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Andy Cabello Bravo

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Construing Religion in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*"

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Abstract: The advent of post-colonialism as an approach to literary texts opened a new route for critics to assess many of the Victorian classics. The light in which the canon saw *Jane Eyre* changed as regards Brontë's treatment of the Creole character, Bertha Mason, later revitalised as Antoinette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Aside from racial and gender issues, which this paper must integrate, religion plays a key role in the two novels. The guidance the religion of the heart can afford the heroines heavily relies upon their experience and interpretation of the hostile world by which they must abide. Their success or failure, their apprehension or values and demeanours, will be influenced by their capacity to turn God into an ally. A revision of the strategies they apply is implemented hand in hand with their biography to appraise both singularities and points of confluence. The Christian discourse, the figure of Mr Rochester, and the overlaps of Antoinette and Jane's story thus constitute a rich source of material to draw upon for the analysis of female religious experience.

Keywords: religion, religious experience, imperialism, Anglicanism, race, gender.

Andy Cabello Bravo

A God for Two Women: Construing Religion in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*

0. Introduction

The appearance of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in October 1966 offered the other side of the coin as to Antoinette Cosway's coming of age, marriage, and end. Originally, Rhys' last novel was concocted as an attempt to voice and humanise the Creole character in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*,[1] who seemed a mere resource for the plot. The general reaction of literary critics was to praise the author for bringing into the play a reality that had been offstage since the commencements of English imperialism in the West Indies. Antoinette's split self was construed as the impossibility to conceive one's identity as a woman within the boundaries of a racialised community, this community itself subjected to the English values. The conflict is not much unlike Jane Eyre's, only separated by the Sargasso Sea: both heroines' journey shares several parallelisms that, although intentional on the side of Rhys, work feasibly for the pair of them. These parallelisms (the condition of being a woman in the early nineteenth century, their growing up in an oppressive environment, a rich imaginative life, the red motif, or the plight of self-discovery) have been exploited almost unanimously on the grounds of feminist and postcolonial criticism, thus putting the focus on gender and racial issues that occupy the core of Rhys's novel. Readings that place religion as a core of analysis have been inexistent or exclusively devoted to Brontë's text.

The latter view regards *Jane Eyre* as a secular rewriting of the Christian bildungsroman from the perspective of a female character. The innovative element present in the book is better understood when set off against Bunyan's canonical *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), in which the pilgrim Christian tells his journey to the Celestial City. The journey, both literal and physical, shares with Brontë's novel the metaphorical and spiritual growth of the characters, who, through introspection, incorporate Christian values; the triumph over sins and temptations represented through characters; and the vindication of faith as an ever-guiding star. The emphasis on *Jane Eyre* as a pilgrimage novel, however, is intentionally made to highlight the traits that make it a more modern, subjective, and 'real' work in the sense that it reconciles the religious growth of the individual with the protagonist's earthly struggles, her right to equality and companionship, and her claim to speak to God by herself. That all these aspects intervene within a contextualised historic, economic, and cultural background renders a more individualistic account of religion than could have been possible in Bunyan's bildungsroman. For this reason, it is highly meaningful to consider these works as a continuum understanding spiritual relationships; admitting *Pilgrim's Progress* close to the comparison between Brontë and Rhys will help to provide a

[1] In one of Rhys' letters to Diana Athill from 1966, she said the following: "Of course Charlotte Brontë makes her own world, of course she convinces you, and that makes the poor Creole lunatic all the more dreadful. I remember being quite shocked, and when I re-read it rather annoyed. 'That's only one side—the English side' sort of thing" ("Selected Letters" 144).

better insight into the circumstances that make each heroine's journey so unique, and to acknowledge common ground.

This analysis traces the influences of the Christian Gospel on the two protagonists and stems from Jane as a model of individual interpretation of the Holy Scriptures to understand why she, as the daughter of the empire, prospers in life, while Antoinette fails to replicate this process. It is pivotal to assess *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre* as independent texts that echo each other rather than take the former as a rewriting of the latter: that way intertextuality adds to the richness of the story instead of reducing it to a dependent piece of literature. This approach to the characters tries to rescue the dark, animalised figure of Bertha Mason, who, according to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, represents "Jane's truest and darkest double" (360).[2] Gayatri Spivak's considerations on the possibilities of the subject must also be taken into account to evaluate the extent to which this independence of texts really entitles Antoinette to a voice of her own. Spivak applies the term "native 'subject' " to Antoinette (248), for she contends that "No perspective *critical* of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self" (253). This implies Rhys was drawing on a 'domesticated' construction, which was ultimately a product in the English market of how the English saw themselves, to turn Bertha Mason into the real Antoinette.

The issue of reflecting a racial identity arises with a dichotomy in the alternatives for the representation of racial otherness. For critics such as Benita Parry, writers should strive "to recover historically repressed knowledges and 'the speaking position' of the subaltern, a 'conception of the native subject and agent of an oppositional discourse' " (qtd. in Mardorossian 1071). For Spivak, however, recovering this historical knowledge in order to voice the subaltern 'Other' is already a failed attempt insofar as one cannot build on Western assumptions—these reflecting the image and beliefs of the empire—to recreate a subjectivity that was never known to the writer: the coloniser's discourse would inevitably impinge on the text (qtd. in Mardorossian 1071). This analysis bears both perspectives in mind and brings forward the character of Antoinette as a self/native of the West Indies so that the comparison with her English counterpart be plausible if yet inauthentic in the sense described by Spivak. Only by doing that can one approach the two female protagonists as interwoven but independent selves, each in a different set of circumstances. "Both heroines," Thorpe argues, "seek imaginative escape, know terrors beyond the common, endure the encroachment of menace that threatens the very soul, and reach out for a seemingly impossible happiness" (104). It is in their journey to this happiness where the role of religion has been much overlooked, if not ignored, in spite of the questions it raises as to why only Jane, as the empire subject, succeeds in her quest. The point of this study can thus be condensed in the exploration of the nourishment God affords for each heroine on moral grounds and how their religious experience is felt and reflected in their evolution throughout the bildungsroman.

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[2] Jane can be regarded as a doppelgänger in the sense that Antoinette personifies Jane's early fears of banishment from human appreciation. Her tantrums as a child also remind us of Bertha's violence.

1. **The world through a girl's eyes: religious experience until Jane and Antoinette's coming-of-age**

The abode of a devotee is oftentimes said to represent in the mortal world the *highness* of the Christian spirit, a household worship to the divine, somehow the same relation that a temple holds with God. The beginning of Rhys' novel already presents the decay of Coulibri Estate, home to Antoinette:

> Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible—the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell. … All Coulibri Estate had gone wild like the garden, gone to bush. No more slavery—why should *anybody* work? This never saddened me. I did not remember the place when it was prosperous. (Rhys 10–1)

The allusions to the Garden of Eden and the tree of life set an initial contrast between the life standards of white people before and after the abolition of slavery. This hints at the existence of a prosperous past where home was a reputable place full of the floral richness of the West Indies, altogether reminding the reader that this past ceased to be idyllic before the opening lines of the book: "My father, visitors, horses, feeling safe in bed—all belonged to the past" (9). The implementation of the Emancipation Act in 1834 is translated into a symbolic fall by the young, naive Antoinette: the tree of life has withered, and the sacred garden has become a heathen jungle. Yet the religious implications of this time do not end with the dissolution of the white slave-owners' hegemony and the consequent tumbledown of their properties; there lurks behind them the perils of disorder and impoverishment. Insofar as God is felt to have forsaken His sheep in the colonies, the spiritual relationship with the Creator is weakened; the new social and economic station of the family requires further effort to get ahead and leaves little room for non-material reflection. Amongst the flowers in the garden, one orchid is depicted as "snaky looking" (11), and later on, the snake reappears physically before Antoinette. The presence of the snake betokens the moral fall of the Coulibri inmates, who have turned their backs on the Christian path to salvation. The garden is, then, the projection of the evils born out of the dereliction of duty where God has refused to reinstate order.

The early background in *Jane Eyre* resembles Antoinette's in some respects. Although orphan Jane is brought up in a white, Anglican house, Gateshead Hall, where the values of propriety, Englishness, and trust in God's Truth are the order of the day, she has to endure oppression (Mrs Reed, Master John, Eliza, and Georgiana). Mrs Reed, widow to Jane's deceased uncle Reed, is the most prominent source of misery for her in that she is a *substitute* for her parents; she is rich and reputable in the eyes of society; and all household authority lies in her. The orphan's idiosyncrasies, however, seem to deny every trace of authority to Mrs Reed when it is claimed on those grounds. Jane cannot accept an external influence to govern her actions and so rebels against the sanctioned hand of her aunt with the determination that, one day, she will rid herself of adult oppression and rule her life by

the values that are universal to her: what she feels to be good and what she feels to be bad. Antoinette experiences a more ambiguous predicament: she is fatherless too, and her mother Annette has to manage the income and seek economic support amongst the white ranks that have marooned her family. As a Creole woman, Annette is displaced to a state of in-betweenness; socially, her place lies above the black community in Jamaica yet below the category of white English property-owners. Antoinette does not grasp the repercussions that this situation has brought upon her mother, and even though there is no real insight into her mind, the reader nears an understanding when Annette refuses to embrace her daughter. Both heroines at this point share the tale of the misunderstood infant; the comfort they find comes exceptionally from a servant, someone whom, from their powerless standpoint, they can regard as an equal. Antoinette has Christophine: their relationship as *adoptive* mother and daughter helps the former to realise her predicament. Jane, for her part, receives with thankful warmth the condescendence of Bessie, who feeds her imagination with stories and songs. Indeed, imagination distinguishes itself as the early foundations of a rich spiritual life, and in the two books it will furnish the capacity to adapt the common Christian cult to the religion of the heart. This last stands for a more personal interpretation of the Scriptures, hinged on how the individual perceives their experiences, emotions, and weaknesses; a doctrine where the ultimate religious authority emerges from the self.

It is necessary, then, to explore how the protagonists' mental space for abstraction is progressively moulded in order to analyse their future selves. In Gateshead Hall, we see Miss Eyre ensconcing in a window-seat, screened by the curtains from unwelcome relatives. There she peruses Bewick's *History of British Birds* and fantasises about "the bleak shores of Lapland, Siberia, … [the] death-white realms [of which] I formed an idea of my own: shadowy, like all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children's brains, but strangely impressive" (Brontë 3–4). In Jamaica, the sight differs in some way from its counterpart's. Antoinette traverses the roads 'to parts of Coulibri that I had not seen' and rests sheltered in nature: "Watching the red and yellow flowers in the sun thinking of nothing, it was as if a door opened and I was somewhere else, something else. Not myself any longer" (Rhys 16). In both instances, they prescind from human contact and resort to their own stream of thought, but the manner in which they develop the capacity for creative imagination offers an insightful contrast that should not be overlooked. On the one hand, Antoinette experiences inventiveness and inspiration directly from nature: no intermediaries mediate the scene. During this process, she seems to relinquish the 'I' in her discourse; her will to thrive in spite of adversity is dissolved in abstract metamorphoses that cancel her identity. On the other hand, there is a clear 'I' expressed in the desires of Jane, who has access to a fantasy world by proxy—the standardised form of English cultural dominion, *viz*. the written word of print. The background bears a possible explanation as to why she is able to incorporate the notion of a Christian God: insofar as she imbibes a product of a cultural environment, she can proceed to reflect and make those ideas her own when her maturity allows her to question their origin, intentions, and meaning. She achieves this by blending the strictly religious with her imagination in a dialogue where the code is the same cultural discourse, a fact which facilitates the conciliation of the two realms. Even at this early stage, the pattern has taken roots in the characters: for Jane, the vindication of the self is

idiosyncratic, and so she defends herself by reaffirming her will; for Antoinette, life is so detached from the mind and body that she will need to look in the 'other' to know who she is in a narrative that refuses to discriminate the 'I' from the objectified subject. According to Fayad, Antoinette's chance of gaining an autonomous identity is curtailed already in her infancy by the presence of a 'they' that permeates the story through her voice (438).[3] The question remains whether she will be able to establish a first-hand relationship with a God that is almost absent in this critical period of growth.

In the next stage of the bildungsroman, Jane and Antoinette are required to gather strength and courage before leaping into the outside reality. What in Christian's pilgrimage would constitute the moral guidance offered by Evangelist becomes, for the two heroines, a more personal space for discovering the shapes religious beliefs can take and ultimately forming a base for themselves. This is, of course, the time in which Jane attends Lowood School and Antoinette, the convent. Whereas in England a mind is opening to absorb fresh ideas, across the Sargasso Sea Antoinette cannot forget the fact that her beloved home has been burned down by the black community and that her mother has deserted her; the past clings to her life and hampers the necessary progress. The conditions in which life goes on in Lowood and the convent are certainly diverse. The habits and rituals they perform establish, to some degree, the inner strength they will possess in the future. Hardships are at this point a test on the souls supposed to endorse the Christian faith. Little Eyre describes a setting filled with "dreary silence," rows of girls carrying out automatised tasks, food rations consisting of "thin oaten cake shared into fragments" (Brontë 36), frozen water in a basin fulfilling the purpose of personal toilette, "protracted reading[s] of the Bible, which lasted for an hour" (37) or "fog-bread pestilence; which … breathed typhus through its crowded schoolroom and … transformed the seminary into an hospital" (65). The plight of these girls can even be interpreted as a sort of purge through which the strong souls are prepared to endure the penalties of a destitute life and the weak souls, helped to reunite with a tender-hearted Creator in Heaven. Life at the convent in *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not appear overall to be punishing to the inmates. The ingress of Antoinette into it is an immediate relief to her: the walls of the building offer her protection against the children that plague her outside; the nuns are a ready source of solace, a refuge to her.

The habits the girls take up there are not prima facie liable to instil any trait of behaviour into them as one can appreciate in Lowood. The hours of study are limited to Mother Justine reading about the lives of Catholic saints. "But we have our own Saint, the skeleton of a girl of fourteen under the altar of the convent chapel. … St Innocenzia is her name. We do not know her story, she is not in the book. The saints we hear about were all very beautiful and wealthy. All were loved by rich and handsome young men" (Rhys 32). The array of Saints is linked to the Roman Catholic tradition of the Church which, in turn, affords them no real cognition as to who the meaning of their actions, or the sufferings that drove

[3] Fayad bears out this interpretation by recurring to the opening lines of the book, where the presence of a 'they' blots out the chance of narration with a "woman as subject" (438), taking woman to be the self that narrates the story in her own voice. Thus the novel is permeated with polyphony, making it hard sometimes to distinguish the origin of the discourse that is actualised by Antoinette.

them to martyrdom. They also idolise the relics of a Catholic Saint whose deeds are unknown to them and, therefore, incapable of revealing inward knowledge. Official religious learning in the convent is consequently deprived of meaningful reflection; the attempt to ingrain order and chastity through the sacred texts, rendered void of purpose.

Similarly to the process of instruction, Antoinette does not seem to grasp the value of certain routines in the convent. These she performs perfunctorily, with no will to use them to her benefit. One instance is particularly worth bringing to the fore, which is that of bathing oneself in the presence of others. She comes down to "the big stone bath where we splashed about wearing long grey cotton chemises which reached to our ankles. The smell of soap as you cautiously soaped yourself under the chemise, a trick to be learned, dressing with modesty, another trick. Great splashes of sunlight as we ran up the wooden steps of the refectory" (34). If, as the perspective of the nuns can be argued to be, this ritual intends to accustom the girls to be modest about their bodies and exhibit as little flesh as possible, it is no less true that for Antoinette it merely represents a trick to comply with, and not a practice from which to glean Christian values. For her, the act of covering the body to wash oneself is unnatural to the innocence of a child, especially when she recalls the time—previous to sexual awakening—in which she bathed nakedly with her friend Tia in the pool of Coulibri Estate. Another factor underlying the early spiritual experience of the two heroines lies in the authority conceded to the masculine presence. Whereas, in the convent, male figures of authority are absent, in Lowood there will lurk the shadow of Mr Brocklehurst, the ultimate benefactor to the institution. Mr Brocklehurst is described as a "black marble clergyman" (Brontë 56) who starves the girls to sickness in the name of self-denial while he enjoys a life full of luxuries. He endorses radical doctrines of Evangelism: "[M]y mission is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh; to teach them to clothe themselves with shame-facedness and sobriety," and eventually, to destroy their nature in order to make them "children of Grace" (54). His character unites the harshness of unjust punishments with the obstinacy of an unhealthy understanding of religion, which prompts the rejection of his model of faith. Ten-year-old Eyre cannot reconcile so easily her aspirations to fraternity with a version of God that foils every chance to happiness and confines the 'I' to submissiveness. As pilgrim Christian in Bunyan's novel, Jane will require the spiritual guidance of a Goodwill, whom Brontë will grant a feminine shape and mind. Aside from adult Miss Temple, who "had always something of serenity in her air, of state in her mien, of refined propriety in her language, which precluded deviation into the ardent, the excited, the eager" (62), the most influential figure to Jane will be Helen Burns.

From the very first moment, Helen, also an orphan, shows kindness and pity to Jane. The former, in her precociously knowledgeable view of things, notices the latter's immature responses to injustice and tries to offer solace to her poor soul. Empathy in this relationship soon works both ways, and Jane develops her share of pity in Helen's chastisements: her slatternly and inattentive condition has gained her the reproval of various teachers. The most remarkable aspect of the two children is that both comprehend and forgive each other's flaws without judgment; they understand defects to be part of human nature. Even before Mr Brocklehurst's visit, on their first encounter, Jane finds Helen reading alone and advances to meet her. The occasion prompts an interchange of thoughts about the reasons for

endurance. Burns advocates, "It is far better to endure patiently a smart which nobody feels but yourself, than to commit a hasty action whose evil consequences will extend to all connected with you; and besides, the Bible bids us return good for evil" (46–7), a doctrine endorsed by the most tolerant sector of the Church. The key to grasp Helen's endurance resides in the last sentence, an expression of human goodness as the only weapon to wield in the kingdom of God. However, Jane is not able to interiorise this view yet. As this analysis contends, the vindication of the 'I' comes as inseparable from her, and it is not until Jane finds a way to integrate Burns' attitudes into her 'I' that she will be able to embrace a more mature creed. Little Eyre's rebelliousness manifests itself in that same conversation: she feels she has been wounded and reaffirms her right to place the values that are universal to her in a polarised continuum: "[Y]ou are good to those who are good to you," she declares. "It is all I ever desire to be. If people were always kind and obedient to those who are cruel and unjust, the wicked people would have it all their own way: … When we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again very hard; I am sure we should—so hard as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again" (Brontë 48).

At this stage, her political views—suggestive of the French revolution—symbolise the historic opposition oppressor-oppressed and accept no nuances as to the degree of goodness/wickedness: the answer to a violent oppression is, according to her, a violent upheaval. For her, "[I]t's not enough," as Griesinger asserts, "to be passive and sulk behind the window blinds reading books … No. In the face of injustice, she must take a stand. She must speak the truth as she does to Aunt Reed, even if it means spending time in the Red Room, even if it means being called a liar by people in authority, even if it means being consigned to hell" (47). In spite of the raw effusion of outrage, Helen persuades her to behold her thoughts under a Christian light. She insists on the heathenism she is welcoming and reminds her of Christ's words in the New Testament: "Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you and despitefully use you" (Brontë 49). It is natural to her as it was to the ascetics that a good Christian should bear the blows before priding himself on his virtues. The said asceticism surpasses the common belief in salvation: beyond forgiving the sinner and abhorring the sin, Helen embodies the trust in Eternity, in a heaven of glory where the souls are hopeful and faith is rewarded:

> Besides this earth, and besides the race of men, there is an invisible world and a kingdom of spirits: that world is round us, for it is everywhere; and those spirits watch us, for they are commissioned to guard us; and if we were dying in pain and shame, … and hatred crushed us, angels see our tortures, recognise our innocence … and God waits only the separation of spirit from flesh to crown us with a full reward. Why, then, should we ever sink overwhelmed with distress, when life is so soon over, and death is so certain an entrance to happiness—to glory? (Brontë 59)

On the one hand, her advice preaches the principles of stoicism: earthly affairs between people are superficial insofar as they only satisfy the lower cravings; pain is only pain in this life; the real satisfaction comes with the embrace of death. On the other hand, she goes on to argue that the love of human beings should be shunned in favour of the Creator's love,

truest and uncorrupted. For Helen, her companion's complaints about *bad* people are normal yet useless in the light that they will vanish someday, and there will only remain the eternal spirit of the believer, sundered from the flesh. This decidedly constitutes a great part of the foundations of Jane's mature religious thoughts. The other side of the ocean displays a contrasting picture in terms of moral guidance. If Brontë provided a highly insightful and delineated model of Evangelism, it will be far less sketched in the Jamaican convent. The adult figures, too, should be considered as an influence for Antoinette. All along her stay, the nuns St Justine and Marie Augustine supply the solace of having a familiar face to look at and remind her to cast out the idea of Hell and replace it with peaceful things. The lack of introspection into abstract matters, however well-intentioned, hinders young Antoinette from configuring a personal view of religion: nothing is explained to her; nothing in the Scriptures acquires a deeper worth. That way—contrary to Mr Brocklehurst's insistence on Hell—the guidance God can bring by the proxy falls on a tendency to passiveness.

Louise and Hélène de Plana are the very first girls to whom a scared Antoinette is introduced by the hand of Mother St Justine. One could aver, although only snippets of her experience are presented, they soon become an essential support. They are regarded as a paragon of deportment and appearance, unlike Helen Burns: "Like everyone else, [Mother St Justine] has fallen under the spell of the Plana sisters as an example to the class. I admire them. They sit so poised and imperturbable while she points out the excellence of Miss Hélène's coiffeur, achieved without a looking-glass" (Rhys 32). As opposed to the mandatory toilette at Lowood, here the gratification of *vanity* is held in common praise: the girls are encouraged to look up to a model of femininity rather than spirituality. The merit of these sisters, nevertheless, comprises more than a captivating façade. At least in the figure of Louise, Antoinette hints at the existence of a dimension concerning what is non-material:

> And if we were never envious, they never seemed vain. Hélène and Germaine, a little disdainful, aloof perhaps, but Louise, not even that. She took no part in it—as if she knew that she was born for other things. … Ah but Louise! Her … high sweet voice, singing so carelessly in Chapel about death. Like a bird would sing. Anything might have happened to you, Louise, anything at all, and I wouldn't be surprised. (Rhys 33)

Although in the book she only utters three sentences (which are unrelated to religion), through Antoinette one gets to see a more reflective Louise, detached from vain human creeds. She discriminates Germaine and Hélène from the latter's sister and declares that Louise's aspirations are not their aspirations; the purposes of her life are not shared by the rest of the girls: "[S]he was born for other things." The motif of death, if blurry, emerges as well in her discourse. We do not have access as to why de Plana sings 'carelessly' about death: does she consider it a stairway to the revelations of the Unseen? Does she crave to be rewarded for her faith with a better afterlife? There is another sign tied to Burns' stoicism that indicates Louise endorses the faith of the martyrs they read about in the convent. Antoinette speaks of her as a bird, as though she could fly at liberty over this world and reach heaven by flapping its wings. The imagery conveyed by the choice of this animal

(symbolised too in *Jane Eyre* through Bewick's *History of British Birds*) is followed by an allusion, in the tail of the passage, to the sufferings of martyrs in their journey to Heaven. Antoinette would not be surprised should something occur to Louise because she knows de Plana owns the spirit of a Saint and a martyr; she associates death with the bearers of the Christian Gospel exactly as death was entrenched in Helen Burns' beliefs, except that Helen beheld it as a reward.

The problem for Antoinette in this respect is that her mind resorts to associations and not reflections. Brontë's was a conscious deployment of an exemplary Christian faith: the help Jane is given is explicit, marked by the death of tuberculosis of the *preacher*. Conversely, Rhys' protagonist is hardly ever portrayed as crossing the threshold that separates common assumptions about religion from personal interpretation and moral questioning. If Louise de Plana inspired such reflection, it is a gap in the narrative; in its surface, no self-analysis favouring the interiorisation of concepts is implied. The notion of God as a guide floats dim in the mind of Antoinette while Jane learns to thrive in a hostile environment thanks, precisely, to it. This shows, firstly, how beneficial for her a Christian friend can be and, secondly, how necessary it is for the religion of the heart to incorporate tolerant perspectives into a view where moral authority lies in oneself. In order for religious experience to blossom, an individual needs friendship:

> It is to be hoped that we all have some friend, perhaps more often feminine than masculine, and young than old, whose soul is of this sky-blue tint, whose affinities are rather with flowers and birds and all enchanting innocencies than with dark human passions, who can think no ill of man or God, and in whom religious gladness, being in possession from the outset, needs no deliverance from any antecedent burden. (James 80)

As this analysis has traced, the influence of a friend with such characteristics is present in both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. James is alluding to a type of friend that personifies the ideas of innocence, purity, and lightness; they would then stand as an icon, an ascetic ideal. Somehow the presence of this icon protects them from the "dark human passions" and, in the case of Miss Eyre, teaches her to "think no ill of man or God" in that she is encouraged to behold God for His creation. The extent to which this friendship has been interiorised will result in one outcome or another. As for Jane, eight years after she first arrived to Lowood, she is rewarded with a milder temper and the faculty to apply reason to her actions; she is ready to accommodate her former rebelliousness with Aunt Reed's antipathy for her, leave Mr Brocklehurst behind, and most importantly, keep Helen Burns as a memory of strength in her heart. Even though Gilbert and Gubar regard Helen's spirituality as "all-consuming" (346), it is thanks to her mildness and self-renunciation that Jane is able to understand dissimilar branches of Protestantism. Her feelings remain the primary element in her, yet subdued. She seeks approbation, respectability, and happiness, only in a more mature way. "The novel, overall," as Searle condenses, "does not endorse the stoic universalism of Helen at the expense of feeling, but the more mature Jane recognizes the

need to restrain and discipline her affections, by having God first in her heart, as all creatures inevitably fail" (41).

Much to her future predicament, it cannot be said that Antoinette puts God first in her heart. The fact that, although the convent benefits her in the main, she stills fails to reflect on the spiritual value of religion is conducive to her failure in replicating the process undergone by the successful daughter of the empire. As for her aspirations, it is essential to note that Antoinette will gradually lose her will to procure her own happiness. "But what about happiness, I thought at first, is there no happiness? There must be. Oh happiness of course, happiness, well." In the end, she identifies that feeling as alien to her, thus forgetting about it (Rhys 34). If one of the key transformations in Jane was applying religious thought to her feelings, it will be as vital an element in Antoinette for its absence. Again, the lack of knowledge and sound questioning lead Antoinette to reject the positive effects of religious experience:

> [O]nce I prayed for a long time to be dead. Then remembered that this was a sin. It's presumption or despair, I forget which, but a mortal sin. So I prayed for a long time about that too, but the thought came, so many things are sins, why? Another sin, to think that. … All the same, I did not pray so often after that and soon, hardly at all. I felt bolder, happier, more free. But not so safe. (Rhys 34)

This passage evidences the confusion that is so representative of the protagonist's narrative. Antoinette acknowledges here the effects of her education in the convent. She has been taught what a sin means, but the word 'sin' is a void for her. Indeed, wishing to die is a sin in the Christian religion: the worst sin in the religion of the heart, nevertheless, is to forget about oneself and give in to an external authority without a process of reflection. When she gives the impression that she is actually inquiring into the reasons why thoughts can be sins, she soon dismisses them as the nuns taught her to do. As a result, religion becomes an unknown territory where she feels friendless and destitute of joy, where the prayers in her mother's funeral "fell to the ground meaning nothing" (36).

2. **A woman in a hostile environment: Jane and Antoinette's disparate experiences of God**

Until now, the topic of religious experience has been dealt with in the period of childhood-adolescence of the protagonists. The second part of the analysis accounts for the evolution of the heroines, threading a relation between their past in the convent/boarding school and their adulthood. The immediate prospect after leaving the institution is, for both of them, interwoven with Edward Rochester. Jane and Edward's fairy-tale encounter takes place in a rush of bathos: he falls off his steed and she—now governess in Thornfield Hall—hurries to assist him. In contrast, Antoinette's introduction to him is as brief as can be described in one sentence: the first word after the closure of Part I, they are already married. A share of the missing information is supplied by Rochester in Part II. He reveals his betrothed is a stranger to him; Antoinette refuses to marry him at first, but once Rochester

hugs her and promises happiness and protection, she consents. It is implied in their arranged marriage that they will have no opportunity to initiate the kind of mutual sentiment which is built with a progressive *connaissance* of each other. This is significant in that, because of this time-span, feelings of fondness will be reconciled or not with morality.

On the English side, the relatively ample time in which Jane and Rochester fall in love is compatible with the growing affection they develop; on the West Indies, the sense of imposition renders any attempt at bridging the gap artificial and, at times, abject.[4] Rochester can be feasibly regarded as a trial, a Hill of Difficulty, for the two women. He is the test by which words need to be turned into action; previous experience, put into practice. More than that, he is a moral *coloniser* by whose methods Jane and Antoinette will discover whether they are strong enough to discern for themselves what they construe as God's message—should there be such construing. Further explanation is best provided by Lamonaca when she avers that Rochester intentionally employs religious language as a means to secure Jane. His standpoint is based on Milton's portrayal of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*, that is, he tries to control Jane by invoking a model of religiousness where moral authority lies in the reasoning of men (247). The same reading can be applied to Antoinette, for Rochester tries to dominate her on the grounds of his religious authority as the empire's blessed son he believes himself to be. His use of religious language, full of blasphemous overtones in the heat of some passages, will find a stout rejoinder in Rhys and Brontë's novels, even if it differs in realisation.

This attempt to keep women at his reach cannot be said to be unanticipated. At least in the case of Jane, he had been probing into her feelings through a showcase of performances (the gipsy fortune teller, the songs with Miss Ingram, or his fake marriage proposal). Most importantly, he had been granted a status of power and superiority by society as well as by the two heroines. Brontë's first person narrative takes the reader through many a conflict taking place within the protagonist. Gradually, Jane starts to feel appreciated in Thornfield Hall as a governess. Imagination unfurls for her; prospects of joy begin to beset her mortal heart, and little by little, Rochester ends up being "[M]y whole world; and more than the world: almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun. I could not, in those days, see God for His creature: of whom I had made an idol" (Brontë 242). It is made clear that Jane has let her feelings hold the reins of her life in Thornfield, reason acting when the boundaries of propriety were threatened. Yet it is not until later on that she becomes aware the man she loves is interfering between her and what she deems a proper religious conduct. The change in her mind is prompted by another symbolic trial. Thanks to this she is obliged to abrogate her feelings of affection so that, time acting in between as a healer, she be able to maintain a balance between her earthly cravings and her moral strength. The manifested dread of reliving the years previous to intellectual maturity evidences her need to undergo a process of revaluation. Precisely because she dreads "the psychological and spiritual dangers of excessive solitude, emotional dependence, and

[4] The notion of the abject here refers to a sensation, as defended by Kristeva, of displeasure (mental and physical) originated in the failure to discriminate the self from the other. This would account for Rochester feeling dizzy and disgusted by Antoinette after they have had sexual intercourse.

insecurity" (Searle 44), she is not prepared to engage in a healthy relationship where conscience and desire are congruent with each other. Of course, the event that separates Jane from Rochester, now bride and groom, is the revelation of his union to Bertha Mason still being in force: Bertha, as he calls her, has been secretly imprisoned in the attic of Thornfield Hall for years.

Remarkably similar are the causes that lead Antoinette to adore Edward without a religious sense of idolatry. For her, too, the dread of loneliness and insecurity supposes an additional worry to the fear of reliving a traumatic past. What could have resulted in a nourishing religious experience is always driven by her feelings of a bygone happiness and the dependence on another individual. The narrative at this point turns to Rochester, and it is necessary to rely on his account to track Antoinette's evolution. Her affection for him, because unrequited on his part, will turn out to be an unhealthy subordination to his imperialist law. The motif is again recurring: she cannot discover the worth that lies in her, or give herself that worth. To this follows her notion that death may be a solution to the void of identity. Insecure, she confesses to Rochester: "I never wished to live before I knew you. I always thought it would be better if I died. Such a long time to wait before it's over" (54). The ensuing conversation shows that indeed Antoinette has insight into her emotions, however limited the reflection to explore their origins. She warns Edward that she is not accustomed to happiness, that her hopes had been ruined before and she is scared of losing them anew. The significance of this disclosure resides in the fact that she reinforces her dependence and thus her idolatry of a man to whom she confers a high degree of authority, instead of initiating a process of introspection to regain her agency. The failure of revaluation comes as more contrasting when set off against Jane's courageous decision to leave Rochester precisely on the same grounds that are absent in Antoinette: the duty to put one's dignity before happiness, and God before man.

From this moment onwards, the worlds of each heroine become disparate: the resistance of one to comply with what, in her view, stands as an immoral life offers a vivid contrast to the over-reliance of the other on a safety that will soon be taken away. The latter mention refers, of course, to Antoinette. During her honeymoon, the temptation of the flesh is a recurring image. One scene in which sexual activity is implied depicts how a weakened Antoinette succumbs to a protective Rochester who "watched her die many times. In my way, not in hers. ... Only the sun was there to keep us company" (55). They are a stranger to each other, and the fact that she prioritises physical satisfaction—his or hers—before spiritual communion evinces the inexistence of that bond. To relegate affinity to pleasure equals, in this case, her relegation to the commands of an 'other.' As said before, the roles they have adopted can account for the repugnance Rochester feels for his wife: he, as a coloniser, places himself above the West Indies, the natives, and '"he pale silent creature I had married" (52); this position is immediately assumed by Antoinette when she opens her heart to him yearning for protection. These roles are fixed, and the safeguarding Edward tires of her: he cannot help but regard her as an inferior obliged to comply with his wishes. The operating imperialist strategy reassures the Englishness of the coloniser at the expense of the Creole woman, who becomes a domesticated object. This ideological separation emerges in his speech after his desire has been consummated: by telling her "you are safe,"

by petting her face and removing the tears, he grants her a temporary happiness. "As for the happiness I gave her," he says, "that was worse than nothing. I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love. … [S]he was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did" (55).

Rochester's open confession evidences the downright break of any mutual understanding they could have by labelling her as a stranger. His thirst is the desire for a body, not for a soul; it also links Antoinette's future addiction to alcohol to her current dependence on male approbation. From here until the end of Part II, the reader will witness how a debased and humiliated protagonist gradually loses the already lessened control over her 'I.' The impossibility to redress this conflict in religious terms, this analysis contends, precipitates her reliance on an external source of power. Her omission to see that all creatures inevitably fail baffles any acknowledgement of her weaknesses: religion would have been here a mechanism to level her status with Edward's. As God's creatures, they have neglected His advice; both, as individuals, have turned their backs on a personal reading of the Bible. It is important to mark that religion is not acting as an obstacle for copula. The place of religion here is no other than a mechanism of self-vindication—a reassurance of one's worth and the duty to pursue one's happiness on the path sanctioned by God when "invasive moral states and passionate enthusiasms make one feelingless to evil in some direction" (James 90). The possibility to stand as an equal comes from the commitment to the self, yet accepting the 'other' also holds authority over themselves. Eventually, Antoinette repeats the strategies of the past and assumes the position of the object through a mirror motif: as in a process of metamorphosis, she looks in Rochester to find her defects, her discourse, and her own identity.[5]

As for Jane, the strife to restrain the sexual drive is also worth expounding. Much of the mutual understanding between her and Edward that was accomplished through language will seep out to the surface in that same course. When Jane discovers the existence of Bertha, she refuses to carry on her relationship with Rochester, and he then resorts to coaxing in order to avoid her withdrawal from Thornfield Hall. Once he has realised economic, social, and gender discourse fails to arrest her, he turns to plea in the name of higher values: "I declared I could not change: you tell me to my face I shall change soon. … Is it better to drive a fellow-creature to despair than to transgress a mere human law, no man being injured by the breach?" (Brontë 280). His entreaty comes after her statement that they were born to endure, a declaration evincing the weakness of man in comparison with the silent endurance of woman. The breach he mentions entails the surrender to his intentions and, more than that, a betrayal in Jane's heart. The 'mere' human law of marriage acts as a barrier not only because it is a mandate of Christianity, but also because she approves of it: denying its validity equals denying her own morality and thus being objectified as Mrs Rochester.

The way Jane handles Edward's discourse will mark her victory or defeat in her quest for religious meaning. At first, she debates between happiness and rightfulness:

[5] Conversely, Jane reverses the mirror motif in the passage where she looks at herself covered with jewels and rejects her objectification as Mrs Rochester. Her identity is reaffirmed ultimately because her values find nurture in a fertile soil.

"[C]onscience and reason turned traitors against *me*, and charged *me* with crime in resisting him" (280; emphasis added). Here conscience and reason betray her conception of what is right to do. It is vital to note that she refers to conscience and reason as something different from judgment, which helps to clear doubts as to the ontology of mindfulness in the heroine. On the one hand, reason is conceived as something relatively less partial, separated from conscience and feeling. Conscience, too, is presented as an abstract form independent from the self—we see it does not match her perception of what is right—that is linked to the religious confabulation that subordinates women's experience to male-dominated hierarchy. Conscience advocates, in this case, Jane's compliance with Rochester's plan to live as master and mistress which, he claims, would contribute to her Christian duty of reforming the strayed sheep, that is, himself. On the other hand, she includes an instance of the self (that "me") in her speech. If we could see Jane's rebellious 'I' manifesting itself against any imposition of the other's will in her childhood, now, in her period of intellectual maturity, her determination to be guided by her own judgment will flourish—over conscience and reason—because it is enriched by experience. The challenge is brought upon Jane in the form of religious values: she will have to decide what authority she confers to Rochester's discourse on piety and what place her psychological maturity occupies. While Antoinette's non-fulfilment is materialised in her acquiescence of Edwards's terms, Jane's achievement lies in the capacity to address the conflict in her own terms: those of the religion of the heart. By reverting to her native territory, she is able to discern the course of action propitiated by morality:

> Still indomitable was the reply—'*I* care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. … I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, … Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour; stringent are they; inviolate they shall be.' (Brontë 280)

The conclusion she reaches is a conflation of three elements: the possession of the 'I' against foreign commands, the principles and laws she interiorised during her residence at Lowood, and her own acumen that moral strength should defeat temptation. Her resolution, nevertheless, goes further than a firm individualism: she enacts her thoughts on reformation as she trusts it is her duty to do, for herself and for God's creature. In her belief of self-worth, she demonstrates Rochester that, to deserve salvation, he must attempt to reform himself and repent from his mistakes wholeheartedly. Once her resolution is formed, conscience turns to be an ally in her path; it takes control over passion and fortifies her. The subsequent pages teem with Biblical allusions of salvation. The dictates of Conscience that "[Y]ou shall tear yourself away, none shall help you: you shall yourself pluck out your right eye; yourself cut off your right hand: your heart shall be the victim, and you the priest to

transfix it" (262) are Jane's version of the Sermon of the Mount given in Matthew 5.29–30,[6] addressing the sin of adultery. Jane's *progress* as a pilgrim is her project of salvation, which ultimately comprises Rochester's too.

A last word should be added to the heroines' way of dealing with happiness. William James contends that "[H]appiness … has blindness and insensibility to opposing facts given it as its instinctive weapon for self-protection against disturbance. When happiness is actually in possession, the thought of evil can no more acquire the feeling of reality than the thought of good can gain reality when melancholy rules" (88). This portrayal of happiness as a sort of blindfold fits closely in both Antoinette and Jane's reluctance to part with it. Only for Jane a way will be unearthed to hold onto her convictions before pursuing an *immoral* happiness. By doing this, she transforms the politics of feeling reigning over her thoughts and makes of misfortune a weapon to reinforce the power over herself. As James avers, a religious policy may be born out of the individual's will to fight Evil, since it can be transmuted into a "bracing and tonic good" whose "sting so often departs and turns into a relish when, after vainly seeking to shun it, we agree to face about and bear it cheerfully" (88).

In this sense, God plays a decisive role as a guide in Brontë's narrative. The night after Edward's scandal is revealed, a dream hovers upon the heroine, who is taken back to the red room in Gateshead Hall and, wrapped by the Gothic atmosphere, is visited by a "white human form" who speaks directly to her spirit and tells her to "flee temptation," to what Jane replies, "Mother, I will" (Brontë 282). That a heavenly presence emerges through the clouds to counsel her can be construed in, at least, two ways: God has sent a visitation to help *her daughter*, or her unconscious has sifted a disclosure to fix her determination. In either case, the motif of the dream is distinctively religious: from an almighty entity or from her own heart, she recognises her duty as that of resuming the journey to her Celestial City. This time God, He, is treated as a 'She,' as Mother, exactly as She will be treated later on when Jane takes refuge in *mother* nature to survive. The feminine pronominalisation suggests that adult Eyre does not submit to the conventional religious discourse that arrogates the masculine gender to God. Rhys' narrative offers a counter-parallelism to this. In Antoinette's dream she, as Jane, goes back to her past home, walks towards the forest "sick with fear," following a man who leads her "under the dark tall trees," and then resumes her pace until they reach a scenario likely to forebode Thornfield Hall (Rhys 36). Although quite early in the narrative, it makes the reader bring into consideration the pattern of acquiescence the heroine follows. The light of God cannot penetrate the dark trees that screen Antoinette: nature in her dream is a looking-glass to her mental state; no light can reach her because no light has grown within her. The presence of fear is so overbearing that it concedes no space for religious thoughts of the heart. Since the quest for safety is there, she cannot but follow the man, as though accepting the other's leading role, towards her own inevitable undoing.

A word of explanation may be necessary to account for the role of St John Rivers in Brontë's bildungsroman. The figure of this Church minister is exclusive to *Jane Eyre*,

[6] "And if thy right eye offend thee, plucke it out, and cast it from thee. … And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee. …" (*The Holy Bible*, Authorised King James Version, Matt. 5.29–30).

meaning no counterpart of his is present in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. St John, by now a foil to Rochester, tries to persuade Jane into becoming his wife as a missionary. The grounds on which he bases the proposal are not alien to her. Indeed, both have determined their judgment as to the nature of their actions by looking up to God in some way. In her heart, Jane is far from convinced or delighted by the idea, but the fact that his discourse is immersed in religious implications instils doubts into her. The trial for Jane is, now, discriminating her will from someone else's spoken in the same language, even if to a *different* Creator. As Searle contends, "Jane is convinced that it is possible God might call her to be a missionary, but if so, she would have an assurance of it in her own heart" (45). Ideologically, this slope in the Hill of Difficulty is harder to mount, as her own frame of reference is at stake. The veneration she feels for him acts in his favour by tempting her to submit: "I was tempted to cease struggling with him—to rush down the torrent of his will into the gulf of his existence, and there lose my own. … To have yielded then would have been an error of principle; to have yielded now would have been an error of judgment" (Brontë 370). Jane's identification of marriage with love outweighs traditional Victorian views which advocated that the only object of veneration for a woman should be not a husband but God in a husband. Jane feels as convinced of her right to be loved by an equal as she feels her God sanctions it Himself: she prioritises happiness over dignification in the name of the Evangelical Christian doctrine she practises. All along, Mary and Diana Rivers epitomise a model of Christian integrity that helps Jane to cultivate a healthy-minded Evangelism.

However, while this process is, on the English side, a process of maturation, of accepting responsibility for the obedience she owes to her own heart, chiefly when it entails disobedience to external commands, the Jamaican side stands for the total loss of control over the self. Antoinette's policy of bildungsroman is incompatible with the acknowledgement of one's responsibility. The "dangerous conflation between male spiritual mediators and the Divine itself" (Lamonaca 248) results in the clouding of any sign from the Divine that could reach Antoinette; those spiritual mediators have succeeded in disguising their own discourse in the light of righteous Christianism. This alienation has contributed to the protagonist becoming a commodity of imperialism: the woman her stepfather sold ends up being the detested wife of an Englishman. That woman, deprived of her name and *Christened* Bertha as her mother, is cornered to a pattern of not understanding who she is or where she belongs. Any possibility of developing uplifting religious thoughts is hindered at her expense. She will now take to drowning her existential uncertainties in alcohol, confined within Rochester's house of dolls: "*Marionette, Antoinette, Marionetta, Antoinetta*" (Rhys 92).

At the end of *Jane Eyre*, Jane hears a voice calling for her which she associates with Edward through the supernatural. To analyse this, it is necessary to consider the biblical echo of Jane's words when she refers to the mysterious event that reunited her with Rochester: "The coincidence struck me as too awful and inexplicable to be communicated or discussed. … I kept these things then, and pondered them in my heart" (Brontë 397). Here she avails herself of the Evangelist's words, "But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart" (*The Holy Bible*, Authorised King James Version, Luke 2.19). The connection with the Sacred Text suggests that indeed Jane may be fortifying her own beliefs that she, as Mary, needs no mediators to hear God's message. If she alone could hear the

call, then God's will might be that she should attain happiness together with Rochester. Eventually, the process of reformation Jane had symbolically initiated with the *baptism* of Edward in Chapter XV—his chamber is set on fire, and she hurries to deluge his bed on water—culminates with Edward's punishment (his sight is lost, and his hand is amputated) and penitence after Bertha ignites Thornfield Hall to ruins. Once redeemed, the couple is rewarded with a marriage sanctioned by law, for Bertha is now dead. Jane's wish that they may stand "at God's feet, equal—as we are!" (Brontë 223) is made true, thus reconciling her individuality with social norm. In saying that she is "bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh" (399), another allusion to the Book of Genesis, she is, as Lamonaca avers, "[investing] her relationship to Rochester with redemptive, Evangelical overtones" (257) and, as this analysis defends, corroborating the rightfulness of her heart by casting a graceful look at Heaven.

As for Antoinette, the *Celestial City* cannot be more unlike her counterpart's. Before Rochester takes her to England, thus disclosing Part III of the book, she declares her hatred towards him: he has turned everything she loved into a disagreeable memory. A transition to mental instability and alcoholism is instigated then by her need to forget the pain. Her mother's plight is replicated through her, and Bertha—no longer Antoinette for the world—degenerates into the sinful "clothed hyena" (Brontë 259) that attacks Richard Mason in the attic of Thornfield Hall. The dominant discourse on madness held by Rochester and Daniel Cosway has also assisted the purpose of expelling her from the normative circle of sanity. Antoinette is declared to be an alcoholic, a doll, and altogether a madwoman; she is declared to be so many things that she ends up losing the sense of identity. As Meyer affirms, "Bertha is excluded from the individualistic humanity which [*Jane Eyre*'s] feminism claims for Jane" (250). Chained to the law, she cannot rely on any spiritual remnant of strength; she now discerns a total flight from life as the best ally in a world where God is non-existent for her. True enough, it is her death in the fire provoked by *Bertha* what permits Jane and Rochester's love to thrive. After all, Antoinette had already vanished to her childhood in Coulibri.

To what extent *Jane Eyre*'s proto-feminist claims can be reconciled with her marriage and religious life is another matter. As this analysis has shown, Jane accepts the institution of marriage because it accords the kind of love she seeks while being encouraged by her religion. From then on, however, she creates a situational tie that binds her to the domestic and, it could be argued, curtails her fervent outdoor experiences. Her salvation is interwoven with Rochester's more than ever. In this respect, Lamonaca defends that Jane "renounces spiritual autonomy for a reciprocal dependence" (257). This is not altogether faithful to a reading of the novel that assesses it as a Christian bildungsroman. In fact, that she accepts reciprocal dependence is a token of her will to assert her spiritual autonomy: although her service to God now is fused with her husband's service, it will still depend on her convictions, and thus on her own judgment. If her frame of action and her previous independence are lessened, the reason lies in her decision to embrace the Victorian ideology of marriage on her conditions. Picking up Lamonaca's argument again, "Despite Charlotte Brontë's struggles to reconcile her heroine's spiritual integrity with female desire and with the rhetoric of nineteenth-century femininity, she cannot, in the end, give equal weight to all claims" (259). The closing lines of the book hence remain consecrated to the more self-renouncing views on

religion, even though the conflict of the protagonist had been her progressive adoption of a subjective and individualistic religion of the heart. It cannot be said that Jane's bildungsroman has been a passive process of growth; instead, it has to be analysed as a dynamic quest for happiness of which moral reflection and self-questioning are the prevailing tenets. Only by construing God subjectively has she been able to embrace a religion whose name has served to submit women to conventional domesticity. Jane has swerved from the omnipresent Victorian male discourse in order to earn the responsibility for her own salvation, a principle of Protestantism heaved, for generations, off the female sex. She, as the favoured daughter of God, has preserved her right to speak and listen to her Creator. Adapting Helen Burns' guidance and opening to Diana and Mary Rivers' healthy-mindedness has been a key to vindicating her 'I' as an adult while forgiving her former oppressors, as she comprehends they are His fallen creatures too.

The same episodes that Miss Eyre overcomes are insurmountable for Rhys' protagonist. Antoinette, as the *native* subject, grows divided between the ideals of Englishness she is supposed to pursue and the black community of Jamaica to whose unrest she bears witness. Furthermore, the sudden ostracism from her mother's affection that takes place on the fire of Coulibri combines with her experiences of rejection to form a trauma. On the whole, the sense of displacement between people and memories impedes the formation of religious principles. No inner reflection beyond nature and identity has been encouraged or, at least, distinguished in her patchwork narrative. Her dependence upon the 'other' bolsters the imperialist discourse on religion and leaves no room for personal belief or guidance. At this point, one may wonder whether Antoinette's creed was yearning for the past, and her way to honour the cult, escaping the reminiscences of the present. The question, "What am I doing in this place and who am I?" is the expression of longing for a certainty that is incompatible with life. Antoinette drifts "out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass" (Rhys 107). For Fayad, this conclusion represents the spark to Antoinette's energies insofar as her death ends also the normative tale imposed upon her, thus epitomising the suppression of women's subjectivity that has been perpetuated throughout history (452).

3. **Conclusion**

By this point, the general differences in the interpretation of the Christian Gospel by the two heroines have been outlined. A comparative view of Brontë and Rhys' works has been offered in the personal religious and spiritual experience, contextualising it through gender, historical, and social issues. Brontë's narrative provides a much more extended and forceful account of religious matters, God being a central piece to her life and writings. The Postmodernist context of Rhys must be mentioned to enhance the value of her disjointed narrative: it is closer in many respects to what could have been the reality of the subject then: disordered, polyphonic, and averse to faiths that encourage metanarratives. Where *Jane Eyre* depicts the structured voice of adult Jane narrating previous episodes with a clear line of thought and moral message, *Wide Sargasso Sea* sews a patchwork with no definite reading of a character. To talk about Jane Eyre is to talk about religion; to talk about

Antoinette Cosway entails a debate over the fissure of the self. Studying the guidance God can afford the characters, when such exists for them, constitutes a very interpretative enterprise, no less absorbing when drawing common ground. Their evolution along the novel is worth framing within Bunyan's model of bildungsroman. Charlotte Brontë can be said to have adapted the traditional policy of hero-growth to suit a self-assertive governess who aspires to be worthy of her God. Both *Jane Eyre* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* rise from misfortune to pious realisation, even if *Jane Eyre* exposes a more subjective bridge gender-religion. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in contrast, presents a reversal of Bunyan's pattern: the story of the protagonist is a fall, a failure in creating spiritual meaning. One could argue the matter with *Jane Eyre* is to measure the extent to which the heroine's views on Protestant Evangelism can be harmonised with a threatening rhetoric that dictates where a woman's place should lie. The discourse on Christianity is reversed to cater to the Victorian woman with a private understanding of the creed, that is, the religion of the heart in the person of Jane, who addresses that rhetoric in her own territory. Her commitment to individuality extends to the claim that she needs no intermediaries to mediate between God and herself.

In all its complexity, a reading that obviates her individual dimension to emphasise the wider picture of religious branches, or a reading that sacrifices Jane's context to underline her autonomy and proto-feminism is not desirable; reconciling divergent elements in her work requires to maintain a balance and understand some boundaries. On *the other side*, the conflict emerges when one attempts to elucidate Antoinette's lack of reflection in terms of identity and the other's discourse. The analysis risks confronting two sides of a story: the normative one which imposes limits on the protagonist's self and fall into madness, and the 'real' version—taking real to be the product of the subject—that underlies the former and is unknown to us, since the reader only approaches a domesticated narrative and not the life itself. The same reasoning can be applied to Rhys' ending: whether we can contemplate it in the light of a failure set off against *Jane Eyre* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* or, instead, we should strive to unearth a more specific reading, has yet substantial room for discussion. Assessing, finally, *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* as echoing literature is as singularly complicated in the gaps as it is in the convergences. The nuances of each work have to be regarded in their own frame and then conflated, bearing in mind the significance they acquire when they speak to each other. Religion is a chief factor indeed in the dissimilar worlds where the protagonists grow. Hostile as they are to Antoinette and Jane, this analysis does not defend that the latter accomplishes a total success at the expense of the former, or that the former is driven to death as a plot resource per se. If Bertha served as a double, the same cannot be said of Antoinette. She shares many circumstances with Jane; yet spiritual guidance does not figure amongst them. It comes as poignant in the craft of literary criticism, then, how disparate experiences of the world can make two different Gods for two similar selves, or one single God for two different women.

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Bioprofile of the author: Andy Cabello Bravo is an undergraduate student at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, where he serves as assistant editor and contributor to the Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research (JACLR) within the SIIM research group. He has also translated reviews and short articles on Anne Brontë for the Victorian Web.

Contact: < andcabel@ucm.es >