VRÁNKOVÁ, K., KOY, CH. (eds) *Dream, Imagination and Reality in Literature.*
South Bohemian Anglo-American Studies No. 1.
České Budějovice: Editio Universitatis Bohemiae Meridionalis,
2007. ISBN 978-80-7394-006-5

'A Fearful Voyage I Had:' Dreams of Reality in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Kamila Vránková
University of South Bohemia

Abstract:

The paper attempts to show how the cited reference to Rochester's and his first wife's troubled journey to England in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) is developed into a symbolic drama of an increasing distance between imagination and reality in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Particular levels of meaning will be discussed with respect to the theory of metaphors and symbols (archetypal criticism, Bakhtin's chronotopes, Paul de Man's "Lyric and Modernity") and attention will be paid to the ambiguity of imagination, which represents an important harmonizing as well as disruptive element of both discussed texts.

In his influential essay "Lyric and Modernity," Paul de Man points out the moments of similarity in the nature of modern art and lyrical poetry: the nonrepresentability of what is assumedly being shown (the influence of Romanticism), the fluid relationship between meaning and object and the importance of metaphors as important devices preventing us from restricting the significance of particular objects to one single meaning. Thus metaphors can support the notion of ambiguity and "irreality," of the enigmatic tension between the perceptual and the intellectual elements (de Man 1983:174-5). As the following discussion attempts to show, it is the concern with the power of metaphors that allows Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* to revive the disturbing potential of particular themes and motifs in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, to question the suggested interpretations, to search for other and different points of view. The genre or romance, moreover, opens space for both authors to intensify the relativity of meaning by employing dream and nightmare visions and mingling the rational with the irrational.

The imagery of *Wide Sargasso Sea* draws, in fact, on marginal references to Rochester's disturbing experience of the West Indies, his first wife's home, in *Jane Eyre*. In his memories, Brontë's Rochester visualises the Atlantic Ocean as an open space where a "fresh" and "sweet" wind from Europe mingles with a "sulphur-steam" air of its tropical shores (Brontë 1992:271-72). The notions of distance and irreconcilable difference become central in Jean Rhys's novel, describing the doomed encounter of an impoverished English aristocrat and a rich but outcast Creole from both protagonists' points of view. The title image, indicating the setting of the story (the Sargasso Sea lies north-east of the Lesser West Indies), acquires a strong symbolic potential and echoes, in a way, Matthew Arnold's vision of a "salt, estranging sea" in his poem "To Marguerite" (1852):

> For surely once, they feel, we were
> Parts of a single continent!
> Now round us spreads the watery plain-
> Oh might our marges meet again! (Kermode [1975]:1375)

Accordingly, Jean Rhys's story of alienation is centred on two crucial metaphors: the sea and the island. The sea as an image of separation and an increasing distance suggests the split in both space and time: the conflict between different civilisations, between the past and the present (e.g., the destructive effects of slavery) as well as between the inner world of the individual and the surrounding

reality. Both Antoinette (Brontë's Bertha) and her husband (Brontë's Rochester) are trapped in an imposed and painful isolation. The heroine is introduced as an orphaned daughter of a Jamaican plantation owner, whose family sank into destitution after the liberation of slaves. Her widowed Creole mother belongs neither to the black community nor to the dominant class, being despised by both groups. As a white Creole, Antoinette becomes a double outsider: "white nigger" for the Europeans and "white cockroach" for the Blacks. Jean Rhys herself was a white Creole and Antoinette's story reflects the author's own "sense of displacement:" her feeling of being "dispossessed at home" and "living as an exile in England" (Howells 1991:106).

The vocabulary of Antoinette's first person narrative in Part One is dominated by the repeated world "marooned;" its sinister meaning (the violent hatred of the neighbours) is further mirrored in the destruction of their house, in the murder of the heroine's younger brother and in the motif of a burnt parrot. Antoinette's subsequent experience of the convent is connected with her search for refuge ("the nuns are safe. How can they know what it can be like **outside**?" Rhys 1968:50), which is ironically voiced in Grace Pool's description of Thornfield ("After all the house is big and safe, a shelter from the world outside," Rhys 1968:146). Accordingly, in Rochester's first person narrative (Part 2), we can discern the feelings of anxiety, misunderstanding and injustice permeating through his memory of home and the relationship to his father (pointed out also by Charlotte Brontë). In the marriage of the two protagonists, the cultural, social and religious differences become insurmountable due to the paradoxical similarity of the unsolved conflicts and frustrations deep in their minds.

In the constant atmosphere of hostility, imagination (or, in Kantian terms, the ability to consider the absent, the invisible or even the unrepresentable) becomes a device of escape from an unbearable reality. The appealing charm of the unknown is reflected in Antoinette's dreams of England as well as in Rochester's obsession with the hidden secrets of the Caribbean islands and of his wife's personality ("What I see is nothing – I want what it *hides*" Rhys 1968:73). These dreams correspond with another symbolic level of the title image: the notion of mystery and infinity, the desire for transcending boundaries and limitations, or, in other words, for the experience of the sublime. As J.B. Twitchell points out in his *Romantic Horizons*, "the vastness of the skies" or "the expansion of the sea" initiate the sublime notion of the disjunction between the inner and the outer worlds and a simultaneous effort to "span" this "abyss," to "reconcile subject and object" in the relieving reunion (Twitchell 1983:11).

An interesting discussion of this subject can be found in Lévinas's philosophy. The idea of infinity inspires a real desire, the desire in its deepest and absolute sense, and the desire for the 'other': for the "land where we were not born" and which "we can never reach" (Lévinas 1997:20), for the 'other' person, whose otherness, however, does not mean contradiction. According to Lévinas, to characterise someone as one's opposite is to derive his identity from one's experience, that is to say, to deprive him of his individuality (Brontë's Bertha, described in contrast to Jane, becomes a victim of this kind of violence, which is further intensified by her imprisonment). In this respect, the real desire for the other includes a strong ethical concern; a search for the truth, justice and freedom (Lévinas 1997:19-38). At the same time, this desire demands distance and in Jean Rhys's novel, as well as in the Romantic imagery, it is suggested through the spatial imagery of the sea.

The movement towards the other is reflected in the motif of the voyage and the image of the ship. It is complicated, however, by the ambiguity of the journey, which may be associated with the 'desire for an unknown land' (Antoinette) as well as the rejection of this desire (Rochester's return to his home). In a way, it points to Rochester's centralising his experience and attitudes in the explanation of the conflict in both novels.

> "I never loved, I never esteemed, I did not even know her. I was not sure of the existence of one virtue in her nature" (Brontë 1992:267).

> [...] it meant nothing to me. Nor did she [...] She never had anything to do with me at all (Rhys 1968:64).

A hidden threat connected with the voyage is implied by the reference to the sargassoes, mentioned only in the title of Rhys's novel and suggesting the windless space of the ocean with a great quantity of seaweed. In other words, the difficulty or even impossibility of movement is hinted at, the

empty space of the split widens and the desire for infinity turns into a horror of nothingness. It is this anxiety that is reflected in the Gothic and Romantic images of lost or cursed ships (Coleridge, Byron, Poe, Melville). In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), for example, there is a similar tension between the search for unknown worlds and the hero's failure to feel, in Lévinas's terms, the responsibility for the other. Moreover, Antoinette's and Rochester's hallucinatory dreams and feelings of the other can be interpreted as variations on the mariner's nightmare of a "frightful fiend" (Part VI, verse 450) and also on the only and brief reference to the voyage in *Jane Eyre* ("To England, then, I conveyed her; a fearful voyage I had with such a monster in the vessel" Brontë 1992:273). In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the voyage is related to the crucial events of the plot: Antoinette's cabin becomes the centre of violence, recalling her mother's involuntary seclusion and anticipating her own isolation in Thornfield. Misunderstanding is deepened ("it isn't like it seems to be" Rhys 1968:148) and the discussed split involves also a rupture between particular incidents, words and meanings.

In *Jane Eyre*, the constant references to Bertha as a monster, a lunatic or a maniac deprive Rochester's first wife of her human identity, which is supported also by her inability to speak (ethical aspects of speaking [and listening] are discussed, for example, in the first chapter of Lévinas's study *Totality and Infinity*). Rhys, on the contrary, lets her heroine talk and even narrate the introductory and concluding parts of the novel. She modifies the theme of madness by connecting the images of ghosts and monsters with rumours and false or incomplete stories (e.g., Daniel Cosway's letter of accusation). It is this loss of reality that is reflected in the purpose of the voyage and, accordingly, in its spectral atmosphere ("I think [...] we changed course and lost our way to England" Rhys 1968:148).

Like the moors in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Jean Rhys's sea permeates through the whole narrative even if it is not explicitly referred to. Surrounding the islands where particular incidents of the story take place, it turns our attention to the transient nature of a familiar and secure space, of an individual existence as well as of particular values. In this respect, hostile and threatening natural forces in *Wide Sargasso Sea* recall the concept of the ocean as it is implied in Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) or *Mardi* (1849). Like Melville, Jean Rhys depicts nature as an alien world, which contradicts Charlotte Brontë's humanised concept of nature as a "mother:" Jane Eyre loses all "ties" to "human society" but she can retain her identity (or, in other words, her confidence and hope) as she finds "repose" in nature (Brontë 1992:280). In Rhys's novel, the heroine's existential anxiety ("I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all" Rhys 1968:85) is related to the feeling of estrangement from her natural environment.

> "I feel very much a stranger here," I [Rochester] said. "I feel that this place is my enemy and on your side." "You are quite mistaken [...] It is not for you and not for me. It has nothing to do with either of us. That is why you are afraid of it, because it is something else." (Rhys 1968:107)

The feeling of uneasiness that originates in experiencing a particular environment as "something else" finds its expression also in the difficulty of the mutual relationship: "Is it true [...] that England is like a dream?" [...] "Well [...] that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream." (Rhys 1968:67)

In both novels, Rochester's notion of the beautiful, alien and disturbing fills his views of the place as well as of his exotic wife. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the emphasis on his resentful sobriety ("everything is too much [...] too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near" Rhys 1968:59) creates, in fact, an interesting parallel to the fears of Hawthorne's Giovanni in "Rappaccinni's Daughter" (1846). The wildness of the Caribbean landscape (e.g., the motif of a hurricane) escapes the power of the human reason and threatens those who embody it. Rochester's constant effort to understand includes a desire for control; the other is not accepted but it must be transformed (as Lévinas puts it) into the same. (Cf Charlotte Brontë's concept of the romantic love as a mutual recognition of the same feelings and attitudes.) Accordingly, Jean Rhys develops Charlotte Brontë's concern with self-control and the anxiety of being different. Like Brontë's Jane struggling to hide her excited emotions reflected in the imagery of her paintings, Rhys's Rochester denies his feelings of anger in a pretended politeness (eg in his letters to his father).

Nevertheless, the more rational he attempts to be, the more incomplete his view of the reality is: "everything I had imagined to be truth was false [...] Only the magic and the dream are true – all the

rest's a lie" (Rhys 1968:138). The confusing mixture of reality and illusion recalls, in fact, Northrop Frye's analysis of romance (*Anatomy of Criticism*, *The Secular Scripture*): In connecting the real with dreaming and the unreal with a waking world, *Wide Sargasso Sea* gets closer to the tradition of this genre then Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The notion of uncertainty and ambiguity permeating through *Wide Sargasso Sea* is further supported by the use of intertextual allusions. For instance, there is no explicit reference to feelings of guilt. It is suggested, however, by the hero's unwitting recollection of a verse from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* ("Pity like a naked new-born babe striding the blast" – Rhys 1968:135), which revives the theme of a crime rooted in the struggle for power and which also echoes Jane Eyre's anxious dream preceding the destruction of Thornfield in Charlotte Brontë. The number of contexts corresponds with the different levels of meaning: Rochester's forcing Antoinette into the role of a madwoman may be considered here but also the external sources of evil (connected with the postcolonial development of the West Indies) are implied.

In Jean Rhys's novel, as well as in the works of the Sisters Brontë, the tension between the inner world of the individual and the outer, external world is maintained in the images of particular buildings. Part One is connected with the plantation house Coulibri, the honeymoon cottage Granbois, "a very wild, cool and remote place" (Rhys 1968:57, 64) creates the setting for Part Two and the final incidents take place in Charlotte Brontë's Thornfield Hall. Representing important organising symbols for the novel and connected with particular stages of the individual existence (childhood, love, marriage), the discussed buildings function as ironical counterpoints to Bakhtin's concept of idyll (Cf his *Dialogic Imagination*). The images of peace and tranquillity suggested by the houses are sooner or later turned into their opposites; in terms of Northrop Frye, the idyllic is replaced by the demoniac and a wish-fulfilment sinks into "anxiety and nightmare" (Frye 1976:53).

> Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible – the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown [...] (Rhys 1968:17)

> But the sadness I felt looking at the shabby white house [...] More than ever before it strained away from the black snake-like forest [...] But what are you doing here you folly? [...] Don't you know that this is a dangerous place? And that the dark forest always wins? (Rhys 1968:135)

The uncontrollable powers of nature which forces its way into the human dwellings are accompanied with a harmful interference of men. In this respect, the three buildings can be related to Bakhtin's chronotope of the castle or an old house (i.e., the links between space and time as represented by a particular image). In Coulibri, for example, the experience of injustice, violence and death is linked to its past marked by slavery. The image of destruction (initiated by racial, social and cultural conflicts) is anticipated by an introductory motif of a haunted house and brought to its climax at the end of the novel, pointing to Charlotte Brontë's description of the end of Thornfield. As Elaine Campbell notices, "it is an almost cynical doubling for Rhys to see Antoinette's burning of Thornfield Hall as a double exposure of the freed slaves' burning of Coulibri" (McDowell 1978:313). Thus the fire bringing out the fall of Thornfield acquires also an important purifying function. Moreover, Jean Rhys does not close her novel with the vision of conflagration (it is set in Antoinette's dream) but with the motif of a candle: "There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned again to light me along the dark passage." (Rhys 1968:156). In the concluding scene of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the flame of a candle, a symbol of dreams and imagination, is related to the experience of waking up and to the theme of a passage. In accordance with Bachelard's psychoanalytical approach to the motif, the final image does not suggest the heroine's suicidal death but rather her "waking to being" (Bachelard 1997:18), her new awareness of herself and of her particular ties to the past (Rhys's description of her childhood) as well as the future (the intertextual links to Charlotte Brontë's novel).

In terms of contemporary literary theory, the repeated motifs of deserted houses and ruins in *Wide Sargasso Sea* correspond with the repeated displacement of the story's centre. Such a pattern involves the idea of a decline as well as regeneration and this ambiguity is also suggested by the recurring image of the Sargasso Sea. According to Sylvie Maurel, it may symbolise stagnation; as a place where eels return every year to lay their eggs, however, it can also evoke the feeling of a

"cyclical renewal" (Maurel 1998:129). With respect to Lévinas's concept of infinity, the idea of a renewal can arise also from the notion of a boundless space created by the metaphorical image of the sea: the space for a dialogical relationship between Rhys's novel and Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, for the possibility to consider and to tell the story from the point of view of the "other side" (Rhys 1968:106).

Works Cited:

Bachelard, Gaston (1997): *Plamen Svíce* (The Flame of a Candle), trans. Richard Vyhlídal, Praha: Dauphin.

Bakhtin, M.M. (2004): *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press.

Brontë, Charlotte (1992): *Jane Eyre*, Mary Ibbett, ed., London: Wordsworth edition.

Frye, Northrop (1976): *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press.

Howells, C.A. (1991): *Jean Rhys*, New York: St. Martin's Press.

Kant, Immanuel (1914): *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.H. Bernard, London: Macmillan.

Kermode, Frank, Hollander, John (eds.) (1973) *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, vol. II, London, New York: Oxford University Press.

Lévinas, Emmanuel (1997): *Totalita a nekonečno* (Totality and Infinity), trans. Miroslav Petříček jr. and Jan Sokol, Praha: Oikúmené.

Man, Paul de (1983): *Blindness and Insight*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Maurel, Sylvie (1998): *Jean Rhys*, New York: St. Martin's Press.

McDowell, R.E. (ed.) (1978): *World Literature Written in English*, Arlington: The University of Texas at Arlington.

Rhys, Jean (1968): *Wide Sargasso Sea*, London, New York: Penguin Books.

Twitchell, J.B. (1983): *Romantic Horizons*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press.