

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Trauma

One of the hardest things to answer in the field of psychology today is how to identify madness. To truly find a solution to this one must examine madness from all sides and look into every aspect of living. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys takes Jane Eyre's figure of the "madwoman in the attic" and gives her life by introducing readers to her as the complex character of Antoinette. By taking a character who was only seen as a mad woman and giving her a backstory, readers are finally able to analyze her from a much wider view. By looking into the biology, social influences, and mental delusions in relation to Antoinette's traumatic life, the question of the meaning and birth of madness can come to a more definite head.

To first understand madness and trauma, one must first define it the way society has come to understand them. The American psychological association says that anyone can fall into madness. All it takes "is a special kind of blow to one's self-image to push someone over the edge of sanity." Madness and Trauma may not be exactly the same thing, but they are often extremely correlated. The "special kind of blow" is highly similar to what is described as a traumatic event. As with trauma and many other mental disorders, a psychologist has learned that isolation, and just being treated like someone who is deemed crazy and should no longer be a normal member of society is only going to further solidify or even cause madness.

Madness is one of the most difficult things to truly explain in humans, and since society barely can define it, it is even more impossible to discover its many possible causes. Even the dictionary has four different meanings of this word. One is "the state of being mad; insanity," which even uses mad in its description as well as, the just as vague, insanity. Another one is

“senseless folly,” which also give quiet the complex meaning since it sounds like that could be any child on the playground. Third intense excitement or enthusiasm which again sounds like a child. Fourth is frenzy; rage, which seems to be the definition that best relates to the novels meaning. If one were to mix together these definitions, generally we get that madness is a very intense feeling of passion that is usually expressed by unexplainable frenzies or acting out rashly. As for what can cause madness, generally, it can be any mixture of biological inconsistencies, social pressures, and mental delusions that all result in a certain level of trauma that can scar and increase the possibility for madness in what can be described as a horrible cycle. This makes it hard to tell really if one is born predestined for madness, had madness thrust upon them by society, or perhaps a combination of the both, Either way, at times it seems a person is unable to avoid this so-called “madness.”

Next is to move onto discussing Trauma which, although a complex topic even in this day and age, has a bit more theory behind it then madness. According to the American Psychological Association trauma is “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster.” It has also been defined as “any situation that leaves you feeling overwhelmed and alone can be traumatic, even if it doesn’t involve physical harm.” There is emotional and psychological trauma that centers around a very stressful event or series of events. These can really cause much more trouble since they are based on shattering one's sense of security, leaving the victim feeling extremely isolated. As many know psychology is a fairly newly defined science, meaning many of its theories and disorders are also only recently respected. Trauma theory is one of these recent concepts that appeared around the 1970s. According to the center for nonviolence and social justice, it was used in connection to PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder) patients, one of the most classic examples of trauma, after the

Vietnam War, and other groups containing survivors of stressful events like the Holocaust. PTSD was then finally declared by the APA manual itself in 1980 giving new light to trauma. They finally stopped the seeing people who suffered psychological trauma as “sick,” but more so “injured” and in need of assistance.

Judith Herman states in *Trauma and Recovery* that “Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life.” It is best now to clearly identify what the causes and symptoms are involved in trauma. Causes can include anything from unexpected emotional harm such as a suddenly broken relationship to very horrific events such as witnessing firsthand the death of a loved one. The APA states that the short-term effects may be feelings of shock and possible use of the defense mechanism denial. More long-term responses have shown unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships. There are even at times physical manifestations such as headaches or nausea. Now that trauma has been clearly defined, one can start to make a much more precise analysis of its very large role in Rhys’s novel.

Moving forward to the main attraction of this analysis, it is best to start by explaining who Antoinette is. She is described as many things in the novel, and although with the ever-changing narrators it is hard to tell, here are a few of the words that they attempt to use to explain some things readers may think of her as. She is a questionable “madwoman” who leaves readers constantly questioning her sanity and her ability to reason. She is a Creole woman, which plays a large role in her character since it is the core of her identity issues about how she is neither true white nor a black. Although her skin is white, she was mostly raised by the black Christophine who had a large influence on her cultural experiences. Another easy to see identification is that she is a Victim. Although readers see Rochester’s side of some of the story, it is easy to tell Rhys

insisted on having readers be sympathetic towards Antoinette after everything she is going through. Finally, there is Antoinette the Dreamer, which gives voice in her delusions about her actual identity and about her desires for a perfect England. The complex is the only way one can truly describe this character who at one point was only to be seen as some crazy, hidden, secret, in the attic of Rochester.

The best way to present try to sift through my many complex interpretations of Antoinette is by first explaining her biological condition. She is a white, Carol, female who was born from a loose, slave-owning father and a traumatized, neglectful, and possibly mentally ill mother who devoted all her interest to her disabled brother. She was raised by the ex-slave, Obeah user, Christophine who was given to her by her dead father and is feared by even the other domestics. It is possible mental trauma could be in her families biology. This is liable considering her mother was clearly displayed as already being prone to trauma and madness, and she bother also has disability readers are unaware of. Also, her biology is what gives begins her many issues with her society. Being unaccepted by everyone due to her color and background, she, at a very young age, is forced to go through an identity crisis to which no one could understand these biological facts could play a large role in her rise to so-called madness, but they are only a small factor of the whole.

Antoinette's condition was not just a product of her biological makeup, in fact, it may have been the smallest part of her situation. The most significant cause of her trauma and madness are her social influences throughout her life. These social influences are what make for the largest portion of her psychosis, and are constantly being brought up throughout her life. Antoniette informed many relationships. In order to understand her mind, the trauma she is experiencing, and to get a better idea of who is truly suffering from madness, one must look at

these relationships first. To start, the most influential relationship of childhood; the bond between mother and daughter. Antoinette spends a large portion of Part One of the novel talking about her mother. In an article titled "The Mother-Daughter Bond and History in *Wide Sargasso Sea*" by Valarie L. Phelps, there is a great emphasis on how Antoinette and her trauma was shaped by her mother's own life and trauma. Phelps states "The first section is also the section where the relationship between Antoinette and her mother is divulged and developed to the reader. Therefore, Antoinette is given a chance at the beginning of the novel to foreshadow the end of her story." Even before the story starts, Annette has lost her husband, and is judged as a "white nigger." There is much more to say about these issues, but for now, they are examples of the hardships passed along to Antoinette from birth. The psychological connection between a mother and daughter is very deep. Often daughters grow up to reflect their mothers. In this case, Annette is a single mother and Antoinette's only real parental influence by blood. Basically, Antoinette learns how to react to stressful situations from her mother and trauma is all about people's reactions and ability to cope to painful circumstances. This does not even include biological influences such as susceptibility to certain mental illnesses. We must also remark how Annette had two children, one having a mental or physical disorder never clearly named in the novel. In life, he caused both his mother and sister much stress. For Annette, he was her main reason to keep living, and she obsessed over him to the point of possible insanity. For Antoinette, he was a cause of great isolation, since he took every bit of her mother's attention that she could offer. In death, he caused the death of the home itself. He was Annette's last string of sanity left, and once he left, so did her ability to mentally deal with the world and Antoinette. Pierre and the house Antoinette grew up in left the world together that night, and with it, they symbolically destroyed any form of security of home left for her social stability.

Although the mother and daughter relationship was the biggest cause of her trauma of Antoinette's childhood, this was not the only one. Friends and caretakers were also involved in how she grew up. We only hear of one friend in the entirety of the novel. Tai was the only girl that Antoinette considered a friend who can say a lot about their relationship by how rare it was for her to have one. In the end, though, Tai ends up betraying her by stealing her money and clothing down by the water, and then finally throwing a rock at her while being a part of the mob that changed her out of the area. Betrayal at such a young age by ones the only friend can cause an extreme amount of insecurity issues about making connections with others, resulting in what some may consider social trauma. Not to mention having this done not once, but for a second time as her only home is burning down and her mother is breaking down. Never being taught how to handle these situations, she decided to protect herself with isolation. Antoinette also had relationships with a few caretakers. The most important being Christophine, a servant passed down by her father who practices the art of Obeah, or what some call dark magic. Christophine becomes like a second mother to Antoinette. In "Meeting the Madwomen: Mental Illness in Women in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*..." By Melanie Boyter Weaver, Weaver hits on the fact that Annette was a mother by birth, Christophine was a mother by affinity. Shes also goes on to mention how her relationship with Christophine gives her a greater identification with her creole nature since she was black and not white like her mother. One can say she was the mother she was forced into having, and maybe even the only one who truly cared for her with love and encouraged her to be what she was. Christophine was probably the one symbol of the small amount of security and stability Antoinette had until they were separated by the possessive Rochester. One could say the second they were officially torn apart, was Antoinette's own last straw. Other than her, Aunt Cora and the school nuns also took her in at times and taught her

some lessons, but seemed to only deepen her feelings of being alone in the end when separated with them as she always was. They taught her manners and gave her a place to live and grow in her younger years, but in the end, they were just temporary false homes or which were never to be considered places of emotional security.

Relationships of friendship and guardians are an important part of development, but one must look at how the romantic relationship has influenced her mental state. Now although Antoinette's childhood is where the trauma or possible madness was born and developed deep inside her, it is not where we really see it released. The place in the plot that we truly see the effects and most pure reactions to her traumas is when she gets into a relationship with Rochester. At first, they were just an arrangement so that Rochester could get money, and Antoinette could find a stable life and husband with decent status. He preached love, but gave her lust and even slept with a servant. He also claims that if she did not do the things she has done, he never would have done what he would have done. Rhys never actually gives us an idea of what is the truth here to Antoinette's condition or Rochester's feelings, but Rochester clearly has his own feelings on it. "Meeting the Madwomen: Mental Illness in Women in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*..." By Melanie Boyter Weaver states this best by exclaiming "It is Rochester who, upon hearing from Daniel that "there is madness in that family," goes beyond merely suspecting that she is mentally ill and begins the process of making her so." He is what break Antoinette in the end, and he is the cause of her so final and complete isolation. He flipped a switch in Antoinette's mind that made her no longer able to hope for a secure life of love and sanity. A society so often pushed their views on her, and Rochester being the final shove, Antoinette no longer felt she could escape the fate of her mother. He is a clear and direct personification of what the Trauma theory is needed for. He saw her as mad after only hearing rumors of it, and by

seeing her as mad, he treated her as someone who is infected. By seeing her as some diseased being, and not the injured, fragile soul filled with insecurities she was, he may have created what is called a self-fulfilling prophecy and created his very own madwoman in the attic. This is what makes her relationship with Rochester just as important, if not more so than her mothers. Her mother may have given her the tools to her destruction, but Rochester taught her how to use them.

Finally, to truly understand Antoinette's character and condition, it is important to take a look into her mind, and the delusions she has created for herself. The first delusion she starts to create is one about her identity. From the first time she sees her mother's horse dead, she quiets herself to the truth that she is in a position where she is not accepted by anyone. Her second attempt to fool her own mind when torn between what she desires and what she has is her feelings for England. These constant conflicts of character within her own mind would be enough to drive many people to madness, but honestly any sane human being would be unable to embrace this kind confusing as well without some kind of mental issue.

In an attempt to bring this complex analysis of the character of a madwoman to a head, it is best to now summarize the findings. Madness and trauma will always be difficult to describe and even harder to define. Antoinette's biology was basically made to be susceptible to trauma, but that is not to say it couldn't be avoided if she was not also within what psychologist would consider a hazardous social and mental environment. Social influences such as neglect from her mother, and inability to be accepted by her husband set in motion her downward spiral into this madness. She deluded herself in order to protect herself, but in the end, the reality of her lost identity and England won, leaving her as broken as her mother. People are not just born mad.

Triggers such as trauma, social neglect, and mental instability must be involved in order for the madwoman in the attic to be born.

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