him, while Antoinette feels rage and hatred towards her husband and even towards Grandbois: "I loved this place and you have made it into a place I hate" (p.121).

Any hope of harmony has been destroyed. Christophine tries to intercede for her and even personally pleads with him to go back to her. But he is resolute and, under the pressure of Christophine's rebuke, he bursts out: "I would give my life to undo it. I would give my eyes never to have seen this abominable place" (p.132).

Nature seems to parallel the feelings of the protagonist. Mr. Rochester is dominated by jealous possessiveness and cruelty and he feels as insensitive and destructive as the wind which will destroy everything that shows or attempts defiance now that the hurricane months are near: "I could not touch her. Excepting as the hurricane will touch that tree--and break it" (p.136).

He even relishes the idea of seeing her cry when leaving, but when the moment arrives her countenance is expressionless. It is simply a "blank hating moonstruck face" (p.136).

Knowing that he is going to leave the place for good, Rochester is no longer intimidated by nature and from his safe and advantageous position he expresses his sympathetic pity for the sad destiny of the house, the same type of destiny that he thinks he would have had if he had not decided to leave in time. He sees that "More than ever before it [the house] strained away from the black snake-like forest." He hears the house call, "Save me from destruction, ruin and desolation" (p.137). And he answers:

But what are you doing here, you folly? So near the forest. Don't you know that this is a dangerous place? And that the forest always wins? (p.137)

Rochester's last hours on the island are nightmarish. The memories of the previous months rush through his mind full of contradictions. On the one hand, he feels victorious for he is liberating himself from the "dangerous" place; but on the other hand, he cannot leave aside the shame of having been bought and deceived, and of being ridiculed.

However, he is less aware of his sense of deep guilt. Christophine, his greatest enemy, is the one who has seen him as he is, in other words "not the best, not the worst" (p.129). He tries to convince himself of his righteousness and he acts as if he were superior to these people although he knows in his heart, of course, that he is not. This is revealed well when he shouts, "Much I care what they thought of me!" (p.138). He is referring to the head servant Baptiste who functions perfectly and is quite polite, but Rochester "could feel his dislike and contempt," and to Christophine who scorned English tea--as "horse piss"--and told him to drink her coffee--"bull's blood" (p.71). He knows that the meaning was "that would make you [Rochester] a man" (p.138).

The truth is, Rochester feels if not defeated, humiliated. Despite his pride at being able to hide his emotions, he sees that all these natives have discovered his shame. The conventional Mr. Rochester cannot take it and, consequently, he makes his choice. He prefers to be considered "wicked like Satan self!" (p.132) than to be taken for a fool. Moreover, the idea that on those "uncivilized" islands he had allowed himself to be on the verge of happiness is intolerable. He would rather be empty and thirsty than share Antoinette's world of loveliness or continue partaking of her intoxicating sexuality. As far as nature is concerned, he also takes an easy alternative and chooses to reject and hate it instead of trying to harmonize with it. Likewise, he chooses to destroy Antoinette, who is his real "treasure" before letting anybody else discover or possess her. Finally, he decides to leave the "hidden" inebriating Grandbois with Antoinette as his captive. He thinks that his future life is going to be hell, ("If I was bound for hell, let it be hell," p.140), but he is ready to accept even hell rather than the "magic" and the "dream" of paradise.

## NOTES

- 1.- Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966). All subsequent page references are to this edition.
- 2.- The island is Dominica, the author's birthplace. It is one of the Windward islands which remained, after its cession, in large part linguistically and culturally French.
- 3.- Massacre is a coastal village situated less than ten miles north to the capital Roseau.
- 4.- Clara Thomas, "Mr. Rochester's First Marriage: *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys," *World Literature Written in English* 17.1 (1978): p.342.
- 5.- Vladimir Propp, *Las raíces históricas del cuento*. Madrid: Editorial Fundamentos, 1981, p.78.

