Part One: Antoinette as Narrator

Style

The novel begins with Antoinette narrating the story of her childhood up through her stay at the convent. She also narrates parts of Part Two and the majority of Part Three, but the analysis of her point of view will be consolidating here.

Antoinette tells her story in the past tense but, as Kathy Mezei points out in her essay “‘And it Kept its Secret’: Narration, Memory, and Madness in Jean Rhys’ Wide Sargasso Sea,” “the heavy hand of present consciousness if felt throughout” (203). Mezei analyzes Rhys' construction of Antoinette’s “present consciousness” through her use of the adverbs “always” and “never,” along with “usually” and “sometimes.” However, Mezei leaves out an even more implicit indication of Antoinette’s state of mind. Though she does not often analyze the events of her life, her voice has undertones of a present urgency. This urgency is only explicitly stated in the last few pages of her narration. “Quickly, while I can, I must remember the hot classroom. The hot classroom…” (Rhys 53), but is also characterized stylistically through constant repetition and punctuated by dashes, as if she is desperately reliving the consciousness of these events if only to convince herself of their reality and to convince herself of her own identity in relation to those around her.

I went to parts of Coulibri that I had not seen, where there was no road, no path, no track. And if the razor grass cut my legs and arms I would think ‘It’s better than people.’ Black ants or red ones, tall nests swarming with white ants, rain that soaked me to the skin-once I saw a snake. All better than people.

Better. Better, better than people. (Rhys 28)

“Rhys often resorts to the verbal auxiliary ‘would’” (Mezei 204) to show a habitual state of mind, such as here when Antoinette narrates, “I would think.” Yet though there is no explicit verbal cue to suggest of a present state of mind, such as “now” or “still,” narrator Antoinette is present through her repetition of the thought, “It’s better than people.” Is Antoinette a meticulous author of her past self just as Rhys is the meticulous author of Antoinette’s present self? Or, perhaps more probable, is the present Antoinette being affected by her retelling of events?

There are two instances in Part One where Antoinette the narrator uses ellipses. Ellipses signify an incomplete thought or, more accurately in the case of Antoinette having power over her narrative, signify withdrawal, retreats into safer, less emotionally resonating topics, in order to keep calm enough to tell her story. Antoinette uses each ellipses quite differently, however.

I knew we were hated---but to go away…for once I agreed with my stepfather. (Rhys 31)

Here, the narrator does not voice her reasons for wanting to stay on the island. She uses an ellipses to distract her own thoughts on the matter, “to go away,” with her stepfather’s. The following paragraph picks up on a conversation he “would” (yet another instance of a verbal auxiliary) have with Annette, forcing us to examine their relationship rather than Antoinette’s feelings about the prospect of leaving. In fact, the rest of this section (31-33) is a recording of a conversation without commentary from Antoinette, as if she hoped the conversation would speak for her.

The next and final use of ellipses in Part One occurs only a few pages later.

Now it had started up again and worse than before, my mother knows but she can’t make him believe it. I wish I could tell him that out here is not at all like English people think it is. I wish… (34)

Unlike the previous example, here, Antoinette does not finish her statement but leaves it hanging at the end of a paragraph. We can only guess what Antoinette wanted to say but, if we recall and apply her stylistic use of anaphora, we can assume that the second “I wish” relates to the first. Notice, too, how she uses present tense, where in the surrounded paragraph she uses both verbal auxiliaries and past tense. Antoinette is very, very present in her narration at this point. It is this presence that causes her to back away; she does not wish to reveal her current state of mind in relation to the events. However, taking another step back and analyzing Rhys as authors is also necessary; in writing this book, Rhys was obviously aware of Antoinette’s depiction in Jane Eyre and assumes that her readers are also familiar with the story. Therefore, when Rhys allows Antoinette to distance herself from the story, she is inviting the reader to fill in the details. Readers already know the ending of Wide Sargasso Sea. They do not need to “guess,” as I have suggested above, at Antoinette’s state of mind as she narrates. Because of these elements (the use of anaphora or repetition, the use of the present tense, and Rhys’ understanding that her readers know the story already), the elliptical statement “I wish…” must refer to Antoinette’s present consciousness and the parallel she draws between Mr. Mason and her husband, Rochester. Though character Antoinette is not married at this point in the novel, narrator Antoinette is.

Episodic Structure
Though Antoinette’s narrative in Part One seems chronological, it would be more accurate to describe it as associatively episodic. Again, Antoinette uses more verbal auxiliaries, such as “would” or “could,” to depict scenes rather than concrete past tense forms throughout Part One. When the narrator jumps from one story to the next, we have no way of understanding how much time has passed; there are very few markers of time. As an example, we read the story of Tia stealing Antoinette’s dress between pages 22 and 28. After the white space on page 28, suddenly Antoinette’s mother is married to Mr. Mason, a character with whom we have yet to be acquainted, and after the next white space, her mother and stepfather have returned from their honeymoon in Trinidad. Yet after another white space pages later, only a space of a few hours have passed, as the narrator writes, “Mr. Mason pulled up near the empty huts on our way home that evening” (33). The white spaces do not seem to signify the same amount of time.

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Experimenting with Form: Dreams

Finally, there is one structural technique of Antoinette’s narration that is missing entirely from Rochester’s in Part Two. Antoinette as narrator seems to put a heavy emphasis on dreams. The fact that she remembers them accurately enough to retell them suggests that they have had a major psychological impact on the character. More importantly, these dreams or “unrealities,” especially when compared with Rochester’s use of epistolary form (see below), symbolize not only a difference between Antoinette’s passion and Rochester’s rationality, but also key differences Rhys is noting between Caribbean and English or Victorian English culture.

Antoinette first narrates one of her dreams early in Part One.

I dreamed that I was walking in the forest. Not alone. Someone who hated me was with me, out of sight. I could hear heavy footsteps coming closer and though I struggled and screamed I could not move. I woke crying. (Rhys 27)

The style and form of this excerpt matches its content: Rhys, as the author, has characterized Antoinette’s storytelling here with a number of techniques, including alliteration, such as the juxtaposition of “hear heavy,” “coming closer,” and “struggled and screamed.” The variation of sentence lengths, from short “Not alone” to long to short again depicts a choppy, dreamlike consciousness. And her use of polysyndeton “and though… and screamed…” adds a frantic, helpless tone, almost as if the dream was so severe it felt real to the narrator. Yet beyond these syntactical choices, there is also an interesting element of the dream itself that reappears in subsequent dreams: the setting of the forest. Antoinette’s narrative is characterized by her love for the nature around her, nature that feels home to her. Rochester, as we will see, is not at all at home in this exotic setting and in fact feels threatened by its dreamlike atmosphere.

Antoinette’s second dream is remarkably more detailed.

Again I have left the house at Coulibri. It is still night and I am walking towards the forest. I am wearing a long dress and thin slippers, so I walk with difficulty, following the man who is with me and holding up the skirt of my dress. It is white and beautiful and I don’t wish to get it soiled. I follow him, sick with fear but I make no effort to save myself; if anyone were to try to save me, I would refuse. This must happen. Now we have reached the forest. We are under the tall dark trees and there is no wind. “Here?” He turns and looks at me, his face black with hatred, and when I see this I begin to cry. He smiles slyly. “Not here, not yet,” he says, and I follow him, weeping. Now I do not try to hold up my dress, it trails in the dirt, my beautiful dress. We are no longer in the forest but in an enclosed garden surrounded by a stone wall and the trees are different trees. I do not know them. There are steps leading upwards. It is too dark to see the wall or the steps, but I know they are there and I think, “It will be when I go up these steps. At the top.” I stumble over my dress and cannot get up. I touch a tree and my arms hold on to it. “Here, here.” But I think I will not go any further. The tree sways and jerks as if it is trying to throw me off. Still I cling and the seconds pass and each one is a thousand years. “Here, in here,” a strange voice said, and the tree stopped swaying and jerking. (Rhys 59-60)

Again, Antoinette is in the forest; but this time, “someone” is recognized as a man and she is wearing a “white and beautiful” dress, presumably a wedding dress. It seems to foreshadow her marriage to Rochester and their subsequent move to England. As before, we as readers are aware of Antoinette’s fate even before the novel begins. This dream functions both as reflection of Antoinette’s state of mind at this point in Part One of the novel and her state of mind as the narrator looking back on these events. Antoinette’s comment to Sister Marie Augustine, “I dreamed I was in Hell,” is extremely interpretative and seems somewhat exaggerated given the details she has provided about it. Without a prior understanding of Antoinette’s fate, we as readers might be shocked by Antoinette’s analysis. In this case, Rhys as author is interpreting the dream for Antoinette the character, putting words in her mouth for Antoinette the narrator to understand later.

This dream also highlights that conflict between Caribbean culture and Victorian English culture. The first half of the dream takes place in the forest, in which the man will not stop but treks onwards, disregarding Antoinette’s pleas, “Here?” The “enclosed garden” suggests England and signifies English imperialism or rule over nature in all its forms. Antoinette attempts to hold onto her natural self, clinging onto a tree, reflecting, “But I think I will not go any further.” She struggles in a state of timelessness. But eventually, she stops fighting and is forced to let go of the tree, to let go of her past self and descend into the madness of Victorian structures.

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Part Two: Rochester as Narrator

Style
Like Antoinette’s narration, Rochester’s narration in Part Two includes a number of somewhat unconventional stylistic techniques, especially for a Victorian English man. Compared to Jane Eyre’s narration in Jane Eyre, for example, Rhys characterizes Rochester’s narration with ellipses and dashes, especially as the character delves farther into his story. The function of these marks changes throughout his narration. For example, Rochester’s first use of an ellipsis occurs when he considers the letter he needs to write for his father, “Dear Father…” (Rhys 67) and again Rochester a few pages later, “I looked down at the coarse mane of the horse…Dear Father” (70). However, the third usage parallels Antoinette’s usage in her “I wish…” statement. I have sold my soul or you have sold it, and after all is it such a bad bargain? The girl is thought to be beautiful, she is beautiful. And yet… (Rhys 70)

Rochester then alienates himself from such doubts by continuing on with the story of their horse ride to Granbois rather than finishing his thought. Yet, Rochester’s narration is more defined by dashes, parenthetical phrases, and italicization. Each of these serves a specific function, creates a specific tone. For example, notice how he only uses dashes when attempting to understand the natural world around him:

There was a very strong scent of flowers - the flowers by the river that open at night she told me - and the noise, subdued in the inner room, was deafening… I leaned on the railing and saw hundreds of fireflies - (Rhys 81, my ellipsis)

It was a beautiful place - wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I’d find myself thinking, What I see is nothing - I want what it hides - that is not nothing. (Rhys 87)

I was waiting for the scent of the flowers by the river - they opened when darkness came and it came quickly. Not night or darkness as I knew it but night with blazing stars, an alien moon - night full of strange noises. Still night, not day. (Rhys 88)

At the back of the ruins a wild orange tree covered with fruit, the leaves a dark green. A beautiful place. And calm - so calm that it seemed foolish to think or plan. (Rhys 104)

Dashes suggest quick changes in perception and/or attempts to define what he sees more clearly with each statement. Rochester sees the natural, untamed world as “wild,” as something threatening rather than something freeing. The style of his narration shows that he is very uncomfortable in this place, as he explains explicitly to Antoinette when she claims that the idea of England is “like a dream,” “…that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream”(Rhys 80).

The “dream” starts to catch up with him as his narration progresses. Rochester begins to use italicization and parenthesis, two perhaps more major stylistic choices in that they are eye-catching on the page, for a variety of purposes: to show his own internal thought, to repeat lines from present conversations, and to repeat lines from past conversations and letters. Each of these styles of punctuation comes together at the end of Part Two. Here, Rochester seems to have lost some of the logical coolness that has colored the rest of his narration. His anger and passion comes through these pages, even though he claims that “All the mad conflicting emotions had gone and left (him) wearied and empty. Sane” (Rhys 172); for example, when Antoinette explains that a young servant had wanted to go with she and Rochester when they moved to England, Rochester thinks to himself in parenthesis, “(God! A half-savage boy as well as…as well as…)” (Rhys 171). As well as Antoinette?

Structure

In the first half of Part Two, Rochester attempts to describe his first few weeks with Antoinette in logical, linear fashion. Though it is still episodic in nature, his stories do not seem to be associative but rather picked to highlight the major events in the weeks before and after his marriage. Unlike in Antoinette’s narration, Rochester does not recall or interpret dreams or nightmares; instead, he relies on the concrete: letters written to and from him. This allows a few more narrative perspectives: one, of course, of other characters; and another of his “formal” or external self. Throughout his narrative, Rochester tries to show his internal self through rational examples rather than through passionate free indirect discourse. In his letters, Rochester takes this rational approach a step further, writing merely of Antoinette, “All is well and has gone according to your plans and wishes” (Rhys 75). He avoids all discussion of his true feelings, as he writes after finishing the letter, “As for my confused impressions they will never be written. There are blanks in my mind that cannot be filled up” (Rhys 76).

Rochester the narrator also includes Daniel Cosway’s letter to him in his narration (Rhys 95-99) and a letter from Mr. Fraser (142). He also includes a definition of a zombi from The Glittering Coronot of Isles, as if he is attempting to find a rational understanding of the culture around him.
Part Three: Third-Person Limited Narrator

Our last narrator has only been given a mere two pages with which to make an impression on us as readers. A limited third-person narrator introduces Part Three, the only indication of which is the phrasing, "she thought" (178). The narrator gives no opinion except in what she reveals and what she does not reveal. A conversation is revealed between Grace Poole, Antoinette’s caretaker at Thornfield Hall, or more accurately, Antoinette’s guard, and Leah, a new servant. Grace explains to Leah the circumstances that led to Antoinette’s captivity in the attic. She is one of the few characters in the novel to show some semblance of compassion for Antoinette, first when she tells Leah that she thought Rochester a “devil” (177) when asked to help the household keep his wife a secret. She eventually agrees to do so by telling herself that “After all the house is big and safe, a shelter from the world outside which, say what you like, can be a black and cruel world to a woman” (178).

Because so much of these two pages are in dialogue, we get a sense both of Grace’s personality and compassion not only through her words but also through the style with which the narrator has transcribed them. Grace speaks of conversations within her conversations, mimicking others’ voices. She uses colloquial diction, such as, “If you ask me” (178). Grace also uses fragments rather than full sentences, usually dropping articles. Here’s an example:

Next day Mrs. Eff wanted to see me and she complained about gossip. (Rhys 178)

Notice how the narrator has purposely removed the definite article in order to create a more comfortable, conversational tone. Notice, too, how commas that would traditionally separate phrases and the two independent clauses have been removed in order to create a certain pace in this sentence. Grace’s dialogue throughout these two pages seems very rushed because of the lack of commas and other punctuation of pause.

Sources


Grace Poole Image: http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/janeeyre/grace_poole_1.shtml