Power and the Cultural Other: Insights from Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea. A Critical Literary Analysis

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I am in my senior year as an English major and sociology/psychology double minor in the College of Arts and Sciences. I am an officer in Delta Epsilon Iota honor society, an active member of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars, and a Career Center Ambassador. I am studying at the University of Kentucky on a Governor’s Scholar scholarship. My particular interest is in imperialism, social thought, and oppression of the Other, as reflected in literature, specifically that literature beginning in the Victorian era. During the process of exploring this subject, my mentor, Dr. Hannah C. Freeman, has inspired me to not only pursue English as a career, but to analyze literature on the level of symbolism, which often introduces an entirely deeper (and often undetected) level of understanding. An abbreviated version of this research was presented at the 2009 Showcase of Undergraduate Scholars. My future plans involve delving deeper into Victorian literature and broadening my understanding of the cultural effects of highly influential texts.

Abstract

World history has repeatedly been characterized by countries dominating one another, controlling everything from social norms and expectations to currency. It is difficult to consider modern Western culture without regarding the influence of past power struggles between conflicting nations — nations whose own cultures have shaped the ones existing today. History texts detail these relations, and although many of these factual accounts of nation ownership provide a broad, sweeping idea of life in an imperially dominated country (those countries operating under the rule of another nation), literature supplies a much more detailed, intimate examination of what it means to live in one country ruled by another. Fictional narratives, though they utilize imagined characters leading invented lives, reflect the actual situation of their day, making them relevant to us even today as we examine the past to better understand how such power struggles from the times of old have shaped modern culture. Two such literary works are Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre (1847) and Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea (1966), both of which explore the notion that such a power imbalance serves to benefit those in authority while suppressing the ruled. The resulting reciprocal relationship that develops suggests that what one gains, another must first lose. It is this phenomenon present in these works that I am keen to investigate.
Introduction

Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) mutually manifest the emphasis, extent, and consequences of British rule on the home front as well as on the West Indies islands. The effect of British power is illustrated in both of these novels via the use of two frequently recurring images that impart how Britain’s rule affected women from each region.

Jane Eyre of England and Antoinette Cosway of Jamaica find themselves repeatedly surrounded by fire and the color red; these symbols are used to convey a deeper meaning that over the course of each novel develops into a dissimilar foreshadowing of the same fundamental concept. In *Jane Eyre*, fire and the color red may be interpreted as symbols of emotional power, romantic love, and beneficial gain, whereas in *Wide Sargasso Sea* the same represents destruction, insecurity, and emotional and physical loss. As the result of the contradictory uses of these symbols, two very different women’s lives are fused together in such a manner as to make fortune seem biased toward one and hopeless destruction the regrettable destiny of the other.

Because of the sharp distinctions in the use of the fire symbol and the color red, British rule’s impact is seen giving Jane, of British heritage, a definite upper hand in both fortune and happiness at the expense of Antoinette, the daughter of the cultural Other. Both novels illustrate Antoinette losing desirable qualities, such as love or dominance, whereas Jane is granted such qualities. These novels share the common theme of Jane triumphing in life and, more importantly, triumphing over Antoinette.

Discussion

An early example of this power dynamic is symbolized in Jane Eyre’s childhood. This incident takes place in the Red Room, a scene that introduces what later becomes a major theme of the novel: the color red. After losing a violent argument with her cousin, Jane is sent to the ominous Red Room as punishment, the bedroom where her uncle had passed away years before. The room, complete with a massive pillar-supported bed, dark mahogany wood furniture, and throne-like chair, serves as Jane’s temporary prison cell. During her incarceration, thoughts and superstitions of the room’s circumstances topple repeatedly in her mind, leaving her anxious and uneasy. Her panic eventually culminates in a spell that leaves her unconscious. When more closely examined, the symbols of this episode depict the color red as a dominating, emotionally-provoking force. Jane’s imprisonment portrays red as an inescapable force, an overwhelming power that grips one’s mind and has the ability to inflict emotional and physical consequences.

Nevertheless, the color red is not specifically illustrated as a particularly negative force. Despite becoming spastic and being unsuccessful in searching for an escape, Jane does manage to calm down enough to reminisce about her uncle’s former occupancy of the room, during which he gave his wife, Jane’s Aunt Reed, instructions to treat Jane as one of her own children upon his death. Jane’s recollection of her deceased uncle’s last wish suggest that Jane is entitled to better treatment at Aunt Reed’s hands than that which she is receiving. Despite the room’s initially perceived demonic force, a closer inspection of what the room represents, that is, a source of strength for the mistreated, constructs this space as the empowering environment that will later be revealed to grant Jane the emotional fuel needed for a defining conflict with Aunt Reed.

Shortly after her dramatic experience in the Red Room, Jane discovers herself yet again in an overwhelming situation denoted by red, this time in conjunction with fire. Due to the outburst that resulted in her imprisonment in the Red Room, Aunt Reed decides to send her to Lowood, an underfunded charity school for orphans and unwanted children. Mr. Brocklehurst, the hypocritical master of Lowood, visits Jane’s home to make the acquaintance of his new pupil. Though Jane makes no effort to impress Mr. Brocklehurst, she especially does not do so for her aunt after their guests leave. In fact, it is after Mr. Brocklehurst’s departure that Jane’s fiery passion is initially released in the form of words (and not merely through physical resistance) in the presence of someone who exercises power over her. While her aunt sits in front of the fire, Jane expresses her confined rage and disdain for the woman who has so cruelly mistreated her. She describes to her aunt the agony of living with a family that denies her love. Jane makes a flawlessly clear promise to her aunt that she will never consider her family, and that regardless of where her future takes her, she will most certainly never again reside with the Reeds.

It is not just the physical location of Aunt Reed in front of the fire in this scene that creates a depiction of emotion and force, though. Jane had just been released from her confinement in the Red Room where she noted fires are rarely lit. It seems from her confrontation with her aunt that Jane absorbed the overwhelming passion induced by the Red Room and lit an emotional fire for herself in the presence of someone who exercises power over her. While her aunt sits in front of the fire, Jane expresses her confined rage and disdain for the woman who looked on Jane with her “eye of ice” (Bronte, 1996, p. 47). Aunt Reed, in essence, is a cold person due to her own lack of lighting fires, her eye of ice, and her failure to love Jane. Taking it upon herself to transform her heated feelings into a reality, Jane unleashes her fiery passion while a literal fire serves as her background, in an effort to ensure she melts her aunt’s rigidity. Jane accomplishes just that, and remarks that “Mrs. Reed looked frightened; … even twisting her face as if she
would cry” (Bronte, 1996, p. 48). Hence, Jane actively illustrates how the sense of power she discovered in the Red Room gave her the ability to establish within herself a passionate store of overwhelming feelings possessing the valuable potential to produce life-altering effects for her betterment and benefit.

Jane is not the only central character living amidst redness and fire in the times of the British Empire; Antoinette Cosway also experiences the like. Early in her childhood, her house is set ablaze by Jamaican natives because of their anger over her family’s past slave ownership. Abruptly woken in the middle of the night, Antoinette is told to get dressed and get out of her house, an estate known as Coulibri. Although Antoinette feels unprotected and unsafe regardless of her location or situation, her home is where she feels safest. Now, however, it is engulfed in flames, symbolizing how the fury of others serves as the catalyst for the destruction of what happiness and scant trace of safety she does possess. It is not singly the fact that her home is set ablaze that will be the life-long scar, though. After escaping the flames, Antoinette stumbles upon her only childhood friend, a native girl named Tia. However, Tia, just as the rest of the natives, is also experiencing the effects of passionate revenge against Antoinette’s family, and throws a rock at her former friend’s face. This scene, which is saturated with emotion gone awry, is described by a heartbroken Antoinette who says, “When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass” (Rhys, 1966, p. 45).

The blood that flows down Antoinette’s face symbolizes the destruction of safety as her body has been physically harmed just feet away from her burning home. The devastation of her broken friendship with Tia is also conveyed in this bloody image, as their relationship is now just as broken as the skin on Antoinette’s forehead. She is left friendless as well as homeless. Both leave Antoinette deeply affected, furthering her belief that she is never safe as a social outcast. What leads to this compromise of safety and social acceptance — that the riot takes place at all — can be traced back to her family’s former slave ownership and her own racially mixed ethnicity. Had Antoinette’s family not been involved with the British rule over that island, the natives might not have felt nor expressed the anger that led them to destroy Coulibri. Thus, Antoinette is suffering because of the effects that power (and notably, her own family’s power) has had upon her, a force that can deny her a safe home as well as the only friend she has ever known. Unfortunately, this is not the final instance of redness and fire symbolizing destruction that will be encountered in Antoinette’s life.

In a scene following the tragic fire, Antoinette again is tortured by red. After awaking from unconsciousness following her confrontation with Tia, she finds her “plait, tied with red ribbon” and “thought it was a snake” (Rhys, 1966, p. 45). She lost her hair as another destructive result of the fire. What is notable about this scene is the way in which she looks at her ribbon-tied plait and associates its shape with that of a snake. It is unusual that she automatically connects her own hair with a creature that is infamous for creating dreadful, fearful feelings. The reader is thus made aware of a negative and dangerous image that is not only denoted by the color red, but is actually being bound and held together by the color, as if to say that even more dangerous than a snake is the color red, the element holding that snake in place. This implies that red possesses the negativity of the image (as it is the bounding force of the plait), making red not just a form of danger, but the source of it. The fact that the red ribbon was holding Antoinette’s hair together suggests that harm and danger will always be bound together with whatever grows from Antoinette, whether it be physical hair or emotional instability (which does grow out of Antoinette’s head, though it is not tangible as literal hair). Hence, it is foreshadowed that if Antoinette will be subjected to anything in the future causing her to lose something of great value, just as the fire caused her to lose her home, security, and sole friend, the emotional response that grows out of it as a result will be identified by the characteristic red.

The color red shortly causes additional damage to Antoinette’s mental stability, as is seen during her journey to the convent, which becomes her home following the fire. As she walks to her new residence for the first time, she is taunted by two young children. The boy who belittles her with snide remarks, though he is of Jamaican descent and is thus considered negro, is described as follows: “a dull ugly white covered with freckles, his mouth was a negro’s mouth and he had small eyes, like bits of green glass. He had the eyes of a dead fish. Worst, most horrible of all, his hair was crinkled, a negro’s hair, but bright red, and his eyebrows and eyelashes were red” (Rhys, 1966, pp. 48-49). Again, red is present, not just in the form of unattractive features, but as the worst among all the unattractive features. This red not only stands as a mark of physical ugliness and annoyance, however. This instance of red demonstrates another encounter with a force of undesirability, one that affects Antoinette’s self-security as a racially mixed individual among natives who consider themselves more legitimate. This effect is accomplished by the boy’s taunts and use of language that makes Antoinette feel physically threatened while
adding to her already mounting pile of emotional issues centering on her perceived vulnerability. A final analysis of this scene finds red as it was when her house was engulfed in flames — a force that compromises her well-being while making her ever aware of that fact that she is not considered either truly English nor truly native; she will not be able to find a comfortable position in her relationship with others of either descent. This inability to find acceptance and safety will continue to be marked by fire and the color red in her adulthood.

Images of red and fire remain central in adulthood for Jane Eyre, particularly after she arrives at Thornfield Hall, the estate owned by her employer Edward Rochester. One particular evening, after being awakened by foreign noises, Jane opens her bedroom door to find a lit candle on the floor. After hearing further noise, she proceeds to Rochester’s room, where she finds him sleeping amidst flames. She extinguishes the fire, saving his life. This scene serves as a metaphor that represents Jane running into a passionate relationship with Rochester, one that began with slight, almost unnoticeable romantic feelings (represented by the single flame of the candle outside her bedroom door) and grew into a more elaborate state of deeper and passionate feelings (represented by the more immense fire). That she once again finds herself in a room characterized by red (though it is now due to flames rather than decor) foreshadows that Jane will here find the same type of emotions she found the last time she was in a red room — emotions that will eventually lead to the granting of her own power and happiness.

Also of interest in this passage is that, although the last time a literal fire was seen as a symbol of overwhelming emotion in Jane’s life was on the occasion she daringly confronted her aunt, this fire is seen in a much different context. The difference between this fire and that from her childhood is that on this occasion the fire takes place after Jane has learned valuable, life-changing lessons through various circumstances that teach her how to better handle her emotions. The foundation for more mature feelings that Jane will later enjoy entertaining — that of romance and love with an equally passionate person — is being set during this scene. This scene depicts how her life and personal development has progressed and illustrates how, because of what British heritage has granted her, she has been able to reach a point in her life at which not only can she enjoy the benefits of a job (and such was a rarity for women of her time), but a source of love as well. Thus, this fire portrays Jane’s heightened sense of emotion that allows her to obtain more than what she has previously been able to.

The romantic feelings Jane develops for Rochester lead to another scene in which the color red becomes a dominant image yet again. Shortly before she and Rochester are to be married, a monstrous creature trespasses into her bedroom in the night and rages her wedding veil. Jane is distressed by this horrifying figure who, upon glaring at Jane, exhibits “a discolored face…a savage face” (Bronte, 1996, p. 281), making Jane wish she “could forget the roll of the red eyes” (Bronte, 1996, p. 281). To intensify these vicious eyes is the build of their owner, a monstrous being possessing immense strength wrapped in a portentously oversized stature. Red is connected to all these descriptions in such a way that, after reading the prequel novel Wide Sargasso Sea, they can be understood to represent Antoinette’s (as she is this monster) frustration and hurt over her own failed relationship with Rochester. Because red symbolizes power and emotion with Jane and dangerous destruction and suffering with Antoinette, it is interesting to note how, despite the differences in the meanings of the symbols for each character, Jane and Antoinette’s lives are intertwined while still maintaining the opposite values of these symbols. This scene can thus be interpreted as Antoinette’s hurt because of a man meeting Jane’s passion for that same man, a combination that will have tremendous significance by the end of both novels, but giving only one of the women a desirable destiny.

After enduring the frightening night with the mysterious red-eyed creature, who is later revealed to be Mrs. Antoinette Rochester, Jane runs away and eventually comes to reside with cousins in another town. Her only male cousin, St. John Rivers, plans on leaving England for India in order to be a missionary to the peoples whom the British have come to rule. Because he feels he would be most effective with the help of a partner, and that the only honorable way to take his desired partner is to first marry her, he asks Jane to become his wife and submit to what he deems a holy calling. Jane, however, feels quite the opposite and refuses. Her decision ultimately is rooted in the reality that she feels no chemistry with St. John — he is as ice to her, a feeling she imparts by saying that “St. John was a good man, but I began to feel he had spoken the truth of himself, when he said he was hard and cold” (Bronte, 1996, p. 383).

These characteristics are easily seen in his want of passion for her, as he is not romantically attracted to her fiery personality. Because the two are so different, their fire and ice personalities are metaphorically battling one another — the fire is attempting to melt the ice, while the ice is simultaneously attempting to extinguish the fire. Jane realizes that she can never be truly content if she marries St. John, and does not want to lose touch with her passion. Ultimately, she does not see the point in continuously attempting to do the impossible and melt the ice of St. John’s heart. Thus, she and St. John pursue separate paths. St. John travels to the foreign land of India, a land known to be so hot that his ice may be the very factor keeping him cool enough to avoid heat-related death in the Indian climate. In essence, his personality found the purpose it was to serve. However, Jane’s fiery emotions still need something or someone to consume, and it does not take her long to be reacquainted with the object that will serve this purpose.

Antoinette’s adulthood is similarly defined by fire and images of red. On one particular occasion, her new husband Edward Rochester plans on taking a walk through the island’s wilderness. Antoinette warns him to watch for red ants, telling him, “Look for the red ant, that is the worst. It is very small but bright red so you will be able to see it only if you look. Be careful,’ she said” (Rhys, 1966, pp. 86-87). The red ant represents Antoinette, a politically and socially unaccounted for individual who is capable of inflicting pain. Antoinette has felt small throughout her life as a friendless social outcast lacking a stable home life and the strong family ties.
that are usually provided therein. However, just because the ants are small, says Antoinette, does not mean that they do not pose a threat to someone much bigger. Antoinette, despite her inferiority, seems to be foreshadowing her own potential threat to Rochester, letting him know in advance that her position to him, no matter the sense (physical, social, economical, or emotional) should not be considered on size alone. Red is portrayed as a dangerous color, giving even those who are usually disadvantaged in one way a form of destructive power over others. It is later seen in Wide Sargasso Sea as well as in Jane Eyre that Antoinette will use this color in her effort to become a danger to both Rochester and Jane’s safety and happiness, though she will be unsuccessful in these attempts. Ultimately, Jane and Rochester are able to overcome Antoinette’s destruction, though she will not be so fortunate as to overcome her own potential for harm. Thus, red will remain an overall risky symbol for Antoinette despite her own ability to cause damage.

The most memorable and enduring image of fire and the color red seen in Antoinette’s life takes place during the infamous scene in which she burns Thornfield to the ground. Possibly because of her unhappiness and insecurity before her marriage, and potentially because of the pain experienced due to the surplus of power Britain exercised over Antoinette’s own nation, (which remained a factor into her adulthood), Antoinette takes a drastic measure and performs the action she has often dreamt of in her sleep: set fire to the English prison in which her husband has confined her. Whether or not she kills Rochester does not appear to be her primary concern — she seems only to wish for an end of her own pain. Thus, in the final moments of her life, Antoinette is seen jumping from the burning roof of Thornfield Hall, appropriately clad in a red dress. Because she realizes she has had very little, if any, power throughout her life, she makes quite a memorable impression in this scene, because not only is she wearing the color she foreshadowed would grant her destructive power, but she displays that very power by using the same concept that destroyed most of hers — fire. Ultimately, Antoinette ends her life with the two symbols that had haunted her from the opening of Wide Sargasso Sea. Thus, she succumbs ultimately to letting fire destroy her.

The fire that kills Antoinette does not go disregarded by Jane. Because she was not present when the fire occurred, she did not know if Rochester survived it. Upon discovering that he is still alive, Jane feels an overpowering sense of gratitude and relief that leads her to immediately reunite herself with her lost love. She finds Rochester at his new home and confesses her devotion. Shortly after, the two are married and enjoy what is the classic illustration of a content Victorian marriage, despite his injuries. However, none of this would have been possible had Antoinette not been killed in the fire, leaving Rochester a widower. Hence, Jane’s happiness in her marriage was granted to her by the same destructive fire that killed Antoinette. Thus, the love, romance, and passion that Antoinette yearned for is ultimately denied her via the red dress and the Thornfield fire, while the same fire granted Jane the opposite, placing her in a much more privileged position.

Conclusion

Fire is first seen in Antoinette’s childhood as something that destroyed the only place she had to call home. Later in her life, red and fire serve as reminders of her insecurity via the little boy’s taunts and her husband’s lack of interest in her, which leads him to imprison her in their own home. It is no surprise, then, that a fiery red blaze deals her the ultimate loss and demands her life. However, red and fire are seen early in Jane’s life as the gateways to emotional triumph with her aunt and a true, lasting romance with Rochester. Thus, it is no surprise that the fire that kills Antoinette leaves Jane in a superior situation. Essentially, both results mirror the impacts that the color red and fire had on these two women over the span of their entire lives and reveals that the two symbols were consistent in their connotations throughout both novels.

These two works prove that what can be destructive to one can be beneficial to another; what can overpower one can be harnessed by another; what curses one blesses another. This allows red and fire to be two images that cannot be used necessarily to represent evil or good, because their dual roles in these two novels do not allow for them to be placed neatly in any specific category. Therefore, it can be observed that although Jane Eyre uses fire and the color red to represent mental freedom and empowerment, Wide Sargasso Sea uses the same symbols to stand for destruction and the compromise of safety. This use also suggests that Britain’s rule over the West Indies impacts the outcome of individuals’ lives, symbolically illustrating how the British gain tremendous benefit at the cost of those they rule — the cultural Other.

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Works Cited