

Jeanette Rhys Weaves Fashion, Not Just Words in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

In the *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jeanette Rhys uses the interaction between clothing, fabrics, and characters to highlight important underpinnings of alienation and colonialism permeating through the novel and her own reality. Significantly, Antoinette's main colors of white and red both contain contradictory implications of power, seduction, hedonism versus chastity, purity, and idealism. Rhys weaves clothing as an integral weapon and societal structure that Antoinette and her unnamed husband (assumed to be Rochester) use to display their emotions toward one another, English and Creole society, and their specific situations. Ultimately, Antoinette's clothing parallels her changing roles, goals, and themes in the novel as her style matures.

As a child, Antoinette had two dresses. Much like an infant who doesn't recognize their psychological and physical nakedness to the world, her isolation and geographical location on the Creole islands prevented her from growing accustomed to customs like keeping her clothes clean and tidy. Her first realization of this type of 'nakedness' occurred in her interaction with Tia at the pond. After losing a wager with Tia and angrily insulting her by her race and class, calling her a "cheating" slur (Rhys, 22). Antoinette experiences the loss and betrayal of a friend. Tia not only steals her coins but also her dress, leaving Antoinette with her own poorer one. Antoinette recalls, "I searched for a long time before I could believe that she had taken my dress." (Rhys, 22). This illustrates Antoinette's own confusion and guilt about their relationship as well and utter disbelief in her helplessness. Several things occur here: the balancing of race and class, an impediment of Antoinette's ability to communicate, and the loss of innocence to appearance or 'nakedness.'

By forcing Antoinette to wear her clothes, Tia defies previous racial boundaries. She recognizes Antoinette's loss of power due to the Emancipation Proclamation and the hate and alienation the native Creoles directed at the previous profiteers of slavery and takes advantage of it. She stands up to Antoinette's racism without consequence, branding Antoinette with a symbol of her own poverty and persecution. If Tia had backed down, she would have reinforced the lasting impact of slavery, yet her defiance stands as a symbol foreshadowing the culmination of hate toward the Emancipation

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Proclamation. Still, even as Antoinette “looked at her and I [she] saw her face crumple up as she began to cry” (Rhys, 41) underscoring that relations weren’t so simple and that in that moment Tia and Antoinette “saw [themselves reflected] myself. Like in a looking glass” (Rhys, 41) and that anger and shame that had fought over at the pool was reflected in a larger and more dangerous way through the burning of the Coulibri estate. Life had taught them that lesson the hard way.

Second, the reader gains a sense of Antoinette's weaknesses. Antoinette isn't without fault as she insults Tia, calling her a slur and attempting to use her class and influence. This not only shows her bias and the negative influence of emancipation on her life, but it also highlights Antoinette's lack of social awareness and inability to properly communicate. By insulting Tia, she was trying to communicate that she thought Tia was tricking her by forcing her into a bet she knew Antoinette would lose. However, in reality, Antoinette was the one who proposed the bet, wagering the coins Christophine had given her. Antoinette knew about the Emancipation Proclamation and had seen the detrimental effects it had on her family, likely hearing her parents and other surrounding slave owners complain. A theme we see throughout the book is that Antoinette wishes to be emancipated from emancipation. So part of her may have wanted to use money to reinforce her superiority over Tia in order to regain the security she felt before the Proclamation.

This quick, emotional, and angry side of Antoinette is carried throughout her life, often leading her to disrespect people and quickly form biases and presumptions about those society told her were beneath her. This unmanaged fault of Antoinette is a direct result of the lack of a parental influence on her. Normally, a child would be reprimanded and taught life lessons—that insults of this kind and aggressive displays of anger are wrong, leading to unnecessary harm and broken relationships. Instead, Antoinette comes home to judgment. The English newcomers are the first things Antoinette sees at her homecoming, and their fancy clothes further enhance Antoinette's negative perception of her own poverty, psychological nakedness, and weakness. Her disheveled state is the only thing Annette sees, who quickly reprimands Antoinette for her circumstance. "Throw away that thing, burn it" (Rhys, 22) Antoinette recounts, showcasing her mother's instability and the lack of support Antoinette feels. From this point on, Antoinette begins to care about her looks, whether it's chastity at the school/temple or

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seduction with Rochester. Her clothing plays a large role in her *Bildungsroman* (the period of time when a character develops a new emotional state and philosophy).

In part two, Antoinette's transition from chaste and pure to a witch-like temptress is highlighted through the constant underlying placement of white. This transformation parallels the shift from good to evil and from resident to outsider. Starting with her husband, named Rochester, who fails to remember much about the wedding other than the flash of her white dress. Generically, the groom is supposed to have a lovestruck reaction when seeing his bride—not only in appreciation for her beauty but also for how that beauty enhances the love he has for her at that moment. Rochester's indifferent reaction is explained as he admits to not caring much about Antoinette and manipulating her through words and promises to love and protect her. Yet, from that point on, his vision of her in a white dress is constant and immutable. He describes, "I knew the girl would be wearing a white dress.", "There would be the sky and mountains, the flowers and the girl and the feeling that all this was a nightmare, the faint consoling hope that I might wake up" (Rhys, 108), marking the beginning of his detachment and dehumanization of Antoinette.

At first, he appreciates the color, and the implications behind this favoritism may have several factors. In England, a white dress alluded to an idealized pastoral life. Happy people supposedly lived simply in the country, deriving joy from honest labor. It became incredibly popular and signified wealth and status, being made from various laces, cottons, and silks. Yet, as this style popularized, a white dress also carried peasant-like connotations. Cheap domestic cotton was used by the poorer classes to imitate the rich, and maids wore them too. Overall, in England, the 'white dress' stands as a paradox of virtuousness and scandalousness.

Rochester's specific image of Antoinette reinforces this paradox. The white dress that to Rochester had previously symbolized lust, admiration, and beauty twists in his mind. Even in *Jane Eyre*, Bertha (Rochester's name for Antoinette) always appears in white. This may relate to her 'role' in his eyes as his bride. Rochester sees Antoinette as unfitting for the role he placed on her, too "large for her" as a madwoman raised on an island, and perhaps too 'large' for the life he lives in England as a man. "She was wearing a white dress I had admired, but it had slipped untidily over one shoulder and seemed too

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large for her" (Rhys, 115) he observes, suggesting her lack of fit in both his life and societal expectations. This dress represents his vision of her, almost never her own. We never know whether Antoinette likes the dress, but we know she is aware of Rochester's appreciation for it and uses it as a tool. In many scenes, her decision to wear it may be an attempt to sway him into liking her, loving her, through any means possible. In that aspect, she is a temptress, but a well-intentioned one. Yet every attempt she makes further alienates her from the love she so desperately seeks. Instead, more and more, the dress represents Rochester's conspiracy that society aims to control, weaken, and isolate him.

That conspiracy rots their marriage from the inside out and makes the reader fear and theorize about the meaning behind it. Like so many themes throughout the book, does Rochester's paranoia stem from his nature as a man or from the expectations placed on him as a man in that society? This philosophy that humans are inherently selfish and 'evil' in nature is called Hobbesianism, and its brother, Aggressionism, is the aggressive side. Rochester is a characterization of these philosophies by Jane Rhys. Through his role as an outsider, conqueror, and Antoinette's husband, he fulfills his destiny of being 'evil' in many aspects. After receiving letters from Antoinette's distant relative Daniel, he is quick to find fault in Antoinette. He conspiracizes that his family arranged his marriage not only for their own gain but also to isolate him from English society and weaken him. He has "not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks..." (Rhys, 64) making it clear how resentment begins to fester. As he progresses, he puts the blame on Antoinette. Whether it's her role as a woman or his need to justify his actions, he seeks to take control over his life by proving his ability to maim, hurt, enslave, and overpower as a white, male, English man. In some way, Antoinette is like a slave; she's uneducated, dependent on men, her purpose to be objectified and sexualized, used in the grander politics of men and English society. She was sold to Rochester because of her inheritance (or he to her in his eyes), and after she lost her purpose or sanity in his eyes, he locked her away. So, her transition from a white to a red silk dress represents her transcendence into acceptance of her raw emotional side, her infatuation with the beauty of red overpowering her need to be accepted by her husband, society, and fit into her surroundings. So many features are associated with red: love, anger, power, blood, temptation, devil. While it's not explicitly stated which colored dress she ends up wearing to the burning of the Thornfield estate, red or white,

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Rhys clarifies that the veil is present. The difference between a red and white bride is distinct, but the ambiguity of both has a more powerful effect on the reader where color loses its visible quality and becomes a flame of transcendence within the darkness. Now “ she is both the sadist who sets the fire and the masochist who burns. She is, finally, a dangerous savage. Antoinette transcends her imprisonment in the English manor at the same moment she invokes traditionally defined symbols of gender” (Gilchrist, 486). By depicting Antoinette as a savage, Rhys contrasts European Enlightenment rationality with West Indian slavery, which she sees as a reflection of the sexuality, metaphysicality, and psychology of humankind.

Ultimately, Jeanette Rhys uses clothing and color to paint a tragic perception of human psychology and self. While the novel feels like an attack on society, which so mistreats and abuses women and minorities, it hits true. The reality at the time was that men had a terrifying power over women, and marriage chained women to their abusers. While in the mother novel, *Jane Eyre*, Jane had a happy ending with Rochester, their equality was only reached when Rochester was crippled and physically incapacitated by Antoinette. In turn, Antoinette’s end was a paradox. While she ended up burning down Thornfield and throwing herself into the fire, subsequently crippling Rochester, she also did it as a bride. Whether it’s ironic or intentional, her clothing represented her goals. And so, she burns down her oppressor’s home to free herself from her physical and mental enslavement, ensuring her transcendence into a place where everyone is equal.

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