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Valarie Phelps

The Mother Daughter Bond and History in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

A mother and daughter have a special bond. A mother is to be a role model, a teacher, and an unconditional source of love for a daughter. However, Antoinette and her mother, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, have a strange relationship. Annette treats her daughter as an outsider or as a problem she cannot get rid of. A daughter's life is shaped by her relationship with her mother, and Antoinette's life was definitely shaped by her mother. Antoinette's life problems can be found stemming from the relationship and mentoring of her mother.

"Part One" is narrated by Antoinette, and it begins with her as a child and much of her interest is focused on her mother. Within the first couple of lines Annette is spoken about: "The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother, 'because she pretty like pretty self'" (Rhys 17). With the author placing Antoinette as the narrator and one of the first people Antoinette speaks of is her mother, this can lead the reader to a realization of the importance of the mother's role in the narrator's life. "[T]he narrative [of Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is] of a daughter's cumulative trauma, much of it carried over from her mother's own traumatic life" (Burrows 45). Antoinette is explaining to her audience that her own story begins with her mother, and therefore, she is defined by her mother.

Victoria Burrows also explains that the sectioning of the novel explains the trauma that Antoinette experiences throughout her life. Burrows then states that the first section is "bound together by extremely vivid vignettes which are imagistic recollections of the repetitive traumas that define Antoinette's young life" (43). 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 the chance at the beginning of the novel to foreshadow the end of her story.

Annette is a remnant of the English coming into Jamaica. She is from the “old time white people [and they are] nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger” (Rhys 24), so Antoinette is doomed from birth because of the heritage she acquires from her mother. Antoinette existed in a time where labels were the most powerful item a person could obtain and her label of “white cockroach” held no power for her at all (Rhys 23). Antoinette is young enough in the beginning of the novel to not have any desire to make any distinctions between color, she “never looked at any strange negro” (Rhys 23) and even tries to form a friendship with a black girl named Tia. However, Antoinette is forced to learn quickly that in her world there is a great divide among races and her being of a mix of the once oppressive race and the oppressed race makes her even more of an outsider. This separation can be seen when Tia takes off with Antoinette’s dress and Antoinette has to wear Tia’s ratty and dirty dress home and Annette is offended that her daughter is dressing not only like but in the other races clothing. She orders Tia’s clothing destroyed, much like sanitizing her daughter from a disease.

A mother, especially being the only parent, is supposed to naturally desire to care for and to bond with their children. A mother is the one who cares and protects a child inside her own body until the child is introduced into the world. A daughter is usually seen as a mirror image of the mother in some way or another so usually there is a strong bond between the mother and the daughter. Also a daughter is supposed to love her mother because “not to love your mother seems unthinkable at best, inhuman at worst” (Caplan 18). Paula Caplan goes on to explain that “the very word *mother* elicits a wealth of conflicting, ambivalent feelings—protectiveness, a

desire for approval, need for her love versus rage at the terrible damage [a daughter] feel[s] [a mother] has done “(19). Antoinette’s mother does create this motherly bond but not with Antoinette, only with Antoinette’s ailing brother, Pierre. Annette most of the time does not acknowledge her daughter, thus residing outside of the natural mother-daughter bond.

Annette’s bond with Pierre is seen many times through the first section, this is also the section that is narrated by Antoinette thus showing her knowledge of the difference between the bonding of parent to child. Antoinette wakes from a bad dream and there when she wakes is her mother. This moment should be heartwarming and a moment that Annette shows the reader how much she cares for her daughter but that expression of motherly loves does not occur, at least not for Antoinette. Annette only says, “You were making such a noise. I must go to Pierre, you’ve frightened him” (Rhys 27). This is a moment where a daughter really needs a mother’s comforting words and to feel protected but instead she gets chastised for waking her brother. When Annette was wanting to leave Jamaica and her husband was telling her it was only because of her undo worry about the native people, all Annette says is “*I will go and take Pierre with me...It is not safe. It is not safe for Pierre*” (34-5). Annette does not mention that she is worried about her daughter’s safety; this passage can almost be read as if she has forgotten she even had another child, a daughter.

Antoinette adores her mother. She admires her mother’s beauty and yearns for her love. Antoinette describes an interaction between herself and her mother and how this one particular interaction affected Antoinette.

I hated [my mother’s] frown and once I touched her forehead trying to smooth it.

But she pushed me away, roughly but calmly, coldly, without a word, as if she

had decided once and for all that I was useless to her. She wanted to sit with Pierre or walk where she pleased without being pestered, she wanted peace and quiet. I was old enough to look after myself. ‘Oh let me alone’ she would say, ‘let me alone,’ and after I knew that she talked aloud to herself and I was a little afraid of her. (Rhys 20)

This interaction is a pivotal moment in Antoinette and her mother’s bond; it is the moment that the bond was severed. It becomes the moment that Antoinette no longer even attempts to identify a bond with her biological mother.

A girl still needs a mother figure, someone to care for her and teach her life lessons, and Christophine becomes that for Antoinette. After the aforementioned incident between Antoinette and her mother, Antoinette begins spending “most of [her] time in the kitchen” where Christophine resided and is classically considered to be the heart of the home. Christophine fills in the missing mother position in Antoinette’s life. Christophine even chastises Annette for her failure at being a good mother to Antoinette: “Christophine told [Annette] loudly that it shameful. [Antoinette] run wild, she grow up worthless. And nobody care” (Rhys 26).

Christophine at this time shows that she cares and shows that she knows Antoinette needs a mother figure in her life.

Antoinette displays to the reader that she has created the motherly bond with Christophine when she goes to visit her one day. Antoinette had a moment when she “was suddenly very much afraid” because of the rumors she had been hearing about Christophine and obeahs (Rhys 31). However, “Christophine came in smiling and pleased to see [her]” and Antoinette was comforted by this and her fears went away, unlike when she is around her mother

and is actually “a little afraid of her” (Rhys 20 & 31). This bond between Antoinette and Christophine becomes strong and stable for Antoinette and that is just what she needed.

Antoinette believed that her mother was “ashamed” of her but she still became “sad when [her mother] had gone” into town (Rhys 26-7). Antoinette even tells Rochester that “there was that day when [her mother] saw she was growing up like a white nigger and she was ashamed of [her]” (Rhys 132). However, it was not her mother that she desired to be around but Christophine, which can also be seen as a natural reaction to the abandonment by her mother. Each night Antoinette “waited for Christophine, for [she] liked to see her last thing” (Rhys 37). Antoinette had severed that need for her mother and replaced it with a need for Christophine. This attachment to someone in order to fulfill the need for love will eventually be the downfall of Antoinette.

Antoinette tries one last time to create an emotional bond with her mother. After the fire at Calibri her mother goes insane and is sent away but Antoinette still wants to see her mother. However, Antoinette already being frightened of her mother earlier “insisted that Christophine must go with [her], no one else” (Rhys 47). Christophine had been the protector of Antoinette for so many years and Antoinette subconsciously knew this was going to be a painful moment so she brought her mother figure with her. Antoinette’s attempt at reconnecting with her mother does not go well.

[Antoinette:] I put my arms around [Annette] and kissed her. She held me so tightly that I couldn’t breathe and I thought ‘It’s not her.’ Then, ‘It must be her.’ ...’But I am here, I am here,’ I said, and she said, ‘No,’ quietly. Then ‘No no no’ very loudly and flung me from her. I fell against the partition and hurt myself.

(Rhys 48)

Antoinette was reaffirmed that her mother had no desire for her and there could never be a mother daughter bond between the two of them.

Antoinette might be able to emotionally cut herself free from her mother but she can never completely remove her mother because Antoinette knows she is a reflection of her.

Annette is described as being “such a pretty woman” with “black hair” that was a trait special to her Creole heritage (Rhys 29). At one time her mother’s hair was a symbol of safety and love for Antoinette, “once I made excuses to be near her when she brushed her hair, a soft black cloak to cover me, hide me, keep me safe,” but as Antoinette foretells, “but not any longer. Not any more” (Rhys 22). Antoinette changes this symbol of warmth and motherliness into an object of disgust and it triggers the memories of how much her mother did not want her.

This symbol of her heritage and her mother is to follow Antoinette throughout by her own hair. The first incident that Antoinette realizes she is cursed by her mother and her mother’s heritage is after the fire at Calibri and Antoinette’s burned hair has to be cut. Aunt Cora explains to Antoinette that it is ok that her hair had to be cut because it will “grow again...longer and thicker,” and Antoinette adds “but darker” (Rhys 45). Antoinette knows that she looks like her mother but if her hair grows into its own *soft black cloak* there will be no way to disassociate herself from her mother, whom she has learned to despise but still loves because one is supposed to love their mother.

“[If] we think a [mother’s] destructiveness is of a super-human proportion, our deepest fear is that so is ours” (Caplan 160). Antoinette is constantly reminded that she is doomed to follow in her mother’s crazy footsteps, “Look the crazy girl, you crazy like your mother” (Rhys

49). Antoinette has to carry this label of being crazy throughout her life or until she actually goes crazy. Antoinette “experience[s] her mother as a human mirror who will not retreat respectfully into shadow” (Caplan 193). This label of her family being crazy, that is justified by her mother’s actions, eventually destroys the only happiness Antoinette obtains in her life, her marriage. She knows subconsciously that she is labeled crazy and that she could be like her mother but she suppresses that, however, the local people do not and they taint her husband’s ideas of her.

Antoinette’s marriage to *Rochester* is the beginning of the parallel of her mother’s life she is destined to live. Annette married her first husband, Antoinette’s father, at a young age, and Antoinette is described to *Rochester* as “hardly more than a child” (Rhys 125). Her mother’s second marriage was mostly due to trying to save the family. Her family was in ruins after her first husband “drank himself to death” (Rhys 29). Antoinette’s marriage was also a financial arrangement. Her stepbrother decided it would be best for Antoinette to marry, but her Aunt Cora sees this marriage differently. Aunt Cora states that Richard is “handing over everything the child owns to a perfect stranger” (Rhys 114). She is afraid that Antoinette is just being married for money, but this could just be justice for her mother marrying her second husband for financial stability. Antoinette has to pay for her mother’s dastardly deeds.

As far as Antoinette’s physical beauty being like her mother’s, it becomes another piece of her downfall. Antoinette’s hair becomes a part of her wildness that is a part of her heritage. “Part Two” is narrated by *Rochester* and he tells of their honeymoon night. One aspect of Antoinette that night that he describes is her hair: “Her hair was combed away from her face and fell smoothly far below her waist. I could see the red and gold lights in it” (Rhys 80). Antoinette mentions her mother’s hair when she speaks of her maternally, it is the symbol that expresses her

mother's happiness when she is romancing and dancing, and it eventually becomes a symbol of disgust for Antoinette. Now, Antoinette is being described by her hair during a moment of romance and love. Her hair, the hair of her mother, also changes from a symbol of love and tranquility to a symbol of pain and destruction for *Rochester*.

Later in Antoinette and *Rochester's* relationship, she tries to save her marriage by giving him a potion of which he reacts to this trickery by saying, "I swear before I drank that [potion] I longed to bury my face in her hair as I used to do" he is showing how her hair is appealing and one reason he is attracted to her (Rhys 137). However, after drinking the potion, her hair becomes attached to evil images for him, "when I was awake the feeling of suffocation persisted. Something was lying across my mouth; hair with a sweet heavy smell" (Rhys 137). Now when *Rochester* thinks of her hair, once a symbol of sexiness, he will be reminded of the suffocation and retching. When Antoinette becomes Bertha and the madness overtakes her, her hair finally becomes a symbol of her insanity, "She'll loosen her black hair, and laugh and coax and flatter (a mad girl. She'll not care who she's loving)" (Rhys 165). She has become her mother. She stated as a child that she did not want the dark hair because she knew that when her hair became dark she would finally become her mother and her being described as mad and with black hair the prediction becomes true.

Antoinette's mother's act of pushing her daughter away and Antoinette trying to attach herself to someone to love also becomes part of her destruction in the end. Antoinette never had the female role model she needed to show her how to actually love a man. She also never really knew what love was, she just took what she could get. Antoinette had small forms of love from Christophine, Mr. Mason, Aunt Cora, and Richard but none of these are equivalent to a mother's

love. Therefore, Antoinette did not know how to create a maintainable adult love because the only love she ever experiences was as a child when she still thought her mother loved her.

When *Rochester* talks about Antoinette in “Part Two” he speaks of her as child-like. When they are traveling to Granbois his description of her is very innocent, “Looking up smiling, she might have been any pretty English girl” (Rhys 71). Later when they arrive in their honeymoon suite he tells the reader of how she has him place a crown of flowers on his head and then she says “You look like a king, an emperor” (Rhys 73). All within the first day of them being together *Rochester* has portrayed Antoinette as an imaginative child and she might have been that way because a child’s love was the only love she had ever known. Burrows quotes Deborah Kelly Kloepfer, “Antoinette seems able to articulate only those portions of her life which deal with her mother; she can narrate her childhood (which centres on her mother’s madness) and the period of time she spends imprisoned (like her mother) preparing to reenact and retell her tale” (44). The childishness that *Rochester* is viewing of her is nothing much more than a reenactment of a time when Antoinette knew happiness, parts of her childhood. Antoinette spent so much of her youth either searching for love or suppressing her love and now she feels free enough to express it but has never experienced love as an adult.

Rochester continues to view Antoinette as a child even after they develop carnal knowledge. He says after one encounter where Antoinette expresses that she will have an exact replica of a dress made to make him happy, “If she was a child she was not a stupid child but an obstinate one. ... Reality might disconcert her, bewilder her, hurt her, but it would not be reality” (Rhys 94). He has either created an idea of her as childish or has viewed her innocent childlike love and does not understand it, but either way Antoinette’s is trying to express love the only

way that she knows how. Antoinette is connecting this moment to one in her childhood. She is remembering a time when her mother showed some attention to Antoinette by making her a new dress.

Christophine attempts to play the supportive motherly role for Antoinette when Antoinette needs help saving her marriage. Christophine gives her words of advice such as “Speak to your husband calm and cool...Don’t bawl at the man and don’t make crazy faces. Don’t cry either. Crying no good with him. Speak nice and make him understand” (Rhys 116 & 149). Christophine tries to give her knowledge that her mother should have been giving her when she was growing up. “Christophine, despite her status as servant, black, and woman, has power” and Antoinette is drawn to this power for safety (Walker 40). Christophine gives the protection and projects the strength that Antoinette needs because as Victoria Burrows states she is “the only person to understand the nature of [the] traumatic experience in the novel, [she] tries to help Antoinette by encouraging her to unburden herself of this legacy by speaking its pain” (44) Christophine creates the balance and stability that Antoinette much needs in her unbalanced life.

Antoinette attempts to take Christophine’s advice and tell her story to *Rochester* but he listens to her story as one listens to a child’s rambling tales and then attempts to change her stories outcome. He tells her nonchalantly “your nights are not spoiled, or your days, put the sad things away. Don’t think about them and nothing will be spoiled” (Rhys 133). He is showing that he thinks the entirety of the trauma that Antoinette has experiences in her lifetime can just be forgotten. He then attempts to assert ultimate power over her by changing her name to Bertha. He labels her just as the natives named the old whites white cockroaches and white niggers and her mother was named crazy he eventually calls her “My lunatic. My mad girl” (Rhys 166). He

is not taking her and her trauma seriously because she is just a child with mental problem.

Kathy Mezei states that “A monologue, whether autobiography or memory, is suitable for a mad, rambling, or childish mind that free-associates and thus reveals itself, ...but when a narrator like Antoinette makes such a formidable effort to structure a narrative and abide by the rhetorical principles of narrative, the difference between monologue and narrative becomes the difference between madness and sanity” (202). Antoinette is trying to narrate her life story to *Rochester* in order to make him understand her a little more, but since he has been tainted by the label of crazy that has already been given to Antoinette’s mother, he keeps with his preconceived idea that Antoinette is also just going mad.

Antoinette has been scorned by love and now *Rochester* is repeating this painful cycle again. *Rochester* has laughed at her, cheated on her, degraded her, and psychologically tortured her all through the device of love. When Antoinette finally opens herself up enough to trust in *Rochester* and to love him wholly he stabs her right in the heart. She asks him “Don’t you love me at all” and he replies “No, I do not...Not at this moment” of which makes Antoinette finally mentally snap (Rhys 148). She reenacts a moment with *Rochester* that is similar to the way her mother acted after the fire at Coulibri. After *Rochester* tells her he does not love her she throws a bottle against the wall and screams “Just you touch me once. You’ll soon see if I’m a dam’ coward like you are” (Rhys 148). When her mother’s heart becomes broken after the fire and she screams at her husband “Don’t touch me. I’ll kill you if you touch men. Coward. Hypocrite. I’ll kill you” of which Antoinette would put her “hands over [her] ears [and]...slept and when [she] woke up everything was quiet” (Rhys 47). Antoinette is recalling the painful incident from her childhood and finds herself reenacting it years later when put in a similar situation.

The threat is one of the last times Antoinette is given a vocal voice in the novel (in “Part Three” she given mental monologues and retellings by Grace Poole). “Antoinette is a child of silence, to whom communication, words, speech bring only unhappiness and rejection...She is silenced first by her mother, who denies her existence, and then by Rochester who refuses to be the reader of her story” (Mezei 199). Christophine even tells *Rochester* that Antoinette will never ask him “for love again, she will die first” and then she proceeds to tell the story that Antoinette attempts to tell *Rochester*, and he finally listens (Rhys 157). However, *Rochester* does not fall back in love with Antoinette; he actually develops a hatred for her because his he feels that she only hates him for taking Christophine away when actually he has broken her and all that is left is “her face blank, no expression at all. Tears? There’s not a tear in her” (Rhys 166).

“Like her mother, she is suffering a division of the self where she undergoes what she calls the real death, the death of the mind, and becomes blank, doll-like, inhuman, in waiting for the second death, the death of the body” (Mezei 205). With Antoinette becoming silent and broken she becomes a shell of her former self just as when her mother gets locked away. Antoinette creates a mechanism to protect herself which is to withdraw deep into herself where no one else can harm her, where she is safe. Burrows states that “Antoinette retreats into the supposed psychic safety of the state of *zombification*”(56). She takes and locks herself mentally away and waits patiently for the comforting bed of physical death.

Rochester notices that Antoinette became “A ghost in the grey daylight. Nothing left but hopelessness...Mad eyes. A mad girl” (Rhys 170). He thinks he has finally broken her from being such a wild woman of the island.

[*Rochester*:] Very soon [*Antoinette*]’ll join all the others who know the secret and

will not tell it. Or cannot. Or try and fail because they do not know enough. 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. She's one of them. I too can wait—for the day when she is only a memory to be avoided, locked away, and like all memories a legend. Or a lie.... (Rhys 172)

He is forcing her into becoming her mother, whether he realizes it or not. When he takes the island out of her and makes her a proper English lady he has finally created his “Marionette” or his perfect doll to play with (Rhys 154). Annette becomes the same way when she removes herself mentally from the island because the islanders decided she should be physically removed; she retreats into her own mind and her body becomes “all soft and limp in [another person's] arms” she has become a marionette doll as well (Rhys 134). Antoinette is once again reliving her mother's life.

Antoinette's mother dies alone and insane and it all started with the fire at Calibri where she lost her parrot, her son, and evidently her daughter. Her mother's soul died that day and her body died quietly later locked away and alone. Antoinette was doomed from the beginning because of the damaged tie between her and her mother. Antoinette's soul died at Granbois but her body moved on to England to be locked away and left alone. She lived crushed by love until her flame finally ignites and she goes up in fire. Antoinette is tied to her mother until the end. As Antoinette is roaming the halls at the house in England she states “It was then that I saw her—the ghost. The woman with

streaming hair” she is describing and subconsciously seeing her mother but actually she is seeing herself in a mirror (Rhys 188). She tries to protect herself from this image by setting things afire. As she is running from the fire her mind tries to connect, to protect her once again by placing her back at Calibri, her home, her safety, but it was all just an illusion. Antoinette goes down in a leap of burning flames just as the things her mother loved more than her, the parrot and Pierre.

Antoinette was just a victim of circumstance. She was a child born at the end of a period of change in a country. The balance of power among the people was shifting and she was caught in the downfalls. She had to carry the weight of the trauma her forefathers and foremothers carried which developed a new kind of trauma for her. Her basket held a fallen people, a tainted race, an impoverished family, and a genetic flaw so she never had a chance. When she thought she had finally found the love she was always denied it was either a patchwork, as in her relationship with Christophine, or a ploy, as in her marriage to *Rochester*. She became a pawn in so many people’s games that she eventually snapped. I find it perfectly poetic that she leaps from the fires to a final completeness, or as she states it “[I] jumped and woke” (Rhys 190). Antoinette is a sympathetic character with all of her problems stemming back to her mother. The mother to nurture her, teach her, and unconditionally love her was absent and just abandoned Antoinette. The husband who was supposed to be her savior and her lover just used her in his ploy to become rich. Antoinette’s only savior was Christophine but with the upturn of society during their time made this relationship problematic. Antoinette had been locked away in one way or another and silenced by people she thought loved her for so long that she finally gets her

freedom back and she is the one to finish her own traumatic story by taking an a flamed parrot-like plunge to her death.

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