

ETHICS AND THE GOTHIC IN JEAN RHYS'S *WIDE SARGASSO SEA**¹

Bárbara Arizti Martín
Universidad de Zaragoza
barizti@unizar.es

This article revisits *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a Gothic text focusing on two of the main structuring principles of the novel —excess and in-betweenness. Rhys's rereading of *Jane Eyre* in terms of the excessive and the liminal admits of a double interpretation. Firstly, from an ideological perspective, her gesture has valuable implications for feminist and postcolonial agendas. Complementarily, this opens up the text to an ethical mode of reading. By drawing on Andrew Gibson's ethics of sensibility and on Homi Bhabha's mimicry and hybridity, I intend to read *Wide Sargasso Sea* as representative of a post-foundational form of ethics with which the Gothic shares an emphasis on indeterminacy and an aversion to universals and fixed moral categories.

Keywords: *postcolonial Caribbean Gothic, postmodern ethics, ethics of sensibility, in-betweenness, excess.*

El artículo se aproxima a *Wide Sargasso Sea* como novela gótica mediante el análisis de dos de sus principios estructurales más relevantes: lo liminal y el exceso. La relectura que hace Rhys de *Jane Eyre* desde lo liminal y lo excesivo puede interpretarse desde dos perspectivas complementarias. En primer lugar, desde un punto de vista ideológico, su gesto tiene importantes implicaciones para las agendas feminista y postcolonial. En segundo lugar, este tipo de análisis abre el texto a una lectura desde la crítica ética. Recurriendo a la ética de la sensibilidad de Andrew Gibson y los conceptos de mímica e hibridación de Homi Bhabha, pretendo leer *Wide Sargasso Sea* como ejemplo de la ética post-fundacional con la que el modo gótico comparte el interés por la

indeterminación y la aversión a los universales y las categorías morales.

Palabras clave: *Gótico caribeño postcolonial, ética postmoderna, ética de la sensibilidad, lo liminal, el exceso.*

The Caribbean ‘learned to “read” itself in literature through Gothic fiction’, states Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (2002:333) in her chapter on (post)colonial Caribbean Gothic for *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Jean Rhys, born in Dominica of a Welshman and a white Creole mother, experienced her own identity in similarly textualised terms. As is well known by any reader acquainted with Rhys’s biography and work, her reaction when she first read *Jane Eyre* was one of rage at the description of Rochester’s white Creole wife. Bertha Mason, who bears most of the burden of the Gothic mode in Brontë’s novel, is depicted as wild, beast-like, mad and unruly. The character is further alienated by the fact that, but for a few growls, we never hear her speak directly. It is Rochester that tells horrified Jane the story of his first wife after the famous attic scene. Fortunately, Rhys’s rage was productive as she decided to put this archetypal ‘mad-woman-in-the-attic’ right ‘on-stage’, providing her with a more amiable human appearance, a voice and the opportunity of telling the story of her childhood and early womanhood in her Caribbean island.

But rather than break the Gothic spell cast on the first Mrs Rochester, Rhys draws upon much of the paraphernalia of the subgenre in order to fill in what her own Creole sensitivity revealed as unpardonable Eurocentric gaps. The Gothic explodes in *Wide Sargasso Sea* into a myriad of possibilities that go beyond the conventional list of images and motifs, affecting the very structure of the novel and promoting excess and in-betweenness. Since its origins in the late eighteenth century, the Gothic has revelled in the blurring of distinctions and the overflowing of conventional forms of restraint, be it generic, textual, psychological or moral.² Rhys’s re-reading of the Gothic in terms of the excessive and the liminal in *Wide Sargasso Sea* admits of a double interpretation. Firstly, from an ideological perspective, her gesture has valuable implications for feminist and postcolonial agendas since it confirms the novel’s contestation to

patriarchal and imperial values and practices. Secondly, this opens up the text to an ethical mode of reading. Rhys's questioning of Rochester's one-sided account aligns her novel with a form of post-foundational ethics with which it shares a common emphasis on indeterminacy and an aversion to universals and fixed moral categories. This article intends to offer a fresh reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* by approaching it through the lens of ethical criticism as an instance of post-colonial Gothic. In particular, I will draw on Andrew Gibson's ethics of sensibility or affect, a strand of the contemporary turn to ethics in its postmodern post-foundational form, and on Homi Bhabha's mimicry and hybridity in order to cast extra light on Rhys's attempt to unmask bourgeois limitations by rejecting clear-cut moral divisions between right and wrong.

Critics like Allan Lloyd Smith and Susanne Becker have drawn attention to the striking parallels between the Gothic tradition and postmodernism. The strategies both Gothic fiction and postmodernist fiction deploy encourage, as Becker (1999: 1) puts it, 'a radical scepticism concerning the universalising humanist assumptions of modern thought and of classic realism'. It is precisely from postmodernism, and its critical associates post-structuralism and deconstruction, that a new ethical mode of reading stems. The ethical criticism of J. Hillis Miller, Andrew Gibson, Geoffrey Harpham and Christopher Falzon, to name but a few, proves that a post-foundational ethics is viable and that an ethical reading of texts is perfectly and fruitfully compatible with an interest in Literary Theory. This is only a sketch of the ongoing debate between neo-humanist and deconstructive ethical critics that characterises the current turn to ethics in the literary panorama. The neo-humanists blame the relativism promoted by the Theoretical Era for the disappearance of ethical criticism of the literary agenda from the 1950s to the late 1980s and advocate a return to an ethical reading of texts. The deconstructive critics interpret this move as a revival of F. R. Leavis and the values of liberal humanism and suggest instead an ethical approach to literature informed by the insights of critical theory. Drawing upon the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, they try to demonstrate that some forms of deconstruction and post-structuralism blend well with an ethical reading of texts.³

One of the first to read *Wide Sargasso Sea* from a Gothic perspective was Anthony E. Luengo in “*Wide Sargasso Sea* and the Gothic Mode”. Luengo considers the novel a Gothic, or rather, ‘neo-Gothic’ work, in line with *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. Although he puts forward the label Caribbean Gothic, he questions its validity because, in his opinion, there were not at this early stage enough representatives to constitute a separate category. Luengo tackles two elements that clearly situate *Wide Sargasso Sea* within the Gothic mode: its evocation of landscape and the portrayal of its main characters, for which Rhys draws on such stock types as the Gothic villain, the Byronic hero, the persecuted woman and the femme fatale. More than twenty-five years later, Sylvie Maurel retakes the issue in “Across the ‘Wide Sargasso Sea’: Jean Rhys’s Revision of Charlotte Brontë’s Eurocentric Gothic”, and offers a more sophisticated analysis from a postcolonial perspective. Her contention is that the novel ‘makes the most of the Gothic destabilizing machinery’ in order to disclose ‘the hidden mechanisms of colonial history’ and undermine ‘the naturalized representations circulated by the metropolis’ (109). She bases her argument on the presence of uncanny phenomena articulated around ‘the colonial arbitrary’ and on ‘a rhetoric of haunting’, two characteristic features of postcolonial writing, according to David Punter. Interestingly for the present study, Maurel argues that Jean Rhys ‘exploits the affinity of the Gothic with epistemological uncertainty to disrupt normative discourses, whose stable identifications prove inadequate in the colony’ (2002: 117).

According to Nicola Nixon, *Wide Sargasso Sea* gives vent to all that goes unsaid in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, a novel which represses female sexuality and racial difference and where Jane, the ‘natural’ English woman, is presented as the paradigmatic woman. Similarly, for Sylvie Maurel, Rhys’s novel recommends excess where *Jane Eyre* advocates temperance and self-control. The hyperbolic, Maurel states (1998: 153, 154) is “‘naturally’ indigenous to the universe of the novel’. Although excess has traditionally been used pejoratively in order to downgrade the Gothic as a ‘feminine form’, I will here, as Becker does in *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fictions* (1999: 11), highlight its liberating potential for both cultural and narrative structures. I intend to explore the workings of excess in *Wide Sargasso Sea* on three interrelated planes: the sensual, the moral and the textual.

As Sylvie Maurel (154) has noted, and as is the case with much postcolonial Gothic literature, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* nature takes the place of architecture. The landscape of the Caribbean islands where parts one and two of the novel are set, is a very obvious symptom of excess. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the occulocentrism characteristic of much of Western culture, with its emphasis on the visual, is abandoned in favour of a more complete sensory experience. Jean Rhys has the ability to evoke a sensuous picture of the tropical landscape of Jamaica and Dominica, a picture that demands 'to be smelt, seen, tasted, heard and felt' (Hemmerechts, 1987: 422). Rhys complicates the monological description of West Indian nature, filtered by Edward Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, by offering two opposed perspectives. Rhys's Rochester,⁴ the male imperialistic voice in the novel, undergoes a kind of sensory shock in this alien environment as he is overpowered by the blazing sun, the bright colours, the oppressive heat, the heavy scent of flowers, the too highly seasoned food and the deafening noise: 'Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near'.⁵ But the vision of the islands Rhys privileges is that of Antoinette, the name Bertha Mason receives in the novel. Her perception of West Indian nature counteracts her husband's negative image. Born and brought up there, Antoinette pictures the lush tropical landscape as comforting, life giving and empowering, in contrast to England, which is 'like a cold dark dream' (47) to her. This physical landscape is also an emotional landscape, as nature expresses Antoinette's and Rochester's moods throughout the novel. Rochester is perfectly aware of the intimate connection between his wife and her natural surroundings – 'I feel that this place is my enemy and on your side' (82)– and finds both the exotic tropical forest and Antoinette, excessive and unnerving: 'At least it shadowed her eyes which are too large and can be disconcerting' (37). With this move, Rhys translates the 'late Romantic opposition of wild, free nature with corrupt and oppressive civilisation' (Savory, 2000: 174). into a postcolonial scenario and resorts to it as a way to empower the colonized other.

It is not only as a colonial subject that Antoinette is empowered in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. She also resists her husband as a woman. According to Sue Spaul (1989:105), in the West Indies, 'Rochester comes face to face with the "wild zone" of female experience'. This

anthropological concept, borrowed by Elaine Showalter, refers to women's culture as 'a zone spatially, experientially and metaphysically outside the dominant boundaries.' (93) Antoinette's refusal to being renamed Bertha, her wild temper, her self-imposed silence which strategically undoes Spivak's tenet that the subaltern *cannot* speak, neutralise Rochester's attempts to civilise his wife. In line with many a writer of recent instances of women's Gothic, Jean Rhys produces 'an image of woman as blank, as impossible of inscription' (Punter, 1996:192). Antoinette's resistance to inscription answers not only literary generic reasons but also cultural ones. With the intention of offering a more complex and accurate image of the Caribbean woman's experience, Alison Donnell (2006: 8) has contested the term 'double colonisation', which has traditionally 'doubly' disempowered the female colonial subject by fixing her in the role of passive victim both of patriarchy and the empire. For Donnell, Caribbean women are rather 'double agents' able to mobilise gender as 'a site of resistance, affirmation and oppositional agency.'

The luxuriance of the tropical landscape reflects Antoinette's sexuality. Unlike Radcliffe's heroines, who 'turn with disgust from any suggestion of sexuality even when shown by the hero' (Howells, 1995: 11), Antoinette is portrayed as a passionate woman. Early in their honeymoon, Rochester seems to enjoy his wife's sexual openness: 'Very soon she was as eager for what's called loving as I was – more lost and drowned afterwards. She said, "Here I can do as I like," not I, and then I said it too. It seemed right in that lonely place. "Here I can do as I like"' (55-56). But soon Antoinette's search for unrestrained sexual fulfilment exceeds Rochester's principles of right and wrong. Her sensuality transgresses Victorian moral codes, which dictate that the bourgeois woman is immune to sexual appetite and that sex is primarily oriented to procreation. English bourgeois conventions draw a strict line between wife and whore: 'The nineteenth-century loose woman might have sexual feelings, but the nineteenth-century *wife* did not and must not' (A. Rich in Horner and Slosnik, 1990:164).⁶ Elaine Savory (2000: 65) adds a new twist by introducing the colonial question: 'English middle- and upper-class Victorian culture had already split the sexual from the ideal in women, constructing prostitutes or lower class women or, in this case, perhaps Creoles, as available and the mother/wife as the asexual, pure madonna.' That the

Creoles might share with the black a stronger sexual impulse was then considered a symptom of their moral degeneration.

Antoinette does not fit into the conventional mould of the Victorian wife. For Rochester, her interest in sexuality is improper of a woman of her class and condition. He even comes to believe Daniel Cosway –Antoinette's black half-brother– who insinuates that she is promiscuous: 'You are not the first to kiss her pretty face. Pretty face, soft skin, pretty colour – not yellow like me. But my sister just the same...' (79). Daniel hints at an extramarital affair between Rochester's wife and her cousin Sandi, an affair that seems to be confirmed by Antoinette herself in the last part of the novel. Confined in Thornfield's attic, she asks her keeper for her red dress, 'the colour of fire and sunset' (119), the colour and the smell of West Indian flowers and spices: 'The smell of vetiver and frangipani, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering [...] I was wearing a dress of that colour when Sandi came to see me for the last time' (120). Rhys, who has a flair for the symbolism of colours, conflates in Antoinette's red dress her Caribbean identity, her powerful sexual instinct that cannot be contained by marriage, and a hint at the novel's intertextual connection with *Jane Eyre*. Paraphrasing Rochester's words in Brontë's novel, Antoinette asks Grace Poole: 'Does it make me look intemperate and unchaste? [...] That man told me so' (120).

But, what then is the difference between Brontë's first Mrs Rochester and Rhys's Antoinette if both are portrayed in similar terms as highly sexualised women? Does this fact detract from Rhys's project to rescue Rochester's West Indian wife from Euro-centrism? Bertha Mason's moral excess serves, I believe, as an excuse to confine her in Thornfield's attic and as a forceful justification for Rochester's new interest in Jane. The novel relies on her disappearance in order to promote the much more suitable Jane to the status of Mrs Rochester. It is my contention that Jean Rhys highlights Antoinette's sexuality with a different end in mind. Excess in *Wide Sargasso Sea* turns into a liberating strategy that finds in the Gothic a powerful ally when it comes to undermining bourgeois conventions.

The figure of the monster suits both Gothic and postcolonial contexts. In *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order*, David

Punter (2000: 110) explores questions of 'rage, hatred and haunting by showing some ways in which the postcolonial has an implicit connection with the construction and representation of monsters'. The monstrous body, he states, escapes standardisation and control, two of the main processes by which power is exercised (120). Edward Rochester, on the point of embarking on the ship that will take them to England, describes his wife as part of a long breed of freaks: "They can be recognized. White faces, dazed eyes, aimless gestures, high-pitched laughter. The way they walk and talk and scream or try to kill (themselves or you) if you laugh back at them. Yes, they've got to be watched. For the time comes when they try to kill, then disappear. But others are waiting to take their places, it's a long, long line. She's one of them". (113). Antoinette's sexual assertiveness, her capacity to show anger⁷ and her madness align her with the monstrous-feminine as theorised by Barbara Creed. Following Susan Lurie, Creed asserts that man fears woman not because she has been castrated, as Freud believed, but because she has the power to castrate. The concept 'monstrous-feminine' highlights the role of gender in the construction of female monstrosity: 'As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality' (1993:3). For Susanne Becker, woman as monster 'exceeds her "proper" gender role' since 'it posits a radical attack on the constraints of 'Woman': the feminine ideal in a specific cultural historical context'. In her opinion, female subjectivity, '[I]like the metaphors of experience, excess and escape, and in relation to them [...] becomes a strong thematical and formal [...] challenge to textual and ideological orders' (1999: 58, 41). Borrowing Ann Williams' phrasing (1995:xi), the monstrous-feminine, 'like the Gothic tradition as a whole, expresses the dangerous, the awe-full power of the "female"'. Antoinette's madness, either true or constructed by Rochester, can also be explained in terms of her sexuality. Elaine Showalter (in Horner and Slosnik, 1990: 171-172) has investigated into British nineteenth-century attitudes to nymphomania:

Psychiatrists wrote frequently about the problem of nymphomania. John Millar, the medical superintendent at Bethnal House Asylum in London, observed that nymphomaniac symptoms were 'constantly present' when young women were insane

[...] The most extreme and nightmarish effort to manage women's minds by regulating their bodies was Dr Isaac Baker Brown's surgical practice of clitoridectomy as a cure for female insanity [...] Clitoridectomy is the surgical enforcement of an ideology that restricts female sexuality to reproduction. The removal of the clitoris eliminates the woman's sexual pleasure, and is indeed this autonomous sexual pleasure that Brown defined as the symptom, perhaps the essence, of female malady.

In the person of Antoinette, *Wide Sargasso Sea* rejects normalising models while privileging moral excess and ambiguity. It is the institution of marriage that gets the worst of it. Traditionally presented as the definite solution to the heroine's troubles in female Gothic, marriage is the source of all evils in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The ignorance of Mr Mason, Annette's new husband, brings about the burning of Coulibri by the ex-slaves, the death of Antoinette's young brother, Pierre, and the confinement of her mother, who is deprived of her wits in consequence. Antoinette's marriage to Rochester echoes her mother's in its disastrous ending. Like her, Antoinette loses both her property and her mind and ends up being confined to the attic of Thornfield Hall. Interestingly, Michelle A. Massé (1992:7) has analysed *Wide Sargasso Sea* as an example of 'Marital Gothic', a category of 'texts that begin, rather than end, with marriage, in which the husband becomes the revenant of the very horror his presence was supposed to banish.'

Andrew Gibson's ethics of sensibility or affect, a strand of the contemporary turn to ethics in its postmodern post-foundational form, casts extra light on Rhys's attempt to unmask bourgeois limitations by rejecting clear-cut moral divisions between right and wrong. The ethics of affect, which Gibson bases on the eighteenth-century concept of sensibility and on Levinas's philosophy of alterity, is simply defined as 'the power of being affected rather than affecting' (1999:161). For Gibson, as for Levinas, the decisive ethical moment is the encounter with the singular, irreducible other (Kotte, 2001: 71), an encounter that makes fixed categories and universal moral norms redundant. The other is always already radically different and resists

'being dominated by or reduced to whatever interests or assumptions condition my understanding' (Sim, 1995:263). In approaching the other, Levinas insists, we should confidently open ourselves to the experience of alterity and avoid subsuming the other into the same. The eighteenth-century concept of sensibility, from which the Gothic stems, is defined by Andrew Gibson in the following terms: 'quickness and acuteness in emotional apprehension, a particularly keen susceptibility to emotional influence, indicating a specific kind or quality of emotional capacity, "the soft sense of the mind" that Mackenzie regarded as feminine or feminising'. Sensibility is also an ethical faculty characterised by openness and attentiveness. In Gibson's words, it 'does not direct itself at an object with the intention of mastering it' (1999:162). Levinas associates sensibility with "uncovering" [...], exposure to wounds, *vulnerability* [...], not as a passive reception of stimuli, but as a positive "aptitude". In this sense, sensibility cannot be distinguished from the power of suffering: it is 'the nakedness of a skin presented to contact, to the caress, which always [...] is suffering for the suffering of the other' (165). Drawing upon Bataille's concept of 'expenditure without reserve', Gibson (166) equates sensibility to exuberance and excess. Significantly enough, he finds in the Rhys universe a clear example of his ethics of affect. Her heroines, Gibson affirms, are characterised 'by their power of constant involvement, of gratuitous disinterest, their disposition to self-expenditure' (168).

There is also a textual side to the ethics of affect propounded by Gibson. In this second sense, sensibility is a way of narrating characterised by indeterminacy and instability, which calls into question 'the particularity of its cultural construction, of its place in a given web of social relations' (168). Jean Rhys's (post)modernist poetics in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and, above all, its strongly intertextual nature, expose the novel to the ethics of affect on this further textual level. The following quotation from Susanne Becker's *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fiction* (1999: 66-67) serves to illustrate the point:

The web of feminine gothic writing has prompted contemporary critics to revise traditional concepts of literary influence. [...] feminine gothics are haunted houses, not only in the contextual sense of

'experience' but also in the intertextual sense of continuation and deconstruction of feminine textuality. [...] Filliation 'exceeds' and decentres the idea of linear development and opens up different interdependences of texts. It is a new theory of origins that revises and feminises Harold Bloom's influential theory of the 'anxiety of influence'. (Godard 1984, 50)

As an example of feminine intertextualisation, *Wide Sargasso Sea* exceeds linear development; as a prequel to Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, it challenges origin; and as a polyphonic narrative artifact, the novel gives voice to 'the other side' thus avoiding monologism. Similarly, its open ending exceeds the traditional ending of female Gothic and empowers Antoinette, who rehearses her death in a dream but finally escapes it by waking up just before her famous leap off Thornfield's roof in *Jane Eyre*.

Following Geoffrey Harpham, Gibson (1999:15) defines ethics as 'the strictly undecidable', that which holds morality open, counteracts its will to domination and unsettles 'the compromised binary' of the moral paradigm. Many instances of the Gothic inhabit a similar hinterland that resists borders and encourages indeterminacy and transgression.⁸ This is especially the case with postcolonial Gothic identities, which encapsulate the tensions between different peoples and worldviews and reveal the horrors of colonial domination.

Wide Sargasso Sea is written in the spirit of the liminal. As Mary Lou Emery (1990: 48) puts it, '[t]he dichotomous oppositions of madness/reason, sexuality/control, black/white, and [...] nature/culture, through which Rochester thinks and attempts to maintain his own place in the system, are [...] continually threatened'. But the liminal is no easy space. Those living on the threshold are usually powerless and prone to suffering from the 'anxiety of never again belonging' (Burrows, 2004:25). In-betweenness is a position Jean Rhys –an expatriate white Creole– knew well. Many a critic has seen her as trapped between the ideologies of coloniser and colonized, occupying 'the ambiguous position of being part of colonialism *and* of the resistance to it' (Burrows, 27). Proof of this is Rhys's problematic relationship with the Caribbean literary canon. Her status as a

postcolonial West-Indian writer has been questioned by critics such as Edward Brathwaite, Gayatri Spivak, and Veronica Marie Greg, who consider her nearer the colonial elite. According to Brathwaite, Rhys's origins make it impossible for her to understand the experience of the primarily poor ex-African majority: 'White Creoles [...] have separated themselves by too wide a gulf, and have contributed too little culturally, as a group, to give credence to the notion that they can [...] meaningfully identify or be identified with the spiritual world on this side of the Sargasso Sea' (1974:38). Similarly, in the opinion of Spivak and Greg, *Wide Sargasso Sea* privileges the white Creole over and above the black characters, who, Greg maintains (1995: 114-115), are portrayed in a very stereotypical way. The Indo-Caribbean writer V.S. Naipaul was, on the other hand, one of the first to speak in favour of including Rhys in the West-Indian canon, since there is no doubt, he contends, that her Caribbean background shaped her sensibility and informed most of her work. This is also the opinion of Elaine Savory (2000: x), who in her monograph on Rhys insists on the need for a Caribbean-centred approach to her fiction. 'Like Caribbean culture', Savory asserts, 'her writing is both metropolitan and anti-metropolitan, both colonial and anti-colonial, both racist and anti-racist, both conventional and subversive'. It is precisely her in-betweenness that marks Rhys as a post-colonial West-Indian writer. Despite the fact that she was a member of the colonial elite and that her primary allegiance in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is to the planter class ruined by emancipation, Rhys always defined herself in opposition to the metropolis.

Racial in-betweenness characterises *Wide Sargasso Sea* from its very opening: 'They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks' (Rhys, 2001: 3). Antoinette's oxymoronic nature and the fact that she belongs neither to the white nor to the black community is revealed in the way she is often referred to as a 'white nigger' or a 'white cockroach': "It was a song about a white cockroach. That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers. 'So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all'" (63). The allusions to the figures of the zombie and the revenant, which together with obeah, are a trademark of post-colonial Caribbean Gothic, are also

symptomatic of the ambivalence that pervades Rhys's novel. 'A zombie', Rochester reads, 'is a dead person who seems to be alive or a living person who is dead.' (66). Both Annette and Antoinette are portrayed as living dead in the last stages of their degeneration. In fact, Rochester accuses Christophine, Antoinette's black nanny, of turning his wife into a zombie:

'You haven't yet told me exactly what you did with my – with Antoinette.'

'Yes I tell you. I make her sleep.'

'What? All the time?'

'No, no. I wake her up to sit in the sun, bathe in the cool river. Even is she dropping with sleep [...]'

'Unfortunately your cure was not successful. You didn't make her well. You made her worse.'

'Yes I succeed,' she said angrily. 'I succeed. But I get frightened that she sleeps too much, too long'. (100)

This conversation between the black servant and the imperial male takes place in the second part of the novel, narrated, but for a few pages, by Rochester himself. The fact that he is allowed to give his own version of his marriage to Antoinette has been interpreted by some critics as an act of tremendous ethical proportion (Davies and Womack, 1999: 65). What seems to escape Antoinette's husband is his own contribution to her zombification. 'The effect of the empire', Punter and Byron state (2004-58), 'has been the dematerialization of whole cultures'. For them, 'the Gothic tropes of the ghost, the phantom, the revenant, gain curious new life from the need to assert continuity where the lessons of conventional history and geography would claim that all continuity has been broken by the imperial trauma'.

Racial in-betweenness not only disturbs those who suffer it directly but also becomes a concern for those, like Rochester, who come in close contact with it. The second part of the novel is pervaded by Rochester's anxiety about miscegenation and contamination, both provoked by Antoinette's unclear racial background: 'Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either' (37). He even believes she has poisoned

him when she mixes into his wine Christophine's remedy to cure his disaffection: "She poured wine into two glasses and handed me one [...] I woke in the dark after dreaming that I was buried alive and when I was awake the feeling of suffocation persisted. [...] I was cold too, deathly cold and sick and in pain. [...] I could not vomit. I only retched painfully. I thought, I have been poisoned" (87-88). Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, enunciated in *Powers of Horror*, becomes most useful on this point. The process of individualisation, both on a personal and on a cultural level, implies throwing off everything that threatens integrity. The abject appears as a by-product of the entrance into the symbolic order, which demands a clear-cut opposition between I and not-I. Abjection, Kristeva affirms (1982:232), is caused by what 'disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'. The feminine in general and the maternal in particular, are often associated with it. Like Antoinette, the abject is at the same time 'something to be scared of' and yet infinitely desirable (32). The dynamic of abjection lays bare 'the ambiguous opposition I/Other, Inside/Outside' (7) and disturbs in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rochester's solid positioning as "I" in *Jane Eyre*. Sue Thomas offers a socio-historical explanation of Rochester's fear of pollution and racial mixing. In *The Worlding of Jean Rhys* (1999:32), she reads *Wide Sargasso Sea* against nineteenth-century ethnographic discourses of white Creole degeneracy and the degeneracy of the English abroad: "During the nineteenth century [...] the white Creole became the object of a European ethnographic discourse about tropical degeneration: white Creoles were seen to risk in 'the physical and social climate of the tropics' and proximity to racial others, a degeneration apparent in disease, sickliness, and excessive appetites", hence the need to keep them at a physical, social and, above all, sexual distance from the Anglo-Saxons, who might otherwise 'go native'. The fear of the physical and moral vulnerability of the British in touch with the colonial natives is coetaneous with the birth of the Gothic (Paravinsini-Gebert, 2002: 230). David Punter (1996: 183) lists racial degeneration as a source of the barbaric, which he considers one of the three pillars of the Gothic, together with paranoia and taboo: 'Gothic [...] is intimately to do with the notion of the barbaric. This emerges in a number of forms: as the fear of the past which is the motivating force of the subgenre of the 'historical Gothic', as the fear of the aristocracy

which provides the basis for vampire legendry, as the fear of racial degeneracy, which permeates Stevenson, Wells, Stoker and others.'

In-betweenness in *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been analysed so far as a distinct source of anxiety for the main characters: Antoinette does not feel at ease with either black or white and Rochester fears his own racial and moral degeneration through contact with her. Threshold states, however, can also grant a special position to those who inhabit them. In what remains of this paper I intend to explore the tactical side of in-betweenness. By drawing on Homi Bhabha's concepts of mimicry and hybridity I will demonstrate how the liminal turns out to be a powerful weapon against sexual and colonial domination.

In "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", Bhabha (1994:89) defines mimicry as 'a process by which the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and "partial" representation rearticulates the whole notion of *identity* and alienates it from essence'. Mimicry, for him, connotes both resemblance and menace. Colonial subjects are expected to learn and imitate the ways of the white colonizers in order to become civilized. But, as Angela Smith (1997:xviii) has noted, 'when the colonial subjects, including the Creoles, play the parts assigned to them a strange slippage occurs, like the slippage from a European language to Creole patois.' The attempts on the part of the colonized to imitate the language and customs of the colonizer undermine the latter's authority and show imperialism as a preposterous enterprise. There are several instances of mimicry in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Coco, the family parrot, which speaks French and Creole patois, but not English, is one of them. But perhaps the most potent example of mimicry is that performed by Antoinette in part two of the novel, narrated by Rochester:

'She won't stay here very much longer.'

'She won't stay here very much longer,' she mimicked me, 'and nor will you, nor will you. I thought you liked the black people so much,' she said, still in that mincing voice, 'but that's just a lie like everything else. You like the light brown girls better, don't you? You abused the planters and made up stories about them, but you do the

same thing. [...]'

'Slavery was not a matter of liking or disliking,' I said, trying to speak calmly. 'It was a question of justice.'

'Justice,' she said, 'I've heard that word. It's a cold word. I tried it out [...] I wrote it down. I wrote it down several times and always it looked like a damn cold lie to me. There is no justice.' (94)

In echoing Rochester's words, Antoinette empties them of meaning. Her in-betweenness is revealed as strategic in dismantling the duplicities of colonial discourse.

Mimicry is combined with hybridity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Originally coined to refer to a physiological phenomenon –a cross between two species (Young, 1995: 8)–, hybridity has been reconceptualised by Homi Bhabha in cultural terms. In an interview by Jonathan Rutherford, Bhabha asserts that 'the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the "third space" which enables other positions to emerge'. The effect of this third space, which 'bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it', is to displace the histories that constitute it, and set up 'new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom' (1990:212). The hybrid in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is best represented by Sandi, Antoinette's cousin, described by Daniel Cosway as 'white, but not quite': 'Sandi is like a white man, but more handsome than any white man, and received by many white people they say' (79). Daniel also informs Rochester of Sandi's special relationship with his wife: 'I hear one time that Miss Antoinette and [...] Mr Sandi get married, but that all foolishness. Miss Antoinette a white girl with a lot of money, she won't marry with a coloured man even though he don't look like a coloured man' (76). The difficulty of pinpointing Sandi's racial traits reveals the absurdity of categorisation and contributes to blurring the clear-cut oppositions on which the colonial enterprise rests.

Not only the colonial, but also the sexual, the textual and the moral, lose their contours in a novel that questions rigid Western binarisms by promoting an ethics of in-betweenness and excess. The strategic use of such Gothic props as the wild threatening landscape

of the Caribbean, the she-monster, the zombie, and the racial-other, enable Rhys to lay bare the Eurocentric imperialistic agenda of *Jane Eyre* and the Victorian values on which Brontë's text was built. Read against Andrew Gibson's ethics of sensibility, *Wide Sargasso Sea* emerges as a house haunted by the voices of past inhabitants, all claiming their position as legitimate others. The border between victims and victimisers grows thin as both the hero-villain and the heroine recount their versions of their unhappy marriage. It is Antoinette's story, however, that the novel eventually sides with. Rhys's text rejects narrative closure and allows Antoinette to escape a fate planned for her by an English writer. The subversive qualities of mimicry and hybridity, as conceived by Homi Bhabha, further contribute to reinforcing a brand of ethics that defies the fixed and the ready-made.

NOTES

- ¹ The research carried out for the writing of this article has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science and the European Regional Development Fund (FEDER), in collaboration with the Aragonese Government (no. HUM2007-61035/FIL. Proyecto Eje C-Consolider).
- ² The centrality of the categories of excess and in-betweenness for the Gothic mode has been noted by Jerrold E. Hogle, David Punter (2001), Susanne Becker and Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith, amongst others.
- ³ For further information on this debate see Gibson, Kotte and Craps (5-9).
- ⁴ To be precise, Antoinette's husband is never referred to by his name. Only those readers aware of the intertextual nature of *Wide Sargasso Sea* will recognise him as Brontë's Edward Rochester.
- ⁵ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, [2001] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966. Edited by Hilary Jenkins), p. 39. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.
- ⁶ For an in-depth sociological study of nineteenth-century sexual mores see Seidman.
- ⁷ Another remarkable example of an angry female in a West Indian postcolonial context is Jamaica Kincaid's Lucy, for whom anger is instrumental as a resistance strategy. Notice her answer to

Mariah, her employer: “You are a very angry person, aren’t you?” and her [Mariah’s] voice was filled with alarm and pity. Perhaps I should have said something reassuring; perhaps I should have denied it. But I did not. I said, “Of course I am. What do you expect?” (2002: 96). Lucy also shares with Antoinette Cosway an unconventional attitude to sex, which she openly publicises in order to shock her mother and her employer. In the opinion of Alison Donnell ‘Lucy’s sexual empowerment can be read as a form of subversive resistance within the broad social and political context of the Caribbean in which the sexual subjection of women to men remains normative’. However, Donnell doubts its liberating effect on a more personal ground, since Lucy ‘is not able to arrive at any lasting or meaningful sense of fulfilment through her chosen forms of sexual contact’ (p. 198).

- ⁸ Jesús Benito and Ana M^a Manzanás (eds) *The Dynamics of the Threshold, Studies in Liminality and Literature* 5, includes several articles that explore the importance of border states to Gothic fiction.

WORKS CITED

- Becker, S. 1999. *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fiction*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- Benito, J. and A. M^a Manzanás, eds. 2006. *The Dynamics of the Threshold, Studies in Liminality and Literature* 5. Madrid: The Gateway Press.
- Bhabha, H. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Brathwaite, E. 1974. *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean*. Mona, Jamaica: Savacou Publications, 1974.
- Burrows, V. 2004. *Whiteness and Trauma: The Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison*. Basingstoke and New York: Macmillan Palgrave.
- Craps, S. 2005. *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift: No Short-Cuts to Salvation*. Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press.
- Creed, B. 1993. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Davies, Todd F. and Kenneth Womack. 1999. "Reclaiming the Particular: The Ethics of Self and Sexuality in *Wide Sargasso Sea*". *Jean Rhys Review* 11, 1 (Autumn 1999): 63-78.
- Donnell, A. 2006. *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone* Gibson, A. 1999. *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: from Leavis to Levinas*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Emery, M.L. 1990. *Jean Rhys at "World's End": Novels of Colonial and Sexual Exile*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.
- Gregg, V.M. 1995. *Jean Rhys's Historical Imagination: Reading and Writing the Creole*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Hemmerechts, K. 1987. *A Plausible Story and a Plausible Way of Telling it: A Structuralist Analysis of Jean Rhys's Novels*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Hogle, J. E. ed. 2002. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Horner, A. and S. Zlosnik. 1990. *Landscapes of Desire: Metaphors in Modern Women's Fiction*. New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Howells, C.A. 1995 (1978). *Love, Mystery and Misery*. London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Atholone.
- Kincaid, J. 2002 (1990). *Lucy: A Novel*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.
- Kotte, C. 2001. *Ethical Dimensions in British Historiographic Metafiction: Julian Barnes, Graham Swift, Penelope Lively*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier.
- Kristeva, J. 1982 (1980). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lloyd Smith, A. 1996 "Postmodernism/Gothicism", in V. Sage and A. Lloyd Smith, eds. *Modern Gothic: A Reader*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- Massé, M. A. 1992. *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism and the Gothic*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Maurel, S. 1998. *Jean Rhys*. London: Macmillan.
- Maurel, S. 2002 "Across the 'Wide Sargasso Sea': Jean Rhys's Revision of Charlotte Brontë's Eurocentric Gothic". *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 24:2, 107-118.
- Newman, J. in Sage & Smith (eds.), 1996, *Modern Gothic: A Reader*.
- Nixon, N. 1994 Fall "*Wide Sargasso Sea* and Jean Rhys's Interrogation of the 'nature wholly alien' in *Jane Eyre*". *Essays in Literature*, 21:2, 267-284.

- Paravisini-Gebert, L. 2002 "Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic: the Caribbean" in J. E. Hogle, ed, *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Punter, D. 1996. *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*. Volume 2: The Modern Gothic. London and New York: Longman, 1996.
- Punter, D. 2000. *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Punter, D. ed. 2000. *A Companion to the Gothic*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Punter D. and G. Byron. 2004. *The Gothic*. Malden, Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing.
- Rhys, J. 1997 (1996). *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. xviii. Ed. and intro. by Angela Smith.
- Rhys, J. 2001 (1966). *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. Ed. and intro. by Hilary Jenkins.
- Rutherford, J. ed. 1990. *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Sage, V. and A. Lloyd Smith, eds. 1996. *Modern Gothic: A Reader*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996.
- Savory, E. 2000 (1998). *Jean Rhys*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Seidman, S. 1991. *Romantic Longings: Love in America, 1830-1980*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Sim, S. ed. 1995. *The A-Z Guide to Modern Literary and Cultural Theorists*. London and New York: Prentice Hall, Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Spaull, S. 1989 "Gynocriticism" in S. Mills, L. Pearce, S. Spaull and E. Millard *Feminist Readings/Feminists Reading*. New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Thomas, S. 1999. *The Worlding of Jean Rhys*. Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press.
- Williams, A. 1995. *The Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Young, R. J.C. 1995. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Space*. London and New York: Routledge.