

2: 'I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in'.
Discuss the use of images of entrapment in the work of two female novelists of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries.

In both Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* the narrator's desire for escape is impeded by a patriarchal setting where she is deprived of power, financial security and resources. Where *Jane Eyre* presents the pains of gendered entrapment, *Wide Sargasso Sea* relates this entrapment to the cultural history of the setting which she inhabits. Nevertheless, the setting, and the anxieties it produces, plays an integral role in both works. It is in these texts where Brontë and Rhys depict the nature of existence within a prescribed space and the implications of this on culture and gender.

When reading *A Room of One's Own*, it becomes clear that female genius alone is not a sole means for success but can form a further obstacle to their liberty. Woolf posits that a "highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been... so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty"¹. Indeed, without the availability of creative outlets, female genius becomes weaponised against its possessor. It has been asserted that a poet's heart, if encased in the body of a man, is a symptom of divine prowess, but a suppressed poetical female hand is a mechanism of self-torture. A tortured female artist, then, whose poet's heart has been held down for centuries by a male-dominated literary circle, whose work had been withheld from being published, like Emily Dickinson's was, could have scarcely risen to literary prominence.

In the genre Ellen Moers has recently called the 'female Gothic'², heroines who inhabit convoluted or uncomfortable houses are seen as fettered, trapped, and even buried alive within the setting. It has been theorised that the prominent imagery of enclosure in Gothic female literature is reflective of the woman writer's own discomfort, her sense of powerlessness, her fear that she inhabits alien and incomprehensible places (Gilbert and Gubar, 83-84). Other kinds of works by women- novels of manners, domestic tales, and lyric poems- also show the same concern with spatial constrictions. This is particularly prominent in the Gothic, where Jane Austen's mirrored parlours, Charlotte Brontë's haunted garrets and Emily Brontë's coffin-shaped beds play an integral role in the narrative. This is the case in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a tale told from the perspective of a young female narrator who introduces us to a narrow, female world within the stifling confines of a small Caribbean town, made to feel ever more so by the oppressive summer heat. The "heat and violence" which these social confines engender mean that female genius is considered a danger to her mental stability; the female writer herself, a danger to society, for "...who shall measure the heat and violence of a poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?"³ Society's response to female creativity is, in many respects inadequate. As she herself notes, "the excuse of lack of opportunity, training, encouragement, leisure and money no longer holds good"⁴. In this way, Woolf argues that women must have opportunities to realise their genius lest they turn to madness.

The lack of opportunities through which the narrator can express her intellectual curiosity is a thread which continues to restrict the female protagonist's actions throughout the narratives of the texts. This forces the female narrator to engage in further creative actions in response to her forthcoming predicament as a means of liberating herself from a sadistic patriarchal force, despite her lack of available resources to assist her in doing so. Such repressed creativity is expressed in the role of the garden in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the significance of a location to read in *Jane Eyre* as means of intellectual gratification. The creative, feminine centre is a place which the female protagonist can

¹ Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929. Print.

² *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

³ Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929. Print.

⁴ Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929. Print.

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inhabit, a place where innocence and beauty, goodness and light, reign. It also serves as a dramatic contrast to the darkness that is about to penetrate this female space, in the form of John Reed in *Jane Eyre* and Rochester in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. When this liberty is removed, in the burning of the garden in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the removal of Jane's access to books, the women fall into what is deemed madness. Jane Eyre's impassioned reaction to John Reed's physical abuse and the depressive cycle which ensued is paralleled in Antoinette's grief for the garden and, "like [her]" mother"⁵, the image of madness which follows. Here we see the destruction of a female space as a means to further diminish and ensnare the female spirit. To be trapped within a setting as a female is to have liberties transformed into obstacles, to have talents diminished and utilised as a mechanism of self-torture. This affirms Virginia Woolf's statement that, whilst it is 'unpleasant... it is to be locked out', the liberties which occupying the external world bring mean that it 'is worse perhaps to be locked in'⁶.

"Why are some women poor?" asks Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*. Among the reasons she cites is the fact that "in the first place, to earn money was impossible for them, and in the second, had it been possible, the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned"⁷. That the female artist is also financially inhibited further accentuates her position as a "Nobody"⁸ in the literary canon. This shroud of invisibility is one which not only excludes the female writer from literary society but one that also restricts her to isolated periods of creative passion, periods which form a depressing contrast to the reality of her entrapment. This is pertinent to the depiction of female entrapment due to financial limitations as seen in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, where financial limitations lead to the "lack of opportunity, training, encouragement, leisure", stymieing "women's advancement"⁹. In order to achieve emancipation, Woolf highlights the importance of both access to opportunities and financial security, a need highlighted in the works of Brontë and Rhys.

In *Jane Eyre*, for example, we see Mr Rochester limit funds to ensure that Jane will return to him following her visit to the ill Mrs. Reed, thereby cementing her dependency upon him and securing her captivity. In true Gothic fashion, obstacles to Jane's knowledge and experience of the outer world are manifested in the dictate of a patriarchal figure. "Boundaries and barriers", after all, "are the very stage properties of Gothic romance" (DeLamotte). The extent to which Jane escapes the prescribed domestic boundaries of the female space is debatable. According to DeLamotte, Jane's seeming independence may not be an independence at all, insofar as "Charlotte Brontë... ultimately defines woman's transcendence as domestic enclosure", so that Jane's self-knowledge is limited to the conventional female role as wife and companion.

However, it can be argued that architectural limits place the protagonist within a space which provides a distorted sense of self-knowledge, namely in the form of introspection. The mirror is a central object in both texts as it facilitates this introspection into the position of the protagonist *within* her prescribed space. Her knowledge, therefore, is limited to what is encompassed by the space she occupies, never reflective of her wider surroundings.

⁵ Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. London: Penguin Books, 2000. Print.

⁶ Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929. Print.

⁷ Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929. Print.

⁸ Dickinson, Emily, 1830-1886. *I'm Nobody! Who Are You? : Poems of Emily Dickinson for Children*. Owings Mills, Md.: Stemmer House Publishers, 1978.

⁹ Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929. Print.

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Indeed, one of the earliest experiences of introspection in *Jane Eyre* is the moment in which she meditates upon her gaunt image in a broken mirror, involuntarily exploring "the depth it revealed"¹⁰. The mirror, too, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is crucial to the preservation of the protagonist's identity and sense of self, a powerful object which Rochester disdains. Meanwhile, Antoinette describes her encounter with a mirror in a dream-like trance: "I went into the hall again with the tall candle in my hand. It was then that I saw her – the ghost. The woman with streaming hair."¹¹ Jane's mediation upon her reflection in the distorted mirror, in combination with Antoinette's moment of misrecognition and disassociation with her reflection in the candlelight makes the reader aware that this self-reflection is skewed, the mirror a looking glass of spectres, delusions and fabrications as opposed to truth. Introspection is thus presented as a further obstacle to clarity and truth, rendering the outside world ideal whilst the protagonist's inner dialogue is one tormented by illusion. In this manner, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre* identify confrontation with illusion as a growing aspect of femininity.

This distortion of the female protagonist's personal identity is, in both texts, reinforced by the limitations placed within women's sexuality in her experience with the outer world. Her desires are no longer hers, but rather the possession of the "'sin' which is the legacy of... sexual barbarity"¹². Society's response to full, unfettered female sexual expression parallels the response to the prospect of her creative autonomy; that is, to isolate and withdraw her from what she so desires to do, often drawing her into madness. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester denies Antoinette sexual gratification, a rejection which Christophine cites as the cause of her madness. Like other white colonists, he makes racist associations between Caribbean culture and sexual excess. Thus when he wants to hurt Antoinette, he justifies it by criticising her natural, unconstrained sexuality as being frightening and rooted in immoral foreign customs. As an Englishman of this period, he has grown up with the notion that 'respectable' women should not feel or display sexual passion. Rochester is subject to an internal conflict between his own sexual desire on the one hand and ideologies of race and gender on the other. This, too, gives him an excuse to punish her. It is also a powerful component in the way he defines her as 'mad'.¹³ Here we see, once again, that to be confined to a space is worse than being excluded from a space as it is being confined which engenders an insufferable sense of internal "heat and violence"¹⁴, where being excluded merely disenfranchises.

Their situation is made worse by the fact that they have the intellectual capacity for freedom, but are barred from escape due to physical limitations. Antoinette has enough intellectual presence to escape from entrapment in the attic by tricking Grace Poole, but she is deprived of the strength to escape her emotional one: her husband's betrayal, the way he treated her after he made her love him renders his deception too powerful to allow her to explore her feeling for other characters, namely Sandi. The reader is made implicitly aware of the protagonist's restrained desire for Sandi, a sentiment paralleled in Jane's longing for "a power of vision which might overpass that limit"¹⁵ as she looked over the fields at the distant view. Freedom, for the female protagonist, is always painfully in sight, but rarely in reach.

Wide Sargasso Sea highlights the fact that the limitations placed upon a women's experience are augmented by race and class, factors which play a significant role in determining one's access to resources and opportunities. Jean Rhys's project is thus to correct what she perceives of Bronte's

¹⁰ Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Peterborough, Ont: Broadview Press, 1999. Print.

¹¹ Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. London: Penguin Books, 2000. Print.

¹² Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929. Print.

¹³ Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. London: Penguin Books, 2000. Print.

¹⁴ Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929. Print.

¹⁵ Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Peterborough, Ont: Broadview Press, 1999. Print.

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caricature and to construct in *Wide Sargasso Sea* an alternative picture of the Caribbean and its own legacy of entrapment. In the process, she brings to light the shortcomings in the first novel and reveal its complicities with Victorian prejudices against the "intemperate and unchaste" colonised peoples – their 'inferior' morals, their 'excessive' sexualities and their 'tendency' to violence and lack of control (*Wide Sargasso Sea*). Genius, then, is made all the more torturous if situated within a land which has itself been entrapped, a land which forces the female protagonist to wear the "old fetters of class on her feet"¹⁶. The Caribbean setting, for Jean Rhys, echoes the history of British colonialism and slavery, a history of entrapment which, despite the Emancipation Act, continues to restrict and haunt the protagonist.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester similarly feels oppressed by the secretive, foreign landscape of the Caribbean and is tortured by being 'locked out' of the secrets of Antoinette and her family. He, like Antoinette, is also perturbed by uncanny experiences of elements of this space. The place feels full of ghosts, of the past, of the barely veiled history of colonialism. By employing Gothic and uncanny devices in her writing this way, Jean Rhys is able to represent Rochester's interior fears and conflicts about the sense of entrapment interwoven in the space, its culture and Antoinette. I believe, however, that it is Antoinette who is the more oppressed, for it is Antoinette who is 'locked in' to the island and the shadows of trauma it casts upon her psyche, a position made worse by the fact that she is denied means of escape into the outer world, a world which Rochester has at his disposal.

To conclude, both Charlotte Brontë and Jean Rhys present entrapment as having its own cultural and gendered legacy. When it comes to assessing the future implications of this legacy upon the female space, Anthony T. Hincks' comment on his own work voices Woolf's sentiment well; "The loss of liberty may imprison a person, but it does not confine their mind."¹⁷ Indeed, Virginia Woolf maintains that the female genius can be emancipated from gender and cultural barriers "if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worthwhile."¹⁸

Word Count: 2,496

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¹⁶ Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929. Print.

¹⁷ T. Hincks, Anthony: *An author of life*. (Volume Book 1), 2018, Print

¹⁸ Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929. Print.