

‘YOU CANNOT IMAGINE HOW MUCH I LONG TO HAVE A HOUSE, A ROOM, OR TWO, A CAVE OF MY OWN’: ROOMS AND HOMES IN JEAN RHYS’S *WIDE SARGASSO SEA*, ‘OUTSIDE THE MACHINE’ AND ‘SLEEP IT OFF LADY’

VERONIKA SCHUCHTER

When Jean Rhys left Dominica for England in 1907, her disappointment and struggle with Europe began, leading her to experience life as a constant battle. In addition to finding the English climate inclement, she fought poverty, neglect and descended into a spiral of alcoholism and depression compounded by a profound feeling of displacement. Between three marriages and numerous relocations, writing enabled Rhys to find stability and a sense of permanence. Her use of creativity to find a space of her own finds emphatic expression in a letter she sent to her editor in 1960, in which she asserted, ‘I long to have a house, a room or two, a cave of my own’ because ‘Just now I feel like a displaced person and that is not a part I play well’ (*Letters* 184). Shortly after writing this letter, Rhys settled in Devon where she remained unhappy until her death in 1979.

Rhys’s yearning for home and spiritual stability is echoed throughout her fictional works and especially those in which her female protagonists consistently move in and out of rooms, invariably experiencing space in intensely ambivalent ways. Her characters often suggest feeling confined to material space, but also experience moments of escape; they frequently despise their dwellings, and yet enjoy particular lodgings. They share, rent, and own places, and yet, as inhabitants, they are not only shaped by space, but also by the urban and rural environments that enclose such physical spaces.

In considering these issues, this article investigates the homeliness of the particular rooms and houses depicted in Rhys’s novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), and her short stories ‘Outside the Machine’ (1968) and ‘Sleep It Off Lady’ (1976). *Wide Sargasso Sea* describes a woman’s coming of age whose downfall is powerfully mirrored in the destructive force of her home(s), when, famously, in an act of resistance in retaliation for her imprisonment, she sets fire to the attic space to which

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she has been confined. Likewise, 'Outside the Machine' depicts a young woman's sojourn in what, to her, is rather an intimidating hospital setting, while 'Sleep It Off Lady' is concerned with an old woman's almost pathological fear of intrusion and her own home. These three narratives bring together the way in which Rhys modulates her female protagonists' preoccupation with spatial surroundings by capturing each figure at a different stage in their lives and their ambivalent relations to those spaces. These characters are not the same, yet they vocalise similar experiences of spatiality, and to some extent enact the same stories. By reading Rhys's most famous novel in combination with two relatively unknown and critically neglected short stories, this article demonstrates a significant and hitherto unexplored parallel in Rhys's treatment of (homely) spaces that challenges dominant perceptions of her work conveyed by the legacy of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. My reading opens up new ways of understanding Rhys's conception of home that go beyond the attribution of alienation that permeates this famous novel to her foreignness.

While scant attention has been paid to Rhys's short stories, there is an overwhelming amount of criticism devoted to Rhys's novels which have been studied for their unique autobiographical dimension and the author's particular expression of gender. It is indisputable that both constitute central aspects in Rhys's oeuvre. However, I suggest that her creative work is too often subordinated on its own terms by being compared and irrevocably tied to her biography, thus her narratives are not afforded the artistic merit they deserve. The author's life undeniably shapes her work and so has her experience of space and place. But this latter biographical experience has resulted in Rhys's characteristic and idiosyncratic preoccupation with physical space to be overlooked. In addressing this area of critical omission, I pay special attention to the notions of home and belonging conveyed in these three texts to examine whether this notion is informed by a specifically female experience of safety and hostility in domestic spaces. As I will demonstrate, all three of the narratives are preoccupied with the materiality of the characters' homes and environments, which rather paradoxically in light of the homeliness one conventionally expects to emanate from the materiality of homes, tends to disallow the females to feel *at home*, thus leaving them in a state of dissatisfaction and even paranoia. Despite the palpable reality of the places they inhabit and the physicality of the homes they are ascribed, the female protagonists in these texts by Rhys never arrive at the stability they yearn for.

In accordance with Doreen Massey's view that place and home are important concepts in the formation and maintenance of identity, and her

claim that home ‘may provide...stability, oneness and security’ because the desire for a home is accompanied by a ‘longing for stability and coherence’ (167–68), I propose that these are significant goals for Rhys’s female protagonists—it is what they strive for but are repeatedly denied. An obvious way of finding such stability and coherence is through a markedly physical perception of home as formulated by Gaston Bachelard’s observation in *The Poetics of Space* (1995):

For, in point of fact, a house is first and foremost a geometrical object, one which we are tempted to analyze rationally. Its prime reality is visible and tangible, made of well hewn solids and well fitted framework. A geometrical object of this kind ought to resist metaphors that welcome the human body and the human soul. But transposition to the human plane takes place immediately whenever a house is considered as space for cheer and intimacy, space that is supposed to condense and defend intimacy. (47–48)

Bachelard suggests that, as an object, the house is always subject to rational assessment. Yet he does not rule out the possibility of home being configured in irrational terms; quite the opposite, in fact. In submitting that ‘without [the house] man would be a dispersed being’ (7), Bachelard acknowledges that home might also be construed as the intuitively felt other of the human self. Drawing on Bachelard’s argument, I propose that this is precisely how Rhys projects the idea of home for her female protagonists, whose obsessions with their material surroundings are anything but rational. This confirms Erin Manning’s suggestion that ‘the stronger the desire for security and conformity, the more apparent the fact that nothing is certain and fixed’ (53).

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the reader is introduced to Antoinette Cosway, a young Creole woman brought up in the West Indies who, in the course of the narrative, is married off to an English man—presumably Mr Rochester, the ‘hero’ of Charlotte Brontë’s classic novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847). It is worth noting at the beginning of any consideration of Rhys’s novel that the male protagonist is never called Mr Rochester explicitly, and it is only through references to Thornfield that the intertextual link between *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be surmised. As such, in order to avoid conflation between these two difference texts, this article will refer to ‘the husband’ in the analysis of the *Wide Sargasso Sea* character.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the husband brings Antoinette back to Britain with him only to lock her away (eventually) in the attic of his mansion, Thornfield Hall, because he believes she is mad. Through the act of re-naming, the husband seeks to transform his new wife into Bertha Mason, an act that importantly coincides with a dramatic shift of locations, houses, and rooms. As the novel shows, a change in Antoinette's behaviour goes hand-in-hand with the increasing hostility of the environment towards the female protagonist. At the beginning of the novel, the reader is introduced to the Caribbean estate owned by Antoinette's family which is eventually burned down by locals: 'there would be nothing left but blackened walls and the mounting stone' (WSS 38). The destruction of the Cosway estate results in the death of Antoinette's baby brother and sends her mother into madness, a condition which is believed to run in the family. Reflecting on the emotions of this family space, Antoinette later recalls that 'there is nothing left now. They trampled on it. It was a sacred place. It was sacred to the sun!' (WSS 109). Through this comment, the protagonist emphasises the importance materiality holds for her in the constitution of home. Robbed of her beloved house, Antoinette spends the remainder of her life in her homeland before her departure to England in a house in Granbois with her new husband. The house in Granbois is described as 'neglected and deserted' (WSS 61), a description which foreshadows the precariousness of Antoinette's financial situation, resulting from the way in which her husband takes charge of her fortune. It also denotes the 'desert[ion] and neglect' that will mark her future life on the other side of the Sargasso Sea (WSS 61).

After the husband's arrival on the Caribbean island, it is apparent that he does not perceive his new wife in a loving way: 'I did not love her, I was thirsty for her but that is not love, I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did' (WSS 78). This revelation or even confession of his 'true' feelings for Antoinette suggest that the husband lacks empathy or compassion for her and points to the hostility building towards her that ultimately finds its manifestation in the material surroundings of their wedded home. As if to justify his own behaviour, the husband includes accounts of his compassion for Bertha in his narrative, noting that he used to try and reassure her: "'You are safe", I'd say. She'd liked that—to be told "you are safe"' (WSS 78), thus demonstrating his awareness of her need for the 'stability and coherence' of a home (Massey 168). Notably, the husband fails to acknowledge his wife's upbringing; he only understands her according to the terms of his own culture, a point that shows how he is a prisoner of his own expectations in the same way his wife becomes

his captive towards the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. His inability to resolve problems becomes especially obvious when he physically locks his new wife away, out of sight as far as possible to avoid facing the reasons that lie behind her supposed insanity. In commenting on the connection between space and gender in the novel, Susan Lydon states that ‘patriarchal homes in *Wide Sargasso Sea* are so dangerous that it is necessary for the female protagonist to leave home’ and Antoinette’s failure to ultimately do so ‘leads to madness and imprisonment’ (26–27). It is, however, not a question of choice as the only role she is allowed by the other (male) characters is one of sheer passivity from which she tries to break free in a final self-destructive act, a point I shall touch upon later in this essay.

Antoinette’s displacement and imprisonment starts even before she leaves the Caribbean when the husband systematically strips her of home on a number of different levels. Firstly, in an attempt to isolate Antoinette, he moves her into a new house. If, following Massey’s argument, home can provide a sense of safety and stability and is, therefore, a crucial device in the formation and maintenance of identity (167–68), then the lack of such feeling for Antoinette inevitably result in a loss of confidence in her own voice and her right to self-determination alongside the loss of a sense of security. Secondly, with the act of re-naming, the husband further undermines his wife’s sense of belonging and identity and, despite her protest and her repeated pronouncements that her ‘name is not Bertha’ (WSS 111, 121), he continues to call her as such because ‘it is a name [he is] particularly fond of’ (WSS 111). Drawing on the theories of Jacques Derrida, Harvie Ferguson points out that ‘names connect self and identity...not only are we not our name, we encounter our name as the primordial other, as pure, imposed exteriority’; this in turn entails that naming ‘imposes identity upon us and suppresses the immanent freedom (non-identity) of self’ (90–91). Names function, then, as ‘a powerful device of containment; it is the prison of the self’ (ibid). This (patriarchal) imposition of an essentially made-up identity is the husband’s most powerful step in suppressing his wife’s past and personality, and isolating her in space. By referring to Antoinette as Bertha, he not only demonstrates his male power but implies her status as his object; she is an unknown quantity ready to be re-invented to his liking on his whim. Thus, Antoinette is denied her own physical surrounding (that which she calls home), refused her own conception of self and identity, and stripped of all that is familiar to her only to find herself imprisoned by her husband’s expectations and demands. It is her final relocation to England where she apparently ‘shares’ his home that cements Antionette’s spatial and spiritual

dislocation. She is robbed of all possibilities to transform her new surroundings into a home in order to feel safe, strong and self-confident.

Deborah A. Kimney suggests that Rhys manages to ‘displace Brontë’s text with a play on names’ (118). Kimney argues that Rhys was of the opinion that Charlotte Brontë and her character Mr Rochester both ‘(mis)named Antoinette, and the misnomer is exposed as the white British man’s ‘authority’ over the white Creole woman’ (118). Further, Kimney sees Antoinette’s transformation into Bertha and her subsequent descent towards insanity as a result of ‘her conflicting position vis-à-vis the Europeans and Dominicans; she is both “white cockroach” and “white nigger”’ and consequently ‘denounced and denied’ (117). Kimney refers to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who

uses the printed text as a metaphor to suggest Antoinette is not geographically located in England by the novel’s conclusion, precisely because she is textually bound within the covers of *Jane Eyre*. One could even argue that Antoinette is not in England because, though she is literally ‘bound’, she moves across the map; her placement is reconstituted in each act of reading *Jane Eyre* and its counter-narrative *Wide Sargasso Sea*. (114)

While there has been a substantial amount of criticism on the (colonial) relationship between *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (McLeod 166), I suggest an additional spatial textual politics concerning the setting up of home at play in Rhys’s use of Brontë’s fiction. Rhys is, essentially, a ‘houseguest’ of Brontë’s narrative, and even though she attempts to rebuild the house entirely, ultimately she is restricted by its foundation—the text itself. The annexe to Brontë’s novel—*Wide Sargasso Sea*—does not bring absolute (creative) freedom to Rhys as one would expect the production of fiction might. Indeed, the author found herself increasingly confined to *Jane Eyre*’s textual (and spatial) boundaries and, as noted by Sanders, was aware of the limitations and restrictions such a re-narration of a classic text would entail (98). Even though Rhys is unable to ‘free’ Bertha from the confines of Thornfield’s attic space, through the production of her prequel tale, she liberates Bertha by giving her a voice, thus somewhat ironically granting her a safe place—a safe textual place—in which she can tell her story (Sanders 105).

However, at the level of the text, when the husband brings his wife from the Caribbean to England, his home appears ‘big and safe, a shelter from the world outside which, say what you like, can be a black and cruel world to a woman’ (WSS 146). Antoinette soon realises that it is not just the world outside that is ‘black and cruel’ but the people sharing her new house with her. Unhomeliness, also as a manifestation of the uncanny, is evident when her husband locks her up in the attic room that has ‘thick walls, keeping away all the things that you have fought till you can fight no more’ (WSS 146). The room in which she is imprisoned acquires increasing importance in the final part of the novel; it functions not only as a physical barrier that makes it impossible for Antoinette to escape but also serves as a solitary confinement for her person, coercing mental isolation by denying any human contact beyond what little exchange she has with her forbidding and taciturn keeper, Grace Poole. The prison in which communication is repressed inevitably becomes a hotbed for flights of fancy, in the course of which the ever-so concrete key Antoinette manages to obtain opens the door into an imaginary world that is ‘made of cardboard’ (WSS 148). This world proves to be a hostile environment in which the protagonist finds herself a prisoner and thus she is considered ‘too far gone to be helped’ (WSS 153). By entering the ‘cardboard world’, Antoinette steps into a world made of a completely different material, one that is unstable and points towards the artificiality and constructedness of the environment the husband has created for her within his own home.

In the final scenes of Rhys’s novel, Antoinette passes through a number of rooms until she reaches ‘a large room with a red carpet and red curtains’ set off against the whiteness of ‘everything else’ (WSS 154). The simplicity of the author’s use of colour here allows the reader to associate the images with conventional colour symbolism, according to which red stands for passion (Cirlot 54). In more scientific terms, however, red objects also create an illusion of greater than actual proximity to the eye and, according to psychologists Mahnke and Mahnke, rooms fashioned in red are aggressive and intrusive (11–13). Accordingly, in terms of spatiality and concepts of homeliness, it is only natural that Antoinette—already in a state of mental fragility—says that ‘suddenly [she] felt very miserable in that room’; she ‘saw the wax candles too and hated them. So [she] knocked them all down’ (WSS 154). At the end of the scene, it transpires that Antoinette is dreaming but the dream for her functions as a prophecy intimately connected to homeliness and her sense of self: ‘Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do’ (WSS 155–56). In a final act of (self-) destruction, Antoinette attempts to re-gain control of her life and break

out of her imposed 'home'. The only way she can escape the patriarchal prison and passivity inflicted upon her by her husband is to physically re-claim power over this marital space by destroying her husband's English house in the same way that she was deprived of hers. As the narrative comes full circle with Antoinette's final act of resistance, it becomes apparent that, quite ironically, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* homes for the female protagonist are anything but homely spaces and are, in fact, so hostile that destruction of such places and of the self are the only way to bring personal relief.

In comparison to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys's 'Outside the Machine' depicts a young woman's sojourn in a hospital in France. Even though the hospital might appear an atypical (un)homely space in comparison to the settings shown in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and later in 'Sleep It Off Lady', the protagonist's engagement with her physical environment is, in fact, marked by an almost pathological fear of the unknown and a refusal to view herself as anything but outside of the spaces that are assigned to her. In the story, the highly ordered nature of the hospital in Versailles is evident from the first. At the beginning of the narrative, the reader encounters the protagonist, Inez Best, in a clinic that 'was run on strictly English lines' and has a tight schedule, which is the reason why 'at half-past ten the matron, attended by a sister, came in to inspect the ward, walking as though she were royalty opening a public building' (OTM 83). Having inspected Inez, the matron asks her to not use make-up for the duration of her stay, a request that is, however, absolutely essential to the protagonist's sense of self 'so that [she] shouldn't look too awful, because then [she] always feel[s] much worse' (OTM 84). Later, after her surgery, one of the other patients comments to Inez: 'D'you know what I've noticed? People who look ghastly oughtn't to put make-up on. You only look worse if you aren't all right underneath—much older' (OTM 95). Rishona Zimring states that for Rhys cosmetics were 'not only an instrument of women's commodification and exploitation, but also, and in complex ways, a realm in which women could express and even empower themselves, both symbolically and materially' (215). By speaking of 'a realm', Zimring hints at the spatial dimension I propose Rhys's protagonist endeavours to establish in opening up spaces of the familiar to re-gain a feeling of stability and self-confidence. In a manner very similar to the act of re-naming in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, make-up in this narrative contributes to the protagonist's sense of identity and would, by means of a common routine, allow the main character to return to a familiar and homely space which here is her own body. Inez, already humiliated by her financial shortcomings that will make her homeless after her stay, is denied the ability to maintain and preserve her

appearance by the institutional hierarchy. She is thus not only stripped of her material but also symbolic capital, leaving her in a state of insecurity and acute anxiety.

Importantly—although ironically given Inez’s experience so far—‘Hospitals’, Alice Street suggests, ‘are designed as spaces of improvement’ (44) that make their inhabitants particularly aware of their past and future. Inez’s self-consciousness of her future (her home and finances) becomes especially evident through her habit of procrastinating and refusal to make plans about her prospective living situation. As the husband in *Wide Sargasso Sea* attempts to cover up his marital mistake, so Inez tries to cover up her blemish with make-up so that she can pretend to be in good health and escape her apparently hopeless financial circumstances by pushing aside thoughts about her unknown future:

That night she lay awake for a long time, making plans. But the next morning, when the matron came around, she became nervous of a refusal. ‘I’ll ask tomorrow for certain’. However, the whole of the next day passed and she did not say a word. She ate and slept and read soothing English novels about the respectable and the respected and she did not say a word nor write a letter. Any excuse was good enough: ‘She doesn’t look like in a good temper today...Oh the doctor’s with her; I don’t think he liked me very much. (Well, I don’t like you much either, old cock; your eyes are too close together.) Today’s Friday, not my lucky day...I’ll write when my head is clearer...’ (OTM 97)

For Inez, the hospital becomes a substitute home that provides her with a temporary place to stay but only, strangely, if she continues to be ill, which is why, due to the absence of a home to which she can return, she feels more dependent on the hospital than the other patients. A close connection between the protagonist’s state of mind and her perception of the material environment is presented when Inez is in a state of self-denial. At such times, the hospital appears as a place of refuge where she is well taken care of, passing time by chatting to other patients, engaging in hospital gossip, and telling herself that: “‘everything will be all right; [she] needn’t worry’...and soon she believed it. Lying there, being looked after and waking obediently at dawn, she began to feel like a child, as if the future would surely be pleasant, though it was hardly conceivable’ (OTM 96). When being confronted with her future, however, the perception of the hospital changes and Inez’s descriptions

alter, conceiving of the same space as a drab, clinical and hostile place where ‘there were fifteen beds in the tall, narrow room. The walls were painted grey. The windows were long but high up, so that you could see only the topmost branches of the trees in the grounds outside. Through the glass the sky had no colour’ (OTM 83). Similarly, the ward outside her hospital room ‘was a long, grey river; the beds were ships in a mist’ (OTM 90). In such instances, even the hospital staff who seem to be caring undergo a transformation in Inez’s eyes: ‘But there was another nurse in the operating room. She was wearing a mask and she looked horrible, Inez thought—like a torturer’ (OTM 93). The protagonist’s continual state of anxiety, then, is due to the fact that Inez views herself as an outsider, a point illustrated in the following passage:

They [the hospital staff] did everything in an impersonal way. They were like parts of a machine, she thought, that was working smoothly. The women in the beds bobbed up and down and in and out. They too were parts of a machine.... Because she was outside the machine they might come along any time with a pair of huge iron tongs and pick her up and put her on the rubbish heap, and there she would lie and rot. ‘Useless, this one’, they would say; and throw her away before she could explain, ‘it isn’t like you think it is, not all. It isn’t like they say it is. Wait a bit and let me explain. You must listen; it’s very important’. (OTM 87–88)

The character’s perceived opposition of ‘I’ and ‘they’ makes the purported difference between her and the others more apparent and, as a consequence, her spatial surroundings appear more threatening. The prospect of homelessness renders Inez *so* self-conscious that she projects her insecurities on to others. She is convinced that those around her must surely view her as an inferior, a conclusion that she reaches when her paranoia and self-centredness are at their worst.

The microcosm of the hospital presents the reader with a young protagonist whose understanding of a home is articulated in a materialistic manner. For Inez, home seems to constitute a room, a house or property that she can(not) afford (quite literally in financial terms). This property—a home—would, in turn, allow Inez to create a space in which she is not restricted by patriarchal or hierarchical structures (a space of her own), and could potentially enable her to develop and maintain her identity, and gain independence. However, Inez’s independence is only made possible at the end of the narrative by

another person from ‘outside the machine’; an older female patient grants Inez money and thus provides her with a substitute and temporary home.

Crucially, in Rhys’s ‘Sleep It Off Lady’, it is another old woman who has reached this supposed independence and stability in (mid) life by owning a home who is at the centre of another story concerned with the instability of home and domestic space. Peter Wolfe observes that Rhys’s collection *Sleep It Off Lady* ‘brings back many of the characters, settings, and attitudes of Jean Rhys’s other fiction’ (Wolfe 299). In this narrative, the reader encounters Mrs Verney, an elderly woman who feels acutely threatened by a huge rat that appears in close proximity to her little cottage—her home. After several attempts at voicing her fears about her home’s invader to her neighbours (who dismiss her concerns as an old drunk’s paranoia), Mrs Verney is left to die alone at home. With Mrs Verney, Rhys crafts an elder female protagonist who, despite her advanced age is still, in a manner very similar to Antoinette and Inez, preoccupied with the materiality of her house and trying to turn it into a home and safe haven by fending off unwelcome intruders within the domestic sphere.

At the beginning of the narrative, it is revealed that when Mrs Verney had moved into her little house in the countryside, she

had decided that it was an eyesore when she came to live in the cottage. Most of the paint had worn off the once-black galvanized iron. Now it was a greenish colour. Part of the roof was loose and flapped noisily in windy weather and a small gate off its hinges leaned up against the entrance. (SIOL 160)

The detailed account of her home’s appearance suggests openness and neglect reminiscent of the ‘neglected and deserted’ (WSS 61) house in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. But at the same time, here, it also emphasises Mrs Verney’s hatred of her home. Her aversion and paranoia to her physical environment are fuelled by the loneliness and isolation she experiences that leaves her in a state of constant fear of intrusion from the giant rat that might appear at any given moment. Most of all, Mrs Verney is afraid of her garden shed that, even though uninhabitable, is part of her house. She identifies the shed as the source of the rat plague and requests it to be ‘utterly destroyed and carted away’ by one of her neighbours because she ‘hate[s] the sight of it’ (SIOL 161). Like the others texts then, here Rhys presents a case in which the female protagonist’s desperation within the home turns into aggression. In ‘Sleep It Off Lady’, this

aggression is aimed at the physical surroundings of the home which is perceived as a source of evil and discomfort. This projected aggression affords momentary relief before the female turns to self-destructive behaviour, a pattern that is also reflected in the description of Antoinette's dream in the red room which she 'hate[s]' and eventually 'knock[s]...down' (WSS 154) before taking her own life. Although not as explicitly as the other two protagonists, Inez in 'Outside the Machine' also feels aggression building up around her in the hospital in which she is recuperating, and she too finally engages in self-destructive behaviour in the sense that her passivity and unwillingness to gain independence leave her without a future and home she can return to. For all of the female characters discussed in this article then, the annihilation of the hostile home paradoxically functions as a quest for a safe and homely place.

The secludedness of Mrs Verney's home and life adds to her discomfort, although there is an ambivalence in Rhys's depiction of the lonely female who, on the one hand, seeks the solitude of her home while at the same time refusing to disengage herself from those around her. Even though Mrs Verney lives by herself, marking her home primarily as a space of private isolation, it is also her home that prompts dialogic engagements in the otherwise monologically-oriented narrative when she repeatedly reaches out to others for help against the hostile rodent. 'Sleep It Off Lady' sets itself apart from the two other narratives by the protagonist's attempt to break out of the passivity ascribed to her and takes matters into her own hands; something that the two younger females fail in the other texts to do. Mrs Verney hopes to re-gain control over her irrational fear and essentially her life by destroying part of her home. In this process, she seeks refuge in her little cottage and

slam[s] the door and lock[s] it. Then she shut[s] and bolt[s] all the windows. This done, she [takes] off her shoes, [lies] down, pull[s] the blankets over her head and listen[s] to her hammering heart' (SIOL 163).

Lying in bed, with her blanket over her head gives Mrs Verney momentary relief but, as with many characters in Rhys's short fiction, the failure to find shelter proves to be fatal for Mrs Verney. As her home lacks the sense of security she is longing for, she has to make alterations to it herself by 'dragg[ing] what furniture there [is] away from the walls so that she [will] know that nothing lurked in the corners and decide[s] to keep the windows looking onto the shed and bolted' (SIOL 165). Even though the protagonist takes an active part in turning her house into a

‘safe’ home, such physical and psychological hardship ultimately results in the old woman’s death; she is left helplessly out on the street on a cold evening. Her demise is symbolic of her life—dying in the midst of a community and constantly reaching out for help versus the seclusion of her own home. Not even in the midst of dying is the old woman granted the familiar surroundings of her home. Rhys lets her character die in front of her house, epitomising this ‘homeless’ woman’s vulnerability and loss of privacy.

Concrete rooms and houses are without a doubt one of the most prominent settings in Rhys’s narratives discussed but, as this article has shown, these homely spaces cannot offer the protagonists perfect homeliness; such a space is an imaginary one. Illusory homes or ideas of home are revealed in the stories and these stand in opposition to the material houses and rooms that the characters occupy. These texts not only communicate the instability of home but also the desire for space to provide safety, privacy, comfort and (financial) stability which Rhys’s protagonists all yearn for. Indeed, Rhys female characters never feel *at home*. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette must set fire to her marital home in order to escape being a prisoner. For Inez in ‘Outside the Machine’, the hospital, a space that perceived as a hostile environment, turns into a temporary and substitute home that cannot afford the character stability and safety. Finally, in ‘Sleep It Off Lady’, the old protagonist has acquired home, but it is not homely. As such, Rhys shows that the desire for home is as profound as the materiality of home space itself.

NOTES

Abbreviations

OTM	‘Outside the Machine’
SIOL	‘Sleep It Off Lady’
WSS	<i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i>

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