Wide Sargasso Sea is a prequel to Jane Eyre. It focuses mainly on Antoinette Bertha Mason’s perspective.\(^1\) It accounts for Antoinette’s childhood, encounter and marriage to Rochester and his gradual awareness of Antoinette’s lunacy. Part III is set in England while Antoinette is kept in the attic\(^2\) of Thornfield Hall under the supervision of the enigmatic Grace Poole. Narrated by Bertha who remains voiceless in Jane Eyre, the novel mainly seeks to give a voice to the ‘madwoman in the attic’.

In this room I wake early and lie shivering\(^3\) for it is very cold. At last Grace Poole, the woman who looks after me, lights a fire with paper and sticks a lump of coal. She kneels to blow it with bellows. The paper shrivels, the stick\(^4\) crackle and spit, the coal smoulders\(^5\) and glowers. In the end flames shoot up and they are beautiful. I get out of bed and go close to watch them and to wonder why I have been brought here. For what reason? There must be a reason. What is it that I must do? When I first came I thought it would be for a day, two days, a week perhaps. I thought that when I saw him and spoke to him I would be wise as serpents, harmless as doves. ‘I give you all I have freely,’ I would say, ‘and I will not trouble you again if you will let me go.’ But he never came. […]

There is a window high up – you cannot see out of it. My bed had doors but they have been taken away. There is no much else in the room. Her bed, a black press, the table in the middle and two black chairs carved\(^6\) with fruit and flowers. They have high backs and no arms. The dressing-room is small, the room next to this one is hung with tapestry. Looking at the tapestry one day I recognized my mother dressed in an evening gown\(^7\) but with bare feet. She looked away from me just as she used to do. I wouldn’t tell Grace this. Her name\(^8\) oughtn’t\(^9\) to be Grace. Names matter, like when he wouldn’t call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass.

The door of the tapestry room is kept locked.\(^10\) It leads, I know, into a passage. That is where Grace stands and talks to another woman whom I have never seen. Her name is Leah.\(^11\) I listen but I cannot understand what they say.

So there is still the sound of whispering\(^12\) that I have heard all my life, but these are different voices.

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\(^1\) The first and third part are narrated by Antoinette while the second part (from after the wedding to Rochester’s decision to leave for England after becoming aware of his wife’s madness) is narrated by Rochester.

\(^2\) grenier

\(^3\) frissonner de froid

\(^4\) bout de bois

\(^5\) se consumer

\(^6\) gravés

\(^7\) robe de soirée

\(^8\) ne devrait pas

\(^9\) recouvert de vapeur, embué

\(^10\) verrouillé(e)(e)

\(^11\) One of the servants at Thornfield Hall in Jane Eyre.
When night comes, and she has had several drinks and sleeps, it is easy to take the keys. I know now where she keeps them. Then I open the door and walk into their world. It is, as I always knew, made of cardboard. I have seen it before somewhere, this cardboard world where everything is coloured brown or dark red or yellow that has no light in it. As I walk along the passages I wish I could see what is behind the cardboard. They tell me I am in England but I don’t believe them. We lost our way to England. When? Where? I don’t remember, but we lost it. Was it that evening in the cabin when he found me talking with the young man who brought me food? I put my arms round his neck and asked him to help me. He said, ‘I didn’t know what to do, sir.’ I smashed the glasses and plates against the porthole. I hoped it would break and the sea come in. A woman came and then an older man who cleared up the broken things on the floor. He did not look at me while he was doing it. The third man said drink this and you will sleep. I drank it and I said, ‘It isn’t like it seems to be.’ – ‘I know. It never is,’ he said. And then I slept. When I woke it was a different sea. Colder. It was that night, I think, that we changed course and lost our way to England. This cardboard house where I walk at night is not England.

12 chuchoter
13 Ici, carton-pâte (décor de théâtre, opéra)
14 hublot