

Wide Sargasso Sea Imperial travesty

by Carey Snyder and Eric Anders

from *Jump Cut*, no. 40, March 1996, pp. 21-23
copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 1996, 2006

The passionate embrace of two wet lovers in the promotional shot for John Duigan's *WIDE SARGASSO SEA* beckons viewers to watch a film filled with sensuous, exotic encounters. Blockbuster classifies the video as an "erotic romance," and the description on the back of the box reads:

"The exotic beauty of the Caribbean masks the secrets of sensual pleasure and dark temptation. From the critically-acclaimed novel by Jean Rhys comes a tale of erotic obsession..."

Reviews of this cinematic adaptation of Jean Rhys's 1966 narrative extension of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* verify that the film has been perceived as the promoters intended: a steamy romance set in the inebriating tropical setting of nineteenth century Jamaica. Siskel and Ebert give this "sensual and romantic" film their "two thumbs up," and Siskel adds that this "gripping tale of erotic love" is "refreshingly adult in its sensuality." Siskel's comment is particularly troubling since the sex in this film includes rape and attempted rape. Is this adult sexuality in our culture?

Duigan's film, however, should not be blamed for its promotion — that is, unless it merits the classification "erotic romance" that Blockbuster awards it. If so, Duigan's film is a travesty. For Rhys's impressionistic novella is not a steamy romance. In many ways, it is a psychological anti-romance more in the tradition of *Wuthering Heights* than its literary ancestor. In the novella, sexuality is represented obliquely, and forms a powerful undercurrent that has thematic significance in a work concerned with the violation that Victorian imperialism and sexism entails. Making sex explicit in the film — and packaging it in such a way that evokes the feeling of a tropical romance — obscures the political significance of Rhys' work. To understand what is at stake in the cinematic adaptation of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, we need to understand the film's literary lineage.

As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, *Jane Eyre* charts a "life journey" that is an odyssey of Jane's finding selfhood, even sanity, by finding love based on equality with Rochester. They recall that when orphan Jane is locked up as a child, she is afraid that she might be considered insane, a "bad animal" (7). Later threatening the possibility of matrimony that will provide Jane social legitimacy is "the madwoman in the attic," a refiguring of that feared self — an "animal" locked in a room whom Gilbert and Gubar dub "Jane's darkest double" (342). As a Creole heiress from Jamaica, Rochester's former wife Bertha shares with Jane outsider status. However, as Gayatri Spivak argues, Jane's upward mobility depends on Bertha's conflagration: the colonial "other" conveniently goes up in flames with Rochester's house so *Jane Eyre* can have a conventional happy ending.

Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* gives subjectivity to the white Creole native, by imagining a childhood for Bertha and a method to her madness. Like the novel by which it was inspired, Rhys' novella deals with the harsh reality of a period that denied legal selfhood to women in marriage, while offering few alternatives to female helplessness and dependency. Unlike *Jane Eyre*, whose plot reinforces a myth of British superiority as well as "purity," free from colonial "contamination," *Wide Sargasso Sea* directly interrogates the legacy of slavery and imperialism. From the British perspective portrayed in Rhys' novella, Antoinette figures as a cultural bastard, contaminated by the colonial slavery with which she has come into

contact — slavery and imperialism that have helped to build the British Empire and that England, in both novels, would like to forget. Born into a family of slaveholders, the sins of her father(s) are visited upon her. Obviously hated by the black native population who refer to them as "white cockroaches, Antoinette and her family are "at home" neither in Jamaica, nor in England. From Rochester's perspective she is an inimical "other," whose foreignness is threatening.

Like Jane's, Antoinette's story is an odyssey where the heroine attempts to escape the madness of isolation and social inequality through a relationship with Rochester. The subjectivity with which Rhys has endowed her, however, is at counter-purposes to the film's attempt to portray her primarily through Rochester's eyes: as mysterious and therefore opaque. For instance, Antoinette's friendship with her "dark double," Tia — important in its failing because it establishes the extent of Antoinette's profound solitude — is flattened and compressed into a brief scene. Playmates socialized in a racist society, each girl ultimately rejects the other, foreclosing the possibility of intimacy. The film also omits a central episode which defines Antoinette's ambivalence toward Christophine, the servant who has served as her surrogate mother. In front of Christophine's house, Rhys' Antoinette inwardly declares,

"This is my place and this is where I belong and this is where I wish to stay" (108).

Hers is a fantasy of belonging. But when Christophine advises her not to go to England, Antoinette reverts to racism that contributes to her doom:

"How can she know the best thing for me to do, this ignorant, obstinate old negro woman...?" (112).

The heroine of *Wide Sargasso Sea* imagines that she is entitled to the status ostensibly due to a woman aligned with a position of cultural hegemony — that she is superior to this native who has nursed and consoled her. Her legacy as the daughter of a slave owner is to contribute to oppression, while being herself oppressed; she is tortured by her conflicted place in fields of power and desire.

Antoinette's madness in this context derives from her sense of alienation as one without any supportive culture to mirror her identity. Yet in the film her madness is romanticized; it presumably derives from her all-consuming "love" of Rochester. Antoinette's choice to leave the Caribbean and Christophine in Duigan's version is uncomplicated by her feelings of racial superiority. The film does not present even a hypothetical choice between staying with her surrogate mother/servant or going with her lover. Part of what is lost in the cinematic adaptation is the subtlety and depth of Antoinette's character, which is compromised by a film that perhaps not intentionally re-objectifies its subject. During the couple's consummatory embrace, for example, the camera's gaze is gendered male, sliding over Antoinette's body in a way that aligns the viewer with Rochester and allows both to "consume this foreign object of desire. Antoinette's experience and identity here are neglected.

Forfeiting of identity is dramatized in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Rochester's re-naming his wife, whom Rhys has christened Antoinette, as Bertha. This is a symbolic gesture of his mastery over her. Duigan may have tried to preserve this symbol of patriarchal/imperialist domination in his filmic interpretation, but inexplicably imposes a third name on Antoinette/ Bertha, which could pass as a nickname: Nette. Simply having Rochester abridge Antoinette's given name suggests that Duigan is unaware of the violence of renaming represented by Rhys. "Nette" does not as radically suggest Rochester's colonizing spirit as Bertha does, for Bertha is chosen merely because he fancies the name (the way one names a pet). In the same spirit of perhaps unintentional irony, Duigan changes the name of a native called "Baptiste" to Nelson (perhaps because it sounds less foreign?). This careless renaming suggests that Duigan is identifying a little too closely with Rochester.

Although we hear Antoinette's voice in the beginning of the film, Rochester's perspective seems to engulf all but the closing scene. Furthermore, the film moves to redeem him. In a peculiar way this begins with Rochester's passing out upon introduction to Antoinette and by his awkwardness following this meeting. His actions make him look foolish, but also less formidable. They are comical rather than tragic in effect. When Rochester learns that Antoinette is having second

thoughts about marriage, he reluctantly concedes in the book that he "can't drag her to the Altar." This fact is deeply resented:

"I thought that this would make a fool of me. I did not relish going back to England in the role of rejected suitor jilted by this Creole girl. I must certainly know why."

Duigan revises Rochester's bullyish character by omitting these indignant lines and inserting instead the good-sportish: "I don't blame her" [for not wanting to marry me], and,

"Perhaps she will let me give it another try."

If the filmmaker cannot be reproached for introducing some levity via Rochester's fainting (a visual allusion to his general light-headedness in Jamaica), matters become more serious when this character's sadism is diluted by the film.

The film's plot is propelled forward predominantly by sex, not, as in the impressionistic novella, by dream and introspection. Rhys's narrative does suggest that Rochester is threatened by Antoinette's sexuality; indeed this is the primary way that he perceives her — "wild with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness" (73). But whereas sex itself is obliquely treated in Rhys' novella, in Duigan's filmic interpretation these secondary allusions are made primary and explicit. Rape occurs center stage, erotically packaged, then morally rationalized by its marital context. After being raped, Antoinette coos maternally, "*It's all right,*" as she caresses the perpetrator. This pardoning is entirely of the filmmaker's invention. Antoinette's mounting rage is represented by the film when, as Rochester attempts to rape her again, she spits in his face. But this is presented as a direct response to Rochester's infidelity — not to more general outrage about being objectified and violently dealt with. And again, the film salvages a modicum of sympathy for Rochester by representing his remorse after the attempted rape, depicting him holding back tears.

Before embarking to England, Rhys' narrative also makes it clear that Rochester gets off on his legal entitlement to Antoinette/ Bertha's very person through marriage.

"I could not touch her [yet]. Excepting as the hurricane will touch that tree — and break it. You say I did? No. That was love's fierce play. Now I'll do it" (136).

The film elides lines that express his malevolent possessiveness as well:

"I'll take her in my arms, my lunatic. She's mad but *mine, mine*" (138).

In partially ameliorating Rochester's character (not completely, for it is basically contemptible), Duigan purges the "passion" of some of its violence even as he portrays rape, thus making it okay for the viewer to enjoy the eroticism and to ponder the political and psychosocial symbolism only as an after thought. Somewhere along the line the issues of Rhys' narrative get so buried in red orchids and bare midriffs that some viewers conclude that this is an island romance. Doubtless it is easier to market erotica than to market an indictment of the kind of exploitation that is so much a part of this culture's history and present. But such an ironic distortion, where the film on one level exemplifies what the novel on many levels indicts — exploitation in the interest of profit — makes this film betray the political spirit of Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

WORKS CITED

Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Norton and Co.: New York, 1971).

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Yale U. Press: New Haven, 1979).

Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Penguin Books Ltd: Middlesex, England, 1966).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 1985).

Wide Sargasso Sea was honored with the prestigious W. H. Smith Award and the Heinemann Award of the Royal Society of Literature. The novel was also selected by Random House as one of the best one hundred books of fiction written in the English language during the twentieth century. Author Biography. Jean Rhys was born in Roseau, Dominica, on August 24, 1890. Her father was a Welsh doctor. When she was sixteen years old, she was sent to England to live with an aunt and to attend the Perse School at Cambridge and later the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Although Dominica would influence her writ full title Wide Sargasso Sea. author Jean Rhys. type of work Novel.Â On the other hand, taken as an independent work in its own right, Wide Sargasso Sea points to the rising hatred between Antoinette and Rochester. According to this perspective, the climax might be the moment in which Rochester sees what he has made of his wife: "I was too shocked to speak. Her hair hung uncombed and dull into her eyes which were inflamed and staring, her face was very flushed and looked swollen.