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Wide Sargasso Sea

by

Jean Rhys

1966



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by D. L. Cassie

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The setting of *Wide Sargasso Sea* moves from the lush, tropical, natural world of the Caribbean to the bleak “Great House” in England. The novel is set first in Jamaica at an estate called Coulibri, near the.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Antoinette – She is the main character and narrator of Parts One and Three of the story. She is based on Charlotte Brontë’s character, Bertha, the madwoman who lives in Rochester’s attic in the novel *Jane Eyre*. Being a Creole girl, without friends or any real parenting, Antoinette grows up.....

Antoinette’s husband – He is the unsympathetic Englishman who marries Antoinette. We know his name (Rochester) from Brontë’s novel; he is not named in this story, only referred to as “the man” or “husband”. It is his voice that speaks in Part Two, explaining the honeymoon at Granbois. He does not.....

Christophine - She is an obeah (West Indian voodoo) woman from Martinique who is Annette’s servant. She speaks and dresses differently than the Jamaican women and is not accepted by them. She is.....

Minor Characters

Annette – She is Antoinette’s mother. She is originally from Martinique. This, and her beauty cause the Jamaican women to reject her. She was married to Alexander Cosway, who died, and then to.....

Tia – She is the daughter of a servant. As a child, Antoinette thinks of Tia as a friend until.....

Mr. Mason – He is the Englishman who marries Annette for her beauty and her estate. He is ignorant of the severity of the problems between the servants and his family. After the servants.....

Aunt Cora – She is Antoinette’s Aunt who is the widow of a wealthy former slave owner. She is the one who sends Antoinette to the convent school. Briefly, she cares for.....

Richard Mason – He is the son of Mr. Mason who arranges his stepsister Antoinette’s marriage to.....

Daniel Cosway – He is the bastard child of Alexander Cosway who writes letters to.....

CONFLICT

Protagonist – The role of protagonist alternates between Antoinette and her husband. In Parts One and Three Antoinette is the narrator and therefore the protagonist because we see the plot from her point of view. She is sensitive and lonely and culturally split, with no one to turn to.....

Antagonist – Again, the antagonist is either Antoinette or her husband, depending on who is

Climax – The climax does not occur until the absolute end of the novel. The problems between Antoinette and her husband are resolved when Antoinette decides her purpose and descends from

Outcome - As a literary re-creation of Bertha the *Jane Eyre* character, we know that Antoinette has sealed her own fate. However, as an independent work, *Wide Sargasso Sea* presents Antoinette’s act as.....

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

PART ONE

Antoinette Cosway is a beautiful young Creole heiress growing up in Jamaica just after the Emancipation Act of 1833. Her parents are ex-slave owners whose plantation, Coulibri Estate, is now in disrepair. She lives with her widowed mother Annette and her handicapped brother Pierre. The servants gossip cruelly about the Cosway's discreditable reputation. The one exception is the servant Cristophine, a Martinique woman who has been overseeing and protecting the Cosways.

Annette does not spend much time with her daughter. This leaves Antoinette to her only childhood friend, Tia. Once, however, when Antoinette and Tia go swimming together, Tia betrays Antoinette and steals her pennies and her dress. Antoinette returns home in Tia's dress, which Annette sees as a disgrace.

Rather abruptly, Annette marries a man from England named Mr. Mason. He has Coulibri renovated and believes he can live there in control of the servants. The racial tension is high, however, and one night the freed blacks stage a protest outside the house. They are carrying torches and end up setting the house on fire. Pierre is fatally injured, Antoinette takes ill for several weeks, and Annette's smoldering insanity fully manifests itself as a result of the traumatic event. Mr. Mason abandons them, traveling away from Jamaica for months at a time.

Antoinette's Aunt Cora enrolls her in a convent school. There she is educated alongside other Creole girls. When she is seventeen Mr. Mason visits more frequently and plans to present Antoinette to his English friends.

PART TWO

Antoinette is now married to an Englishman. He and Antoinette go to a honeymoon home called Granbois, which had belonged to Antoinette's mother. The Englishman married Antoinette for.....

THEMES

There are two major themes that surface repeatedly. The first is how the **bondage of dependency becomes like slavery**. This is illustrated in race relations and even more so in gender relations. The second shows the **conflict of values between the colonials and the West Indians** that stems from the.....

MOOD

There is a physical as well as a psychological mood in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The physical mood is sensual and exotic with sweet and intense descriptions of tropical beauty. Nature overgrows all that.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Jean Rhys was born Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams in 1890 on the island of Dominica. Her father was a doctor from Wales, her mother a white Creole of Scottish descent whose family had lived in Dominica for generations and had owned slaves.

When she was sixteen Rhys moved to England to study at the Academy of Dramatic Arts. Wanting a stage career, she traveled as a chorus member with "Our Miss Gibbs" for three seasons. During this time she changed her name repeatedly. After World War I she went to Paris and was married in 1919. When her husband was jailed Rhys had an affair that ended the marriage. During these difficult times, Rhys was.....

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Wide Sargasso Sea takes us into the past of one of fiction's famous characters: the mad wife in the attic of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Rhys turns this classic novel inside out and explains the story of the character

that had no real voice in Bronte's book. As she deconstructs *Jane Eyre*, Rhys also gives us a condemning history of colonialism in the Caribbean.

Antoinette Mason is the prequel character to Bertha of *Jane Eyre*. Rhys has created a history for Rochester's infamous Creole wife that attempts to civilize the disparaging characterization of.....

PART / SECTION SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

Note: The text is not divided into traditional chapters, but into three Parts. The first and second Parts are divided into Sections by filigree between the paragraphs.

PART ONE – SECTION 1

Summary

Antoinette's story tells how and why she had come to feel alienated and insecure at her home, Coulibri Estate after her father's death. She did not identify with the white people in Jamaica who were mostly British colonials, not natives of the islands. The Jamaicans did not accept her family either, her mother being "far too young, they thought, and worse still, a Martinique girl." And without her father, Antoinette and her mother had no financial security and few if any friends.

The Emancipation Act had left them, like other former slave owners, waiting for compensation from England that would never come. A friend and neighbor, Mr. Luttrell, in a similar financial situation, grew tired of waiting. He shot his dog and swam out to sea, never to be seen again. This left Annette, Antoinette's mother, completely friendless.

Still Annette would ride around the property on her horse every day. She seemed not to care that the blacks were jeering at her. They could tell by her clothing that she no longer had money. Then Antoinette found her mother's horse dead, poisoned. Annette's only pastime was gone. She was "marooned."

Annette had a doctor from Spanish Town come to visit Antoinette's handicapped brother, Pierre. The diagnosis is not described, but after the doctor left, Annette became suddenly withdrawn, never leaving the house at all. She became cold and frightening to Antoinette. She spent her time walking the *glacis* (covered terrace) where she was subject to the ridicule of passers by.

Antoinette then spent her time with the servant Christophine. Christophine was a wedding gift from Antoinette's father, Alexander Cosway, to Annette. She, like Annette, was from Martinique. The other blacks were afraid of Christophine because she practiced obeah, West Indian voodoo. She "had her own very good reasons" for staying on at Coulibri, according to Annette.

One day, a black child chased and taunted Antoinette, calling her "white cockroach". When Antoinette got home, she took refuge in the soft moss of the overgrown garden. Christophine found her there, and the next day arranged for a young Martinique girl, Tia, to visit. Tia and Antoinette became friends and would spend entire days together at the bathing pool. Antoinette's mother never asked where she had been. The young girls' friendship was broken, however, when Tia cheated on a bet and stole three pennies that Antoinette had gotten from Christophine. Tia, having heard what other people had said, mocked Antoinette saying that real white people had gold and that Antoinette was a "white nigger" now. Tia took Antoinette's dress forcing Antoinette to return home in Tia's dirty dress.

At home, Antoinette found wealthy strangers visiting. Her mother was angry that Antoinette was wearing Tia's dress. She told Christophine to burn it and find Antoinette another. Christophine knew that there were no other nice dresses and found only an old muslin one. The strangers were Luttrells from England. Christophine called

them “trouble”. Antoinette felt ashamed and went to bed. She dreamt of going through a forest, with heavy footsteps following her. She knew that her life would be changing.

Soon there were yards of pink muslin and new dresses for Antoinette and Annette. Annette got a horse from the Luttrells and was always gone, socializing. Antoinette began to isolate herself, scorning people.

At her mother’s wedding, Antoinette was a bridesmaid. She heard what people said about Annette marrying Mr. Mason. They said that Mr. Mason had come to the West Indies for financial gain and that he would regret the marriage. They joked and gossiped about Christophine.

While her mother honeymooned, Antoinette stayed with her Aunt Cora. When she returned to Coulibri, it had been renovated. There were new servants who also gossiped about Christophine and obeah. Antoinette was afraid because of what she heard, but being that Christophine was the only one remotely nurturing, she chose to bury her fears.

Annette wanted to leave Coulibri. She told Mr. Mason that the blacks hated her, worse now that she had money again. Mr. Mason laughed and said, “They’re too damn lazy to be dangerous.” Antoinette wished she could tell him that the English do not understand the blacks at all.

One night Antoinette heard noises in the bamboo and waited, frightened in her bedroom for Christophine to come. When Christophine did not come, Antoinette wished to be “still babyish” and have the stick that she used to sleep with, believing she could fight off evil with it.

Suddenly Annette woke the household hurriedly and gathered everyone in the drawing room because a group of angry blacks and servants had gathered outside. Mr. Mason was still denying any danger when the back of the house was set on fire. Annette ran to save Pierre. When she emerged, both she and Pierre were burned.

Antoinette, Aunt Cora, and Christophine, carrying Pierre, escaped the burning house while Mr. Mason tried to restrain Annette from running back into the house to save her parrot, Coco. The crowd closed in and then all fell silent. Coco was on fire and attempting to fly down from the *glacis*. Mr. Mason had clipped his wings however and the bird plunged to a screeching, flaming death. There was a bad superstition about parrots dying. This made some of the mob cease their taunting and withdraw.

One man with a machete would not let the family leave, fearing that the police would side with the “white niggers”. Aunt Cora threatened him with curses and he backed away. Mr. Mason tried to load everyone into the carriage, but Annette screamed when he touched her and she began to cry. Coulibri was burning and there would be nothing left. Antoinette tried to run to Tia and Tia’s mother, thinking she could stay and be like them. Tia threw a rock that hit Antoinette in the head. The girls stared at each other “like in a looking-glass”, blood on Antoinette’s face, tears on Tia’s.

Notes

In Part One we can see that the ruin of Coulibri Estate parallels the ruin of the people who prospered in the slave based economy. This part of the novel is narrated by Antoinette and consists of piecemeal memories of her childhood. Her recounting brings forth strong feelings of isolation. She, her mother Annette, and the servant Christophine, the main characters of this section, are all outsiders. There is tension between both races and classes. Mr. Luttrell’s suicide points out the intensity of these feelings.

Tia’s betrayal underscores the role money plays in these strained relationships. Tia has traded her own island values for those of a degraded capitalism. In contrast, Antoinette’s superstitions and acceptance of Christophine’s ideas show that she has assimilated the black West Indian culture. Wearing Tia’s dress

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symbolizes the decline of the Cosways and causes both Annette and Antoinette to feel shame. Without money, Antoinette and her mother are not accepted by native black or wealthy white society. Antoinette and Tia have become each other's reflection, an image that is shattered when Tia hits Antoinette with the rock as Antoinette reluctantly leaves Coulibri to join with the white people.

Antoinette fears the new English colonials who are coming to the islands to profit from the former slave owners' demise. The heavy footsteps in her dream represent her paranoia of being followed and watched by those who look down upon her. The dream forebodes that the changes that were coming would be nightmarish.

Rhys uses the mechanism of overhearing to inform the reader how others see the Cosways. The remarks that Tia makes at the bathing pool mimic the condescension that Tia has overheard. The comments Antoinette overhears at the wedding add credibility to Antoinette's feelings of alienation and insecurity. They also set a tone of ignorance around the Englishmen who like Mr. Mason, jokingly misjudge how much control the blacks have. It is this ignorance that allows the disaster at Coulibri to occur.

Finally, the falling and burning of Coco symbolizes the lives of the Cosway women. Englishmen have clipped their "wings" and bound them for destruction. In terms of *Jane Eyre*, Coco's fate foreshadows Antoinette's (Bertha's) flaming plunge from Rochester's house in England.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Antoinette – Antoinette's character comes from Charlotte Bronte's novel, *Jane Eyre*. Bronte's madwoman, "Bertha", is given a life history, beginning as a young lonely girl in Jamaica, and ending as the wild lunatic in the attic. Antoinette is sensitive and sensuous. The vivid descriptions of nature in Part One reflect her life and her character. She feels the exotic beauty and comfort of the natural world. She identifies so.....

Antoinette's husband – Though he narrates the longest part of the novel, Rhys denies this character a name. Having read *Jane Eyre*, we know his name based on his Bronte counterpart, Rochester, but in Rhys' novel he has no identity outside of his relationship with Antoinette. He becomes.....

Christophine – As the only semblance of a caregiver in Antoinette's life, Christophine grooms Antoinette into the black culture and an appreciation of nature. She is black, but being from Martinique, she is different from the Jamaicans. Her words carry both magic (obeah) and authority. Unlike the.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

Wide Sargasso Sea is written in the trisect form with Parts One and Three narrated by Antoinette and Part Two narrated by Antoinette's husband. This shift in narrative voice, along with forward and backward movements through time and space, is quite different from the linear autobiographical *Jane Eyre* on which the characters are based. In the Parts narrated by Antoinette, Rhys uses the device of fragmentation and.....

THEMES – THEME ANALYSIS

Dependency becomes Slavery - Even though slavery had been officially abolished, the bondage imposed by dependency became like slavery to ex-slaves and women alike. The hostility between ex-slave servants and their white employers escalated as the relationship changed from legal ownership to.....

POINT OF VIEW

The novel is written in first person. The point of view changes depending on which character is narrating. As we alternately enter the minds of Antoinette and her husband the position shifts according to.....

OTHER ELEMENTS

THE MEANING OF THE TITLE

The Sargasso Sea is a large difficult to define area in the central North Atlantic, northeast of the West Indies, variably stretching from east of the Bahamas towards the Azores. It is located in an area of relative calmness locked in-between the strong currents that flow in a circular clock-wise direction around the North Atlantic ocean, north of the North Atlantic tropics. The title *Wide Sargasso Sea* comes from.....

QUOTATIONS – IMPORTANT QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

(Referenced from the Norton Paperback edition, 1982)

1.) “They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks.” (p. 17)

This is the opening of the novel, which sets the tone of impending racial unrest and Antoinette’s feelings of alienation.

2.) “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.’ (p. 26)

This is Christophine’s indictment of colonial society. It illustrates the animosity and resentment festering between the English and the black servants.....

STUDY QUESTIONS / DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is Christophine disliked and feared?
2. Who negotiated the marriage between Antoinette and the Englishman and how did these men benefit from the marriage?
3. What did Aunt Cora give to Antoinette and why did she feel her niece would need them?.....

ESSAY TOPIC IDEAS

1. Using adjectives that Antoinette’s husband used when referring to the servants, explain how these words illustrate his attitudes and fears.....

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