HEAT

Jean Rhys

Analysis by Elena Bastianoni

Short Story

Heat by Jean Rhys was published on May 17th 1976 in *The New Yorker*. The short story deals with the 1902 eruption of Mount Pelée in Martinique. By narrating the events through the voice of a young girl from Dominica, Rhys represents individual perception of geological risk while denouncing how colonial discourses disregarded local communities' trauma and used sensationalism to spectacularize catastrophe.

Year of Publication	Unspecified
Publication Place	New York; London
Editor	W.W. Norton (1987).
Entity	The eruption of Mont Pelée (1902).
Collection	J. Rhys, The Collected Short Stories (1987).
Magazine	The New Yorker (1976).

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcanic eruption The eruption of Mont Pelée (1902).

REAL EVENT

Time	8 May 1902
Location	Martinique (French overseas department in the Caribbean). France
Coordinates	14.741351, -61.175652
Impacted Areas	The city of Saint-Pierre; surrounding areas in northern Martinique; Ash fall on other parts of the island and on the nearby islands.
Base/Complex	Mont Pelée
Typology	Explosive

"Another ship, the Rod ham, managed to sail out of the harbour as pumice and ash rained on its

deck. It headed for St Lucia, most of its crew dead or dying” (McKie n.p.)

Explosive

“Finally, at 8am on 8 May 1902, Mount Pelée blew its top, sending a massive cloud of incandescent gas hurtling down its flanks” (McKie n.p.)

Explosive

“Another ship, the Rod ham, managed to sail out of the harbour as pumice and ash rained on its deck. It headed for St Lucia, most of its crew dead or dying” (McKie n.p.).

Volcano/Eruption Typology

Terrestrial

Active volcano

Anthropization Level

Cities

“The Mount Pelée May 8th, 1902 eruption is responsible for the deaths of more than 29,000 people, as well as the nearly-complete destruction of the city of Saint Pierre by a single pyroclastic current, and is, sadly, the deadliest eruption of the 20th century” (Gueugneau et al. 1).

Streets

“We next travel through what once were streets, but are now masses of broken stones, iron work, wood, and dead bodies, all covered by the prevailing lead-colored dust” (Rost 107).

Ecological Impacts

Physical Landscape Changes

“1902 pyroclastic current deposits seems consistent with a depositional model where a channelized block-and-ash flow emplaced in the Rivière Blanche progressively filled the valley with thick deposits, together with an unconfined ash-cloud surge that spread laterally to produce a relatively thin deposit that thinned away from its source.” (Gueugneau et al. 15-16).

Changes In The Volcano's Shape

“This bed of volcanic matter, mud-lava, pumice-stone and dust, completely covers the leeward slopes of Pelée, filling up deep ravines and valleys, and as we view the volcano from St. Pierre, it seems an easy and gradual ascent to the very summit” (Rost 107)

Social Impacts

Deaths

“St. Pierre, only a few weeks since a city full of human souls, is no more. It lies consumed before us, silent and desolate, a city of the dead” (Rost 107).

Volcanic eruption The eruption of Mont Pelée (1902)

LITERARY EVENT

Time	8 May 1902
Location	Martinique (French overseas department in the Caribbean). France
Coordinates	14.741351, -61.175652
Impacted Areas	The city of Saint-Pierre; surrounding areas in northern Martinique; Ash fall on other parts of the island and on the nearby islands.
Emphasis Phase	Post-disaster (consequences)
Base/Complex	Mont Pelée
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Without reference

Typology	Ash Rainfall, Gases
Volcano/Eruption Typology	Terrestrial
Anthropization Level	Cities, Churches, Public Buildings
Ecological Impacts	Atmospheric Changes
Social Impacts	Deaths, Trauma, Destruction Of Public Buildings, Social Disruption

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Reactions

Name	Unnamed Character (autodiegetic Narrating Voice)
Age	Unspecified, Probably Of A Young Age
Gender	Female
Native Place	Unspecified, Probably Coinciding With The Nationality
Nationality	Dominican
Reactions	Paralysis, Self-Absorption, Fear, Discomfort, Astonishment, Dysphoria

Name	Unnamed Character (the Father Of The Narrating Voice)
Age	Adult Man
Gender	Male
Native Place	Unspecified, Probably Coinciding With The Nationality
Nationality	Dominican
Reactions	Curiosity, Wonder

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	Colonised people
Reactions	Immobility, Fear, Self-Absorption, Curiosity, Distrust

Name	Children
Reactions	Curiosity, Fascination

Name	Colonisers
Reactions	Curiosity

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	Heat, Ash, Volcano, Cloud, Silence, Candlesticks, Grave, Church, Boiling Lake, St Pierre, Death, Gossip.
Similes	- “In the middle what looked to me like lightning flickered, never stopping.” (Rhys 284) - “There was no moon, no stars, but the edges of the cloud were flame-coloured” (Rhys 284)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Locus Horridus, Fire, Thunder, Death, Colonisers, Colonised People, Superstition, Violation Of Taboos
Syntax	Parataxis
Punctuation	Multiple Commas, Multiple Stops
Morphology	High frequency of abstracts, neutral, indefinite forms, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language
Phonetics/Prosody	Relevance of language rhythm

The short story “Heat” by the British author of Caribbean origin Jean Rhys, was published on May 17 of 1976 in *The New Yorker* and later included in the 1987 collection *Jean Rhys – The Collected Short Stories*. “Heat” highlights a crucial theme in the representation of natural disasters, namely the psycho-social response to the consequences of a volcanic event. The exploration of how geological risk is perceived individually is conducted through the perspective of a young girl, whose autodiegetic voice illustrates the mechanisms of response to such geological event, while also underlining the contrast between individual and collective reactions to moments of environmental crisis.

The young narrator, originally from the island of Dominica, recalls retrospectively her perception of the disaster. The latter is underlined as both a moment of passage and a formative experience through which the protagonist develops a new awareness of the liminal boundary between the human and the more-than-human realm. The story revolves around a real historical event, namely the eruption of Mount Pelée in 1902. Located on the Caribbean Island of Martinique, Mount Pelée is an active volcano whose violent eruption in 1902 led to the destruction of the city of Saint-Pierre and the death of over 30,000 people (McKie n.p.; Gueugneau et al. 1).

The young protagonist resides on the nearby island of Dominica, where the impact of the eruption was less destructive but still left an indelible mark on the collective memory of the place. The eruption of Mount Pelée, referred to in this analysis as the “main event”, is preceded by a “framing event”, a moment foreshadowing the primary geological risk, that took place on Dominica a year prior, in 1901. Such event concerns the death of two men, a local guide and a British tourist, near the Boiling Lake in Dominica. The Boiling Lake is a geothermal site – more specifically, a flooded fumarole – that emits boiling steam and gases that could cause the death of those who are close to the site.

According to Rhys’s story – which aligns with some journalistic accounts from the time – during a hike, a British tourist approached the geothermal site and was killed by the fumes springing from the lake. To save him, the local guide also encountered his death due to a sudden burst of steam from the fumarole (Paravisini-Gebert 255; Rott et al.).

The Boiling Lake is presented by the narrator as a mysterious place in the collective imagination, *“a sheet of water that always boiled”* (Rhys 283), whose destructive potential is recognised by the local population, which rarely ventures near the geological site. This episode represents the young girl’s

first encounter with nature's destructive power. Risk perception is shaped both at the semantic and lexical level through the insertion of interrogative phrases referring to the semantic field of uncertainty, which is linked to the narrator's attempt at retrieving her traumatic memories. Expressions referring to the "framing event" such as *"Our volcano was called the boiling lake […] From what fires?"* (283), or pointing at the "main event" as *"Was it a blue or a grey day? I only know ash wasn't falling any longer"* (284) outline a tone marked of uncertainty, revealing a process of identity formation shaped by the inability to cope with both traumatic events.

On May 8, 1902, a thick layer of ash covered the streets of Roseau, the town in Dominica where the protagonist lives (Rost 107). Facing the sudden appearance of an uncanny phenomenon, the young girl enters a dissociative state due to the inability to accept the catastrophic scale of the geological event. *"I refused"* she says, *"I didn't want to touch the ash. I don't remember the rest of the day"* (Rhys 284) – an avoidance strategy used to cope with the of death triggered by the manifestation of the "main event".

Ash is a recurring element in the story symbolising the trans-corporeal nature of the human body, which – as theorized by Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010) – is porous, interconnected, and subjected to the influence of non-human bodies. These, in turn, participate in a reciprocal, interdependent relationship uniting all inhabitants of the biosphere.

While the "framing event" seemingly does not affect the non-human world, the "main event" results in the darkening of the sky, the formation of pyroclastic clouds, and the disruption of the local ecosystem. These consequences are described in a language reflecting the semi-hallucinatory atmosphere triggered by the geological crisis, as well as the narrator's inability to define the aftermath of the eruption: *"There was a huge black cloud over Martinique. I couldn't ever describe that cloud, so huge and black it was, but I have never forgotten it. There was no moon, no stars, but the edges of the cloud were flame-coloured and in the middle what looked to me like lightning flickered, never stopping"* (284). The protagonist, unable to put the catastrophic event into words, adopts a detached, alienated tone, lacking the coping tools to process the traumatic experience.

Rhys then portrays the collective response to the eruption, which takes on the form of a spectacularisation of the tragedy. Through the eyes of a young girl, Rhys explores risk perception, identity formation, and the collective sublimation of trauma. Public opinion turns the tragedy into a spectacle, transforming a dramatic event into the fetish object of a moralizing narrative. This strategy is exemplified by the collection of volcanic ash on the islands near to the site of the eruption, an attempt to cope with grief through the retrieval of symbolic artifacts, now converted in the tangible manifestations of traumatic memory.

Nevertheless, the protagonist's individual reaction is marked by alienation, as the young girl is frozen in a liminal position between acceptance and denial, solidifying in her inability to speak directly about the event. A tragic event is thus transformed into the collection of a series of objects bearing on their surface the marks of the catastrophe. Such process culminates the moment the girl's father shows her two brass candlesticks that were melted and distorted by the eruption's heat: *"tall heavy brass candlesticks which must have been in a church. The heat had twisted them into an extraordinary shape. He hung them on the wall of the dining-room and I stared at them all through meals, trying to make sense of the shape"* (284). The candlesticks, a memento mori to the protagonist, visually display the presence of traumatic memory, while also symbolising a survival strategy that is rooted in the adaptation to and acceptance of nature's destructive force.

The narrative style of the short story is predominantly paratactic, with interrogative sentences creating a hallucinatory tone to the whole narrative. The almost total absence of dialogue reflects trauma temporality, anchored to the past and the inner world of the protagonist, marked by the disaster.

The short story highlights the discrepancy between truth and falsehood, the latter embodied by public opinion and the spectacularization of the catastrophe by the English colonisers, epytomized by the English press. On the other hand, disaster is depicted by the colonised community as a punishment coming from a higher power triggered by the sinful behaviour of the inhabitants of Saint-Pierre, particularly the women. The now destroyed city is defined as being "very wicked", for it not only dared to host a theatre, but also *"an opera house, which was probably wickeder still"* (284). Thus, the

text alludes to activities pertaining to Western cultures and demonised by religious dogmatism because of their association with art, beauty, and pleasure. This passage reveals the structural violence against specific social categories upon which unjustified blame, collective fears, and individual anxieties are projected by the community in times of crisis. Furthermore, structural violence in the short story acquires the form of gender-based discrimination, since the blame of the catastrophic event is specifically attributed to the women of St Pierre. Their beauty and innovative sense of fashion is marked by progress and emancipation from traditional cultural standards, as even the married women embrace different ways of presenting themselves to society: “Even the women who were married, or as good as, tied their kerchiefs in the ‘I am free’ way” (284). This element is further enhanced by a reference to the disdain of the religious authorities visiting the place towards its inhabitants: “The last bishop who had visited the city had taken off his shoes and solemnly shaken them over it. After that, of course, you couldn’t wonder” (284-285).

A key theme is the exploration of the divide between truth and distortion, which is shaped by public discourse and the English media manipulating the real event into a sensationalist narrative.

The eruption is thus transformed into a spectacle designed to provide an escape from reality for the community. While the local population searches for a scapegoat – namely, the inhabitants of Saint-Pierre, condemned for their libertine lifestyle – the British press focuses instead on a miraculous survival story. The eruption enables the escape of a local convict, who is elevated into a symbol of survival by a shallow, morally void narrative trying to profit from the catastrophe: *“They said nothing about the opera house or the theatre which must have seemed to the English the height of frivolity in a Caribbean island, and very little about the city and its inhabitants. It was nearly all about the one man who had survived. He was a convict imprisoned in an underground cell”* (285). The story ends with a negation on behalf of the protagonist, as she declares: *“I read all this, then I thought but it wasn’t like that, it wasn’t like that at all”* (285), therefore exposing the falsity of the official narrative.

Starting from the depiction of the psycho-social consequences of a geological disaster, the story illustrates a stance of alienated detachment that commodifies the catastrophic event – hereby symbolized by the British press – to fade the emotional impact of the tragedy. The catastrophe is no longer a tragic, visceral experience but instead a form of entertainment, leaving the protagonist’s individual experience isolated from the rest of the community.

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