Wide Sargasso Sea Study Guide

Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys

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Introduction

When *Wide Sargasso Sea* was published in 1966 it helped to rescue its author, Jean Rhys, from the obscurity into which she had fallen. Her previous novels and short stories, published between the two world wars, were out of print. Rhys, who had succumbed to an alcohol addiction, lived an isolated life in a remote village in England, a country she had always despised. *Wide Sargasso Sea* caught the immediate attention of critics, won the prestigious W. H. Smith Award and Heinemann Award, and earned Rhys a place in the literary canon. The unique novel seeks to recreate the true story of Bertha Mason, the Jamaican mad wife of Edward Rochester in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. In telling Bertha's story (known in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as Antoinette Cosway), Rhys explores the complex relations between white and black West Indians, and between the old slaveholding West Indian families and the new English settlers in the post-emancipation Caribbean. Set mainly in Jamaica and Dominica, the country of Rhys's birth, the novel describes how Antoinette became mad. In Bronte's novel, Bertha/Antoinette is a monster, described as violent, insane, and promiscuous. Rhys creates instead a sympathetic and vulnerable young woman who seeks, unsuccessfully, to belong. The themes explored in the novel, especially the status of women and the race relations between newly freed slaves and their former owners, have drawn the attention of critics. Other critics debate the merits of the novel, saying that it relies too closely on *Jane Eyre* and cannot stand alone. Certainly, Rhys's novel forces readers to reexamine Bronte's novel and consider the significance of race in the nineteenth-century English novel.

Author Biography

Set in mid-1800s Jamaica, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the least overtly autobiographical of Rhys's fiction. However, critics have noticed some connections between Rhys's life and family history and that of her doomed protagonist, Antoinette Cosway. Born Ella Gwendolyn Rees Williams in 1890, Rhys was the third child of a Creole mother and a Welsh doctor. She grew up in Dominica, one of the Windward Islands, and, like her heroine, moved from the Caribbean to England while still a teenager. Rhys's ancestors on her mother's side had been slaveholders in Dominica, and their plantation house was burned down by freed slaves soon after emancipation. Antoinette witnesses a similar scene in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Like Antoinette, Rhys was educated at a convent school. Rhys left the Caribbean when her parents discovered her relationship with a partblack man. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's husband shuttles her off to England after hearing rumors of her illicit affair with her "mulatto" cousin Sandi. Tragically, Antoinette's insanity was also mirrored in Rhys's bouts with depression and occasional confinements in mental institutions.

Moving to England in 1907, Rhys tried her hand at acting. Finding work as a chorus girl, Rhys eventually became the kept mistress of an older man. This relationship, and many subsequent ones, ended unhappily. In 1917, Rhys married Willem Lenglet, a Dutch writer. After the couple moved to Paris in 1924, Rhys began publishing her short stories under the patronage of the English novelist Ford Madox Ford. Her first novel, *Quartet,* published in 1928, was a thinly veiled fictional account of her love affair with Ford. Rhys eventually returned to England, where she continued to write stories and novels featuring female protagonists on the margins of society. In 1939, Rhys disappeared from the public eye for a number of years. She had married Leslie Tilden-Smith, her literary agent, in 1937. Two years after his death in 1945, she married his cousin Max Hamer. In 1948, Rhys was briefly institutionalized at the Holloway Prison Hospital. Her alcoholic assault on her neighbors led the authorities to question her sanity. Around this time, the British radio actress Selma Vas Dias began to search for Rhys, hoping to do a radio broadcast of Rhys's 1939 novel *Good Morning Midnight*. Vas Dias and many others had assumed Rhys was dead.

With new public interest in her writing, Rhys secured a contract for the novel that would become *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Still drinking to excess, caring for her ailing third husband, and hampered by poor health, Rhys did not complete the novel until 1966. In a letter, Rhys explained that she had "brooded over *Jane Eyre* for years" and that she "was vexed at [Bronte's] portrait of the 'paper tiger' lunatic, the all wrong creole scenes, and above all by the real cruelty of Mr. Rochester." Her re-reading of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* inspired her to write the "true story" of Bertha Mason, whom Rhys renamed Antoinette Cosway. *Wide Sargasso Sea* was an instant success, winning the W. H. Smith Award for writers and the Heinemann Award of the Royal Society of Literature. Rhys followed this novel with two more collections of short stories. She was working on her autobiography, *Smile Please,*, when she died at the age of 88 in 1979.

Plot Summary

Part I

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* attempts to fill in the blanks of a fictional character's life story. Here Rhys creates a biography for Bertha Mason, the insane wife of Edward Rochester in Charlotte Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre*. As Rhys's novel begins, Bertha Mason, known through most of the narrative as Antoinette Cosway, is a child living on the overgrown and impoverished Coulibri Estate in Jamaica.

The story begins in 1839, six years after slavery was abolished in the British Empire, of which Jamaica was part. Antoinette, the young narrator of Part I, describes both her family's isolation and poverty in the wake of emancipation. She lives alone with her mother Annette, her brother Pierre, and three black servants, Christophine, Godfrey, and Sass, on the sprawling, but crumbling Cosway family plantation. No neighbors visit the family because Annette Cosway, who was born on Martinique, is considered an outsider. The family's only friend, Mr. Luttrell, kills himself on the novel's opening page. Antoinette believes he was tired of waiting for the world of former slaveowners to improve. Soon after, Annette's horse is poisoned, presumably by former slaves. Voicing the precariousness of their position, Annette remarks, "Now we are marooned."

Antoinette is even more isolated than her mother. Her mother devotes her time and attention to Pierre, who is mentally retarded, and repels Antoinette's affectionate advances. Black children taunt Antoinette, calling her a "white cockroach." When she finally does make friends with Tia, a black girl, the friendship soon ends. After Antoinette calls Tia a "nigger," Tia retaliates by saying that Antoinette and her family are "white niggers," not like the "real white people" who have money and position. Tia then steals Antoinette's clothes, forcing Antoinette to dress herself in Tia's rags. Just at this moment, Antoinette meets some "real white people," new friends of her mother's. Her mother is embarrassed that Antoinette is so unpresentable. Believing that her mother is ashamed of her, Antoinette decides that what Tia said must be true. She fears that she can never belong to white or black people.

Selling the last of her jewelry, Annette Cosway is able to dress well and attend the parties of the white elite. She soon has a wealthy Englishman, Mr. Mason, fall in love with her. Gossiping women whisper that perhaps Annette literally bewitched him. After all, she has in her employ Christophine, a known practitioner of obeah, a type of voodoo. Antoinette is distressed when she overhears these rumors at her mother's wedding to Mr. Mason. The rumors signal to her how far from really belonging she and her family are.

Soon after the wedding, the family, including Antoinette's Aunt Cora, return to Coulibri. Mr. Mason is able to fix up the plantation and hire many more servants. Aunt Cora and Annette fear that their new wealth may leave them even more vulnerable than they were in their poverty. Aunt Cora warns Mr. Mason not to speak of replacing the black laborers

with East Indian "coolies" in front of the black servants. Mr. Mason laughs off such warnings, saying that blacks are like children and not to be feared. He thinks that if no one molested the Cosway family when they were poor and defenceless, surely no one will harm them now. Annette pleads with him to leave Coulibri, but he accuses her of being irrational. Antoinette, who remains silent through these debates, agrees with Mr. Mason that they should stay at the plantation. It is the only place where she feels safe.

Aunt Cora and Annette are proved right, however, when black laborers burn down Coulibri. The fire begins in Pierre's room after his black nurse abandons him. As the family tries to escape the fire, they realize that an angry mob awaits them outside. In the chaos that ensues, Annette runs back into the house to try to save her parrot, Coco. She fails, and Coco, all afire, falls from the house into the crowd. Taking this as a bad omen, the mob disperses. Before she can be taken away, Antoinette spies her old friend Tia in the distance. She runs toward 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." But Tia interrupts this reverie by throwing a rock at Antoinette. As the blood trickles down Antoinette's face, she looks at Tia: "We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking glass."

When the narrative resumes, Antoinette has just woken up from a long illness. She learns that Pierre died from the injuries he sustained in the fire. She further learns that her mother has gone insane. In her madness, Annette attempted to kill Mr. Mason. Relative peace follows these revelations. Antoinette attends a convent school where she feels safe and at peace. Her stepfather, Mr. Mason, often visits her there. As Part I comes to a close, Antoinette learns that Mr. Mason wants her to leave the convent. She fears returning to the outside world, and her sleep is troubled by nightmares.

Part II

The narrator of Part II is Edward Rochester, the hero of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. He is never named in Rhys's novel, but the details he gives of his life make it clear to the reader that he is a younger version of Bronte's character. The narration of Part II begins several months after Antoinette voiced her fears of leaving the sanctuary of the convent for the outside world. In that time, Mr. Mason has died and his son, Richard, has arranged the marriage of Antoinette to Rochester. Put ashore in the town of Massacre, Dominica with his new bride, Rochester thinks to himself, "So it was all over." He has gone through with a marriage arranged primarily for financial reasons and has now come to the "honeymoon-house," a property Antoinette inherited from her mother.

Almost immediately, Rochester begins to doubt his wife. He questions her racial purity: "Creole of pure English descent she may be, but [her eyes] are not English or European either." He also questions what he has been told about her: "The girl is thought to be beautiful, she is beautiful. And yet. . ." As he muses on his marriage, he thinks frequently of his father and brother back in England. As a younger son, Edward is not guaranteed an inheritance. To make his way in the world, he has come to the West

Indies. His father has enjoined him to marry a Caribbean heiress to secure a fortune. Rochester wonders, though, whether he has sold his soul to fulfill his family's ambitions.

Despite the strong physical attraction Rochester feels toward Antoinette, he still questions their relationship. When he receives a letter from a man claiming to be her half-brother, Rochester finds it easy to believe the worst of her. His correspondent, Daniel Cosway, tells Rochester of Annette Cosway's insanity and promiscuity and suggests that Antoinette has engaged in an illicit sexual relationship with her black cousin Sandi Cosway. Armed with this information, Rochester believes he has been deceived by Richard Mason, his own father, and by Antoinette. He thinks they purposely hid the fact of Antoinette's promiscuity and her propensity for madness. He spurns the sexual advances of his affectionate wife, and begins to sleep alone.

At this point, Rochester's narrative is interrupted, and Antoinette begins to tell her own story. She has fallen deeply in love with Rochester and is hurt by his coldness. She seeks out her old nurse, Christophine, and asks for a magic potion to make Edward love her again. Edward then resumes the narration. Antoinette drugs his wine with the love potion Christophine made. The drug works: Rochester makes love to Antoinette. When he awakes, he is angered by what his wife has done. In an act of revenge, he has sex with Amelie, the "half-caste" serving girl who reminds Rochester of Antoinette. Antoinette hears the two making love, and becomes very bitter. She tells her husband that he has destroyed the one place where she felt free and happy. Christophine believes that Rochester's actions will break Antoinette. She needs Rochester to return her passionate love. Rochester says that he will always take care of Antoinette, but it is clear that he will never love her. When he looks at her, he sees only her "blank lovely eyes." He decides that the eyes are mad, and that his wife is insane. He declares that he will never touch her again, and that he'll lock her away from the caresses of others. As Part II comes to a close, Antoinette and Rochester leave the honeymoon-house, and Rochester determines to sell the property.

Part III

Grace Poole, another character from Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, begins the narration of Part III. In Bronte's novel, Grace is the woman hired to care for Bertha/Antoinette when she is locked in the attic of Thornfield Hall, Rochester's home in England. In Rhys's novel, Grace tells of how Rochester's father and brother have died and how Edward has become very wealthy. He has instructed his housekeeper to hire Grace at extremely high wages to look out for the mad woman, Antoinette. Grace calls her "that girl who lives in her own darkness." She describes Antoinette as "still fierce," and notes that she needs to be watched carefully.

Antoinette resumes narration of the story, and through her cloudy recollections of how she has come to live in this cold English attic, she reveals what happened to her after she and Rochester left the honeymoon house. Rochester kept her in a house in the countryside and seldom visited her. Alone, she was often visited by her cousin Sandi, and the two became lovers. Enraged by this news, Rochester took his wife to England.

It is unclear how long Antoinette has been confined in the attic. Grace tells her that she has attacked her brother, Richard Mason. But Antoinette has a hard time distinguishing between reality and her nightmares. She envisions herself time and again burning down Thornfield Hall. She imagines jumping from the roof to the cold stones below and ending her life. In her dreams, this fire gets mixed up with the one that destroyed Coulibri. She sees the dying burning parrot, and hears her husband screaming her name, Bertha. In her imagination, she sees her old friend Tia beckoning her to swim in the pool where they once played. As the novel ends, Antoinette declares, "I know why I was brought here and what I must do." She grabs a candle in preparation for burning down Thornfield, just as Bertha Mason finally does in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*.

Part 1

Part 1 Summary

Antoinette and her mother, Annette Cosway Mason, live on the decaying Coulibri plantation in Jamaica in the late 1830s. Annette, a Creole woman from Martinique, had been the second wife of the estate's owner. Mr. Cosway was a much older slave owner who was generally thought to have wasted his life and his wealth on alcohol and women. After her husband dies, Annette is left penniless and isolated on the plantation with her two young children. Antoinette is the daughter whom she frequently ignores, and Pierre is her sickly son, on whom she lavishes her attention.

The other white Jamaican landowners look down on the family because of its reduced circumstances and because of Cosway's penchant for having children with black women. Annette and her children are also hated by the black Jamaicans, who view them as part of the slave-owning establishment recently dismantled through emancipation laws. After Annette's only friend and neighbor, Mr. Luttrell, kills himself because he cannot adjust to the new social structure, the family is left alone except for a few servants who voluntarily remain. The servants include Godfrey, an old man with questionable motives for remaining, Sass, a young boy, and Christophine, the maid who was brought from Martinique by Annette's husband as a wedding present. She acts like a nurse to the children. Christophine herself is an outsider in the closed Jamaican society. There are rumors that Christophine is an "obeah woman" who has magical powers. The servants and other blacks are afraid of her, and she uses their fear to force them to work for the family after Cosway's death.

Antoinette spends her days essentially alone except for rare interactions with her mother and brother, Christophine, and Godfrey. She wanders about the plantation trying to avoid any black people she does not know. She understands that they hate her and her family; the children shout insults when they see her, calling her a "white cockroach." Christophine recognizes that Antoinette needs a companion and brings a little black girl, Tia, to play with her. Tia and Antoinette spend entire days rambling together through the plantation, swimming in a deep isolated pool and snacking on green bananas they cook over fires that Tia starts.

Tia is considered a friend until the day Antoinette drops some pennies that Christophine gave her by the pool. When Tia sees the pennies, she bets Antoinette that she cannot turn a somersault under water as she said she could. Antoinette takes off her clothes and jumps in the water to show Tia she really can perform this act. After she completes it successfully, Tia says she did not do it very well and takes the pennies anyway.

Antoinette is angry and calls Tia by an uncomplimentary name. She tells her it does not matter because she can always get more pennies if she wants. Tia retorts that she hears differently, that Antoinette's family has no money, and that she has to eat salted fish because they cannot buy fresh fish, and that the roof of their house leaks. She says

that now black Jamaicans are better than the old slave-owner families and that "real white people," rich white Jamaicans who never owned slaves, will not have anything to do with Antoinette or her mother. Antoinette turns her back on Tia in annoyance, and when she turns around, Tia has not only gone, but she has stolen Antoinette's clean and starched dress, replacing it with her own dirty one.

Antoinette walks home dejectedly to find that her mother has visitors, two young ladies and a young gentleman. Her mother calls for her to come and meet them, and the girl, who had longed for visitors, but who is embarrassed to be wearing Tia's dress, runs away from them into the house. Her mother follows, asking who Tia is and why Antoinette is wearing her dress. She asks Christophine to find her daughter a clean dress and to burn the one she is wearing. Christophine and Annette argue over the fact that the girl only has two dresses; she wears one while the other is being washed. Christophine tells Annette that her daughter is running wild and that she will grow up to be worthless. Annette remembers that the girl has an old muslin dress and orders Christophine to find it. The dress tears when Antoinette puts it on, but no one notices.

Christophine does not have a good opinion of the visitors. They are relatives of Mr. Luttrell and now live on his plantation. She says Luttrell would not put up with them. She ridicules the new post-slavery society. She believes the new white people have only replaced traditional slavery with magistrates, fines, jails, torture machines and chain gangs to impose their rule on black Jamaicans.

Antoinette's mother enjoys the company of the new people at Luttrell's plantation, has new clothes made and rides about the countryside on a horse they lend her. Antoinette herself spends more and more time away from people, walking along deserted roads and exploring parts of the Coulibri estate she had never seen before.

Ultimately, her mother's social connections lead to a marriage with Mr. Mason, and Antoinette is a bridesmaid at the wedding in Spanish Town. Antoinette overhears guests at the wedding criticizing the marriage, wondering why Mason would want to marry an impoverished widow with an "imbecile" for a son and a daughter running wild on the decaying plantation. The girl would soon follow her mother's "lowering" example, the guests predict. The critics do agree that Annette is attractive, however, and a very good dancer. They know that Mason has come to Jamaica to make money, so it may be in his interest to gain the Coulibri plantation through this marriage. The overheard conversation also touches on the evident "usefulness" of having an "obeah woman" on site to work some ancient magic.

Antoinette had never been afraid of Christophine, but the comments she overheard stay in her mind; when she visits Christophine's room at the plantation afterward, she becomes uneasy. She fearfully imagines that secret implements and ingredients used to perform black magic are hidden in the room. She hides her fear from Mr. Mason, thinking that he will laugh at her because he does not believe in such things.

Mason is an Englishman and somewhat naïve about his surroundings. He has never lived among black Jamaicans and he perceives them as merely curious, child-like and

non-threatening. After Annette and Mason have been married for a year, they begin to argue about leaving Coulibri. His wife tells him that the blacks hate them, but Mason dismisses her concerns as paranoid. He reminds her that she had been living alone on the plantation with her two small children for some time before he came and that she had been left unharmed. She responds that in those days, her family was very poor and the people had little to resent. Now, however, the family was rich again and became the focus of a strong hatred. She presses her husband to leave Coulibri for another island away from the growing danger. He continues to dismiss her concerns, commenting that the blacks are too lazy to be dangerous.

Returning home one evening with Antoinette and her Aunt Cora, Mason stops the carriage near some deserted huts. He thinks that all the people have gone to a dance or some other celebration like a wedding. Antoinette tells him it would never be a wedding in this country, making her aunt smile. She shares her mother's fears of an uprising against their family now that they have regained their wealth, but she knows that Mason will never understand the imminent danger facing them.

Later, Antoinette overhears the adults talking before dinner. Her mother again asks Mason if they can leave Coulibri. Antoinette stands outside the room on a semi-enclosed veranda. From there she can hear the sounds of the bamboo "shivering" but there is no wind; she thinks she hears whispering in the bamboo. She hears her mother tell Mason that she will go away without him, taking only Pierre. Mason tells her she is overreacting, but agrees to arrange for them to leave soon. At dinner, Antoinette hears her mother repeat that it is not safe at Coulibri, especially for Pierre.

They have English food at the plantation now, mutton and puddings. Antoinette is happy to be a "proper English girl," but she misses Christophine's cooking. She looks at her favorite painting during dinner. It is a painting of an English girl called "The Miller's Daughter." Annette continues her attempts to convince her husband that the blacks on the plantation hate them and are likely to cause them real harm. Mason holds fast to his opinion that the people are like children and expresses surprise that she, who has lived among them all her life, knows so little about them. He begins to talk about his plan to import laborers from the East Indies to work the plantation, but he is warned by Aunt Cora not to speak of his plans in front of Myra, the black girl serving their dinner. He dismisses Cora's remarks just as he dismisses his wife's remarks.

Antoinette leaves the dinner table and goes to Pierre's room. She finds him asleep. He sleeps almost all the time now and is very sick. She picks him up and tells him that Mr. Mason has promised to take them to England where Pierre will be made well, "like other people." She again hears unusual sounds that seem to come from the bamboo outside his room. She goes to bed and waits for Christophine to come and assure her that everything is all right, but the woman does not come. Antoinette reaches for the stick she keeps by her bed for protection because she senses that something is wrong.

Later that night, Antoinette's mother wakes her and tells her to get dressed. She hears Aunt Cora talking with Myra, one of the servants, and then a noise like a chair falling over. The girl joins her family, which has gathered in the drawing room for protection

against a crowd of people forming outside the house. None of their servants is with them in the drawing room. Mason assures the family that everything is fine and that the disturbance is caused by a few drunken blacks. When he walks outside to confront them, however, the family hears a horrible howling and stones falling on the veranda's roof. Mason quickly comes inside, admitting the crowd is larger than he thought. He says they are in a "nasty mood" but that they will "repent" in the morning. Aunt Cora warns that morning will be too late to take action. Annette has left Pierre asleep in his room with Myra to look after him. She is wringing her hands together with worry, and her wedding ring falls off. As Mason and the servant Mannie stoop to retrieve it, Mannie notices smoke coming from under the door of Antoinette's room. They then realize the crowd has set fire to the back of the house.

Annette opens the door and runs to save Pierre. Aunt Cora comforts Antoinette as her mother returns carrying Pierre in her arms. Annette's hair is burning, and Pierre looks dead. Annette says she found Pierre's crib on fire, and Myra was nowhere to be found. Aunt Cora is not surprised that Myra left the boy to die. Annette, who had been whispering, begins to scream at Mason, telling him he was a fool to stay after she warned him of the danger. She dares him to go outside and face the crowd now and tell them how innocent he is and how he has always trusted them. Mannie and Sass, another servant, haul water in an attempt to put out the spreading flames. Then they realize that the crowd has set fire to the other side of the house, and they all must get out while they can.

Antoinette's mother runs back toward the fire. Mason thinks she wants to go back to retrieve her jewel box, but Aunt Cora tells him Annette wants to save Coco, her parrot. Coco had been Annette's pet before her marriage to Mason. Mason had clipped Coco's wings and so he could no longer fly. This made the bird bad-tempered, and he was friendly toward no one but Annette. Mason manages to restrain her from going back into the fire. The crowd can see her reactions because she is outside on the veranda, and Aunt Cora tells her that the people are laughing at her. Annette stops fighting then and allows her self to be dragged away.

Antoinette looks at the crowd of faces when the family exits the house. She thinks she must know some of the people, but they all look the same to her now. The crowd tries to block the carriage and horses that Mannie and Sass are bringing to save them. Someone in the crowd calls Sass a "black Englishman" because he is riding one of the horses, while others call the family "white niggers." Mason tries to move the family toward the carriage, but the crowd presses in close around them hampering their movement. Mason begins praying in a loud voice for God to defend them. For Antoinette, it appears that the God who allowed the attackers to burn Pierre in his bed without making a sign, suddenly answers Mr. Mason's prayer. The crowd watches as Coco, the parrot with clipped wings tries to save himself by flying off the balcony, but falls to the ground, screeching and on fire.

In the local folklore, it is unlucky to kill a parrot or even to watch a parrot die. Aunt Cora tells Antoinette not to look. After the parrot falls, the threatening crowd begins to disperse, moving away quickly and stepping aside to allow the family to walk across the

yard to the waiting carriage and horses. None of them looked back as they move away from the house.

Mannie drives the carriage up to a group of men and women still standing in the way. One of the men refuses to move, saying that Mason and the others will go to the police and tell them many lies about what occurred. A woman in the group tells him to let the family go, that everyone knows the fire was an accident, and that Myra would be a witness to the fact. The man is still unwilling to let them go, but Aunt Cora appeals to him, saying that Pierre is badly burned and he will die without help. The man lets them go, but tells Cora he will throw her on a fire if she puts bad luck on him. He calls her an "old white jumby." She looks directly into his eyes and threatens him calmly with eternal fire if he does not move away, and he does.

Christophine gets into the carriage with Pierre, and Mason tells Annette to get in after them, but she is looking back at the burning house. She screams when he touches her. Antoinette also looks back and realizes that nothing will be left of the life she lived but blackened walls. Then she sees Tia and her mother. Antoinette runs to Tia, thinking that she can stay with them and not have to leave her beloved Coulibri. When she approaches Tia, however, she sees a sharp stone in the girl's hand. Antoinette never actually sees Tia throw the stone, but she feels something wet run down her face and watches Tia begin to cry. With blood streaming down her face, Antoinette stares at Tia, who is staring back at her through her tears. Antoinette thinks it is like looking in a mirror.

Six weeks later, Antoinette wakes up in Aunt Cora's house and sees that her hair has been cut. Cora tells her she has been sick, but that she is safe now and that her hair will grow back. Cora tells her what happened the night of the fire: how the Luttrells took them in, how Pierre died and how her mother Annette is resting in the country now. Cora thinks that Antoinette does not remember anything about that night, but the girl remembers her mother screaming like the parrot and threatening to kill Mason if he touched her.

Later on, Cora takes Antoinette to visit her mother in the country. At first, Antoinette does not recognize her, and then realizes the woman she sees must be her mother. Annette expects her daughter to be joined by Pierre, and then remembers that Pierre is dead and throws Antoinette away from her against a wall. She wails loudly and asks why Cora has brought the child to make trouble for her.

Antoinette lives with her Aunt Cora for a time and then a convent school. The first day of school, she is accosted by two children, one black and one of mixed race, who call her names and taunt her with remarks about her mother and her ancestry. The children tell her that she will end up crazy like her mother. Sandi, the son of Alexander Cosway and her cousin, saves her from these attackers. Antoinette reaches the convent school in tears, but the black nuns there comfort her.

She grows accustomed to the school and even makes some friends. No one speaks to her about her mother. Christophine had done so when she was in the area, but she has

left the family to live with her son. Antoinette seldom sees her stepfather who stays away from Jamaica for months at a time. The convent becomes Antoinette's refuge, especially when Aunt Cora decides to return to England. Antoinette is not as happy at the convent as she had been at Coulibri, but she feels safer.

After some time, Mason begins to visit Antoinette regularly. He brings her presents and sweets. One day he realizes that she has become a grown woman, over seventeen years of age. He tells her that she will go to live with him soon, together with Aunt Cora who is returning from England to spend her last days in Jamaica. Mason says he wants Antoinette to be happy and that he has invited some people to his house the next winter. He wants her to meet them and enjoy herself with them. The manner in which he discusses these people makes the girl feel sad and dismayed, however.

After her talk with Mason, Antoinette has a dream about Coulibri. It is the second time she has had the same dream. In the dream, she is walking in the forest wearing a long dress and slippers, following a man. She is holding up the skirt of her dress, which is white and beautiful. She does not want to soil it. She is afraid as she follows this man, but she does not try to save herself. She knows that if anyone else tried to save her, she would have to refuse. They reach a forest, and she still follows the man, but she is crying. She gives up trying to keep her dress clean and lets it trail in the dirt. Then they are no longer in the forest, but in a garden, enclosed by a stonewall. The trees are different from those in the Coulibri forest. There are steps that lead upward, and it is dark. At the top of the stairs, she stumbles and falls. She cannot get up so she grabs a tree for support, but the tree sways and tries to throw her off with a jerk. Still, she clings to it, and the seasons pass. Each season is one thousand years. Then a strange voice says, "Here. In here," and the tree stops swaying and jerking. That is the end of the dream.

She is upset by the dream. One of the nuns leads her to her dormitory, asking if she feels sick. Antoinette tells her she dreamed she was in Hell. The nun tells her the dream was evil and that she must forget it. She makes the girl drink hot chocolate in an effort to comfort her. Antoinette remembers that after her mother's funeral the family went home to drink hot chocolate. No one ever told her how her mother died. Mason and Christophine were at the funeral, but no one else. Christophine cried, but Antoinette could not cry so she prayed, but the words meant nothing to her. Thoughts of her mother were confused with the dream. She wants to know why these terrible things had to happen to her mother and her family, but the nun tells her that she shouldn't concern herself with that mystery; no one knows why the devil must have his day. The nun tells her to go back to bed and to think of peaceful thoughts. Soon it will be tomorrow morning, she says.

Part 1 Analysis

The first part of the story introduces Antoinette Bertha Mason, the future wife of the character Edward Rochester in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. The section describes Antoinette's family and childhood in Jamaica before Rochester married her from her

point of view. By imagining the experiences of the character Bertha, the author provides a history for a character is known to readers as the "mad woman in the attic" and she offers reasons for her madness. In amplifying Bertha's life story, the author describes the complex social and economic relationships between the old white slave-owning families of colonial Jamaica, the black former slaves and the white landowners who came after the Emancipation Act of 1834. The first section also introduces additional themes that will be repeated throughout the book. These include cultural conflicts, racism, betrayal and the status of women.

The complexities of English colonial society and its degeneration are illustrated through the experiences of Antoinette's family. The estate of Coulibri had a "tree of life" in the garden, but it had "gone wild" just as Antoinette would grow up. The social structure of the place also goes "wild" as few people felt the need to work after slavery was abolished. Pierre, the sickly "imbecile" son, represents the dying colonial society. Pierre would have inherited a rich and successful plantation if emancipation had not occurred; emancipation is his disability. Pierre is killed in a fire during an uprising against his family by its black neighbors, just as the Emancipation Act ruined the wealthy colonial slave-owners.

Annette is strongly symbolic of the ruin of colonial society but also of the fact that the colonials degraded the native culture. She was a Creole who came from Martinique with her own beliefs, and both white and black Jamaicans shunned her because of her difference. She tries to tell Mason about the power of Caribbean spirituality and how cultural anger can make use of this power, but he ignores her because she is a woman and just another one of the "childish" island people as well.

Mason represents the naïve, newly arrived English population. He is focused on making money and thinks British culture has all the answers. He has stereotypical views of the black "natives." Mason believes the anger and spirituality of the black Jamaicans are childish. He refuses to see the real danger and power presented by *obeah* and the resentment the people retain against the old slave-owning families. He believes they are too "lazy" to be a real danger, and he dismisses his wife's concerns, refusing to believe she understands the culture better than he does.

Christophine, Annette's maid and Antoinette's nurse, is an *obeah* woman from Martinique, a woman who works magic. *Obeah* is another word for voodoo. She represents the danger and salvation of magical intervention for those that believe in it. The reader is never told directly of her involvement in the events of Part I beyond knowing that she stayed with the family after Annette's first husband died, but there is always the hint of her power in the background. Her direct involvement with Annette and Antoinette's lives becomes more evident in Part II of the story.

The prevalence of magic in Jamaican culture for both blacks and whites is illustrated by Aunt Cora's response to being called an old white "jumby" by a man who fears she will curse him. She stands her ground and uses his fear of her against him to free the family from a dangerous situation. The interaction between the man and Aunt Cora also

demonstrates the lack of trust each culture has of the other and the willingness to use ignorance and mistrust for their own purposes.

The relationship between Antoinette and Tia shows the complexity of race relations in post-colonial Jamaica. The girls begin as friends, then insult one another using the stereotypical insults and behavior of their respective cultures, and finally conclude by looking at each other as if in a "mirror." The mirror image suggests equality between the newly oppressed former slave owners and the historically oppressed slaves on the island. It illustrates the reversals imposed on individual lives by circumstances beyond their control and the way strong cultural identification can cause even friends to inflict pain on each other while disliking themselves for their actions.

The "bad luck" imposed on those who kill a parrot or see one die as described in Jamaican folklore is visited on the characters later on. It is bad luck for Rochester to marry Antoinette in Part II. Antoinette is unlucky when she is imprisoned by Mr. Rochester in the attic room in his English house. The fact that the parrot had its wings clipped by Mason symbolizes Mason's control of his wife, Annette. He effectively "clipped her wings" as required by the society that disapproved of her. The image of the burning parrot falling from the veranda also suggests the fall of the "mad woman" from the roof of Thornfield Hall at the end of *Jane Eyre.* The parrot represents both Antoinette/ Bertha and her mother, who were strong and exotic women forced by society to give up their individuality through marriage.

Part I describes the conflicted feelings of the white people born in Jamaica toward British culture. Antoinette is glad to be a "proper English girl" after Mason marries her mother, but she misses Christophine's cooking. Aunt Cora, who lived in Jamaica most of her life, spends a year at "home" in England for health reasons only to return to the island to live out her final days. Antoinette believes that God answers Mason's prayer to save the family from the mob while allowing her brother to die because of the fire. However, the powerful image of the burning parrot and its related bad luck recurs to tell the reader that the island culture will prevail regardless of what the British impose upon it.

Part 2

Part 2 Summary

The Englishman stands under a mango tree in a town called Massacre in Jamaica, sheltering from the rain during a journey to a honeymoon house located on the family lands of his new wife, Antoinette. The newly married couple is accompanied by several porters and Amelie, a servant girl. He asks his wife if slaves had been massacred in this place. She assures him that it had nothing to do with slavery, and it was something that happened a long time ago.

The husband is disoriented. He has just recovered from a bout of fever and has had little time to become accustomed to his new wife. He married her within a month of meeting her, and he was sick with fever for most of the time. While his wife goes to talk with someone she knows, the husband remains under the mango tree watching the activities of the people around him, looking at the Caribbean landscape and listening to the musical sounds of a language he does not understand.

When the rain stops, the honeymoon party moves up the mountain to the house, which is located in an area where the weather is cooler. The man observes the flowers, forests and mountains and he finds everything somewhat overwhelming. The colors are too bright, the mountains are too high and he realizes that he has married a stranger whose manner annoys him. He thinks she is beautiful, but there is something about her that makes him uneasy.

They arrive at last at the estate of Granbois. Antoinette's old nurse, Christophine, Baptiste the caretaker and two servants, Bertrande and Hilda, greet them. The husband and Christophine immediately recognize the other as a rival for power over Antoinette. In the days that follow, Antoinette introduces her husband to the layout of the house and the pleasures of island living. There are exotic places to see on the estate and good food to eat. Antoinette tells him that Granbois is her special place, a place where she feels safe.

He has a dressing room of his own, but there is a connecting door to his wife's bedroom. Baptiste tells him the room had belonged to Mr. Mason, but that he rarely used it because he did not like to come to Granbois. The room is comfortably furnished with a carpet and books, but the husband notes that the door to his wife's room can be bolted and barred. The morning after the couple's first night at Granbois, Christophine brings coffee to their room. She tells the husband to try what she calls her "bull's blood;" she is proud of the fact that it is so much stronger than the English beverage.

Antoinette's husband came to Jamaica to make his living. His brother was the eldest son and so he would inherit all property from their father. His father had arranged with Antoinette's father to join their children in marriage. Her new husband would control Antoinette's money and property. Antoinette's father died before the husband-to-be

arrived in Jamaica, however, so upon his arrival, everything was arranged through Richard Mason, who was introduced as Antoinette's brother. With this marriage, the husband feels he has made his place in the world. At the wedding celebration, however, he senses that the guests are looking at him with pity and making fun of him for marrying Antoinette. They think that Mason has hidden important facts about her history from him, tricking him into the marriage. Faced with limited options, however, the husband feels he has received a good bargain.

The newly married couple spends their early days getting to know one another and enjoying the physical attraction and passion they find they have for one another. The husband does not love Antoinette, but he craves her, and his attentions awaken her desire for him. They get along quite well, except for disagreements over Antoinette's relationship with Christophine. The husband does not understand how his wife can feel so close to this black woman. He does not especially like the black Jamaicans and believes that his wife's appreciation for them is wrong.

One day the husband receives a letter from a man who calls himself Daniel Cosway. He says he is Antoinette's half-brother, the son of old Mr. Cosway and a black woman. Daniel is extremely bitter because Cosway would not openly accept him as a son and provided him with little monetary support. Daniel writes that it is his duty to tell Antoinette's husband the truth about her family. He says that the family's drunkenness, promiscuity and madness farewell known by everyone in the islands. Everyone also knows that Richard Mason lied in order to convince the Englishman to marry his sister. Daniel writes that both Antoinette's mother and father died "raving" and that she would follow the same path. He says it is his "Christian duty" to warn the husband about the "bad blood" on his wife's side and of her reliance on Christophine, the obeah woman. He tells the husband that Christophine had once been imprisoned for using the magic.

The husband is not especially shocked by the letter. It confirms some of the misgivings he has felt about his wife already. He thinks back to his own father and elder brother and the way they had encouraged him to go to Jamaica. He realizes that everyone knew about the madness and promiscuity of Antoinette's parents and knew that she had shown the same weaknesses, but no one told him. He feels betrayed by his father and by everyone who did not tell him the truth. He worries that everyone thinks he is a fool to have married such a woman. In a state of despair, the husband goes for a walk in the forest. He quickly becomes lost. Everything is too green, and the trees are too tall. He stumbles upon the ruins of a house deep in the forest. There is an old orange tree nearby, and the place seems very peaceful. He notices little bundles of flowers tied with grass are strewn under the orange tree. Time passes, and before he knows it, it is late in the day. On his way home, he sees a little girl passing by and calls to her, but she is afraid of him and runs away crying. He realizes he is again lost among the "enemy trees" and does not recognize the man who eventually finds him as the servant Baptiste. Baptiste says everyone has been looking for him for a long time.

The husband replies that he got lost, and then asks who had lived in the ruined house. Baptiste answers that a priest lived there long ago. The husband mentions the little girl and how she was afraid of him; he asks if there is something wrong about the ruined

house, whether there is a ghost or zombie there. Baptiste does not answer. When he returns homes, the husband asks for rum and water and reads about zombies in a book he found. He discovers that zombies can be dead people who seem alive, or they can be the evil spirits of a place that can sometimes be appeased by offerings of flowers or fruit. He remembers the little bundles of flowers under the orange tree at the ruined house. He reads that the magic in the islands is called voodoo in Haiti and *obeah* in Jamaica. The book says white people tend to dismiss it as silly, while blacks refuse to either talk about it or tell lies about it. He reads about a poison known to practitioners that leaves no trace.

Antoinette is upset because her new husband has suddenly stopped making love to her. He avoids her in general, but she does not know why. She decides to visit Christophine, who had left Granbois to live with her son in a house given to her by Mr. Mason. When Antoinette describes her problem and asks for answers, Christophine counsels her to leave her husband for a time. Her absence will make him want her again. Antoinette does not like this answer, however, and asks Christophine to perform magic on her husband to make him love her again. Christophine is hesitant to do so because she says that magic used on white people can bring uncertain and unusual results. Because Antoinette continues to plead with her, she relents and provides a magic potion for the woman to use on her husband.

Baptiste informs Antoinette's husband that she has gone away on a visit and will return the following day. Amelie, the servant who is in contact with Daniel Cosway, brings him another letter from the man. This letter is more demanding. Daniel wants to know why the husband does not believe his stories. He threatens to come to Granbois and tell everyone there about the scandals surrounding Antoinette if the husband does not meet with him. The husband calls for Amelie and tells her to tell Daniel to stop sending these letters or face the consequences. Then he asks Amelie why Daniel is sending such letters. She is coy and flirtatious with the husband, questioning his assertion that Daniel has not told him why he is writing. She says Daniel is a very religious man who is always reading the Bible. He lives "like white people," she says. He has pictures of his parents on the wall of his house. When asked if they are white, she replies that they are black. The husband expresses surprise because Daniel had told him his father was white, but Amelie says it was too long ago for her to know anything about it. She encourages the husband to meet with Daniel. She also tells him she had heard there was a marriage between Sandi, the son of Daniel's brother Alexander and Antoinette. She dismisses this, however, saying that Miss Antoinette was a white woman and would never marry a black man, even if he did not look like a black man. This statement prompts the husband to meet with Daniel after all.

Daniel has been drinking rum for some time before the husband arrives for his meeting at Daniel's house. There is a sign reading "Vengeance Is Mine" on the wall, but Daniel remarks that the Lord is taking too long. He must take matters into his own hands. He tells the husband that his real name is Esau and that his father was old Cosway, the same Cosway who has a memorial tablet in the church saying how pious, beloved and merciful he was. Daniel scoffs at these words because his father always treated him badly. The last time he saw his father he asked for money, but the man questioned his

paternity and cursed him. He sent him away, but later on, did send him some money. He demands money from the husband, and then tells him to give his love to his "sister." As the husband leaves, Daniel makes sure to inform him that he is not the first man to be intimate with Antoinette, black or white.

He finds Antoinette at home when he returns. He is upset by what Daniel has told him and demands to know the truth. She asks why he never listens to her and why he hates her. She asks him why he no longer visits her bed. Everything about her annoys him. He replies that he has his reasons for staying away from her, but he is willing to hear her story now. They both start drinking rum while she tells him about her mother.

She describes how poor her mother was after the death of old Cosway and how lonely. There was no one to help her. The black people on the plantation hated her. Only Christophine, Godfrey, and a boy named Disastrous Thomas, whom they called Sass, remained. Many people died in the period directly after the Emancipation Law was passed, and her family would have died too without Christophine's help. Antoinette tells her husband that she was not always unhappy as a child because she had never known another kind of life. It was different for her mother. Things seemed to improve once her mother married Mr. Mason, but he did not really understand the problems between former slaves and the former slave-owners. One night, the hatred of the people erupted, and they set fire to the plantation house, killing her brother Pierre.

After Pierre died, her mother began to hate Mr. Mason, even threatening to kill him, so he built her a new house, hired people to care for her, and spent much of his time away from Jamaica. Her mother descended further and further into madness brought on by the fire and death of her son. The people who were hired to take care of her exploited her instead, sexually abusing her and using her madness to place her into prostitution. Once, when Antoinette went to visit, she saw the black caretaker kissing her mother on the lips. She ran to Christophine for protection. That is where Antoinette ends her story, laughing bitterly that she had tried to make her husband understand, but can see that nothing has changed.

The husband asks where Antoinette went on her recent visit. She tells him she went to ask for advice from Christophine because he would no longer come to her. She tells him that Christophine told her to leave him. The husband suggests that Christophine may be right, that it would be better for Antoinette if she went somewhere else rather than remain in a place with so many bad memories. She says he can leave if he wants, but this is where she belongs. He takes her to the bedroom to comfort her, saying they will talk more in the morning. He has begun calling her Bertha rather than Antoinette. It is his way of putting distance between his wife and the woman at the center of so much scandal. She dislikes being called by her middle name, however, and asks him not to call her Bertha, especially on this night. As he walks into her bedroom, he notices a white powder spread on the floor. She tells him it is to keep the cockroaches away. When they approach the bed, Antoinette gives him a glass of wine. Even before he drinks from the glass, the husband feels his strong desire for Antoinette returning. The last thing he remembers is putting out the candles by the bed.

In the morning, he wakes feeling sick, as if he has been buried alive. He realizes that Antoinette poisoned him the night before. He forces himself to get up and move about. He sees his wife lying motionless on the bed, strangely youthful and beautiful. He covers her with a sheet as if she were dead, then notices she had drained her glass of wine, while he had consumed only a portion of his. He dresses and runs out of the house, spending the entire day at the ruined house in the forest by the orange tree. When he returns at dark, he sees that food has been left out for him, but he does not eat it. He lies on his bed and waits for something to happen.

After a while, Amelie, the flirtatious servant girl, comes to him. She brings him different food and feeds him as if he were a child. She tells him she is sorry for him, but there is gaiety in her eyes. They laugh together and ultimately have sex, knowing that Antoinette can hear them through the thin wall separating the rooms. In the morning, the husband's feelings toward Amelie have changed. He notices that her lips are thicker than he thought and that she is darker than he remembered. He no longer wants to touch her. She leaves after telling him of her ambition to move to another island. The husband sleeps until awakened by Baptiste.

Shortly afterward, when Antoinette is not at home, Baptiste tells him that the cook and other servants are leaving Granbois. He will stay, along with the young servant girl Hilda. The husband spends the day writing to Mr. Fraser, a retired magistrate, informing him that he is thinking of writing a book about *obeah* and remembered a story about a woman who had been charged with a voodoo-related murder in the past. He asks Fraser if he knows the whereabouts of this woman, Christophine. In a few days, Fraser writes back with information about the case. He is certain that the woman still lives in the area, and he promises to bring legal action if the husband finds her to be a threat.

When Antoinette returns, she ignores her husband and calls for Baptiste to bring her rum. She goes into her room and closes the door. Hilda lights the candles at dusk, but the husband can see she is frightened. The husband begins to drink some special rum "that kills you in a hundred years." When he tries to go into Antoinette's room, he finds she has put a large piece of furniture in front of the door to block his entrance. He can see Antoinette through a gap he makes by pushing against the door, however. She is lying in bed under the sheet with a nearly empty bottle of rum on the table beside her.

The husband sits in the dark on the veranda, drinking. When Baptiste passes with another bottle of rum for Antoinette, the husband stops him and takes the bottle for himself. Antoinette begins screaming for Christophine from the bedroom, and Baptiste runs to get her. Antoinette comes out of her room, looking disheveled and flushed, her eyes red and staring. She runs to the table to grab the bottle of rum. Her husband asks her to stop drinking, but she says he has no right to tell her to do anything. She again screams for Christophine. Antoinette berates her husband for having sex with Amelie. She calls him a hypocrite for criticizing the plantation owners and their behavior while preferring black women. She says he is the same as the planters; he just sends the girls away faster and with less money. The husband replies that his behavior is different from slavery, since there was no choice involved with slavery. The end of slavery was a

matter of justice, he tells her, but she jeers at him, saying there was no justice for her mother.

She drinks more rum. He asks her to stop, calling her Bertha. She retorts that Bertha is not her name and that he is trying to make her into someone else. She says he has spoiled Granbois for her. The place where she had always been happy was now ruined because of him and Amelie. She asks why he preferred Amelie to her, and then calls him as a cold man. She informs him that her Aunt Cora told her not to marry him. When he tries to take the rum bottle away from her, she bites his arm, causing him to drop the bottle. She grabs the broken bottle and threatens to kill him if he comes near her. She curses him with words and phrases that shock him. In the midst of her raving, Christophine appears.

Christophine criticizes him for having sex with Amelie in the room next to Antoinette where she can hear everything. She takes Antoinette into her room and calms her by singing old songs. The husband takes yet another bottle of rum to his room and continues to drink. After seeing to Antoinette, Christophine comes to the husband's room. She tells him that everyone knows he married Antoinette for her money and then accuses him of trying to break her down because he is jealous of the life she lived before him. She asks why he made Antoinette love him and then abandoned her after she became obsessed with him.

The husband accuses Christophine of trying to force him to love Antoinette again by using her obeah poison. She says she tried to dissuade Antoinette from using magic potions on him because he was white, but the woman would not be discouraged. She tells him that Daniel's letters were filled with lies and that Cosway was not his father. He asks about Antoinette's mother and the madness Daniel described, and Christophine explains that her mother was driven mad by circumstances and unscrupulous people bent on revenge.

Christophine accuses the husband of wanting Antoinette to be like a doll, but even that is not enough for him. He wants to destroy her because of his jealousy. She suggests that he allow Antoinette to go away, give half of her money back to her so she can start over, maybe even get married again. Christophine will go away with her to watch over her. At her mention of money, the husband turns cold. He accuses Christophine of trying to get the money for her self. He tells her that he holds her responsible for all that has happened and that she should never come back to Granbois. He informs her, to her surprise, that he now owns everything that had once been Antoinette's, even the house at Granbois. He threatens her with police action if she bothers him again.

The husband's jealousy and desire for revenge prompt him to devise a plan that will punish Antoinette and Christophine for their attempts to manipulate him and save his reputation in society. He believes that Antoinette is a hedonist who feels lust for anyone, not real love for him. He decides that he will take Antoinette, whom he will continue to call Bertha, away from the place she loves and install her in a locked room in a house in England. She will never be allowed to leave. She will never see the sun or forests again, and she, a woman "made for love," will have no lovers.

On the day they are to leave Granbois, the husband's heart softens somewhat toward his wife. He feels some pity for her and thinks to himself that if she sheds one tear at the thought of leaving he will forgive her. However, Antoinette has gone so far into herself that her face is void of expression. She is silent and cold, like a doll or a puppet. She has pasted a smile on her face. The husband is suddenly weary of the entire situation, of the island, of the people, and he hates Antoinette because she represents all of the beauty and magic of the islands that had betrayed him. As they ride away, he thinks that he will sell the place for whatever price he can get. Early in their marriage, he had planned to give Granbois to Antoinette, but now he realizes this act would be useless.

Part 2 Analysis

In Part 2, the longest part of the book, the reader meets the man Mason had arranged for Antoinette to marry. The man is never named, but since the author is using the characters from *Jane Eyre*, it is assumed that he is Edward Rochester. The second part of the story is told primarily from his point of view.

Using the husband's point of view allows the author to describe more fully the effect of the exotic Jamaican landscape and culture on newly arrived white English people. The husband is overwhelmed by the colors and scents of his new land. He come comes down with a fever shortly after meeting the woman he is to marry, foreshadowing his future trouble and obsession with her. He arrives in Jamaica believing his position in society will be secured through his marriage with a rich landowner's daughter, but he soon begins to feel that certain elements of the arrangement have been hidden from him. He notices that people are whispering about him, and they look at him with expressions of pity or ridicule. He does not have any time to assess the situation due to his bout with fever, and he finds himself married to Antoinette before his culture shock subsides.

The character of Antoinette represents Jamaica in all its romantic splendor and threatening power. She is unlike anyone he has known before, and this both attracts and repels him. He comes to hate her because he succumbed to her charms. He is obsessed with her as evidenced by his jealous reactions to Christophine's suggestion that she could marry again. The plan he devises to lock her away forever is an act of revenge that springs from his passion for the woman, while his decision to sell the island property represents the same impulse on a material level. He says he hates the island's beauty and "its magic and the secret I would never know." He knows his experiences in Jamaica have changed him. He no longer likes poetry or music, for example, though he remembers liking both when he was young. He is "no longer young."

The theme of betrayal is repeated throughout the story and expressed by the image of crowing roosters. The image echoes biblical betrayal and suggests future troubles. The husband hears a cock crowing when he leaves the village on his way to the honeymoon house of Granbois. He remembers that the night before, when he and Antoinette slept in separate rooms in the town, he listened to the cocks crowing all night. After Antoinette

visits Christophine to obtain an *obeah* potion to use on her husband, she hears a cock crowing and thinks to herself that it was "for betrayal." She wonders whom the traitor is, but admits to herself that she had offered Christophine "ugly money" to use her magic powers.

There is always the hint of voodoo lurking in the background of the narration. On his first morning at Granbois, Christophine brings him "bull's blood" and the reader wonders if this is just coffee or perhaps some *obeah* brew. Perhaps Christophine has been dosing Antoinette and her husband the entire time she lives at Granbois. The lack of her influence could explain why things go so badly for the couple after she leaves.

Other examples of the voodoo-laden atmosphere include the incident in which the husband runs out of the house and gets lost in the forest. He finds the ruins of a priest's house and wonders if it is haunted. A little girl passing by is frightened by him, perhaps thinking he is the ghost or zombie. Another example is the description of Antoinette/Bertha the morning after the husband has been poisoned. He says she is "like a dead girl" and frequently thereafter remarks on her blank, expressionless eyes and her doll-like behavior.

There are many similarities between Antoinette/Bertha's situation at Granbois and those of her mother at Coulibri. The author mentions their similar facial features, including the description of both as having a "deep cleft" between the eyebrows. Both women are subject to their husbands, but both also have Christophine to help them. Both women are hated and betrayed through rumor and jealousy, and both finally descend into madness as a result.

Part 3

Part 3 Summary

Grace Poole begins Part 3 by saying that everyone knew her master had been in Jamaica when his father and brother died. The gentleman inherited everything, but he was already wealthy, they said, lucky in his marriage to the woman he brought back from the island. Grace explains she was hired by the housekeeper, Mrs. Eff, on behalf of the master to care for this woman on the premises.

She was told that, above all, the master wanted no gossip about the situation. Grace Poole informed the housekeeper she did not allow gossip, but servants would talk no matter what anyone said. She told Mrs. Eff that she was not sure the situation would suit her, but then the housekeeper read her a letter from the master. He suggested that Grace Poole be paid double or triple the amount of money originally discussed if she was found suitable for the job. He just did not want to be bothered about it anymore.

Grace noticed a foreign stamp on the envelope and told Mrs. Eff that she would not serve the devil no matter what the amount of money. Mrs. Eff told her that her master was far from being a devil and that she had known him all his life. Before he went to the West Indies, he was gentle, kind, and brave, she said. His stay in the Indies changed him so much that he was unrecognizable. He returned with gray hair and burdened by misery. Mrs. Eff offered Grace double her salary to care for the woman and again told her there must be no gossiping or she would be dismissed. Grace agreed, and Mrs. Eff sent all the other servants away. Afterwards she hired a new cook, one maid and Leah.

Upon accepting the job, Grace finds the house where she is employed to be big and safe. No matter what occurs there, it is better for her than being in the outside world, which can be cruel to a woman. The thick walls of the estate keep all danger away. She speculates they stay for this reason, except for the woman who lives in "her own darkness." In a way, Grace admires this woman because she has never lost her spirit. Grace does not turn her back on her when she gets a certain look in her eyes, though.

After Grace Poole discusses her situation, the imprisoned woman describes her life shut away in her husband's house. She knows Grace Poole is the woman who cares for her and who starts the fire each morning. Antoinette watches the flames and wonders why she has been brought to this place. She thinks there must have been a reason. She first thought that she would be confined for only one or two days and decided she would talk with her husband about the situation when he came to see her. He never came, however.

The woman sometimes watches Grace Poole count her money at night. Grace smiles as she puts the money into a canvas bag and hangs it around her neck hidden from view. In the beginning, Grace waited until the woman appeared to be asleep before she counted her money, but now she just ignores her. Grace drinks every night and

sometimes falls asleep sitting at the table. The woman waits until Grace passes out and drinks some of the colorless liquid in Grace's bottle before going back to bed.

The woman lives in a room with one window so high up she cannot look out. A small dressing room next door is decorated with a tapestry. When she looked at the tapestry on one occasion, she saw her mother in a wedding dress, but wearing no shoes. She did not mention this vision to Grace. She does not think Grace is an appropriate name for her caretaker. She thinks names are important and remembers how her husband insisted on referring to her as Bertha, refusing to call her Antoinette. She remembers watching as Antoinette floated out of the window with her mirror and all her pretty clothes.

There is no mirror in the room now, so Antoinette does not know what she looks like. She does not know why she is in this place or who she really is. The door of the room with the tapestry is always locked, but she knows it leads to a passageway. She has seen Grace talking to Leah in the doorway. She cannot understand what they say. There has always been the sound of whispering in her life, she thinks.

After Grace drinks herself to sleep, Antoinette steals her keys and wanders about the hallways. She wishes she could see what lies beyond the house. They tell her she is in England, but she does not believe it. She and her husband got lost in England, she thinks to herself. Perhaps it was when he objected to her talking to the young man who brought her food in the ship's cabin. She smashed the dishes against the porthole window hoping it would break. Some people came and cleaned up the mess, and then a man came and told her drink the beverage he offered her. After that, she slept, and when she awoke, she was in this place. This is not England, she thinks.

Grace Poole asks if she remembers what happened on the night before. She had had a visitor; Grace prompted her. Antoinette remembers that she had gotten out of her room and wandered the halls. She saw two girls in the hallway but hid from them. She asks Grace which of them came to see her. She knows that her husband did not come.

Grace says Antoinette's brother came. Antoinette says she does not have a brother, but then she remembers Richard. She asks Grace where she has put a letter she wrote to Richard, a short letter because he did not like long ones. Then she loses her train of thought and cannot remember what happened between her and Richard the night before. Grace says he will not come back after what happened. Grace says Antoinette attacked him with a knife. Antoinette and Richard were speaking, and Richard told her that he could not legally interfere between the woman and her husband. This enraged Antoinette, who then attacked him. Grace does not believe that Antoinette cannot remember.

Antoinette remembers that Richard did not recognize her at first. She accuses Grace of hiding her red dress. If she had been wearing that dress, Richard would have known her. Grace shows her that the dress is hanging right in front of her and remarks that Antoinette does not know how long she has been kept in this room. Antoinette knows that it has been many days and nights, but time has no meaning for her. When she

turns to look at the dress, she sees the color of fires and sunsets and flowers. She can still smell the faint scent of Jamaican flowers and spices on her dress.

She knows she was wearing this dress when Sandi came to see her for the last time. He asked her to leave with him, but she said she could not. She remembers that her husband found out that Sandi had come to visit her and that she had gone to see him as well. Her husband called her the "infamous daughter of an infamous mother."

Grace tells her to put the dress away. It is just as well that she does not remember Richard's visit. Richard nearly fainted, and there was blood everywhere. Grace was blamed for the incident, and now the master was coming back. Grace tells Antoinette she will never help her again. She is "too far gone" to be helped.

Antoinette had her dream for the third time that night. In the dream, she takes Grace's keys and goes out into the house holding a candle. All the people in the house are gone, but it seems that someone is chasing her and laughing. She never looks back because she does not want to see the ghost of the woman they say haunts this house. She finds herself in a hall where a lamp is burning. She enters a room with red carpets and red curtains, and she lights many candles in the room. She feels miserable in the room and then finds herself suddenly in Aunt Cora's room watching the sunlight through the windows. She sees the wax candles too, and she hates them. She knocks them all down. Most of them go out, but a few set fire to the curtains. Antoinette laughs when she sees the red color of the flames.

She glimpses the ghost of the house surrounded by a gilt frame. It is a woman with her hair streaming and fire all around her. She screams for Christophine to help her and runs up a last flight of stairs to the battlements. People are shouting below her but she can hardly hear them. She sees the red sky, and "all her life is in it." She sees Aunt Cora's patchwork quilt and a grandfather clock, orchards and exotic flowers, green moss on a garden wall, and her doll's house. She sees the painting "The Miller's Daughter" and hears Coco, the parrot, calling. She also hears the man who hates her calling to her. He calls her Bertha. The wind catches her hair, and it streams out like wings. She thinks that perhaps these wings will hold her up if she jumps from the roof. When she looks over the edge of the roof, she sees the pool at Coulibri. Tia is by the pool. She screams Tia's name, then jumps. When she jumps, she awakens from the dream.

Grace Poole was asleep at the table, but she heard the scream. She checks on Antoinette who is still in bed. Grace thinks that perhaps she had been dreaming. Grace leaves Antoinette and falls asleep again. Antoinette waits until she hears Grace snoring, then steals her keys, unlocks the door, and goes outside holding a candle. She knows what she must do. The wind almost extinguishes the flame, but Antoinette shields the candle with her hand, and it lights her way along the passage.

Part 3 Analysis

The third and last part of the book begins with Grace Poole, a character from *Jane Eyre,* describing how she was hired by "Mrs. Eff," the Mrs. Fairfax of the Bronte novel, to care for a mad woman. In contrast to the Bronte story, this Grace Poole does not appear as a sinister character, but only as a woman who seeks to work in a safe place. Grace drinks to excess, but she performs her job effectively and saves her money. She realizes it is difficult for a woman alone to make her way in the world, and she has a certain sympathy for Antoinette. Through Grace, the author suggests that Antoinette may be more conscious of her actions than a "mad woman" would be. For example, Grace does not believe that Antoinette cannot remember stabbing Richard Mason. Antoinette would have every reason to take revenge on the man who effectively sold her into slavery to the husband who now keeps her locked in a room.

Antoinette is coherent enough to find ways to get out of the locked room, but her long imprisonment has disoriented her to the degree that she doesn't know where she is or even who she is. The locked chamber, the "man who hates her," and walls of Thornfield are realities in her current life that were foreshadowed in her recurring dream.

By using Antoinette's dream, the author links her experiences together: those that really happened, the memories she has of the past, and symbolic images of her madness. The image of fire is used repeatedly to suggest sexual obsession, hatred and madness. These fires ultimately consume Antoinette as they had consumed her mother, her husband and other unlucky ones.

At the end of the story, the image of the burning parrot at Coulibri is invoked as Antoinette/Bertha hears the bird calling in her dream. The parrot again hints at the final destruction of Thornfield Hall and the end of Antoinette.

Characters

Amelie

Amelie is a "half-caste" servant at Rochester and Antoinette's "honeymoon-house" in Dominica. Amelie mocks Antoinette, calling her a "white cockroach." Rochester, who thinks Amelie resembles Antoinette, has sex with Amelie within earshot of Antoinette. Afterwards, Amelie, who has often said that she feels sorry for Rochester, remarks "I find it in my heart to be sorry for [Antoinette] too." Amelie seems to have planned her seduction of Rochester in order to get money to leave the island.

Baptiste

A black servant at the "honeymoon house" on Dominica, Baptiste does not hide his disdain of Rochester.

Daniel Boyd

See Daniel Cosway

Aunt Cora

The widow of a slave owner, Aunt Cora takes care of Antoinette after her mother goes insane. Aunt Cora and Mr. Mason do not get along. He blames her for not helping out the Cosway family when they were poor and isolated. Aunt Cora believes that Mr. Mason's treatment of his black workers will endanger the Cosway/Mason family. Later, Aunt Cora blames Richard Mason for arranging an unsuitable marriage for Antoinette: "It's disgraceful. . .It's shameful. You are handing over everything the child owns to a perfect stranger. Your father would have never allowed it. She should be protected, legally." Aunt Cora is afraid that the marriage settlements leave Antoinette vulnerable, but is powerless to change them.

Annette Cosway

The daughter and wife of slave owners, Annette Cosway leads a precarious existence as a young widow with two children in post-emancipation Jamaica. A native of Martinique, Annette is considered an outsider by Jamaican society. She is an unresponsive mother to Antoinette who craves her mother's attention. She does lavish time and energy on her mentally retarded and physically disabled son, Pierre. Fearing for the future and hoping to end her impoverishment, Annette gets the rich Mr. Mason to fall in love with her. The local gossips believe that she used the powers of her voodoopracticing servant Christophine to entrap her second husband. After the fire at

Coulibri, Annette goes insane, unable to face the deaths of her son and pet parrot. In her madness, she attacks Mr. Mason and tries to kill him. When Antoinette visits her in her confinement, Annette has become the sexual plaything of her black caregiver.

Antoinette Cosway

A monster in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Antoinette Cosway, otherwise known as Bertha Mason, is the heroine of Rhys's novel. A sensitive child as the novel begins, Antoinette narrates the story of her life. Isolated from society and hungry for her mother's attention, Antoinette tries to find her rightful place in the world. The local blacks taunt her, calling her a "white cockroach," and white women speak of her strangeness. In postemancipation Jamaica, former slaves hate her because her father was a slave owner. Emancipation left the Cosways impoverished, and their poverty isolates them from white society. Antoinette seeks solace in the wild ruins of the family's formerly grand plantation, Coulibri. She feels a kinship toward the vibrant colors and lushness of the overgrown grounds. But Antoinette is banished from this Garden of Eden. After her mother, Annette, marries the wealthy Mr. Mason, she is supposed to take her place in a more ordered and orderly world. The wild Caribbean plantation is remodeled as an English country estate. This paradise is finally lost when disgruntled black servants burn Coulibri to the ground. As she watches it burn, Antoinette knows that she has lost her home forever. Later, Antoinette finds solace in a convent school where she is protected from the outside world. Antoinette loses this haven when her stepfather, Mr. Mason, arranges her marriage to Edward Rochester. Falling passionately in love with her husband, Antoinette hopes that their "honeymoon house" can become a true home. Her husband, however, spurns her advances, much as her mother did. This final rejection, coupled with her earlier isolation, leads Antoinette to the brink of insanity. Eventually imprisoned in Rochester's English house, Thornfield Hall, Antoinette plots to burn it down and to take a suicide leap from its roof. In a dream vision, she imagines that she can jump back to Coulibri and into the beckoning arms of her black childhood friend, Tia. In death she hopes to find a place to belong.

Daniel Cosway

DanielCosway, who is part black, claims to be Antoinette's illegitimate half-brother. He writes Rochester a letter explaining that Antoinette's mother went mad and that Antoinette has led a promiscuous life. His actions destroy all possibilities that Antoinette and Rochester will be happy in marriage. Antoinette says that Daniel is not really her brother, and that he has caused this misery out of his hatred for all white people.

Pierre Cosway

Pierre Cosway, described as an "idiot" by the local gossips, is Antoinette's younger brother. His physical and mental disabilities serve to further isolate the Cosways in the years before Annette Cosway's marriage to Mr. Mason. Pierre dies as a result of injuries

sustained in the fire that destroys Coulibri. Remorse over his death is one of the main causes of his mother's subsequent insanity. Pierre's mental disabilities also add to Rochester's suspicion that Antoinette is hereditarily predisposed to mental illness.

Sandi Cosway

Sandi, the black grandson of Antoinette's father, appears fleetingly in the novel as a kind man who tries to protect Antoinette. He scares off the black children who taunt her on her way to school. Years later, his kindness makes him the subject of rumors: Daniel tells Rochester that Antoinette and Sandi were involved sexually. Locked in Thornfield Hall, Antoinette recalls Sandi's frequent visits to her after her marriage and remembers their last kiss. After her marriage to Rochester was effectively dissolved, Sandi and Antoinette did become lovers. He had offered to protect her from Rochester and had wanted to run away with her. Enraged by news of their affair, Rochester takes Antoinette to England.

Christophine Dubois

Christophine, an obeah (voodoo) practitioner from Martinique, is one of three black servants to stay with the Cosway family after emancipation. A formidable character, Christophine's obeah powers are legendary among both the Jamaican blacks and whites. Christophine frightens the local black women into helping her in the Cosway kitchen. White women assume that Christophine used black magic to help Annette "catch" her second husband, Mr. Mason. Though Antoinette is also somewhat frightened of Christophine, Christophine acts as a mother figure to her. After silently noticing Antoinette's loneliness, Christophine arranges for Tia to be Antoinette's companion. Christophine also tells Annette that she is neglecting her daughter: "She run wild, she grow up worthless. And nobody care." After Antoinette grows up and gets married, Christophine is still the only person who looks out for her welfare. Unhappy that her husband has stopped loving her, Antoinette turns to Christophine for advice. Christophine tells her to leave her husband: "When man don't love you, more you try, more he hate you, man like that." Refusing to listen, Antoinette begs Christophine for a magical cure. Christophine relents and provides her with a drug to seduce Rochester. As Christophine predicts, however, the drug ultimately makes Rochester hate Antoinette. Just as she tried to get Antoinette's mother to care for her child, Christophine attempts (and fails) to persuade Rochester to love his wife, if only a little.

Godfrey

Godfrey is one of three black servants who remain with the Cosway family after emancipation. However, Annette does not trust him; she believes he is complicit in the poisoning of her horse. During the fire at Coulibri, Godfrey does not try to help the white family.

Josephine

See Christophine Dubois

Mannie

Mannie, the black groom who comes to Coulibri after Mr. Mason marries Annette Cosway, is the only new servant whom Antoinette likes. He is one of three servants to stay loyal to the Cosway/Mason family during the plantation fire. He tries to put out the fire and fearlessly confronts those who set it: "What all you are, eh? Brute beasts?" Shouting back, the crowd calls him a "black Englishman."

Annette Mason

See Annette Cosway

Bertha Mason

See Antoinette Cosway

Mr. Mason

Mr. Mason, Annette Cosway's second husband, is a rich Englishman who has recently come to Jamaica. Local gossip has it that he could have married any woman he wanted. The white Spanish Town ladies are surprised that he chose Annette, an impoverished widow with a disabled son and a strange daughter. Mr. Mason restores the Cosway home, Coulibri, to its former grandeur. As an Englishman, he seems ignorant of the racial politics on Jamaica. He plans to replace his black laborers with East Indian "coolies," and doesn't realize the extent to which his workers will resent this change. The fire at Coulibri takes him unawares, despite the constant warnings of Aunt Cora that black animosity toward the rich white family runs high. Mr. Mason also holds very stereotypical views about blacks: he believes that they are like harmless children. He is not comfortable with the close relations the Cosways have with their black relatives. Antoinette and Pierre have many black halfsiblings— their father was a notorious womanizer— and Annette has always befriended these children. Mr. Mason demands that these ties be cut. Trying to endow Coulibri with specifically English values, Mr. Mason fills the house with English art and orders the cook to prepare English dishes. Ultimately, Mr. Mason can control neither Coulibri nor his wife. His English possessions burn in the fire and his wife goes insane. Still trying to control the fate of the Cosway family, he plans Antoinette's marriage to Rochester before he dies. But Rochester, like Mr. Mason, is unable to anglicize either Antoinette or her Caribbean possessions.

Richard Mason

Richard Mason, Antoinette Cosway's (Bertha Mason's) stepbrother, is one of the characters who also appear in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Richard is responsible for arranging the marriage of Antoinette to Edward Rochester. Christophine and Aunt Cora each worry that the marriage settlements leave Antoinette vulnerable and dependent upon Rochester, a man the family barely knows. In both novels, Rochester blames Richard for keeping the secret of Annette Cosway/Mason's insanity and believes that Richard purposely hid evidence of Antoinette's madness and promiscuity. Antoinette/ Bertha violently attacks Richard when he visits her in her confinement in England. While he appears infrequently in Rhys's novel, Richard's actions have a profound effect on the novel's heroine.

Myra

Myra, a black servant, comes to Coulibri after Mr. Mason marries Annette Cosway. Aunt Cora warns Mr. Mason that Myra cannot be trusted and that he should not discuss his plans to fire the black workers in front of her. Mr. Mason laughs off these concerns, saying that Myra and all blacks are "children" who are "too damn lazy to be dangerous." Aunt Cora's fears are later confirmed. When the black workers set fire to the estate, Myra is mysteriously absent. The fire begins in Pierre's room, where Myra was supposed to be watching the child.

Grace Poole

Grace Poole, who narrates a short section of Part Three, is Antoinette/Bertha's nurse in England. She appears as a character also in *Jane Eyre*. Grace feels protected by the isolation of her position— she's alone in a large mansion with an insane woman and just two other servants. She is also glad to have the money. Her alcohol problem, which is described in some detail in *Jane Eyre*, is alluded to here. She is afraid of Antoinette "when her eyes have that look" and knows that despite her confinement, Antoinette is "still fierce."

Edward Rochester

Antoinette's husband, and the narrator of Part Two, is clearly meant to be a young Edward Rochester, the hero of Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. However, Rhys never gives a name to this character in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. As a younger son with no prospects of inheritance, Rochester has come to Jamaica to make his fortune. He feels coerced by his father and by Antoinette's family into marrying Antoinette for her money. In a letter to his father, Rochester writes: "I have sold my soul or you have sold it, and after all the girl is thought to be beautiful, she is beautiful. And yet. . ." Despite Antoinette's beauty, Rochester has serious reservations about her. She seems foreign and unfamiliar and, like the West Indies themselves, possibly threatening. Rochester becomes obsessed

with her purity, even questioning whether she is really white. He notes her "dark alien eyes" and concludes that while "of pure English descent she may be," her eyes "are not English or European either." After receiving a letter from Daniel Cosway, who claims to be Antoinette's half-brother, Rochester decides—erroneously—that Antoinette, like her mother, is promiscuous and insane. He trusts her even less after she drugs his wine in an attempt to make him love her. Punishing her for this transgression, Rochester has sex with the black servant Amelie within earshot of Antoinette. Rochester had earlier commented that Amelie looked like Antoinette and had speculated that they might be sisters. In substituting the black "sister" for the white, Rochester shows what he thinks of Antoinette: that she is alien, foreign, and "other." Rochester comes across as racist in these scenes, repulsed by and distrustful of blacks. As Rochester and Antoinette leave their honeymoon house, he blames her for destroying his future: "Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it." Out of desperation and anger, Rochester isolates his wife, withdrawing his physical affection. After he hears rumors of her affair with her black cousin, Sandi, he takes Antoinette to England. Deciding that she is insane, he locks her in the attic. Her eventual insanity becomes the confirmation of all his fears. Throughout his narration in Part Two, Rochester presents himself as a helpless victim of circumstance. In his bitterness, he lashes out at Antoinette, spurning her love and destroying her potential for happiness as well as his own.

Sass

Sass is one of three black servants to stay with the Cosways after emancipation. He helps to protect the Cosway/Mason family during the fire at Coulibri.

Disastrous Thomas

See Sass

Tia

Tia is Antoinette's first friend. The two swim and play together, and, for a brief while, are happy. The friendship ends after Antoinette calls Tia a "nigger." Tia retaliates by calling Antoinette a "white nigger" and by stealing her clothes. During the fire at Coulibri, Antoinette hopes that Tia and her mother will let her live with them. As she starts running toward Tia, Tia throws a rock at Antoinette. Staring at each other, the blood trickles down Antoinette's face while the tears fall down Tia's. Their racial difference divides them even as they feel for each other. Years later, before she goes to burn down Thornfield Hall, Antoinette imagines that Tia is beckoning her and that the two can be friends again.

Themes

Race Relations and Prejudice

How people of different races get along and what prejudices they hold are major themes in this book. As the book opens, the former slaveowners and the newly freed slaves await compensation from the British government. In this time of change— the novel begins in 1839, five years after slavery had ended and one year after the apprenticeship system of forced black labor had ended—the relations between black and white West Indians were tense. This tension erupts as the fire at Coulibri. The black workers burn the symbol of white oppression, the plantation house. Further, the newly arriving English colonists—represented in the book by Mr. Mason and Edward Rochester—are prejudiced against blacks. Mr. Mason calls them children and believes blacks make bad workers. Rochester describes blacks through racist characterizations. Both Mr. Mason and Rochester want Antoinette to disown her black half-siblings and other relatives. This prejudice is also evident in their fears of miscegenation. Rochester is disgusted with himself after he sleeps with a half-black woman, and he questions Antoinette's racial heritage. Antoinette's presumably sexual relationship with her black cousin Sandi causes Rochester to declare her insane and lock her in the attic at Thornfield Hall. Likewise, Annette Cosway's sexual liaison with a black caretaker is the mark of her insanity. In her dream at the end of the novel, Antoinette envisions a harmony between blacks and whites that has eluded her in life. By burning down Thornfield Hall, the symbol of her oppression in marriage, she imaginatively aligns herself with the blacks who burned down their symbol of oppression, Coulibri. Such alignment, however, seems only possible in the imagination. Antoinette's early friendship with the black child Tia is marred by the racial slurs each uses to describe the other. Years later, locked in the attic, Antoinette dreams of a reconciliation with Tia. However, as many West Indian critics have pointed out, such a possibility remains illusory, a mad woman's fantasy.

Isolation

Throughout the novel, the isolation of its major characters is a major theme. Characters are variously isolated by geography, social position, race, and insanity. At the beginning of the novel, the Cosway family is isolated by living at Coulibri, a plantation far from Spanish Town, the center of white civilization on Jamaica. This geographic isolation is highlighted by the death of Annette's horse. Without transportation, the Cosway family is, in the words of Annette, "marooned." As white former slaveowners, the Cosways are further isolated. Former slaves have abandoned the family, and the recently freed blacks despise their old oppressors. Later, Edward Rochester feels as though he has been exiled from England. Feeling no affinity for the lush Caribbean surroundings, he feels alone, even in marriage. Antoinette experiences a similar alienation when she is locked in the attic of Rochester's English home. These feelings of isolation are emotional as well as geographical. Antoinette tries to find love— from her mother, from Tia, and from Rochester— but time and again her advances are spurned. Rochester

similarly feels locked out from his father's affection. As a child, Antoinette is a social outcast; her family's poverty separates them from other white families on Jamaica. Called a "white nigger" she seems to belong neither to black or white society. Her mother, as a native of Martinique, finds no friends among white Jamaican society. The black servant Christophine is held at bay by other black servants. From Martinique like her mistress, Christophine's ways seem foreign and frightening to the Jamaicans. The extent to which Antoinette and her mother feel isolated is finally manifested in their insanity. Locked away from society, Antoinette and Annette are marked as outcasts. Unaware of the passage of time or how they came to be imprisoned, both face the ultimate isolation of being unable to communicate at all.

Doubles

The novel presents many black and white doubles. This doubling ties back into the theme of racial difference and prejudice, as the novel explores both what brings women of different races together and what separates them. As young girls, Tia and Antoinette are doubles. They play together like sisters, but they also seem to be mirror reflections of the other. This is especially apparent when Tia dons Antoinette's dress and leaves her own ragged outfit for Antoinette. Dressed in the black girl's clothes, Antoinette becomes the "white nigger" that Tia has called her. Wearing Tia's dress, Antoinette is rejected by her mother and white society as an outsider, much as white society would reject Tia because of her race. Later, when Tia throws a rock at Antoinette, the blood streaming down Antoinette's face is a reflection of the tears streaming down Tia's. They each hurt because of the racial gulf that separates them. In Part II, Rochester sees Amelie as a black reflection of Antoinette. He notes that the two could be sisters. By sleeping with Amelie, he then symbolically trades one sister for the other. In many ways, Amelie is the embodiment of the blackness he sees in Antoinette. Rochester does not quite trust that Antoinette is all white. The repulsion he feels upon waking up in Amelie's arms is matched by the repulsion he felt toward his wife when she seduced him with "black" magic. Antoinette and her mother Annette are another example of black and white doubles. Annette's blackness is metaphorical; as an insane and "impure" woman (she engages in a miscegenational relationship with her black caretaker), she has lost her claims on white society. The similarity of their names and fates links Annette to Antoinette. Rochester tries to erase this doubleness by changing Antoinette's name to Bertha. He is afraid that Annette's promiscuity and insanity, which have "blackened" her name, will taint her daughter. In many ways, Antoinette can only become close to her mother by following a similar life path, ultimately leading to her own affair with a black man and her eventual insanity.

Style

Point of View

The novel is divided into three parts. In the first, Antoinette is the only narrator. In the second part, Rochester takes over, but his narrative is interrupted briefly by Antoinette. In the third part, the English nurse Grace Poole is the narrator until Antoinette regains the narrative voice. This first-person narration is significant because it lets the reader see the world through the subjective gaze of flawed characters. In Parts I and II, Antoinette reveals her own naivety by relating her story. She so obviously does not understand the world she has been born into. Why her mother rejects her, why Tia will refuse to shelter her in the midst of the riot at Coulibri, and why Rochester will reject the gift of her love are all mysteries to this uneducated, ignorant, and yet sympathetic heroine. Watching Antoinette struggle to belong and witnessing her repeated rejections through her eyes, the reader cannot help but pity the fragility of Antoinette's position. However, when Rochester takes over the narration, as Sanford Sternlicht argues in his chapter on the novel, "It is as if the author is allowing the accused to convict himself on his own testimony." As the "villain" of the novel, the man who eventually causes Antoi nette's insanity and locks her away, Rochester is ostensibly an unsympathetic character. He unwittingly reveals his racism by recording his reactions to the black people he meets. His greed, his lack of respect for his wife and her culture, his willingness to blame anyone and everyone for his life's disappointments become apparent as he tries to portray himself as a victim of circumstance. Despite this, in his narration Rochester reveals himself to be a passionate man, who, blinded by prejudice, is denying his own happiness as well as his wife's. Grace Poole, the alcoholic nurse hired to care for Antoinette in England, is an equally subjective narrator. So caught up in her desire to escape the pressures of the outside world, she cannot comprehend the tragedy of Antoinette's imprisonment. When Antoinette once again takes over, Rhys succeeds in presenting the world through a madwoman's eyes. In a letter, Rhys had noted, "A mad girl speaking all the time is too much!" In splitting the narrative, though, Rhys shows how all perspectives are limited, if not by madness then by prejudice, self interest, and ignorance.

Setting

The setting of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a very important factor in the novel. The Sargasso Sea evokes both fear and tranquillity. Rachel Carson describes how the Sargasso holds "legendary terrors for sailing ships" but also how its skies are "seldom clouded." In the novel, the Caribbean seems to be both paradisiacal and threatening. The lush growth, the vibrant colors, make Antoinette feel as though she is growing up in the Garden of Eden, but that the Garden has "gone wild." The wildness seems to encroach on the inroads civilization has made. Rochester imagines that the "honeymoon- house" is being invaded by the ever-growing forest. The heat and color of Jamaica and Dominica are also contrasted to the cold grayness of England. The time setting of the novel is

another crucial factor. Though Rhys decided to write the "true story" of Charlotte Bronte's character, Bertha Mason, Rhys broke from Bronte by moving the time setting from the late 1700s to the 1840s. This shift allows her to depict a volatile time period. Slavery had recently been abolished in the Caribbean, and the economic repercussions of emancipation changed Caribbean society. This is evident in both the decay of Coulibri, a once-rich plantation, as well as in the riot staged by black workers afraid that they will soon be replaced by East Indian laborers.

Symbolism

Wide Sargasso Sea is filled with recurring symbols. Coulibri, the big plantation house that is burned to the ground by black laborers, is a symbol of slavery and oppression. Thornfield Hall, Rochester's English estate, is equally a symbol of oppression, but of a different sort. Locked in the attic, Antoinette sees Thornfield Hall as the symbol of her husband's power over her. Burning it down, she symbolically reaches out to the blacks who burned down her childhood home. Clothes are also important symbols in the novel. When Antoinette puts on Tia's dress, she feels as though she has put on Tia's skin. Antoinette imagines that her white mother and their white neighbors see her as a "white nigger." Later in life, Antoinette wears the white dress that Rochester likes in an attempt to make him love her. But Rochester, noting that the dress does not fit Antoinette correctly, sees this as yet another way that his wife is different and doesn't fit into his English ideals. After she has gone insane, Antoinette asks her keeper again and again to let her wear her red dress. The red dress symbolizes both her infidelity—she wore a similar dress when her lover Sandi visited her-and the fire and warmth of the Caribbean. She imagines, as she sees the dress on the floor, that it is a fire spreading across the room. This reminder of the Caribbean inspires her finally to burn down Thornfield Hall and to figuratively return to the place of her youth.

Literary Heritage

Critics argue about which literary heritage Rhys draws upon in her novel Wide Sargasso Sea. Some, like Sandra Drake, argue that Rhys uses a particularly Afro-Caribbean tradition in her novel: "This reading is sustained by the centrally Afro-Caribbean structure of the novel, by the quintessentially Afro-Caribbean figure of the zombi, and by the Africa-derived beliefs about the relations between the living and the dead that the concept of the zombi— the living-dead— incorporates." Drake believes that the novel favors an Afro-Caribbean worldview over a European one, and that Rhys challenges her readers to reject the Western idea that African beliefs are "foolish." Others see Rhys, who left Dominica as a teenager and only returned for one brief visit, as belonging to the European Modernist tradition. Mary Lou Emery finds, however, that such categories "limit our understanding of her work." She argues instead that the modernist writer, the West Indian writer, and the woman writer can be seen as complimentary categories that help shape each other. The power of European influence on Rhys's novel can certainly not be denied. She did, after all, choose to write the "true story" of a character she borrowed from one of the best known nineteenth-century English novels, *Jane Eyre*.

The mixture of African and English elements seems finally to best represent the literary heritage of the West Indies, where so many different cultures intermingled over centuries of colonization.

Historical Context

Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea* between 1945 and 1966. Critic Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell writes in "The Paradoxes of Belonging: The White West Indian Woman in Fiction," that the novel is a "response to the nationalistic mood in [the West Indies] of the late 1950s and 1960s." During this time period Jamaica became independent of Britain (in 1962). Dominica, the country of Rhys's birth and the setting for Part II, did not become independent until 1978. In these times of change, which also saw a large influx of West Indian immigrants into England, the relations between whites and blacks were often tense, erupting sometimes into violence. Not addressing these questions directly, Rhys chose to set her novel between 1839 and 1845. Slavery had ended in the British colonies in 1833, so these years were also ones of change.

In deciding to tell the "true story" of Bertha Mason, the Creole madwoman in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Rhys confronted directly English stereotypes about the Caribbean and also how white and black West Indians viewed the English. Interestingly, Rhys changed the time setting. Bronte's novel is set in the late 1700s, before the abolition of slavery in the British colonies. By moving the setting, Rhys places her characters in a much more volatile time period. The West Indian planters who had made their fortunes cultivating sugar with slave laborers were impoverished by abolition. Their property values plummeted, and they found it difficult to secure a labor force to work their declining estates. White West Indians had threatened secession from England over the question of emancipation. In his history of West Indian slavery, *Capitalism and Slavery*, Eric Williams quotes one Jamaican planter as saying, "We owe no more allegiance to the inhabitants of Great Britain than we owe our brother colonists in Canada. . .We do not for a moment acknowledge that Jamaica can be cited to the bar of English opinion to defend her laws and customs." In other words, white Jamaicans did not want to accept British sovereignty, and felt that England had no right to abolish slavery in their land. Meanwhile, new English colonists were able to make a fortune buying up devalued West Indian estates. As is apparent in Mr. Mason's and Edward Rochester's attitudes toward the former slave owners in the novel, the new arrivals felt morally superior to the West Indian whites who had supported a system of human bondage. However, as the former slave Christophine notes in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, abolition and the new colonists did not bring blacks complete freedom: "No more slavery! She had to laugh! "These new ones have Letter of the Law. Same thing. They got magistrate. They got fine. They got jail house and chain gang. They got tread machine to mash up people's feet. New ones worse than old ones—more cunning, that's all.'" In fact, immediately following emancipation, the British put an apprenticeship system into effect. The freed slaves were forced to stay with their former masters and accept whatever wages the masters chose to pay. Steep fines and imprisonment awaited those blacks who sought greater freedom. The new white colonists tried to create a greater divide between blacks and whites. In Rhys's novel, Antoinette and Pierre have many part-black half-siblings, children of their father's frequent liaisons with black women. Their mother Annette welcomes these children and accepts them into her home. Mr. Mason, however, tries to put a stop to this interaction. Antoinette recalls that Mr. Mason tried to instill in her

shame for having black relatives. Similarly, Rochester is repulsed after he sleeps with a black servant. Having sex with her, he feels, puts him on the same level as the immoral old slave owners.

These three distinct groups—white West Indians, black West Indians, and English colonists— uneasily inhabited the small islands of the Englishspeaking Caribbean. In the years following abolition, black rebellions frequently erupted, and the white governors were often accused of treating their black subjects too harshly. Rhys's ancestors watched their plantation burn down shortly after emancipation. Rhys, too, would have been aware of the debate surrounding what was known as the Governor Eyre controversy. In 1865, Jamaican Governor Eyre quelled a black rebellion using an extreme amount of force. Eminent English writers immediately began debating over what was the correct way to protect the white minority interests in the overwhelmingly black Caribbean. Novelist Charles Dickens supported Eyre, believing that any white violence was justified for fear of potential black violence. Scientist Charles Darwin, on the other hand, believed that Eyre's barbarity could never be justified. What is important to remember is that Jamaica and other far-flung British colonies were significant in England. The English discussed how best to govern these colonies and theorized about the racial differences of their inhabitants. One thing that Rhys contends with in her novel is how the Caribbean is perceived through various forms of English discourse. In deciding to tell the "true story" of a Creole subject whom readers knew only through Charlotte Bronte's eyes, Rhys lets the colonials talk back.

Critical Overview

Wide Sargasso Sea was an immediate critical success. The book won for its author two prestigious awards, the W. H. Smith Literary Award and the Heinemann Award of the Royal Society for Literature. Critics were attracted to Rhys's imaginative retelling of the story of the madwoman Bertha Mason from Charlotte Bronte's beloved novel, *Jane Eyre*. The tie to Bronte that probably brought *Wide Sargasso Sea* its wide readership also brought its share of controversy. Early reviewer Walter Allen declared that the book could "not exist in its own right" and only works as an interesting appendage to Bronte's better novel. Others disagree. Michael Thorpe believes that *Wide Sargasso Sea* actually forces readers to see *Jane Eyre* as a flawed, "more 'dated' work, marred by stereotyping and crude imaginings."

Critical attention to Jean Rhys and her last novel is ever growing. As Judith L. Raiskin writes in her introduction to the novel, "*Wide Sargasso Sea* has served as a touchstone text for critics interested in modernism, feminism, and post-colonial theory." If feminists have, in the words of Raiskin, "been challenged by a novel that rewrites an English classic [*Jane Eyre*] long touted for its feminist vision," they have come to see how "the issues of race and slavery raised in *Wide Sargasso Sea* complicate not only many evaluations of *Jane Eyre* but also the readings of Rhys's 'European fiction' that analyze exploitation in terms of gender only." In other words, feminist critics have been forced to understand both how women are simultaneously united by gender and divided by racial and class difference in their assessments of Rhys's novel.

But *Wide Sargasso Sea* has not only challenged feminist critics to reexamine Rhys's other works. Pierrette M. Frickey states that not until the publication of this last novel did Rhys become "known as a West Indian writer." Critics try to trace the signifi- cance of Rhys's Caribbean childhood in the structure and imagery of the novel. Sandra Drake argues that Rhys draws on a particularly Afro-Caribbean literary tradition, and that she uses her knowledge of voodoo and zombies to make an anti-European statement in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Kenneth Ramchand, however, is quick to point out that not all West Indian writers and critics want to claim Rhys as one of their own. He quotes poet Edward Brathwaite who believes that "white Creoles in the English and French West Indies have separated themselves by too wide a gulf and have contributed too little culturally. . .to give credence to the notion that they can. . .meaningfully identify or be identified with the spiritual world on this side of the Sargasso Sea." But many find it hard to argue with the West Indian feeling of Rhys's last novel. Indeed recent critics point, with humor, to the 1974 assessment of A. Alvarez that Rhys was "the best living English novelist." In her indictment of English imperialism and in her evocation of a Caribbean landscape and culture, Jean Rhys is a powerful and gifted novelist, but certainly not English.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Lutz is an instructor at New York University and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses racial identity and ambiguity in Wide Sargasso Sea.

In her unfinished autobiography, *Smile Please*, Jean Rhys records her childhood longing to be black: "[My mother] loved babies, any babies. Once I heard her say that black babies were prettier than white ones. Was this the reason why I prayed so ardently to be black, and would run to the lookingglass in the morning to see if the miracle had happened? And though it never had, I tried again. Dear God, let me be black." In an unpublished manuscript entitled "Black Exercise Book," Rhys suggests that she can boast a distant black ancestor: "My great grandfather and his beautiful Spanish wife. Spanish? I wonder." In questioning the ethnic heritage of this presumably darker skinned woman, Rhys questions the stories her family has told about their ethnicity. On at least one occasion, in "The Bible Is Modern," Rhys called herself "black" to imply her alienation from English culture. As Judith L. Raiskin writes, "While Rhys did not identify herself racially as other than white Creole, her selfidentification as. . .'black' is a political stance meant to position her in opposition to the metropolitan colonizing culture." In desiring to be black, in searching for a black ancestor, and in aligning herself with black West Indians, Rhys complicated the boundaries between black and white so stark in her time, and even starker in the mid-nineteenth century, the timeframe of her best-known novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Certainly race and racial difference are complicated categories in a novel set just after the emancipation of slavery in the British colonies. The heroine of the novel, Antoinette Cosway, otherwise known as Bertha Mason, is called at one point a "white nigger." Similarly, the Cosway/Mason family's servant Mannie is called a "black Englishman." Held up as opposites, pairing the categories of "white" with "nigger" and "black" with "Englishman" seems to be paradoxical. As Lee Erwin argues in his article "'Like in a Looking Glass': History and Narrative in *Wide Sargasso Sea* ," such terms indicate an "interchangeability of racial positions." What becomes apparent, however, is that these words have meaning beyond simple racial designations, and really speak to the competing meanings attached to race throughout the novel. What it means to be black or white in *Wide Sargasso Sea* depends on who's telling the story. Racial difference takes on widely different meanings as the novel is narrated variously by Antoinette and Edward Rochester. Erwin suggests that Rochester "interprets racial difference in moral and sexual terms," that blackness implies sexual and moral perversion, while whiteness stands for purity. Meanwhile, Erwin says that Antoinette views race "in terms of historically specific shifts in class and economic power." Feeling neither black nor white, Antoinette is torn between the discourses of what race means.

Antoinette's main desire in this novel is to belong—whether with her mother, with her first (and only) friend Tia, or with her husband Edward Rochester. She is, in turn, rejected by each one. Time and again this rejection is coded as a rejection based on racial difference. Rejected alike by her white Creole mother, by her black friend, and by

her English husband, to what racial and ethnic category does Antoinette belong? As a child, Antoinette sees the gulf emerge between her and Tia. Angry at her friend, Antoinette calls Tia a "nigger." This racial slur immediately shifts the meaning of their petty argument. Antoinette does not need to prove that she is right because she is white. Designating Tia as a "cheating nigger," Antoinette reduces her friend to a stereotype. Tia counters by calling Antoinette a "white nigger." At this moment Antoinette is forced to literally put on Tia's dress (Tia has stolen Antoinette's) and to figuratively put on the dress of the racial stereotype. As a "white nigger" Antoinette is, in Tia's words, not "real white people." Without money, Antoinette and her family have lost position. Whiteness, in Tia's definition, signals power and wealth, and to be a "black nigger is better than white nigger." To be a "white nigger" is to be reduced to living like one's former slaves, eating their food and wearing their clothes.

In Tia's dress and weighed down by Tia's slur, Antoinette returns home where her mother is entertaining their new English neighbors. The ragged dress contrasts with the visitors' "beautiful clothes." Antoinette cannot bring herself to speak to these people who seem so different from her. When later her mother refuses to speak or look at her, Antoinette thinks to herself, "what Tia said is true." As a "white nigger" Antoinette is further separated from a mother who has already spurned the advances of her affectionate daughter. Later, after her mother has married the English Mr. Mason, Antoinette realizes that no one would mistake her mother for English. To Antoinette, Englishness is epitomized by Mr. Mason's painting of "The Miller's Daughter" which depicts "a lovely English girl with brown curls and blue eyes and a dress slipping off her shoulders" and by Mr. Mason himself, "so sure of himself, so without a doubt English." Her Creole mother is "so without a doubt not English, but no white nigger either. Not my mother. Never had been. Never could be." Antoinette believes that her mother would have died if Mr. Mason had not been able to restore to her the standing and wealth of her former position. But Antoinette cannot be restored to a position she never held. She feels alienated from her mother and stepfather's position. Instead of embracing Mr. Mason as a father, Antoinette can only call him her "white pappy," indicating again her distance from his whiteness and his power. For as Judith Raiskin explains in a footnote to the novel, "big Pappy" was a term used by Jamaican slaves to refer to their masters. In many ways, even though newly enriched, Antoinette is still clothed in Tia's dress.

Antoinette recognizes her affinity with Tia on her last day at Coulibri. The plantation burning, the Cosway/Mason family struggles to escape both the rising flames and the rising anger of the black mob seeking to destroy their white oppressors. At this moment, Antoinette realizes that more than Coulibri is her home. She belongs to the land and the people who inhabit it. Seeing Tia in the distance, Antoinette runs to her "for she was all that was left of my life that had been. We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river." This is what kinship means; this is what it means to belong. But almost at the same moment that Antoinette decides "I will live with Tia and I will be like her," the hope is dashed by the rock Tia throws at her. Tia's action makes her cry as she watches the blood run down Antoinette's face. Love and friendship cannot bridge the gulf of racial difference in nineteenth-century Jamaica.

Years afterward, her mother and stepfather both dead, Antoinette follows in her mother's footsteps by marrying an Englishman, Edward Rochester. Rochester has been told that his wife is "Creole of pure English descent." In the section he narrates, however, Rochester questions this heritage. When he ultimately rejects his wife, Rochester does so because he has designated her as "black." Antoinette's physical features ("dark alien eyes"), fellowship with black servants, and sexual desire for her husband first make Rochester suspicious of her racial and sexual purity. Later, when he knows that she has employed the power of obeah—black magic— to seduce him, learns that she has many black half-siblings, and hears rumors of her sexual relationship with her black relative Sandi, Rochester is convinced of Antoinette's otherness. His greatest fear, as he feels simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by the exotic Caribbean, is that he is vulnerable, that he can become as alienated from Europe as Antoinette. After all, Rochester has come to Jamaica because England cannot support him. His only chance for wealth, he and his family believe, is for him to marry a Creole heiress. But what if instead of anglicizing his wife—as he tries to do by renaming her Bertha—she contaminates him? The house with the English furnishings and books in which they live on Dominica is in danger of becoming engulfed by the forest. Rochester imagines as he leaves that the house cries out: "Save me from destruction, ruin and desolation. . .But what are you doing here you folly? So near the forest. Don't you know that the forest is a dangerous place? And that the dark forest always wins? Always. If you don't, you soon will, and I can do nothing to help you." To stay English, to stay white, Rochester must reject the wild Caribbean and his wife who is of it. To him, Jamaica, Dominica, and his wife's sensuality are a dream from which he must awake. He hates what he cannot control or understand: "I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness."

As the novel ends, far from the "honeymoonhouse" on Dominica, and instead inside a cold attic in Thornfield Hall, Rochester's English estate, Antoinette has been banished once more from her home. Coulibri has been long in ashes, and locked up as a madwoman in England, the Caribbean exists to Antoinette only as a dream. Known now as Bertha Mason, she is glimpsed fleetingly by the readers of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. The madwoman in the attic, Antoinette appears, in Bronte's words, as "a discoloured face. . .a savage face. . .purple: the lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed; the black eyebrows raised over the bloodshot eyes." In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is Rochester's Caribbean nightmare, and she is described through racialized language that connects her to the savage. Ironically, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it is to the European conception of the savage that Antoinette wishes to belong. Critics of Rhys's last novel notice both Antoinette Cosway's desire to be black and her political solidarity with the oppressed black workers at Coulibri. When, for instance, Antoinette hopes to live with Tia and her mother after black workers have burned down Coulibri, Erwin argues that Antoinette "will try to be black." Despite the failure of her efforts, at the end of the novel Antoinette dreams that Tia is beckoning her, that she can finally find a home with her former friend. Sandra Drake argues in "'All that Foolishness/That All Foolishness': Race and Caribbean Culture as Thematics of Liberation in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*" that when Antoinette decides to burn down Thornfield Hall, she aligns herself with the

black workers who burned down Coulibri. Together they stand against imperialism and a European worldview. In Charlotte Bronte's and Edward Rochester's minds, Antoinette/Bertha is the dark Other, a woman whose Caribbean heritage, insanity, and sexual impurity mark her as black, not white. Antoinette accepts this designation to the extent that she knows she doesn't belong in cold England. However, her dream vision, her desire to "try to be black," seems as doomed as her childhood attempt. In the vision fueled by her madness, Antoinette chooses to jump to Tia and away from Rochester. But it seems that Antoinette, who has never been able to be black or white, will find the hard pavestones that greet her suicide leap as jarring as Tia's rock.

Source: Kimberly Lutz, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay on Jean Rhys's novel, Wide Sargasso Sea, Maria Olaussen examines the author's narrative structure to show the construction of Rhy's own racial identity both in the context of the novel and in a larger, political context.

Jean Rhys, while reluctantly trying to settle in England as a white West Indian, started working on her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* with the primary intention of describing the Dominica of her childhood. In 1956, she wrote in a letter: "I still work but write mostly about the vanished West Indies of my childhood. Seems to me that wants doing badly—for never was anything more vanished or forgotten. Or lovely" (*Letters*). This preoccupation with the lost island of her childhood came very early on to be tied to another concern, that of "rescuing" the white Creole madwoman from the denigrating descriptions of her found in *Jane Eyre*. The choice of *Jane Eyre* as a starting point is important to Rhys. In one of her letters, she writes about her work on the novel: "it might be possible to unhitch the whole thing from Charlotte Brontë's novel, but I don't want to do that. It is that particular mad Creole I want to write about, not any of the other mad Creoles" (*Letters*). This connection to one of Britain's most well-known women writers puts Rhys's exploration of the construction of her own racial identity into a larger political context. Rhys shows awareness of the fact that the meaning of who she is as a white West Indian woman cannot be understood separately from the way this identity has been constructed in the dominant Anglo-Saxon cultural context.

Rhys worked on the novel during the 1950s and 1960s, a period of increasing West Indian immigration to Britain and of a growing awareness of the issues involved in struggles for independence in colonized countries. She sets her novel in a time that was crucial in the development of colonial history: the time just following the passing of the Abolition of Slavery Act in 1833. She focuses on the experience of the white plutocracy, people born in the West Indies who derived their wealth, status, and identity from the system of slavery. In the midnineteenth century, the colonies were no longer economically important for Britain. Planters often pocketed their compensation money, sold their estates, and left the island. The freed slaves bought land where they could or squatted on the estates. Estate owners who decided to stay on, therefore, were faced with a process of considerable restructuring which left many of them destitute (Williams). Rhys's primary concern was the fate of a woman belonging to a group that no longer has a place, or in John Hearne's words, "a marginal community run over and abandoned by History."

An important part of the exploration of the white colonial experience is an understanding of the consequences of the division between black and white. Rhys remembers a fierce longing to be part of the black community, something she expected to happen through a miracle: "Dear God, let me be black" (*Smile*), she used to pray. She often describes black women in contrast to white women: "They were stronger than we were, they could walk a long way without getting tired, carry heavy weights with ease . . . Also there wasn't for them as there was for us, what I thought of as the worry of getting married . . . Black girls . . . seemed to be perfectly free" (*Smile*). Rhys's clearly expressed longing for

blackness in her letters, in her autobiography, and in her fiction has caused critics to draw the conclusion that she was concerned with issues of racial justice and that she had taken the side of black people. Lucy Wilson, for instance, looks at Rhys's black characters Christophine in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Selina in the short story "Let Them Call it Jazz" and comments on the contrast to the white characters. She sees Rhys's description of both strong and assertive black women and the weak and dependent white women as a way of fighting for justice. According to Wilson, Rhys simply describes two ways of being victimized and two ways of noncooperation with oppressive structures. Selma James similarly sees the ending of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a reconciliation between black and white:

Many years before she had said, "I will live with Tia and I will be like her." But first she had to let Tia know the terms on which she planned for them to be together. All she had offered Tia before was the domination of her white skin. But as Antoinette burns down the Great House which imprisons her—as Tia had burnt down the Great House which was the centre of her exploitation—Tia welcomes her home.

Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell reads Rhys's autobiographical comments on her childhood preference for a black doll over a white one as an indication of her "sense of kinship with her black compatriots." Carole Angier in her biography of Rhys draws similar conclusions from Rhys's own statements about her relations to black people. Although Angier analyzes Rhys's fiction carefully, her analyses do not include a critical approach to Rhys's professed preference for black over white people. On the contrary, this is one of the rare instances where Angier takes Rhys's own view and hands it on unexamined.

Rhys's rather complicated attitude towards black people should be looked at in the context of her enterprise of writing the Creole madwoman's part of the story. It is the "worrying of getting married" that for her defines womanhood. The specific limitations and complications connected with white womanhood did not apply to black women, and therefore Rhys sees them as "perfectly free." Needless to say, this is not an accurate description of black women's lives but a construction which functions to define the dilemma of the white woman as a biological necessity. For a white woman, blackness as freedom means that the only way for her to be free is by miraculously changing the colour of her skin; biological determinism is thus not limited to sex alone.

This clinging to biological determinism can be understood within the context of Rhys's own lack of a clearly defined identity. Lee Erwin argues that although in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rhys takes up her West Indian past, she cannot be said to articulate West Indian nationalism. "The novel seems rather to inhabit a limbo *between* nationalisms; it exists as a response to the loss, rather than the recovery, of a 'place-to-be-from.'" Mary Lou Emery describes Jean Rhys asking: "Am I an expatriate? Expatriate from where?" In this way, Rhys articulates the connection between place and identity which Houston A. Baker describes as follows:

For place to be recognized by one as actually PLACE, as a personally valued locale, one must set and maintain the boundaries. If one, however, is constituted and maintained by and within boundaries set by a dominating authority, then one is not a

setter of place but a prisoner of another's desire. Under the displacing impress of authority even what one calls and, perhaps, feels is one's *own place* is, from the perspective of human agency, *placeless*. Bereft of determinative control of boundaries, the occupant of authorized boundaries would not be secure in his or her own eulogized world but maximally secured by another, a prisoner of interlocking, institutional arrangements of power.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the starting point is this placelessness. Although Rhys's novel starts with Antoinette's childhood in Coulibri, its boundaries lie outside the novel in another woman's text. In *Jane Eyre* we have the madwoman Bertha locked up in the attic of Thornfield Hall. We know the ending of the story and thus the restrictions placed on both the narrative and the main character. The significant title "Wide Sargasso Sea" refers to the dangers of the sea voyage. Rochester first crosses the Atlantic alone to a place which threatens to destroy him, then once more, bringing his new wife to England. Both Rochester and Antoinette are transformed through this passage. Rochester gives Antoinette a new name, Bertha, and in England she finally is locked up as mad. Rhys finds her own place in *Jane Eyre*, "a prisoner of another's desire." She sets out to describe that place and, in doing that, she redefines it as her own. In her challenge to *Jane Eyre*, Rhys draws on the collective experience of black people as sought out, uprooted, and transported across the Middle Passage and finally locked up and brutally exploited for economic gain. She uses this experience and the black forms of resistance as modes through which the madwoman in *Jane Eyre* is recreated.

Another white Dominican novelist, Phyllis Shand Allfrey, also makes her white protagonists use black ways of resistance in her novel *The Orchid House*, first published in 1952. In distinction to Shand Allfrey, Rhys constructs black womanhood as exactly that which is desirable and lacking in the white woman's position. Here many critics actually repeat Rhys's wishful thinking, equating British colonial rule over all inhabitants of the colonies with the specific situation of slavery. Emery writes: "The protagonist of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette (Bertha) Cosway Mason (Rochester), undergoes sexual and class enslavement as a white Creole woman." Such a definition of slavery disregards the actual, historical institution of slavery as experienced by black people under the domination of their white owners. That these white slave owners could also be oppressed and excluded by metropolitan politics and the fact that patriarchal oppression took on a specific meaning for a white Creole woman still did not make her share the experience of slavery. Rhys does not suggest such a "women and blacks" equation; instead, she moves within the shifting boundaries of constructed racial identities desperately trying to find her own place. Her descriptions of black women serve this purpose.

With the imprisoned madwoman in Thornfield as both starting point and end, Rhys starts her own narrative. The narrator is the madwoman but her tale is the young Antoinette's. The theme is the fear and the possibility of losing one's whiteness. The very first sentences of the novel set the tone: "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks." Also the black people point out that they now lack real whiteness: "Real white people, they got gold

money. They didn't look at us, nobody see them come near us. Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger."

The lack of real whiteness gains increasing significance when Antoinette grows up. The meaning of her sexual identity is what ultimately determines her racial identity and vice versa. Antoinette recollects an incident where she returned home in her black friend Tia's dress to find that they had beautifully dressed white visitors. Antoinette's appearance in a black girl's torn and dirty dress causes a great deal of disturbance; it shows that she is not part of the real white people. The black servant Christophine is the one who points to the necessity for change when she says: "She run wild, she grow up worthless." Tia's dress has to be burned, and Antoinette's mother comes out of her passive state and tries to provide Antoinette with new clothes. Antoinette remembers this change in her mother: "it was my fault that she started to plan and work in a frenzy, in a fever to change our lives." Here Antoinette has a dream which is then repeated three times in the novel, each time with more clarity and detail:

I dreamed that I was walking in the forest. Not alone. Someone who hated me was with me, out of sight. I could hear heavy footsteps coming closer and though I struggled and screamed I could not move.

This dream suggests fear of sexual violation. Antoinette fears her future when it becomes clear that she cannot grow up like Tia.

The real change, however, comes with Mr Mason, Antoinette's mother's second husband. He sees himself as a liberator; he "rescues" Antoinette from growing up worthless, from being a "white nigger." This he does by reestablishing the blackwhite dichotomy, reintroducing the connection of white with wealth and domination, and the connection to England. For Antoinette the meaning of being a woman is firmly placed within a colonial context. Growing up worthless, on the other hand, is the result of a situation where the black-white dichotomy no longer exists.

The most important black character in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the servant Christophine. She is the first character to speak within Antoinette's narrative and her voice is used to explain the behaviour of the white people. "The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother, 'because she pretty like pretty self' Christophine said." A description of Christophine, again, is given by Antoinette's mother Annette. Antoinette wants to know who Christophine is, her origin and her age. Annette tells her that Christophine was a wedding present from her first husband; she knows that Christophine comes from Martinique, but she doesn't know her age. Annette says:

I don't know how old she was when they brought her to Jamaica, quite young. I don't know how old she is now. Does it matter? Why do you pester and bother me about all these things that happened long ago? Christophine stayed with me because she wanted to stay. She had her own very good reasons you may be sure. I dare say we would have died if she'd turned against us and that would have been a better fate.

Christophine's most important function as a powerful protector and nursing mother-figure is thus introduced against the backdrop of the information that she was a wedding gift. The life of the white family is now in the hands of a person who once was part of their property. The reasons for staying are Christophine's own, her age is unknown, her origin on another island. She is thus outside the sphere of what can be controlled and understood by the white family once slavery has ended.

Christophine is mentioned in her relation to Antoinette at a point in the narrative where Antoinette most clearly describes the indifference of her mother to herself: "she pushed me away, . . . without a word, as if she had decided once and for all that I was useless to her." When her own mother pushes her away and finds her 'useless,' Antoinette turns to Christophine for the mothering she needs. It is Antoinette who finds Christophine useful. "So I spent most of my time in the kitchen which was in an outbuilding some way off. Christophine slept in the little room next to it." Antoinette's mother, the white lady, develops only her feminine qualities in spite of their distressing situation. These qualities, such as beauty, fragility, dependence, and passivity, make it impossible for her to change actively their situation. They also make her unable to care for her daughter or to perform the most necessary household tasks. Antoinette's mother concentrates her energies on survival in a feminine way in that she does everything to get a new husband.

Christophine's function in the novel has to be understood within the overall context of the white woman's tale. Antoinette's narrative in Part One is a reminiscence of her childhood which carries within it an awareness of the loss of place and identity which, for her, is the meaning of womanhood. Christophine belongs to her childhood, to a period of time which is lost even before the narrative begins. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes about Christophine:

Christophine is tangential to this narrative. She cannot be contained by a novel which rewrites a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native. No perspective *critical* of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self.

Black feminist critics in the United States have studied black female characters in texts by white authors and pointed to the way in which these characters are constructed to fit a view of history which mystifies the oppression of black people. Although there are important differences between the American South and the Caribbean, they have the history of slavery in common. Hazel Carby argues that stereotypes about black women have their origin in slavery and furthermore that these stereotypes do not exist in isolation but should be understood in connection with dominant ideas about white women. "The dominating ideology to define the boundaries of acceptable female behavior from the 1820s until the Civil War was the 'cult of true womanhood.'" This ideology defined white women as physically delicate and saw this as an outward sign of chastity, sensitivity, and refinement; it also defined the black woman but in different terms. Here the physical strength and endurance necessary for the work required of

black women were seen as signs of moral and spiritual depravity. The function of these stereotypes becomes clear only when the situation of the white slave-owning man is seen as the determining instance, the centre around which female identities were constructed. Carby writes:

The effect of black female sexuality on the white male was represented in an entirely different form from that of the figurative power of while female sexuality. Confronted by the black woman, the white man behaved in a manner that was considered to be entirely untempered by any virtuous qualities: the white male, in fact, was represented as being merely prey to the rampant sexuality of his female slaves. A basic assumption underlying the cult of true womanhood was the necessity for the white female to "civilize" the basic instincts of man. But in the face of what was constructed as the overt sexuality of the black female, excluded as she was from the parameters of virtuous possibilities, these baser male instincts were entirely uncontrolled.

In contrast to the stereotype of the black woman as a "whore," another stereotype emerged, that of the "mammy." Barbara Christian points out that also this stereotyped role has to be looked at in the context of the role of the white woman. "The mammy figure, Aunt Jemima, the most prominent black female figure in southern white literature, is in direct contrast to the ideal white woman, though both images are dependent on each other for their effectiveness." The mammy is the house slave or domestic servant, who is represented as being loyal to the white family and who has no ties to the black community; the needs of her own family do not interfere with her work for the white family. She is harmless or benevolent and can therefore be trusted with a great deal of responsibility when it comes to taking care of the white children. In this way the contradiction of considering black people less than human and at the same time entrusting the care of one's children to them is to some extent made less apparent. Christian argues that the mammy, the whore, and the conjure woman as stereotypical roles for the black woman are based on a fear of female sexuality and spiritual power. In the oral tradition of the slaves the mammy is still present as a stereotype:

She is there as cook, housekeeper, nursemaid, seamstress, always nurturing and caring for her folk. But unlike the white southern image of mammy, she is cunning, prone to poisoning her master, and not at all content with her lot.

The complexity of Christophine as a character does not challenge these stereotypes. Christophine's relations to her own children and to the rest of the community are made to fit the needs of the white family without making Christophine's own situation seem overly oppressive. Only one of her children survived and he is now grown. She does not have a husband having chosen to be independent. Although the family unit takes on different forms because of the situation of slavery, there is ample evidence to show that such units existed and were maintained and recognized as families by the black community (Klein). Similarly, the fact that black women could have children on their own, and thus were not subject to the same rules as white settler women, does not mean that most black women did not, sooner or later, live together with men. According to Herbert S. Klein, it was common during slavery for black women in the Caribbean "to engage in pre-marital intercourse on a rather free basis. This continued until the birth of

the first child. At this point in time a woman usually settled down into a relationship which might or might not be with the child's father." As Hortense J. Spillers has written in an analysis of the meaning of black American kinship systems as determined by slavery,

"kinship" loses meaning, *since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations*. I certainly do not mean to say that African peoples in the New World did not maintain the powerful ties of sympathy that bind blood-relations in a network of feeling, of continuity. It is precisely *that* relationship—not customarily recognized by the code of slavery—that historians have long identified as the inviolable "Black Family."

Rhys works within an ideological framework where property relations are given the meaning of blood-relations for black people. By describing Christophine as perfectly free of social ties and responsibilities, she makes her primary attachment to the white family seem natural. Being a white Creole woman implies the necessity of securing a husband by clinging to a definition of womanhood which makes that husband necessary in the first place. The black woman is, however, free to work and support herself. She is furthermore in a position to help the white woman in distress until the husband is found. She is not able to prevent the ultimate disaster where the white woman is victimized precisely through her womanhood, but she herself is saved because as a black woman she is excluded from that definition of womanhood.

Black feminist critics claim that it is the mysti- fication of sexual relations between white men and black women that has given rise to the stereotype of the black whore. We find two important incidents of this kind in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette's father is said to have had several children by his black slaves; one of these children, Daniel Cosway, approaches Rochester with fatal information about the Cosway family. This he does in revenge for not having received proper recognition as one of the family. Daniel's mother is described as a liar, someone who tempted Mr Cosway and then tried to trick him into taking responsibility for her son.

The second incident concerns Rochester and the servant girl Amélie on the honeymoon island. Amélie destroys what is left between Rochester and Antoinette by seducing Rochester at a crucial moment. She is scheming and finally manages to take advantage of the white man so that she can start a new life with the money she gets from him; at the same time, it is the "white cockroach" that she is willing to harm most ruthlessly. Thus we have the white mistress, victimized by the white servant woman who takes advantage of the white master and husband. Christophine takes the side of the white mistress when she tells Rochester, "'Why you don't take that worthless good-for-nothing girl somewhere else? But she love money like you love money—must be why you come together. Like goes to like.'"

In both these incidents the victim is the white wife. The first incident causes suffering for Antoinette's mother and later destroys Antoinette's life; the second incident brings a great deal of pain to Antoinette and constitutes a turning point in her life. The black women are not seen to suffer; even the white men are to some extent victims of their

own confusion caused by the cunning of the black women. The mammy turns against the whore in defending the white mistress. The identification of black with sexual power and white with innocent confusion is further underlined through the description of Antoinette's mother: mad and abandoned, being sexually abused by her black warden while his female mate watches them, smiling maliciously.

Significantly, Rochester is the narrator of Part Two of the novel, which describes his encounters with Daniel Cosway and Amélie. In this way his confusion and fear of the island, his desire for black women, and his guilt are all narrated from his point of view. This narrative also contains the possibility of blackness for Antoinette but here blackness is given an entirely new meaning. When Daniel Cosway visits Rochester he makes a clear link between sexual promiscuity and blackness: "'Give my love to your wife—my sister,' he called after me venomously. 'You are not the first to kiss her pretty face. Pretty face, soft skin, pretty colour-not yellow like me. But my sister just the same.'" Shortly afterwards, Rochester looks at Antoinette and thinks that she looks very much like Amélie. As Lee Erwin points out,

[i]f Antoinette's racial imagination is metaphoric, based upon the wished-for substitution of one term for another, Rochester's is metonymic, constantly expressing itself as a perception of contamination from contiguity, one racial term slipping or "leaking" into another through sheer proximity, obsessively perceived as sexual.

Antoinette's own wish to be part of the black people is thus supported by Rochester's fears. Rochester's narrative gives the British point of view. This point of view starts in *Jane Eyre* and we know that what really happens next is that Antoinette goes mad and has to be incarcerated in the attic of Thornfield Hall. We also know that she will set fire to the house, kill herself, and blind Rochester. By giving Rochester a voice in the narrative, Rhys shows that this is only his perception of events. If we complement the black feminist insight about race and gender construction with analyses of nineteenth-century British definitions of womanhood, we find that sexual desire and womanhood are defined as mutually exclusive. Furthermore, Victorian psychiatrists established a link between mental illness in women and the female reproductive system. Elaine Showalter has studied these discussions and concludes that

[i]n contrast to the rather vague and uncertain concepts of insanity in general which Victorian psychiatry produced, theories of female insanity were specifi- cally and confidentially linked to the biological crises of the female life cyle—puberty, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause—during which the mind would be weakened and the symptoms of insanity might emerge.

In Victorian discussions, female sexuality exists as a symptom of mental illness. In 1857, William Acton found sexual desire in women only among low and immoral women whom he encountered in the divorce courts and the lunatic asylum (Hellerstein). Not surprisingly, Charlotte Brontë describes her madwoman very much in accordance with the beliefs and attitudes of her time. *Jane Eyre* provides clear indications that Rochester fears Bertha's sexuality: "Bertha Mason, the true daugther of an infamous mother, dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man

bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste." In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys takes up this element but places it within Rochester's narrative. His encounters with the island, Amélie, Daniel Cosway, and finally Christophine's love-potion are described as a powerful illicit force, at once tempting and dangerous. The only escape is to project all the forbidden feelings onto Antoinette and define her as mad because of these feelings: "She'll loosen her black hair, and laugh and coax and flatter (a mad girl. She'll not care who she's loving.) She'll moan and cry and give herself as no sane woman would— or could. *Or could*." Rochester experiences only a brief conflict about the reality of his vision. He is aware of all that he has to give up in order to keep his view of the world intact.

I shall never understand why, suddenly, bewilderingly, I was certain that everything I had imagined to be truth was false. False. Only the magic and the dream are true—all the rest's a lie. Let it go. Here is the secret. Here.

In Antoinette's narrative, which continues in Part Three and gives the final meaning to the events taking place in Part One, the alternative vision is expressed. The vision can only exist if the reality of England and the meaning of being a white woman in that context is denied. An identification with blackness is established as the only possible escape. In Part One, the burning of the great house at Coulibri is a final and clear manifestation of the hostility of the black people towards their oppressors. Antoinette's narrative is shaped around this event, in that everything that took place before it is reinterpreted and thus turns into premonitions. Everything that happened after the event is seen as resulting from this. The dead horse, poisoned by the black people, is one of the first signs of hostility. "Now we are marooned." is the reaction of Antoinette's mother. Mary Lou Emery argues that this term, referring to the Maroon communities of escaped slaves, might suggest for Antoinette a possible way out of the necessity of getting married and living the life of a white lady.

Inadvertently Annette alludes to places in the island's history that Antoinette might inhabit and the wild unexplored parts of the island that may help her to survive. And she suggests possible kinship with Christophine, who, as an obeah woman, practices a magic that enables survival in dangerous and hostile environments.

When the black people burn the house and it becomes clear that white and black are irreconcilable, Antoinette chooses sides: she runs back to her black friend Tia.

As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. Not. When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it.

Here Antoinette still believes that her racial identity is simply a matter of choice, that through an act of will she can make herself belong to the black community. The rejection by Tia places Antoinette firmly within the white community and thus secures her white female identity. Significantly, Antoinette's Aunt Cora later refers to the wound inflicted by Tia in this way: "That is healing very nicely. It won't spoil you on your wedding day." The wound in- flicted through the separation of white from black did not only not spoil her on

her wedding day, it was in fact a necessary prerequisite for her wedding with a British gentleman. Without that separation she would not have been able to escape the risk of 'growing up worthless.'

The feeling of impending danger is momentarily relieved at the convent. The convent represents a world where definitions of womanhood are suspended and where the necessity of counteracting black hostility and fighting for a place among the black people is no longer present. As soon as Antoinette is visited by Mr Mason the security vanishes.

It may have been the way he smiled, but again a feeling of dismay, sadness, loss, almost choked me. This time I did not let him see it.It was like that morning when I found the dead horse. Say nothing and it may not be true.But they all knew at the convent. The girls were very curious but I would not answer their questions and for the first time I resented the nuns' cheerful faces.They are safe. How can they know what it can be like *outside?*

Here Antoinette has her dream for the second time. This time the dream contains even more clearly the fear of sexual violation but also an active determination not to fight or try to escape. It is significant that the visit by Mr Mason is a premonition equal to the incident of the dead horse. In this way, fear of sexual violation is linked to the rejection by Tia: Antoinette is not a black person; thus she cannot escape what lies in store for all white women.

The theme of the burning of the Great House is repeated in the third part of the novel when Antoinette in a dream sets fire to Rochester's mansion in England. This dream is described by Antoinette when she has already lost her sanity and her ability to communicate her view of the world to other people. We arrive, then, back at *Jane Eyre*, from a world of relative clarity and sanity to a world of madness. This is the result of the passage across the Sargasso Sea and the other side of *Jane Eyre*. Rhys thus invites a comparison between Antoinette's situation and that of the slaves. Antoinette is captured, sold, given a new name, transported across the sea, and locked up. She does, however, offer passive resistance; the love-potion prepared by Christophine makes Rochester think he has been poisoned. Antoinette also resists in that she refuses her new identity. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Bertha remains Antoinette. For her to keep this identify she is compelled to remember and to perform an important task, something which she has seen coming to her ever since the house at Coulibri was burned.

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?

Shortly afterwards, Antoinette has her dream for the third time. Now the dream is clear; she knows why she was brought to England. Antoinette is far from a passive victim. She is determined to fulfil her mission even though its significance lies entirely in the West

Indies of her childhood. The confrontation with her mirror image in the hall brings her great confusion, and it is only by escaping that image that she can hold on to the significance of her dream. She calls to Christophine for help and miraculously escapes "the ghost" in the mirror.

The struggle for "Antoinette" against "Bertha" continues through the last part of the novel. "Antoinette" is connected to the island and the power of Christophine's obeah, whereas Rochester's attempts to turn her into a Victorian woman is in Part Two rejected by Antoinette as just another form of obeah. In the dream, Antoinette sees the Coulibri of her childhood in the red sky:

I saw my doll's house and the books and the picture of the Miller's Daughter. 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! The wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings. It might bear me up, I thought, if I jumped to those hard stones. But 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! All this I saw and heard in a fraction of a second. And the sky so red. Someone screamed and I thought, *Why did I scream?* I called "Tia!" and jumped and woke.

The dream finally shows her what she is supposed to do: "Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do." The second burning implies liberation and fulfillment and this meaning it derives by refusing the English context. At the event at Coulibri the whole family was saved by their parrot, which frightened the superstitious black people when it was falling off the railing with its clipped wings alight. Antoinette embodies the burning parrot when she jumps down from the battlement at Thornfield Hall, her hair aflame. As Wilson Harris suggests, Rhys here evokes the black legend of flying to freedom. In Virginia Hamilton's retelling of the legend "The People Could Fly" some slaves knew how to fly already in Africa but had to shed their wings on the slave ship. They thus looked the same as all other slaves but owned the secret knowledge and flew away to freedom when the situation in the fields became unbearable. The Master "said it was a lie, a trick of the light" (Hamilton). Rhys similarly invokes a secret knowledge which changes the meaning of her actions, a mission which will give her a new identity outside of that prescribed for her by patriarchal demands. The Master will always have his own interpretation of events, but within this frame Antoinette creates her own alternative.

It is finally the combination of both Rochester's and Antoinette's narratives that points towards blackness as the escape from white femininity. Lee Erwin sees Rochester's narrative as determinate in this respect: "The impossible desire evident in Antoinette's narrative, that is, to occupy a racial position not open to her, can only realize itself in the gaze of the Other, in an attempt to perform the impossible feat of seeing herself from the place from which she is seen." Antoinette's use of black strategies of resistance reinforces the meaning of blackness as freedom. In exploring the construction of a particular white female identity, Rhys denies the existence of systematic oppression of

black women. They, in turn, become "prisoners of another's desire" as the white Creole madwoman is set free.

Source: Maria Olaussen, "Jean Rhys's Construction of Blackness as Escape from White Femininity in 'Wide Sargasso Sea,'" in *ARIEL*, Vol. 24, No. 2, April, 1993, pp. 65-82.

Adaptations

Wide Sargasso Sea was adapted as a film in 1993 by Carol Angier, John Dugian, and Jan Sharpe. The Australian film stars Karina Lombard, Rachel Ward, Michael York, Nathaniel Parker, and Naomi Watts. The sexually explicit nature of the film earned it an NC-17 rating, but an edited Rrated version is also available through New Line Home Video.

The composer Gordon Crosse wrote a musical score called *Memories of Morning: A Monodrama for Mezzo-soprano and Orchestra* in 1973 that is loosely based on Rhys's novel. The score is available through Oxford University Press.

In 1996, Australian composer Brian Howard adapted *Wide Sargasso Sea* into a chamber opera.

Topics for Further Study

Rhys based her character Antoinette Cosway on Bertha Mason, the madwoman in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Compare the depictions of the two women.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* the black servants set fire to Coulibri after they learn that Mr. Mason is planning on importing workers from the East Indies. How did the diverse working population— Indian, Chinese, African-Caribbean, white Creole, and European —interact in the nineteenthcentury Caribbean?

Investigate the care of the mentally ill in the nineteenth century and compare their treatment to the way in which Annette Cosway Mason and Antoinette Cosway are treated.

Research the living conditions of emancipated slaves in Jamaica and/or Dominica. How accurately does Rhys describe their lives?

What Do I Read Next?

In Charlotte Bronte's 1847 novel *Jane Eyre*, Rhys found the inspiration for *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Jane Eyre* traces the travails of a poor English governess. In this novel, Bertha Antoinetta Mason appears fleetingly as a crazed Creole madwoman who threatens Jane Eyre's happiness.

The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands, Mary Seacole's 1857 autobiography. The Jamaican-born Seacole relates her life as a nurse in the West Indies, Central America, England, and the Crimea. This woman of mixed Scottish and African ancestry describes her rise to fame as a celebrated nurse as well as the racial prejudice she encountered along the way.

In her 1934 novel, *Voyage in the Dark,* Rhys tells the story of Anna Morgan, a white West Indian woman who lives in England. Often dreaming of home and feeling alienated by life in England, Anna becomes an alcoholic prostitute.

In her posthumously published *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography* (1979), Rhys recollects her Dominican childhood and reflects on the tensions that divided blacks from whites.

"Jean Rhys" is Caribbean writer Derek Walcott's 1981 poetic tribute to the author. Walcott imaginatively recreates how Rhys came to write *Wide Sargasso Sea* in this short poem.

In *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1985), Elaine Showalter discusses the diagnosis and treatment of mentally ill women in England. She includes an analysis of *Jane Eyre*'s Bertha Mason, and describes the historical background of such a character.

Further Study

Ramchand, Kenneth, "*Wide Sargasso Sea,*" in *Critical Perspectives on Jean Rhys,* edited by Pierrette M. Frickey, Three Continents Press, 1990.

Ramchand argues that *Wide Sargasso Sea* truly is a West Indian novel. However, he believes that "to say a novel is West Indian is not to deny its accessibility to a non-West Indian, nor indeed to deny the validity of a non-West Indian's reading."

Sternlicht, Sanford, *Jean Rhys, Twayne,* 1997.

This critical biography of Jean Rhys provides information on Rhys's life as well as an analysis of each of her works. The chapter on *Wide Sargasso Sea* describes the novel's major themes.

Thomas, Sue, *The Worlding of Jean Rhys,* Greenwood Press, 1999.

In this book, Thomas explains that she "wanted to begin to understand Rhys's locations, the manner in which she situates her authorial and narrative voices politically and ethically in relation to the worlds of her fiction and autobiographical writing."

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LDNfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and

undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LDNfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LDNfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LDNfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LDNfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LDNfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literature of Developing Nations for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literature of Developing Nations for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literature of Developing Nations for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LDNfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LDNfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literature of Developing Nations for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literature of Developing Nations for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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