Symbols and Motifs

Alcohol

Alcohol – particularly rum – is almost as much a part of the novel’s general atmosphere as the wildlife or the distant sea. It functions as a way of escaping an elusive reality thereby creating characters who are more willing to speak boldly, more apt to cast issues aside and sleep, and more inclined to create small circles of drunken solitude in which the ideals of identity, companionship, and happiness are made all the more evasive. Alcohol’s effects (i.e. drunkenness) are temporary. As the modern understanding of alcoholism can attest, using alcohol as a means of combating deep psychological and emotional issues can lead to an addiction, if not at least serious delusions. Such a delusion is perhaps most evident when Antoinette and Rochester repeatedly drink to some ideal of a future happiness (56 and 76). “It was very late when I poured out two glasses and told her to drink to our happiness, to our love and the day without end which would be tomorrow.” Alcohol also has a place for lesser characters like the pretend hermits who “are drunk all the time” (81). Such descriptions, though not intricately connected with the overall plot, add to the pervading island atmosphere of sadness, loneliness, hopelessness, and despair all while showing that life in the vibrant tropics, despite fertility and vitality, isn’t free from deterioration.

Magic/Obeah

Obeah is a staple of West Indian culture in the novel. Magic and superstition govern, to an extent, the actions and perceptions of the natives. Like in Part I where the former slaves completely abandon their ruthless destruction of the Cosway/Mason home, “I remembered that it was very unlucky to kill a parrot, or even to see a parrot die. They began to go then, quickly, silently” (39). Obeah and Magic are greatly distanced from Rochester’s English disposition. Where a practitioner of Obeah might say it is something to be feared, Rochester casts it aside as a childish futility. However, he has clearly been exposed to superstition. “Is there a ghost, a zombi there?” I persisted” (96). He asks this of Baptiste after the incident at the abandoned home. Upon returning home, he takes up his copy of The Glittering Coronet of Isles and reads the chapter titled “Obeah” (97). The pressures and odd happenings have made him question and doubt. Christophine, a master of Obeah herself, warns Antoinette about the dangers of a white woman playing with magic. “So you believe in that tim-tim story about obeah, you hear when you so high? All that foolishness and folly. Too besides, this is not for béké. Bad, bad trouble come when béké meddle with that” (102). Her warning is unheeded, and the love potion she subsequently gives to the Englishman is mistaken for poison. This all adds to the divisions between blacks and whites (former slaves and their former owners), between men and women, and between the natives and the English foreigners.

Obeah out of the Wide Sargasso Sea context

- Spelling variations: Obi, Obea, Obia
- “Obeah men (and sometimes women) in the Caribbean were diviners, doctors, and petitioners who specialized in finding out why things happened in daily life” (Rucker).
- “The Obeah-man (or woman) is a well established persona in the Jamaican society, with a patronage which is largely lower class” (Rucker).
- The Obeah priest who wanted to display his power to his followers was said to prepare an infusion of rum and the macerated leaves of a plant known as the Branched Calaloue (Angelire).
- Obeah can be used as a way of curing possessive states: “Possession indicates the takeover of a person’s mind and body by an external force such as a spirit, deity or ancestor. The force then controls the person’s thoughts and actions and deprives them of responsibility for these” (Incayawar). “Even today websites offer spell casting services. The California Astrology Association charges $29.00 to cast an obeah spell for such purposes as retrieving a lover, “striking it rich”, and reconciliation among others. For an extra $9.00 the spell will be cast twice. They do, however, advise caution: “WARNING: Do not turn to Obeah unless your need is great. Obeah spells are too powerful to waste on trivial pursuits!”

Mirrors/Looking-Glasses

Mirrors function as means of constructing self-identities. Antoinette, as both a young girl and a married woman, frequently gazes at herself in looking-glasses. The mirrors alleviate existential anxieties, allowing the looker to see an almost tactile representation of “self-hood”. Characters – particularly Antoinette and her mother – are forced to deal with racial tensions, man-created arbitrary distinctions of power, and isolation among other things; mirrors establish a notion of self that is otherwise lost amid the calamities of such a tumultuous life. “All day she’d be like any other girl, smile at herself in her looking glass” (83). “Names matter, like when he wouldn’t call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass” (162). Here Rochester has taken Antoinette’s identity and killed it. Whoever she thought she was has been squashed and marginalized. He refuses to accept the fact that he has been purchased as a man and instead turns the tables on Antoinette. “There is no looking glass here and I don’t know what I am like now” (163). Locked up and isolated in the attic in a foreign and cold country, Antoinette has no idea who she is and no means of figuring it out. Rochester has taken her freedom and her self-awareness, and she – without those – is completely lost. (talk about the nun who sees herself and smiles, pg 50)

Laughter

There is almost no occasion for real, genuine laughter in the novel. The servants frequently giggle at Rochester and tell him that they are sorry for him. Laughter, in this sense, is mysterious and enigmatic; it hides something. “Like Hilda she put her hand over her mouth as though she could not stop herself from laughing and walked away. Then turned and said in a very low voice, ‘I am sorry for you’” (110). Such mild and mysterious, yet explicit, laughter creates a sense of unease. Rochester’s own awareness of being in an unknown land is heightened; and, along with that, so are his anxieties. Laughter is also tied in with madness, “She laughed at that. A crazy laugh” (134). Which can also be seen in Jane Eyre.
## Coco, Annette’s Green Parrot

Annette’s pet bird is symbolic of what men are able to do to women. Mr. Mason’s stubborn resistance to leaving the island is congruous to his having clipped the wings of the parrot. Annette is held captive under the dominance of Mr. Mason; she is unable to live freely and choose for herself. The culmination of all this is when the pet is unable to escape the burning home on account of its lame wings. One of the few things the parrot is able to say is “Qui est là?” Which is French for “Who is it?” If the bird is a sort of extension of Annette, this question can be taken as a sort of existential foreboding. The ambiguity and uncertainty of people and places is central to the novel and it is one of the main forces that trouble the characters, particularly Annette and her daughter. Coco’s response to himself “Ché Coco” (it’s Coco (me)) illustrates the difficulty Annette has in relating to and understanding other people. She can only make sense of the world through her own eyes which may leave room for her to believe that she, herself, is the only certainly real thing in the world. So, taking the metaphor of Annette being Coco, it is as if Annette is running back into the burning house to save herself on page 37 when the family home is torched by the black natives. “‘Jewel case? Nothing so sensible,’ bawled Mr. Mason. ‘She wanted to go back for her damned parrot. I won’t allow it.’” Again, Mr. Mason is in control, morphing and directing the women as he sees fit. Essentially, there is some part of his character that stymies Annette from being herself or, at least, saving herself. Though it is the natives who have burned down the house, killed Coco and help drive Annette out of her mind, Mr. Mason still holds some culpability—even if that be on a deeper, more shadowy level.

## Fire

Fire is a form of destruction in both a physical and an emotional sense. It may be intended as a means of eradicating all connection and memory but that is not possible. Fire physically destroys the estate at Coulibri and, later in Jane Eyre, Rochester’s Thornfield Hall in England but the memories of the places and the emotions garnered therein cannot merely be burnt away. Arson is used as a way of demonstrating deep-seeded, almost innate emotions. For the black natives of Coulibri, it is a form of lashing out against the former slave-owing “white niggers”. For Antoinette, fire is an attempt at destroying the bond between Rochester and his new wife in England. Though the physical properties of fire take hold (a veil is burned, ginger-lilies and rocking chairs and a “picture of the Miller’s Daughter” are no more) the emotions and inclinations that set the fire in motion are only intensified by the hate and destruction. Ironically enough, fire does have its allure. Bugs mistake candle flames for the moon and fly right through the glow, “I watched the procession of small moths and beetles fly into the candle flames” (115). Also, the novel ends with Antoinette using fire as a means of guidance, “There must have been a drought for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage” (171). Though fire may destroy, it can also guide—perhaps even mistakenly guide so that the arson in Part I can be seen as a result of misguided intentions. Antoinette’s description of the bird Coco’s death in a fire parallels her own tragic death surrounded by fire. “Our parrot was called Coco, a green parrot. He didn’t talk very well, he could say Qui est là? Qui est là? And answer himself Che Coco, Che Coco. After Mr. Mason clipped his wings he grew very bad tempered. . . . I opened my eyes, everybody was looking up and pointing at Coco on the glacis railings with his feathers alight. He made an effort to fly down but his clipped wings failed him and he fell screeching. He was all on fire.” This gruesome account of Coco’s death symbolizes Antoinette’s own death as she must either jump or burn in Thornewfield Hall.

## Resources and Links
