

Rewriting without Righting:
the Post-Colonial Canon Revised

An Honors Thesis for the Department of English

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Introduction

When we think about classic literature, we think about a certain set of texts: the names Dante, Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens, among others, come to mind. The idea of the “classic” has been in flux throughout history, from when it encapsulated the works of Greek and Roman thinkers to the works of poets like Chaucer to its current iteration today. The classics make up the literary canon— a set of texts carried through history as “pinnacles” of the English language and literature. This canon, however, has been criticized for its Eurocentric nature, as it has historically focused on White authors, predominantly from the British Empire. This has led to criticism of the “Western canon” as a structure that has perpetuated colonial authority and values. What does it mean, then, to confront that canon? To what extent is it possible to revise the canon or rewrite it?

To address these questions, we must first establish the definition of the “classic” as it fits into the literary canon. South African author J.M. Coetzee, one of the authors studied in this thesis, wrote an essay in 1993 entitled “What is a Classic?” in response to poet T.S. Eliot’s 1944 speech of the same name, which, in turn, was influenced by Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve’s 1850 essay of the same name. The question has been an object of discussion for centuries, and each new interpretation builds off of what has come before. Though the term “classic” is fundamental to the study of English literature and often determines whether or not a literary text warrants attention, the conditions of canonical status remain unclear.

In his essay, Sainte-Beuve attributes the term “classic” to the Romans and argues that a classical author “has enriched the human mind, increased its treasure, and caused it to advance a step” (Sainte-Beuve). He gives weight to the term “classic” by endowing it with cultural power and significance—the “classic” becomes a force for societal advancement. Eliot then claims that classic literature can only come from a “mature” civilization (Eliot 10-11). Classic literature must be aware of its civilization’s history and its literary predecessors (14). Eliot, however, argues that no classical age or author exists in the English language or literature; instead, he lauds Virgil as the ultimate classic (21). In his response, Coetzee interprets Eliot’s speech as the poet’s attempt to label himself a kind of Virgil, or, at the very least, an Aeneas—the hero of Virgil’s epic poetry (“What is a classic?” 9). Through Coetzee’s essay, we can see how Eliot’s definition depends on what has come before; Eliot cements himself as a “classic” in comparison to the classical Virgil. Coetzee emphasizes the ways in which the notion of the classic is historically constituted. The formation of the classic depends on specific historical forces, as understanding of the past shapes the present (15). The canon ensures its longevity through survival; as long as the classic continues to be discussed or critiqued, it continues to be relevant—a “classic” (20).

Though the notion of the classic continues changing, it persists as a pillar of Western thought. Sainte-Beuve’s notion that the classic “advances” society and Eliot’s idea that the classic comes only from a “mature civilization” are both laden with language that establishes colonial authority. Colonialism has proven to be one of the major historical forces shaping which works are deemed classic. Through shifting ideas of what it does and does not mean to be a classic, the group of classics as whole—in the form of the literary canon—has remained an invention of the West, perpetuated by colonial power around the globe. If we take into account

Coetzee's notion of the classic, what effect does it have to criticize the canon when criticism is simply another means for its survival? We must confront the extent to which it is possible to overwrite the authority of the Western canon and make room for new, non-Western voices.

The strongest challenge to the authority of the Western canon has come from post-colonial literature. As products of an outward fight against colonial dominion, post-colonial works are often the most outspoken about the violence in colonialism. By establishing certain parameters of language and culture, the Western canon was one such violence— a force by which colonial authority operated and showed itself. Literary texts served as microcosms of colonialism, as first-world characters would dominate the narrative, relegating third-world characters to the background. The canon dismissed the importance of colonized peoples by pushing them to the edges. Thus, populations were marginalized two-fold: in their positioning on a global scale, and in the literary and historical record. As canonical works were carried through time, the colonized were cemented in marginal positioning.

In order to counteract this violence, colonizing classics must be pushed out of their authoritative positions in the canon. The stakes of this endeavor are such that allowing colonizing works to remain in their current forms would risk preserving the status of the marginalized. Recently, a canon debate in academia has allowed more diverse works, those by the likes of Gabriel García Márquez, Toni Morrison, and Salman Rushdie, to be incorporated into the “classics.” While this opens the possibility for a less Eurocentric structure to the canon, the original violence cannot be escaped so long as the previous iteration of the canon continues to be passed down. The only way to confront original violence, then, is to confront the original sources of that violence— those texts that incorporated and thus perpetuated colonialism in their narratives.

This essay seeks to examine what it means to confront the canon through rewriting and to consider whether or not rewriting is an effective means of confronting the Western canon. We can examine this directly through forms of post-colonial rewriting, of which Aimé Césaire's 1969 French play *Une Tempête*, which rewrites William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, is perhaps the most notable example. Post-colonial literature boomed in the latter half of the twentieth century; however, canonical rewritings still exist today, under the influence of the works of the past. We have yet to see how the process of rewriting has changed and what implication it has for the future of the literary canon.

The first chapter discusses Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a rewriting of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Though Brontë's classical novel depends on the presence of the Creole Bertha Mason, she is marginalized, relegated to the portrayal of a madwoman trapped in the attic. The British-Caribbean author Jean Rhys elucidates a background for the character, steeped in the colonialism that is visibly absent from the original work. Jacques Derrida's concept of the dangerous supplement reveals the nature of the relationship between the two texts as a kind of mirroring—on a larger scale in the novels as a whole but also on a smaller scale in the repeated motif of the mirror image or the looking glass. What becomes clear is that the act of rewriting creates a reciprocal link between the two works—*Jane Eyre* can no longer exist without *Wide Sargasso Sea*, just as the opposite is true. Each relies on the latent presence of its other.

The focus of the second chapter is J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, which not only revisits Daniel Defoe's novels *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana* but also revisits the historical figure of Daniel Defoe himself. Coetzee, a White South African essayist and author, addresses his own notions of what it means to be a classic by examining speech and writing as a historical force for marginalization. He does so predominantly through his portrayal of the mute Black character of

Friday, who represented the colonized, “civilized” figure of literary history in *Robinson Crusoe*. In *Foe*, Coetzee deconstructs speech to subvert its power, effectively undermining the authority of canonical authors and, ultimately, his own authority as well.

The third chapter moves to the present day with Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty*, an adaptation of E.M. Forster’s *Howards End*. Smith, a Black British author, moves Forster’s comic novel to the contemporary era and situates it in a context that centers race and education. The novel’s portrayals of the academic institution provide commentary on the implications of studying art in an age after post-modernism. Like Forster did in his original work, Smith sets up certain binaries and considers the ways in which those binaries break down to form moments of connection. However, examining the ways that Smith uses literary allusion in her novel showcases her literary reconfiguring— a means by which the canon can be utilized as a tool to create new, original plotlines independent from the old.

By tracing the development of rewriting through *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Foe*, and *On Beauty*, which were each published consecutively about 20 years apart, we can see what has come out of the project of revising the canon. Together, the three novels make up a kind of post-colonial canon—in the form of three post-war authors revising works that came out of the British Empire. The main question of this thesis addresses whether or not the novels successfully challenge the original violence of the canon. Through the works of Rhys, Coetzee, and Smith, we confront the possibility of a canon that can move beyond its Eurocentric focus to become a more representative structure and set of texts. The question that arises, then, is “what becomes of the classic?”

The Dangerous Supplement of *Wide Sargasso Sea*

The events of *Wide Sargasso Sea* parallel those of *Jane Eyre*, as Jean Rhys' 1966 novel revisits Charlotte Brontë's 1847 canonical work from a post-colonial perspective. Both novels trace the development of a main heroine from childhood to adulthood, as she faces personal difficulties that impact her identity and development. Both end with a heroine who asserts her identity and independence. However, whereas Brontë's *Jane Eyre* ends happily in a marriage, Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* ends tragically in death. Rhys' rewriting creates a plotline whose latent presence endows Brontë's work with deeper meaning and questions the nature of her "happy ending." After reading *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it becomes impossible to see the character of Bertha Mason simply on Brontë's terms. In this way, the novel operates as a kind of mirror, as well as a Derridean supplement, for *Jane Eyre*. On a deeper level, Rhys' novel utilizes mirror imagery to signal a process by which Antoinette Cosway comes to terms with a divided identity that becomes even more divided because of Bertha Mason. Bertha haunts the novel as a fabrication created within the text by the character Edward Rochester and outside of the text by the author Charlotte Brontë, in both cases to demonstrate colonial authority. The doubling between characters and their mirror images, and the moments of the text in which the image in the looking glass becomes a dangerous supplement, reflects the nature of the inextricable connection between *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*. *Wide Sargasso Sea* thus manifests itself as a work that traces the process of creating gaps by writing over certain marginalized identities, and the impossibility of ever fully escaping from or rectifying this violence.

Wide Sargasso Sea can be seen to supplement to *Jane Eyre*. To be more specific, it fills in gaps from the prior work in order to complete it. The novel also resonates with Jacques Derrida's idea of the supplement, which he elaborated in his 1967 book, *On Grammatology*. Derrida used the concept of the "dangerous supplement" to describe how writing was intended to enhance speaking but ultimately grew to overshadow it. This is the pattern for Derridean supplements—they intend to substitute, but instead replace. The desire for "true presence" becomes a byproduct of this process, as the substitute creates a desire for the original. The Derridean supplement can thus be connected to the canon through notions of authenticity. Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a supplement insofar as it not only fills in the gaps but can also be seen to take the place of Bertha Mason's original storyline in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

Mirroring operates on two levels in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: a broader level in which the novel mirrors *Jane Eyre*, and a deeper level in which mirror imagery explores ideas of identity formation. The mirror image becomes a Derridean supplement, as it does not only serve as a point of reference for personal appearance but also becomes a manifestation of self-identity. It acts as a supplement for Antoinette as well as for her mother, Annette. Both women are noted to concern themselves with their appearances and habitually look at themselves in the mirror to assure themselves of a certain kind of identity. The repetition of this motif forges a connection between inward identity and outward appearance. Their encounters with looking glass imagery remind Antoinette and her mother of their racial positions as Creole women. As members of a White, formerly slave-owning class, they are not accepted by Black community members. At the same time, due to their roots in the Caribbean, they are not seen as equal to upper-class English whites. They exist in a kind of in-between in the racial hierarchy. Because they cannot see

themselves in the society around them, they must use the mirror to understand their identities and make sense of their Whiteness, which is not accepted as Whiteness.

Antoinette's mother Annette showcases an unhealthy dependence on the mirror image as supplement. When Antoinette later describes her mother, she says:

I used to think that every time she looked in the glass she must have hoped and pretended. I pretended too. Different things of course. You can pretend for a long time, but one day it all falls away and you are alone. (Rhys 118)

The mirror becomes a vehicle for pretense. Annette does not see her alienation and her position as an outsider in society; instead, she reassures herself of her Whiteness, her prettiness. She pretends her version of Whiteness is palatable, especially by other Whites, when she looks in the mirror. Antoinette describes how her “mother still planned and hoped— perhaps she had to hope every time she passed a looking glass” (16). Rather than confronting a hard reality, Annette uses the mirror image to pretend and endow herself with hope.

In order to face the self and the image in the glass, Annette must pretend she sees herself as she would want to be seen. In the vein of the Derridean supplement, the image substitutes her self-perception to make her life bearable. It is not permanent. When she tries to write over her identity with what she sees, she recognizes the impossibility of a Creole woman fully claiming Whiteness. Society will not accept her. She cannot escape her racial and societal positionings. As “it all falls away,” she is left alone with an identity she cannot bear (118). Furthermore, the Derridean notion of the supplement predicates on the assumption that everything is revealed to be in an endless chain of supplements. The mirror image, then, is indeed a dangerous supplement insofar as it showcases that everything is a chain of images. As Annette's faith in her mirror image “falls away,” so too does her self-perception. She loses connection with her identity, and is left, then, with the discombobulated self “alone.”

As Antoinette grows up, the mirror begins to serve a similar purpose for her as it did for her mother. Because she shares her mother's racial position, she also shares her status as an outsider. Tensions over race and class shape her relationship with other children. For instance, a young Black girl named Tia follows Antoinette home one day, repeatedly leering the racial insult, "white cockroach" (20). This insult, focusing on the in-between nature of being Creole, haunts Antoinette's perception of herself. Though the two girls eventually become friends, race continues to act as a point of division, as Tia never accepts Antoinette. Antoinette, then, comes to a greater understanding of the danger in her racial positioning when her childhood home in Coulibri is burned to the ground by Black former slaves who are upset with racial inequality. As the house burns, those responsible jeer, "look at the black Englishmen, look at the white niggers!" (38). They specifically target the in-between racial location of the Cosway family. Antoinette's home burns, her brother Pierre lays dying, and she watches her family spiral apart. In this ultimate moment of violence, the Cosways are simultaneously Black and White but cannot survive in either society.

Antoinette tries to save herself, then, by rejecting her in-between identity. She attempts to claim Blackness by running toward Tia, hoping that she will be protected from the family tragedy she is facing:

... I ran to her, for she was all that was left of my life as it had been. We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. Not. (41)

Antoinette runs to Tia because she believes that she can share Tia's life. Through repetition, Antoinette asserts that she and Tia lived the "same" life "side-by-side." However, this is not the life she had, but rather the life that she wished she could have had. Tia, who is largely free of the restrictions and prejudices that are placed on Antoinette, finds more welcome in their shared

society. Antoinette craves this freedom and protection. If she can claim Blackness, she can live a life outside of her status as “white cockroach,” “black Englishman,” or “white nigger.”

The racial differences between the two girls cannot be bridged, however, as Tia rejects the possibility of Antoinette supplanting her life. In response to Antoinette’s attempt to fit herself into Blackness, Tia becomes violent, throwing a rock at Antoinette’s head:

I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry.
We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as
if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass. (41)

The mirror image crops up in a violent setting. However, in this case, the dangerous supplement fails. Antoinette believes that Tia’s life is a mirror image that she can fall into, substituting and replacing her own life. Tia, however, rejects Antoinette’s appropriation. Blackness cannot be seen as a substitute, nor can it be seen as a replacement for Whiteness. Race complicates the notion of the dangerous supplement. As a White girl, Antoinette cannot appropriate Tia’s life as her own and attempt to consume it. She cannot reject her Whiteness, nor can she project herself onto Blackness. Her image of the self, then, becomes dangerous as it highlights the conflicts within her own identity.

The looking glass forces Antoinette to face the stark reality of an identity split between two levels of a racial hierarchy. At one formative moment in Antoinette’s childhood, she wakes up to see “two enormous rats, as big as cats, on the sill staring at me” (75). She notes that the rats did not startle her but instead captured her attention completely:

I stared at them and they did not move. I could see myself in the
looking-glass the other side of the room, in my white chemise with
a frill round the neck, staring at those rats and the rats quite still,
staring at me. (75)

As she calmly stares at the unusual rats, she also watches herself in the looking glass. Her gaze is doubled through the mirror. In the mirror image, the rats are contrasted with the detail of the

“white chemise with a frill.” The white chemise associates her with wealth and class, but the rats connect to the unacceptable— that which is rejected by society. Their juxtaposition, then, points at Antoinette’s status as a “white cockroach,” accepted by neither Whites nor by Blacks, neither within society nor without. The mirror does not present an image of what she wishes could be, as it did to her mother, but instead presents a image of her divided identity. In her almost dream-like state, she cannot look away.

This unusual mirror image leads to Antoinette’s connection with moonlight, a motif that will continue throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea* and further connects to Bertha Mason’s characterization in *Jane Eyre*. After watching the rats, Antoinette falls asleep. She wakes up to find that the rats are no longer on the windowsill, and she is alone. Suddenly frightened, she runs outside and looks into the moon: “There was a full moon that night — and I watched it for a long time. There were no clouds chasing it, so it seemed to be standing still and it shone on me” (75). She falls asleep in the moonlight. The imagery of the moon shining directly on Antoinette associates her character with nighttime, much like her appearances in *Jane Eyre*. In Brontë’s novel, Bertha is consistently referred to as “dark,” and she only appears in the text at nighttime. In Rhys’ work, however, Antoinette is not a figure of the darkness but instead a figure of moonlight and the light in darkness. At the same time, moonlight becomes associated with Antoinette’s perceived lunacy. Antoinette is told that “it was very bad to sleep in the moonlight when the moon is full,” and she begins to be haunted by the belief that this may be true (75). Crossing the threshold between the room with the rats and moving into the open air with the moon becomes a transformative moment in Antoinette’s life. She refers to the way the night has stayed with her, because “some things happen and are there for always even though you forget why or when” (74). This moment cannot be renounced; it is “there for always.” Thus, later

references to Antoinette as a “lunatic” with a “blank hating moonstruck face” remind the reader of this moment (150). Antoinette becomes a character associated with the moon, and lunacy becomes a lunar condition.

Antoinette’s already splintered identity becomes even more so as she must adapt to her shifting relationship with her husband, an English White man who effectively takes control of her money as well as her life. Though he remains unnamed in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, knowledge of *Jane Eyre* reveals the husband to be Edward Rochester. When Antoinette fears that the night in the moonlight has fundamentally changed her, she asks Rochester if he believes she has “slept too long in the moonlight” (75). In response, Rochester sings her a song: “*Hail to the queen of the silent night. / Shine bright, shine bright Robin as you die*” (76, italics original). The phrase “queen of the silent night” establishes Antoinette’s connection to darkness. Rochester shapes her into a figure of the night simultaneously as he refers to her as the Robin, a figure of the light. The song connects the process of death and dying to light— as the Robin dies, it “shine[s] bright.” The reader can begin to see the ways in which Rochester is making Antoinette into a certain form, based on his patriarchal and racial authority. To Rochester, Antoinette is neither light nor darkness, neither Black nor White. She continues to occupy the in-between, as Rochester contributes to her split sense of self.

Rather than reconciling her internal differences, Antoinette grounds her identity in her relationship to Rochester. Their sexual relationship initially becomes connected to light. In one of the most intimate moments between the couple, Antoinette tells Rochester that she fears losing his love and would prefer to die while she was happy with him:

‘Say die and I will die. You don’t believe me? Then try, try, say die and watch me die.’ ‘Die then! Die!’ I watched her die many times. In my way, not in hers. In sunlight, in shadow, by moonlight, by candlelight. In the long afternoons when the house

was empty. Only the 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. (84)

Two ways of dying are established. The first, Antoinette's, is the traditional notion of death in the form of physical and spiritual departure. The second, Rochester's way of death, is the orgasm, insofar as it is "la petite mort." However, in this passage, a third kind of death takes place— a death of identity. As she orgasms, Antoinette gives herself completely to Rochester and loses herself to him. This only occurs in moments of light, as they have sex "in sunlight, in shadow, by moonlight, by candlelight." Their sexual relations are closely linked to wherever there is light. Even shadow, which is associated with darkness, is only created where there is light. Being with Rochester means light, but being with him for too long means feeling "lost and drowned." As the text progresses, Antoinette grows more and more dependent on the love, both sexual and emotional, that her husband gives her. She loses herself in her relationship with Rochester and drowns in that loss of identity. In a way, their relationship becomes a new dangerous supplement for her identity, as it takes the place of her independence.

The relationship also has a dark side, literally, in moments of darkness. At night, Rochester comes to understand the control he holds over his wife, and the extent to which he can exert that power:

Die then. Sleep. It is all that I can give you I wonder if she ever guessed how near she came to dying. In her way, not in mine. It was not a safe game to play — in that place. Desire, Hatred, Life, Death came very close in the darkness. Better not know how close. (86)

This passage juxtaposes the earlier passage about the orgasm, Rochester's kind of death. Darkness creates death where light created sex and life. In the darkness, Rochester is overtaken with the violent knowledge that he could, in fact, kill Antoinette if he wanted to. For her to give herself completely to him is suddenly "not a safe game to play." In the darkness, the nature of

their relationship becomes clear as one steeped in dualities, split between desire and hatred, between life and death. As he thinks about this, Rochester “listen[s] to the rain, a sleepy tune that as if it would go on forever... Rain, for ever raining. Drown me in sleep. And soon” (86). On the following morning, however, he finds “there would be very little sign of these showers” (86). Just as his violent thoughts dissipate, so too does the rain. Darkness and light offer conflicting versions of reality—what happens at night does not continue during the day. Their relationship entrenches itself in dualities. Night and day become opposing mirror images, as light and life become darkness and death.

In the novel’s final sexual encounter depicted between Rochester and Antoinette, the lines between night and day become blurred, and their relationship breaks down completely. As time goes on, Rochester alienates his Creole wife more and more. Antoinette seeks help from Christophine, a Martinique servant of the family as well as friend and confidante. According to Antoinette, Christophine “was not like the other [Jamaican] women. She was much blacker” (18). Christophine is set apart from the other Black women in her society, and she is endowed with authority and superstition as a result of her practicing obeah. In her essay on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes that the Black religion of Obeah is often misconstrued as sorcery or black magic by Whites, as happens repeatedly throughout Rhys’ novel (Spivak 253). As Antoinette is White, she does not escape this misunderstanding. Christophine says that her “magic” does not work as Antoinette believes it does, “Even if I can make him come to your bed, I cannot make him love you. Afterward he hate you” (Rhys 102). Still, Christophine makes a kind of draught to send with Antoinette. When Antoinette gives it to her husband, she becomes irresistible to him as his consciousness fades away:

She needs not have done what she did to me. I will always swear that, she need not have done it. When she handed me the glass she

was smiling. I remember saying in a voice that was not like my own that it was too light. I remember putting out the candles on the table near the bed and that is all I remember. All I will remember of the night. (124)

Unlike their previous encounters in “sunlight, in shadow, by moonlight, by candlelight,” all light in the setting must be extinguished before they have sex (84). This moment, artificially stimulated by a magic spell in the form of a drug or poison, subverts the established nature of their sexual relationship. What usually happens in the light must instead take place in the darkness. As night becomes the setting for their sexual encounter, it thus opens the way for the “Desire, Hatred, Life, Death” of the darkness (86). The split nature of their relationship must be reconciled.

The sexual encounter becomes a moment in which the dangerous supplement of their nighttime relationship replaces that which exists during the day. Rochester has an out-of-body experience, and removes himself from the experience completely. He speaks in “a voice that was not like [his] own” (124). His memory blacks out with the lights, and that is “all [he] will remember of the night” (124). At this moment, the version of Rochester who existed during the day disappears, and the Rochester who exists at night, the one who thinks of death, takes his place. Indeed, the night becomes a kind of death. “I woke in the dark after dreaming that I was buried alive, and when I was awake the feeling of suffocation persisted” (124). The repeated burial imagery indicates that his awakening is a sort of ongoing death—the death of Rochester as he has been. At this point, looking glass imagery returns: “I got out of bed without looking at her, staggered into my dressing-room and saw myself in the glass. I turned away at once. I could not vomit. I only retched painfully” (124-125). Confronting his own image becomes an unbearable act for Rochester, as vomiting signals an attempt to expel the visceral remnants of the night.

When Rochester vomits, it symbolizes not only an expulsion of his feelings for Antoinette but also an expulsion of the identity that held those feelings. When Rochester looks in the mirror, he can see himself as a White man, endowed with racial and gendered power. He must face the reality that Antoinette subverted this power through her drink. The dangerous supplement in the form of his “dark side” takes over his persona, expelling and taking the place of the part of his identity that had feelings for his wife. The mirror then triggers a process of supplementation. After he finishes vomiting, he looks at Antoinette. He examines her appearance and then covers her with a sheet, “as if [he] covered a dead girl” (125). This metaphorical death is neither the orgasm nor a physical death, but rather symbolizes an ending to their relationship. Rochester drives out of his body every remnant of the night along with any feelings he may have had in their intimate encounter. This, to Rochester, is the death of Antoinette Cosway.

Antoinette’s death in this scene plays into a larger narrative in the novel regarding the discrepancy between metaphorical and physical deaths. “There are always two deaths, the real one and the one people know about,” Antoinette tells Rochester when he asks her about her mother’s death (116). She refers to Annette’s “real death” as the moment in which her mother was lost *to her* as a result of family trauma. After the burning down of Coulibri and the death of her young son Pierre, Annette spirals into a deep depression. She goes to live with a caretaker and is removed from her daughter. When Antoinette goes to visit her mother, Annette rejects her, unable to cope with the reality of her dead son. Antoinette mourns her mother, “whom [she] must forget and pray for as though she were dead” despite the fact that Annette lives, albeit in a way that makes her unrecognizable as Antoinette’s mother (50). “The one people know about,” then, is the moment of death that was recorded and marked by others—Annette’s physical death. Antoinette, however, remembers another death as “the real death”, the social death that resulted

in the loss of her mother. Rochester experiences Antoinette's "real death" when he "covered a dead girl," effectively putting their relationship to rest. The following night, he sleeps with the family's half-caste servant, Amélie. He rids himself of all feelings related to sex, and the act becomes meaningless. Having sex with Amélie becomes the final irredeemable act of his marriage to Antoinette, as he loses all feeling related to monogamous love.

However, Rochester's love was always based on pretense, in the form of his selfish desire to shape Antoinette into a certain form. Rochester says, "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" (85). Characterizing Antoinette as a "stranger who did not think or feel as I did" becomes a way of establishing her character as fundamentally different from Rochester's, through a difference rooted in race and class. He was never willing to bridge the gap of their differences; he saw her precisely as he wanted to see her. He was "thirsty" for her as though she were an object to be consumed and discarded. He needed her only insofar as she fulfilled a certain sexual and emotional role in his life; beyond that, he did not care for her personal or psychological needs.

Rochester's power over Antoinette replicates the authority that Brontë, as author, held over Bertha. The reader witnesses the stripping away of Antoinette's identity as Rochester pushes her into becoming Brontë's canonical character. Rochester and Antoinette grow further and further apart, to the point where he describes Antoinette as a "red-eyed wild-haired stranger who was my wife shouting obscenities at me" (Rhys 135). This imagery of Antoinette resonates with the characterization of Bertha throughout *Jane Eyre*. In Brontë's novel, Rochester refers to Bertha's "red balls" for eyes, her "mask" for face, her "bulk" for form, and says, "That is *my wife*" (Brontë 259). Rhys reveals that Rochester and Brontë are equally responsible for this

portrait of insanity. Just as Rochester manipulates Antoinette, Brontë shaped Bertha into exactly the kind of character that was necessary to advance the plot of her novel, without acknowledging her as a fully human character. To Brontë, Bertha was simply a “stranger who did not think or feel,” just as Antoinette was to Rochester (Rhys 85). Both were ultimately written out.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the violent process of creating “Bertha Mason” heavily involves the power of language; in this way, it replicates the process of canon formation. Early in their marriage, Rochester begins calling Antoinette “Bertha.” This signifies an attempt to undo her identity so that he may redo it in a form that is not only more palatable but also more submissive. Antoinette recognizes that, “He never calls me Antoinette now. He has found out it was my mother’s name” (Rhys 103). After he learns about Annette’s mental illness, he strives to cut off any possible connection his wife would have to her family history. She later asks, “why do you call me Bertha?” to which he responds, “Because it’s a name I’m particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha” (122). He tries to shape her into an image of his own creation. He gives her a White name to write over the name that is connected to her Creole mother and history. When Antoinette eventually confronts him, she tells him, “You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name” (133). Antoinette recognizes that Rochester uses names to manipulate and influence her. Rochester tries to turn Antoinette into someone entirely under his control, and even refers to Antoinette as a “marionette” (139). Indeed, while Antoinette confronts Rochester over her renaming and threatens him with a broken bottle, he notices she is “like a doll. Even when she threatened me with the bottle she had a marionette quality” (136). The use of puppet imagery emphasizes the control Rochester has over Antoinette, his “Bertha.” Just as Brontë writes “Bertha Mason” as the madwoman in the attic, ignored and delegitimized, so too does Rochester.

The process of creating “Bertha Mason” begins verbally but is further enacted on paper, again replicating a canonical process. Rochester draws:

... a house surrounded by trees. A large house. I divided the third floor into rooms and in one room I drew a standing woman — a child’s scribble, a dot for a head, a larger one for the body, a triangle for a skirt, slanting lines for arms and feet. But it was an English house. (148)

The imagery of the house may remind the reader of Thornfield Hall, the setting of *Jane Eyre*, a building “three storeys high” surrounded by “an array of mighty old thorn trees” (Brontë 85-86). Rochester writes the events of Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* into existence— a future in which Antoinette, known as Bertha, lives isolated in a room on the third floor of Thornfield. He determines this future on paper, in the same way that the fates of colonized peoples were established through papers and laws, especially slave papers. Paper functions as a permanent record of colonial history. In the Western canon, it was on paper that characters like Bertha were relegated to positions of inferiority and thus erased from literary history. Just as Bertha is trapped in her room, marginalized people are limited in character and growth in classic literary texts. Their silence and invisibility in these texts showcase the violence that has been imposed by canonical authors. Through his drawing, Rochester embodies himself with the same authorship as Brontë or any classic author. He rewrites Antoinette’s future as Bertha Mason, the madwoman trapped in the attic.

Rochester finalizes the process of marginalizing Antoinette by bringing her to England, where she becomes an outsider, as he takes complete control over her. The colonizer returns to the empire with his colonized. He decides, “She’ll not laugh in the sun again. She’ll not dress up and smile at herself in that damnable looking-glass” (Rhys 150). He goes on to describe the lack of “human tear[s]” in her “blank hating moonstruck face” (150). To Rochester, Antoinette is something less than human, and he attributes her peculiarity to the moon. He seeks to hide her

away, from the sun and from society as a whole. By preventing her from looking “in that damnable looking-glass,” he further hides her away from that very thing that keeps her identity coherent— her own image. In this instance, the dangerous supplement, in the form of a mirror, grounds her identity in a perceived notion of who she is because of who she appears to be. She keeps her fragmented identity together by looking at her mirror image and allowing it to define her self-perception. However, without a mirror, this pretense is impossible. Just as was the case with Annette, “it all falls away,” and Antoinette is left alone (118).

The end of the novel offers a glimpse into an Antoinette whose identity has lost itself to the forced characterization of Bertha. She is locked in the attic under the care of a White servant named Grace Poole. Here, we find Antoinette/Bertha as she exists in *Jane Eyre*, invisible for the majority of the novel except for moments of feral and violent visibility. Rhys offers a deeper understanding of the conditions under which Antoinette lives and her relationship with the woman who is her guard and keeper:

Her name oughtn't 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. (162)

Referring to herself as in the first person as Antoinette as well as to an Antoinette in the third person indicates a splitting of her identity that has already happened. The Antoinette associated with scents and pretty clothes has split from the woman who is locked in the attic. Furthermore, Antoinette emphasizes the importance of names, connecting back to the formation of Bertha. Because “he wouldn't call me Antoinette,” Rochester forces Antoinette to split as she makes sense of the imposition of Bertha Mason as an identity.

In the attic, Antoinette's identity becomes disconnected and shapeless. Trapped in England, she loses connection to the identity, however fragmented, that she developed in

Jamaica. Her confusion regarding her race and place in Jamaican society is written over because she enters England as a complete outsider.

There is no looking glass here and I don't know what I am like now. I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us — hard, cold and misted over with my breath. Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I? (162)

This passage reveals Antoinette's reckoning with her identity. In her younger age, she recognized her image in the looking glass as a supplement, "myself yet not quite myself." She understood the division between what she sees and who she is. She attempted to close that gap with a kiss. But the glass, "hard, cold, and misted over with my breath" served as a stark reminder that the image is just that— an image— while she lives and breathes. In the present day, however, she relies on that image, however, to "know what [she is] like now." Without the mirror image to serve as her supplement, she cannot be sure of whom she is. Taking the mirror image away means taking "everything away," leaving her with the ultimate question of "who am I?" The final part of text, then, focuses on Antoinette's search for identity. Trapped in Rochester's house, she asks why she has been brought there: "For what reason? There must be a reason. What is it that I must do?" (161). These questions are both rhetorical but also directly address Charlotte Brontë, the author directly responsible for Bertha's creation and thus her purpose.

What becomes clear is that Antoinette's purpose inextricably connects to Brontë's construction of Bertha. Antoinette confronts this possibility in a dream that serves as a culmination of her exploration of identity. In her dream, Antoinette sets fire to the house in which she is trapped. She then goes to the roof and sees a culmination of images from her life, vibrant and full of color. After watching the sky, she jumps to the ground. After waking up from

the dream, she realizes, “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do” (171). She takes a candle into the hall “to light [her] along the dark passage” (171). This dark passage leads directly to *Jane Eyre*. Towards the end of Brontë’s novel, Bertha sets fire to Thornfield Hall immediately before flinging herself from the top of it. Antoinette’s dream moves between Rhys’ and Brontë’s text to establish an inextricable connection between the two. Antoinette’s insistence on remembering what she “must do” indicates a sort of inevitability to the events of *Jane Eyre*, events that cannot be understood without *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

The dream showcases the ways in which the construction of “Bertha Mason” haunts Antoinette, just as *Jane Eyre* haunts *Wide Sargasso Sea*. When Antoinette walks through the halls in her dream, she “never looked behind [her] for [she] did not want to see that ghost of a woman who they say haunts this place” (168). This moment showcases the text’s evident awareness of *Jane Eyre*. In Brontë’s novel, Bertha is seen throughout the text only as a ghost, an image of folklore that Jane only encounters briefly. Antoinette does not recognize that “Bertha Mason” is the one that “they say haunts this place.” Nor does she seem to process that “they” represents the White Europeans of England who have labeled her “that girl who lives in her own darkness,” as Grace Poole, her caretaker and jailer, labels her (160). Bertha is a ghost and a construction. The identity of Bertha that “they,” particularly Rochester, have imposed on Antoinette haunts her just as it haunts the house. The ghost’s positioning behind Antoinette indicates her inability to escape from its path— Bertha follows wherever Antoinette goes, just as Antoinette follows Bertha. Their relationship is reciprocal. Neither exists without the other.

Antoinette only comes to understand her relationship to Bertha after coming face-to-face with her in the dream. “It was then that I saw her— the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her” (Rhys 169). The streaming hair imagery is a

repetition from *Jane Eyre*, as the description of what happened the night that Thornfield Hall burned provides an additional detail of Bertha's hair "streaming against the flames" (Brontë 379). The gilt frame around the woman indicates that this is not only a kind of apparition but also a final repetition of the looking glass imagery. As Antoinette looks at Bertha, she also finally looks into a mirror. In the time that she has been removed from her mirror image, she has gotten farther and farther from her own identity. She looks into the mirror to see that she has become Bertha and Bertha has become her. She has become her own ghost. The mirror serves as a dangerous supplement to show how her life has been supplemented. She must confront the plurality in her identity, which now encompasses the construction of Bertha as well.

After encountering Bertha, Antoinette turns back to her history in an attempt to affirm her identity over what has been constructed for her by Rochester and Brontë. Antoinette sets Thornfield Hall aflame and immediately runs to the battlements at the top of the house. This imagery serves as the climax of the novel: "I turned round and saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it," which follows with a compilation of various relics from Antoinette's childhood as well as lush nature images from the Caribbean (Rhys 170). The imagery, which is "red," "gold," "green," "all colours" indicates what has literally colored Antoinette's life (170). The collection of adolescent memories, while nebulous, addresses Antoinette's questions of identity, past and present: "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!" (170). The combination of these particular statements is striking, as the parrot asks, "who is there?" and Rochester, "the man who hated me", responds with "Bertha!" The pairing of these specific memories show how Antoinette must come to terms with a reality in which she has become and is identified as "Bertha."

The parrot's relationship to Antoinette's family history gives further depth to the poignant scene at the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The parrot, Coco, was Annette's beloved pet who would repeatedly chatter two phrases: "*Qui est là? Qui est là?*" and answer himself *Ché Coco. Ché Coco*" (38, italics original). The parrot responds to "who is there?" which is a question in the third person, with its own name, a declaration of the first person. This juxtaposition introduces the questions of disjointed identity that dominate Antoinette's life, as she must confront "Bertha Mason" as someone both outside of and within herself. Furthermore, Coco's tragic death also parallels that of Antoinette. Because Coco's wings were clipped by Annette's White and English husband, Mr. Mason, it gets trapped when Antoinette's family home is burning down. Antoinette witnesses Coco's violent death:

I opened my eyes, everybody was looking up and pointing at Coco on the *glacis* railings with his feathers alight. He made an effort to fly down but his clipped wings failed him and he fell screeching. He was all on fire. (39)

The scene of Coco falling aflame from Coulibri foreshadows the ending scene of the novel, where Antoinette falls from the burning Thornfield. As Coco is physically crippled by the White Englishman Mr. Mason, Antoinette is impaired by her marriage Rochester. Neither Coco nor Antoinette can escape from the space that entraps them and both, ultimately, fall to their death under the gaze of a crowd of spectators. The resurfaced memory of Coco brings a poetic circling to the text. The text mirrors itself just as it mirrors *Jane Eyre*.

The end of *Wide Sargasso Sea* signals a final circularity in the text, as Tia returns in Antoinette's dream to present a solution to her identity dilemma:

... when I looked over the edge I saw the pool at Coulibri. Tia was there. She beckoned to me and when I hesitated, she laughed. I heard her say, You frightened? And I heard the man's voice, Bertha! Bertha! ... I called "Tia!" and jumped and woke. (171)

Tia, who presented the earliest challenge to Antoinette's notions of identity, returns at the climax. As Rochester calls to Antoinette through a name and identity that he has constructed, Tia again serves as a possible escape. Antoinette faces a choice between being consumed by a dangerous supplement, in the form of Rochester's Bertha, and the opportunity to break the chain of supplements by jumping to Tia and killing herself. Tia no longer serves as a possibility for escape through appropriation; instead, she reminds Antoinette of the identity struggle that had defined her identity as Antoinette Cosway. To end the construction of Bertha Mason, Antoinette Cosway must also die. Death ends the division. In order for this to happen, however, Antoinette must play the part of Bertha as Brontë and Rochester have written her. Bertha Mason and Antoinette Cosway are each responsible for killing the other, and death works as both acceptance and rejection of the dangerous supplement. Antoinette lets in the dangerous supplement just enough to escape the process of supplementing.

In this way, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre* act as supplements to one another. Rhys' novel underlines and undermines Brontë's prior text. When considering the ways in which the events of *Wide Sargasso Sea* occur at the very same moments in *Jane Eyre*, it becomes clear as the unacknowledged colonial backdrop to the classic bildungsroman. When Thornfield Hall burns down at the end of *Jane Eyre*, the "cardboard world" of Brontë's text is eaten by the flames of Rhys' creation (Rhys 162). At the same time, Brontë's text haunts Rhys' novel through glances at a subverted mirror image that threatens to consume the text and the characters in it. Just as Antoinette Cosway must let in Bertha Mason, *Wide Sargasso Sea* must let in *Jane Eyre* in order to destroy it. As these supplements get tied up in one another, the impossibility of a locus for a true origin becomes clear.

(De)*Foe* and the (De)Construction of Hierarchy

J.M. Coetzee's 1986 novel *Foe* revisits canonical works in the moment of their creation not only by rewriting Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana*, but also by rewriting Daniel Defoe himself as the titular character Foe. In this way, it becomes a unique addition to the post-colonial canon. Coetzee reconfigures the original novels such that the authenticity of their original plotlines comes into question. In *Foe*, Susan Barton, a representation of Defoe's titular *Roxana*, becomes a central figure in the castaway plot of *Robinson Crusoe* when she is shipwrecked on an island. There, she encounters Cruso— spelled without an e in this retelling— and his “servant” Friday. Coetzee's mute Black figure of Friday differs from Defoe's Friday, an Indian man forced to undergo a colonial process of “civilizing.” In Coetzee's *Foe*, Friday's silence becomes a point of obsession for Susan as well as a focal point for the novel as a whole. Through representations of speech and silence, the novel articulates the construction of colonial hierarchies of power and subsequently deconstructs them by dismantling the power of language. In this way, Coetzee confronts the necessity of rewriting the Western canon and, at the same time, reveals the impossibility of doing so through authorship. Ultimately, *Foe* explores the ways in which silence exists as a subversive force rather than a narrative hole or gap, as its presence threatens the stability of language.

After being marooned, Susan Barton transfers colonial logic of hierarchy onto the isolated island where she finds herself. She begins a colonizing process by declaring the island's king: “I presented myself to Robinson Cruso, in the days when he still ruled over his island, and

became his second subject, the first being his manservant Friday” (Coetzee 11). Racial notions of power come into play, as Susan identifies the White man, Crusoe, as king, and the Black man, Friday, as “manservant.” Gender further informs her positioning when she subjects herself to Crusoe’s rule as well. The nature of being “subject” is often double-sided in the novel. Though “subject” can refer to someone who has agency over their own life, like the subject of a narrative, being made “subject” in *Foe* more often refers to the project of actualizing subjection through domination. Friday is one such subject.

Susan imposes colonial definitions of power onto Friday by attempting to rewrite the mute Black man as a dependent individual. When she brings him to England, she tells the sailors, “inasmuch as Friday is a slave and child, it is our duty to care for him in all things and not abandon him to a solitude worse than death” (39). She establishes Friday as a “slave” and “child,” subject to a benevolent colonial force. She creates a sense of patriotic first-world “duty” in caring for him as a third-world being. Bringing Friday to London from the island serves as an uprooting reminiscent of those necessary for bringing slaves to the “New World.”

Friday is brought to England as product and proof of Crusoe’s empire. In some ways, Susan recognizes the endeavor to commodify Friday’s body:

If [Friday] was not a slave, was he nevertheless not the helpless captive of my desire to have our story told? How did he differ from one of the wild Indians whom explorers bring back with them, in a cargo of parakeets and gold and indigo and skins of panthers, to show they have truly been to the Americas? (150)

When Susan brings Friday to London, she establishes his subjection on multiple levels. His presence in London proves there is a story for Susan to tell. If Friday had not been on the island, Crusoe would not have had anyone to rule over. If Susan had not brought Friday back to London with her, she would have no proof that she and Crusoe were in a strange place with strange people. Through his skin color and positioning as an outsider, Friday proves that Crusoe’s island,

empire, and story existed. On a metatextual level, Defoe's creation of Friday made him not only a product of empire but also proof of that empire, rooted in one-dimensional and degrading colonizing mindsets. The figure of the marginalized was necessary in Western historical accounts and the Western canon to showcase proof of power and colonial authority.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes the positioning of marginalized people in Western thought, referring to them as the "subaltern." In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak discusses the possibility of whether or not it is possible for the subaltern to speak on behalf of themselves, in arts and politics, after having been spoken for by the colonizing West. She argues that Western intellectuals cannot speak on behalf of the subaltern without asserting their own assumed superiority. Furthermore, she argues that it is impossible for the subaltern to speak for themselves, because existential "knowledge" of the other is usually intended for a Western audience and naturally laden with an imbalanced power structure. Even subaltern speech can become a way of imposing dominance and cultural norms.

Throughout the text, Susan becomes the Western intellectual who tries to make sense of Friday's subaltern behavior, and then commodifies that behavior. For instance, when Susan sees Friday throwing white petals off the island into the ocean, she decides, "This casting of petals was the first sign I had that a spirit or soul— call it what you will— stirred beneath that dull and unpleasing exterior" (32). She attributes superstition and religious folklore to Friday's actions. Though she recognizes a possibility for Friday's "spirit or soul," she still attributes a sense of barbarism to his "dull and unpleasing exterior." She cannot empathize without simultaneously marginalizing. In another instance, she notices in London that Friday repeats a six-note song he had played on the island. She decides to respond in turn with music, stipulating that, "if there were any language accessible to Friday, it would be the language of music" (96). She grows

frustrated when Friday refuses to engage, instead continuing to repeat his tune. From this refusal, she wonders if “a disdain for intercourse with me” bars communication between her and the mute Black man (98). In a rare moment, Susan seems to show some understanding of Friday’s personal agency. However, when she later recreates a dance she sees Friday doing, she continues to write her own meaning over it. She believes she falls into “a kind of trance,” and tells herself, “I have discovered why Friday dances in England” (103). She assumes a level of superior understanding of Friday after adopting his behavior. Though Susan may claim to understand Friday’s practices, she ultimately cannot know what the petals, song, and dance mean. She creates her own coherence regarding Friday’s character. Her recreation of Friday’s song and dance serves as a rewriting of the symbolic order, in the form of a colonial practice that appropriates cultural ceremonies by claiming understanding without achieving it.

In the same vein, the relationship between oppressor and oppressed that dominates the text endeavors to achieve liberation but ultimately creates new forms of subjection. Susan ignores the reality that she holds a position of authority over Friday: “Friday is no more in subjection than my shadow is for following me around. He is not free, but he is not in subjection. He is his own master, and has been since Cruso’s death” (150). She establishes a relationship in which Friday must depend upon her, following her around as her “shadow.” Furthermore, she upholds a narrative in which Cruso was Friday’s master, and firmly holds to her rationale that she liberated Friday by rescuing him from the island and bringing him to London. She ignores the ways in which she is personally responsible for his isolation and degradation in his new surroundings.

Susan speaks over Friday's silence and masks it as an attempt to use language as a means of liberation. She asserts her authority through her belief that only she can help Friday by freeing his story:

It is enough to hope that if I make the air around him thick with words, memories will be reborn around him which died under Cruso's rule, and with them the recognition that to live in silence is to live like the whales, great castles of flesh floating leagues apart one from another, or like the spiders, sitting each alone at the heart of his web, which to him is the entire world. (59)

Susan's language shows the ways in which she degrades Friday in the name of his "liberation." The alternative to speaking is living "like the whales" or "like the spiders." Susan creates a dichotomy between humanity, which speaks, and animality, which remains silent. In his silence, Friday is a creature of the island, transplanted to the city of London. Susan convinces herself that through learning English, Friday can return "to the world of words" (60). The colonial project of language acquisition becomes clear. Speech thus becomes a tool Susan uses against Friday.

There are, however, moments in the text that offer a glimpse into Susan's awareness of the power she holds over the mute Friday. She admits:

I tell myself I talk to Friday to educate him out of darkness and silence. But is that the truth? There are times when benevolence deserts me and I use words only as the shortest way to subject him to my will. At such times I understand why Cruso preferred not to disturb his muteness. I understand, that is to say, why a man will choose to be a slaveowner. (60)

She comments on the ways in which master and slave relationships are created, and what role language plays. The act of speaking becomes equivocal, literally, with subordinating someone under slave-owner control. Because Susan spends so much time speaking to Friday, with the knowledge that he will not understand what she is saying, she subjects him to her speech. In that way, she gains her own power and authority.

The imbalanced relationship between Susan and Friday over speech is reminiscent of master and slave relations as discussed by Hegel. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel discusses the relationship between a lord and his bondsman, or a master and slave. Both attempt to achieve self-consciousness and self-sufficiency through a life-and-death struggle. Negating, or conquering, the other creates an opportunity to recognize the self (114). However, when the lord wins that struggle, he begins to perceive the bondsman as an extension of himself, someone who does his bidding and lives for him. The lord no longer recognizes the bondsman as an other, and, as a result, can no longer recognize himself in relation to the bondsman either (116). On the other hand, because the bondsman must do the lord's bidding, he recognizes the lord as someone outside himself. (117) Therefore, he must recognize his own self. The bondsman achieves self-consciousness as well as self-sufficiency in a way that the lord cannot. In *Foe*, this Hegelian relationship becomes one between master and subject, as it involves speech and subjection through language.

Foe creates and complicates a hierarchy among different level of speech. Human speech takes up the first level. Susan mourns the loss of human speech when she is marooned:

If the company of brutes had been enough for me, I might have lived most happily on my island. But who, accustomed to the fullness of human speech, can be content with caws and chirps and screeches, and the barking of seals, and the moan of the wind?
(Coetzee 8)

The dichotomy created in this quote, between *brutes* and *human speech*, continues through the rest of the novel. The quote also establishes another kind of speaking, encompassing animalistic and natural sounds that make up the second level. The sounds of the island upset Susan as an unappealing alternative to human language. At one point, she wakes up to find, “The wind had dropped; I could hear the singing of crickets and, far away, the roar of the waves. ‘I am safe, I am on an island, all will be well,’ I whispered to myself” (14). She soothes herself of the harsh

language of the island using her own language and tongue. To fully escape these sounds, Susan seeks “to know what it was to have silence” (15). The third level, then, is silence and the absence of speech entirely.

The levels of speech, however, are complicated by Hegelian theory of self-consciousness and self-sufficiency. Susan, who occupies the first level, uses speech to enact authority over Friday, who occupies the third level because of his muteness. Friday embodies the figure of the subject, and Susan acts as his master. She “subject[s] him to [her] will” by constantly speaking to him and attempting to make him listen and understand (60). With the knowledge that Friday has no tongue, she recognizes that Friday will never speak back to her. She hopes, however, that he will come to understand English, and “speak” through other means like writing. In other words, she hopes that her own belief in the power of language will transfer to him. She relies on speech in a way that Friday does not. Therefore, the master, who occupies the first level, lacks self-sufficiency, as she remains subject to the authority of language. Though Susan may believe she is master over nature, animality and silence, she is subject to the mastery of language. Friday, however, is free from language’s pervasive control, and becomes self-sufficient in a way that Susan cannot achieve. The third level, that which frustrates Susan most, has the most control through impermeable silence.

Still, Susan seeks to fill Friday’s silence because she perceives the freeing of Friday’s story as his, and her, liberation. Friday’s speech would reassure her that she holds authorship of their story, and thus holds authority over language, rather than the other way around. Instead, Friday’s muteness—particularly his lack of a tongue—becomes a gap in her narrative:

The story of Friday’s tongue is a story unable to be told, or unable to be told by me. That is to say, many stories can be told of Friday’s tongue, but the true story is buried within Friday, who is

mute. The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a
means of giving voice to Friday. (118)

She recognizes Friday's silence as a limit to their shared story— understands that she cannot try to tell the full and complete story of Friday without knowing how or why he lost his tongue.

Susan considers the possibility of many stories: Friday could have lost his tongue as a result of his upbringing, the actions of colonizers, or perhaps he may have never had a tongue at all. Susan does not consider, however, the possibility that Friday's story is not meant for her ears—the ears of the colonizer. Her speech is laden with language that asserts her Western authority. Her claim that she has the ability to “give” voice implies that Friday lacks agency with regards to his speech. She believes Friday is “child of silence, a child unborn, a child waiting to be born that cannot be born” (122). Such a statement places Friday in relation to his silence; it lacks recognition of Friday's status as a person with agency separate from language. Though she calls Friday a “child of silence,” she does not understand that she is ultimately a child of *language*, subject to its force and control.

Through Susan's use of language, Friday's freedom becomes inextricably wrapped up in its opposite in the form of assumed slavery. When she brings Friday to London, Susan decides, “I have written a deed granting Friday his freedom and signed it in Cruso's name. This I have sewn into a little bag and hung on a cord around Friday's neck” (99). Again, Susan exhibits conviction in the power of text and language, with the belief that writing Friday's freedom will somehow grant him complete liberation and agency. However, slavery was not a condition that Friday was born or sold into. By writing the paper, Susan assumes the condition for freedom: slavery. The physical manifestation of freedom in the form of papers becomes corporeal; at the end of the novel, an unnamed narrator finds Friday lying on the floor and notices around “his neck — I had not observed this before — is a scar like a necklace, left by a rope or chain” (155).

The imagery is immediately reminiscent of the scars left by slavery, either in the form of the noose that killed the slave or the chains that bind a person. Friday's noose and chains are made up of freedom papers. In this way, "freedom" of the colonized becomes a violent show of power for the colonizer rather than a tangible truth.

Friday's freedom, or lack thereof, becomes a contested point in the text, especially between Susan and Daniel Foe. Both characters represent different kinds of colonizers who seek to rewrite Friday's story. They disagree, however, over what Friday's "freedom" means, and their discussion is rooted in language rather than the actual state of liberation. Susan tells Foe:

He does not understand that I am leading him to freedom. He does not know what freedom is. Freedom is a word, less than a word, a noise, one of the multitude of noises I make when I open my mouth. His master is dead, now he has a mistress— that is all he knows. (100)

Susan uses language to make assumptions of Friday's agency. She argues that, because he does not know the word "freedom," he cannot understand the concept that it represents. Susan makes freedom something that can only be achieved as long as one understands its language. Foe points out an oversight in her line of thought: "Freedom is a word like any word. It is a puff of air, seven letters on a slate. It is but the name we give to the desire you speak of, the desire to be free. What concerns us is the desire, not the name" (149). Foe asserts that what we consider language is simply an abstraction of what is ultimately abstract. Foe's definition of "freedom" creates a chain that ultimately makes freedom an ever-elusive desire and therefore an unachievable thing. Neither recognizes the ways in which his or her argument proves subjection to language. They argue over the *word* rather than the thing itself, and both disregard Friday's ability to achieve freedom. In this way, both try to subject Friday to their control through their notions of language and speech. Because of the novel's structure, however, each holds different a kind of power over Friday.

Different levels of authority exist in the novel, as layers of narration complicate subjection. *Foe*, as Coetzee's rewriting of Defoe's original work, predicated on a claim that Defoe's novels were originally rewritings of the true stories of Susan, Crusoe, and Friday. Friday is thus rewritten and subjected in different ways, with each corresponding to an order of speech and authority. In the first, Susan speaks to Friday and subjects him to her language within the narrative. The next order becomes clear from the quotes that frame the text of the novel. Quotation marks precede every passage in the first two parts of the novel, eventually revealing those parts' structures to be made up of letters from Susan to Foe (45). On the second order of text, then, Susan speaks for Friday to Foe. The intertextual element of the novel draws attention to a third order of language on which Friday is subjected— that of Foe's writing over Friday, and, by extension, the real-life Daniel Defoe's writing over Friday in *Robinson Crusoe*. Foe's narration over and for Friday points to the ways in which Defoe originally subjected Friday in *Robinson Crusoe*. Looking beyond Susan, Foe, and Defoe takes the reader to Coetzee, who has written the character of Friday in *Foe* with some significant differences from the original text. Coetzee cannot escape this chain of authority. Through the language of the novel, Coetzee can subject Friday to his desired form.

Changing the character of Friday draws attention to Coetzee's power as an author, as well as his limitations. In an essay on *Foe* and intertextuality, Tisha Turk explores the ways in which Coetzee alters his novel from its source material. Coetzee makes two key changes that transform and define his conception of Friday. The first is that he makes Friday an explicitly Black character whereas he was Indian in the prior work; the second is that he makes Friday mute (Turk 300). In Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Friday is described with as having "all the sweetness and softness of a European in his countenance," with hair "not curl'd like wool," skin "not quite

black," "nose small, not flat like the negroes," and "thin lips" (Defoe 173). Friday's characterization involves the ways in which he is *not* like Blacks or other people of color, and therefore the ways in which he can get closer to Whiteness. Crusoe tries to convert Friday to Christianity and to teach him English, a colonial "civilizing" mission of "enlightening this savage creature" (Defoe 186). Crusoe succeeds in these tasks, dressing Friday in European clothing as well as culture, therefore bringing the Indian man closer to imposed Whiteness. However, Friday never escapes his subaltern status, constantly relegated to a position of inferiority. In his rewriting, Coetzee rejects the colonial project of language acquisition and "civilizing." He instead writes Friday as a character who is starkly Black, will not learn English, and will not become the "enlightened savage." This authorial decision points at Coetzee's criticism of colonialism and colonial texts. He will not make his Friday undergo the same racist colonizing process as Defoe once did.

Coetzee draws attention to the ways in which colonial and canonical texts often overlook marginalized figures in an attempt to focus attention on their Western-centric characters and plotlines. Though authors like Brontë and Defoe may not have recognized the ways in which they dismissed characters like Bertha Mason and Friday, they did so to complete their own stories. Susan claims to not believe in these gaps in narratives. She says, "To tell my story and be silent on Friday's tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty" (Coetzee 67). She seeks to fill in these pages, which she recognizes as "a puzzle or hole in the narrative," or, "a buttonhole, carefully cross-stitched around, but empty, waiting for the button" (121). Both of these quotes relate to a greater theme of canon formation. Though Susan may be upset with pages that are "quietly left empty," those pages were crucial to the project of Western canon formation. They, like Friday, were products as well as proof of literary empire, as

Western figures were prioritized over non-Western marginalized populations. Coetzee addresses these narrative holes in his rewriting of Defoe's work; however, rather than filling them in, he emphasizes their emptiness. Coetzee's rewriting points to the gap without filling it. He renders Friday mute to indicate this limitation— he cannot speak for the mute Black man without speaking over him so he never makes Friday speak.

Through Susan, Coetzee speaks to the desire, especially in Western thought, to make the silenced or subaltern speak by filling in narrative holes. Susan has an obsession with knowing Friday's story, as she tells Foe that Friday's silence has limited her not only from telling her own story but also from experiencing her life in a normal way. She tells him about how she would lie awake and listen to Friday's silence:

A silence that rose up the stairway like smoke, like a welling of black smoke. Before long I could not breathe, I would feel I was stifling in my bed. My lungs, my heart, my head were full of black smoke. I had to spring up and open the curtains and put my head outside and breathe fresh air and see for myself that there were stars still in the sky. (118)

Friday's silence creeps into and obscures the narrative that Susan would like to create; the black smoke haunts her and leaves her unable to pursue the truth. This lack of clarity is unbearable and "stifling," taking away Susan's very breath, as she cannot live with the unknown. This problematic notion asserts that Friday's speech can somehow clear the black smoke and give Susan access to a deeper truth. She assumes that such clarity exists. Susan cannot accept a landscape that involves emptiness or black smoke as an inherent part.

Coetzee gives the reader an idea of what story Susan would tell of Friday, if "by art [she finds] a means of giving voice to Friday" (118). Susan outlines how colonizers can prioritize certain figures above others in colonial art and literature, though she may not understand that she is doing so:

A painter engaged to paint a dull scene—let us say two men digging in a field—has means at hand to lend allure to his subject. He can set the golden hues of the first man's skin against the sooty hues of the second's, creating a play of light against dark. By artfully representing their attitudes, he can indicate which is master, which slave. (88)

Susan's quote highlights the way in which creation of interpretation of art and literature from the colonizer can often work in their favor, by prioritizing them or endowing them with more power. The "play of light against dark," and the comparison between one "sooty" and one "golden" hand both highlight the role of race in this process. Colonial art is informed by colonial logics of power. Even though Susan wants to fill in the gap of Friday's story, she would ultimately impose her own notions of power in doing so. Her story of Friday would inevitably focus on his "sooty hues" and his status as a "slave." Her "artful representation" cannot be separated from her position as a colonizer.

In this way, Coetzee draws attention to how language and writing can be used to shape and reshape perceptions of authority. At first, Susan believes that Foe's publication of her story will allow her and Friday to "live forever, after a manner" (Coetzee 58). However, Foe's story vastly differs from the one Susan imagined. Tisha Turk notes that characters from *Roxana*, like the daughter also named Susan Barton and the nurse named Amy, "somehow come adrift from their own book," ostensibly from Foe's writing (Turk 305). These unexpected developments leave the elder Susan Barton confused and upset. What is real becomes increasingly unclear. She tells Foe, "now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me" (Coetzee 133). Rather than expanding her life, writing has replaced and consumed it. By depending so heavily on language, she became susceptible to becoming a subject of Foe's mastery of it. The Hegelian master and slave relationship reappears, but this time Susan is at the other end. The inversion of this relationship, as she becomes a subject, begins to show her the dangers of relying

on speech and language. Losing authorship of her story to Foe leads Susan to believe that she has also lost all of her own authority. Her story may “live forever” but in the manner of Foe’s choosing, rather than Susan’s. The reader knows that her story eventually becomes *Roxana*.

Metafictional references in the text complicate the relationship between subjects of writing and their writers, as characters call upon the authors Defoe and Coetzee. For instance, early in the novel, Crusoe gets sick and yells out, “about *Masa* or *Massa*, a word with no meaning I can discover,” (29, italics original). Here, “Mas(s)a” seems to be a loud exclamation of the word, “master.” He screams to an external force that is unknown and undiscoverable by Susan. At this point, Susan is firmly planted in the text and in the power of text. In his illness, however, Crusoe reaches out to the one responsible for his misery and sickness— his author. Because of the metafictional aspect of *Foe*, his author can either be Defoe, the man ultimately responsible for the conception and creation of Robinson Crusoe, or Coetzee, the man who rewrites that original.

Characters in the text must confront their writers and rewriters. The exclamation of “Mas(s)a” gives further significance to a moment later in the novel, in which Foe tells Susan:

Let us confront our worst fear, which is that we have all of us been called into the world from a different order (which we have now forgotten) by a conjurer, unknown to us, as you say I have conjured up your daughter and her companion (I have not) ... Have we thereby lost our freedom? (135)

Beyond the religious implications of this passage, it works as a metatextual moment, recognizing the author as a “conjurer,” writing characters into and out of existence. Speech and language again get wrapped up in the notion of freedom. Foe and Susan both established their definitions of freedom in relation to language, and their abilities to speak over others. A loss of authority over language, however, threatens a loss of freedom. Foe’s “worst fear” is the possibility that somebody writes his story just as he writes Susan’s. The reader, of course, understands the truth behind Foe’s sentiment; indeed, Foe and Susan have been called into the world by Coetzee, who

is unknown to both but imbued with power that controls their fates— at least within Coetzee’s text. Language becomes less secure as further orders of writing and speech are introduced.

The act of rewriting begins to illuminate the ways in which writing, speech, and language are permeable and uncertain. As Susan’s story becomes absorbed into Foe’s, she loses control over speech and language. Her rewriting of Friday’s story becomes less secure as her own story gets rewritten. She asks Foe, “Why do I speak, to whom do I speak, when there is no need to speak?” before going on to confront his authorial intrusion over her life:

But now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me. I thought I was myself and this girl a creature from another order speaking words you made up for her. But now I am full of doubt. Nothing is left to me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong? And you: who are you? (133)

She believes that she has lost her grasp on reality because Foe’s story has taken over. Susan’s questions of, “who is speaking me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong?” showcase an awareness of her status as subject— she is being treated as an extension of the story created by the author, in this case Foe. As a subject, she begins to understand the power the master holds in constructing certain realities, especially when both master and subject are rooted in language. Though Susan once used speech to cement her “civilized” authority over the “barbarian” Friday, that authority is subverted when Foe speaks for her. She lacks full awareness of the perverse, undermining qualities of speech until they work against her. Susan then brings up the crucial question, “Who is speaking me?” Someone must be actively involved in speaking her character into existence. She is pulled onto the order of *Roxana*, in which she is no longer a subject with agency but instead a character subjected to Foe’s control. She becomes a phantom, one who can only watch her identity being chipped away without interference.

As she becomes subject, Susan slowly begins to understand language as an empty gesture, though this loss in authority is foreshadowed early in the text. Susan initially tries to establish speech and language as a unique thing to civilized people:

When I take the spoon from his hand (but is it a truly a spoon to him, or a mere thing? – I do not know), and say *Spoon*, how can I be sure he does not think I am chattering to myself as a magpie or an ape does, for the pleasure of hearing the noise I make, and feeling the play of my tongue, as he himself used to find pleasure in playing his flute? (57, italics original)

Susan believes in speech as a human gesture, markedly different from that of “a magpie or an ape.” In this way, she uses speech to cement her belief in her own power and “civilized” behavior. She understands, however, that Friday may perceive her speech as a kind of “chattering” or “noise,” because speech is unnecessary and perhaps meaningless for him. She believes Friday can never understand her unique, human struggle for speech: “you, who have never, for all I know, spoken a word in your life, and certainly never will, what it is to speak into a void, day after day, without answer” (80). At the same time, however, Susan foreshadows an understanding of the possible meaninglessness of speech, as well as the collapse of its authority. Speech becomes a process lost to a void. Ultimately, it turns into “the pleasure of hearing the noise I make, and feeling the play of my tongue,” rather than an action laden with meaning.

Friday, however, cannot be dominated through speech and language because he does not allow language to hold power over him. Though both Susan and Foe attempt to subject him, Friday shows the greatest awareness of language as a construction. He subverts that construction until its meaning collapses. The main part of the novel ends as Susan and Foe attempt to teach Friday to write. Susan grows frustrated when Friday does not learn, and Foe reassures her, “if you have planted a seed, that is progress enough, for the time being” (147). The act of “planting a seed” serves as a reflection of the act of colonizing—in this case, trying to colonize Friday’s

very mind. Friday rejects this possibility. Instead, he takes the slate upon which Susan was teaching him to write, and does something unusual:

Glancing over his shoulder, I saw he was filling it with a design of, as it seemed, leaves and flowers. But when I came closer I saw the leaves were eyes, open eyes, each set upon a human foot: row upon row of eyes upon feet: walking eyes. (147)

Friday takes the tools Susan believes will open access to the innermost workings of his mind and uses them instead to emphasize that such access is unattainable. He refuses to conform to her mold.

By abstracting and obscuring his writing, Friday rewrites the very process of writing. When Susan tries to show the glyphs to Foe, “Friday put three fingers into his mouth and wet them with spittle and rubbed the slate clean” (147). Friday will not allow Susan to try to make meaning of his writing, and he will not even allow Foe to see it. He cannot become a rewritten object of either order, because he does not provide them with anything to write over. His incomprehensible writing thus cannot endow Susan or Foe with further power. Friday’s active choice to erase the slate, another form of silence, reflects his Hegelian self-consciousness. Because he is aware of the emptiness in the power of language, he can subvert that power and turn it into a meaningless glyph or thing.

Friday’s subversive behavior seems to reveal an awareness and subsequent rejection of the authority of the colonizer. For instance, Friday frequently wears Foe’s clothing—literally the master’s robes— but no explanation is given in the text:

But the man seated at the table was not Foe. It was Friday, with Foe’s robes on his back and Foe’s wig, filthy as a bird’s nest, on his head. In his hand, poised over Foe’s papers, he held a quill with a drop of black ink glistening at its tip. ‘Let him be, Susan,’ [Foe] said in a tired voice: ‘he is accustoming himself to his tools, it is part of learning to write.’ (151)

Friday wears the traditional robes and wig that distinguish Foe to endow him with traditional Western authority, reminiscent of an English member of parliament. However, on Friday, the wig becomes a “bird’s nest.” Western artifacts of colonial authority lose their meaning in another rewriting of the symbolic order, much like how Susan replicated Friday’s behavior. Friday, whether intentionally or not, establishes himself in a position of authority over Foe because *he* is now the rewriter. Speech no longer marks who can have power, because Friday has been placed in a position above Foe and thus over Susan as well.

Friday finally does “write,” but his writing acts as another subversion of language. When Foe tries to teach Friday the letter O, he is met with a kind of unwriting:

The paper before him was heavily smudged, as by a child unused to the pen, but there was writing on it, writing of a kind, rows and rows of the letter *o* tightly packed together. A second page lay at his elbow, fully written over, and it was the same. (152)

The letter *o* repeats over and over to the point where it becomes a meaningless symbol, a glyph much like the “walking eye.” He writes with no apparent purpose, in a similar vein as Susan’s speaking “into a void, day after day, without answer.” The main part of the novel ends with this vague promise of Friday learning to write. Foe tells Susan, “It is a beginning. ... Tomorrow you must teach him *a*” (152). Though the meaning of speech begins to spiral apart, the colonizer’s belief that it could still mean something remains. The reader, however, never sees what understanding takes place, nor do they see Friday’s writing come to fruition.

The emptiness of the text converges in the gap of Friday’s O. Meaning spirals apart as he turns letters and symbols into meaningless glyphs. He establishes the limit not only of Susan and Foe’s understanding, but of the text itself. Immediately after the writing lesson with the repeating Os, the fourth part begins with a sentence repeated from the start of the third: “The staircase was dark and mean” (153). The text then takes on a cyclical structure through three independent

endings that jump back and forth in time. In the first ending, an unnamed narrator encounters a sleeping Friday as well as the dead bodies of Susan and Foe lying in Foe's bed. This ending functions as a chronological progression, taking place sometime after the writing lesson. After the narrator tries to listen to Friday's mouth, which "issue[s] the sounds of the island," the novel then shifts to a second ending (154). In this second ending, the unnamed narrator enters the apartment of "*Daniel Defoe, Author*" (155, italics original). The text enters an order closer to reality where Foe has become Defoe. The unknown narrator again sees a couple in bed and Friday on the floor. When the narrator picks up a paper and reads the words printed there, the third shift takes place, which serves as a final cycling in the text—the words are also the first words of *Foe*, and the narrator is transported to another shipwreck. This time, Susan, "her captain," and Friday have drowned. In this ending, it may be assumed that Susan and Friday left the island but never reached England or found Foe. Thus, Susan never wrote her letters to Foe, and Coetzee's narrative becomes an impossibility. The novel concludes with ambiguity rather than finality, as the use of three endings cements the uncertainty of speech and language. Coetzee's endings create further orders on which the text operates, and *Foe* becomes characterized by disorder.

Coetzee leaves the reader with a final image of the absence of speech. The novel ends in the shipwreck, "a place where bodies are their own signs... It is the home of Friday" (157). In an effort to interpret that sign and "find a way in" Friday's body, the narrator opens Friday's mouth (157).

From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face. (157)

Friday finally “speaks.” However, like his writing, it is a form of speech that is incomprehensible and denied understanding— an unreadable sign. Unknowing permeates everything, “to the ends of the earth.” The end of the novel showcases the ways in which speech ultimately becomes an empty gesture devoid of meaning. Nobody other than Friday can say whether or not Friday’s “speech” may have meaning. Just as the lack of understanding haunts Susan and Foe, it comes to the reader— beating against us as we try to make sense of a disjointed ending.

Foe shows us what the Western canon looks like when defined as much by its gaps as by its narratives. In his novel, Coetzee shows the reader how speech functions as a colonizing process that establishes relationships of power and results in erasure through speaking over. Thus, the “buttonholes” that have been “carefully cross-stitched around” in the Western canon cannot be filled (67). The pages that have been “quietly left empty” must remain in their quietness (67). Friday’s silence does not serve as a narrative gap or hole but instead as a force of its own; it exists and speaks for itself by asserting its own permanence. *Foe* shows the ways in which silence can subvert hierarchies of power and authority. Coetzee’s novel falls into Friday’s O and his “slow stream.” Unlike the philosophy of Spivak, the subaltern *chooses* not to speak, and in that silence, there exists a powerful form of rewriting.

On Beauty, On Reconfiguring the Canon

Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* takes a classic novel and reframes it in the context of the contemporary period. As time has passed, so too has the practice of revising the canon. Smith's 2005 novel serves as a modern adaptation of E.M. Forster's 1910 novel, *Howards End*. Rather than post-colonialism, *On Beauty* operates using a kind of postmodernism in the form of pastiche, referring to elements of a literary past to present something new. Smith writes the book in homage to E.M. Forster, to whom, she says in her acknowledgments, "all my fiction is indebted, one way or the other" (Smith vii). Unlike the approach taken by Rhys and Coetzee, both of whom strive to point out the failures of classic authors like Charlotte Brontë and Daniel Defoe, Smith builds off the classic work in a way that she hopes will celebrate rather than criticize Forster, as it discusses the affect of art and literature. In *On Beauty*, Smith presents certain binaries—between "high" art and "low" art, between academia and non-academia—and uses them to get to a deeper question of what it means to study art. The novel unfolds as a kind of chiasmus in which academics undermine the political and ethical importance of studying art, while art and artistic values showcase fundamental hypocrisy in academia. Those outside the institution, then, show us why art remains an important moral force in today's world.

Smith, like Forster, writes comic novels intended to showcase aspects of a certain kind of common human experience. Forster's novel *Howards End* revolves around two families, the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes. The liberal Schlegels fundamentally oppose the conservative Wilcoxes on issues of class, wealth, and education. The two families, however, become

intertwined through the friendship of Margaret, the eldest daughter of the Schlegels, and Ruth, the wife and mother of the Wilcoxes. Many aspects of *Howards End* resonate particularly with a White, middle to upper class British experience. The conflict itself cannot directly transplant onto the present day, so *On Beauty* implements some key changes. Smith's novel moves to America, where it revolves around the liberal Belseys and the conservative Kippses. The families become intertwined through a sudden friendship between the mothers, Kiki Belsey and Carlene Kipps, despite a fierce rivalry between the fathers, Howard Belsey and Montague Kipps. Issues of education and class compound with issues of race, as academia comes to the forefront of the debate.

In reconfiguring a work from the past, Smith comments on the ways in which human ethics are interpreted through art and literature across space and time. Art is inherently connected to the values it spreads. According to Smith, "It seems that if you put people on paper and move them through time, you cannot help but talk about ethics, because the ethical realm exists nowhere if not here: in the consequences of human actions as they unfold in time, and the multiple interpretive possibility of those actions" ("Love, Actually"). This quote comes from a 2003 essay in which Smith defends Forster's work and writing style, which has been criticized for its "too messy" and "chaotic" plot structures. Smith does not agree with these critiques, as she believes that his form emulates the "emotional, erratic and unreasonable in human life;" it is messy just as human life itself is messy ("Love, Actually"). Smith discusses the relationship between form and content and the connection between ethics and aesthetics in writing. She believes that the act of writing, no matter what how "trivial" its intention, intrinsically becomes commentary on ethics and moral value. This, then, asserts the significance of expanding the canon beyond Western centric values, because the lauding of certain texts over others through

time functions as affirmation of those texts' values. While Smith seems to believe in a canon, she also emphasizes the importance of a canon with "multiple interpretive possibility." Her approach to Forster works as one of many possible interpretations of his work, as well as one of many ways to approach the classic.

As Smith herself claims in the opening pages, "this isn't 1910" and it is important to note the ways in which her text diverges from Forster's original novel (Smith 15). Smith's novel does not so much rewrite Forster's original work as it reconfigures that work. *On Beauty* does not carry the exact same conflict as *Howards End* to the present day, but instead the essence of that conflict. Both texts explore a binary between liberalism and traditionalism and the ways in which that binary meets. Smith's novel, however, centers on a conflict between two families of color; in this way, Smith reconfigures Forster's canonical work so that it makes space for racial issues. The liberal Belseys are mixed-race, with a White British father, Howard, and a Black American mother, Kiki; the conservative Kippses are Black and British. Their conflict cannot ignore race, nor can it disregard manifestations of Blackness. Each Black character deals with their race in a different way, and no fundamental or all-encompassing Black experience exists in the novel. Smith instead presents muddled portraits of what it can mean to be Black, with a similar kind of messiness as Forster's novels. Furthermore, the novel not only moves to America but it also moves to Wellington, a fictional town just outside of Boston in which the fictional Wellington College is located, a veiled reference to Harvard University. At this prestigious academic institution, Howard Belsey and Montague Kipps debate fiercely over the study of art and the production of knowledge.

The conflict at Wellington College resonates with a modern debate in academia regarding the study of the canon. Towards the end of the twentieth century, a fierce debate raged over the

existing White-centric canon. A question was posed: what works should be studied and what does it mean to study artistic and literary canons and their histories? “Traditionalists,” who favored the existing Western-centric canon, debated with “multiculturalists,” who wanted to open the canon to those who had been marginalized, predominantly women and people of color (Donadio). The debate was criticized by literary scholar John Guillory in his book *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. In the book, Guillory argues that the canon debate is a kind of “imaginary politics” that limits itself to the institution by focusing on which works should be included on academic syllabi (7). Thus, he argued, incorporating certain works into the canon would not be able to fix existing social and racial inequality; representation cannot fix all problems caused by exclusion. Furthermore, he argues that one cannot group all “marginalized” authors together as “noncanonical,” and then bring them into the canon; instead, there must be the recognition of how different modes of domination worked together to exclude groups from the canon (11). Guillory’s book was published when the debate was at a climax, in the year 1993.

When Smith wrote her novel, however, the debate had mostly settled. Liberalism had succeeded and the canon now included authors like Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie, and Smith herself. What Smith questions in her novel, then, are the interpretative frames used to study certain texts. *On Beauty* is concerned with Guillory’s aforementioned modes of domination, particularly those within academia. When more texts are represented in the canon, the next question to address regards how to study them.

Smith makes use of a certain kind of multicultural canon in *On Beauty*. In its references to canonical art, literature, and music, along with modern-day culture and events, the novel operates using what Linda Hutcheon refers to as “historiographic metafiction.” According to

Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction situates a work in a certain moment of history without relinquishing its “autonomy as a fiction” (Hutcheon 4). *On Beauty* becomes a pastiche of the present by using modern-day allusions to situate the work in relation to what has come before. Not only is the book loosely structured on *Howards End*, but it also implements both the title and much of the philosophy from Elaine Scarry’s *On Beauty and Being Just*, which muses on liberal thinking and its relationship to aesthetics. Beyond these major two influences, *On Beauty* contains references to Rembrandt, Mozart, Shakespeare, Jules Verne, Jane Austen, Lewis Carroll, T.S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson, Zora Neale Hurston, Edward Hopper, EM Forster, as well as more modern references like *Sound of Music*, the hip hop group Public Enemy, the hip hop artist Tupac Shakur, the film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, entrepreneur Richard Branson, and singer Tracey Chapman. Classic “high” art and pop-culture “low” art are used in equal measure.

Utilizing allusions allows Smith to locate her work in the particular place and time of the present-day, which is connected to an extensive literary and artistic past. As an example, an allusion to T.S. Eliot appears in the thought process of the character Zora Belsey in such a way that establishes its lingering relevance to the present. As Zora waits for her classmates in front of a poetry club they are going to, “She prepared a face — as her favorite poet had it — to meet the faces that she met” (Smith 209). The reference to “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” not only establishes Zora’s knowledge as the daughter of a professor, but also works as a subtle detail to showcase Smith’s use of the canon. Smith utilizes it as foundation for the present day. Literary and artistic works, like those of T.S. Eliot, are as much a part of the fictional landscape of *On Beauty* as Wellington itself. The postmodernist fabric of references does not function as a breaking down of the canon but instead showcases how the historical canon can create something entirely new.

In her references to the classics, Smith refuses to turn away from the political, social, and racial issues of the modern-day. To illustrate this use of the canon, we can refer to the passage in which Smith elaborates how listening to Mozart affects Kiki Belsey, a Black woman in the White majority suburb of Wellington.

Mozart's Requiem begins with you walking towards a huge pit. The pit is on the other side of a precipice, which you cannot see over until you are right at its edge. Your death is awaiting you in that pit. You don't know what it looks like or sounds like or smells like. You don't know whether it will be good or bad. You just walk towards it. ... In the pit is a great choir, like the one you joined for two months in Wellington in which you were the only black woman. (69)

Smith establishes Mozart's Requiem as a textual experience: something that is felt, seen, and heard. At the same time, however, she asserts, "you don't know what it looks like or sounds like or smells like." Through abstraction, Smith rejects one standard way of interpreting Mozart's music but instead points to the ways in which that music is experienced on a personal level. She thus leaves room for multiple interpretive possibility. The affirming of an unclear yet unique experience of music differs from Forster's passage on music in *Howards End*: "It will be generally admitted that Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is the most sublime noise that has ever penetrated into the ear of man. All sorts and conditions are satisfied by it" (Forster 43). Forster lauds Beethoven's music as something that is "generally" revered by "all sorts and conditions." The rigidity of Forster's interpretation of the classic is offset by the flexibility of Smith's.

In *On Beauty*, the canon does not operate on a universal set of aesthetics that affect everyone equally, as Forster may claim. Smith's interpretation begins generally, but then ties into personal experiences. Similarly, the passage on Mozart's Requiem first uses the second-person to ascribe a general experience onto the reader, and then shifts to a specific experience when the text refers to a "choir, like the one you joined for two months in Wellington in which you were

the only black woman” (Smith 69). Mozart’s classical work connects to Kiki’s personal, racial history. Particularity is intrinsic to Smith’s universality. The ways in which one interacts with “universality” is thus inherently informed by their position in society, whether it be racial or gender-based or class-based.

Howard Belsey and Montague Kipps, however, interact with the canon in unusual and counterintuitive ways, considering their respective racial locations. The two men come into conflict over the study and philosophy of art history. Monty, an ardent traditionalist, suggests that, “Art was a gift from God, blessing only a handful of masters, and most Literature merely a veil for poorly reasoned left-wing ideologies” (44). He fiercely opposes the notion of multiculturalism as well as the liberal measures intended to promote equality among races. Many members of the Wellington community are outraged that Monty opposes Affirmative Action, which is intended to bolster and support Black populations in the US; instead, he refers to the measure as a “corruption” (329). His character is constructed in relation to the most conservative academics of the modern era, with a notable complication: he is Black, with Trinidadian roots. Howard, on the other hand, is the exemplar multiculturalist. He tells his students, “Art is the Western myth ... with which we both *console* ourselves and *make* ourselves” (155, italics original). By focusing on approaches to criticizing and dissecting art, he neither believes in the Western canon nor in Western authority over art. Howard, however, is a White British man. Thus, the “colonizer” occupies the position of the multiculturalist while the “colonized” occupies the position of the traditionalist. Racial locations do not automatically correspond with certain academic philosophies or positions. Smith showcases a nuanced debate over ethics and aesthetics, as no simple binary exists between Black and White.

Monty Kipps' hypocritical ideology, despite his Blackness, is rooted in his authority with regards to both class and gender. His claims, such as "poetry is the first mark of the truly civilized," are more reminiscent to those of the colonizer than those of the colonized (94). As a visiting lecturer of Wellington, he plans to host a lecture series called "Taking the Liberal Out of the Liberal Arts." One of his main points of contention at the university regards the presence of "discretionary students," or non-Wellington College students in university courses. Namely, the White professor Claire Malcolm opens her selective poetry seminar to discretionaries, with the reasoning that "There are a *lot* of talented kids in this town who don't have the advantages of Zora Belsey — who can't *afford* college, who can't *afford* our summer school, who are looking at the army as their next best possibility" (160, italics original). Monty, however, vigorously opposes the enrollment of discretionaries like Chantelle Williams in Claire's seminar:

Here is a young African-American lady ... who has *no* college education and *no* college experience, who did not *graduate from her high school*, who yet believes that somehow the academic world of Wellington *owes* her a place within its hallowed walls — and why? As restitution for her own — or her family's — misfortunes. Actually, the problem is larger than that. These children are being encouraged to claim reparation *for history itself*. They are being used as political pawns — they are being fed lies. (365, italics original)

He does not believe that Chantelle should have a place in academia unless she can afford it or if she fits a certain mold. The study and creation of art cannot be open to all, only to those who deserve it. His incredulity that students would want "reparation *for history itself*" showcases an avid disavowal of the violence in that history. He erases and trivializes the shared history of racial slavery that African Americans share, as though it is a history that has come and gone rather than a history that has lingered into the present day. As a British Black man who has risen to an upper-class, Monty refuses to believe that institutional obstacles impede Black Americans. Those very obstacles contribute to why women like Chantelle are unable to graduate from high

school, and thus cannot go to the “hallowed walls” of Wellington College. Consequently, the revelation that he has been sleeping with Chantelle shows how he perpetuates gender and class inequality, taking advantage of his power over her not only by sleeping with her but also fighting against her presence at Wellington. He contradicts against his own claims for the possibility of upward mobility through academia.

On the other hand, Howard Belsey seeks to actively avoid the faults of Whiteness through his academic career, though those faults come to show themselves in his personal life. The main endeavor of his class is to “imagine prettiness as the mask that power wears. To recast Aesthetics as a rarefied language of exclusion” (155). In an effort to avoid the Western “language of exclusion,” he claims to not believe in representational painting and refuses to have such paintings in the Belsey family home. He equates the failure to represent *all* in artistic and literary history with the impossibility of representation. His Black family must tread carefully around his narrow academic tastes. Though he claims a multiculturalist perspective, he dictates the art his Black mixed-race family may or may not enjoy. Furthermore, when he marries Kiki, he isolates himself from his father Harold, a racist British butcher who often makes generalizations about Black people as a “them.” His marriage to Kiki offers proof that the prodigal White son has risen above his family’s racism and low-class background and, indeed, has even become a multiculturalist.

However, Howard’s marriage to Kiki is steeped in aesthetics, and his decision to cheat on her equally so. When Kiki confronts him over his affair with Claire Malcolm, a family friend and professor at Wellington, she is outraged that he not only cheated on her, but that he cheated on her with a small White woman. She tells him, “My *leg* weighs more than that woman ... You married a big black bitch and you run off with a fucking leprechaun?” (206). Howard then

responds, “Well, I married a slim black woman, actually” (207). His personal decisions counter his academic philosophy. In his sexuality, he adheres to beauty standards rather than rejecting or criticizing them. He tells Kiki, “men— they respond to beauty ... it doesn’t end for them, this ... this *concern* with beauty as a physical actuality in the world” (207). Though Howard may reject aesthetics in his academic career and refer to them as a “language of exclusion,” he actively perpetuates that process of exclusion in his personal life. Despite Kiki’s forgiveness of his original transgression, he again chases after someone that aligns more closely with beauty standards than his shapely, aging wife. He sleeps with Victoria Kipps, Monty’s young Black daughter with whom Howard’s eldest son Jerome had fallen in love in the beginning of the novel; he does so because of her youth and remarkable beauty. Ultimately, his “*concern with beauty*” becomes a driving force in his life, and his claim to any kind of moral dominance regarding aesthetics and liberalism falls flat.

Zora Belsey interacts with her father’s multicultural and postmodern values in a way that guarantees her success in academia. She adopts the same disdain for art as Howard. At one point, Howard’s teaching assistant, Smith J. Miller, praises Zora’s ability to dissect art. He criticizes the students who discuss what they “like” or “love” about the art, but affirms that Zora is different because, “Whatever she [gets] in front of her she rips apart to see how it works. She’s gonna go a long way” (Smith 145). Zora has been trained in all the right ways to succeed in academia, predicated on the ability to destroy art and its impact. In this positioning, it does not matter so much what is in the canon; rather, what is important is the ability to “rip apart” whatever is there. Academia, especially postmodern academia, rewards the ability to put aside the ways in which a text or work of art makes one feel and instead focus on its intellectual effect. Zora is not Chantelle Williams. Through her father, she has been given the means to overcome institutional

obstacles, at least to an extent, and move forward within the “hallowed walls” of Wellington College. At the same time, Zora supports the presence of discretionary students like Chantelle in the institution, albeit for mixed reasons. Her actions do not correlate with pure intentions. More specifically, she vouches for the presence of Carl Thomas, a young Black spoken word poet. She takes a personal interest in Carl, as both a moral cause and a personal one. Zora finds Carl attractive and believes that advocating on his behalf will lead to romance. As an added bonus, she would gain further cultural capital by being a champion for this cause. Bringing Carl into the academic structure becomes a personal endeavor rather than a true opening of the institution to those that have been left behind.

Claire Malcolm’s involvement with Zora and Carl further showcases how power dynamics operate within university politics. The novel makes note of the cult following of Claire’s poetry seminar—her subject material coupled with her academic politics make her a popular instructor; her position on discretionary students further endows her with cultural capital at the liberal institution. When she needs someone to take up her fight, she capitalizes on Zora’s dual interest. Claire tells Zora, “when I think of Carl, I’m thinking of someone who doesn’t have a voice and who needs someone like you, who has a very powerful voice, to speak for him. I actually think it’s that important. I also think it’s a beautiful thing to do for a dispossessed person in this climate. Don’t you feel that?” (263). As a White woman as well as a professor, Claire holds an advantaged position over Zora and Carl. With an understanding of Zora’s personal interest in Carl and thus her vulnerability to such an appeal, Claire asserts her authority over the mixed-race Zora through manipulation. Furthermore, the politics she uses to justify her appeal are misguided, cementing Carl’s position as a disadvantaged or marginalized member of society. Her hypocrisy lies in the juxtaposition between her claim to bring in talented, disadvantaged

students and her simultaneous discrediting of those students. Because of his socioeconomic class and race, Claire assumes that Carl “doesn’t have a voice,” and is “a dispossessed person in this climate.”

Carl, however, does have a clear and strong voice; when he attempts to assert that voice, he is met with belittling by the academic institution. He performs spoken word poetry, which is largely written off as an art form not comparable to those within traditional academia. When Carl first meets the Belsey family and tells them about his spoken word, Levi Belsey calls him a “street poet,” telling the other Belseys, “People do other shit than go to college” (76). Levi, the youngest Belsey and the only Belsey born in America, constantly searches for ways to bring himself closer to what he believes is an authentic Black American experience: he employs a fake Brooklyn accent, listens to rap and hip-hop, and pretends to hail from the racially diverse Roxbury rather than White-majority Wellington. He tries to place his own perception of “street” onto Carl, putting this in direct opposition with “going to college.” Carl, however, hesitates to label himself as a “street poet,” telling them “I do some stuff, Spoken Word — that’s all” (77). Zora is quick to compare this poetry to institutionalized poetry, like that of Claire Malcolm. She refers to Claire as a “*poet poet*” in comparison (77, italics original). Zora’s repetition indicates that Claire’s poetry has a kind of authenticity that Carl’s work lacks. Spoken word and slam poetry, as an art form that operates culturally, does not merit the same respect as work done within the institution. Zora’s “high” art is pitted against Levi’s “low” art. Both sides of this binary are constructed by children who have been raised in close proximity to academia; therefore, Zora and Levi cannot fully understand the cultural resonance of slam poetry. Each writes off the practice in different ways.

Carl's eventual performance of spoken word poetry showcases its synthesis of classic and cultural canon, as well as its vulnerability to institutionalization. Slam poetry can lose its uniqueness if it gets too close to *poetry* poetry. Carl's performance makes a great emotional impact on its viewers, including Claire and her poetry seminar:

The whole audience was on its feet swaying together, the music passing through the crowd like wind through a cornfield. The voice that was so exciting this room expressed itself with precision (it was the first time all night that nobody missed a word) and threw out complicated multisyllabic lines with apparent ease. (Smith 230).

The poem's effect on the crowd is obvious, "like wind through a cornfield." The poet himself, however, is disembodied— simply a "voice that was so exciting this room." In the passage, Smith focuses on the way that the beauty of the poem moves a room of people, rather than putting the emphasis on the artist. The poem's refrain, "*But it ain't like that,*" affirms the negative, through which Smith establishes a motif that she uses throughout the novel to highlight the ways in which Carl "ain't like" others believe him to be, rather than offering a clear picture as to whom he really is (230, italics original). As readers, we only see Carl as he is in Wellington and as those in Wellington see him. Claire sees him as an opportunity. She asks him, "Are you interested in refining what you have?" (232). She constructs a hierarchy in which spoken word poetry is simply a rudimentary version of her own that needs to be refined. The academic structure seeks to take in the art form and shape it in a way that is more palatable to its general practice; in this way, it becomes institutionalized. In Claire's belief, Carl must join her poetry course if he ever hopes to make true art, *poetry* poetry.

Carl's practice of art intersects with canonicity in a way that is informed by his particular understanding of culture— a blending of traditional "high" and "low" art. We can see this in his interactions with and interpretations of Mozart. After meeting the Belsey family at the Mozart

concert, Carl continues to think about the Requiem for the next few weeks until he runs into Zora in Wellington again. He asks her if she remembers a part of the Requiem called the *Lacrimosa*. He refers to it as “the *best* thing in the Requiem, and it made me think *damn*, you can be so close to genius that it like lifts you up” (137). He emphasizes the way that art makes him feel, that it “lifts you up.” He goes on to explain that another man, Süssmayr, composed the *Lacrimosa* part of the Requiem after Mozart died without completing the work, which surprised him, because:

All these people be trying to prove that it’s Mozart ‘cos that fits in with their idea of who can and who can’t make music like this, but the *deal* is that this amazing sound was just by this guy Süssmayr, this average Joe Shmo guy. (137)

Carl introduces the project of institutional bias in academia: the belief that an amazing work could be done by no less than a master. Canonical works can only be created by specific members of the canon. However, Carl himself showcases that this is not the case. He samples the *Lacrimosa* in his music; in doing so, he not only fuses together classical and cultural canons, but he makes something new and original out of something old. The lines between the different kinds of art become even blurrier. Carl himself becomes a figure like Süssmayr, an “average Joe Shmo guy” who produces unique art but cannot fit in with the “idea of who can and can’t” be part of the academic ideals of art formation.

As Carl plants himself deeper into Wellington, he gains a greater understanding of the ways in which he is not allowed to fit. An opportunity to work as the Hip-Hop Archivist in the Black Studies department excites him: “He was being hired because he knew about *this* subject, *this* thing called hip-hop, and knew much more about it than the average Joe—maybe more than anyone else in this university ... He was an *archivist*” (372). Being part of the institution means escaping his positioning as “average Joe Schmo guy.” Both he and his mother are excited by the prestige and the academic cultural capital of Wellington, proudly displaying the paychecks “in

Wellington envelopes printed with the Wellington crest,” (372). Carl believes the job serves as recognition from the institution of his knowledge and expertise. What he does not know, however, is that Dr. Erskine Jegede hires him as a favor to Claire, who faces immense pressure from Zora to find a way to keep Carl at Wellington. Erskine capitalizes on his authority as Assistant Director of the Black Studies Department to solve the problem by giving Carl a job. Thus, unbeknownst to Carl, his position arises from campus politics rather than his merit. Still, he tries to find a place for himself at Wellington, alongside Elisha Park, a Black graduate student from a “third-rate college way down South” who serves as the Chief Librarian of the Music Library:

Like Carl, she felt a mixture of awe and resentment faced with the grandeur of a Wellington and together they formed a gang of two, always steeled for the contempt of the students and faculty, but equally appreciative when ‘they’ treated ‘us’ kindly. (372)

Carl and Elisha’s mixed feelings of “awe and resentment” reflect their presence within and without the institution. They are insiders, working within the framework of the college, but also outsiders, still not seen as equals by students or faculty. Even Erskine does not vest any interest in the two of them: “when Carl bumped into him by chance in a hallway, Erskine appeared confused as to who Carl even was, and suggested he address all queries to the librarian— what was her name? Oh, yes, Elisha Park,” (374). Erskine does not offer the basic respect of recognition to the very people who work in his department. This event leads to Carl’s understanding of their alienation in academia, as Elisha says, “people like you and me ... we’re not really a part of this community, are we? I mean, no one’s gonna help us feel that way” (374). Regardless of their dedication to academia, Carl and Elisha will always be “pretending” to be “Wellingtonian or whatever” (374).

Carl's relationship with Zora, and its breakdown, showcases the delicacy of his position in the university. When Carl pursues the more attractive Victoria Kipps, Zora is enraged at what she sees as Carl's betrayal, telling him "I've been working *constantly* for you and—," (413). His initial surprise stems from his lack of understanding how he could have possibly hurt her. He then recognizes her intentions: "Apparently you wanted to do a little more than help me. Apparently you expected some payback. Apparently I had to sleep with yo' skank ass as well" (413). He goes on to express his hurt, "Is *that* why you helped me? I guess I can't write at all — is that it? You were just making me look like an idiot in that class. . . . Is that *it*? You pick me up off the streets and when I don't do what you want, you turn on me? Damn!" (414, italics original). He understands that he has been objectified two-fold: both sexually and as an object of university study. His relationship to Zora comes undone along with his feeling of security in Claire's class— as though everyone was objectifying him just like Zora. He understands that his presence in the class, picked up "off the streets," played into a larger game of the cultural capital of liberalism. His identity as a Wellingtonian breaks down, along with "the charming Carl Thomas of Wellington's Black Music Library" (413). Just as slam poetry is vulnerable to institutionalization, so too is Carl. The process of canonizing Carl and bringing him into the fold of academia turns into a violent process that threatens to write over his existing persona to create something more palatable by the institution.

Carl's displacement culminates with an accusation of theft, rooted in his position as an outsider at Wellington because of his education, race, and class. The same night that Zora and Carl argue, a painting is stolen from the Black Studies department. The painting, "Maitresse Erzulie" by Haitian painter Hector Hyppolite, belongs to Monty Kipps. When the painting is discovered to be missing, Monty quickly pins the blame on Carl, "one of the *street-children* of

Dr Malcolm's collection" (421). He asks Zora, "what kind of young man — in your estimation — is this Carl Thomas? Did he strike you, for example, as a thief?" (422). Zora, as a child of the institution, holds a valued perspective and trustworthiness that Carl does not have. Monty continues, "Would it be an unfair description to describe this young man as from the 'wrong side of the tracks'? Are we likely to find a criminal record?" (422). Carl is vilified as a result of his class and education background. The reader recognizes this moment of hypocrisy, because Monty ultimately holds responsibility for stealing the painting. When his wife Carlene died, she left her painting to Kiki Belsey after recognizing the way the painting affected Kiki, saying "it needs to be loved by someone like you" (430). Rather than give the painting away, Monty and his children burned the will, treasuring the artwork's monetary value over its sentimental value. The rich academic becomes the thief. Though Carl does not witness the accusation, he began to understand this Wellingtonian hypocrisy the night before. Whether the academic ideology is liberal, like Zora's, or conservative, like Monty's, Carl cannot fit.

Carl's disappearance from the text marks his exit from Wellingtonian academia. "He disappeared from Wellington altogether" (439). Carl has left the institution, and it is fair to assume that he will not return. After a number of incidents that have devalued him, objectified him, and vilified him, he rejects the academic institution itself. He refuses its power. The final mention of Carl in the novel marks both his disappearance as well as his omnipresence:

Five months later Zora continued to see Carl's many doppelgängers in the street, day after day — the hoodie, the baggy jeans, the box-fresh sneakers, the big black earphones — and each time she spotted a twin she felt his name soar from her chest to her throat. Sometimes she let it out. But the boy always walked on.
(439)

Zora is haunted by the way in which she displaced Carl from the university. However, her displacement of Carl speaks to a larger displacement of those who share similar racial, education,

and class-based backgrounds as Carl. These figures are real and she sees them everywhere. Though they do not share Carl's exact experience, they face similar institutional obstacles. Academia does not only close itself to the one, but to the many.

Comparing Carl to the figure of Leonard Bast from *Howards End* speaks to a divide between academics and the “dispossessed” or “marginalized” populations that they claim to speak for. In *Howards End*, Leonard Bast is a young man of a lower social class than the Schlegels and Wilcoxes. Though he tries to “improve” himself to reach a higher level of culture and society, both families see Leonard as they want to see him. He is either relegated to an inferior position in his class or is romanticized as a “real man, who cared for adventure and beauty” (Forster 270). Both families seek a certain kind of authentic image of Leonard and both fail to recognize the ways in which this image becomes a construction. The preoccupation with molding Leonard into a specific shape results in his untimely death. “Books fell over him in a shower. Nothing had sense” (Forster 277). His cause of death serves as an explicit symbol: the man was crushed by books, as he was killed by education and culture. Carl, though based on Leonard's character, does not die in *On Beauty*. He instead makes the choice to disappear. His final words are an outward rejection of intellectual culture and an affirmation of his own.

People like me are just toys to people like you ... I'm just some
experiment for you to play with. ... You got your college degrees,
but you don't even live right ... I need to be with *my people*, man
— I can't do this no more. (Smith 419)

Because he cannot make a place for himself in an institution that has been built against him, Carl resists canonicity as well as the imposed status of subaltern. He turns away from academics, regardless of whether they are liberal or conservative, as they seek to shape him to a certain mold. Furthermore, he refuses to be rendered voiceless. Carl will not be Wellington's “experiment” or “dispossessed” member of society who must be spoken for. After getting

wrapped up in Wellington's politics, he leaves the institution altogether to be with his own community. The novel ultimately showcases the pitfalls of intellectualism as a means of "empowering" disadvantaged communities.

On Beauty draws attention to another disadvantaged community through its commentary on Haitians in Wellington and neighboring areas of Boston. In the text, Haitians are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, much like Carl's many doppelgangers. Characters throughout the text are noted to be Haitian, from Monique, the Belsey family cleaner who is introduced in the first few pages despite her minor role, to an unnamed jewelry vendor, to Levi's good friend Chouchou, whom he refers to as Choo. None of these characters are central in the novel but all play distinct roles in establishing an essential political struggle that takes place. Haitian political movements occur throughout and are often pointed at implicitly, but also often come out explicitly. For instance, as Zora and Carl have a conversation inside an academic building, a noise comes from outside the window. Zora notices that there is "some kind of Haitian protest thing" in Wellington Square for "minimum wage, getting shit on by everybody all the time—a lot of stuff, I guess" (376). She closes the window so that the noise will no longer disturb Carl's work. However, Smith does not let the window close fully, nor does she make that the end of the story. The protest appears again in the following scene, when Howard and Victoria rendezvous at a hotel to carry out their affair. The hotel concierge tells Howard their room may be noisy because, "A march is going through town— if you find it unbearable, please call down to us" (380). The novel showcases the way important political movements are not only written out of literature but also out of daily life. Smith, however, does not actively exclude the Haitian struggle from of her novel. Though the protests do not drive the plot, they remain intricately connected in another version of omnipresence and disappearance.

Levi Belsey connects to Haitian movements in a way that other characters do not, and this relationship takes root in art. As a result of his relationships with Haitians, especially Choo, Levi turns away from his father's philosophy of disregarding art's affect. He instead connects to various forms of Haitian art, and, through it, Haitian culture. He becomes more involved in the Haitian protests, which confuses the rest of his family. His mother comments, "Don't you find it a little strange that he's so interested in *Haitian* things? I mean, *we're* not Haitian, he's never been to Haiti — six months ago he couldn't have pointed to Haiti on a map" (400, italics original). However, the reader has an understanding and knowledge that Kiki lacks. The reader follows Levi's emotional journey as he slowly becomes more connected to Haitian culture and history. In one instance, as he travels on the subway on his way to visit Choo's house, he reads a book about Haiti, described as "pretty much the most depressing book Levi had ever read" (355).

The book affects Levi in a way that readers rarely see from academics in *On Beauty*. "Each time he returned to the Haiti book he felt impassioned," as he is moved to engage further with Haitian immigrants in Wellington, and with Americans who do not know about "this wretched, blood-stained little island a mere hour's boat trip from Florida" (355). Levi experiences the most empathy for Haiti's intense and violent history in the moments when he reads the book, but those feelings still linger in the time that he spends away from it.

He need only leave the book on Haiti in a forgotten knapsack in his closet for a week, and the whole island and its history grew obscure to him once more. He seemed to know no more about it than he ever had. . . . It all became a haze of history to him. He retained only the searing, unwelcome awareness that somewhere, not far from him, a people were suffering greatly. (356)

In this passage, Smith illustrates art's extensive impact. Through reading, Levi becomes connected to a culture and history outside his own. Though the details go missing and become

“obscure” in the time away from the book, their effects remain in the form of a “searing, unwelcome awareness” of pain that is not his own.

Haitian works in the text showcase Smith’s articulation of a connection between aesthetics and ethics, as well as art and politics. In another instance, Levi listens to music by a group of Haitians and feels incredibly moved:

She didn’t know the half of it: couldn’t know, would never know,
the lovely sadness of that Haitian music, or what it was like to sit
in a small dark booth and be alone with it — the plangent, irregular
rhythm, like a human heartbeat, the way the many harmonized
voices had sounded, to Levi, like a whole nation weeping in tune.
(408)

Art leaves a residual effect in the form of not only knowing but also feeling pain. Just as Carl experienced the *Lacrimosa*, Levi is viscerally moved by what he hears. Through the music, Levi sees a “human heartbeat” and “whole nation weeping in tune”— the music itself has life. Levi is moved to take political action. Through interacting with that music, and with Haitian art generally, Levi forges a relationship with a nation he would not know otherwise. Aesthetics lead to the formation of a certain kind of ethos. Levi cannot interact with Haitian art without remembering its “wretched, blood-stained” history. Consequently, his appreciation of the art turns into political drive, and beauty inspires action.

Smith demonstrates how interactions with art ultimately address the values those pieces of art represent. Levi’s attempts to help Haiti culminate with his taking “Maitresse Erzulie” from the office of Monty Kipps. Hyppolite’s Haitian painting is the very one that Carl is accused of stealing. Levi’s theft connects to a comment made earlier by Choo on Kipps’ collection: “You rob the peasants of their art and it makes you a rich man! A rich man! Those artists died poor and hungry. They sold what they had for a few dollars out of desperation— they didn’t know! Poor and hungry!” (362). Choo elucidates the conflict between the marginalized populations who

create art and the privileged populations who capitalize on the commodification and academic study of that art. Levi perceives taking the art as a way to level the field, to take from the rich and give to the poor in an effort to “save” Haiti.

The specific reference to “Maitresse Erzulie” has special significance with regards to interactions with Haitian art. As Nicole King points out in her essay on creolisation in *On Beauty*, Erzulie represents an important Haitian Vodou divine entity, or *lwa*, also known as the Black Virgin (King 266). Furthermore, Carlene Kipps explains to Kiki that Erzulie “represents love, beauty, purity, the ideal female and the moon ... jealousy, vengeance, and discord, *and*, on the other hand, of love, perpetual help, goodwill, health, beauty, and fortune” (Smith 175). Monty’s action of taking “Maitresse Erzulie,” a feminist symbol, from his own wife thus gains deeper meaning— in stealing the painting, Monty enacts gendered violence that disregards and ignores the ethical values of the important cultural symbol. Levi, however, steals the painting back. Though neither may know it, both characters interact with the ethos of the painting. Levi acts on the values of “love, perpetual help, goodwill, health, beauty, and fortune,” whereas Monty acts on its “jealousy, vengeance and discord.” Art cannot be separated from that which the art represents— “Maitresse Erzulie” becomes not only a painting but also an important cultural signifier.

Still, Smith does not argue that problems of the everyday can be solved directly through art; instead, Smith points to the possibility that art can create the mechanisms for change. When Levi takes the painting, he reasons, “that money belongs to the Haitian people, not some ... some *Caucasian art dealer* ... That money needs to be redis— to be shared” (Smith 429, italics original). Levi conflates saving the painting with saving the Haitian nation and culture; However, becomes clear that returning the painting to Haiti will not account for the pain that the original

commodification of the painting may have caused. Giving “Maitresse Erzulie” back to the proper hands does not undo the violence of the “wretched, blood-stained little island” (355). Instead, Levi’s action symbolizes the integral connections between art and politics. Aesthetics and ethics can never be a mutually exclusive binary, because a work of art will always have a tangible effect on the ethos of its viewer. Consequently, this ethos can lead to action.

On Beauty shows how academia can complicate the ways in which art affects the drive for action. In the novel, the characters outside of the academic structure—such as Levi, Carl, and Kiki—experience art’s impact most strongly. The text offers some explanation for this phenomenon: “in Levi— who knew nothing of history or economics, of philosophy or anthropology, who had no hard ideological shell to protect him— [a liberal susceptibility to the pain of others] was particularly pronounced” (Smith 355). Academic subjects like history, economics, philosophy, and anthropology make the concrete emotions of art and literature into something abstract to be studied in specific ways. Interacting with art becomes a test of existing knowledge, as Howard and Monty show in their classes. Both classes center on the active effort to avoid how art makes one feel and instead focus on how it makes one think. In that process, art becomes an abstract force as its political relevance is removed from the intellectual. Both sides of the binary—with postmodern unraveling at one end and traditional glorification at the other—disregard the real impact that art can have, regardless of origin, as a source of empathy.

The novel provides commentary on academic abstraction through an extended metaphor about tomatoes. Victoria Kipps tells Howard that Wellington students refer to their classes through the ways in which they would approach tomatoes, with descriptions like, “The tomato’s nature versus the tomato’s nurture,” “To properly understand the tomato you must first uncover the tomato’s suppressed Herstory,” “The tomato is structured like an aubergine,” or “There is no

way of proving the existence of the tomato without making reference to the tomato itself” (312).

In academia, a tomato cannot exist as simply a tomato— it is a complex thing to be dissected and abstracted. Furthermore, Victoria tells Howard that his class is “properly intellectual,” because:

The tomato is just totally revealed as this phoney construction that can't lead you to some higher truth — nobody's pretending the tomato will save your life. ... Your tomatoes have got nothing to do with *love* or *truth*. They're not fallacies ... It's like what you're always saying: let's *interrogate* these terms. What's so beautiful about this tomato? Who decided on its truth? (313)

Howard's class does not only destroy Western notions of beauty, but also attempts to destroy individual ideas of and appreciation for beauty. Howard's class deprioritizes “love” and “truth” and focuses on “interrogation.” He denies the connection between aesthetics and ethics— art does not and cannot have a deeper meaning. The significance of the tomato, across all Wellington courses, only comes out of the histories of study. Without access to that institutional knowledge, the tomato is meaningless— simply a thing or a fabrication. This focus on cultural capital, or the knowledge that has already been gained through the institution, acts as a main force alienating and isolating outsiders like Carl. Regardless of whether academic politics are liberal or conservative, they often play into the same system in which art cannot be understood unless it is understood in a specific, academic way. Affect cannot matter.

At the end of the novel, aesthetics offer a means of escape from the entanglements of academic debate, thereby turning back to the emotions and subsequent ethics that are inherent in art. Howard is on his way to give a presentation to a group of people from various universities and institutions, hoping that he will be offered a position with tenure, when the *Lacrimosa* plays on the car stereo: “like a teenager, [he] turned it up high and kept his windows down. *Swish dah dah, swish dah dah*” (440, italics original). The language that Carl had used earlier to describe the *Lacrimosa* appears once again, and the ghost of Carl returns to the text. In this moment,

Howard enjoys the music fully and completely, turning to the non-academic way to enjoy art. When he arrives, he realizes that he left his notes in the car and only has a slideshow with images of Rembrandt paintings. He looks at the final image, one of *Hendrickje Bathing*, 1654, and then looks at his spectators, where he is surprised to see Kiki watching. At this point, they have been separated as a result of his revealed affair with Victoria Kipps. He looks back and forth between Kiki, “In her face, his life,” and the painting of “Rembrandt’s love, Hendrickje,” (442-443). He then looks intently at the painting:

Though her hands were imprecise blurs, paint heaped on paint and roiled with the brush, the rest of her skin had been expertly rendered in all its variety—chalky whites and lively pinks, the underlying blue of her veins and the ever present human hint of yellow, intimation of what is to come. (443)

Howard realizes for himself the connection between aesthetics and ethics when he shares a moment of intimate connection with his wife because of how Rembrandt’s painting makes him feel. Aesthetics, in all their color and texture, become his focus. As though Hendrickje lives and breathes in her painting, with the “underlying blue of her veins,” she brings out an “ever present human” quality, which he connects to his love for Kiki. As Howard gazes at the painting, he connects Rembrandt’s loving portrait of his mistress, to the connection that he and Kiki share. Kiki no longer faces the same kind of abstraction as the art that Howard studies. Smith does not give the reader insight into the possibility of reconciliation between Howard and Kiki. She simply showcases a moment of connection through art, and offers “intimation of what is to come.” She leaves the door open to multiple interpretive possibility, just as she saw in Forster.

In *On Beauty*, Smith presents art and academia as two powerful forces that can come into conflict with one another. By doing so, she addresses questions inherently linked to those of canonicity. Her novel articulates limits to modern-day academia by showing the ways in which institutions can marginalize those they claim to speak for, regardless of ideology. At the same

time, however, she does not ignore the ways in which art itself can be limited. What emerges from this debate, then, is a messy and muddled medium in which the two must meet. Change must come out of the empathy created by art as well as the knowledge provided by academia. The novel works as proof of this very notion. The intertextual construction of Smith's novel reconciles academic ideologies with forms of canonical and non-canonical art. *On Beauty* thus showcases what a canonical novel can become. In the vein of a true comic novelist like Forster, Smith formulates her own messy, muddled, yet unique solution to a problem of the modern-age.

Conclusion: The Unfixed Classic

The project of post-colonial revision intricately connects to the project of canon reform. It becomes an attempt to “fix” the canon in some capacity. This endeavor doubles itself in a split definition of what it means to “fix.” On one hand, fixing refers to solving the problems of the canon as it stands. It acknowledges the failures and absences of existing classics and attempts to right those wrongs. Fixing becomes a process of developing an alternative by creating the supplement or addressing the silence. On the other hand, however, to “fix” also refers to the establishment of the meaning of canonicity and the construction of the group of texts as a whole. As a larger project, fixing means determining which plots, values, and meanings have a place in the canon. Jean Rhys, J.M. Coetzee, and Zadie Smith each use different means in their endeavors to confront the classics through rewriting. Looking at *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Foe*, and *On Beauty* together shows us how the project of “fixing” the classic relies on unfixing the structure of the canon; in this way, it pushes for a promise of multiple interpretive possibility.

Wide Sargasso Sea revises the classic by rewriting in the form of a supplement. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys constructs a Derridean dangerous supplement to Charlotte Brontë’s original *Jane Eyre*. Rhys’ work mirrors Brontë’s novel, and its plotline fits so neatly into the original work that it begins to overshadow it. By creating Antoinette Cosway as supplement, Rhys gives Bertha Mason the life and depth she lacked in *Jane Eyre*. The “problem” of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* is fixed, to an extent. Though the violence that has been forced upon Bertha has not been undone, Rhys has created a work in which Bertha is no longer marginal, no longer a

ghost of the text, but a force of her own. After reading *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it becomes impossible to see Brontë's Bertha Mason without also seeing Antoinette Cosway.

Analyzing Rhys' novel shows us how the relationship of supplement is reciprocal. Just as Rhys' construction of Antoinette Cosway supplements the original Bertha Mason, Brontë's construction of Bertha Mason supplements Antoinette Cosway. The novel shows how the supplements collapse together, and that process dismantles the notion of "originality." Because the two novels are wrapped up in one another, it ultimately becomes impossible to identify which holds authority over the character. The "dark passage" created between the two novels cannot be closed. Each novel cannot exist without its alternate. As Rhys' novel "fixes" the problem of Bertha Mason, it "unfixes" Brontë's novel from its independent place as a classic. *Jane Eyre* must make room for *Wide Sargasso Sea* to insert itself into the Western canon.

J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* addresses the silence of the canon by acknowledging the ways in which canonical authors like Daniel Defoe failed to create real, complex roles for marginalized characters—the pages "quietly left empty" (67). Coetzee centers his novel on the "buttonholes," as Susan Barton calls them, in the fabric of the Western canon (Coetzee 121). They are seen in Friday's empty mouth, in the Os of his writing, in the "slow stream, without breath, without interruption" that washes over everything (157). Coetzee shows these gaps as they are, forcing silence to "beat against [our] eyelids, against the skin of [our] face[s]" (157). However, *Foe* refuses to fill in the button as *Wide Sargasso Sea* did. Coetzee rejects the process of filling in narrative holes by discussing the violence inherent to the process of rewriting.

Coetzee's novel shows how writing over the "quietly left empty" pages, particularly in Western writing, can be a force that violently overwrites the agency of the marginalized. The novel deconstructs the authority of speech to show the ways in which the subaltern need not

speaking because silence can serve as a subversive force. In his unreadable muteness, Friday subverts the authority of the colonizer to overwrite the very process of writing. Friday does not speak, and Coetzee refuses to “fix” the problems of Defoe’s novel by filling in his silence. In this way, *Foe* pushes back on *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Though Rhys’ rewriting may be intended to counteract a previous form of violence, Coetzee asserts that it can dangerously become a violence of its own. Instead, Coetzee rewrites through silence—allowing the gap to speak.

The metafictional and intertextual elements of Coetzee’s novel, then, highlight the ways in which he unfixes Defoe’s original works. By creating a literary representation of Defoe in the character of Daniel Foe and referencing the way that (De)Foe created his original texts, Coetzee delegitimizes the author’s original authority. Through the blurring of the lines between Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana*, Coetzee creates an underwriting—a “true story” or narrative that lies behind Defoe’s texts. In this narrative, Susan Barton exists independently from the plotline of *Roxana*, Crusoe and Friday exist in alternate forms to those in *Robinson Crusoe*, and (De)Foe rewrites their stories. This narrative seems to exist in an order closer to reality than either fictitious novel. Defoe’s two novels break under the silencing of this “truth.” At the end of the novel, the reader still cannot be sure of what makes up Susan’s, Friday’s, or Crusoe’s stories. Furthermore, the use of three cyclical endings leaves the reader uncertain about Coetzee’s narrative as well. Coetzee deconstructs his own authority alongside Defoe, in order to deconstruct literary order. *Foe* speaks back to the classic through muteness and silence.

Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty* counters Rhys’ and Coetzee’s philosophies. Though Smith structures her novel around E.M. Forster’s classic work *Howards End*, she does not create a dangerous supplement. Instead, her project becomes one of rewriting entirely—recreating the plotline of *Howards End* to the point where it is barely recognizable. She does not seem to agree

with Coetzee's method of deconstruction to silence the novel. Through her representation of Wellington College, she establishes that postmodern deconstruction can be as damaging as ardent traditionalism. Smith's literary philosophy does not value silence— either in the existing gaps of the canon or in the author's refusal to represent. Instead, Smith addresses what art and literature says to us when it speaks— the moments where the Requiem “lifts you up” or a book leaves you with a “searing, unwelcome awareness” (Smith 137)(356). Smith emphasizes the connections between aesthetics and ethics— the way that art can make us feel, and what it can then make us do. Indeed, her own project to rewrite Forster originated with the way his novels made her feel, spurring her to create a literary imagining of what that feeling can become.

Thus, rather than breaking down the canon, *On Beauty* builds itself off of it. Smith gives the plotline of *Howards End* further modern relevance. It takes the novel that begins with a letter and begins it with an email: “One may as well begin with Jerome's emails to his father” (Smith 3). Smith seeks to “fix” the problems of the canonical work of *Howard's End* by actively “unfixing” canonical works as a whole. Rather than a straightforward rewriting of Forster's work, she takes the parts that succeeded— the novel's conflict and ethics—and reinterprets them through a modern lens.

Smith's use of pastiche further illustrates this “unfixing,” as she implements different kinds of allusions in the context of her novel as background. The canon becomes a fluid, changing collection of art and literature that Smith uses to varying degrees. Furthermore, she counters references to classic works with references to a more-modern day canon, which is multicultural and made up of those forms of art unrecognized by traditional academia. Rap songs and slam poetry counter typical notions of classical music or literature. *On Beauty* becomes a project of canon reconstruction rather than deconstruction, as Smith constructs her novel from

pieces of the past and present. She acknowledges the successes of the existing canon while still addressing the failures, and thus points to what the canon can become.

However, Smith's work has failures of its own. Her endeavor to create a messy and muddled plot structure like Forster's is complicated by the novel's being situated in Blackness. Because the novel delineates certain kinds of Black experiences, significant care is crucial to constructing its plotlines. Consequently, her constructions of Black characters— especially Black female characters like Kiki Belsey and Victoria Kipps— have been criticized by some as stereotypical. These portrayals are further problematized by her claim in an interview with *The Atlantic* that “it really isn't the race thing that I'm interested in” (Moo). In that same interview, she asserts that she “tried to set as few scenes as possible in the university,” instead prioritizing Kiki and Howard's marriage (Moo). However, her authorial intention may not align with reader interpretation. The reader's attention is naturally drawn to the politics on Wellington campus which resonate with relevancy to the present-day. Furthermore, while Smith may not be interested in “the race thing,” the very act of rewriting a canonical novel and centering it on race is subversive and must be not only be carefully accomplished but also acknowledged.

Smith's philosophy of “multiple interpretive possibility” comes into play here. Though Smith may establish her text in a certain way and with a certain focus, she also highlights the importance of personal interpretation in art. In *On Beauty*, characters interact with art in unique ways, depending on their personal racial, gendered, and socio-economic positionings. Inherent to multiple interpretive possibility is the premise that texts will have fluid meaning, thus opening them to many different kinds of interpretations and imaginings. Her novel centers on the importance of engaging with art and experiencing its effect, whether positive or negative.

Therefore, while Smith may not agree with the criticism she has received, her novel champions the practice of doing so.

We must return to the original question now— “what becomes of the classic?” In the works of Rhys, Coetzee, and Smith, we see different forms of rewriting. Regardless of the method or extent of revision, however, they cannot write over the classics they are based on. Antoinette Cosway can never escape Bertha Mason, Friday will never leave behind his imposed status of subaltern. We must consider the possibility that, in this way, the canon will never be fixed; it will continue to have problems, whether in the form of old violence that cannot be written out or new violence that arises from recent additions. The canon continues to exist as a set of texts that perpetuate certain morals and values.

However, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Foe*, and *On Beauty* show the possibility of undermining the authority of the classic and using rewriting as a means to open the structure of the literary canon. By adapting canonical narratives to their own purposes, Rhys, Coetzee, and Smith overturn the authority of classical authors like Brontë, DeFoe, and Forster, and effectively canonize themselves. Metafictional and intertextual rewritings call the authority of classic texts into question. The “classic” is unfixed from its dominating position, and instead becomes a tool for the post-colonial author’s use. The canon is made fluid, and in its unsteady, unfixed position, can no longer stand as a pillar of Western thought.

In this way, post-colonial rewritings subvert the power of the “classic” and use it to open the structure of the literary canon. Fixing the existing problems of the classics predicates on a process of unfixing the canon, thus opening it to new voices. Each novel utilizes the status of the classic to push itself into the structure of the canon. *Wide Sargasso Sea* writes over *Jane Eyre*, *Foe* writes under the narratives of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana*, and *On Beauty* writes with the

foundation of *Howards End*. Whether the rewriting sews on the button, forms a new hole, or creates patchwork from what was once there, the fabric of the canon continues changing. The classic becomes palimpsest, making way for the new to address the shortcomings of the old. In that way, the canon can never be fixed.

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