

Wide Sargasso Sea

Jean Rhys · 1966 · A landmark of postcolonial and feminist literature

POSTCOLONIALISM

FEMINIST WRITING

REVISIONIST NOVEL



Jean Rhys: Brief Biography



- **Born 1890** in Dominica to a Welsh doctor and a Creole mother of Scots ancestry
- **Age 16:** Sent to England; ostracized for her Caribbean accent; left acting school
- **1920s:** Met Ford Madox Ford, who became her mentor and publisher; she adopted the pen name Jean Rhys
- **1930s:** Published three novels to mixed reception; two failed marriages; deepening alcoholism
- **1966:** Published *Wide Sargasso Sea* to international acclaim; won major literary awards
- **Died 1979** in Exeter, UK — her most celebrated work secured her place in the postcolonial canon

Historical Context

Set in 1830s Jamaica, *Wide Sargasso Sea* was published in 1966 – a pivotal era of Caribbean decolonization. Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago gained independence from Britain in 1962; Barbados followed in 1966. The novel's themes of conflicted cultural identity mirror the struggles of these newly independent nations.

Rhys came of age during first-wave feminism, which fought *de jure* gender inequalities like voting and property rights – the very constraints that trap Antoinette. By 1966, second-wave feminism was spotlighting *de facto* inequalities such as domestic roles and beauty standards, also central to the novel.

Major postcolonial contemporaries include Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964), and V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) – all grappling with colonialism, identity, and alienation.

Key Facts

- **Written:** Early 1950s–1966, Cornwall & Devon, UK
- **Published:** 1966
- **Genre:** Postcolonial, revisionist, bildungsroman, feminist
- **Setting:** 1830s Jamaica
- **Narrators:** Antoinette, the Husband, Grace Poole
- **Prequel to:** Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847)
- **Antagonist:** The Husband; Daniel Cosway

Plot Summary

Part 1 — Childhood at Coulibri

Antoinette grows up isolated in post-Emancipation Jamaica. Her mother Annette remarries Mr. Mason. An angry mob burns Coulibri; brother Pierre dies; Annette descends into madness.

Antoinette recovers at Aunt Cora's, then attends a convent school for 18 months.

Part 3 — The Attic in England

Grace's short section finishes as she thinks about the house's inhabitants: "...All of us except that girl who lives in her own darkness. I'll say one thing for her, she hasn't lost her spirit."

Afterwards, it is Antoinette's turn: In this room I wake early and lie shivering for it is very cold. At last Grace Poole, the woman who looks after me, lights a fire..."

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Part 2 — The Honeymoon at Granbois

Antoinette marries an unnamed Englishman (Rochester). Daniel Cosway's letters poison the husband against her. Antoinette seeks obeah from Christophine. The husband sleeps with Amélie; Antoinette spirals. Christophine is threatened with arrest. The couple departs Jamaica — Antoinette numb, the husband consumed by hatred.

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Major Characters



Antoinette Cosway

Protagonist and partial narrator. A Creole woman defined by alienation, she watches her family destroyed, is married for money, and ultimately imprisoned — finding freedom only in suicide.



The Husband (Rochester)

Never named. Deeply disoriented by Jamaica, he marries Antoinette for her fortune. His distrust and coldness grow until he imprisons her in his English attic.



Christophine

Antoinette's nurse and the novel's moral center. A practitioner of obeah, respected and feared by all. She counsels Antoinette to leave, but is ultimately silenced by the husband's legal threats.



Annette

Antoinette's mother. Driven to remarriage for survival, she is destroyed by grief after Coulibri burns and Pierre dies — a foreshadowing of Antoinette's own fate.

Minor Characters

Daniel Cosway

Daniel's parentage is not confirmed, based on Antoinette and Christophine's quotes in the novel.

Aunt Cora

A stabilizing widow who shelters Antoinette after Coulibri burns and arranges her convent education. Ultimately powerless against Richard Mason's financial arrangements.

Grace Poole

Antoinette's paid caretaker in England. Narrates Part 3. Stays silent about Antoinette's conditions in exchange for double wages.

Amélie

A maid at Granbois who sleeps with the husband within earshot of Antoinette. Uses sex and manipulation to gain money and power.

Richard Mason

Antoinette's stepbrother who signs over her entire inheritance to the husband. Later attacked by Antoinette with a knife in England.

Tia

Antoinette's only childhood friend – a black girl. Their falling-out mirrors Jamaica's racial fractures. Tia throws a rock at Antoinette during the Coulibri fire.

Themes

Otherness & Alienation

No character belongs fully to any group. Antoinette is excluded by both white and black society; the husband is paralyzed by Caribbean culture; Christophine is set apart by her Martinique origins. Alienation drives every destructive act in the novel – from the mob burning Coulibri to Rochester imprisoning Antoinette.

Slavery & Freedom

Freedom is double-edged. Emancipation leaves discontent and violence in its wake. Characters enter imprisonment willingly out of fear of abandonment. Antoinette's fiery suicide is the novel's ultimate – and only – act of true liberation.

Women & Power

Marriage destroys the Cosway women. The only female characters with agency – Christophine, Aunt Cora, Amélie – remain outside traditional marriage. Even they are ultimately thwarted by men and the law.

Truth & Unreliable Narration

Every story has competing versions. Narrators contradict each other; senses hallucinate; gossip replaces fact. The novel questions whether truth is ever knowable – denial and madness are the only alternatives.

Symbols & Motifs



Fire

The novel's supreme symbol of destruction and redemption. The Coulibri fire is an act of protest; Coco the parrot dying in flames foreshadows Antoinette's end. Her final arson is both emancipation and suicide — echoing the mob's defiance.



Gardens & Landscape

The natural world mirrors inner states. Antoinette finds refuge in gardens; the husband finds the jungle menacing. Unfamiliar trees haunt Antoinette's nightmares of England. Nature is the one constant in her fractured identity.



Clothing & Hair

Women's dress and hair signal desirability, agency, and status. Tia steals Antoinette's dress; Annette orders new dresses to signal social ambition; Antoinette's cut hair marks her illness and loss of self. The husband's attraction is often directed at clothing alone.



The Looking-Glass

When Antoinette sees herself in Tia's weeping face — "like in a looking-glass" — Rhys captures the paradox of sameness and difference. In Part 3, Antoinette cannot recognize herself in a mirror, symbolizing her complete loss of identity.

Summary & Analysis: Part 1

Coulibri — Childhood, Fire, and Loss

Antoinette narrates her isolated childhood in post-Emancipation Jamaica. Her family — destitute, excluded from white society — is further marginalized when Annette's French Creole origins alienate her from English Jamaicans. After Annette remarries Mr. Mason, his ostentatious renovations of Coulibri enrage the neighboring black community. Ignoring Annette's warnings, Mason is unprepared when a mob burns the estate. Pierre dies; Annette descends into madness. Antoinette spends 18 months at a convent school — finding comfort in routine but failing to find faith.

📖 "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks." — Antoinette, establishing the novel's central paradox of belonging.

Thematic Connections

Alienation

Antoinette is excluded by both white and black communities — a "white cockroach" to former slaves, yet not English enough for white society.

Women & Power

Annette's only path to security is remarriage. Mr. Mason ignores her warnings — his failure to listen destroys the family.

Truth

Antoinette addresses readers as insiders, implying rather than stating key truths. She refuses to speak of the poisoned horse, believing silence might erase reality.

Summary & Analysis: Part 2 & 3

Part 2 — The Honeymoon Unravels

The husband's narration reveals his financial motives and cultural alienation. Daniel Cosway's letters inject a third, competing narrative — poisoning the husband against Antoinette. She seeks obeah from Christophine to reclaim his love; he sleeps with Amélie within earshot of Antoinette. Christophine confronts him with devastating accuracy, but is silenced by his threat to report her obeah practice to authorities. The couple departs Jamaica — Antoinette numb, the husband consumed by hatred and already sketching an English house with a woman on the third floor.

Part 3 — The Attic

Grace Poole's narration opens on layers of gossip and concealment. Antoinette, stripped of her name ("Bertha"), mirror, and memory, wanders the house at night. She attacks Richard Mason with a knife — an act she cannot remember. Antoinette's recurring nightmare reaches its conclusion in her third dream. In the dream, she sets fire to the house, calls to Tia, and jumps before waking. In the final waking scene, she takes the keys, leaves her room with a candle, and resolves to act on what the dream has shown her. The novel therefore ends before the fire and the leap take place. Her decision to act may be interpreted as a final attempt to reclaim control over her identity and fate, although the outcome remains deliberately unresolved.

Key Quotes

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"They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. **But we were not in their ranks.**"

– Antoinette · Part 1 · Theme: Alienation

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"Woman must have spunks to live in this wicked world."

– Christophine · Part 2 · Theme: Women & Power

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"All women, all colours, nothing but fools. **I keep my money. I don't give it to no worthless man.**"

– Christophine · Part 2 · Theme: Women & Power

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"Justice. I've heard the word. It's a cold word... **There is no justice.**"

– Antoinette · Part 2 · Theme: Slavery & Freedom

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"Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do."

– Antoinette · Part 3 · Theme: Freedom through Fire

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"We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. **It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass.**"

– Antoinette on Tia · Part 1 · Theme: Otherness

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Contemporary Relevance

Postcolonial Identity

Wide Sargasso Sea anticipates today's debates about whose stories get told, and who controls historical narrative. Rhys reclaims the "madwoman" silenced by a canonical English novel – a model for decolonizing the literary canon.

Gender & Autonomy

Antoinette's loss of name, money, and freedom under marriage law resonates with ongoing struggles for women's financial independence and bodily autonomy worldwide.

Race & Belonging

The novel's labyrinthine racial hierarchies – where no one fully belongs – mirror contemporary conversations about mixed identity, colorism, and the violence of exclusion.

Truth & Narrative Power

In an era of contested facts and competing narratives, Rhys's multi-voiced, unreliable narration feels urgently modern – a reminder that who tells the story determines what counts as truth.

- Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) argued that 19th-century women writers were confined to "angel" or "monster" archetypes. *Wide Sargasso Sea* – published a decade earlier – already enacted their call: Antoinette is neither angel nor monster, but a fully imagined, deeply troubled human being.