



## **‘With a shuddering roar it caved in upon itself’: Colonial power in domiciliary buildings in *Troubles* and *Wide Sargasso Sea***

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Andrew Teverson and Sara Upstone claim that space ‘in all its forms’ is ‘integral to the postcolonial experience.’<sup>1</sup> In this way, I argue that Jean Rhys and J.G. Farrell stress the importance of space in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Troubles*. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys presents the setting of the West Indies as asserting power over colonial dominance. For Farrell, however, British rule is clung to in the symbolic ‘Majestic’ hotel- a space which represents maintained colonial power in Ireland. This essay explores this difference as it appears in domiciles in both texts. I argue that the houses and the hotel symbolically present both the dominance of Empire and its decline in both texts. However, these spaces never exist in isolation- the way the characters inhabit them is vital. This essay explores how buildings represent colonial power, and also how these structures intersect with light and nature. Further, I consider how power is both conjured and lost in the characters’ commandment of these spaces.

In *Troubles*, the decaying Majestic hotel represents Britain’s crumbling empire. This symbolism has been noted by critics, such as Tijana Parezanović, who asserts that *Troubles* ‘provides a spatial framework for the gradual historical downfall of the British Empire’.<sup>2</sup> The hotel’s disintegration slowly occurs throughout the narrative and by the dénouement, it is reduced to rubble. It can be argued that this directly parallels the instability of Ireland and the declining power of the British Empire, which is the context that forms the background of *Troubles*. The Major’s last encounter with the Majestic sums up the final deterioration of the hotel; the building is ruined beyond recognition. In this dilapidation, the hotel has wholly yielded the power it possessed, as a symbol of imperial grandeur. What were once ‘rooms’ with given purposes have been reduced to the simplistic term ‘compartment’ which, to the Major, have been rendered ‘insignificant’.<sup>3</sup> The Major asserts that now the hotel’s interior is ‘open to the mild Irish sky’, it seemed ‘much smaller- in fact, quite insignificant’ (453). Farrell signals the fading control of the British empire in labelling the Majestic ‘insignificant’. He also presents the triumph of nature over colonialism. The hotel is minimised compared to the markedly Irish ‘sky’- nature’s power is coupled with the power of Ireland as a nation. Parezanović insists that the spatiality of *Troubles* is ‘crucial to the development of the story’.<sup>4</sup> The crumbling of empire in Ireland forms the narrative of *Troubles*; as Parezanović has

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Teverson and Sara Upstone, *Postcolonial Geographies: The Politics of Place in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 6, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Tijana Parezanović, ‘Other Spaces of the Empire: A Colonial Hotel in J.G. Farrell’s *Troubles*’, *Prague Journal of English Studies*, 5:1 (2016), 53-70 (pp. 55- 6).

<sup>3</sup> James Gordon Farrell, *Troubles* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2021), p. 453. All subsequent quotations from this text will be to the same edition and will be indicated in parentheses after the quotations in the main body of the essay.

<sup>4</sup> Parezanović, ‘Other Spaces of the Empire: A Colonial Hotel in J.G. Farrell’s *Troubles*’, p. 55.

**'With a shuddering roar it caved in upon itself': Colonial power in domiciliary buildings in *Troubles* and *Wide Sargasso Sea***

noted, the story could not have developed without the spatial dimensions that the Majestic provides.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys also employs the destruction of domiciles to represent the decline of Empire. Rhys shatters the oppression instated by the idyllic English country house. Katherine C. Henderson posits that in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the English country house is 'the site of an ongoing negotiation of post-imperial identity.'<sup>5</sup> Rhys employs houses in the text to conjure colonial legacies, and the subverted English domicile is coupled with the power of the pastoral. The pastoral is emblematic of the native, which threatens imperial authority. Like the Majestic, the 'Granbois' estate is a wrecked domicile; on first encountering, Rochester regards the setting 'an imitation of an English summer house'.<sup>6</sup> This description positions the house as something deficient- an 'imitation' that cannot achieve the idyll. It is a 'shabby, white house' (50)- signalling not only its colour but a white, European colonial legacy. Rhys subverts the power of the building as it 'shrinks from the forest behind it' (50, 51). 'Shrinks' inverts the colonial process in its conjuring of the house retreating from the West Indian landscape. While the English domicile attempts to retain colonialism, it '[cranes]' to a 'distant sea' (51). Indeed, foreign lands are now 'distant', and no longer tangible or conquerable. Rochester deems the house 'more awkward than ugly' (51)- Rhys makes apparent his unease towards Granbois, which epitomises imperialist panic as empire deteriorates. Further, Rhys suggests the unavoidable decline of empire; the house looked 'a little sad as if it knew it couldn't last' (51). A recurrent theme in both texts is tangible here; that the British Empire knows its looming collapse, and yet still tries to maintain rule. Indeed, in *Troubles* many descriptions of the hotel's dilapidation implicate the coloniser's role of self-sabotage. In the scarcely-used ballroom, the Major is 'deafened by the scraping of his own feet on the grimy floor' (189). Farrell associates the mire that tarnishes the Majestic's grandeur with the movement of the Major's 'own' feet. 'Scraping' connotes of irreparable damage- that is inflicted by the Major. Parezanović agrees that the Majestic signifies empire's 'dislocated centre' and points out its destruction is facilitated by its 'constancy and perpetuation of the illusion of grandeur.'<sup>7</sup> It is evident that the ballroom is in disrepair, however the Major 'perpetuates' the space in insisting on moving his feet across the floor.

In *Troubles*, Farrell implicates empire in bringing about its own collapse; he points out that colonial projects fail to surrender until, like the Majestic, they are wholly destroyed. This is implied as the hotel finally collapses- Farrell writes that 'with a shuddering roar it caved in upon itself' (451). This sentence, I posit, summarises an idea of colonial power. From its beginning, Farrell offers a sense of resistance to destruction of empire, as the hotel 'roars' in protest. However, Farrell quickly imbues the idea that, despite this protest, the empire can be blamed for its downfall. This is evident as the building '[caves] in on itself'. Though the hotel is set alight, the final image Farrell conjures is the building breaking down and collapsing in on itself. It has been argued that the Majestic constitutes what Foucault terms a

<sup>5</sup> Katherine C. Henderson, 'Claims of Heritage: Restoring the English Country House in *Wide Sargasso Sea*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 38:4 (2015), 93-109 (p. 102).

<sup>6</sup> Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: The Penguin Group, 2011), p. 50. All quotations from this text will be to the same edition and indicated in parentheses.

<sup>7</sup> Parezanović, 'Other Spaces of the Empire: A Colonial Hotel in J.G. Farrell's *Troubles*', p. 53.

'heterotopia'.<sup>8</sup> According to Foucault, these are 'counter-sites' within which all real sites are concurrently represented, contested, and inverted. The Majestic represents the site of the Empire, which is then contested by its dilapidation. Ultimately, The Majestic is ruined and transformed to a site of post-colonial legacy. The site is further contested, then, by its own role in destroying itself.

In *Troubles* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the buildings symbolise hubs of colonial power, which are situated beyond the centre of empire. However, my argument relies upon the notion that such spaces never exist in isolation; they accrue meaning from those who inhabit them. Therefore, both the Major and Antoinette's interaction with the buildings is symbolic—the characters are disempowered by their inability to command or navigate the buildings. Indeed, the Major loses all knowledge of domiciliary space. He cannot navigate the Majestic and is often found lost or walking aimlessly. Once the building burns down, his spatial confusion is confirmed whilst he paces the ruins, 'trying to orientate himself' (453). The Major makes declarations: 'I'm standing in the residents' lounge, in the corridor, in the writing-room'(453). These declarations epitomise his impulsive need to delineate space; indeed, in the deserted and ruined Majestic, the Major still possesses the urge to try and conquer the space.

Trevor Hope analyses the significance of buildings in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*— he points out that there is a 'single building that monopolises either narrative structure', and that crucially, these texts are 'about displacement as much as inhabitation'.<sup>9</sup> In this way, Rochester displaces Antoinette inside Thornfield— a house she cannot navigate. Indeed, Rochester reassumes his conquering position as Rhys removes Antoinette's spatial empowerment inside houses. In part three of the novel; her lack of spatial knowledge facilitates the loss of Antoinette's autonomy. This connection is shown in her question: 'what am I doing in this place and who am I?' (144). In this question, Antoinette is clearly asking about her purpose and identity. However, in calling Thornfield 'this place', Rhys is implicitly suggesting that Antoinette requires an understanding of her surroundings in order to assert autonomy. Antoinette is rendered unaware of her environment, proclaiming that the 'cardboard house where [she walks] at night is not England' (144). The English domicile as a 'cardboard house' is a recurrent image in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Antoinette's insistence that she inhabits 'a cardboard world' shows her detachment from real space. The corridors of the 'cardboard house' oppose Rhys's natural images, established in both descriptions of nature's abundance and the openness conjured in the 'Wide Sargasso Sea'. Indeed, nature has previously represented the colonised subject's resistance. Yet, this alliance has been subverted as Antoinette finds herself in a space entirely in contrast to the pastoral.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* exemplifies the dynamic of the coloniser and the colonised 'other' in Rochester and Antoinette. It is Christophine who confronts Rochester's domineering actions. However, as she does so, she links imperialism and domiciles; her damnation comprises repeated reference to houses. Christophine tells Rochester that '[Antoinette] don't come to your beautiful house to beg you to marry with her', instead, Rochester travels 'all the long way to her house' (125). Rhys conjures lengthy, colonial

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,' in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. by Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 332.

<sup>9</sup> Trevor Hope, 'Revisiting the Imperial Archive: "Jane Eyre", "Wide Sargasso Sea", and the Decomposition of Englishness', *College Literature*, 39:1 (2012), 51-73 (p. 53).

**'With a shuddering roar it caved in upon itself': Colonial power in domiciliary buildings in  
*Troubles* and *Wide Sargasso Sea***

voyages in stating Rochester '[came] all the long way'. Yet, Rhys links houses to the colonial project in Christophine's assertion that the destination is Antoinette's 'house'. Indeed, the domestic space epitomises power.

My essay now turns to the significance of light in both texts; light allows Antoinette and the Major to make sense of space within buildings, thus empowering them. So, when Farrell and Rhys endarken their protagonists, they are denied access to both space and power. The presence of light creates spatial power for Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rochester tries to subjugate Antoinette's power by surrounding her with the darkness of Thornfield. However, the narrative ends with Antoinette retaining enough light for her final enactment of power. In the novel's final pages, Antoinette walks the corridors of Thornfield. She ponders if there is 'a draught, for the flame flickered and [she] thought it was out,' but when she shields the flame, 'it burned up again to light [her] along the dark passage' (152). Indeed, Antoinette's flame 'burns up again' to signify the colonial subject's final success. Though Rochester attempts to deconstruct Antoinette's spatial awareness, light permits her to command surroundings and realise her final transgressive act of setting Thornfield ablaze. A close reading of this, the final line in the novel, uncovers the potency of light. The flame is the subject of the sentence- Rhys ascribes it the power to 'light' Antoinette 'along the dark passage.' The light facilitates Antoinette's physical movement, and it is a 'draught' that imperils her flame. Indeed, a draught exists only in a building, and they are commonly associated with large, antiquated houses. Once again, the English country house is transfigured as a source of oppression for Antoinette. Further, the draught occurs because the physical limits of the house have employed nature- which was previously allied with Antoinette- and rendered it a threat.

In *Troubles*, light within buildings also symbolises power- however, it is the power of the empire. Therefore, depictions of dying light reflect the fall of empire. When the Major first glimpses the Majestic, he labels it a looming 'dark mass' (12). Farrell's choice of the noun 'mass' connotes overpowering strength (that of the empire); however, further into the text, it becomes clear that light possesses power. The Major deems the Majestic's entrance a 'vast shadowy cavern'; the darkness means he cannot navigate the 'eerie' place although his 'eyes [try] to probe beyond the circle of light into the darker shadows,' (100). Here, Farrell furthers the allegory. 'Light', an inspiring force, is applied to a 'circle', which conjures the vision of a colonial circle of nations. This circle is one that ought to be expanded to the 'darker shadows'. Further, the verb 'probe' connotates exploration. The Major is in darkness and cannot delineate the space of the Majestic. Upon entering, the Major sees a 'glimmer of light' (100) from inside. Farrell conjures the saying 'glimmer of hope'; this implies that, in the Majestic, the imperial project is not wholly defeated. However, the Major finds that 'the electric light appeared not to be functioning but an oil lamp was burning dimly on the reception desk' (100). This image conjures the idea empire's futility in a modern world. In this way, the hotel rejects electricity and continues tradition, but its power is not limitless. The light of empire is 'burning', but it does so 'dimly' and indeed, will finally burn out.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys counters the rigid structures of houses with vastness of nature. Antoinette's affinity with the pastoral world is a source of agency and in the West Indian setting, Rochester is threatened by the vastness of nature. He asserts that 'everything is too much... too much purple, too much green' (49). He considers the 'hills too near' (49);

reflecting his imperial urge to delineate space. Antoinette, however, understands nature. Therefore, Rochester enacts his abduction of Antoinette to England and denies her spatial understanding; wherein, to her, she occupies a 'cardboard house' that 'is not England' (144). Antoinette's lack of power stems from the substitution of nature for a house. Rhys underlines the removal of the pastoral by conjuring a brown countenance in the 'cardboard house' that contrasts the 'green' landscape of the previous West Indian scenery.

I lastly examine the way the texts present the ruins of buildings in order to allude to agency possessed by Antoinette, and the remainders of the British Empire. Indeed, both *Troubles* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* revisit devastated buildings and imply that along with the ruins, their symbolic legacies remain. Antoinette's childhood home, the Coulibri estate, is set alight and rampaged. Though not enacted by the archetypal colonial figure of Rochester, Coulibri's subjugates Antoinette through usurping her sense of belonging as her family home goes up in flames. Rhys may suggest that the remains of the buildings create the remnants of Antoinette's agency. She writes that after the fire, nothing remained 'but blackened walls and the mounting stone... [nothing] that could not be stolen or burned' (27). Antoinette's assertion suggests she retains agency through the structure of the house. Further, the notion that autonomy can prevail despite death foreshadows Antoinette's final destructive act. Similarly, *Troubles* suggests that although buildings seem to be destroyed, there are parts of their structure that last; indeed, the Major makes a 'melancholy visit' to the 'charred rubble which was now all that remained of the Majestic' (453). Despite its burning to the ground, the remnants of the hotel have endured, which reflects the legacies of colonialism. However, there is a subtle difference between the endurance of the Majestic compared with that of Coulibri. Coulibri's walls remain upright, possibly showing that Antoinette still possesses agency. Indeed, though the Major aims to retain empire, the rubble suggests it is all but destroyed. Yet, that there are still physical ruins of the Majestic emblematises that even when colonial power is overthrown, the legacy of empire can still be felt in the modern world.

However, there are instances in *Troubles* in which the Major seems to release his preoccupation with the space he inhabits; he considers himself to have severed 'any ties, either in London or elsewhere' (247). Seemingly, Farrell removes the Major's identification with space, as the character questions where 'in all the aching void of the world' he should go, and why it should be 'one place or another' (247). Farrell names the world a 'void', thus critiquing the need to conquer land and then define space by border. Further, as the significance of space is upturned, so is the allegorical nature of the text. *Troubles* is 'extremely allegorical', yet the Major's language resists attaching meaning to space and describes it in simple terms: 'one place' and 'another'.<sup>10</sup>

As Robert Zacharias puts it, the wide- spread migration and displacement inherent to the colonial project means that postcolonial literature is 'unavoidably concerned with space'.<sup>11</sup> This is evident in *Troubles* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as it is the buildings that emblematised power and its removal in both the coloniser and the colonial subject. Yet, the buildings cannot achieve symbolism in and of themselves. The intersection of nature, light,

<sup>10</sup> Parezanović, 'Other Spaces of the Empire: A Colonial Hotel in J.G. Farrell's *Troubles*', p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Zacharias, 'Space and the Postcolonial Novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Postcolonial Novel*, ed. by Ato Quayson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 208.

**'With a shuddering roar it caved in upon itself': Colonial power in domiciliary buildings in  
*Troubles* and *Wide Sargasso Sea***

and the characters, all concurrently construct meaning within the Majestic and the domiciles of Wide Sargasso Sea.

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