

SHAMING THE LOVE PLOT:  
INCONVENIENT WOMEN NAVIGATING  
CONVENTIONAL ROMANCE

by

BRITTAN WILKEY

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## Abstract

The love plot is one of the most widely consumed genres of fiction for women. Romance often dictates a woman's identity and her "story" or narrative, leaving little room for other avenues of self-development. However, when romance fails, even in the realm of fiction, women are left with shame. Shame might suggest a catastrophic aftereffect of the failure of women's initial investment of the love plot; however, I argue that shame functions in place of the love plot and helps to provide a critique of the oppressive and patriarchal nature of conventional romance. Using affect theory, I look at both Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* as they rewrite the love plot typified by Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

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## Introduction

On July 9, 2012, blogger Malory Ortberg posted an entry on the feminist website *The Hairpin* titled “Texts from Jane Eyre.” The premise of the blog post is straightforward enough—a list of short “texts” supposedly exchanged between characters, suggesting a kind of anachronistic fan fiction:

[Rochester:] JANE

[R:] JANE I BOUGHT YOU A DRESS MADE OF TEN THOUSAND PEARLS  
AS A BRIDAL PRESENT

[Jane:] *where on earth would I wear that*

[R:] YOU COULD WEAR IT ON THE MOON

[J:] *that seems impractical*

[J:] *how would i even breathe on the moon?*

[R:] I WOULD BREATHE FOR YOU MY JANE (Ortberg)

The post parodies a specific scene in Charlotte Brontë’s original *Jane Eyre* (1847) in which Mr. Rochester tells his young ward, Adele, “I am to take mademoiselle [Jane] to the moon ... mademoiselle shall live with me there and only me” (398). The post’s characterization of Rochester exaggerates his desperate devotion to Jane while simultaneously exaggerating Jane’s relative practicality and indifference towards Rochester’s ridiculous pleas. Jane assumes the role of the “straight man” in *The Hairpin*’s parody, a serious and rational character serving as a foil to a significantly more absurd one, in this case Rochester. Jane’s “texts” are comedic because they serve as a kind of perspective for a reader of *The Hairpin*, a “wink and a nudge” suggesting that

any reasonable person such as Jane would find Rochester's behavior foolish and immoderate. Ortberg's Jane is a space for the feminist reader of *The Hairpin* to occupy, to voice logical reservations about love and romantic gestures, but also to dismiss the bombastic clamoring of an "impractical" suitor. In fact, many female readers of *The Hairpin* are likely familiar with Jane's position, a position that is detached from romantic gestures and scoffs at the well-meaning but silly men who employ such behavior for the purpose of desperately trying to attract more "practical" people like Jane who—wink, nudge—know *so* much better than to react with anything apart from indifference and possibly detached amusement.

Jane's rational disposition is in fact what makes her so desirable to readers. Readers familiar with the actual text of *Jane Eyre* are made aware of Jane's self-discipline and strong work ethic throughout her narrative. Her disengagement with romance comes as no surprise after a childhood riddled with tragedy and hard work. Jane's background sharply contrasts that of Edward Rochester, a man born into landed gentry and money who has lived a comfortable life, essentially free from want of material possessions. However, hard work is not the only thing that makes Jane seem more desirable and attractive to Mr. Rochester and to the reader. The ideal female romantic partner in novels is not expected to be weak or hyper-emotional—quite the opposite, in fact. *Jane Eyre* communicates a desirable woman who is paradoxically attractive in a romantic way because she is disengaged from romantic expectations. Jane is a heroine entrenched in a love plot; however, she is conveniently distanced from it and is made somewhat uneasy by it (especially upon learning about the existence of Bertha Mason, the madwoman in the attic still married to Mr. Rochester). Mr. Rochester, conversely, communicates the promise of the romantic gesture on the part of a man. His frantic outbursts such as "JANE, MY LITTLE

SUNBEAM” in Ortberg’s post are simultaneously irritating while also enforcing the notion that men are afforded the agency necessary to approach a (female) romantic partner. The love plot is rife with complex standards and expectations for both men and women. Women in particular are expected ultimately to consume and to define themselves around the love plot, as Lauren Berlant argues in *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Berlant opens her argument with the statement: “Everyone knows what the female complaint is: women live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking” (9). *Jane Eyre* enforces Berlant’s claim that love serves as the *raison d’être* for many women—despite Mr. Rochester’s absurd obsession, he still manages to wed Jane, and the close of Brontë’s novel suggests Jane’s satisfaction with her decision to marry. “Reader, I married him” serves as the abrupt beginning of *Jane Eyre*’s final chapter, still communicating Jane’s understated emotion (Brontë 636). The line presents Jane, rather than begrudgingly giving into Mr. Rochester’s romantic solicitations, instead growing to calmly embrace them and learn how much happiness the love plot brings to her life. No space is offered to imagine a heroine who chooses to reject the love plot entirely.

But what of Berlant’s claim that “love is the gift that keeps on taking”? Berlant goes on to describe women’s culture and the love plots within it as “a space of disappointment, but not disenchantment” (*The Female Complaint* 14). Although many novels, especially those consumed by women, seem to cling to the cycle of conventional romance and the domestic happiness it one day might bring, others are more critical of that cycle. I explore “disenchanted” or failed love plots in two novels, while arguing that women who navigate outside of conventional romance are shamed for their disinterest or disenchantment. Shame, in addition to the external consequences

of rejecting marriage, is a barrier to women who are then unable to explore other avenues for personal happiness or success. I also analyze the repercussions of remembering “disenchantment,” in line with Berlant’s claim that “love is the enemy of memory” (*The Female Complaint* 169). Berlant describes “amnesia” as a consistent optimism even in the face of failing love plots and disenchantment. Amnesia is necessary to the love plot in order to perpetuate the optimistic cycle of glorifying romance over anything else:

The modern love plot requires that, if you are a woman, you must at least *entertain* believing in love’s capacity both to rescue you from your life and to give you a new one, a fantasy that romantic love’s narratives constantly invest with beauty and utopian power ... I would claim that popular culture constantly reinvents the love plot as a figure for optimism, while maintaining women’s culture’s strong ambivalence about believing in and relinquishing this promise. (*The Female Complaint* 170)

While engaging in “amnesia” and forgetting the less pleasant elements of romance might perpetuate the cycle of the love plot, actually holding onto memories of love’s disappointments can instill deep shame in women. Love might indeed be the gift that keeps on taking from women, but a lack of optimism or investment in romance hardly frees women from the oppression of the love plot.

In chapter one, I examine Mrs. Henry Wood’s sensation novel *East Lynne* (1860-61). For *East Lynne*’s fallen heroine Lady Isabel, shame functions as something to choose in place of conventional romance and married life. Lady Isabel transcends her broken marriage by engaging in severe self-punishment, despite the fact that she was unhappy with her marriage to begin with.



Her romance, while entirely consonant with the conventional love plot, depresses her and is a cause of her severe distress that eventually leads to a breakdown and her fall from grace. I argue that *East Lynne* critiques the love plot by representing a heroine who finds what could be considered ideal domestic security and yet still struggles to find happiness and personal fulfillment.

My second analysis examines Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), a novel meant to serve as a "prequel" to *Jane Eyre*, following the life of Bertha Mason before she is locked in an attic by her husband, Edward Rochester. I argue that Bertha, known in the novel as Antoinette, is made ashamed of the failure of her romance because she is unwilling to *forget* its inevitable failure, before and after the fact. Antoinette's heritage and behavior become increasingly less convenient for Mr. Rochester, who in fact forces Antoinette to sever her interest in him despite her desperate attempts to prevent that from happening. Antoinette initially tries to consume the conventions of traditional romance, unlike the bored, disillusioned Lady Isabel, but meets a terrible fate as a result of the oppressive nature of the love plot.

In contrast to the novels I examine here, *Jane Eyre* exemplifies a love plot integral not only to most novels but also to Western women's culture as a whole. The love plot goes beyond just a fixation on heteronormative romance and the courtship process; rather, the love plot is rife with complex expectations and roles demanded of both men and women portrayed in fiction with the purpose of cycling romance and its fantasies indefinitely. Deviation from the roles necessary to the love plot can result in shame at having gravitated too far from what is "expected" of women. Berlant describes the "roles" of women as so hackneyed as to be comparable with B

movies: “femininity is a B movie, a genre of the unsurprising that is deeply fulfilling because it is unsurprising” (*The Female Complaint* 210).

Some of the “unsurprising” feminine tropes of the love plot include the use of a “hard-to-get” or romantically disengaged woman such as Jane Eyre. The fantasy being communicated by this cliché is that even if a woman is convinced that she can live a fulfilling life independently, by working hard or traveling, say, deep down inside she is still in want of a man, and, unsurprisingly, she eventually falls in love with one. Berlant notes how women are distracted from challenging the oppressive nature of “sentimentality” and heteronormative ideals and that rather than involve themselves with politics they are expected to devote their time and energy to finding love and security—what Berlant sarcastically describes as “having a life” (*The Female Complaint* 214). “Women’s culture,” according to Berlant, is considered “unfinished business” because it neglects an entire spectrum of other identities women could embrace instead of love plots or domestic fantasies. Romance is treated as something that women in sentimental novels are often initially unaware of before they are taught to appreciate or desire it. Even today, it seems as though the public waits with baited breath for women—even independent or romantically uninterested women—to finally consume conventional romance and learn “what it means to love.” When women are unable to find satisfaction in love, advice or consolation usually comes in the form of a romantically optimistic statement like “You just haven’t found the right man yet,” a statement that still urges consumption of the love plot rather than considering alternative sources of happiness.

Another facet of the love plot is the man who feels the need to “fight” for a woman, especially if she is “hard-to-get” or uninterested in romance. Literature and popular media, even

today, more often than not portrays men as assuming the role of initiator in a romance. Even when a man does approach the object of his romantic desires, often a conflict arises such as a difference in class or the existence of another spouse or even extreme political differences such as in Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) or in the romantic classic *Romeo and Juliet* (1597). Even contemporary romances employ complications or obstacles as the foundation of the romance: for example, in Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005) series, love between a vampire and a human presents conflicts between the different species. The love plot is exactly that—a love *plot*, a narrative constructed entirely around the likelihood of two characters forming a romantic relationship. Other conflicts that arise are merely side acts that only serve to demonstrate the loyalty or devotion of the two characters who, regardless of how much or how little they have in common, are “meant to be.”

What I aim to examine in this analysis is the failure of the love plot and the “what next?” that occurs after a romance has fallen through and has no hope of ever being rekindled. I describe the fictional women who find themselves not following the conventions of the love plot and who find themselves, consequently, “inconvenient” because their rejections of the love plot disrupt their lives and the lives of those around them. An “inconvenient” woman such as Lady Isabel can be deeply unhappy within conventional romance, a rejection that contrasts with Berlant's argument that women seek to define themselves through sentimentality. To be clear, the declaration of resisting the love plot—as Jane Eyre can be interpreted as doing when she leaves Mr. Rochester—is not what I would define as inconvenient. Rather, the inconvenient expressions of the characters I observe are the result of either choosing to reject the love plot or of being forced out of it due to unfortunate, yet realistic, circumstances. Women who do not participate in

the love plot offer less in the way of an optimistically happy ending—after all, if love can fail once, especially if it’s the “fault” of the heroine in the first place, there is nothing in particular preventing the failure of the love plot from occurring again, as Berlant claims in her definition of the “amnesia” that love fosters. Consider the case of *Jane Eyre*’s Bertha Mason, who is afforded only one chance at love and when her romance with Mr. Rochester dissolves, she is stripped not just of her chances for romance but of her identity entirely. In fact, even today Bertha is primarily known in popular culture as “the madwoman in the attic.” She is the ultimate inconvenience, not only to Mr. Rochester but also to Jane, an object of pity and the victim of unrequited love and her own irrationality. An “inconvenient” woman is threatening by nature of her existence without a romance within which to define herself. She threatens the oppressive institution of the love plot by exemplifying its severe flaws or by failing to find happiness within it.

I am employing “shame” defined by Silvan Tomkins’s affect theory in order to approach how it is presented in texts. Gregory J. Seigworth, editor of *The Affect Theory Reader*, summarizes Tomkins’s definition of an affect as “the prime ‘interest’ motivator that comes to put the drive in bodily drives” (6). Affects are not narrowly defined in the way that emotions and facial expressions are: rather, affects are somewhat “fluid” and “liminal”—they exist in the “in-betweens” of stimulation and reaction, as Seigworth explains: “Affect is integral to a body’s perpetual becoming ... pulled beyond its seeming surface-boundness by way of its relation to, indeed its composition through, the forces of encounter” (3). Employing Silvan Tomkins’s definition, I demonstrate how shame operates in the love plot. According to Tomkins in *Shame and Its Sisters*, “the innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest or joy”

(123). It follows then that a reduction of interest or joy in the love plot, an interest often demanded of women by what Berlant calls “women’s culture,” can culminate in shame. Tomkins takes a more psychological, rather than literary, approach to discussing shame, but notes that “it is both an interruption and a further impediment to communication, which is itself communication” (137). I argue that the communication of shame itself also contribute to a woman’s “inconvenience” as it threatens the optimistic fantasy of the love plot. Of course, shame is a natural human emotion and the purpose of this analysis is not to dismiss it as a kind of tortuous punishment for the women who navigate outside of the love plot. Rather, affect theory does not dismiss emotions and expressions as “illogical” or “impractical.” Instead it presents emotional experiences as complex spaces in which memories and stimuli mesh and produce reactions. I approach shame as both an internal and external force and I aim to explain how it functions in “sentimental” women’s culture, whether it is embraced as an alternative (in the case of *East Lynne*) or contributes to mental deterioration and desperation (in the case of *Wide Sargasso Sea*).

Important to note is the treatment of female agency in regards to the love plot. Both of the texts I examine for my analysis are vastly different and the motivations of their protagonists differ immensely. In *East Lynne*, love is never fulfilling or a source of genuine happiness for Lady Isabel, resulting in her desperate attempts to find fulfillment and identity elsewhere. *East Lynne* is still presented as a cautionary tale in its attempts to illustrate Lady Isabel’s follies and her subsequent punishment; however, I argue that it offers a stringent critique of the love plot itself, not just Lady Isabel’s failures to conform to it. By contrast, *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s Antoinette hesitantly consumes her love plot but when the uneasy Edward begins to back out,

she finds herself trying everything possible to keep him and maintain their intimacy and companionship. *Wide Sargasso Sea* was penned during the beginning of the so-called sexual revolution, and its portrayal of the oppressive nature of marriage anticipates the consciousness-raising novels published after it in the 1970s. If *East Lynne* is more of a cautionary tale, then *Wide Sargasso Sea* is one meant to inspire a thoughtful critique of Bertha Mason's failed love plot in relation to Jane Eyre's optimistic one. Both Antoinette and Lady Isabel's inconvenient relationship with the love plot and the roles it demands of them contrast with Jane Eyre, who remains indifferent to the love plot's hold on her life until she can settle comfortably within it, arguably without ever making herself seem as foolish and lovesick as Mr. Rochester.

Ultimately, the love plot is not altogether an entirely evil force but it can be used as a tool for oppression, resulting in shame on the part of the subject. I aim to examine the gendered roles the love plot imposes on women in fiction and how they are shamed after the love plot's failure. The love plot is somewhat cyclical in nature, and by demanding women remain optimistic about romance in the future, it seems to suggest that all of the suffering associated with disenchantment with love will be eventually "rewarded." Despite Jane Eyre's claim that "no net ensnares me," I would argue that Jane is in fact *very* much ensnared in the expectations and passive longing that by the novel's end serve to dictate the rest of her life (Brontë 378).

## **Shame and Sentimentality: *East Lynne* and the Choice to Suffer**

The fantasy of the love plot suggests that more than simply favorable circumstances are at play when two characters engage in a romantic relationship. The conditions that allow for two characters to end up in a healthy and loving marriage often seem excessively perfect and somewhat contrived, such as Bertha Mason's convenient death towards the end of *Jane Eyre* (1847), which allows Jane to pursue a romantic future with Mr. Rochester. Literature for women is often guilty of molding the plot around the impending relationship between two characters. In her critique of sentimental culture, *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant argues that fictional women identify themselves primarily through a love plot or at least the promise of a love plot (5). Berlant describes "women's culture" as an intimate public, or a sphere in which women's interests circulate in the form of texts or other elements of media and consumable objects (*The Female Complaint* 5). Indeed, for a genre such as a sensation novel that relies heavily on shock and suspense, a love plot can provide mystery around the fate of a romance or secrets within it.

Named for its ability to provoke "sensations" in readers, the sensation novel of mid-Victorian Britain, while not exclusively marketed to women, still functioned as a novel widely read by women. Sensation novels rely on the dramatic scandals and mysteries surrounding its characters to perpetuate a story often set in a regular English environment, making the stories accessible for the British middle-class. Anna Maria Jones notes the importance of suspense and mystery in many sensation novels, novels "titillating with the spectacle of transgression and reassuring with its exercise of disciplinary power over that transgression" (22). Often published in a serialized form via monthly magazines, sensation fiction functioned as mass-marketed entertainment. Sensation novels present interesting treatments of marriage, often detailing

scandal as the crux of its love plots rather than domestic bliss. Bigamy and extramarital affairs represent popular elements of the sensation novel, illustrating criminal marriages and unconventional romances that unfold in bizarre ways.

Sensation novels could provide a Victorian audience with an alternative to the traditional love plot women were expected to desire by way of shocking affairs and bigamy. Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1860-61), originally serialized in *New Monthly Magazine*, presents such an alternative to the conventional love plot. I argue that the women of *East Lynne* exhibit inconvenient emotions and that their shame or lack thereof serve as a means for the sentimental love plot to be critiqued. I will specifically be comparing Lady Isabel Vane, an orphaned aristocrat who marries a successful lawyer, Mr. Carlyle, in order to be taken care of, and Barbara Hare, a neighbor of Isabel who later becomes Mr. Carlyle's second wife. I also assert that shame functions as a "love object"—a focal point of interest and motivation—for Lady Isabel, in place of her family or her esteemed position as an upper-middle-class Victorian housewife. Additionally, I refer to *Jane Eyre* as a touchstone for defining the parameters of a conventional love plot since it shares similar plot elements with *East Lynne*. Although critics do not usually read sensation novels in relation to *Jane Eyre*, we can see a surprising number of similarities, which suggests that Brontë's novel can in fact be examined alongside *East Lynne* since both texts provide examples of the love plot's parameters.

As I discuss in my introduction, affect theory provides a useful methodology when approaching the subject of shame because it treats shame as a consequence of a previous affect, interest. Without initial interest shame cannot exist, since shame is the self-conscious severance of interest (Tomkins 136). Lauren Berlant's work is of particular use to an analysis of shame and



sentimentality. In her essay “Cruel Optimism,” later expanded into a monograph of the same name, Berlant defines the “love object” as a cluster of promises and what-ifs, and “cruel optimism” as the anticipation of the loss of the love object (94). *East Lynne* is rife with instances in which the normative ideals of a sentimental culture—the love plot and the culmination of a family—are rejected or lost. Lady Isabel’s shame arises from her severance of interest in the love plot; however, by examining her shame alongside cruel optimism, we become aware of Lady Isabel’s agency and her reasoning behind leaving her family.

### Literature Review

Of some interest to the scholars who analyze *East Lynne* is the treatment of melodrama and what I refer to as “inconvenient emotions,” or what Athena Vrettos refers to as “excessive affect” in her study of Victorian hysteria (29). Perhaps the most significant piece of scholarship on *East Lynne* is Ann Cvetkovich’s book *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* in which Cvetkovich argues that “nineteenth-century culture invented the suffering woman, and that she serves a political purpose beyond the need to tell her story” (98). In particular, Cvetkovich is concerned with the act of crying in *East Lynne* and the implications and effects of such an emotional response. In *Shame and Its Sisters*, Sedgwick and Frank are skeptical of Cvetkovich’s approach to affect, citing it as too compartmentalizing; however, her analysis of suffering as a source of pleasure for Lady Isabel remains particularly enlightening. Cvetkovich argues that “in addition to providing an outlet for the expression of suffering, *East Lynne* accomplishes the more complex task of converting pain into pleasure” (100), invoking the presence of masochism in the text. Other critics have offered interesting treatments of *East Lynne* in recent years, such as Anne-Marie Beller and Heidi Hansson. All

these accounts of *East Lynne* have attempted to define the scope of female agency in the novel, usually somehow in relation to hysteria. Following from these, I argue that in Lady Isabel's case, agency takes the form of replacing the heteronormative love plot with an obsessive desire to shame herself. My intent is neither to condemn Lady Isabel nor to make a sympathetic case for her character. Rather, I want to examine her married life and what it means for a woman to reject marriage, domesticity, and especially love.

*East Lynne* is a fitting novel to examine shame as a dysfunctional mechanism in a love plot due to its "backwards" approach to romance. The text begins with the death of Isabel's irresponsible father, and, despite her aristocratic status, she is left penniless and is forced to marry Mr. Carlyle in order to live comfortably. Mr. Carlyle is a loving husband, and the couple has three children together, fulfilling the purpose of conventional romance early on in the text. However, Isabel is unable to shake the melancholy that plagues her, and to make matters worse, she is intensely suspicious that Mr. Carlyle is engaging in an affair with their neighbor, Barbara Hare. In a fit of jealous passion, Isabel leaves her home and her family to pursue a short-lived affair with an unscrupulous man, Francis Levison, who leaves her. Shortly thereafter, Isabel is disfigured in a train accident and takes advantage of her new physical identity to disguise herself as a governess and work for Mr. Carlyle in his own house after he has married Barbara Hare, believing Isabel to be dead. As I will argue, Isabel adopts shame as a "love object" in place of romance and domestic happiness, which she could never enjoy when she had it, in contrast with Barbara, who invests fully in, and is thus rewarded by, the love plot.

## Barbara and the Love Plot

Barbara Hare consumes the love plot and allows her identity to be dictated by the sentimental promise of true and everlasting love, brought together by perfect circumstances. Her expressions and confessions, while equally as inconvenient and occasionally as hysterical as Isabel's, result in her shame, but do not altogether deter her from pursuing a romance with Mr. Carlyle. In Barbara's case, the affect of "interest" is one that she does not sever. Rather, Barbara clings to the promise of love, engaging in the "female complaint" that Berlant cites as the limiting factor in women's identity-formation. The female complaint is inherently distrusting of the self and frustrated with men who are unwilling to submit to romance, while still ultimately investing in romance and never considering other options (*The Female Complaint 2*). Indeed, Barbara's conflict to win Mr. Carlyle's love becomes the sole purpose of her life, since "the emotional labor of women places them at the center of the story of what counts as life, regardless of what lives women actually live ... femininity marks the scene of the reproduction of life as a project" (20). Barbara's love plot with Mr. Carlyle, at first hopeless, is made conveniently possible by the fact that Mr. Carlyle is a lawyer involved in the murder mystery surrounding Barbara's older brother, Richard, who has gone into hiding in order to avoid being framed for the crime. Mr. Carlyle and Barbara frequently meet in secret to discuss the case, and Barbara eventually confesses her love to a rather dismissive Mr. Carlyle. After Barbara's desperate and hysterical confession of love, Mr. Carlyle muses: "I heartily hope she will soon find someone to her liking, and forget me ... As to living and dying Barbara Hare, that is all moonshine; the sentimental rubbish that girls like" (Wood 215). Despite Mr. Carlyle's dismissal of Barbara's feelings, the eventual romance that blooms between them seems almost natural to the reader

since Barbara so earnestly consumes the love plot. This alone is enough to foster a love plot even if the two characters don't seem to have much in common apart from an involvement in a legal issue. As a product of a culture that glorifies sentimentality, Barbara is willing to mold herself to be whatever Mr. Carlyle desires.

Barbara does indeed experience shame as a result of the confessional incident, and the text even admits that “a little self-control and Barbara would not have uttered words that remain on her mind hereafter as an incubus, dyeing her cheeks red whenever she recalled them” (212). Barbara's open acknowledgment of her investment in the love plot and of her burning belief in dreams of a future romance with Mr. Carlyle are the source of her shame. However, the shame is still deeply entrenched in the love plot itself, unlike Lady Isabel's obsession with shame and punishment that attempts to free itself from conventional romance. By applying the Tomkins definition of shame as an affect, we might say that Mr. Carlyle serves as the “love object” or source of interest for Barbara. Barbara resists severing that interest upon her confession after his dismissive rejection. In contrast, Lady Isabel is ashamed as a result of her lack of interest in the “female complaint.” Lady Isabel's punishment becomes the only alternative to a love plot in which she does not wish to participate.

### Isabel and Rejection

Isabel's rejection of the love plot suggests that she had anticipated such a punishing outcome and was willing to choose a life of suffering and shame even before her disfigurement. Isabel's initial success in love attests to the attainability of the love plot. Her convenient circumstances and later *inconvenient* circumstances can be read as what she morally “deserves,” particularly in a sensation novel in which contrived events happen regularly. However, Isabel

rejects this notion of romantic circumstance, adopting a great deal of personal agency towards the end of the novel that allows her to do as she pleases outside the sphere of romance. After leaving her husband and family in disgrace, Isabel is freed from the constraints of, in Berlant's words, "compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered to be ... too possible, and toxic" (*The Female Complaint* 94). The romantic fulfillment of having acquired a loving, successful husband and several children, the dream of any good Victorian woman (at least in theory), forces Isabel to confront the fact that there is almost nothing she could feasibly do to improve her situation and cure her lingering depression. The incessant bullying Isabel suffers at the hands of Mr. Carlyle's obnoxious sister is another cause for her budding shame and unhappiness: "It struck a complete chill to Isabel's heart, and she became painfully imbued with the incubus she must be to Mr. Carlyle—so far as his purse was concerned" (Wood 217). The loss of an attachment to her husband and family, while a source of regret later on, is something that Isabel at least anticipates. Her choice to navigate outside of the love plot is a permanent one, as a fallen woman cannot possibly return to her former position within the family and society, and therefore when Isabel finds herself persuaded by the villain Francis Levison into a clandestine affair, she is completely aware of the repercussions for her actions.

Isabel never expresses genuine romantic interest in Mr. Carlyle, despite all of his conventionally desirable qualities such as his handsomeness, his successful law firm, and his gentle disposition. Consequently, Isabel feels ashamed at her lack of interest in him and rather than express pity or detachment she engages in the relationship anyway. Isabel seeks to protect the emotionally invested Mr. Carlyle from scandal and emasculating shame should she reject his proposal of marriage. While blaming herself for her lack of interest, "Isabel did not love him: of

that she was conscious; but her deep and earnest hope by night and by day was that she might learn to love him, for she knew that he deserved it” (Wood 190). Isabel does not seem to demand love from Mr. Carlyle and instead considers the economically convenient marriage one-sided and somewhat incomplete. Isabel does not invest in Berlant’s “female complaint” like Barbara and her only coping mechanism within her unhappy marriage is gloomy silence.

Ann Cvetkovich argues that *East Lynne*’s narrative is somewhat manipulative in its treatment of Isabel’s marital problems. Cvetkovich asserts that “by depicting Isabel’s suffering as the result of her silence ... the novel can suggest that relief would be provided if she could only articulate her feelings” (98). Cvetkovich is skeptical of this solution, and I would argue that the communication of Isabel’s feelings could not possibly alleviate her suffering since she finds herself in a position that she never wanted to begin with. The problem does not lie in Mr. Carlyle, who is never described as having any severe shortcomings besides his somewhat patronizing dismissal of Isabel’s meek expressions of unhappiness, expressions that, to Mr. Carlyle, are inconvenient. Therefore, were Isabel to confront Mr. Carlyle with more urgency about her problems, nothing in the text suggests that her husband would be any more likely to take her seriously. Choosing a new partner in the form of Levison does not provide Isabel with happiness either, and by that point in the story the possibility of her ever living as a normal housewife again is destroyed. Isabel’s choices culminate in a reinforcement of her rejection of the love plot in favor of her choice to suffer in shame.

*East Lynne* presents the possibility of never engaging in romance to begin with in the form of Mr. Carlyle’s sister Cornelia. She is the only woman of *East Lynne* who remains entirely uninvolved with a romantic partner, yet she exemplifies the unmanageable, bossy shrew that Mr.

Carlyle more often than not just chooses to ignore or regard with indifference. Not much insight is offered about Cornelia or why she has remained unmarried for so long, but she effectively offers a representation of what it means to be unwed. Although Isabel is unhappily married, and Cornelia Carlyle is portrayed as fairly content living off of her brother, outside of a love plot, Cornelia still effectively “sours” the representation of older, unmarried women. Cornelia is pitted against Isabel for her brother’s attention, but her abrasive personality is meant to signify why she has remained unmarried for so long. Although, according to Berlant, all women are expected to situate themselves within a love plot, the alternative could signify a character flaw or even ugliness. While Cornelia is a strong, albeit obnoxious character, she never offers any sentimental expressions, in contrast with Lady Isabel’s overwhelming feelings of misery or suffering.

Cvetkovich asserts that *East Lynne* illustrates how “patriarchal culture does violence to women by forcing them to hide their feelings, and that the expression of those feelings will alleviate their suffering” (98). Although I argue that the shame and suffering are Isabel’s avenues of escape from marriage, she is still operating within the oppressive cycle of the love plot. Isabel is unable to entirely free herself from societal structures and, as a result, she is forced to exist within a liminal space between freedom and submissiveness as an “unmarried” woman who is still subject to oppression and control due to her employment under Mr. Carlyle.

### Masochism

Although *East Lynne* opens up a space for readers to critique the love plot, it still reinforces the notion that Lady Isabel is committed to some kind of structure in her life centered around a man. Her commitment to structure is even applicable after she leaves and then returns in disguise to her family. Isabel’s relationship with shame allows her to at least exercise some

degree of agency, such as her decision to move back to England after working in Germany as a governess. Devoting her life to punishment and self-flagellation is one way Isabel can navigate outside of her love plot and unhappy marriage. Her interest and her passion lie in atoning for the destruction of her marriage, despite the fact that Mr. Carlyle marries Barbara (unknowingly committing bigamy), and therefore Isabel's sacrifice seems extraordinarily unnecessary. The self-inflicted suffering that Isabel forces herself to endure gives her life a structure, a kind of framework within which she can mold herself and construct an identity without having to submit to a romantic fantasy. Isabel's employment contract with Mr. Carlyle serves as a kind of grotesque mirror to her marriage contract with him in which she can impose despair and misery upon herself. Her contract becomes a literal representation of her masochistic commitment to suffering, and as Anna Maria Jones illustrates in her analysis of masochistic subjects and their relationships with hierarchies of power, "the masochistic contract requires punishment, suffering, and sacrifice, but most important, it demands agency. Passive suffering alone is not enough—one must consent to, contract to suffer" (27). Although Isabel takes a kind of masochistic pleasure in her position as a disfigured governess—as Cvetkovich argues in her analysis of Isabel's emotional manipulation—she refuses to let herself outwardly display the signs of suffering:

It was with utmost difficulty she kept tranquil: had the tears once burst forth, they would have gone on the hysterics, without the possibility of control. . . . She knelt down by the bed, and prayed for courage to go through the task she had undertaken, prayed for self-control: even she, the sinful, who had quitted that house under circumstances so notorious. (Wood 459)



Even Isabel's deathbed scene can be interpreted as a masochistic scenario with an element of agency behind it. Rather than interpret the suffering itself as producing masochistic pleasure, Anne-Marie Beller interprets Isabel's death as a reward: "It would therefore be more consistent to read Isabel Vane's death as a final blessing, bestowed by Wood as a recognition of her true goodness and patient suffering" (225). I would interpret Isabel's "reward" as her rejection of her own marriage and the identity and fulfillment she is able to foster through her suffering.

By denying herself the ability to outwardly display her inconvenient emotions, Isabel is inflicting another form of masochistic punishment on herself. *East Lynne's* narrative regularly employs violent imagery to refer to Isabel's suffering and self-punishment, such as "adder-like stings" and "gnawing retribution" (335). Heidi Hansson takes note of the fact that "in [*East Lynne*], women's emotions are typically referred to in terms of storms and natural disasters" (156), further demonstrating the violent and destructive consequences of hysterical, inconvenient emotions. The paramount image of Isabel's embodied shame is offered in the form of "the cross—far heavier though it was proving than anything she had imagined or pictured—was only what she had brought upon herself, and must bear" (471). Isabel's "cross" is mentioned several times towards the end of the novel, especially in relation to how heavy it weighs upon her shoulders. Isabel is still shackled into a contract that makes her miserable; however, I would argue that her decision to live a life of suffering attests to how, for her, such a life is preferable to the life offered by the conventional romance plot. Although Isabel's shame is consistently illustrated with such unpleasant descriptions, any alternative to punishment is not even considered. Isabel is entirely consumed by her present suffering.

## Amnesia

*East Lynne* forces the reader to consider the consequences of achieving the ideal female life through a love plot by incorporating different approaches to memory and retrospect. Both Isabel and Barbara engage in different approaches to “memories” associated with the love plot. That is to say, Barbara continues to pursue conventional romance despite the suffering it has caused her in the past. In contrast, Isabel holds deeply to her memories and therefore her shame associated with her failed marriage. Berlant refers to “amnesia” such as Barbara’s as the result of having “multiple motives for the desire to forget—to drown out, to diminish, to reshape, the repress, to remotivate, to sublimate—the standard traumas of intimacy, whenever love enters in” (*The Female Complaint* 170). Barbara desperately returns again and again to the idea of marrying Mr. Carlyle despite its unlikelihood, even indignantly insisting that if he doesn’t marry her she will consequently remain unmarried forever. Barbara is completely invested in the “amnesia” required to consume the love plot, and the reader is unlikely to be surprised that Barbara and Mr. Carlyle end up married despite the fact that earlier in the novel he had made his lack of sentimental feelings toward her very clear. Barbara is even dismissive or “amnesiac” towards Isabel’s existence altogether. Barbara chooses to ignore Isabel’s children who, to her, are just reminders of Isabel and the ever-present threat that her marriage might not last forever. Isabel is not so quick to forget the unhappiness borne out of her marriage and family life, resulting in her affair and her employment under Mr. Carlyle. Isabel’s decision to work for Mr. Carlyle as a governess is a testament to how she rejects the amnesia of a love plot and in fact how she seems obsessed with holding onto the memory of the failure of her romance. She puts

herself in a position of being reminded all the time of what could have been and essentially what was her life while married.

A critique of my argument might assert that Isabel should have had some interest invested in the love plot in order to engage in the overwhelming shame as a result of losing it. However, even though Isabel cries in despair over the loss of her marriage, the text does not suggest that Isabel looks back at her memories with Mr. Carlyle as particularly fond ones. Isabel's personal love plot, even after she has lost it, provides her with a motive for her self-flagellation. To be the employee of Barbara Carlyle is certainly a humiliating experience for Isabel, and her bitter feelings toward Barbara are a way for her to critique the love plot since it is Barbara who embodies all that Isabel had and "ought" to have been happy with. Upon seeing Carlyle and Barbara together as husband and wife, Isabel "[yearned] after his affection with this passionate, jealous longing" (Wood 535). I would argue that it is not Mr. Carlyle himself that Isabel finds herself possessive and jealous towards, but instead her jealousy is a manifestation of her overall dislike of Barbara. Barbara is capable of investing in romance, after all, and Isabel had formerly viewed Barbara's investment in romance as a threat to her own supposedly comfortable life as Mr. Carlyle's wife. Although jealousy and love triangles are common elements of the love plot, Isabel reveals that her jealousy towards Barbara following her marriage to Mr. Carlyle is related to her realizing that she can never again be the object of his—or anyone's—affections. From Isabel's perspective, at one point Barbara "flew off to her idolized husband, leaving her, who had once been the idolized, to her loneliness" (559). Isabel's shame is still very much centered on herself despite the social implications of her actions.

*East Lynne* subverts the love plot by critiquing the social necessity of marriage in a Victorian woman's life and detailing the shame resulting from the destruction of a socially necessary marriage. At one point the narrative directly addresses the reader as though Lady Isabel's experiences should serve as a "warning" to the sensation novel's female reader:

Oh, reader, believe me! Lady—wife—mother! should you ever be tempted to abandon your home, so will you waken! Whatever trials may be the lot of your married life, though they may magnify themselves to your crushed spirit as beyond the endurance of woman to bear, resolve to bear them; fall down upon your knees and pray to be enabled to bear them: pray for patience; pray for strength to resist the demon that would urge you to escape; bear unto death, rather than forfeit your fair name and your good conscience; for be assured that the alternative, if you rush on to it, will be found far worse than death! (335)

The cost of leaving a marriage is forfeiting a "fair name" and a "good conscience" as opposed to forfeiting a romance. Indeed, it is the social institution of a family that renders marriage so important. However, Isabel is still able to raise her children even without a marriage (although legally her marriage to Mr. Carlyle is not void when she goes to work for him). Isabel navigates out of the love plot from a "private sphere," that is, her marriage and family, to a more "public" one, in the form of her employment and humiliating position in the Carlyle household. Although *Jane Eyre* sentimentalizes the position of an English governess in the mid-nineteenth century, the awkwardness of Isabel's position is almost as painful as her self-imposed suffering in the novel. Isabel's shame partly arises from her passage from a private existence to an unpleasant public one, and as Berlant argues, "people who are unhinged or unhitched, who live out of the

normative loops of property and reproduction, are frequently seen as both symptoms of personal failure and threats to the general happiness, which seems to require ... the positioning of any person's core life story in a plot of love's unfolding" (*The Female Complaint* 172). Therefore, the ultimate punishment for Isabel is not the rejection of Mr. Carlyle and what he has to offer as a husband or lover, but instead the shame arising from losing a social position, especially since her purpose in marrying Mr. Carlyle in the first place was to uphold her social position and live a comfortable life. Forced to work for a living as a governess, Isabel has absolutely no chance of ever regaining the status or quality of life she had once enjoyed and punishes herself regularly by musing upon it and making herself feel ashamed. Because, after all, shame stands as the only socially acceptable response for Isabel's actions and by immersing herself in it, Isabel is still able to win the sympathy of *East Lynne*'s readers and maintain a certain degree of social acceptance. For Lady Isabel to experience no repercussions for her actions, the reader would be presented with a narrative that successfully navigated beyond the love plot. Even more threatening to the oppressive standards of conventional romance would be for Lady Isabel to focus her attention in areas completely unrelated to romance or marriage. However, by becoming a governess for her own children, Lady Isabel still manages to reinforce the traditional conventions of femininity and domesticity.

### *East Lynne* as Cautionary Tale

*East Lynne* provides two perspectives on the love plot and helps to give insight into the perspective of what it means to reject the love plot entirely. Since rejecting romance and navigating outside of the love plot are seen as quite taboo, sometimes the only option in order to regain some sort of social sympathy is to adopt shame and punishment as replacements for what

was once affection and love. Although other sensation novels such as *The Woman in White* (1859-60) or *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) detail the mysterious, often immoral lives of their characters, few novels feature a character that is as obsessed with remorse as *East Lynne's* Lady Isabel. However, my argument that Isabel chooses her shame adds another dimension to the subject of shame and suffering on behalf of a lost romance. Not only, in fact, does Isabel choose her shame and her "cross," but she also is able to use shame to cope with her misery and allows it to become a focal point in her life and identity. Barbara, in contrast, sees the love plot as having paramount importance in her life. She is constantly anxious and doesn't seem to exhibit a strong will of her own until Mr. Carlyle marries her. Barbara ignores the remnants of Lady Isabel as Mr. Carlyle's previous wife and continues to live in the sphere of Berlant's "female complaint" and by the end of the novel her romance has come "full circle," culminating in the role of a domestic housewife. By pursuing a life outside of the love plot, Isabel is afforded a far less comfortable, less certain, and ultimately shorter life, but one that at least seems to give her a sense of purpose.

Since the ostensible purpose of the sensation genre is to inspire "sensations" in its readers, the reader response to the love plot is worth analysis. I would argue that some critics of *East Lynne* and of Lady Isabel somewhat neglect the extent of the unfair circumstances, such as the pressure to find fulfillment and blissful happiness in a love plot, of which Lady Isabel is victim. Although *East Lynne's* narrator addresses the reader directly with words of caution, the advice administered does not seem to be applicable to Isabel's situation. Consider both Lady Isabel and Jane Eyre, who not only suffer dismal poverty but also find their "endings" (as far as the texts are concerned) in well-decorated, rich environments. Indeed, following Lady Isabel's

shameful abandonment of her family, the first plight that Wood elaborately addresses is Isabel's rapidly diminishing economic security and how tragic her life will be henceforth as she is forced to earn her own money in addition to selling her few valuable jewels (349). The narrative lists her sins and asks "What had she gained in return?" (349), as though her situation is the result of an unwise economic transaction rather than navigation outside of an oppressive social construct. For the sake of comparing reversed circumstances, it is interesting to note that while Isabel Vane is damned for leaving her upper-middle-class husband for a man of a disgraced, albeit aristocratic background, *Jane Eyre's* Mr. Rochester improves his life by casting off his aristocratic but disturbed wife for the humble, sensible Jane Eyre. Rationality and practicality are treated as desirable traits and yet women are still expected to retain some attachment to sentimentality in order to participate in marriage and the conventional, monogamous love plot.

Despite a possible critique of Lady Isabel's situation based on her socioeconomic privilege, other readers of *East Lynne* are provided an opportunity to project themselves into the text in the form of the middle-class Barbara Hare who willingly consumes the conventions of romance. Isabel serves as a caution to readers because she deviates from the norm and her shame—although I argue that this is an outlet of identity for Isabel—is a deterrent to navigating outside of the love plot. Barbara Hare, conversely, illustrates the domestic benefits of committing to one man (even when he is emotionally unavailable). Unlike Isabel, Barbara's inconvenient emotions are only temporarily inconvenient until she can assume the role of housewife to Mr. Carlyle. Her middle-class status and commitment to the love plot illustrates her "every-womanness" undoubtedly catering to the identities of the sensation novel-reading, middle-class public. Berlant notes that "the works of 'women's culture' enact a fantasy that my life is not just mine, but an

experience understood by other women, even when it is not shared by many or any” (*The Female Complaint* x). Isabel seems to serve as the “other woman” so criticized by those who consume the love plot, an example of ungratefulness and of what *not* to be or do.

In addition to the treatment of the love plot in the novel, the treatment of inconvenient emotion is worth study. Readers of *East Lynne* are exposed to negative depictions of emotional expression, unlike those of *Jane Eyre* in which Jane epitomizes rationality and emotional restraint, as Ortberg’s post on *The Hairpin* demonstrates. What is being communicated to Victorian readers is the danger of “excessive affect.” Despite the fact that Barbara’s love plot eventually works to her advantage, she is only rewarded for her suffering after Isabel has left her family, not when she desperately confesses her love to Mr. Carlyle.

By examining deviations from the love plot in the Victorian era, more can be understood about the origins of the love plot and its evolution. In *East Lynne*, Isabel’s family takes precedence in her life even after she pursues a scandalous affair and leaves her children. However, as Berlant points out in *The Female Complaint*, a significant shift was occurring in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that placed the couple before the family unit; additionally, the idea of marrying for love as opposed to social status was becoming more commonplace (15). The love plot essentially became even more constrictive than ever, and its emphasis on the relationship between two people is an element of sentimental culture frequently seen today in works of literature or film. Such an important cultural shift regarding the normative approach to romance is worth study, especially when considering how love and romance are considered such integral elements to the female identity and, by contrast, such relatively inconsequential elements of the male identity. Within sentimental fiction, the love plot demands that women to be both



willing to invest in the love plot while at the same time maintaining a certain amount of distance from the “love object,” a man, who ultimately maintains control over the outcome of romance. While historically, detached women are “wooded” by infatuated men, the infatuated woman is often portrayed as inconvenient and annoying. Even worse, as in the case of Lady Isabel, is the woman who has been exposed to the romantic ideal and still finds it unfulfilling, an attitude that is portrayed in literature as unnatural and shameful.

## **Ignoring Shame in *Wide Sargasso Sea***

Although *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is Jean Rhys's most famous novel, the topic of socially, sexually, and racially "inconvenient" women is one that Rhys explored almost forty years prior. Preceding *Wide Sargasso Sea* are Rhys's novels such as *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1931) and *Voyage in the Dark* (1934). Following the publication of her novel *Good Morning Midnight* (1939), Rhys took a hiatus from publishing novels for over fifteen years. In that time she experienced two marriages (Wyndham 6). Rhys's temporary retirement came to an end when she managed to have her most famous novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, published in 1966 after a few years of penning short stories for magazines (6). Rhys's commitment to the topic of the female "breakdown" and its effect on men in her fiction undertakes an insightful critique of how men view women and their "inconvenient" expressions. Jean Rhys does not abandon this perspective in her later works. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys explores the trope of the "inconvenient" woman in a neo-Victorian context. While writing in the mid-1960s, Rhys would have been in midst of the so-called sexual revolution, a time of increased awareness about women's issues and sexuality. By revisiting the Victorian era in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, her only novel that does so, Rhys is able to demonstrate the oppressive nature of the love plot that still existed in the 1960s and indeed, exists today. The classic Charlotte Brontë novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) provides Rhys with one of the most popular "inconvenient" characters, the infamous "madwoman in the attic" known as Bertha Mason.

I argue that *Wide Sargasso Sea* serves as a critique of the love plot, contrasting with *Jane Eyre*. Bertha's role in *Jane Eyre* is a cautionary example for Jane, not unlike Isabel Vane in Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1860-61), although Bertha's punishment for navigating outside of

the love plot is beyond her control. Comparing Jane and Bertha is a popular subject for many critics who argue that the two are representative of a hysterical, disturbed identity constantly at war with a practical, self-disciplined identity. While my purpose is not to argue that Jane and Antoinette are one in the same who merely manage their affects differently, I argue that the progress Jane experiences communicates to readers that convenience will result in happiness and domestic security, while inconvenience will result in being distrusted and ignored. In her comparison of Jane and Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, Patsy Stoneman notes that:

[Bertha] is no longer confined and unmentionable but has, precariously, the status of speaking subject ... *Wide Sargasso Sea* forced readers to acknowledge the existence of a colonial woman within the text of *Jane Eyre*—a woman, who, though conceivably once articulate, is now denied access to rational discourse which is Jane's salvation from hysteria, and can only manifest her anger 'in perverse ways.' (187)

Since *Jane Eyre* illustrates the benefits of stifling inconvenient emotions, *Wide Sargasso Sea* returns to the notion of the domestic happy ending and seems to ask, "Is this really what Jane wants?" Suddenly Jane's future with Rochester is up for the reader's speculation. Despite Stoneman's argument that rational discourse is Jane's "salvation," I would argue that the love plot demands irrational behavior often on the part of the woman. If, as Berlant says, "love is the enemy of memory," then investment in Berlant's amnesia and dismissing all of the failures and oppression of the love plot can result in the cycle of "the female complaint" repeating itself forever (*The Female Complaint* 169).

Despite *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s focus on Bertha Mason as its protagonist, the novel is told from Bertha's point of view during only two parts of the three-part novel. Edward Rochester's point-of-view occupies most of the novel's second part, and consequently readers are given little access to Antoinette's thoughts during the beginning of her marriage. As a result, the novel manages to communicate both perspectives on the issue of female inconvenience and a failed love plot, while simultaneously affording Rochester the ability to control the narrative. Rochester's control of the narrative and his subsequent manipulation of Antoinette are indicative of how oppressive the love plot is for women who are not afforded any way out. Unlike Wood's Victorian sensation novel *East Lynne*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* illustrates a love plot that ultimately collapses without any choice or agency afforded to its heroine. Although women can reject the love plot and suffer by choice like Lady Isabel Vane of *East Lynne*, Antoinette's love plot is instead pulled out from under her despite her investment in it. Following the demise of her relationship with Rochester, Antoinette's "madness" (as Rochester seems to interpret it) manifests itself in order for her to cope with the crippling shame she is forced to endure. I argue that Antoinette's shame is not a choice that she makes freely as her love plot unravels, and that *Wide Sargasso Sea* demonstrates the dangers of the love plot even to women who invest in its fantasies. I aim to analyze not only Antoinette's perverse, doomed love plot but also her role as an "inconvenient" woman to her husband. Finally, I argue that the neo-Victorian *Wide Sargasso Sea*, written during the beginning of the Sexual Revolution and Civil Rights Movement, is a critique of the love plot as a sexist and oppressive institution.

Using the definition of the "shame affect" outlined in the Silvan Tomkins reader, we can understand Antoinette's shame straightforwardly in the form of the forced severance of her love,

or “interest,” in her husband. Recall that, according to Tomkins in *Shame and Its Sisters*, shame is characterized primarily as a response to the interruption of the “interest” affect, or as Tomkins puts it, “a specific inhibitor of continuing interest and enjoyment” (134 ). Additionally, shame is a form of interaction with the self and with others. As an affect, it has a physical manifestation and even its own gestures and expressions such as blushing or hiding the face (137). Affect theory and its take on shame are of particular use when analyzing Antoinette’s madness in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Her desire to participate in the love plot is interrupted as a result of factors that she cannot control, and since she is left with no free choices or agency of her own, Antoinette’s role in Rochester’s life turns swiftly from impassioned lover to a fierce inconvenience. Even Antoinette’s heritage and environment are sources of shame for her, validating Rochester’s paranoia and equipping him with a “reason” to abuse and neglect his wife.

Since *Wide Sargasso Sea* is an extension of Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, much scholarship is devoted to the similarities and differences between Jane and Antoinette. I would argue that, although Jane and Antoinette certainly exemplify different behaviors and certainly have different heritages, they are both swept into the same sort of love plot with the same man. *Wide Sargasso Sea* demands its readers recognize Antoinette as a speaking subject, but also demands its readers recognize that Jane’s romance could be in as much danger of dissolving as Antoinette’s.

Although in my previous chapter I examined how shame can be forged as a kind of new identity, in this chapter I aim to explore how conventional romance can be rejected by remembering the shame that it can produce. I utilize Lauren Berlant’s critique of sentimental fiction and love plots, specifically her use of the term “amnesia” to refer to how women consistently invest in the cycle of romance no matter how badly the love plot has played out in the past. In addition to

providing a critique of the love plot, *Wide Sargasso Sea* also offers much in the way of postcolonial critique. *Wide Sargasso Sea* anticipates the consciousness-raising novels of the 1970s, novels that attempted to shift the focus from sentimental fiction to a more politically-disruptive mode in women's fiction.

### Literature Review

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is a widely studied text, and critics regularly propose arguments dedicated to analyzing the racial themes of the novel. Since the novel serves as a kind of companion to *Jane Eyre*, many critics seek to understand the relationships between the two works and why Rhys returned to a Victorian time period in order to illustrate her story since her earlier novels such as *Voyage in the Dark* include settings that are relatively faithful to the time periods in which they were written. Critics such as Susan Lydon, John Gruesser, and Sylvie Maurel attempt to analyze the relationship between Antoinette and Rochester, and are particularly concerned with environment and the postcolonial implications of the novel. Lydon seeks to analyze the "leaving" and "returning to" domestic space in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*, while Gruesser offers a study of Rochester's total control over Antoinette. Sylvie Maurel's article is particularly interesting, as it poses the argument that *Jane Eyre* offers a "wintry" romance of "reality," while *Wide Sargasso Sea* presents a romantic ideal that is exotic and wild (despite Rochester's extreme discomfort on the island). Although Maurel is concerned with the overt sexuality of the "Other" and the Caribbean environment, I would argue that it is in fact *Jane Eyre* that offers a conventional romantic fantasy. In line with my argument about amnesia, John J. Su offers the analysis that Antoinette is forever looking backwards. Su asserts that Antoinette's primary perspective is one of nostalgia and a consistently backwards-looking

narrative is mostly concerned with her childhood and memories on her island home. Finally, significant scholarship is devoted to understanding Antoinette's madness, such as articles by Paula Grace Anderson and Rajeev S. Patke. Anderson makes the case that Antoinette is entirely a victim of the manipulative and greedy Rochester, while Patke characterizes Antoinette as one who merely wishes to end her suffering through death. I attempt to provide a different perspective on Antoinette and Rochester's relationship as well as on her madness. While I agree with Anderson to the extent that Antoinette lacks significant agency, I do not propose that she is ignorant of the love plot and its promises.

Although *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847, *Wide Sargasso Sea* seeks to revisit some of the elements of the novel long before Jane appears, specifically the beginning of Bertha Mason and Edward Rochester's marriage. The first part of the novel is told in Antoinette's first-person point-of-view and details her childhood on an unnamed Caribbean island. Antoinette Cosway is the Creole daughter of a failing family. Her mother marries an Englishman in an attempt to better the family, a family that includes Antoinette and her disabled younger brother. After the Cosway family's former slaves engage in several uprisings, and following the death of her helpless son, Antoinette's mother descends into madness. When Antoinette's adoptive father realizes how dangerous and alien the island is, he leaves Antoinette's mother behind to return to England while she suffers abuse at the hands of those who are tasked with caring for her. Antoinette is sent to a boarding school and returns to marry a man who, we eventually realize, is Edward Rochester (although he is never officially named). As a member of landed gentry and a second son, Rochester's decision to marry Antoinette is an economic one in order to assume power over her estate.

The second part of the novel is told almost entirely from Rochester's first-person point-of-view, and therefore the reader isn't offered much insight into Antoinette's perspective on her marriage. Rochester notes that Antoinette is reluctant to marry him at first but once the two are wed he spoils her with attention and sex, while she attempts to expose Rochester to her inner world and the importance of the island to her memories and sense of self. However, Rochester becomes increasingly paranoid and distrustful of his new wife, meeting secretly with Daniel Cosway, a man claiming to be Antoinette's half-brother. Daniel exposes the story of Antoinette's mother and her tragic fate to Rochester, who becomes convinced that his wife will follow in her mother's footsteps. Antoinette attempts to rekindle their love but Rochester only grows to resent her more, having sex with a servant girl as a final act of dismissal of Antoinette's desperate love. The third part of the novel switches back to Antoinette's point of view and takes place during the action of *Jane Eyre*. The reader is offered insight into the daily life of Antoinette, who is now referred to as Bertha Mason, and how her madness has and has not affected her perceptions about her situation of being locked in the attic of Thornfield Hall. Bertha dreams of burning the entire estate down, and the novel ends with her silent escape out of her room. The novel is unclear as to whether or not this is the instance from *Jane Eyre* in which Bertha attempts to set fire to Rochester's bed.

### Antoinette's Narrative

Antoinette's shame upon losing her love plot demands that she be aware of what the love plot has to offer her in the first place. Antoinette's initial hesitation in marrying Rochester brings to mind Jane Eyre's own reservations about romance. In her analysis of Antoinette/Bertha's madness, Paula Grace Anderson contends that Antoinette is essentially ignorant about love,



claiming that “because Antoinette internalizes the image of femininity-as-passivity, she drifts blindly (like the moths which she watches burning themselves to death on the lamp) and fatalistically, into an obviously ill-fated marriage. Her innocence is her excuse” (62). While I would agree that Antoinette is given little choice in the matter regarding her marriage, “innocence” fails to accurately describe the kind of expectations Antoinette has for herself and for her relationship with Rochester. Despite her youth, Antoinette’s grim past makes clear that ill-fated relationships are a concept to which she has been exposed and of which she is wary before marrying Rochester. Before learning of her arranged marriage, Antoinette muses on her expectations for her life, silently critical of the “passivity” she is taught while away at school: “I learnt to say very quickly as the others did, ‘offer up all the prayers, works, and sufferings of this day.’ But what about happiness, I thought at first, is there no happiness? There must be” (Rhys 34). Antoinette’s initial questioning about the possibility of happiness, followed by her claim that “there must be” sets her up for at least some degree of hope and expectation for her life, although she lacks the agency to fulfill her desires.

Although Antoinette is capable of investing interest into the love plot, and she knows what it has to offer her, she is ultimately convinced that her failed marriage with Rochester is inevitable despite her desperate attempts to spare herself such a tragic fate. In this way, Antoinette navigates outside of Berlant’s “amnesia” and remains hyper-aware of the past rather than invest in hopes of a better future. By being aware of the tenuousness of the love plot, Antoinette unwittingly is cast out of it, since the oppressive nature of the love plot leaves little room for women to be critical of conventional romance. Even before she meets her husband, Antoinette describes a dream sequence in which she is led astray by a stranger: “I follow him,

sick with fear but I make no effort to save myself; if anyone were to try to save me, I would refuse. This must happen” (Rhys 36). Antoinette’s conviction that her fate is inevitable contrasts with Jane Eyre’s flexible possibilities for her life and for her own love plot. The love plot seems to suggest that characters are always capable of changing themselves to mold themselves better for romance. One scholar notes that:

...there is even a sense of Jane [Eyre] trying on various fictions to see which best fits her experience; and that naturally alerts us to the existence of a more complicated personal or psychological reality behind the narrative form. Jane regularly offers herself as a kind of Cinderella or Pamela, buoyed by good fortune and good behavior to love and prosperity. (Maynard 95)

Although Jane is afforded the agency to “try on various fictions,” Antoinette only gets one genre, the romance, and she recognizes the entrapment she is subject to in her own love plot. Much of the suspense of *Jane Eyre* arises from the possibility of Jane accepting or rejecting a romance with Mr. Rochester or even St. John, a cousin who takes her in after she flees Thornfield Hall. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is devoid of that kind of suspense since, much like *East Lynne*, marriage takes place early on in the novel. Antoinette internalizes the vicious claims that Daniel Cosway makes against her, hiding the truth about her disturbed and abandoned mother from Rochester. The theme of inevitability is especially fitting when considering how Antoinette’s “inconvenience” is presented in a genetic and heritable context, a result of her “bad blood” (Rhys 97). However, while Antoinette’s love plot might be impossible to navigate outside of safety, her madness exists as a testament to the unjustness of Rochester’s treatment and imprisonment of her as partly based on her heritage, something that she is unable to control.

While some critics point to the possibility of Antoinette's madness as a representation of the breakdown of her identity as a marginalized, postcolonial "Other," I would argue that the oppressive institution of the love plot is equally worthy of study as a provoker of shame. To clarify, my intent is neither to diagnose Antoinette nor to speculate as to whether or not her madness is "genuine" or the result of Rochester's misguided paranoia, but rather to observe the role her madness takes within her love plot as a reaction to injustice at the hands of a representative of patriarchy. Whatever pain or torment Antoinette's madness causes for her, we see that it is the ultimate inconvenience for Rochester, who muses: "Pity. Is there none for me? Tied to a lunatic for life—a drunken lying lunatic—gone her mother's way" (Rhys 99). The love plot tends to demand that a male partner assume responsibility over a submissive female partner. Antoinette does not bemoan the lack of fairness, but is instead forced to accept it and her retreat into madness functions not as a choice but rather as a reaction. Initially, Rochester attempts to equalize their roles when propositioning Antoinette for marriage by saying: "I'll trust you if you'll trust me. Is that a bargain?" (79). His promise, or "bargain," interestingly offered as a kind of transaction (since, after all, the premise of their entire marriage is based upon economics), is one that he will break soon after learning the sort of responsibility he has assumed as a lover. In fact, the responsibility of trust and the acceptance of Antoinette's inconvenience—her love, her expressions and her identity—are precisely what sever Rochester's interest in his wife. His initial "deal" with Antoinette by using the word "bargain" further suggests the unjustness of Antoinette's situation. Antoinette loses everything she holds dear in her life: not only Rochester's love, but also her own home and material possessions.

## Navigating Unconventional Romance

Antoinette's most desperate attempt to win back Rochester's love serves as a perversion of the love plot, a kind of "false love" that is meant to arise from the use of magic. Antoinette begs her friend Christophine to make a love potion for her, despite Christophine's insistence that the magic will make things worse. As a result of ingesting the potion, Rochester falls ill and becomes suspicious that Antoinette has poisoned him, deepening his hatred towards her. The use of a magical potion, after all, is not only alien to Mr. Rochester, but is also counter to practicality and rationality. She is forced to resort to the only tool she thinks is available in improving her relationship with Rochester. The actual ingredients used in the love potion are never described in the novel, shrouding the final product in mystery and wildness, not unlike Antoinette's tropical home. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, this "satirized" love is treated as something that can be consumed or ingested in the form of a liquid, perverting the notion that love is intangible and arises naturally between subjects. Although Antoinette serves Rochester a presumably magical love potion hidden in wine, Christophine later accuses Rochester of feeding Antoinette a love potion of his own, also using vocabulary that suggests alcohol: "And then . . . you make love to her till she drunk with it, no rum could make her drunk like that, till she can't do without it. Its she can't see the sun any more. Only you she see. But all you want is to break her up" (Rhys 92).

Consumable love is thereby satirized, something that can make one sick or drunk and that can also manifest itself in the form of an addiction. The use of magic or some kind of "love-drink" has no place in the conventional love plot—such tropes are too easy and too tangible for a system that demands so much in the way of circumstance. The love-drink "teases" the reader who yearns for a conventional romance or for a happy ending for Antoinette, although we know

that isn't possible. By introducing "teasers" such as the love-drink or the presence of an "unconventional" love interest, *Wide Sargasso Sea* makes readers aware of the impossibility of a romantically happy ending for Antoinette.

Of particular interest is the presence of an "alternative" love interest in *Wide Sargasso Sea*—the mulatto man known as Sandi, a childhood friend of Antoinette's. Sandi is underprivileged as a man of color but is described as being quite handsome, even visiting Antoinette at Granbois and kissing her several times before she is forced to leave for England. In part three of the novel, Antoinette describes their last meeting in which Sandi asks Antoinette to run away with him rather than to travel to England with Rochester: "But I can't leave you like this ... you are unhappy," to which Antoinette replies, "You are wasting time ... And we have so little" (Rhys 110). Since the reader is presumably aware of Bertha's fate, Sandi's presence in the narrative seems all the more tragic since (one could imagine) it is he, not Rochester, who cares for Antoinette's happiness. Perhaps in a true, sentimental romance novel Sandi could have served as Antoinette's escape and as a more suitable husband for her.

### Remembering Suffering

Antoinette's shame following the failure of her love plot arises due to her preoccupation with the past, and the absence of any convenient amnesia that binds her not only to her Caribbean birthplace but also to the memories of her failed love plot. Other critics have taken note of Antoinette's more "nostalgic" perspectives such as John J. Su, who notes that "[Antoinette's] regret, then, is not simply a passive longing but a mode of prioritizing a lost, even nonexistent, past over an intolerable present" (163). I agree with Su's claim that Antoinette is primarily backwards-looking and concerned with the past; however, in part three of the novel

when Antoinette—by this point known as Bertha—is kept trapped in the attic of Thornfield Hall, her memories of her failed love with Rochester do not “prioritize” her more pleasant memories with Rochester. In almost every part of the novel, Antoinette finds herself in an “intolerable” situation. As such, I do find myself in agreement with Su’s claim that “Rhys’s model of repetitive storytelling represents an ethical critique: it insists on remembering past suffering” (168). The relationship between the love plot and memory demands that women be less nostalgic and more forwards-looking in order to invest in the love plot in a kind of endless loop. However, Bertha dreams of the day when her husband will let her go—not of the day when they can resume their passionate romance (Rhys 106). Since Bertha is unconcerned with her present but is hyper-aware of her traumatic past, she cannot engage in “amnesia” or the willful rejection of memories associated with failed love for the purpose of keeping at least some investment in the institution of the love plot. Su proposes that Jane Eyre’s narrative is optimistically forward-looking, willing to forgive Rochester’s past failures in order to invest in a comfortable, domestic future (164). *Wide Sargasso Sea* provides readers with skepticism regarding Rochester’s blooming love for Jane by illustrating a romance that could just as easily turn sour again and again despite the “happy ending” that Brontë writes, complete with new living arrangements and a child.

#### Controlling Antoinette, Hiding Bertha

The domestic happiness that Jane experiences is conversely portrayed in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as suffocating control, a perversion of “safety.” The “domestic goal” of the love plot, that is, the fostering of a family, is never achieved by Antoinette, who expresses her desire for “safety” early on in the novel. Berlant describes the relationship between domesticity and safety thusly:

It is said that being in a loving couple or family should make you feel safe from the world, in the world, and for the world; and even if, at the threshold, intimacy feels risky, the institutions of intimacy are supposed to protect you from remembering and therefore from feeling that risk acutely, so that you might build up a sense of love's reliability, its promise of stimulating yet balancing security.

*(The Female Complaint 171)*

Although Antoinette specifically mentions happiness in the first part of the novel with a certain wistful longing, her desire for safety is described by Rochester: “‘You are safe,’ I’d say. She’d like that—to be told ‘you are safe.’ ... As for the happiness I gave her, that was worse than nothing. 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” (Rhys 55). Safety is also an extension of amnesia, since for Antoinette to genuinely feel “safe” she would have to conveniently forget not only her violent past on the island, but also her reservations about her love plot and Rochester’s abusive treatment. The suffocating control and eventual imprisonment that Rochester subjects Antoinette to is a perversion of the love plot’s culmination in a domestic fantasy, wherein a wife is committed to the home, raising children and perhaps housekeeping for most of her life. By “perverting” the love plot in this way, Rhys is fostering doubt and skepticism about how *truly* safe the love plot could be or if it is, in fact, what causes harm in the first place. Even Rochester thinks of his wife’s imprisonment as a sort of embrace, devoid of affection but entirely controlling. The tone of Rochester’s narrative adopts an eerily endearing tone: “Hide you face. Hide yourself but in my arms. You’ll soon see how gentle. My lunatic. My mad girl” (Rhys 99). Antoinette is entirely infantilized by Rochester, shamed out of her desire for happiness in

order to be controlled by her husband. As a result of being imprisoned against her will, Antoinette is also robbed of her mobility. In the same way that her mother's horse is slain, abandoning her family to the estate during uprisings, Antoinette becomes stranded when Rochester's control begins to creep into her life before finally consuming her entirely.

Even the environment of the Caribbean contributes to the dissolving of Antoinette's love plot, and the shame that arises from her suddenly tainted childhood home provides Antoinette with good reason to resent her husband's treatment. Additionally, Antoinette's rejection of amnesia would suggest that her growing bitterness towards the environment she once loved makes her aware that she has loved it in the past and can now never love it again. Rochester is uncomfortable in the Caribbean from the beginning, and his attempts to make England seem appealing to Antoinette suggest his unsubtle desire to return home. Indeed, even Antoinette has a mixed approach to the island, simultaneously loving it and looking back on the violent memories associated with it. The dissolution of her love plot with Rochester results in Antoinette's overwhelming shame about her birthplace, an environment she holds dear but is suddenly forced to hate. She tells Rochester after he sleeps with one of the servants, "Do you know what you've done to me? It's not the girl, not the girl. But I loved this place and you have made it into a place that I hate. I used to think that if everything else went out of my life I would still have this, and now you have spoilt it" (Rhys 88). Effectively, Antoinette is forced to sever her interest in her Caribbean home. In hating the vast, wild environment in which she has claimed to love and feel at home in, Antoinette is left with no choice but to retreat inside, trapped in a perverse domestic prison within a country that she not only does not care for but scarcely believes exists. Before the demise of their marital bliss, Antoinette attempts to share the love of her environment with



Rochester, who rejects her: “I won’t tell you that I scarcely listened to your stories. I was longing for night and darkness and the time when the moonflowers open” (Rhys 101-02). Entirely uninterested in Antoinette’s fond memories as a child, Rochester is only concerned with the times he can lock himself away with Antoinette in the dark. Musing on those passionate nights, Rochester notes that “Only the hot sun was there to keep us company. We shut him out. And why not? Very soon she was as eager for what’s called loving as I was—more lost and drowned afterwards” (55). Indeed, the absence of light effectively hides Antoinette away not only from Rochester, but from the rest of the world.

#### What Bertha Means for Jane

Since readers presumably know what will happen to Bertha, her fate towards the end of the novel does not provide suspense and the hope for a happy ending or for a different love. Readers are not engaged in Berlant’s amnesia, and the tragedy of her demise is something that is always kept at the back of one’s mind. As a result, reading a text in which the ending is already known fosters an entirely different kind of experience and expectation for Antoinette. The presence of Sandi as a possible alternative love interest almost serves as a teaser, since readers know that the *Jane Eyre* canon does not allow for Bertha to engage in another existence other than her imprisonment in an attic for many years. By presenting a more complex—rather than pitiable—illustration of Bertha Mason, *Wide Sargasso Sea* allows for Antoinette’s story to imply that abuse and the unraveling of a love plot can happen to anyone and does not denote a character flaw or some kind of inconvenience that begs to be tamed by a capable man.

In this way, *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be read as anticipating the consciousness-raising novels of the 1970s. Consciousness-raising novels are fictions that describe the complex and

somewhat disturbed inner world of a woman who resists tradition and conventionality while often attempting to explore her sexuality (Hogeland 4-5). The deep shame that Antoinette experiences assists readers in questioning the worth of such a smothering, oppressive convention that is the traditional love plot. *Wide Sargasso Sea* follows other novels concerned with women's mental illness such as *The Bell Jar* (1963) and *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964) while drifting away from the highly internal narrative those novels follow. However, *Wide Sargasso Sea* differs from the consciousness-raising novels later on in 1970s in that Antoinette's consciousness is never "raised," and she suffers a depressing ending. She is never offered the opportunity to empower herself. Although the late 1960s marked the advent of the so-called sexual revolution for women, *Wide Sargasso Sea* offers a compelling example of why to consider other alternatives to the love plot and why consciousness-raising fictions that focus on female self-actualization and political empowerment are necessary. Conventional romance, such as the one found in *Jane Eyre*, often acts as a function of patriarchy and male control in an attempt to limit women's sexual freedom and personal, academic, or professional advancements.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* forces readers to consider a character they might have otherwise written off as merely an inconvenient antagonist of *Jane Eyre*, offering a more fair representation of the infamous "madwoman in the attic." By affording readers the ability to come to their own conclusions about Bertha, Jean Rhys effectively complicates and navigates outside of a love plot and its promise of domestic security and fulfillment for women. The love plot is complicated after all, and just because Antoinette is beautiful, sexual, and initially deeply in love with Rochester does not mean that the two are fated to live happily ever after. By raising the question of *Jane Eyre's* fate, *Wide Sargasso Sea* breaks free of a framework that ends with domestic bliss

while also detailing the consequences of navigating outside of the love plot. Antoinette is forced to sever her interest in her own love plot, her environment, and even her own identity in order to satisfy Rochester, leaving her with nothing but shame, marginalized as an invalid by those around her who wish to ignore her inconvenience.

## Conclusion

While *East Lynne* (1860-61) and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) present unpleasant depictions of marriage and the love plot, *Jane Eyre* (1847) illustrates an arguably more irresistible romantic fantasy. The allure of Jane's romance is that, within the convoluted and paradoxical love plot, her grim and mistreated life culminates in a relationship that appears to have been effortlessly achieved. Jane's hard work and sharp wit are not regarded as having gotten her especially far in life, despite her resolve to be independent. In fact, Jane's proclamations of self-reliance and dignity seem to reject traditional femininity while still posing little threat to patriarchal institutions such as marriage. After Mr. Rochester professes his love to her, Jane claims with striking fierceness: "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will" (Brontë 378). However, Jane's dismissal of Rochester makes her all the more desirable, providing the text with its central conflict. Indeed, John Maynard argues that "[Jane's] life follows a secular star; it is essentially a quest fulfillment through love and sexual relations. It is indeed a rather clear case for [Northrop] Frye's familiar argument that romance plots are a displacement of a simpler mythic pattern of desire fulfilled" (99). The peculiar element of Maynard's argument lies within the use of the phrase "desire fulfilled" in regards to Jane's desire for romance. Mr. Rochester teases Jane and her independent will while he is dressed in disguise, mimicking her by saying:

"I can live alone, if self-respect, and circumstances require me so to do. I need not sell my soul to buy bliss. I have an inward treasure born with me, which can keep me alive if all extraneous delights should be withheld, or offered only at a price I cannot afford to give." (Brontë 299)

Jane affirms Mr. Rochester's teasing remarks, but by this point in the narrative she is already finding herself feeling pangs of jealousy towards another woman, whom she suspects Mr. Rochester is courting for marriage. Despite Jane admitting her feelings to the reader, she still is at first hesitant to accept Mr. Rochester's declarations of love one night in the garden. Since Jane is initially dismissive of the love plot without having ever experienced it, she can afford acting ignorant or uninterested since she isn't depicted as harboring an interest in romance to begin with. Therefore, Jane's initial reservations about romance create just another obstacle for the "happy ending" of the love plot—specifically, marriage and the birth of children. Her narrative does not reject the love plot, but rather perpetuates the desirability of a naïve, presumably virgin girl who has yet to comprehend what she is missing.

Charlotte Brontë even attempts to abstain from writing a love plot in her novel *Shirley* (1849). In a gently patronizing tone, Brontë assumes that her readers are reading her latest book with the expectation of another romance like Jane's:

If you think, from this prelude, that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you were never more mistaken. Do you anticipate sentiment, and poetry, and reverie? Do you expect passion, and stimulus, and melodrama? Calm your expectations; reduce them to a lowly standard. (39)

Interestingly enough, *Shirley* does in fact culminate in an eventual love plot. Regardless of Brontë's stated intentions, sentimental or romantic fictions are in fact wildly popular amongst female readers for a reason. Romance provides a space for women readers to shuck off their skepticism and consume a socially acceptable fantasy. Fictions that do not in some way resolve in a love plot or make way for the possibility of new love defy a reader's expectations, as

Brontë's warning suggests. Despite the wish-fulfillment that a romance provides, female readers are left without much in the way of wish-fulfillment in other avenues such as academics, work, friends, hobbies, or travel.

In the case of *East Lynne* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the "quest" for love is absent, replaced instead by illustrations of what is at stake when the love plot fails. The failure of the love plot is often treated as the fault of the woman, due to her "inconvenience," whether or not her navigation outside of it is by choice. By consulting Lauren Berlant's *The Female Complaint* and its argument that within "women's culture," romance and sentimentality dictate the identities of women (8), we can see that the shaming that follows the dissolution of a love plot should come as no surprise. In *East Lynne* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, shame is the result of an interruption or severance with the love plot, a severance that implies that the love plot can never occur again. Berlant's use of the term "amnesia" to describe the willingness of women to disregard the pitfalls of sentimentality in the past is especially applicable to the aforementioned texts, since both Lady Isabel Vane and Antoinette resist "forgetting" their failed love plots (*The Female Complaint* 170). Since both characters are aware of what they are supposed to have as dictated by society—that is, a wealthy husband and many children—they must live in shame. This notion of amnesia and "awareness" contrasts with Jane Eyre, whose independence and work ethic is constructed as admirable but ultimately misguided and callow until she is exposed to the real shining reward: romance culminating in an acceptance of a domestic role.

Charlotte Brontë's novel of a strong young woman who finds herself eventually consuming the love plot is widely considered a British classic, and a staggering amount of scholarship exists to analyze Jane's romance, a romance that I argue is structured and complex in

a way that makes navigation outside of it difficult for women. Jane's complicated love plot has much in common with the "women's fiction" or "chick lit" published today. For example, Katie Kapurch examines the "melodrama" present in both *Jane Eyre* and Stephanie Meyer's enormously popular *Twilight* (2005). *Jane Eyre*'s status as a classic is found not only on high school reading lists but has also made its way into women's consumer culture, alongside Jane Austen's Regency romances. The allure of the nineteenth-century British romance has even inspired modern spin-off "guides" such as Elizabeth Kantor's *The Jane Austen Guide to Happily Ever After* (2012). Anachronistic dating "guides" meant to invoke a time period in which women were afforded few rights would suggest a trend in "women's culture" that still looks to the oppressive past to define the "universal" experiences of women. Even *Jane Eyre* has been the subject of an "update" meant to entice modern readers, as Charlotte Brontë's original text has been doctored by Eve Sinclair to produce *Jane Eyre Laid Bare: The Classic Novel with an Erotic Twist* (2012). With a more overtly sexual element, *Jane Eyre* represents the same ideal, desirable romance to be consumed by contemporary readers without navigating outside of conventionality or offering an un-romantic alternative.

While *Jane Eyre* offers an illustration of the "rewards" of the love plot, *East Lynne* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* present less desirable outcomes of a sentimental romance. Both texts offer a more "backwards looking" perspective, resisting Berlant's amnesia with protagonists who are acutely aware of the failure of their own love plots and the undesirable consequences of such a failure. Even Mallory Ortberg's blog post "Texts from Jane Eyre" on *The Hairpin* offers a depiction of a "historically aware" Jane by proposing the possibility of Mr. Rochester repeating the treatment of his first wife, Bertha Mason:

[Rochester:] DID YOU LEAVE BECAUSE OF MY ATTIC WIFE

[R:] IS THAT WHAT THIS IS ABOUT

[Jane:] yes

[J:] absolutely

[R:] BECAUSE MY HOUSE IN FRANCE DOESN'T EVEN HAVE AN ATTIC

[R:] IF THAT'S WHAT YOU WERE WORRIED ABOUT

[R:] IT HAS A CELLAR THOUGH SO YOU KNOW

[R:] DON'T CROSS ME

[R:] HAHA I'M ONLY JOKING

What *The Hairpin* is offering to its readers is a version of the cliché advice posited by many dating guides—that a woman should give up her endeavor to “change” a man because he is unchangeable, and either accept his behavior or move on. However, *The Hairpin*'s Jane resists “texting back” to Mr. Rochester, seemingly rejecting his insistence that he won't lock her in an attic. The blog post ends with texts exchanged between St. John and Jane in which she sarcastically resists his request to accompany him on a mission trip to India, and for readers perhaps unfamiliar with the original *Jane Eyre* text, the blog post concludes her narrative without her returning to Mr. Rochester or engaging in any romantic ending as she does in the novel. However, as the subtitle of Lauren Berlant's book indicates (*The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*), an “unfinished” element exists not only in *Jane Eyre*, but also in *East Lynne* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

The alternatives for inconvenient women who reject the love plot can be extremely unpleasant, presenting illustrations of the dissolution of the love plot to serve as a cautionary



tales to appeal to women universally. While *Jane Eyre* does not truly provide an alternative at all, *East Lynne* illustrates a life of self-inflicted suffering and *Wide Sargasso Sea* ends with its female protagonist finding herself locked away in an attic for many years. Despite the extreme consequences that these novels depict for women of the nineteenth century who attempt to navigate outside of the love plot, romance itself is even today still posited as a unifying and immensely important element of women's culture. The individual narratives of both Lady Isabel Vane and Antoinette Cosway are meant to be consumed by a collective public, according to Lauren Berlant:

The consumption of "women's culture" would be, in this view... a way of experiencing one's own story as part of something social, even if one's singular relation to that belonging is extremely limited, episodic, ambivalent, rejecting, or mediated by random encounters with relevantly marked texts. (*The Female Complaint* 8)

By approaching the love plot as the textual foundation of "women's culture" meant to define women's experiences through the lens of romance, we can interpret the experiences of Lady Isabel and Antoinette as both cautionary and critical. Since the action in *Wide Sargasso Sea* in particular pre-dates the famous romance between Mr. Rochester and Jane Eyre, the reader is presented with a more skeptical account of a romance with Mr. Rochester, much like *The Hairpin*'s in-character remark that Mr. Rochester's new house in France "has a cellar though" (Ortberg). The process of navigating outside of the love plot is "unfinished," however, since skepticism towards a specific romance does not necessarily provide a more universal critique of the love plot. Women's individual fictions, memoirs, and other texts that make up "women's

culture” are posited by Berlant as presenting a universal narrative, no matter how dated. Even modern women can interpret centuries-old sentimental fiction as projections of their own lives, and yet depictions of the repeated failure of the love plot have yet to inspire widespread critique of its oppressive elements. Consulting texts that do not present a “happy ending” tied up within marital bliss and domestic fulfillment would suggest that the love plot is more than just a “desire” that can be fulfilled and can be instead a fiercely oppressive force in the lives of women.

Rarely in popular culture and even less frequently in “women’s culture,” or “chick-lit,” is the love plot ever depicted as entirely unnecessary. While romance is often treated as a sub-plot in mainstream, male-dominated texts, it predominantly exists as the main conflict in women’s fiction. Although “romantic ideals” in contemporary women’s fiction or chick-lit can be presented as unrealistic, the genre generally avoids rejecting love altogether. After all, the most prevalent experience shared between women, according to Lauren Berlant, is a sentimental romance with a man. The love plot is a unifying, universalizing experience that enforces a complex system regularly shaming women by virtue of its importance to the fictional female identity, and without it women might alternatively find a unifying narrative in some other element of fiction. Lauren Berlant argues that sentimentality is what keeps women from concerning themselves with politics and possibly ending the oppressive structure of the love plot and “romantic ideals.” Accepting the love plot as such a flawed system is one way to approach the problem that its complexities present; however, I argue that navigating outside of the love plot entirely is what is required of “women’s culture” in order to embrace alternative modes of defining the self. Berlant considers the relationship between sentimentality and politics:

[The community] of feminine realist-sentimentality thrives in proximity to the political, occasionally crossing over in political alliance, even more occasionally doing some politics, but most often not, acting as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and recalibration as achievement enough. (*The Female Complaint* 9)

Berlant's statement begs the question: What would it take for women to reject sentimentality as a mode and channel their frustrations with conventional romance into other areas? By presenting women as untethered to a man and untethered to romance, women's culture could possibly succeed in lifting some of the burden that so many women struggle with by being defined individually and even collectively through the narrow, convoluted restrictions of the conventional love plot. In a modern world in which women no longer need marry in order to find success in life, the fictional notion of romance as fundamental to female development and identity can severely stunt and even quell entirely the alternative interests of the women who consume such texts, texts that essentially present the same oppressive conventions as those consumed by women hundreds of years ago.

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