

'Ché Coco, ché Coco': An animal reading of Coco the parrot in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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The various human characters of Jean Rhys's novel Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) have attracted the attention of literary scholars from different perspectives. However, the novel's nonhuman animal characters have previously been studied mainly as symbols for human actions and destinies. In this article, I problematise this type of anthropocentric approach from a Human-Animal Studies and a literary criticism perspective. I analyse Coco as a character of the novel and as a member of his own species. My analysis examines the nature of human-animal relationships, their representations in literature, and the binary oppositions inherent in them. Additionally, I critically evaluate the ways in which nonhuman animals are perceived and depicted in cultural representations. I argue that Rhys shows Coco as a parrot with species-typical behaviour and as a character with his own agency. Nevertheless, one should not disregard his symbolic functions, which draw attention to gendered colonial violence. Furthermore, the symbolic and linguistic violence in the novel forces the nonhuman animal into a position below the human animal and normalises violence towards nonhuman animals. The human-animal relationships in Wide Sargasso Sea vary from something akin to close companionship all the way to subjugation under the will of the more powerful.

KEYWORDS: animal abuse; binary oppositions; Caribbean literature; human-animal relationships; parrots; pets

Introduction

Coco is a green parrot, a nonhuman animal caught and imprisoned to become a companion for a member of the species *Homo sapiens*. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) tells the end of Coco's story and hints at the time spent in capture. However, the novel does not reveal the origin story of Coco, one of the novel's minor characters, of which only a couple are nonhuman. Even though Coco does not feature much in the novel, the parts in which he does appear give some ideas of his life.¹ His past before becoming – or being made into – a pet of the family does not seem to be a concern in the story. *Wide Sargasso Sea* also does not tell how the parrot came to live with the family. He merely is a pet parrot, a creature confined to a human household.

Most likely because of his nonhuman animality, Coco has predominantly been regarded as a symbol for the destinies of the novel's human characters. I offer a different reading of Coco. I look at him from an interdisciplinary Human-Animal Studies perspective as a character of the novel, instead of as a symbol or metaphor. However, for a full examination of Coco, his life before and upon capture as well as his death, it is necessary to understand how he has previously been read as a symbol for human destinies. Furthermore, it is necessary to pay attention to the literary context, that is to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as well as the cultural context within which Rhys wrote it.

I concentrate on analysing Coco and *Wide Sargasso Sea* from a Human-Animal Studies and literary criticism perspective. I argue that in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Coco is a character in his own right and can be seen as more than just a symbol. Furthermore, I propose that Rhys explores the complexities of a human-animal relationship beyond the scope of symbolism. The question I seek to answer is: how does *Wide Sargasso Sea* represent Coco and his life when one ventures outside the limits of symbolic readings of animals in literature? I also concentrate on how different human characters of the novel approach Coco either as an individual actor or as an expendable item. My examination of Coco's point of view provides a new interpretative angle on *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

The structure of the article is as follows. I start with a brief overview of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and symbolism. Then, I introduce the framework of literary and Human-Animal Studies within which I examine Coco (the second and third sections). After setting up the contextual and theoretical framework, I venture into a more detailed

1 I refer to Coco with the personal pronoun 'he' for two reasons. First, I wish to acknowledge nonhuman animals as individuals worthy of respect and, thus, address them with the same pronouns as humans. Second, 'he' is the pronoun used in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a reference to Coco.

analysis of Coco, which progresses in a sequence of four aspects of Coco's life: Coco as a member of his species and a free bird (fourth section), Coco as a liminal being (fifth section), Coco's speech acts (sixth section), and the effects of violence towards Coco and animals more generally (seventh section). In the end, I make concluding remarks to tie up Coco's case.

Symbolism and *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* was inspired by Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), specifically by Rochester's "mad" wife Bertha. Rhys wanted to tell the story of Bertha, who in her novel appears first under the name Antoinette, and as Bertha only after her husband renames her. Brontë did not tell Bertha's origin story, thus it was there for Rhys to compose. She wished to retrieve Bertha/Antoinette by creating and telling Bertha's story (Josephs 2013, 70), to show the perspective of someone forced into a position subordinate to others (Cappello 2009, 47). Rhys viewed Bertha as a misunderstood character in *Jane Eyre*. In writing *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys examines the complexity of the character and gives her a background within which her state and actions in *Jane Eyre* start to make sense. Rhys is interested in providing answers to the questions of who the character was and what caused her mental breakdown (Josephs 2013, 72; Yurdakul 2019, 66). In a sense, I do a similar retelling. Rhys tells Bertha's story in the form of a fictional novel, whereas I examine Coco's story from a Human-Animal Studies point of view in a research article. I ask about Coco's background, about his behaviour and the reasons behind it.

Coco is not a main character in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. He appears only in two parts of the novel. In the first of these parts, a mob burns down the Coulibri estate and threatens to attack the family (Rhys 2001, 21–22). In the second, Antoinette dreams of burning down Thornfield Hall and hears Coco's voice once more (Rhys 2001, 123). This is the extent to which Coco features in the novel. The scenes are significant in terms of the development of the novel's plot and as symbolic references to Antoinette's life story. However, the same applies to some of the human characters of the novel. Such minor characters – just like many other minor human characters in fiction – have received attention in research for their stories instead of as mere symbolic devices (see e.g., Jaising 2010; Hai 2015). An examination of Coco's story further strengthens the awareness of the minor characters' significance in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

In general, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is full of symbolism, whether referring to animals or to other motifs. Rhys is, indeed, known for her use of symbolically motivated language

and names (see Schapiro 1995, 87). Even a direct reference to the symbolism of parrots occurs in the novel: Antoinette recalls that: “it was very unlucky to kill a parrot, even to see a parrot die” (Rhys 2001, 22). Rhys uses animals, such as Coco or the family’s horse that gets poisoned, as symbols and foreshadowings of what is to come. These animals appear in a corporeal form in the novel and, thus, have a physical form alongside their linguistic form. The animals only appearing in human utterances, in turn, have only a linguistic form, like when Antoinette describes how the freed slaves referred to her and her mother: “[t]hey called us white cockroaches” (Rhys 2001, 7). In the utterance the actual animal is not present, and it is only what the animal represents that is brought forth to differentiate between “us” and “them.” Because the novel is permeated by symbolism, it is no wonder that many read Coco predominantly through his symbolic and metaphoric functions (see e.g., Gilchrist 2012; Hope 2012; Huggan 1994; Neel 2017). Granted, the animal symbolism in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and surrounding Coco is unmistakable, but perhaps exactly because of this it is refreshing to think of him – or any of the other nonhuman animals for that matter – as an own character instead of as a mere symbol and metaphor for human actions and destinies.

(Literary) Human-Animal Studies

The field of literary studies has traditionally concentrated on human characters. However, especially during the 21st century, nonhuman animals have entered a more central stage in literary studies (Copeland 2012, 98). To regard a work of fiction from the point of view of a nonhuman animal enables the examination of the author’s but also of the society’s views on nonhuman animals. However, all human representations of animals are dependent on culture, and are only approximations that are channelled through human cognition and identity. The representations thus depend on human feelings, prejudices, and motives (Simons 2002, 86; Nyman 2003, 8). Consequently, it is impossible for humans to have a definite and complete understanding of what and how nonhuman animals experience, feel, and think. Nonetheless, an examination of animal representations illustrates the views which humans and their societies have on and construct about animals.

Typically, nonhuman animals take symbolic roles in literary texts, and that is also the role in which they have mainly been examined. As animal symbols are heavily dependent on human language and cognition, they are understood but also constrained within shared cultural meanings, based on human language and its binary structures separating the human from the nonhuman animal (Simons 2002, 115). Thus, the necessity

to critically examine and deconstruct the language of the literary text is essential to the examination of the animals featuring in it (see Stibbe 2012, 21–22; Szydlowski et al. 2022, 45–46). Additionally, it is essential to be aware of the cultural prejudices that may guide the interpretation of the nonhuman animal. An animal reading thus attempts to go beyond the human thinking of the animal and to breach the surface that confines the nonhuman animal within the human symbolic system.

Instead of looking at nonhuman animals as mere metaphors reflecting human existence, they can be “read” as individual members of their own species. In such a reading it is necessary to concentrate on how nonhuman animals are represented, determined, and understood in literary texts (Simons 2002, 5–6). According to Erica Fudge (2009, 13), “refusing to simply interpret animals as symbolic is also a reminder that animals are, in such allegorical readings, absented in order for humans to be made central.” That is, focusing on animals in literary texts as themselves challenges the anthropocentric symbolic systems and the ways in which they construct human worldviews. Furthermore, literature, just like any use of language, binds nonhuman animals to the human representational system. By paying attention to and critically examining as well as de- and reconstructing literary representations of animals, it is possible to influence the cultural misrepresentation and general mistreatment of nonhuman animals (McHugh 2009, 491). Authors and researchers each have a chance of influencing the way in which we perceive, represent, and treat nonhuman animals. To represent is to have power.

Kenneth Shapiro and Marion W. Copeland (2005, 343) have defined “a literary criticism perspective on animal issues” as entailing the analysis and critique of the roles of animals in literature. The literary criticism perspective is an analytic framework applicable to interpreting fictional narratives whether they include animals in major, minor, or absent roles. According to Shapiro and Copeland (2005, 344), a Human-Animal Studies perspective on literature should: “1. Deconstruct reductive, disrespectful ways of presenting nonhuman animals; and 2. Evaluate the degree to which the author presents the animal ‘in itself,’ both as an experiencing individual and as a species-typical way of living in the world.” Additionally, they call upon researchers to “include an analysis of human-animal relationships in the work at hand” and “to explicate the form of that relationship and to place it in the universe of possible relationships.” From this perspective, it is important to critically examine the animal’s position in the literary work and to keep in mind the true animality of the animal, as well as the implications that arise from how the animal is written about.

Critical Animal Studies offers additional perspectives on the study of nonhuman animals in literature. I find Kim Socha’s and Les Mitchell’s (2017, 129) *Critical Animal*

Studies -approach to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1874) especially appropriate. They introduce questions regarding Rochester's dog Pilot: "What of that dog's life? How were dogs bred and domesticated in the nineteenth century and what does that say of the Western world's current infantilization, fetishization, and abuse of canines? What of Pilot's supposed natural subservience to Rochester and to humans in general?" (Socha and Mitchell 2017, 129). While Rhys used Brontë's writing as inspiration for her own novel, I use Socha's and Mitchell's questions regarding Brontë's book as inspiration for questions regarding Rhys's book: What of Coco's life? What does the domestication of parrots tell us about how they are treated? How does the human practice of rendering parrots flightless influence the animals' lives?

Birds of a feather

Antoinette describes her mother's parrot: "Our parrot was called Coco, a green parrot" (Rhys 2001, 21). Coco's colouring is not an exotic one, but a rather common green hue. Thus, I assume that Coco was most likely not bred in captivity, and lived a free bird life until humans captured him and turned him into a pet, which might have happened when he was still a hatchling or when he was already a grown parrot. After all, breeding parrots in captivity has taken place mainly in certain cases where breeders have wished to obtain a specific coloration (Bond and Diamond 2019, 133). Correspondingly, colour plays an important role in the status of the human characters of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as well. The distinctions of social status between different groups of people based on their skin colour are significant in the novel. The former slaves call Antoinette and her mother Annette, a Martiniquan white Creole, "white cockroaches" (Rhys 2001, 7). That is, Antoinette and Annette are seen as occupying a low position in the social hierarchy; they do not belong within the group of the white colonialists even after either one's marriage to an Englishman.

Graham Huggan (1994, 655) calls Coco "the Creole parrot." His choice of words likely springs from Coco's connection with his owner Annette. Another, less likely, option is that Huggan is referring to Coco's species. After all, the term Creole has been employed since the 18th century to refer "equally to humans, animals, or vegetables" that were "born in the islands though of foreign descent" (Schiebinger 2004, 15). Coco is, indeed, most likely a member of a parrot or parakeet species endemic to Jamaica. By the late 20th century, 38% of the parrot and parakeet species of the Greater Antilles, to which also Jamaica belongs, had become extinct. Due to human influence, Jamaican parrot and parakeet populations have experienced significant habitat loss; imported

species like rats and honeybees compete for nesting places with parrots, and in agriculture parrots are regarded as pests. Also pet trade has influenced the size of the parrot populations. The only surviving endemic parrot and parakeet species to the area are the yellow-billed amazon, *Amazona collaria*, the black-billed amazon, *Amazona agilis*, and the olive-throated parakeet, *Aratinga nana* (Wiley 1991, 188–191), now known as *Eupsittula nana* and formerly known as *Psittacara nana* (see Image 1). They all are mostly green in colouring. Coco might be a member of any of these, or some other, species, be it an indigenous, Creole, or a by now extinct one.

Image 1: *Psittacara nana*, a green parrot endemic to Jamaica, depicted in detail by a 19th century Englishman, Edward Lear. The image is plate 12 in Lear’s monograph *Illustrations of the family of Psittacidae, or parrots* (1832). Lear painted the watercolours to be turned into lithographs for his book in the London Zoo. He used captive live birds as his models (Peck 2018, 164–165). Considering the transportation of the birds to England and the practice of keeping them in captivity to be admired as exotic specimens, Lear’s vision of the parrots is one imbued with colonialism.



It is doubtful, however, that Coco himself would have cared about the taxonomic specifics of his species. After all, the classification and categorisation of animals with scientific labels is purely a human endeavour – a means for humans to control nature, to suppress the nonhuman animal with language to human scientific thinking while also developing a hierarchical order of humans too (Ritvo 1997, 41). In such hierarchies, the “other” is confined within a taxonomic structure and becomes an educational spectacle that

further emphasises binary structures. The components of a binary pair are regarded as distinctly opposite to each other, but still heavily dependent on each other as concepts. Furthermore, they consist of a hierarchical dichotomic structure in which the first in these pairs is rated as the norm and, as such, ranking higher than the second. For example, in binary thinking “good” cannot exist or be understood without “evil.” Similarly, in a binary view, humans are a category opposite to animals and the colonist to the colonised, mutually exclusive and dependent at the same time. The categorisation of nonhuman animals under scientific names is symptomatic of the binary thinking within which nature is configured an opposite to and as categorically lower than culture.

Wide Sargasso Sea's narrative structure contains several elements of binary constructions, such as coloniser-colonised, rational-emotional and male-female (see Huggan and Tiffin 2010). However, the novel's narration ventures to reveal their relevance in the identity construction of the white British middle-class male and his nation (Mardorossian 1999, 88). Binary opposites serve the establisher of the distinction between the opposites as a means of social control. Furthermore, according to Gail Fincham (2010, 21), *Wide Sargasso Sea* shows Antoinette as a child who is in touch with the local nature of her home island and whose point of view is in contradiction with the nature-culture binary prevalent in Western thinking. Antoinette, like her mother, is white Creole, as her ancestors are European, but she has been born and lived her life in the Caribbean. No matter how far from the Western worldview Antoinette's thinking is, she is still bound by her humanness. Furthermore, after her marriage, her English colonialist husband's attitudes drive to further confine her worldview, finally pushing her to a mental breaking point. To write about Antoinette in this way reveals Rhys's wish to challenge the Western philosophical tradition and its binary worldview.

Even though postcolonial literature offers the reader ideas on how to perceive nonhuman animals in another light than that of traditional Western philosophy, it is important to remember that these nonhuman animals too have been written about by humans and that they thus are bound to and by human thinking (Nyman 2003, 8). However, as Karoliina Lummaa (2015, 193) emphasises, it is necessary to remember that nonhumans are separate from human impressions and narratives on them and do have agency – whether it be voluntary or involuntary – in influencing our representations of them (see also Philo and Wilbert 2000, 5). Furthermore, nonhuman-human relationships are always networks of interconnectedness to which each element brings their own aspects and nuances (Burger, Rahn and Liebermann 2021, 7–9). Rhys, no doubt, had some parrots in her mind when she was writing about Coco, and these parrots likely influenced her writing. But Coco is, nevertheless, a parrot written about from the perspective of

a human; *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not provide the reader with an animal perspective on the narrative. Quite the opposite. Rhys describes Coco and his experiences solely through the eyes of Antoinette, whose family had made Coco a domesticated parrot.

The history of domesticating parrots as pets is at least three millennia in length (Bond and Diamond 2019, 132). They were valued as colourful and exotic pets (Hollsten 2013, 61). For example, in Britain, they were (along with other exotic animals) used as status symbols. By the 18th century, however, owning such animals became more commonplace as Britain spread its power overseas (Tague 2015, 52). Consequently, the animals can be seen as having signified such power over others. The owner-pet relationship is similarly a hierarchic construction that strengthens a binary view (Fudge 2009, 15–16), and pet keeping correlates with the more general human need to control nature. Adrian Franklin (1999), in turn, argues that people take pets to alleviate their own ontological insecurities, that is, social life extends beyond the limits of humans, and pets are included in the family as companions to enhance feelings of security.

Liminal bird

Parrot life and social connections concentrate around the flock in which they live. They cultivate and establish their various relationships within the flock throughout their lives, starting with hatching. Parrots often have distinct social units for different daily activities, like feeding, grooming, and playing (Bond and Diamond 2019, 57). That social connections are important to a parrot suggests that removing one from their flock and native environment is a stressful event, even though the social nature of parrots is seen as enabling them to adapt to captivity and to form a close bond to their owners. *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not tell the story of Coco's capture, only of his life at the Coulibri estate. In Coco's life there are two distinct periods: the time before and after capture. The naming by humans could be thought as the final consolidation of the beginning of the second period of his life. His now owners name him Coco. Naturally, before his confinement, Coco was not identified as Coco. With naming his identity experiences a re-shaping similarly to Antoinette's when her husband purposely renames her Bertha and recasts her identity: Antoinette ceases to exist and a new sense of self is inflicted on her (Gruesser 2003, 103; Walker 2012, 493). Naming matters, naming is power. When Coco is named, he symbolically ceases to be a free parrot and a member of a flock of birds – instead, he becomes Coco the pet parrot, confined to be a member of a human family.

Coco's name discloses his position as subordinate to other members of the family. Huggan (1994, 651) perceives Coco's name as "clownlike." It could, indeed, be an

allusion to Coco the Clown, Nicolai Poliakov (1900–1974), a famous 20th century clown in the United Kingdom, where also Rhys resided at the time. However, according to a French dictionary of the 19th century – the novel’s time-period – the term *coco* translates into English as *darling* and is used to address small children (*Dictionnaire de la langue française*, s.v. “coco”). Such semantic connotation conforms to the parrot’s utterance “Ché Coco” when translated from French as dear Coco (see Rhys 2001, 21). It could also be translated as “‘It’s Coco,’ or ‘Coco’s place’” (Neel 2017, 184). Silvia Cappello (2009, 47) demonstrates that Rhys uses alternates between different varieties of language, mainly English, to build character personalities as well as the setting of the novel. In Coco’s case, language points to his owner’s background and binds him closer to her – since Antoinette’s mother originates in Martinique, it makes sense that the parrot speaks Martiniquan Creole French. Along with his name, also Coco’s speech act is portrayed as infantilising him.

Being taught to speak human language pushes Coco further into a liminal state (see Hollsten 2013, 55–56), into which his capture has already pushed him. Removal from his natural habitat acts as a rupture point that forces him to cross from the sphere of “wild” into that of “domestic,” and becoming a liminal being. By liminality I mean a stage in which one belongs simultaneously into two mutually exclusive groups, but still does not quite belong to either one of them (see Turner 1969, 95). Liminality is part of Antoinette’s story as well. She is not quite one of the locals in Jamaica, nor in England. She is always something else, something more (or less) than the others, not quite Jamaican enough, too English, not English enough, too Creole, too white, not white enough. She is a threat to the more clearly defined groups of people, because by her being she shatters borders (Josephs 2013, 73–74). She does not fit within binary categories. Similarly, when Coco is turned into a pet, he gets stuck between various categories, making their borders fuzzy. Before his capture, Coco was what is traditionally called a “wild” animal. After his capture, he became “domesticated”. Furthermore, as a “pet” he occupies a double liminal space that breaches the borders of “human,” “pet,” “domesticated,” and “wild.”

Unlike human-human relationships, animal-human relationships are not based on any “form of social contract or agreed ways of behaviour” (Simons 2002, 7). Thus, they are very much dependent on the individuals in question, and much is dependent on the one with power over the other. One does not, however, necessarily regard the animal as a lower, insignificant being. Antoinette’s usage of the “human” pronoun “he” in reference to Coco challenges the subject-object binary and transfers the animal from the latter to the former (see Aaltola and Wahlberg 2020, 14). Furthermore, pets often

intrude into the “world of humans.” Thus, they share the domestic space and even become a part of the human family, which makes referring to them with “human” pronouns relatively typical. For the character of Coco this intrusion into the family is visible in Antoinette’s pronoun usage, but also in the attitude that Antoinette’s mother Annette has towards the pet parrot. After saving her son Pierre from the burning house, she attempts to go back to save Coco too.

That Annette is ready to risk her own life to save Coco emphasises how important the parrot is to her. Mr Mason’s exclamation, in turn, reveals that Annette’s husband does not understand such sentimentality towards nonhuman animals: “‘Jewel case? Nothing so sensible,’ [...] ‘She wanted to go back for her damned parrot. I won’t allow it’” (Rhys 2001, 21). With these words he damns the parrot to a fiery death. To Mr. Mason the parrot is without value, unlike jewels. For him Coco is not even an exotic status symbol. Furthermore, he sees it as his decision whether the parrot should be saved or not. His thinking comes back to the binaries typical to Western thinking. He is the man who makes the decision and the nonhuman animal that represents nature is worth less than the jewel case representing money, and with that, culture. Mr. Mason is an embodiment of the colonial suppressive power that was as a rule targeted on humans and other species endemic to the British colonies from a male-dominated patriarchal perspective.

Trying to go back for Coco is the last time Annette acts according to her own mind. After this she loses her agency completely, and is at the mercy of other people (Schapiro 1995, 89). Annette becomes a completely succumbed “other,” who is treated with indifference similar to that contained in Mr. Mason’s words about Coco. However, already previously, at Coulibri, the patriarchal society and its rules had passivised her daughter (Fincham 2010, 20). Annette and Antoinette were not in charge of their own lives. By narrating their lives and showing their emotional distress, Rhys draws attention to how patriarchal societies treat women (Yurdakul 2019, 68). Akin to Coco, they fall into the “lesser” binary position. Fittingly, Annette and Antoinette do not seem to place Coco into a secondary binary position. The actions and attitude of Annette and Antoinette towards the parrot indicate that they value him as a living being instead of just an object or “just an animal.”

Wide Sargasso Sea challenges binary structures by showing the point of view of those who fall into the liminality between the two opposites in a rigid dualistic distinction, for example, the white Creole family who does not quite belong to any of the opposites in the binary pairs white-black and European-native. Furthermore, that the novel takes place in the time of abolition and was written during the time of decolonisation

highlights and questions how such divisive structures are maintained by those in power (Josephs 2013, 71). Similarly, Coco can be read as a character challenging the binary distinction human-animal. The characters in *Wide Sargasso Sea* have different attitudes toward the parrot. They seem to put him in different binary categories. Mr. Mason puts him firmly in the category “animal,” whereas Annette and Antoinette seem to regard him more akin to themselves. The difference in attitudes toward Coco is symptomatic of the position in a binary category of those classifying Coco. Mr. Mason fits firmly into the “higher” binary categories, whereas Antoinette and Annette tend to fall either in between categories or into the “lower” categories. *Wide Sargasso Sea* allows Coco to be an active agent.

Coco speaks

Antoinette describes Coco’s imitation of non-standard French with a somewhat belittling attitude: “He didn’t talk very well, he could say *Qui est là? Qui est là?* and answer himself *Ché Coco, Ché Coco*” (Rhys 2001, 21). This is a human perspective on an animal’s speech. Thus, it is more telling of Antoinette’s views on animals than of Coco. Indeed, language is often regarded as something specific to humans, something that is “possessed by either ‘master’ or ‘human’; rarely slave, servant, or animal” (Tiffin 2011, 138). Furthermore, the distinction through language is one that has been used to separate animals from humans but also the colonised from the coloniser (Nyman 2003, 13). Under colonial rule, linguistic dominance compels the colonised people to utilise the oppressors’ language, concepts, and worldviews, as indicated by the behaviour of Mr. Mason in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (see Huggan and Tiffin 1990, 134–139). Similarly, Coco’s imitation of human speech confines him to the linguistic dominance of his owners. However, Homi Bhabha (1994, 122–123) argues that mimicry is, in fact, a strategy of the oppressed to gain agency by parody while seemingly seeking acceptance by the oppressor. Mimicry, thus, is an act parodying the oppressor’s power. Graham Huggan (1994, 657) interprets Coco’s participation in the act of mimicry as a gendered critique of Bhabha’s idea of mimicry. Furthermore, Coco’s use of Martiniquan Creole French performs a double act of parody – the nonhuman animal targeting the human animal and the colonised targeting the coloniser.

Parrots are famously capable of learning to produce human sounds and words. Because of this trait, they have been seen as especially valuable as pets and as luxury “objects” to own (Hollsten 2013, 58). But for the same ability to imitate human speech acts, they have also been regarded as comical (Hollsten 2013, 52). Indeed, the parrot

as a symbol traditionally signifies “imitation and mockery” and [...] unintelligent repetition” (Cooper 1992, s.v. “parrot”). Consequently, Coco’s repetition of words taught to him has been read as a symbol for Antoinette mimicking other people and their habits in her search for her own identity (Cappello 2009, 50). But Coco’s speech should not be read simply as a symbolic device. After all, the symbolic significance of a parrot does not quite reflect reality. Parrots learn to use sounds that they understand as communicative. In the “wild”, parrots communicate with each other with vocal expressions, and in captivity they do it with humans (Bond and Diamond 2019, 135). When they do both, they become multilingual across species boundaries (Hollsten 2013, 60). Coco’s speech, albeit limited in vocabulary, should not be read solely as a symbol but as communicative behaviour typical of parrots. Thus, the focus switches from a human-centred narrative to an animal perspective, and simultaneously the borders of binary categories get blurred.

Even though Coco dies early on in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette hears his voice once again in her dream at the end of the novel: “I heard the parrot call as he did when he saw a stranger, *Qui est là? Qui est là?* and the man who hated me was calling too, Bertha! Bertha!” (Rhys 2001, 123; emphasis in the original). Depending on the translation, the parrot’s usual response to his own question can indicate his self as well as his location. This time, however, Coco does not reply to his own question. Instead, the voice of Antoinette’s husband answers the question with the name that he has forced upon her. Coco’s question indicates that Antoinette has become a stranger to Coco, but the answer implies that Antoinette’s husband is the one who has the power to determine her identity, which distances her further from her past self and the life of which Coco was a part (Neel 2017, 184).

The fact that Antoinette becomes a stranger to Coco in her dream pinpoints Coco’s ability to recognise people he knows. Trevor Hope (2012, 69) writes that Coco “is [...] supposed to have the capacity to discriminate between strangers and ‘insiders’ to domestic space,” but questions whether it is possible for a bird to make such a distinction. According to parrot specialists Alan B. Bond and Judy Diamond (2019, 57–58), parrots make clear distinctions between strangers and acquaintances based on their previous interactions with other birds. Parrots have wide social networks within which they have relationships of closer or more distant nature with the other members of the flock. They have friends, rivals, and birds to whom their attitude is more neutral. Similarly, Coco has different types of relationships with members of his human “flock” – some closer and some more distant. Furthermore, parrots are intelligent birds with high cognitive abilities, so it seems evident that Coco is capable of recognising people; humans have become a replacement flock for this highly social bird.

Coco's question and Antoinette's husband's answer to it stir a sense of unbelonging and loss of identity (Walker 2012, 494–495). It is not, however, only Antoinette who is here robbed of her identity. Coco is not allowed to answer his own question anymore; he has been silenced. Neel (2017, 184) suggests that Coco cannot answer with his usual response because he has died earlier in the novel. In her dream, Antoinette regains agency by setting fire to Thornfield Hall, but also by refusing to be determined by the name her husband inflicts on her; she frees herself in her jump in which she dreams of being like a bird: "The wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings. It might bear me up, I thought, if I jumped to those hard stones" (Rhys 2001, 123). Refusing her new name, she plunges into a liminal state. Antoinette's death thus becomes intertwined with Coco's fate. Antoinette and Coco plunging into death with deadly fire roaring around them evoke the imagery of a phoenix. As the phoenix burns up and gives rise to a new life, Coco's fiery death enables the life of Antoinette and her family to continue, and Antoinette's death allows the narrative development of Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

Coco "misbehaves"

Mr. Mason is the one who dooms Coco to his fiery death. His act of clipping Coco's wings illustrates his attitude towards the parrot and defines Coco's fate. Mr. Mason has rendered Coco flightless; he is the one who has refused to move away even though Annette has asked him, fearing for their safety. Coco's clipped wings imprison him inside the Mason household, like Annette, and later Antoinette, are confined under the patriarchal system, under the will of their respective husbands (Schapiro 1995, 95; Hope 2012, 69; Neel 2017, 184). The confinements epitomise patriarchal colonialist and gendered control, culminating in colonial violence, over local people, nonhuman animals, and the environment (see e.g., Huggan and Tiffin 2010). The restriction of Coco's movement within the human household is symptomatic of the human need to decide within which spaces nonhuman animals belong. Human restrictive behaviour regarding nonhuman spaces culminates in how animals are thought to misbehave within the places that have been deemed as belonging to humans (Philo and Wilbert 2000, 10). Such restrictions also act to force the oppressed into constantly alleviating the ontological insecurities of the oppressor.

The mutilation of a bird's wings to render the bird incapable of flight constricts the movement of the bird onto the same spatial plane with humans. Furthermore, it is a cruel act. The view on such matters was most likely different during the 19th century

in which the novel takes place, or even in the mid-20th century when the novel was written. *Wide Sargasso Sea* suggests, however, that Antoinette understands Coco's suffering: "He made an effort to fly but his clipped wings failed him and he fell screeching" (Rhys 2001, 22). Choosing to use the word "fail" indicates compassion towards the animal as well as understanding that the animal's agency has been curtailed. Furthermore, describing Coco as falling and screeching expresses Antoinette's understanding of Coco's suffering. After the clipping of his wings, Coco no longer has the option of returning to the "wild" and is thus doomed to his liminal existence and his death. Had Coco still been able to fly, he might have been able to save himself from the burning house.

Coco's clipped wings have been read as a symbol for the English, who wish to suppress the former colony's society under their control while simultaneously talking about liberation (Gilchrist 2012, 470). It is an attempt at "the reconfirmation of European cultural supremacy" (Huggan 1994, 658), which ventures to constrict the local people onto the linguistic and cultural plane of the oppressor. However, the novel depicts acts of resistance towards those exerting control. Just like Antoinette struggles against her confinement, Coco behaves as an independent actor as well: "After Mr Mason clipped his wings he grew very bad tempered, and though he would sit quietly on my mother's shoulder, he darted at everyone who came near her and pecked their feet" (Rhys 2001, 21). Coco chooses not to behave like the little darling that he has been named. He is no longer acting in a way that is expected of a nonhuman animal living in a human space.

In pet keeping, care and violence become intertwined (McDonnell 2013, 12). In a contradictory setting the pet is confined and suppressed under the owner's will while the owner simultaneously takes care of the pet. Generally, pets are supposed to behave as their owners wish them to act instead of using their own initiative (Tuan 2007, 148). When Coco acts according to his ill-tempered ways he "misbehaves." That is, breaching the norm of how humans imagine their pets should act is regarded as a sign of misbehaviour and not normal. Such norms are, naturally, hierarchical in their nature. Furthermore, humans breed animals to make them behave more according to what is deemed as the ideal behaviour of a pet. Because parrots have not been bred to meet specific behavioural standards set by humans – unlike dogs – they continue to exhibit the same "wild" behaviour they exhibit in their natural habitat, no matter whether they were born or lived in freedom or in captivity (Bond and Diamond 2019, 133). That is, Coco keeps acting according to parrots' typical behavioural patterns.

Reading Coco as a representative of his own species shows that Mr. Mason has not been able to completely eradicate Coco's agency – Coco keeps people at a distance

by attacking them. Coco demonstrates his agency by “misbehaving.” Antoinette, in turn, regains her agency by setting Thornfield Hall on fire in her dream (Fincham 2010, 20-21). Thus, Antoinette and Coco, who along with Antoinette’s mother were linked together at Coulibri by passivation and loss of agency, regain their agency by “misbehaviour.” Coco does not, however, direct his “misbehaviour” at everyone. He sits perched on Annette’s shoulder, seeming to defend not only himself against others but also defending Annette. After Coco’s death, Annette no longer has Coco to defend her; she becomes more vulnerable to other people’s actions.

Coco’s Wide Sargasso Sea

The difference between two binary opposites often appears as wide as a sea. Binary opposites are constructed on the basis of a divisive black-and-white worldview, which makes them highly disruptive. It is important to recognise that binary distinctions are heavily problematic and should be scrutinised accordingly. To look at the products of culture from the point of view of those who occupy a position in the margin or in a liminal state between the opposites provides tools for the deconstruction of binary thinking and brings colour into the black-and-white worldview. One of the well-established binary distinctions in Western philosophical tradition is the binary pair human-animal. I undertook to offer a Human-Animal Studies perspective on Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* and to interpret how the novel represents Coco. More specifically, I proposed to challenge the previous anthropocentric readings with an interdisciplinary animal reading of Coco as a character, instead of imagining him simply as a symbolic representation for human actions and destinies.

Coco’s life falls distinctively into two parts: before and after captivity. *Wide Sargasso Sea* gives only a small glimpse into the latter and none into the former. However, Antoinette’s brief descriptions of the parrot illuminate his life to a considerable extent. Furthermore, with the appropriate sources on parrot life, the examination of Coco’s life can become more detailed. *Wide Sargasso Sea* exhibits points of views of those often not seen or heard. In this vein the novel also portrays the life of Coco. It shows him as a liminal being, not quite one of “us” nor one of “them.” He breaches binary distinctions by speaking and occupying a space in a human household while still behaving like a “wild” animal. Before capture, Coco has been a member of a flock of birds, living a normal birdlife and exhibiting behaviour typical to parrots. Upon capture Coco the pet starts to emerge. Naming the parrot Coco implements a new identity for him, that of a pet parrot. However, as discussed previously, even in confinement, Coco’s behaviour

exhibits species-typical ways. Coco's life in captivity could also be divided into two parts: before and after the clipping of his wings, even though it is not mentioned when the clipping took place. The description of the mutilation of the parrot challenges the construction of binary distinctions by those in power. When the Englishman Mr. Mason restrains Coco's movements and removes from him the spatial movement important to most birds, this influences his behaviour considerably: Coco becomes ill-tempered. But he is thus also thereupon destined to his fiery death.

Wide Sargasso Sea challenges and deconstructs binary oppositions – among others, the binary distinction between humans and nonhuman animals. Even though Coco clearly acts as a symbol for the fates and identities of human characters, he still appears as a character in his own right too. The novel shows him as a character with his own experiences, temperament, and a capacity to communicate. Coco has agency and behaves according to species-typical ways. That his speech is not very developed might reveal more about the human characters around him than about the parrot himself or about parrot behaviour in general.

The novel depicts different types of human-animal relationships. Mr. Mason sees Coco simply as a “lower” being that he can treat as he wishes, whereas Annette approaches him as a beloved member of the family and is willing to risk her own life for him. Antoinette, in turn, regards Coco with sympathy and seems to identify with him. However, none of the characters, nor the novel in general, question the justification of confining an animal in captivity. The physical and linguistic violence Coco faces in the novel is symbolic for the fates of the human characters. Furthermore, the violence depicted normalises violent behaviour towards nonhuman animals. The critical examination of such instances facilitates restructuring of behavioural patterns and understanding life within a set worldview. I wonder if it would be too daring to read *Wide Sargasso Sea* as challenging the trope of violence towards animals. Instead of reading violence towards Coco as a symbol for human lives and destinies, one could read it as an alarming example of existing human-animal relationships, drawing attention to the inequality in suppressing nonhuman animals under human control in human living spaces.

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