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Re-reading and re-writing English literature

Introduction

Writing about her experience of the study of English Literature in India, Meenakshi Mukherjee has defended postcolonialism as an emancipatory concept on the grounds that 'it makes us interrogate many aspects of the study of literature that we were made to take for granted, enabling us ... to re-interpret some of the old canonical texts from Europe from the perspective of our specific historical and geographical location' (*Interrogating Post-Colonialism: Theory, Text and Context*, eds. Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukherjee, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1996, pp. 3-4). The re-interpretation of 'classic' English literary works has become an important area of postcolonialism and has impacted upon all kinds of literary debates, in particular the ongoing disputes about which texts can be considered as possessing 'literary value' and the criteria we use to measure it.

This chapter will introduce these issues by taking as points of orientation two inter-related themes: the *re-reading* of literary 'classics' in the light of postcolonial scholarship and experience, and the *re-writing* of received literary texts by postcolonial writers. In so doing we shall be looking at two novels: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) which engages with Brontë's text.

Colonialism and the teaching of English literature

Mukherjee's phrase 'old canonical texts' refers to the 'canon' of English literature: the writers and their work which are believed to be of particular, rare value for reasons of aesthetic beauty and moral sense. I shall be using the term 'classic' to refer to this kind of text. The inverted commas will be kept to signal that it is a matter for debate whether or not texts are *inherently* valuable or worthy; for some, the status of 'classic' is ultimately awarded by readers. Hence, the literary value of a text is open to disagreement and change.

Many postcolonial writers and critics were taught the 'classics' of English literature in once-colonised locations, where English literature has been an important subject on the curriculum. For example, the Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid recalls studying 'the Brontës, Hardy, Shakespeare, Milton, Keats ... They were read to us while we sat under a tree' (in *Caribbean Women Writers*, ed. Selwyn Cudjoe, Calaloux, 1990). The teaching of English literature in the colonies must be understood as part of the many ways in which Western colonial powers such as Britain asserted their cultural and moral superiority while at the same time devaluing indigenous cultural products. The image of Jamaica Kincaid sitting under her tree in Antigua reading a series of texts that ostensibly concern British locations, culture and history is a striking example of the ways in which many of those in the colonies were asked to perceive of Western nations as places where the very best in art and learning were produced, the lasting value of which could survive in locations far removed from the texts' point of origin. However, the *responses* to English literature by people in similar positions to Kincaid are particularly interesting and varied, and we shall be considering their character in this chapter.

Education is arguably a crucial ideological apparatus of the state by which certain values are asserted as the best or most true. Colonialism uses educational institutions to augment the perceived legitimacy and propriety of itself, as well as providing the means by which colonial power can be maintained. This is the argument of Gauri Viswanathan's book *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (Faber, 1989). Viswanathan's study concerns the emergence of English literature as a subject in educational

establishments in India during the early nineteenth century specifically to serve colonial interests. Many administrators were keen to build an English-speaking Indian workforce that would help carry out the work of the colonial authorities. Lord Macaulay, president of the Council on Education in India, put it thus in his now infamous 'Minute on Indian Education' of 1835:

> It is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population. (reprinted in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, p. 430)

Macaulay's pronouncement rests upon several assumptions. Knowledge is deemed the enriching possession of the 'scientific' West and must be taught to those in India, but the process is not reciprocal. An Orientalist hierarchy is asserted between a knowledgeable, civilised West and an ignorant, savage East. Thus, the education of Indians is part of a civilising process that involves a certain *moral* improvement – it is not just a process that will heighten intellect and opinion. The education of Indians for the purposes of consolidating power is legitimised by seeming morally just and improving.

This was also the concern of many evangelicals in India at the time who were keen that Indians converted to Christianity. However, it became clear during the early nineteenth century that many Indians objected to the denigration of their own religions by missionaries and the teaching of biblical scripture in schools. Viswanathan argues that evangelicals coped with this problem by trying to promote Christian morality indirectly through the teaching of English literature. Rather than studying issues such as grammar or diction, English literary texts were presented in profoundly moral terms, with students invited to consider how texts conveyed 'truths' at once universal and timeless, yet entirely correspondent with Christian

morality. 'The importance of English literature for this process could not be exaggerated', argues Viswanathan; 'as the source of moral values for correct behaviour and action, it represented a convenient replacement for direct religious instruction' (*Masks of Conquest*, p. 93). The study of English literature became the study of models of moral worth to the extent that English literature seemed first and foremost *about* morality. This weaving together of morality with a specifically *English* literature had important ideological consequences. Literature implied that moral behaviour and English behaviour were synonymous, so that the English literary text functioned 'as a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state' (p. 20). In reading English literature in moral terms, then, Indian students were being exposed to a code of values deemed Christian and universal, yet also specifically identified with the colonising nation.

So, in an Indian context Viswanathan reveals that the teaching of English literature in the colonies was complicit with the maintenance of colonial power. And although it is never wise to generalise, it is fair to say that writers from other colonised locations have often pointed out this relationship. For many in countries with a history of colonialism, English literary texts have become considered *not* as timeless works of art remote from history but as complicit in the colonising enterprise itself. So, when Meenakshi Mukherjee argues that postcolonialism 'makes us interrogate many aspects of the study of literature that we were made to take for granted', we understand that the ability to read literary texts in ways *different to* those which have been laid down, can contribute to resisting the assumptions of colonial discourses which may still circulate today.

It is important to realise this 'interrogation' can take several forms. On the one hand it can lead to the questioning of the value of specific literary texts. In 1975 Chinua Achebe controversially denounced Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) on the grounds that it proved how Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist (see Chinua Achebe, 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*' reprinted in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, Norton Critical Edition, 1988, pp. 251–62). Achebe objected to Conrad's derogatory and dehumanising representation of Africa and Africans, and pointed out that it remained one of the

most commonly taught books in English departments in American universities as part of the canon of 'great' literature. In continuing to teach this novel as 'great', Conrad's alleged late-Victorian racism was being perpetuated in the present day as this supposedly racist text was falsely presented to students as of exceptional literary value.

But Achebe's dismissal of this 'classic' text is not definitive. Although many object to the 'classics' either because they proffer colonialist views of the world, or because they first encountered them as part of a colonial education, several writers have emphasised that the relationship between literary 'classics' and themselves has also been a *productive* one. Writers have *put literary 'classics' to new uses* for which they were scarcely originally intended.

For example, consider Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which is set on an un-named magical island and frequently depicts the magician Prospero in command of his unruly subjects Ariel and (especially) Caliban. Some postcolonial writers, such as George Lamming and Aimé Césaire from the Caribbean, have re-read the relationship between Prospero and Caliban as exemplifying the relationship between coloniser and colonised, and have used this response to the play in structuring their own writings (see Lamming's use of Prospero and Caliban in his book of essays *The Pleasures of Exile*, Michael Joseph, 1960) This is *not* the same as claiming that Shakespeare wrote a play about colonialism; although there has been much debate about the extent to which the play takes colonialism as its subject, as in Peter Hulme's excellent book *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean 1492–1797*, (Routledge, 1986). Rather, we need to consider how the received literary 'classics' can become *resources* for those writing to articulate postcolonial positions who use them as *points of departure*. Many writers enter into a *productive critical dialogue* with literary 'classics'. Although they reveal how a 'classic' can be culpable with colonialism, they also make available new ways of dealing with the 'classics' which make new meanings possible. We shall explore this 'productive critical dialogue' further at the end of the chapter when considering Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Colonial contexts

Let us concentrate first on looking at how literary 'classics' have been re-read. Postcolonial literary criticism has affinities with other kinds of study in recent years concerned with reading literary texts in relation to their historical, social and cultural contexts, rather than timeless expressions of universally acknowledged moral values. 'Context' refers to something more dynamic and less unified than 'historical background'; it is used to suggest the many dominant issues, debates and knowledges in circulation at the time a text was written, the various and competing ways in which people conceived of their reality in the past. All societies labour under certain assumptions about how the world is ordered. As we have seen previously, colonialism operates in part *discursively* by asserting knowledge about such things as 'race', gender, differences in culture and nation, and so on. Colonial representations will tend to support a view of the world which justifies the continuing legitimacy of colonialism.

Reading a text in relation to its contexts involves doing two things simultaneously: first, identifying how such contexts are made present or absent in a text, and second, exploring how the text itself may *intervene* in the debates of its day and applaud or resist dominant views of the world. We must not forget that literary texts are always *mediations*: they do not passively reflect the world but actively interrogate it, take up various positions in relation to prevailing views, resist or critique dominant ways of seeing. To read a text in its historical, social and cultural contexts is to attend to the ways it *dynamically* deals with the issues it raises. And in a colonial context, it is also perhaps to refute the dominant way of teaching literature as expressing lasting moral truths contradictorily deemed at once timeless yet specifically characteristic of the colonising nation.

For many postcolonial critics, reading an established 'classic' of literature written at the time of colonialism often involves exploring its relationship with many of the issues and assumptions that were fundamental to colonial discourses. In Chapter 2 we thought about how Kipling's 'The Overland Mail' could be read in relation to theories of colonial discourses. The reasons for this were reasonably straightforward: Kipling lived in India as a young man and

his poem is set in colonial India, so it would seem appropriate to read the poem in the manner we explored. However, postcolonial re-readings of literary works have in some instances focused upon texts that might seem hardly to deal with colonialism. Just because a literary text is *not* set in a colonial location, nor makes colonialism the predominant theme to be explored, it does not follow that such texts are free from the realities of the British Empire. In recent years, several literary 'classics' have been re-read to reveal, sometimes controversially, their hitherto unseen investment in colonialism.

STOP and THINK

How many 'classic' works of literature can you think of in which the existence and influence of Britain's relationship with colonial lands overseas plays a part? What role do the colonies, or characters from the colonies, play in these texts? To what extent do these texts support or problematise some of the assumptions in colonial discourses which we have met in previous chapters? For example, you might like to consider the importance of the colony of Virginia in Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) or Australia in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861).

Reading literature 'contrapuntally'

Two 'classic' English novels that have been re-read in their colonial contexts are Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) and – as we will explore at some length – Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). *Mansfield Park*'s relations with colonial contexts have been discussed at some length by Edward W. Said in his book *Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage, 1993). As part of his lucid and convincing argument that Western culture cannot be understood without recognising its fundamental investment in imperialism, Said explores the relations between Austen's *Mansfield Park* and Britain's colonisation of the Caribbean island of Antigua. Said provocatively argues that the Antiguan material in the novel is not marginal but central to the

novel's meaning, and the connections between the locations of Mansfield Park and Antigua are vital.

Mansfield Park is the property of Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram. As Said argues, Sir Thomas's economic interests in the Caribbean provide the material wealth upon which the comfortable middle-class lifestyle of Mansfield Park depends. The seemingly domestic, interior world of this English country house cannot exist independent from the world outside, no matter how remote it might seem from the plantations of Antigua. Indeed, the inseparability of the world 'inside' and 'outside' the house is reflected [illegible] other ways. Throughout much of the novel Sir Thomas is absent from Mansfield Park, tending to some problems that have arisen on his plantation in Antigua. In [illegible] absence, the younger characters at Mansfield Park become unruly. On his return, Sir Thomas instantly puts a stop to their disorderly conduct and re-establishes decorum. Said suggests that Sir Thomas's ability to set his house in order on his return is reflective of his role as a colonial landlord:

> There is nothing in *Mansfield Park* that would contradict us, however, were we to assume that Sir Thomas does exactly the same things – on a larger scale – in his Antigua 'plantations'. Whatever was wrong there … Sir Thomas was able to fix, thereby maintaining his control over his colonial domain. More clearly than anywhere else in her fiction, Austen here synchronises domestic with international authority, making it plain that the values associated with such higher things as ordination, law, and propriety must be grounded firmly in actual rule over and possession of territory. She sees clearly that to hold and rule Mansfield Park is to hold and rule an imperial estate in close, not to say inevitable association with it. What assures the domestic tranquillity and attractive harmony of one is the productivity and regulated discipline of the [illegible] p. 104)

The parallels Said detects between these locations supports his argument that the borders between inside and outside, domestic and international, England and Empire are permeable. The interior world of Mansfield Park is not static or enclosed, but dynamic and dependent upon being resourced from the outside. Fanny's movement from her poor Portsmouth beginnings to the eventual heir of Mansfield Park secures its future, just as Sir Thomas's movements

between England and Antigua safeguard its economic health. Indeed, Said believes Fanny's journey corresponds at a small-scale level to Sir Thomas's transatlantic ventures: both bring resources from the outside into Mansfield Park, upon which its subsequent security depends.

There are three consequences of re-reading *Mansfield Park* in its colonial contexts. First, such a reading bears witness to what Said calls the *worldliness* of culture. This term reminds us that literary texts emerge from and have complex engagements with the historical, social and political conditions of their time, amongst which colonialism is fundamental in the nineteenth century. Second, this approach both exemplifies and encourages *contrapuntal readings* of literary texts. Said defines a contrapuntal reading as one which remains simultaneously aware 'both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts' (p. 59). For example, in order to read *Mansfield Park* contrapuntally we must recognise that the dominant world-view offered by the novel is grounded in various presumptions. The novel bears witness to the existence of the slave plantations in Antigua but assumes that there is nothing very objectionable in this fact. Reading *Mansfield Park* contrapuntally not only involves spotting moments when the colonies are represented; it is also to bring to the novel a knowledge of the history of the Caribbean which the novel is not necessarily writing but upon which it ultimately depends. The history which helps to shape *Mansfield Park* is not just limited to the social changes occurring in Britain at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but is also the history of colonisation and its resistance (one wonders why Sir Bertram's Antiguan estate is in such disarray in the first place). Ultimately, contrapuntal readings 'must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it' (p. 79).

The third point concerns literary value. Reading texts contrapuntally, Said argues, often reminds the critic of the continuing value of the literary work being studied. *Mansfield Park* may have 'affiliations with a sordid history' of slavery (p. 114) but in Said's view there is no need to devalue the novel as a consequence. The brilliance of Austen's work depends upon the complex and subtle ways she configures the relations between Mansfield Park and Antigua. A lesser

work 'wears its historical affiliation more plainly; its worldliness is simple and direct, the way a jingoistic ditty ... connects directly to the situation and constituency that coined it' (p. 116).

STOP and THINK

Said's comments about literary value are questionable. Why shouldn't a text's affiliations with a 'sordid history' prompt us to question how and why we value that particular text? And why is a subtle and complex text more valuable than one that is 'simple and direct'? From one position it could be argued that Said's line of thought inevitably takes him to the brink of asking large questions about literary evaluation, yet at the last moment he shrinks from the consequences of his own argument by defending rather too adamantly the unshakeable value of the many literary 'classics' he cites.

Yet, an alternative response might suggest that Said is trying to read the literary 'classics' with more subtlety than someone like Chinua Achebe, whose critique of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* led it to be condemned because it did not pass a certain ideological test. Said's reinstatement in *Culture and Imperialism* of the value of *Mansfield Park* suggests that literary value need not be entirely dependent upon a text's ideological moorings. In so doing, Said perhaps keeps open a debate on literary value which Achebe's reading of Conrad forecloses.

We shall be returning to the problematic area of literary value in our exploration of *Jane Eyre*. But it is worth giving some thought throughout this chapter to whether, in your view, re-reading texts in their colonial contexts alters how *you* value them, and why.

Re-reading Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

Let us now turn to reading a literary 'classic' in the light of some of the ideas we have gathered so far. In what follows we aim to emphasise some of the purposes, methods, and the difficult questions

raised by reading Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in relation to its colonial contexts. We shall be using the current Penguin Classics (1985) edition of the novel edited by Q. D. Leavis.

Jane Eyre follows the life of a young girl from her childhood into the first years of adulthood. At the beginning of the novel Jane is a lonely orphan living miserably at Gateshead Hall in the company of her Aunt Reed and three cousins. The subject of much cruelty and little love from the Reeds, she is sent away to the strict regime of Lowood school where, after some initial unpleasantness instigated by the puritanical Mr Brocklehurst, she enjoys a more supportive environment and begins to flourish. She eventually works as a teacher in the School, and as an eighteen-year-old is employed as a governess to a young French child, Adèle, at Thornfield Hall.

At Thornfield she meets Edward Rochester, the wealthy owner of the Hall, and the pair gradually fall in love. Thornfield is a place both of happiness and disquiet for Jane. She enjoys her role as governess but struggles to control her strong feelings for Rochester. She settles into the house and makes good relationships with many of the staff, but is occasionally disturbed at night by a strange laughter coming from the room above hers. Several mysterious incidents also occur; in one, Jane is forced to pull a sleeping Rochester from his chamber which inexplicably has been set on fire.

Eventually Rochester and Jane confess their feelings of love for each other and agree to marry. During the night before the wedding, Jane wakes to see reflected in her mirror a strange dark figure ripping her wedding-veil in two. The next day, the wedding service is interrupted by John Mason, previously a guest at Thornfield, who claims to Jane's horror that her marriage cannot take place as Rochester already has a wife. Rochester is forced to admit that he is indeed married, to Mr Mason's sister, Bertha. Bertha is the figure that Jane saw the previous night, whom Rochester has kept locked up in the room above Jane's. Rochester explains that his marriage to Bertha was the result of his father's financial dealings. His father had intended that the Rochester family fortune should pass to the eldest son, Rowland. In order to provide an income for his second son Edward, he secured Edward's marriage to Bertha, the daughter of a planter and merchant living in Jamaica. Bertha's mother was a Jamaican Creole (a term which Brontë uses to signify 'racially

mixed' parentage) believed to be dead, but after the marriage Rochester learned that she was locked in a lunatic asylum. Once married, Bertha also sinks swiftly into lunacy. Rochester decides to quit Jamaica and return to Thornfield with his wife, whom he has since kept secretly imprisoned in the attic.

Appalled and upset at these revelations, Jane leaves Thornfield secretly soon after the failed wedding. After wandering lonely, desolate and hungry, she is taken in by a parson, St. John Rivers, and his two sisters, Diana and Mary, at Moor House. Calling herself Jane Elliott, she recuperates and soon takes charge of the local village school. By chance St. John Rivers discovers Jane's true identity and reveals that she is the cousin of himself, Diana and Mary. In a further twist, Jane learns that she is to inherit the fortune of twenty thousand pounds from her uncle John Eyre, a wine merchant from Madeira (a Portuguese-governed island off the Moroccan coast). Jane shares this inheritance equally between the cousins and then faces another challenge: an offer of marriage from St. John Rivers. St. John is keen to travel to India to work as a missionary; he has been teaching Jane Hindustani, and wishes her to accompany him. Jane turns down the offer and decides instead to return to Thornfield to be reunited with her beloved Rochester. She finds only ruins. Soon after Jane's departure from Thornfield Hall, Bertha had escaped her confines and set the house ablaze. The fire claimed her life and left Rochester blind and missing a hand – but also a widower. Jane finds Rochester, is lovingly reunited with him, and as she famously announces in the last chapter, 'Reader, I married him' (p. 474). The novel ends with the news that Rochester has regained some sight, that the now-wealthy Diana and Mary have both happily married, and with the image of St. John braving the dangers of India as he pursues his pioneering missionary work, although Jane anticipates she will soon learn of his death abroad.

Such a scant summary of *Jane Eyre* does little justice to the intricate twists and turns of Brontë's narrative, but it should be noticeable even in a brief account like this the extent to which colonialism and colonial locations are crucial to the events of the novel. Two particular colonial scenarios are conjured: via the Masons we are exposed to the plantation-owning community in Jamaica, while St. John Rivers connects the novel with British missionary work in

India. In addition, elements from colonial locations also emerge in the novel *figuratively*; that is, they supply Jane with a series of images and metaphors which she uses to articulate her own position on several occasions. The economic relationships between the novel's characters are particularly vital to the plot. Edward Rochester's first marriage to Jamaican-born Bertha gains him a fortune of thirty thousand pounds which makes possible his affluent lifestyle at Thornfield. And as Susan Meyer reminds us in her excellent essay '"Indian Ink": Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of *Jane Eyre*', Jane's inheritance of twenty thousand pounds also has a colonial source:

> It comes from her uncle in Madeira, who is an agent for a Jamaican wine manufacturer, Bertha's brother. The location of Jane's uncle John [Eyre] in Madeira, off Morocco, on the West African coast, where Richard Mason stops on his way home from England, also indirectly suggests, through Mason's itinerary, the triangular route of the British slave traders, and suggests that John Eyre's wealth is implicated in the slave trade. (Susan Meyer, *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction*, Cornell, 1996, p. 93)

Put bluntly, without the money made from colonialism, Rochester could not enjoy the luxuries of Thornfield Hall, nor could Jane secure a life with Rochester and facilitate the happy and respectable marriages of her cousins Diana and Mary, who were otherwise destined to live as humble governesses for wealthy families in the south-east of England. So, as Judie Newman puts it, at the end of the novel 'Jane and Rochester settle down to a happy married life on the proceeds of the Empire' (*The Ballistic Bard: Postcolonial Fictions*, Edward Arnold, 1995, p. 14).

Yet despite the novel's use of the economics of colonialism, readings of *Jane Eyre* in its colonial contexts have emerged only in recent years. One of the most important is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's ground-breaking if cryptic essay 'Three Women's Texts and A Critique of Imperialism', first published in 1985 (in *'Race', Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates jr., University of Chicago Press, pp. 262–80). This essay is especially important as it reveals how *Jane Eyre* is implicated in colonialism not just in terms of economic wealth, but *at the levels of narrative and representation.*

In order to explore this claim, we first need to place Spivak's essay in its own context. 'Three Women's Texts and A Critique of Imperialism' is ostensibly a response to Anglo-American feminist literary criticism of the late 1970s, in which *Jane Eyre* had become a celebrated or 'cult' text. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their ground-breaking book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Yale University Press, 1979) celebrate Jane as a proto-feminist heroine who struggles successfully to achieve female self-determination in an otherwise patriarchal and oppressive world. Spivak suggests that celebratory readings of the novel as politically subversive are flawed in their lack of attention to the fact that 'imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English' ('Three Women's Texts and A Critique of Imperialism', p. 262). Jane's journey from subservience to female self-determination, economic security and marriage on her terms could not occur without the oppression of Bertha Mason, Rochester's Creole wife from Jamaica. Spivak points out that Gilbert and Gubar read Bertha always *in relation* to Jane, never as an individual self in her own right. In their words, Bertha is Jane's 'truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self that Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead' (*Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 360). Thus conceived, Bertha's lunacy represents the anger that Jane represses in order to be deemed an acceptable woman in a patriarchal world. This reading of Bertha purely in relation to Jane's self leaves out the colonial context of Bertha's imprisonment and fails to examine some of the assumptions concerning Bertha's lunacy and her representation in terms of 'race'.

For example, consider the moment when Rochester takes Jane to see Bertha just after the wedding has been disrupted by Mr Mason. Jane describes seeing a figure 'whether beast or human being, one could not at first sight tell' (*Jane Eyre*, p. 321). Bertha's ambiguous bestiality, her wild and violent nature dovetail with her 'mixed' Creole lineage and Jamaican birthplace. This slippage repeats a frequent assumption in colonial discourses that those born of parents not from the same 'race' are degenerate beings, perhaps not fully human, closer to animals. Bertha is robbed of human selfhood; she

has no voice in the novel other than the demoniac laughter and the discomforting noises that Jane reports. Her animalistic character disqualifies her from the journey of human self-determination for which Jane is celebrated by Anglo-American feminist critics.

Bertha's half-human Creole 'savagery' leaves its mark most memorably in the novel when she sets fire to Thornfield Hall and jumps to her death in an apparent act of suicide, rather than allow Rochester to save her from the burning building. But note that this act is of fundamental consequence to the plot: Bertha is the major impediment to Jane's process of movement from the position of misbegotten orphan to one of legitimacy, fortune and especially marriage. Jane can only clinch this position as a consequence of Bertha's death in the blaze. By attending to the ways in which Bertha is derogatively characterised, and the fact that her suicide acts as a crucial cog in the 'structural motors' ('Three Women's Texts', p. 263) of the narrative, Spivak reveals how Jane's journey towards legitimacy, fulfilment and agency cannot occur without the persistent subservience of Bertha Mason to the requirements of the plot. Bertha is always connected to Jane as an 'other'; she never achieves any self of her own. Jane's journey to self-fulfilment and her happy marriage are achieved at the cost of Bertha's human selfhood and, ultimately, her life. As Spivak memorably puts it, Bertha 'must play out her role, act out the transformation of her "self" into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction' (p. 270).

Spivak's reading of *Jane Eyre* underlines the novel's investment in colonial realities and thus complicates the ease with which it might be read as a politically subversive feminist text. According to Spivak, a reading which does not take colonialism into account 'reproduces the axioms of imperialism' (p. 262). By reading Bertha Mason *metaphorically* as the repressed side of Jane's psyche, at most an expression of the 'secret self' of the main character, Gilbert and Gubar stand accused of this charge. Spivak's reading of the novel returns it to its colonial contexts, and ultimately urges new strategies of reading which take colonialism into aceount when approaching not only this novel, but nineteenth-century literature in general.

One (perhaps unintentional) result of Spivak's essay is the

impression that *Jane Eyre* is entirely complicit with many of the assumptions in colonial discourses. An examination of other passages in the novel might seem to support this reading, although as we shall see later it is not the only conclusion that can be made. The first passage is taken from Rochester's narrative of his marriage to Bertha which occurs in Chapter 27. Rochester is describing a 'fiery West Indian night' (*Jane Eyre*, p. 335) during which he contemplated committing suicide rather than having to endure the future with his lunatic wife:

> Being unable to sleep in bed, I got up and opened the window. The air was like sulphur-streams – I could find no refreshment anywhere. Mosquitoes came buzzing in and hummed sullenly round the room; the sea, which I could hear from thence, rumbled dull like an earthquake – black clouds were casting up over it; the moon was setting in the waves, broad and red, like a hot cannon-ball – she threw her last bloody glance over a world quivering with the ferment of tempest. I was physically influenced by the atmosphere and scene, and my ears were filled with the curses the maniac [Bertha] still shrieked out. (p. 335)

This passage seems to perpetuate many colonial assumptions. Rochester's terms of reference depict Jamaica as a satanic and apocalyptic location. The references to the 'sulphur-streams' of air, the ominous noise of the sea, and the 'hot cannon-ball' of the moon give the impression of Jamaica as a hell-on-earth. His senses are assaulted and disturbed: he sees a blood-red landscape under black clouds; he hears rumblings like an earthquake and the screams of his wife from another room of the house; the intense heat denies him sleep or comfort. It is as if the very demoniac nature of the landscape gets into the being of those unfortunate enough to live there, as Rochester admits. The crazed world outside is responsible for driving Rochester wild, and his decision to shoot himself shows how much his mind has been deranged by the stormy environment. Consequently, the tumultuous conditions of Jamaica seem to have affected Bertha, who similarly displays fiery, tempestuous and turbulent behaviour. Bertha represents what Rochester could become – indeed, perhaps *has* become – by staying in Jamaica: lunatic and useless, at the mercy of demoniac forces that will turn his life into a living hell.

What saves him from madness and suicide? The answer is particularly revealing. As Rochester describes it, a wind 'fresh from Europe' (p. 335) breaks the storm and offers relief from the crazed conditions of the night. By the morning he, like the weather, has had a change of heart; and the landscape too has also changed:

> The sweet wind from Europe was still whispering in the refreshed leaves, and the Atlantic was thundering in glorious liberty; my heart, dried up and scorched for a long time, swelled to the tone, and filled with living blood – my being longed for renewal – my soul thirsted for a pure draught. I saw hope revive – and felt regeneration possible. From a flowery arch at the bottom of my garden I gazed over the sea – bluer than the sky: the old world was beyond; clear prospects opened. (p. 336)

This passage depicts a different Jamaica, one of growth and beauty, as suggested by the references to the clear blue sea, the refreshed leaves, the flowery arch where Rochester looks again at the world. Note that although this passage acknowledges the beauty of the landscape, one that contrasts sharply with the bleak, mosquito-infested environment of the night before, 'regeneration' has been produced by the 'sweet' wind from Europe that 'whispers' in the leaves, as opposed to the fiery 'West Indian night' when it seemed the world was in the midst of an earthquake. This series of contrasts – sulphurous/sweet, rumble/whisper, thirst/refreshment – also connects with other contrasts between the scenes, such as the black fiery night and the blue regenerative morning.

In comparing these two scenes we notice how Brontë constructs her fictional world in terms of what we might term *manichean* oppositions. This is a term popularised by Abdul JanMohamed in his book *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1983), which we can borrow for our example. 'Manichean aesthetics' refers to a system of representations which conceives of the world in terms of opposed categories, from which comes a chain of associations. Reality is constructed as a series of polarities which derive from the opposition posited between light and darkness, and good and evil. This provides a structure of both meaning and morality. So, in a system of manichean aesthetics, all that is light is orderly, tractable,

rational, angelic and ultimately good; whereas all that is dark is degenerate, chaotic, transgressive, lunatic, satanic and hence evil. In *Jane Eyre*, the blue light of the morning reveals that the 'old world beyond' has magically broken through the tempestuous night of the new world and saved Rochester's life from self-destruction. The relationship between Jamaica and Europe is both contrasting and unequal, the latter having more power than the former despite the spectacular apocalyptic storm of the night before.

These passages would suggest that *Jane Eyre* can be read as reproducing some of the assumptions of colonial discourses. The representation of Bertha and of Jamaica, as well as the economic relations of the novel, bear witness to the relationship between *Jane Eyre* and the contexts of colonialism. They remind us that the canonical 'classical' works of English literature did not emerge, and do not exist, remote from history, culture and politics.

STOP and THINK

There remains a problem in re-reading literary 'classics' as colonial discourses. Are we to conclude that Charlotte Brontë is somehow a colonialist in the light of our reading so far? If so, what purpose does this conclusion serve? If, as Patrick Brantlinger points out, in British literature of the mid-nineteenth century there was an 'easy confidence that rarely saw anything problematic' about imperialism (*Rule of Darkness*, Cornell, 1988, p. 29), should we be surprised that aspects of Brontë's work conform to colonialist views? It might be mistaken to think of Brontë as a typically British colonialist in her outlook, not least because she was the daughter of a Cornish mother and an Irish-born Church of England clergyman (who, incidentally, changed the Irish family name 'Brunty' to the more Germanic-sounding 'Brontë' with its famous umlaut).

To return to an issue we raised earlier: does the novel's investment in colonialism threaten its status as a work of artistic value? Should *Jane Eyre* be stripped of its status as a 'classic'? These have proven difficult questions to answer, and it is worth

spending some time thinking about the answers you would give, and why.

Jane Eyre: a postcolonial text?

In the light of Spivak's essay, several critics have pursued relations between *Jane Eyre* and its colonial contexts, but have been more speculative as to the extent to which the novel is complicit with nineteenth-century British colonialism. To re-read *Jane Eyre* as merely reflective of the assumptions of colonial discourses only takes us so far. Re-reading literary 'classics' in relation to their colonial contexts is perhaps not particularly productive if all we do is label and dismiss those texts once and for all as ideologically corrupt or 'colonialist'. We are in danger of imposing upon the literature from the past the concerns of the present, and in one sense we cannot claim to be reading historically at all. Said would describe this critical response as a 'rhetoric of blame' (*Culture and Imperialism*, p. 115) used by some critics to denounce retrospectively literary works which seem to support a colonial view of the world.

Furthermore, it is not perhaps wise to assume that the manichean view of the world articulated by Edward Rochester in his descriptions of Jamaica is also the view of Charlotte Brontë. Few, I suspect, would assume that Shakespeare was anti-Scottish after watching a performance of *Macbeth*. But perhaps most importantly, this kind of labelling fails to consider conceiving of texts as potentially *questioning* colonial views. Indeed, for some critics, the point of re-reading these texts is not just to show how they confirm dominant perspectives, but how they might be read as *challenging* these views.

In these terms, 'classic' texts are re-read to uncover emergent, counter-colonialist positions that they may, perhaps unwittingly, make available to the reader. In so doing, by identifying how colonialism was brought to *crisis* in the literature from the past, this critical enterprise lends support to the continued challenge to colonialism in the present by underlining the ways in which colonialism has been subverted. Many literary texts can be re-read to discover the hitherto hidden history of *resistance* to colonialism that they also articulate, often inadvertently. Although this

approach also involves reading a past text in the light of present concerns, as all readings unavoidably do, perhaps this reading strategy enables a more dynamic and potentially resourceful relationship between literature from the past and present concerns. In re-reading the 'classic' text readers can *put that text to work*, rather than either placing it on a pedestal or tossing it to one side as a consequence of whether or not it is deemed free from ideological taint. Furthermore, an attention to the counter-colonial properties of the literary 'classic' might also enable a way of challenging the kind of generalising view of literary history that Brantlinger risks in the description of mid-nineteenth-century literature we encountered a moment ago.

In *Jane Eyre*, we can find the possibility of subversion in, perhaps surprisingly, Bertha Mason. As we have seen, Bertha is described as degenerate, half-animal; a figure whose behaviour both reflects and seems created by the tempestuous, chaotic and fiery environs of the West Indies. How can this figure be subversive? Bertha's incendiary character is of particular importance when we recall that Brontë was writing *Jane Eyre* in the 1840s. Many of the slaves working on the plantations in Jamaica were originally Africans who had been captured, shipped in appalling conditions across the Atlantic Ocean and sold to the plantation-owners. (This horrific journey, often referred to as the 'Middle Passage', has been an important subject in postcolonial literature from the Caribbean). Britain abolished the slave trade in 1808 but it still permitted the use of slaves as hard labour on the plantations. Full slave emancipation in the British Caribbean possessions was achieved between 1834 and 1838, the period which Susan Meyer argues roughly corresponds to Jane's time at Thornfield Hall and her eventual marriage to Rochester. During the 1830s, resistance by the slaves to their conditions was widespread. In western Jamaica between December 1831 and early 1832 there occurred what historians call the 'Baptist War', when over sixty thousand slaves rose against the British. Fires were started which served as beacons to let other slaves know that an uprising had begun, and the burning of the plantations was an important part of the slaves' resistance (see Peter Fryer, *Black People in the British Empire: An Introduction*, Pluto, 1988, pp. 92–7). It could be argued that Bertha's attempt to set fire to Rochester's chamber while he is asleep, and her

eventual razing of Thornfield Hall to the ground, recall the fiery resistant activities of slaves in Jamaica.

Susan Meyer argues that '[t]he story of Bertha, however finally unsympathetic to her as a human being, nonetheless does make an indictment of British imperialism in the West Indies and the stained wealth that came from its oppressive rule' (*Imperialism at Home*, p. 71). Although the novel never allows Bertha to tell her own story (rather than have it narrated by Rochester), it does bear witness to resistance to colonial rule occurring at the time. Firdous Azim reads Bertha's unruly temperament as evidence of the ultimate failure of colonialism to control those from whom it commanded obedience. As she persuasively puts it, '[t]he figure of Bertha Mason is significant, as she represents the failure of the pedagogical, colonising enterprise. Recalcitrant and uneducable, she escapes the dominating and hegemonising imperialist and educational processes' (*The Colonial Rise of the Novel*, Routledge, 1993, p. 183). Following Said's model, Bertha's unruly presence can be read *contrapuntally* as resistant to the rule of those who deem her less than fully human, and paradigmatic of the plantation slaves who rose against the oppressive rule of the Jamaican slave-owners.

Bertha also might be seen to resist the authoritative eye of our narrator, Jane Eyre. Let us briefly recall the dehumanising description of Bertha that interested Spivak:

> In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human, one could not, at first sight tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (*Jane Eyre*, p. 321)

This is a remarkable moment in the novel. Prior to this passage the reader has been teased by theenigmatic noises and strange figures that disrupt Jane's nights. The revelation of Bertha promises to solve the mystery by allowing Jane to look upon that which has been hitherto concealed. But notice how, in a series of vague phrases, Jane struggles to render what she sees. Bertha is not clearly visible to Jane's eye; she remains in shade, *seeming* to grovel, looking like *some* strange animal. Her head and face remain hidden from view. We could read this pas-

sage as evidence of the extent to which colonial discourses (if we take the passage as an example of such) often disqualify the colonised subject from being adequately represented. But from another position we might notice how the presence of Bertha *problematises* Jane's position as an omniscient narrator. Jane's authority as a narrator is challenged as Bertha will not be readily captured within Jane's narrative. She is beyond easy rendering in language. Is Bertha's hiding of her face and head a purposeful act, an attempt to escape representation?

If Bertha exists to make possible Jane's proto-feminist journey from orphanhood to money and marriage, perhaps in this crucial passage she threatens to bring Jane's fictional world to crisis by threatening to escape containment within its descriptive confines. In this imprecise description the omniscient narrative of the nineteenth-century realist novel is pushed to its limits by the presence of an unruly colonised subject who threatens to escape that which sentences her. Maybe at this moment *Jane Eyre* is more a postcolonial than a colonial text.

STOP and THINK

As we noted above, *Jane Eyre* connects with colonialism in at least two locations: Jamaica and India. Think about how India is represented in the text. At one point, at the climax to Chapter 24, Jane compares herself to Indian Hindu women who ascend their husbands' funeral pyres and perform the act of *sati*, or widow burning. How would you read this passage? What is at stake in Jane's appropriation of this position?

Also, how might the final chapter of the novel, including details of St. John Rivers's life in India as a missionary, influence the extent to which this novel supports or critiques British colonialism?

Postcolonial re-writings: Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Earlier we noted that many writers have entered into a productive critical dialogue with literary 'classics', where the 'classic' text is

interrogated but also can function as an important imaginative resource. Let us conclude this chapter by exploring how Jean Rhys rewrites *Jane Eyre* in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). We shall use the latest Penguin Classics (1997) edition of the novel, edited and introduced by Angela Smith.

Jean Rhys was born in the Caribbean island of Dominica in 1890 and moved to Britain as a sixteen-year-old. Her Welsh father had come to the island as a young man while her mother's family had been based there throughout the nineteenth century and had once owned slaves. Rhys had a significant relationship with the Caribbean and Britain, yet her sense of belonging to both was complicated by the circumstances of her birth. As a descendent of the white slave-owning class, her relations with black Caribbeans descended from slavery could not be unaffected by the historical circumstances of the region, and as a Dominican-born white woman she could not consider herself first and foremost British. As Helen Carr summarises, 'Rhys was a colonial in terms of her history, even though she can be considered a postcolonial in her attitude to the Empire and in her employment of many postcolonial strategies (*Jean Rhys*, Northcote House, 1996, p. 18).

Perhaps because of her Caribbean background, Rhys became preoccupied with Brontë's Bertha Mason with whom in some respects she occupied a similar position. Bertha's father is Jonas Mason, a planter and merchant, and thus a member of the colonising community in Jamaica. Both Bertha's mother and Rhys's mother were Creoles; both Bertha and Rhys left the Caribbean for England as young women. We might describe *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a novel in which Rhys takes as her point of inspiration the figure of Bertha Mason and places her centre-stage, allowing her the possibility to achieve selfhood and granting her the opportunity of telling things from her point of view (although, as we shall see, there are problems in making this statement). This is not done for the purposes of 'completing' *Jane Eyre*, adding the story that is missing from the novel like a missing piece from a jigsaw. Instead, the relationship between the two novels is much more dynamic and dialogic, enabling an *interrogation* of the agency of the 'classic' text to fix meaning. Furthermore, the extent to which *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be (or should be) read squarely in terms of *Jane Eyre* is also open to debate. As we shall

see, Rhys's novel both *engages with* and *refuses Jane Eyre* as an authoritative source. We can regard this refusal as part of the postcolonial strategies which Carr claims for Rhys's writing.

Wide Sargasso Sea proceeds through three parts. The first is narrated by Antoinette Cosway, who records her childhood with her widowed mother Annette in a large house, Coulibri, in Jamaica just after the Emancipation Act which formally ended slavery. She remembers her childhood as a time of both beauty and danger. With the power of the plantation-owning class in decline, the relationship between the black and white communities becomes increasingly tense. Antoinette's mother marries Mr Mason, who attempts to reinvest Coulibri with some of its previous grandeur and authority. But Coulibri is set on fire and Antoinette's brother Pierre is killed. The incident drives Annette to distraction, and Antoinette is sent away to a convent school during which time her mother dies. Later, as a seventeen-year-old she is visited by her step-father Mr Mason who invites her to live with him in Jamaica.

In Part 2 the narrative shifts unexpectedly to an un-named male character who, it quickly transpires, has married Antoinette. The couple are on their honeymoon at Granbois. Although this figure is never named, the reader familiar with *Jane Eyre* might assume that this character is analogous to Brontë's Rochester. At first it seems their relationship is benign, but it soon becomes fraught with tension. The un-named narrator takes to calling his wife 'Bertha', a name to which she objects. Antoinette's husband is uncomfortable with the island and its inhabitants, especially his wife's black servant Christophine. Eventually he is contacted by one Daniel Cosway who claims to be Antoinette's half-brother. He informs the narrator about the madness of the Cosway family and links Christophine to the practice of obeah (or voodoo). Choosing to believe Daniel, the narrator convinces himself that he has been tricked into marriage, and his relationship with Antoinette deteriorates. Antoinette interrupts the narrative and tells briefly of how she pleads with Christophine to give her a potion that will make her husband love her again. Instead, her husband has a sexual encounter with a black servant, Amélie, and decides to return to England with the wealth he has inherited through his marriage. Antoinette will come too, although under duress.

The third part of the novel is set in England, in a large house. The opening paragraphs are narrated by Grace Poole but the rest is delivered by Antoinette. She contrasts her memories of Caribbean life with the grey surroundings of her attic cell, and tells of her wanderings through the house at night. In a remarkable climax to the novel she dreams of setting the house on fire and jumping from the rooftop. On waking she resolves 'what I have to do' (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 124). She takes a candle and the keys from the slumbering Grace Poole and leaves the room. The novel ends with Antoinette walking with the candle along a dark passage.

There are two elements of the text upon which we shall particularly focus: the novel's curious narrative structure and the importance of naming. As might be clear from our summary, one of the novel's complexities concerns narrative voice. The text has two major first-person narrators, Antoinette and her husband, as well as other contributors such as Grace Poole and Daniel Cosway. This beckons questions concerning the overall control of the narrative in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette's representation of events comes into competition with her husband's. On several occasions in the text our attention is drawn to the incompatibility of each other's vista, as they both compete for the control of meaning. For example, at one point in the husband's narrative he argues with Antoinette about the appearance and manner of Christophine:

> 'Her coffee is delicious [I said] but her language is horrible and she might hold her dress up. It must get very dirty, yards of it trailing on the floor.'
>
> 'When they don't hold their dress up it's for respect,' said Antoinette. 'Or for feast days or going to Mass.'
>
> 'And is this feast day?'
>
> 'She wanted it to be a feast day.'
>
> 'Whatever the reason it is not a clean habit.'
>
> 'It is. You don't understand at all. They don't care about getting a dress dirty because it shows it isn't the only dress they have.' (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, pp. 52–3)

In this exchange, Antoinette's husband lacks knowledge of local custom. His interpretation of events is not allowed to stand unchallenged. The incident is in stark contrast to Rochester's position in

Jane Eyre, where his version of life in the Caribbean is the only one the reader has, while Bertha is reduced to shrieks and unintelligible noises. In the quotation above the husband is confronted with his own ignorance of cultural specificity. But he refuses to learn and dismisses Antoinette's view ('Whatever the reason it is not a clean habit'). In this clash of perspectives we can trace a contest of power which is simultaneously colonial and patriarchal. In this exchange we might also find figured the relationship between *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, with the latter *answering back* and critically challenging the views of Caribbean people and places in the former.

Antoinette's husband wishes to be the arbiter rather than the recipient of knowledge, and he aims to assert his control over his wife by contesting her views. This is reflected in the novel's structure by the fact that (apart from one hiatus) he is the narrator of their married life in the Caribbean which constitutes Part 2. In marrying Antoinette, he also lays claim to the authority over her *representation*. Antoinette's debasement takes place entirely within his first-person narrative. He chooses to believe Daniel Cosway's slander that 'there is madness in that family' (p. 59) and that she has had intimate relations with her cousin Sandi, preferring these allegations to Antoinette's version of her family history. By the end of Part 2 he has *made for himself* his own version of events in which he believes that his father and eldest brother have married him off to Antoinette so as to be rid of him, situating her as the focal point for his anger:

> They bought me, *me* with your paltry money. You helped them do it. You deceived me, betrayed me, and you'll do worse if you get the chance ... (*That girl she look you straight in the eye and talk sweet talk – and it's lies she tell you. Lies. Her mother was so. They say she worse than her mother.*)(p. 110)

In this quotation the un-named narrator's interior monologue slips into the voice of Daniel Cosway. The italicised sentences are a quotation of a speech made by Daniel to Antoinette's husband earlier in the novel. It is these *masculine* voices which attempt to define and confine Antoinette, (re)constructing her character and passing judgement on her behaviour. Hence, Rhys exposes the ways in which colonial discourses create their own images of alterity rather than reflect an existent reality, while undercutting this process by

highlighting the extent to which the husband's knowledge is based on the flimsiest of evidence. This passage also exposes the complicity between colonialism and patriarchy which we will pursue in Chapter 6.

Significantly, Antoinette's husband makes a drawing which anticipates both her fate and that of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*:

> I drew a house surrounded by trees. A large house. I divided the third floor into rooms and in one room I drew a standing woman – a child's scribble, a dot for a head, a larger one for the body, a triangle for a skirt, slanting lines for arms and feet. But it was an English house. (pp. 105–6)

This quotation is crucial on two counts. First, it represents the extent to which Antoinette's husband lays claim to the power of representing her on his own terms. She becomes what he makes of her. Second, the 'child's scribble' of Antoinette as a crude line drawing hardly approximates to the complex character we have met in the first section of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and reminds us that, both in this novel and in *Jane Eyre*, Antoinette and Bertha are *not* the crude definitions given by their husbands. No matter how much others try to define Antoinette's identity, we know she is not what her husband represents in his narrative. His power of representation is not secure, not complete in this text.

In these terms, Antoinette is both *confined by* and *escapes* her representation by other characters in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This is reflected in the novel's structure. Her husband may relate the longest section of the narrative, reflecting his desire to control meaning, but Antoinette's voice interrupts his at the novel's central point in Part 2. She is also the novel's first and last narrator, making her husband's narratives contained inside hers. Neither character is fully in control. Meaning and definition are continually contested in this narrative, and it is difficult to fix meaning in the ways that Antoinette's husband would like. Significantly, unruly voices are *always* deemed threatening to authority in the novel. Antoinette's husband fears that if he stays in the Caribbean 'I'd be gossiped about, sung about (but they make up songs about everything, everybody. You should hear the one about the Governor's wife)' (p. 105). According to Grace Poole, there are complaints about the gossip

concerning Antoinette in the attic: '*there were hints about the woman he brought back to England with him. Next day Mrs Eff wanted to see me and she complained about gossip. I don't allow gossip*' (p. 115). Rhys draws attention to the presence of unruly voices of people in subservient positions which challenge and unnerve those in positions of power. In so doing the novel explores the ways by which those made subject to others can resist the attempts by authority figures to fix meaning and establish their voices as the dominant and controlling ones. This contest, I would argue, is epitomised in the relationship between Antoinette and her husband.

Attending to how some characters attempt to fix meaning while others resist being fixed through voicing their own perspectives helps us consider the important intertextual relationship between *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. As we have seen, Rhys's novel does much more than 'fill in' the gaps missing in Brontë's work. Yet in tethering *Wide Sargasso Sea* to *Jane Eyre*, Rhys might be in danger of constructing an unequal power relationship between the two by positioning *Jane Eyre* as an authoritative source-text from which the meanings of Rhys's novel are derived. In making *Jane Eyre* the point of authoritative reference, it could be argued that *Wide Sargasso Sea* remains dependent upon Brontë's novel in a way that mirrors Antoinette's subservience to her husband's design. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that the dependent relationship between two texts echoes the colonial relationship between Britain and its Caribbean colonies, with Rhys's novel 'governed' by the dictates of *Jane Eyre*.

However, *Wide Sargasso Sea* complicates its relationship with *Jane Eyre* in several ways which make it difficult to draw these conclusions. To take but two: first, consider how *Wide Sargasso Sea* is set during the 1830s and 1840s, specifically *after* much of the action of *Jane Eyre* takes place. Yet, if the novel is meant to be the life of Bertha Mason *before* her transportation to England as the first Mrs Rochester then this cannot be right: the action must have occurred much earlier in time. This oddity has led the novel to be called a 'post-dated prequel' of *Jane Eyre*. The temporal anomaly makes *Wide Sargasso Sea* seem to pre-date *Jane Eyre*, and position Rhys's novel as that which anticipates the action of Brontë's text (as opposed to the other way round). As Judie Newman succinctly puts

it, '[b]y commandeering *Jane Eyre* as *her* sequel, therefore, Rhys enjoins future readers to envisage Victorian Britain as dependent upon her colonies, just as Brontë's heroine depends upon a colonial inheritance to gain her own independence' (*The Ballistic Bard*, p. 15). So, in complicating the potentially dependent relationship between the texts, Rhys attempts to resist her novel being fully contained by Brontë's. Indeed, Antoinette's challenge to the narrative authority of her husband reflects the novel's relationship as a whole with *Jane Eyre*. *Wide Sargasso Sea* stands in a similar relationship to *Jane Eyre*, engaging with Brontë's novel in order to challenge its meaning by criticising its representations. This activity of 'putting meaning on the move' is an important postcolonial strategy which motivates the re-writing of 'classic' texts. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is in part engendered by *Jane Eyre*, but its meanings are not fully determined by it. Instead, Rhys's novel turns to challenge the meanings made available in Brontë's work by entering into critical dialogue with it.

Which leads us, finally, to the naming of characters in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Names are often central to our sense of identity. Note how Antoinette's name is constantly changing in the novel as her family circumstances alter (some critics refer to her as Bertha Antoinette Cosway Mason Rochester!). Such a long convoluted name calls attention to the extent to which Antoinette's identity is always being defined in relation both *to* men and *by* men. To what extent is Antoinette ever really free of others' definitions of her identity and in control of her self? In addition, why is her husband never named as Rochester?

It is tempting perhaps to fix 'Bertha Antoinette Cosway Mason Rochester' as simply 'Bertha' and her husband as 'Rochester', but in so doing we perhaps re-enact something not too dissimilar from Antoinette's husband's 'child's scribble' of a woman in a house in England: we trap these characters inside representations made by somebody else which only *approximate* to the individuals we have met. If we identify Brontë's novel as the source of meaning which can explain and resolve the ambiguities of naming in Rhys's text, we perhaps do what Rhys does not do: we as readers construct that hierarchical relationship in which *Wide Sargasso Sea* is contained and determined by *Jane Eyre*. We no longer think of Antoinette and her

husband as fictional creations of Rhys independent from semantic determination by another text.

Through the complications surrounding naming, Rhys reminds us that *we as readers always have an active role to play* in the creation and questioning of meaning. *Wide Sargasso Sea* demands that we think carefully about our attempts to fix meaning and resolve ambiguity, to discover one authoritative voice amongst the clamour of many voices. It invites us to consider that such attempts might not be too remote from colonial and patriarchal impulses to fix representations of others whose voices are consequently silenced. Ultimately, the extent to which *Wide Sargasso Sea* confirms or resists the authority of *Jane Eyre* is the responsibility of the reader, who mayor may not choose to treat *Jane Eyre* as an authoritive source and settle the nature of the relationship between the two. Rhys may well deploy postcolonial narrative strategies, as Helen Carr claimed; but we need to think also about our agency and responsibility as readers if we are not to erase the subversive potential of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

'Re-writing': possibilities and problems

In the light of our discussion, let us recap what can be involved in the 're-writing' of a literary 'classic':

- A re-writing does much more than merely 'fill in' the gaps perceived in the source-text. Rather, it enters into a *productive critical dialogue* with the source-text.
- A re-writing takes the source-text as a point of inspiration and departure, but its meanings are not fully determined by it.
- A re-writing often exists to *resist* or *challenge* colonialist representations of colonised peoples and cultures perceived in the source-text and popular readings of it. In this way we might consider a re-writing of a 'classic' text as 'postcolonial'.
- A re-writing often implicates the reader as an *active agent* in determining the meanings made possible by the dialogue between the source-text and its re-writing.

But for some, re-writings of literary 'classics' are not without their problems which must also be faced when exploring the interface between the source-text and the re-writing.

First, a re-writing often imagines that the reader will be familiar with the source-text it utilises, and thus is addressed first and foremost to an educated reader versed in the literary works of the colonising culture. For some this makes re-writings directed at a small privileged and educated elite. Those of us who have not had access to the source-text will be in a relatively deficient position. Second, a re-writing will always remain tethered in some degree to its antecedent. This problematises the extent to which postcolonial re-writings of literary 'classics' ever can be really independent of colonial culture. The re-writing will always invest value in the source-text as a point of reference, no matter how much it is challenged as a consequence. For this reason, some critics believe that re-writings can never fully challenge the authority of the 'classic' text; indeed, re-writings continue to invest literary 'classics' with value by making them a point of reference for postcolonial texts.

STOP and THINK

In this chapter we have looked at *Jane Eyre* as containing both colonial *and* postcolonial moments, and it is worth concluding by thinking about the tethering of *Wide Sargasso Sea* to *Jane Eyre*. Can Rhys's text fully eradicate its dependence on Brontë's work? In reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a postcolonial text we must also recognise the possible perpetuation of a colonial relationship between the source-text and its re-writing. If *Jane Eyre* is not simply a colonial text, then *Wide Sargasso Sea* is perhaps not readily regarded as postcolonial. As we are discovering in this book as a whole, these categories are by no means mutually exclusive or absolute.

Selected reading

Azim, Firdous, *The Colonial Rise of the Novel* (Routledge, 1993).

An excellent study of nineteenth-century fiction in its colonial contexts.

Brantlinger, Patrick, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism 1830–1914* (Cornell University Press, 1988).

A wide-ranging examination of mostly nineteenth-century English literature which plots changing attitudes to colonialism and their manifestation in the writing of the period. The chapter on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is especially useful.

Carr, Helen, *Jean Rhys* (Northcote House, 1996).

A recent, short and compelling study of Jean Rhys which accounts for Rhys's particular kinds of modernist, feminist and postcolonial writing. Chapter 2, 'Feminist and Postcolonial Approaches to Jean Rhys', is particularly useful.

Childs, Peter (ed.), *Post-Colonial Theory and English Literature: A Reader* (Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

A useful collection of salient essays which deal in the main with the re-reading of the 'classics', including Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922).

Fryer, Peter, *Black People in the British Empire: An Introduction* (Pluto, 1988).

An excellent historical work which depicts the rule and resistance of black peoples during colonialism.

Hulme, Peter, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean 1492–1797* (Routledge, 1986).

Includes a long, scholarly study of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in its colonial contexts, highly recommended.

James, Selma, *The Ladies and the Mammies: Jane Austen and Jean Rhys* (Falling Wall Press, 1983).

Meyer, Susan, '"Indian Ink": Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy in *Jane Eyre*' in *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction* (Cornell, 1996).

In my view the best essay on *Jane Eyre* and its colonial contexts, and a good example of 'contrapuntal' reading. Witty, erudite and highly pursuasive. Reprinted in Peter Childs's collection cited above.

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A stimulating, lively and challenging text whieh looks at several different postcolonial re-writings of 'classic' texts and offers a series of imaginative readings. The first chapter, 'I Walked With a Zombie', is a wonderful reading of the intertextual relationship between *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The introduction is also highly recommended.

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A major work in postcolonialism in which Said traces the relations between Western culture and Western imperialism in a variety of genres and looks at the work of Conrad, Austen, Yeats and others. The second half of the book deals with the resistance to Western culture and imperialism by colonised peoples.

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A highly informative essay which looks in detail at the historical contexts of Austen's novel.

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This is Spivak's influential reading of *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and required reading when thinking about re-reading and re-writing 'classic' texts. This essay features moments of some difficulty and can be hard to follow in places, so proceed through it slowly.

Viswanathan, Gauri, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (Faber, 1989).

A prolonged and detailed study of the teaching of English in India which has proven highly influential for postcolonial critics and writers.

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An examination of Brontë's problematic use of Orientalism for her own feminist purposes. (Reprinted in Peter Childs's collection cited above.)