The Search for the True Identity within *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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*Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys follows the life of Antoinette as she struggles with the oppression of one's self to conform to the demands of her society. Antoinette's inability to classify herself within the boundaries of her society ultimately causes her own abjection and isolation within her colonial world. Critic Sheri Ann Denison states that “Postcolonial gothic is a literature of resistance, one questioning the boundaries of history, gender, race, and social class” (Denison iii). Criticism of binary oppositions questions boundaries of identity and illustrates the similarities between categories. The blurring of social boundaries within the genre is a questioning of the system of power division that resulted from European imperialism: a system under which individuals within their society were forced to conform to the strict regulations of binary categories or face abjection into a liminal space. Rhys criticizes the negative implications of the failure to conform as she presents Antoinette as the ultimate abject symbol. Through her existence as an abject body Antoinette threatens the other's sense of self as she blurs the binaries within race and social class. This distortion of oppositions threatens colonialist power dynamics that require distinct binaries to ensure enforcement of social constructs. Antoinette's journey from a member of her society to complete isolation is thus one that represents the dangers of colonialist categorization, and is unfortunately something that Rhys is unable to present a solution for.

During the imperial mission of greater Europe to expand and conquer new colonies, the boundaries between colonizer and colony began to blur as the two cultures altered each other. For European colonizers, there came a need to establish clear categories between the two to ensure that European power over the colonies remains consistent. White heterosexual males were classified as dominant over the subjugated native bodies to ensure Eurocentric domination. A clear distinction between self and other was required during this time. If one's identity contained aspects of multiple cultures then the power dynamics that prioritized the dominance of one culture over another would become distorted and unstable. Postcolonial gothic literature explores the dangers of subjugation as it presents social norms as limiters of autonomy. As Denison previously pointed out, boundaries between history, race, gender and social class can restrict one's individuality, but this restriction is integral towards maintaining the power dynamics of imperialism. The inability to conform to these social constructs is classified as abject and rejected from society and is consequently the primary focus of this paper. Julia Kristeva argues that what "causes abjection [is] what disturbs identity's systems [and] order" (4). By labeling a body that is unable to conform to the classification system of colonization as abject, society is able to debase and reject it as alien from the 'norms' it has created. I will expand upon this concept as I use Antoinette's role as the ultimate abject symbol to argue that abject bodies are not only isolated within their society but are also forced into subjugation by whatever means necessary.

Every aspect of Antoinette's sense of identity presents her as the ultimate abject symbol in her society. Antoinette's Creole status forces her into a position between English and Native societies inadvertently excluding her from both. As she is often called a "white cockroach" or "white nigger" Antoinette's danger is presented as a result of mixing oppositions like race (Rhys 102). Any benefit that Antoinette appears to have from one identity, like European financial class, is an illusion as her inability to conform to one classification prevents her family from properly running the land and controlling their slaves. Laura Ciołkowski furthers this claim as she argues, “Not quite English and not quite native, Rhys's Creole woman straddles the embattled divide between human and savage, core and periphery, self and other” (340). As Ciołkowski notes, Antoinette exists in a liminal space between the colonizer and colonized that leads to ambiguity in her sense of self. Antoinette is constantly switching between attributes of these dualities: one moment she attends a Christian convent school and another moment she enlists the use of black magic for personal gain. Antoinette is never able to completely adopt the entire classification of the binaries in her life and her existence as an abject body within a liminal space begins to disrupt the power dynamics around her.

As Antoinette's conflicting duality blurs her internal line between self and other, people around her begin to notice her abjection and incorporate it within their own consciousness. Rochester constantly suppresses aspects of his identity that do not align with his colonialist characterization. His entire marriage with Antoinette is done in order for him to gain the financial stability needed to reassure a sense of material wealth. However, as he watches Antoinette incorporate European culture with Jamaican culture he begins to notice her abject body and subsequently his own existence within a liminal space. The similarities between Rochester and the natives become present to him as Vivian Nun Halloran argues that "social demarcations between English and Creole

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1 It is interesting to note that Orestes also has a red handkerchief, which he uses to brush "some cobweb off the [Doll's] folded hands...infinitely gently” (Lee 195). Here, along with the narrator, Orestes becomes implicated in the creation of an alternate sphere, helping to facilitate the Doll's emancipation from the confines of her prescribed gender role.
cultural identities are artificial because they ultimately depend on chance" (87). Concerning "the geographical accident of a given person’s or character’s place of birth" Rochester regards Antoinette's inclusion of both cultural identities as something he has been ignoring within his own self (Halloran 87). His status as an empowered white male becomes an artificial illusion of his self as he sees through Antoinette the social constructs of colonialism: “Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it” (Rhys 172). Rochester's hatred for Antoinette is fueled by a longing for the ignorance of his own abjection and his inability to reclaim it. If Rochester accepts Antoinette he would be accepting colonial attributes that he assumes a prohibition, a rule, or law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them” (Kristeva 15). This 'turning them aside' occurs when Antoinette blur[s] oppositions together and when people around her see her strange position and identify themselves within it. They in turn fear the other within themselves and hate Antoinette for causing their realization. Antoinette's existence prevents the people around her from denying their own liminal existence and is why they reject her and force her subjugation by any means necessary. To ensure Antoinette does not pose a risk to the power structures of colonialism she is forced to wear 'masks' to cover her identity. These are not physical masks but masks that Lorna Burns argues one must wear in a colonial society. She states that “Rhys's novel offers an understanding of identity as a series of masks… some of which are validated, some of which are not” (Burns 38). Burns argues that Antoinette's sense of identity cannot be validated as it scares people around her, and thus she is forced to wear the mask of “being-Bertha” to hide her true identity (Burns 16). By renaming Antoinette against her will, Rhys creates a moment in which the individual is powerless to stop their subjugation. Burns argues that this adoption of masks is what constitutes the postcolonial world of the text, as each member must mask or classify themselves into the binaries created for them. Rochester forces the “being-Bertha” mask onto Antoinette in hopes that she could be manipulated back into a subject position. However, as an abject body Antoinette cannot wear a singular identity, as she contains multiple binaries. Regardless of Rochester's attempts to force Antoinette's subjugation, by taking her away from her homeland and renaming her he becomes unable to recreate her as Bertha. Thus to prevent her from causing further damage to his own understanding of self, he forces her physical isolation away from everyone. Within the confines of isolation Antoinette's sense of reality becomes destructive to her sense of identity and she uses madness to escape it. As Antoinette is unable to exist as herself without being forced to wear colonial masks she begins to create a world not limited by classification. During her moments of madness she completely blurs her sense of identification and attacks people like Richard in an animalistic manner (Rhys 147). While this may seem to demoralize Antoinette's position it illustrates the desperation of the abject individual. Antoinette seeks a world not bound by colonial masks or oppressed identity, so she creates a world in which identity does not exist. Her internal madness becomes the only way she may comprehend the cruelty of her external world. However, she is unable to completely adopt the position of madness as she is repeatedly forced to recognize her colonialist world. Her red dress becomes the symbol of the subjugated body as it roots her to her society: “Time has no meaning. But something you can touch and hold like my red dress, that has a meaning” (Rhys 147). The material dress becomes the only thing that sustains Antoinette's sanity as it causes her to remember her past. Through the act of remembering her time with Sandi, Antoinette reestablishes herself within the colonial world and the rules it imposes on her. Her own liminal subjectivity is thus extended to her
conflicting mental states as she cannot adopt the position of madness or sanity. Rhys ultimately leaves Antoinette’s fate undecided in a reflection of her own apparent inability to provide a solution for the abject individual. The ending, however, alludes to Bertha’s death in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre, in which Bertha commits suicide. This aligns with the argument of Jennifer Bann who notes that “in the supernatural fiction of the later nineteenth century, death began to bring freedom: shackles, silence, and regret were cast aside” (Bann 664). Antoinette is not able adopt or escape the limitations of colonial society and so she chose death as the only escape possible. Rhys’ text thus makes the argument that the only solution for the abject individual to gain any form of autonomy is to gain freedom through death itself. This raises many ethical questions of the foundations of colonial societies and how their forced subjection isolates individuals to the extent of suicide. Thus, by examining Antoinette as a symbol of the ultimate abject and how her existence threatens both internal and external sense of self, it becomes clear that the abject body cannot exist in a colonial society. In a world structured on distinct binaries, the abject body causes boundary uncertainty and monstrous perverseness in the recognition of the self within the other. Rhys may not have provided a clear solution for the incorporation of the abject within society, but her book alludes to suicide as the only true choice one can make. As Charles Sarvan notes, the text ultimately outlines a “journey out of entrapment into the peace of death” (Sarvan 443).

Appearance and Alterity: the Coding of Homoeroticism in Vernon Lee’s “The Doll”

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Addressing representation, Galia Ofek writes that “self-identity is constructed and determined, to a great extent, at a visual level,” a two-sided interaction which occurs between “one’s projected body image and the sociocultural codes which interpret it.” This theme of appearance and its analysis is central to Vernon Lee’s short story “The Doll,” wherein the narrator, who has arrived in Italy to collect trinkets and furniture, accidentally comes across a life-sized recreation of a Countess made by her husband, the Count, upon her death. The incorporation and deconstruction of elements of standard female beauty and behaviour is largely accomplished through the interactions between the figure of the Doll and the narrator, a tie that becomes complex and at times problematic. The narrator never meets the Count personally, and instead recreates his and the Countess’s relationship through her mental communication with the Doll, as well as from the stories told to her by Orestes, the curiosity collector, and the maid working in the late Count’s home. Yet this potential bias on the narrator’s part is nevertheless informative, as it serves as a conscious attempt to create distance from the heteronormative patriarchy in which both characters (as married women) participate. An examination of the Doll’s figure also allows for a space in which alternatives to the dominant discourses of both the Doll’s and the narrator’s societies can be practiced safely, albeit in a secret and coded fashion. The continued references to faggots, for example, gestures towards