

# Wide Sargasso Sea

by  
Jean Rhys



**B**orn in 1890 in Roseau, Dominica, the West Indies, Jean Rhys was of mixed parentage. Her father, Dr. William Rhys, was a Welshman, and her mother, Minna Williams, was a Creole. In 1907, Rhys left Dominica to attend the Perse School in Cambridge, England, but spent only one term there; the following year, she entered the Academy of Dramatic Art to study acting, but left to join a chorus line. In 1919, after a sporadic theatrical career and several failed relationships, Rhys left England to marry Jean Lenglet, a French-Dutch songwriter and journalist; the pair lived on the European Continent. In 1923, however, Lenglet was arrested on a charge of illegal entry into France and extradited to Holland. Rhys returned to England alone, where she began a career as a writer, publishing her first book, *The Left Bank and Other Stories* (1927). More works followed: the semi-autobiographical *Postures* (called *Quartet* in the United States; 1928); *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1930); *Voyage in the Dark* (1934); and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939). Divorced from Lenglet in 1932, Rhys married two more times: first to Leslie Tilden Smith, a publisher's reader, who died in 1945, then to Max Hamer, a retired naval officer, who died in 1964. With Hamer, Rhys lived a retired life in Europe, Cornwall, and, finally, Devon. Returning to the literary scene in 1966, she garnered critical acclaim with *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which tells the story of a minor character in Charlotte Brontë's classic novel *Jane Eyre* (also in *Literature and Its Times*). This minor character is the insane first wife

## THE LITERARY WORK

A novel set in the British West Indies—especially Jamaica and the Windward Islands—and England during the mid-nineteenth century; published in 1966.

## SYNOPSIS

A young Creole woman marries an English gentleman but racial prejudices and his infidelity take their toll on her sanity.

of the classic's main male figure, Edward Rochester. *Wide Sargasso Sea* was especially praised for its portrayal of a doomed interracial romance between a Creole woman and a white Englishman. In giving it and the marginalized woman the leading role, Rhys's novel shows a faithfulness to preoccupations of her own volatile times.

## *Events in History at the Time the Novel Takes Place*

**The British West Indies—an overview.** At the time of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jamaica and the Windward Islands (Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Grenada, and the Grenadines) were governed by the British. Spain had been first among the European nations to gain a foothold in the New World in the late fifteenth century. Many of the Caribbean islands, including Jamaica, Trinidad,

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and Hispaniola, were settled by the Spanish in the wake of Christopher Columbus’s voyages of exploration. However, Spain’s dominance as a world power waned in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, allowing other nations—England, France, and the Netherlands—to acquire territories in the Americas and the Caribbean. The British settled Barbados in 1625, then seized Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655. Initially regarded as an inferior acquisition—a poor consolation for Britain’s failure to capture Hispaniola or Cuba—Jamaica became the most important of Britain’s Caribbean colonies by 1750.

Jamaica’s rise to prominence was mainly attributable to two factors: the establishment of sugar plantations and the importation of African slaves to work those plantations. Originally, British colonists in the Caribbean had cultivated tobacco—a popular New World crop. Caribbean tobacco, however, could not compete in quality or quantity with that produced elsewhere, necessitating the introduction of sugar cane. During the 1700s, the British colonies in the Caribbean gave themselves over to the production of sugar, which became virtually the only crop. Large plantations requiring vast tracts of land and amounts of capital replaced the small farms that had produced cotton and tobacco. Jamaica, which possessed abundant land and an ideal climate, had become the greatest sugar producer in the British Empire by 1750, a distinc-

tion it retained until the 1830s, when the Emancipation Act of 1833 freed the slaves.

As an inevitable result of the thriving sugar industry, the transatlantic slave trade increased. Between 1700 and 1810 the number of slaves brought to the New World more than tripled, and between 1811 and 1830, about 32,000 slaves per year were imported. An estimated 17 percent of 10 million Africans brought to the Americas were sent to the British Caribbean (Meditz and Hanratty, p. 18). While the whites held a superior social position and all the real power on the islands, the population of the British West Indies became predominantly black. The earliest white colonists had aspired to recreate British society in the West Indies by bringing their law, political institutions, and religion to the tropics, but the dream of making the West Indies a culturally British part of the world never materialized. Instead the sugar industry established a plantation society, in which a white minority presided over a nonwhite majority: “In the early nineteenth century, whites constituted less than 5 percent of the total population of Jamaica, Grenada, Nevis, St. Vincent, and Tabago and less than 10 percent of the population of Angulla, Montserrat, St. Kitts, St. Lucia, and the Virgin Islands” (Meditz and Hanratty, p. 18).

Not surprisingly, British Caribbean society was divided along lines of class, caste, and color. The three main divisions consisted of free white persons, free nonwhite persons, and slaves. Subdivisions existed even within those categories—successful, upper-class whites who owned thriving plantations and numerous slaves were considered superior to white servants, day laborers, and even independent farmers. Socially, free nonwhites—a group that originated from miscegenation between European masters and African slaves—ranked below even the poor whites, but many, especially those who had been free for generations, had made places for themselves as artisans, merchants, and even planters and slave owners. The degree of success and acceptance that free nonwhites found, however, often depended to a large degree on skin color; nonwhites with fairer complexions usually had an advantage over those with darker complexions. Though more numerous than any other group, slaves occupied the lowest position in Caribbean society. In 1834 the racial breakdown in Jamaica alone was 20,000 whites, 46,000 free nonwhites, and 310,000 slaves out of an estimated 376,000 people (Rogozinski, p. 114). The inequities of a plantation society with such a lop-

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sided population come to the fore in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Continually explored in the novel are the ongoing tensions between whites, non-whites, and slaves, especially after the emancipation of the slaves, when the fortunes of the Cosway family decline.

**Emancipation of slaves in the British colonies.** During the 1780s movements to abolish slavery began to take shape in Britain. An increasing number of Europeans, led by intellectuals and evangelists, came to believe that slavery was unjust, immoral, and evil. Some of them became activists, forming groups like the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade (1787), which pressed the British government, submitting petitions against the slave trade. William Wilberforce, a wealthy and influential politician, became a prominent spokesperson for the abolitionists. He initiated a series of parliamentary inquiries that exposed the horrors and inhumanities of the slave trade, including the use of shackles, thumb-screws, and branding irons on the flesh of the human cargo carried by slave ships.

Despite strong resistance from several quarters, the anti-slavery movement gained momentum during the early nineteenth century. In 1807 Parliament abolished the slave trade, effective as of March 1, 1808. Abolitionists continued to push for the end of slavery in the colonies altogether. Bolstering their efforts was a series of slave re-

volts, which erupted on all the British islands, including Barbados and Jamaica. The Jamaican uprising, which took place in December 1831, was especially violent: more than 60,000 slaves participated in the revolt, which covered an area of some 750 square miles. By the time British troops and militia suppressed the rebellion at the end of January 1832, 540 slaves and 14 whites had died, and over 200 sugar plantations had been burned and pillaged. The resulting outrage—over the revolt and its suppression—was a contributing factor to the passage of the Abolition Act of 1833, which ended slavery in the British Empire as of August 1834. To ease the transition, Parliament introduced a system by which farm laborers had to work as “apprentices” for their former masters until 1840. But the system proved too unwieldy to implement, so Parliament ended it two years early. On August 1, 1838, full emancipation took place, freeing an estimated 750,000 slaves in the British colonies.

Unprepared for emancipation, planters in the British Caribbean suffered an immediate reversal of fortune. One historian speaks of an unfortunate confluence of circumstances:

Emancipation sharply increased a planter’s costs precisely as his income from the harvest was dropping. When prices fell by half—as they did between 1840 and 1848—planters had to double their output merely to stay even. But cane

production fell after emancipation—by 50 percent on Jamaica—as the former slaves fled from the harsh routines of field labor. Many plantations operated at a loss, and government revenues plummeted.

(Rogozinski, p. 185)

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the Cosway family is caught in the middle of this economic and racial maelstrom. The death of Mr. Cosway and the emancipation of the slaves in 1838 have led to the ruin of the family plantation. The local blacks, now free, jeer at the widowed Mrs. Cosway as she becomes increasingly poor and shabby; her daughter, Antoinette, is similarly mocked and called a “white cockroach” by black children (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 23). Antoinette’s sometime playmate, Tia, tells her, “Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger” (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 24).

### THE CREOLES: RACE OR CULTURE?



The term “Creole” has taken on various meanings over the years. Coming into widespread use around the sixteenth century, in the West Indies it first referred to descendants of French, Spanish, or Portuguese settlers, then came to refer to the descendants of all kinds of Europeans living in the West Indies and of Africans too. The term came to imply some degree of mixed-race ancestry. Rhys’s novel uses “Creole” this way, to imply mixed blood ancestry—with all the tensions such a designation might evoke among the nineteenth-century British. Like other Europeans, the British harbored fears of becoming “creolized” by living in the colonies, that is, of acquiring the characteristics, even the appearance, of colored peoples by physical immersion in their culture. These fears are manifest in the character of the sheltered white Englishman, Rochester, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. To Rochester, his bride, Antoinette Cosway, is a Creole first and a woman second. He distrusts her beauty, even as he is drawn to it, most obviously because it is different from the purely European beauty he has been brought up to admire, and more subtly because his attraction to her threatens to “taint” him.

**Marriage and property rights.** During the first half of the nineteenth century, women living within the British Empire had few property rights, especially after marriage. However wealthy or well situated a woman might be as a

spinster, her entire situation changed once she became a wife. The law recognized only one person in the marriage: the husband. Married women had no independent legal existence; everything they owned, earned, or inherited belonged to their husbands. Wives did not even have the right to sign contracts, make wills, or spend their own income. Even the children born of marriage were considered the property of the fathers, who could control and educate them as they saw fit.

Some brides’ families tried to arrange safeguards before the marriages took place. Well-to-do fathers and guardians often insisted on a marriage settlement, a type of prenuptial agreement that protected the interests of their daughters and wards. Before the wedding, a bridegroom would have to sign a deed of settlement, a contract that set aside a sum of money for his wife as her personal property. Marriage settlements ensured that wives would have some independent income, especially if their husbands died or went bankrupt; a husband could not appropriate his wife’s settlement money to pay his debts. Settlements were distinct from dowries, the money or property brought by the bride from her family into the marriage. Although some families made legal arrangements to protect the bride’s dowry, an unscrupulous husband could seize control and spend it for his own purposes.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette finds herself at the mercy of her new husband, not least because of her lack of property rights. Her stepbrother, Richard Mason, who arranges her marriage to Edward Rochester, fails to provide for her future security. No settlements are made on her behalf and Antoinette’s large dowry passes into Rochester’s hands the moment they are married. The unhappy bride explains to her old nurse, Christophine, “And you must understand I am not rich now. I have no money of my own at all, everything I had belongs to him. . . . That is English law” (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 110).

### *The Novel in Focus*

**The plot.** *Wide Sargasso Sea* is divided into three parts. The first is the childhood narrative of Antoinette Cosway, a young Creole girl living on the impoverished Jamaican estate of Coulibri, with her widowed mother, Annette, and her mentally and physically enfeebled brother, Pierre. Annette, who originally came from Martinique, is rejected alike by local whites and by the recently freed black slaves. Lacking a male

protector, the Cosways lead an increasingly poor and shabby existence; Annette devotes most of her energies to caring for the sickly Pierre, while Antoinette is left to the care of her devoted black nurse, Christophine. Rejected by other children, Antoinette runs wild in the Jamaican rainforest, deriving some comfort from her untamed surroundings. With Christophine's help, she makes friends with a little black girl named Tia, though the friendship is not unmarked by feelings of jealousy and rivalry. One day, after a quarrel, Tia switches clothes with Antoinette, taking the latter's newly laundered dress and leaving her own shabbier one behind. Forced to don Tia's dress, Antoinette returns home to find her mother entertaining several wealthy white guests, who laugh at the child's tattered appearance. That night, Antoinette dreams she is walking in the forest with someone who hates her and wakes in distress, feeling as though her world is changing irrevocably.

Some time later, Annette captivates and marries Mr. Mason, a wealthy English planter with properties in Trinidad. Antoinette, serving as bridesmaid, hears unkind whispers about her family from the wedding guests and fears for her mother's happiness. At first, matters seem to improve at Coulibri, at least materially. Mason repairs the estate, buys new furniture, and hires more servants, but fails to perceive how the family's new prosperity angers the natives. Annette vainly pleads with Mason to sell Coulibri and let them settle elsewhere.

Finally, the local blacks form a mob that attacks and burns the estate, killing Pierre and driving Annette into madness. Antoinette does not escape unharmed. Her former friend Tia throws a stone at her, delivering a blow to her head. On recovering several weeks later, Antoinette learns that Pierre has died and her mother has been sent away to the country. Antoinette recalls her mother's screams and her threats to kill Mr. Mason but keeps the memories to herself. Later Antoinette visits her mother at her new abode, only to be rejected by her when she does not see Pierre there too.

Antoinette is sent to live in a convent school in the part of Jamaica known as Spanish Town. Walking to the convent, she is taunted by two native children but defended by her mixed-blood cousin, Alexander Cosway, for whom she forms a lasting affection. At the convent, Antoinette finds a refuge and begins to make friends. She sees little of her stepfather during this period; after she turns 17, however, Mason visits to tell her he

wishes to arrange a secure future for her. Disturbed by the sense of impending change, Antoinette again has the nightmare of walking with someone who hates her, but this time she sees that her companion in the dream is a man who brings her to an enclosed garden and seems to want to shut her away behind stone walls. As before, she awakes distraught. One of the nuns tries to console her with a cup of hot chocolate, but the drink reminds Antoinette of her mother's funeral the previous year, saddening her further. Still unsettled, she returns to her bed in the dormitory.

### THE YOUNGER SON'S PORTION



The ancient system known as primogeniture ensured that, among landed upper-class British families, the bulk of the property was left—by the father—to the eldest son. Unless the father made provision for them, younger sons usually had to shift for themselves. Most tried to enter a respectable profession, such as the church, the army, the navy, or the law. Others sought wealthy wives, supposing prospective brides were willing to ally themselves with younger sons who could only inherit if their elder brothers died. As a youngest son with few prospects, Rochester grudgingly consents to marriage with a Creole heiress who has a dowry of 30,000 pounds, equivalent to \$600,000 or more in the United States today. However, after the deaths of his father and elder brother, Rochester inherits the family money and property, by which time his mad wife has become an embarrassment to him.

The novel's second part, which begins some time later, is narrated by Edward Rochester, Antoinette's new husband, who is also the younger son of a prominent English family.

Rochester's father and elder brother, along with Mr. Mason's son Richard, have arranged his marriage to Antoinette, now a considerable heiress, thanks to the dowry settled on by her stepfather, Mr. Mason. The young couple are honeymooning on one of the Windward Islands at Granbois, a small estate formerly belonging to Antoinette's mother. Recently recovered from fever, Rochester chafes at his situation, though he feels a reluctant attraction to his bride. Thinking back to the days before the wedding, Rochester remembers that Antoinette had also expressed doubts about going through with the ceremony; not wanting to return home as a jilted

suitor, Rochester had persuaded her with kisses and reassurances of “peace, happiness, safety” (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 79). Now Rochester’s resentments and misgivings resurface; he finds himself overwhelmed by the vividness and mystery of the West Indies, especially as personified in his bride. For her part, Antoinette, already in love with her husband, tries to bridge the cultural and emotional gap, revealing memories of her childhood to him. Rochester partly responds to her need for intimacy, and they share a night of happiness.

The chasm soon reopens, however; Rochester complains about Antoinette’s familiarity with the native servants at Granbois, especially her old nurse, Christophine. Antoinette is bewildered and amused by her husband’s peevishness. For a time, the newlyweds continue to find harmony in the marriage bed, though Rochester denies to himself that he feels anything more than lust for his wife. But matters deteriorate when Rochester starts receiving letters from a local mulatto who calls himself Daniel Cosway and claims to be Antoinette’s half-brother, by her slaveowner father. Daniel also claims that there is “bad blood” in Antoinette’s family, that her mother was a madwoman, and Antoinette is destined to become one too. Infected by Daniel’s malice, Rochester becomes further estranged from his wife and stops sleeping with her. Wandering through the rainforest in distress over what he has learned, Rochester becomes lost and needs the help of a manservant to get back to Granbois safely.

Meanwhile, Antoinette feels increasingly isolated by the coldness of her husband, the malice of her mulatto maid Amelie, and even the defection of Christophine, who leaves Granbois rather than become a bone of contention between the couple. Unaware of Daniel’s letters and their effect on her husband, Antoinette visits Christophine in the latter’s own home, confides in her about her marital woes, and asks how she might regain her husband’s love. Rochester, says Antoinette, does not even call her by her given name anymore. Instead he addresses her as Bertha to separate her from her mother and her mother’s heritage. Christophine advises her to leave Rochester, arguing “When man don’t love you, more you try, more he hate you, man like that. If you love them they treat you bad, if you don’t love them they after you night and day bothering your soul case out” (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 109). Antoinette refuses to abandon her husband, instead pleading for a love potion that will win back his affections. Although Christophine

has some reputation as a practitioner of obeah, she is reluctant to comply. Christophine warns Antoinette that Rochester may hate her even more afterwards. She also suggests that Antoinette tell Rochester the truth about the insanity in her family before anyone can poison his mind against her. Ultimately, Christophine gives Antoinette the potion, not for payment but for the latter’s promise to speak to her husband.

Rochester’s narrative resumes as he receives a second letter from Daniel, containing more of the same accusations against Antoinette’s family. At Amelie’s suggestion, Rochester decides to visit Daniel at his home in the lower village; the embittered mulatto insists that everything in his letters is true, recounting how he visited Coulibri when Mr. Cosway was alive and how the old man denied paternity and drove Daniel off his property. Although Daniel received some monetary compensation from Cosway, he considered it meager compared to what Cosway gave his acknowledged son, Alexander, and Alexander’s son, Sandi (Antoinette’s cousin and protector on her first day at the convent-school). Besides reiterating his story about Antoinette’s “bad blood,” Daniel insinuates that she and Sandi were lovers. Rochester listens to these stories with mounting disgust, then storms from the house when Daniel demands 500 pounds for his silence.

Back at Granbois, hearing at last of Daniel’s letters, Antoinette dismisses them as lies, rejects Daniel’s claim to kinship, and tells Rochester her side of the story. She speaks of her family’s poverty, her mother’s remarriage, and the fire at Coulibri that killed her brother and caused her mother’s insanity. Although Rochester has privately decided to believe Daniel’s story, he is stirred by Antoinette’s distress and by the aphrodisiac she has secretly placed in the wine. Still insisting on calling her Bertha, Rochester takes her to bed.

On awakening the next morning, Rochester feels ill and soon discovers that Antoinette has drugged him. As Christophine predicted, his revulsion towards his wife revives and he revenges himself on her by having sex with the maid Amelie just outside the bedroom he shares with Antoinette. Afterwards, Rochester finds Amelie less attractive than before, and Amelie herself now pities her mistress and wishes only to leave Granbois; she takes Rochester’s money and departs. Antoinette discovers Rochester’s infidelity; heartbroken, she drowns her sorrows in drink, then lashes out at her husband, claiming to hate him for his insult to her and for the way he has

polluted Granbois, one of the few places she loved. Christophine arrives to console her distraught mistress; later, Rochester and Christophine themselves face off, the native woman berating the Englishman for his crimes against his wife:

Everybody know that you marry her for her money and you take it all. And then you want to break her up, because you jealous of her. She is more better than you, she have better blood in her and she don't care for money—it's nothing for her. . . . You fool the girl. You make her think you can't see the sun for looking at her.

(*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 152)

Christophine's accusations do not impress Rochester; nor does he listen to what she has to say about Daniel's being a liar or Antoinette's still loving him and needing his love to survive. Instead, Rochester orders Christophine from the house, threatening to have her arrested for giving Antoinette the drugs used on him. Already imprisoned once for practicing obeah, Christophine departs, though not without denouncing Rochester one last time as unworthy of Antoinette.

Bitter, disillusioned, and vengeful, Rochester resolves to make Antoinette pay for all his disappointments in the marriage. He plans to take her away from Granbois and back to Jamaica. On the morning of their departure, he is tempted to ask Antoinette's forgiveness and attempt to make a fresh start with her, but her enduring hatred strengthens his own and they remain coldly estranged.

The third part of *Wide Sargasso Sea* takes place some years later as Grace Poole, a servant at Thornfield Hall in England, relates how Rochester inherited the family property after the deaths of his father and brother. On Rochester's orders, Antoinette was locked up in an attic of the house, tended only by Grace Poole and another servant. Grace notices how the West Indian woman seems to live in her own world; nonetheless, the servant does not dare to turn her back on her charge.

Antoinette then takes up the narrative; she cannot remember where she is, how long she has been in the attic, nor why she has been brought there, but she is always cold and hoping for the chance to escape. She notices that Grace drinks heavily. One morning, Antoinette wakes up feeling stiff and sore; Grace informs her that her stepbrother, Richard Mason, visited the night before and Antoinette attacked him with a knife. On being reminded of the encounter, Antoinette can only recall that Richard did not recognize her. Memo-

ries of the West Indies, including an affectionate parting from her cousin Sandi, haunt her; she asks Grace for the red dress she used to wear in the islands. Holding the dress up to herself, Antoinette imagines fire spreading across the room.

That night, Antoinette has the dream that has plagued her twice before, but now she knows how it ends. In her dream, she sees herself taking the keys from the sleeping Grace, slipping out of the attic to wander through Thornfield Hall, which she sets afire by knocking over some candles. Running up to the roof to escape the

### OBEAH—FORBIDDEN MAGIC



Several references are made in *Wide Sargasso Sea* to obeah, the shamanic folk religion practice by African slaves in Jamaica. Conjurers or "obeah men" and "obeah women" were hired to curse or do harm to enemies (including whites), although they might also be called upon to heal and work charms of protection or love. Obeah practitioners were said to use such materials as blood (human or animal), broken bottles, eggshells, grave dirt, and rum in their spells. While white slave owners usually dismissed obeah as idle superstition, some accused obeah men of cursing and poisoning whites. Outlawed in Jamaica in 1760, obeah continued to be practiced in secret. In the novel, Christophine, Antoinette's old nurse, is an obeah woman, though she takes care not to be caught practicing her craft, especially after having been jailed for it before. She tries to dissuade Antoinette from using obeah to win back Rochester's love, warning her former charge that the Englishman will hate her if he discovers the spell cast on him. Sadly, her prediction proves all too accurate; obeah becomes yet another contributing factor to the widening gap of cultural misunderstanding between Antoinette and Rochester.

heat of the blaze, Antoinette sees her life in Jamaica flashing before her. She hears a man calling for "Bertha" but looking down from the battlements, she sees the pool at Coulibri and Tia beckoning to her. Antoinette jumps down to join her friend, and wakes up in the attic again. Grace also awakens but Antoinette feigns sleep until the servant is snoring again. Knowing now what she must do, Antoinette steals Grace's keys and escapes from the attic in earnest. The novel ends as she slips down the passage with a candle, planning to turn her dreams into reality.

**Anatomy of a madwoman.** Throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the threat of madness hovers over Antoinette and her family like a storm cloud, undermining whatever security or happiness they try to achieve. Pierre, Antoinette's brother, is born with apparent physical and mental handicaps; Annette, her mother, suffers a permanent breakdown after Pierre's death; and Antoinette ends her own days as a madwoman confined in the attic of her estranged husband's ancestral home.

Rhys, however, allows for ambiguity in her depiction of madness within the Cosway family. Two supporting characters—one malevolent, one benign—present differing viewpoints on the cause of the Cosways' insanity. Daniel, the jealous mulatto who claims to be Antoinette's half-brother, informs Rochester that old Cosway “die raving like his father before him” and that Annette succumbed to “that madness that is in her, and in all these white Creoles” (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 96). Daniel predicts that Antoinette will end up as both her parents did because of “the bad blood she have from both sides” (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 97). By contrast, Christophine, Antoinette's nurse, offers a more sympathetic explanation for what happened to Annette: “They drive her to it. When she lose her son she lose herself for a while and they shut her away. They tell her she is mad, they act like she is mad. . . . In the end—mad I don't know—she give up, she care for nothing” (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 157). Christophine then accuses Rochester of trying to do the same thing to Antoinette that Mr. Mason had done to Antoinette's mother: “You want her money but you don't want her. It is in your mind to pretend she is mad. I know it. The doctors say what you want them to say” (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 160). To the end, Rhys seems to leave it up to the reader to decide whether Antoinette's ultimate withdrawal into her own world is the result of hereditary insanity, exacerbated by drink and passion, or is her only defense against her husband's cruelty and betrayal.

The uncertainty surrounding Antoinette's condition reflects the complex attitudes towards mental illness during the period in which *Wide Sargasso Sea* takes place. Nineteenth-century Britain witnessed significant changes in the care of the insane. Early in the century, doctors treated the mentally ill (who were often confined in madhouses) with purges, blisters, and bleedings. The belief was that such methods rendered their patients docile and easier to manage. Later, however, with the establishment of private asylums, which offered improved living conditions,

inmates received less violent and more humane treatment from the doctors in charge. Patients were often permitted outdoor exercise in pleasant surroundings instead of being confined to cells or chained to walls.

Methods of treating the mentally ill continued in a state of flux, owing to the ongoing debate over what factors caused insanity. Early nineteenth-century writers on the subject tended to believe that madness resulted from some moral cause, such as the patient's lack of moderation or overindulgence in certain appetites. If the patient's will and conscience were appealed to, reasoned the writers, recovery from insanity was possible: “Habit, perseverance, the will and character may each constitute such a counteracting force” (Skultans, p. 2). Later writers, however, concentrated on other possible factors, including heredity, character, and gender. In 1828 George Man Burrows declared unequivocally, “Hereditary predisposition, therefore, is a prominent cause of mental derangement,” adding:

Sometimes, in a large family, we find all the forms and relations of insanity developed in a remarkable manner. Mania, melancholia, hypochondriasis, apoplexy, paralysis, epilepsy, convulsions, chorea, hysteria, &c., or high nervous irritability are often found to pervade one or the other of the same progeny [offspring].

(Burrows in Skultans, p. 204)

Women were considered especially vulnerable to hereditary insanity, possibly because of the multiple physical changes—puberty, menstruation, childbirth, and menopause—they would undergo during their sexual development. The nineteenth-century view of women as physically and emotionally fragile creatures also contributed to the belief that they were more susceptible to madness. Thomas Laycock wrote in 1840, “It is widely acknowledged that the affectability of the female sex has its counterpart in that of children, mental emotions and movements are excited in both with equal facility” (Laycock in Skultans, p. 4). The transmission of insanity between generations of women was therefore only to be expected. Writing in 1875, Andrew Wynter declared,

It is agreed by all alienist physicians, that girls are far more likely to inherit insanity from their mothers than from the other parent. . . . If the daughter of an insane mother very much resembles her in feature and in temperament, the chances are that she is more likely to inherit the disease than other daughters who are not so like.

(Wynter in Skultans, p. 235)



In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys continually emphasizes the resemblance between the doomed Antoinette and her equally star-crossed mother. “Tied to a lunatic for life,” says Rochester, “a drunken lying lunatic—gone her mother’s way” (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 164). The emphasis seems to reveal an awareness of these prevailing nineteenth-century theories, however little scientific merit they hold today.

**Sources and literary context.** Charlotte Brontë’s famous novel *Jane Eyre* was the primary source of inspiration for *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Indeed Rhys had long been fascinated with the enigmatic figure of the first Mrs. Rochester, as stated in an interview done for the *Guardian*:

The mad wife in *Jane Eyre* always interested me. I was convinced that Charlotte Brontë must have had something against the West Indies, and I was angry about it. Otherwise, why did she take a West Indian for that horrible lunatic, for that really dreadful creature? I hadn’t really formulated the idea of vindicating the mad woman in a novel but when I was rediscovered I was encouraged to do so.

(Rhys in Nebeker, p. 126)

Although *Wide Sargasso Sea* uses a historical rather than a contemporary setting, Rhys probably drew upon some of her personal experiences: her love of the West Indies, her sense of being caught between British and Caribbean cultures, her ambivalence toward West Indian blacks, and her various failed relationships and troubled marriages.

Like *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* might be best described as a Gothic romance, a type of prose fiction characterized by a gloomy, brooding atmosphere; an exotic, often medieval, setting; melodramatic or macabre events; and often a touch of the supernatural. The West Indian flavor of Rhys’s novel has prompted at least one reviewer, Walter Allen, to describe it as a “Caribbean Gothic” (Allen in Wolfe, p. 158). More recently, critics and literary scholars have cited *Wide Sargasso Sea* as an example of postcolonial literature because of its exploration of such themes as imperialism, racism, and the problematic relationship between colonized and colonizer.

### **Events in History at the Time the Novel was Written**

**Racial diversity in postcolonial Britain.** The publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966 coincided with a particularly turbulent period in

British history. In the years following the Second World War, Great Britain began to divest itself of its various colonies throughout the world. The process of decolonization, which took several decades, was to have major consequences upon the ethnic composition of Britain proper. In 1948 the British Nationality Act ascribed British citizenship to all subjects in the United Kingdom, its existing colonies, and even newly independent Commonwealth countries. That same year 492 Jamaicans arrived in Britain on the S.S. *Empire Windrush*, marking the start of large-scale immigration by blacks to Britain. About 66,000 West Indians immigrated to the United Kingdom during the period from 1948 to 1961.

### **TWO PERSPECTIVES ON THE LEADING MAN**



In her novel, *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë paints a very different picture of Rochester’s youthful marriage and first wife. Accused of attempted bigamy on his wedding day to Jane, Rochester admits the charge but furiously defends his actions:

Bigamy is an ugly word!—I meant, however, to be a bigamist; but fate has out-manoeuvred me, or Providence has checked me,—perhaps the last. I am little better than a devil at this moment; and, as my pastor there would tell me, deserve no doubt the sternest judgments of God, even to the quenchless fire and deathless worm. Gentlemen, my plan is broken up:—what this lawyer and his client say is true: I have been married, and the woman to whom I was married lives! You say you never heard of a Mrs. Rochester at the house up yonder, Wood; but I dare say you have many a time inclined your ear to gossip about the mysterious lunatic kept there under watch and ward. Some have whispered to you that she is my bastard half-sister: some, my cast-off mistress. I now inform you that she is my wife, whom I married fifteen years ago,—Bertha Mason by name . . . Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations? Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard!—as I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before. Bertha, like a dutiful child, copied her parent in both points. I had a charming partner—pure, wise, modest: you can fancy I was a happy man. I went through rich scenes! . . . I invite you all to come up to the house and visit Mrs. Poole’s patient, and my wife! You shall see what sort of a being I was cheated into espousing, and judge whether or not I had a right to break the compact, and seek sympathy with something at least human.

(Brontë, p. 256)

Between 1958 and 1968 an estimated one million immigrants—mostly from former colonies—entered England, bringing with them a variety of languages, cultures, and religions that were to change the ethnic makeup of the nation forever. Many British whites resented and feared these newcomers, harboring racist views of Asian and African immigrants. In 1958 race riots broke out in Nottingham and London. During the 1960s and 1970s the British government began to take a role in counteracting racial prejudice. In 1965 the Race Relations Act prohibited racial discrimination in public places, outlawed the promotion of racial hatred, and established a Race Relations Board to hear and mediate complaints.

Although *Wide Sargasso Sea* takes place in the nineteenth century, the racial tensions and prejudices that exist between characters in the novel may have heightened its relevance to modern readers. Rochester, as a white Englishman, seems especially prejudiced, distrusting the beauty of his Creole bride Antoinette because it is not an English or European beauty and objecting to her embracing and kissing her black West Indian nurse, Christophine: "I wouldn't hug and kiss them . . . I couldn't" (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 91). The morning after Rochester sleeps with Amelie, Antoinette's maid, he notices that "her skin was darker, her lips thicker than I had thought" (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 140).

**Reviews.** After Rhys's absence from the writing world, *Wide Sargasso Sea* was eagerly anticipated and warmly praised. British critics were positive on the whole. The reviewer for *The Spectator* called *Wide Sargasso Sea* "a magnificent comeback," while the *Times Literary Supplement* devoted a long essay to the novel, contending that it represents the culmination of the author's art.

American critics were similarly enthusiastic when *Wide Sargasso Sea* appeared in the United States the following summer. Walter Allen, writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, expressed some reservations as to whether *Wide*

*Sargasso Sea* could stand alone, without reference to *Jane Eyre*, but nonetheless called the novel "a considerable tour de force by any standards" and "a triumph of atmosphere" (Allen in Samudio, p. 1092). Similarly, Francis Hope wrote in the *New Statesman* that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is "a work of some power, and some poetry" (Hope in Samudio, p. 1092). Finally, Elizabeth Frazier, reviewer for *Library Journal*, declared that "Miss Rhys has brilliantly and imaginatively constructed the girlhood and the marriage of . . . the mysterious madwoman in *Jane Eyre*" and predicted that the number of Jean Rhys aficionados would be "considerably increased by this excellent tour de force" (Frazier in Samudio, p. 1092).

—Pamela S. Loy

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