In their chapter, “The Queen’s Looking Glass,” Gilbert and Gubar challenge women to overcome the limitations placed upon them by the patriarchy by diminishing the power of the “phallic pen” that is used to objectify women (6). Gilbert and Gubar employ Virginia Woolf’s belief that the “extreme images” of the angel and “its opposite…the monster” must first be “killed” in order for women to escape objectivity and achieve the individual subjectivity denied them through limited access to the patriarchal tool (17). Jean Rhys’ novel, Wide Sargasso Sea, written as a prequel to Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre, gives voice to Mr. Rochester’s first wife Antoinette, the mad woman in the attic. By giving the silent, fire starting Bertha Antoinetta Mason a voice where it was previously silenced, Rhys attempts to release her identity from patriarchal confines. In doing so Rhys further presents the objectification of women within her novel by reinforcing the “extreme images” and suggesting that women cannot exist outside of them (Gilbert and Gubar 17). While Rhys’ attempt to subvert the “male gaze” ultimately fails, Antoinette nevertheless is able to achieve subjectivity by entering a liminal space.

Feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey, describes women as “object[s] of [male] desire,” scrutinized under what she describes as “the male gaze” (10). With possession of the tools to “[make] things happen” (10), Mulvey claims that men achieve “pleasure in looking” from their construction of idealized women (8). This is viewed as the appropriate role for men, because as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, they possess the “phallic pen” (6), thereby allowing them to “kill [women] into art” in order to establish a position of power and ownership (17). Rhys presents Antoinette as having fallen victim to “the male gaze” in Wide Sargasso Sea, and in doing so the looking glass becomes a powerful tool used by Rochester to frame her (Mulvey 10).

By subjecting Antoinette to his gaze, Rochester seeks to “make English sense out of the [colonial] confusion”
that Antoinette's ambiguous background causes (Ciolkowski 342). Since she is accepted by neither English nor Creole peoples, Rochester sees Antoinette as only “beautiful...[a]nd yet” (Rhys 59); their hesitation alludes to an uncertainty about her that prevents her from being purely an “object of [his] desire” (Mulvey 10). His attempt to “make English sense” out of Antoinette can thus be seen as an attempt to strengthen his grasp on the pen (Ciolkowski 342). Her ambiguous background weakens his grasp as she cannot be easily defined, nor enclosed in a “frame” (Gilbert and Gubar 17).

Antoinette's confession upon being awoken to “rats quite still, staring at [her]” through “the looking-glass,” implies that she is always conscious of being gazed upon (Rhys 69). However, by telling Rochester of this experience – which she claims to have revealed to no one else – it is as if Antoinette seeks to inform him that she is not only aware and “not frightened” by his gaze, but that she also sees herself on the surface of the glass (Rhys 69). Antoinette's confession allows her to maintain a sense of control, or subjectivity, despite Rochester's attempts to objectify her. Antoinette uses this awareness of her interiority to enter a state of “to-be-looked-at ness” that is aligned with patriarchal idealizations (Mulvey 9).

As Mulvey notes, a woman assumes a state of “to-be-looked-at-ness” in order to receive the male approval that she ultimately desires (9). This is done out of a woman’s belief that men do not “perceive who [women] really are,” but instead desire only an idealized version of that woman (Mulvey 11). Antoinette admits that she wishes to make Rochester love her, thus confessing her desire to be loved. Her statement implies that she knows that Rochester's affection can only be achieved by conforming to an image that he already approves of (Rhys 93). Knowing that Rochester is threatened by her Creole identity, Antoinette employs the looking-glass to conceal this aspect of herself behind the glass surface “like a prisoner” (16). Doing so allows her the “authority of her own experience” (Gilbert and Gubar 16), for as she gazes at her reflection, she wonders whether Rochester likes the scent she is wearing. This suggests that she constructs her identity in alignment with his gaze. (Rhys 76). Antoinette asserts that she will “wear the dress [Rochester] like[s]” if it pleases him (Rhys 78). She masks her “Creole uncertainty” with a white dress that pleases Rochester (Ciolkowski 342). While clothed in white, she appears pure like a wholly “passive” angel that Rochester is capable of dominating, which leaves him “breathless and savage with desire” (Rhys 78). However, while Rochester admits that he is “thirsty for her,” he also expresses that he does not love Antoinette, as she wishes him to (Rhys 78).

Unable to achieve her desires, Antoinette attempts to exercise control
over Rochester so that he will truly desire her. Two “wreaths of frangipani” await the couple after their wedding ceremony, which appears to be a symbol of their union and mutual commitment to each other (Rhys 62). Antoinette indicates her delight as Rochester wears one, for she calls him “a king [or] an emperor,” as she views him within the looking-glass (62). Antoinette’s statement objectifies him, and leads Rochester to remove the wreath from his head and crush it beneath his feet. Rochester refuses to be made into an idealized image by Antoinette, and refuses to have his authorial powers revoked and controlled by Antoinette. Rhys refers to the revoking of authorial powers in her own writing, noting that it would cause one to become “a pen in someone else's hand” (Smith 116). She further contends that it leads to having authorial powers used for purposes beyond one's intentions, thereby limiting subjectivity (Smith 116). Rochester's anxieties lead him to reinstate his male dominance. He does this by setting his gaze on Antoinette, as demonstrated when he watches her fan herself with “a small palm-leaf fan” through the mirror (Rhys 62). By setting his gaze upon Antoinette's image within the frame, Rochester makes Antoinette an object to be viewed (Mulvey 10). Rochester once again objectifies her with his grasp of the “phallic pen,” thus denying her possession of it, and indicating that it is only through the phallus that Antoinette can elicit her own gaze (Gilbert and Gubar 6). Rochester’s consequent actions prove that it is beyond her control, and that it is a woman’s place to remain only a product of it.

Although Rochester is able to re-establish a patriarchal structure, Antoinette’s attempts to act upon her desire and exercise subjectivity within the boundaries continue to provoke Rochester’s anxieties. After having been drugged with the obeah love potion by Christophe (upon Antoinette’s request) Rochester views Antoinette as exhibiting both “self-indulgence” and a “sexual appetite” (Ciolkowski 343). Laura Ciolkowski examines both behaviours and contends that they are highly stigmatized by the English empire, and therefore prevent Antoinette from being seen as a passive angel. By moving beyond the passive status that Rochester attempts to restrict her to, Antoinette becomes a threat to him. He claims that she “thirst[s] for anyone” (Rhys 135), as if to suggest that he can no longer control her sexual activity or “frame” her identity within patriarchal boundaries (Gilbert and Gubar 17).

After having sex with Antoinette, Rochester vomits, suggesting that she is an abject being. This echoes Julia Kristeva’s examination of the abject as she argues that to “expel [one]self” is to reject that which threatens the boundaries between “I and Other” (Kristeva 7). Clearly Antoinette threatens Rochester in this sense, and by then referring to her as a “lunatic” and a “mad girl,” Rochester continues to express a
continued rejection of – and loathing for – Antoinette as an abject being that threatens his subjectivity (Rhys 136). While already controlling his anxieties through the expression of loathing, in order to “allay his anxieties” completely, Rochester must fully oppress Antoinette (Gilbert and Gubar 28).

Rochester prevents access to the looking-glass, or the “phallic pen” (Gilbert and Gubar 6), that allows Antoinette the “authority of her own experience” (16). Having acknowledged that “all day... [Antoinette would] smile at herself in the looking-glass,” (Ryhs 76) Rochester is evidently aware that this is the tool used by Antoinette to manage her identity and image. Without it, Antoinette no longer has access to her image on the surface of the glass or the perspective of the “male gaze” (Mulvey 10). As a result, the “enraged prisoner” that Antoinette has attempted to conceal becomes exposed (Gilbert and Gubar 16). Rochester describes her as a “red-eyed, wild-haired stranger” (Rhys 122), thus forcing Antoinette to adhere to the “extreme image” of monster, since she has no way of opposing the image or identity that is created by his gaze (Gilbert and Gubar 17). By shutting her in the attic with only a “window high up” that she cannot see her reflection in (Rhys 147), Antoinette is suppressed and forced to remain a monster, or an objectified product of “the male gaze” (Mulvey 10). With her identity under his control, and Antoinette isolated in the attic, Rochester’s fear regarding Antoinette as a threat and an abject being is circumvented.

Even in her abject state, hidden in the attic without access to the “phallic pen,” Antoinette is able to obtain subjectivity by maintaining a conscious sense of her interiority (Gilbert and Gubar 6). Antoinette’s ability to maintain subjectivity through her interiority causes her to occupy a liminal space, which continues to threaten the patriarchal structure. Antoinette recognizes that in oppressing her, Rochester’s intent is to deny her subjectivity, for she is aware of the fact that with “no looking-glass” she experiences a diminished sense of identity (Rhys 147). However, after escaping the attic and once again having access to her reflection, Antoinette identifies with the oppressed woman that she sees confined in the “gilt frame” (Rhys 154), and therefore acknowledges that she has been “killed” into an object (Gilbert and Gubar 17). That she sees herself in the same way as those who fear her – as a ghost – is significant. The fear that her abject state represents has resurfaced in the form of the uncanny. Antoinette once more occupies the space between subject and object, “passive” angel and autonomous monster (Gilbert and
This time “the woman [she sees] with streaming hair” is not a product of her own construction, but instead a product of those who only know her as a ghost (Rhys 154). Thus, while identifying with the woman confined in the frame, Antoinette recognizes that she has been “killed into art,” and will remain within the limitations placed upon her by the patriarchy so long as she remains in the attic (Gilbert and Gubar 17). It is only by escaping the attic that Antoinette can establish her own subjectivity.

Antoinette’s discovery of her red dress functions as a link to her previous identity, causing her to recognize the freedom that escaping from the attic would allow for. With its bright colour, like that of the Caribbean scenery, the dress links Antoinette to her past, thus standing in contrast to the white dress that represents her inferior position under Rochester’s gaze. The red dress is a connection to her past as it causes her to reflect upon the last time it was worn. Antoinette notes that on this occasion she shared the “kiss of life and death” with her cousin Sandi, thus trading in the freedom, or subjectivity, once practiced by meeting Sandi in secret, for “death” of self under Rochester’s control (Rhys 152). Antoinette searches the attic for the red dress that she thinks is missing, implying that she believes Rochester and Grace Poole have collaborated to rid her of access to the dress that connects her to her past. By destroying her link to the past Rochester controls her identity completely. When the dress is found, Antoinette worries that it has been changed from its original in the same way that her identity has been as a result of her confinement in the attic. Antoinette is able to establish “why [she] was brought [to England] and what [she] has to do” in order to release herself from the restrictions that she experiences in the attic (Rhys 155-156).

The house in England, where Antoinette is confined to the attic without a way to see her own reflection, imprisons her in the same way that the “male gaze” objectifies her (Mulvey 10). In a dream, Antoinette watches herself set the house on fire, noting that it “protects her” as it burns, before stating that she sees herself with her hair “streamed out like wings” from the wind (Rhys 155). Both images conjure an image of freedom, implying that Antoinette sees herself as no longer oppressed by male authority. Since it is a vision within her dream, Antoinette’s image of herself as free is accessible to her gaze only and is therefore unable to be altered or controlled by a male power; she can imagine herself as the free woman that she is unable to be while imprisoned in the attic. By hearing Rochester call out ‘Bertha’ in the dream, one of the names he calls her to establish his authority over her, Antoinette knows that she must jump from the house in order to escape its limitations. Falling from the house, as the walls and that “frame” her burn down, is her only path to freedom (Gilbert and Gubar 17). Yet, to jump to her death is to become a corpse, which is defined by
Kristeva as the ultimate symbol of the abject, since it threatens the boundaries between self and other. Even in death, Antoinette occupies a liminal space between these binary oppositions, which are a patriarchal institution. Although Antoinette had dreamt about freeing herself through death, as a corpse Antoinette evidently still remains defined by the “male gaze”, and is therefore unable to escape the dichotomy set in place by patriarchal order.

Gilbert and Gubar believe that “few women have definitively killed” the images constructed by men (17). Antoinette navigates within the patriarchal boundaries to achieve subjectivity but she is still confined by them, even in death. Although she dies in the fire, her act proves to have a lasting effect. Charlotte Brontë writes in Jane Eyre, the ‘mother novel’ to Wide Sargasso Sea, that Rochester goes blind as a result of the fire, reducing his ability to access the “male gaze”. Without access to the “male gaze” Rochester is unable to construct an idealization of his new wife, Jane, and therefore, Rochester and Jane are able to exist in a relationship of mutual power. Patricia Duncker notes, blindness is “a symbolic castration,” thus leaving Rochester without the phallus and no longer able to “evaluate, dominate [or] control” his wife through objectification” (11). This suggests that it is not until the phallus is taken from men, that women can kill the “extreme images” (Gilbert and Gubar 17).

Work Cited


