

Wide Sargasso Sea Summary

Jean Rhys

Antoinette's story begins when she is a young girl in early nineteenth-century Jamaica. The white daughter of ex-slave owners, she lives on a run-down plantation called Coulibri Estate. Five years have passed since her father, Mr. Cosway, reportedly drunk himself to death, his finances in ruins after the passage of the Emancipation Act of 1833, which freed Black enslaved people and led to the demise of many white slave owners. Throughout Antoinette's childhood, hostility flares between the crumbling white aristocracy and the impoverished servants they employ.

As a young girl, Antoinette lives at Coulibri Estate with her widowed mother, Annette, her sickly younger brother, Pierre, and gossiping servants who seem particularly attuned to their employers' misfortune and social disrepute. Antoinette spends her days in isolation. Her mother, a beautiful young woman who is ostracized by the Jamaican elite, spends little time with her, choosing to pace listlessly on the house's *glacis* (the covered balcony) instead of nurturing her child. Antoinette's only companion, Tia, the daughter of a servant, turns against her unexpectedly.

One day, Antoinette is surprised to find a group of elegant visitors calling on her mother from Spanish Town, the island's version of a sophisticated metropolis. Among them is an English man named Mr. Mason who, after a short courtship, asks for Annette's hand in marriage. When Mr. Mason and Annette honeymoon in Trinidad, Antoinette and Pierre stay with their Aunt Cora in Spanish Town.

In the interim, Mr. Mason has had the estate repaired and restored to it to its former grandeur, and has bought new servants. Discontent, however, is rising among the freed Black people, who protest one night outside the house. Bearing torches, they accidentally set the house on fire, and Pierre is badly hurt. As the family flees the house, Antoinette runs desperately towards Tia and her mother. Tia throws a jagged rock at Antoinette, cutting her forehead and drawing blood.

The events of the night leave Antoinette dangerously ill for six weeks. She wakes to find herself in Aunt Cora's care. Pierre has died. Annette's madness, which has revealed itself gradually over the years, has fully surfaced after the trauma of the fire. When Antoinette visits her mother, who has been placed in the care of a Black couple, she hardly recognizes the ghostlike figure she encounters. When Antoinette approaches, Annette violently flings her away.

Antoinette then enrolls in convent school along with other young Creole girls. For several years, she lives at the school with the nuns, learning everything from proper ladylike deportment to the tortured histories of female saints. Antoinette's family has all but deserted her: Aunt Cora has moved to England for a year, while Mr. Mason travels for months away from Jamaica, visiting only occasionally.

When Antoinette is seventeen, Mr. Mason announces on his visit that friends from England will be coming the following winter. He means to present Antoinette into society as a cultivated

woman, fit for marriage. At this point, the end of Part One, Antoinette's narration becomes increasingly muddled, jumping from present-tense descriptions of her life in the convent to muddled recollections of past events.

Antoinette's husband, an Englishman who remains nameless, narrates Part Two. After a wedding ceremony in Spanish Town, he and Antoinette honeymoon on one of the Windward Islands, at an estate that once belonged to Antoinette's mother. He begins to have misgivings about the marriage as they approach a town ominously called Massacre. He knows little of his new wife, having agreed to marry her days before, when Mr. Mason's son, Richard Mason, offered him £30,000 if he proposed. Desperate for money, he agreed to the marriage.

When the couple arrives at Granbois, Antoinette's inherited estate, the man feels increasingly uncomfortable around the servants and his strange young wife. Hostility grows between the man and Christophine, Antoinette's surrogate mother and a servant who wields great power in the house. The man soon receives a menacing letter from Daniel Cosway, one of old Cosway's illegitimate children. Venomous in tone, the letter warns of Antoinette's depravity, saying that she comes from a family of derelicts and has madness in her blood. After reading this letter, the man begins to detect signs of Antoinette's insanity.

Antoinette, sensing that her husband hates her, asks Christophine for a magic love potion. Christophine grudgingly agrees. That night, when the man confronts Antoinette about her past, they argue passionately. He awakes the next morning believing he has been poisoned, and he later sleeps with the servant girl, Amelie, who helps him recover. Sitting in the next room, Antoinette hears everything.

The next morning, Antoinette leaves for Christophine's. When she returns, she seems to be totally mad. Drunk and raving, she pleads with the man to stop calling her "Bertha," a name he has given her without explanation. Antoinette then bites her husband's arm, drawing blood. After she collapses and falls in bed, Christophine rails at him for his cruelty. That night, he decides to leave Jamaica with Antoinette.

Antoinette narrates Part Three from England, where she is locked away in a garret room in her husband's house, under the watch of a servant, Grace Poole. A hidden captive, Antoinette has no sense of time or place; she does not even believe she is in England when Grace tells her so. Violent and frenzied, Antoinette draws a knife on her stepbrother, Richard Mason, when he visits her. Later she has no memory of the incident. Antoinette has a recurring dream about taking Grace's keys and exploring the house's downstairs quarters. In this dream, she lights candles and sets the house ablaze. One night, she wakes from this dream and feels she must act on it. The novel ends with Antoinette holding a candle and walking down from her upstairs prison.

As a reimagining of one of *Jane Eyre's* most mysterious characters, *Wide Sargasso Sea* offers a more nuanced look at the sociopolitical forces that drive a woman like Antoinette to madness. Rhys calls attention to the harmful impacts of colonialism and patriarchal values by depicting Antoinette's struggle to maintain agency in a world which refuses to allow her any. Examining these influences ultimately humanizes Brontë's silenced madwoman, and giving her a voice

allows Rhys to challenge the oppressive social values that *Jane Eyre* reflects. Antoinette is not the sole narrator of the novel, however, and including Mr. Rochester as a second narrator works to emphasize the discrepancies between his point of view as a colonizer and her lived experience as a colonial subject. By placing their voices side by side, Rhys shows how those in power can silence narratives which question their authority and rewrite them to maintain control. This structure hints at the novel's central conflict between the oppressed and their oppressors. While *Wide Sargasso Sea* is most explicitly about the interpersonal tension between Antoinette and Mr. Rochester, its primary concern is about Antoinette's pursuit of freedom and belonging in the face of an unwavering colonial power.

From the earliest moments of the novel, Rhys emphasizes the dark history of colonialism in Jamaica and foreshadows the doomed fate that Antoinette will eventually meet. What once was a lush, tropical paradise has become diseased and marred by death, and the formerly rich Coulibri Estate appears run-down. With its dark connotations, this initial imagery reflects the immense suffering that occurred there prior to the Emancipation Act as well as the unease that continues to persist as white families like the Cosways face the ridicule and resentment of their former slaves. The poisoning and subsequent death of Annette Cosway's horse, a symbol of movement and access to the world, highlights the growing isolation that the family experiences as a result of the shifting power dynamics of their world. Unable to support her two young children as a widow ostracized from her community, Annette marries Mr. Mason, a wealthy Englishman who sets his sights on revitalizing Coulibri. Young Antoinette watches as her mother warns him against displaying his riches, arguing that their Black neighbors will view such behavior as an act of aggression, while Mr. Mason promptly dismisses her voice. The consequences of this unbalanced relationship become apparent as their neighbors burn Coulibri to the ground, an event that serves as the novel's inciting incident. Infuriated by her husband's unwillingness to acknowledge her perspective, Annette flies into a mad rage which sets the stage for her daughter's own struggle to find freedom.

In the aftermath of her mother's descent into madness, Antoinette sinks further into isolation until Mr. Rochester arrives to marry her, and this moment represents the introduction of a colonizing force into her own life. The last event that Antoinette narrates is her departure from the convent and her ominous dream about walking through a dark forest with a strange man guiding her, both of which precede her ill-suited marriage. Mr. Rochester's voice takes over once the pair marries, however, and this narrative shift represents the way in which he conquers her life. Although he admits that his own family tricked him into marrying Antoinette, he does so purely for economic gain and cares little about who his wife truly is. This perspective aligns him with the primary historical motivations for colonialism and establishes him as a domineering character. Throughout the novel's rising action, Rochester, who goes unnamed, struggles to understand the unfamiliar culture he finds himself in but does little to connect with Antoinette on a personal level. He dismisses her fears, judges her perceptions, and objectifies her, all of which reflect his inherent sense of superiority.

As Antoinette and Rochester spend more together, their relationship becomes increasingly strained and causes Antoinette to begin spiraling downward just as her mother did. A letter from Daniel Cosway, Antoinette's vengeful half-brother, suggests to Rochester that his wife may be predisposed to madness, and he allows this information to dictate how he treats his wife without

genuinely evaluating how truthful it is. Antoinette laments the growing distance between them as it reminds her of her isolated childhood, and in a final attempt to reclaim her agency, she begs Christophine to use obeah in order to make him love her again. This brief reappearance of Antoinette's narrative voice reflects her challenge of Rochester's authority over her, although the return back to his perspective emphasizes the futility of her struggle. She puts the substance that Christophine gave her in Rochester's drink, causing him to run from the house and sleep with Amélie upon his return.

These acts of infidelity ultimately cause Antoinette to spiral just as her mother did upon witnessing the consequences of Mr. Mason's unwillingness to acknowledge her perspective. The climax of the novel occurs when Rochester sees Antoinette in this fallen state, with her hair "uncombed and dull" and her eyes "inflamed and staring." This condition is the result of her inability to feel a sense of belonging within her oppressive relationship, and Rochester responds to her behavior with even more hatred. In the novel's falling action, Rochester's colonial perspective plays out literally as he locks his wife in the attic of his English estate. Stripped of everything she has ever known, Antoinette loses her sense of self and turns into the madwoman that Rochester convinced her she was. This final shift serves as the connecting point between *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre* as Antoinette dreams of a fire and then wakes to walk down the dark hall with a candle, a nod to the climax of Brontë's novel in which Bertha reclaims her agency by burning Thornfield Hall and jumping to her death.

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Wide Sargasso Sea begins in Jamaica after the Emancipation Act of 1833, under which Britain outlawed slavery in all its colonies. The first part of the novella is told from the point-of-view of Antoinette Cosway, a young white girl whose father, a hated former slaveholder, has died and left his wife and children in poverty. The family's estate, Coulibri, is quickly falling into ruin, and Antoinette's mother, Annette, is rapidly sinking into a deep depression. Since her mother frequently rejects her, Antoinette spends most of her time alone or with her black nurse, Christophine, one of the few servants who has not chosen to desert the struggling family.

One day, for the first time in a long time, visitors come to Coulibri. One of these men, an Englishman by the name of [Mr. Mason](#), proposes to Annette after a short courtship. She accepts, and the two wed in spite of the malicious gossip of the servants and local islanders. For a while things seem to be improving for the Cosways: Mr. Mason uses his wealth to restore the crumbling Coulibri plantation, and this in turn seems to improve Annette's mental state. Still, Antoinette's mother repeatedly expresses a desperate wish to leave Jamaica. She is acutely aware of the fact that the freed blacks still harbor immense hatred toward the white aristocracy that enslaved them. Mr. Mason, however, fails to realize how dire the situation has become. One night, a mob sets the house on fire, and the family is forced to flee forever.

Antoinette wakes up several weeks later at the home of her [Aunt Cora](#) in Spanish Town. She learns that her brother has died and that her mother has had a mental breakdown. Aunt Cora enrolls Antoinette in a convent school, where she spends several years learning how to be a lady. During this time Antoinette is largely alone; her mother is confined to the home of a care-taking couple, her aunt returns to England, and her stepfather travels frequently and visits rarely. Then, when Antoinette turns seventeen, Mr. Mason comes to the convent and announces that he has friends coming from England for the winter. He implies that one of these men will marry Antoinette.

The second part of the narrative opens after the marriage has taken place. This section of the work is narrated mostly by Antoinette's new husband, a man who remains nameless throughout the text but who is clearly based on the character of Mr. Rochester from Charlotte Brontë's [Jane Eyre](#). As the couple journeys to their honeymoon house, Rochester explains the circumstances that necessitated his hasty wedding. Evidently Rochester arrived in the West Indies and was immediately struck by the fever; as a result he is now questioning his decision to marry a woman he barely knows. Still, he reflects, there was a tremendous incentive for him to do so: his new wife's stepbrother has given him unconditional control of her entire dowry. This money enables Rochester, who is a second son and stands to inherit nothing under the English law of primogeniture, to be financially independent, which is crucial since he has apparently accrued some dishonorable debt.

The wedding party arrives at Granbois, Antoinette's inherited property on another island where she spent much of her youth. Rochester is overwhelmed by the scenery, distrustful of the servants, and generally displeased with the honeymoon house. Antoinette tries to reassure him and help him understand the Caribbean way of life, and for a while this seems to work. Several weeks pass reasonably happily, as the two get to know one another through conversation and finally through consummation of their marriage. Both soon become addicted to sex.

Then one day Rochester receives a letter from a man who calls himself Daniel Cosway and insists that he is Antoinette's illegitimate half-brother. In his letter, Daniel tells Rochester that the Englishman has been tricked into marriage with a madwoman, and encourages Rochester to come and visit him to get the full story. Rochester believes what he reads, and when he returns to the house Antoinette and the servants can sense that his attitude toward her has changed.

The point-of-view then shifts back to Antoinette, who is journeying on horseback to visit the wise old servant Christophine, a woman who is rumored to practice the dark art known as obeah. Antoinette explains that Rochester has become cold and distant, and begs her former nurse to use black magic to make him love her again. Christophine resists, suggesting that Antoinette leave her husband instead. Antoinette refuses, however, noting that under English law all of her money now belongs to Rochester. Christophine, appalled to hear about Antoinette's utter dependence on Rochester, finally agrees to help her.

The perspective then shifts back to Rochester, who receives a second missive from Daniel Cosway and goes to pay the man a visit. Daniel immediately begins to deride the Cosway family, implying, among other things, that Antoinette has had an incestuous relationship with her half-brother Sandi. Daniel attempts to bribe Rochester, saying that he will keep quiet about these matters for a fee. Rochester is disgusted and leaves, but is clearly affected by the encounter.

Back at Granbois, Antoinette confronts her husband about his hatred of her, and he admits that he has been to see Daniel. Antoinette attempts to explain her family history to him but in doing so becomes highly distraught. Rochester suggests that she retire for the night so that they can talk when she is more "reasonable." She agrees but asks him to come to her room. He obliges, and she slips the powder that Christophine gave her into his drink.

Rochester awakens in his wife's bed the next morning and realizes that he was drugged and that the two of them have slept together again. He is sick to his stomach and then furious, and retaliates by seducing the servant girl Amélie within Antoinette's range of hearing. Antoinette is traumatized by her husband's infidelity and disappears for several days. She returns in a state of drunken dishevelment, and verbally lashes out at Rochester for what he has done to her. She loses control of herself entirely.

Christophine also comes to the house and accuses Rochester of psychologically destroying Antoinette, who has been reduced to throwing objects and trying to bite like an animal. The old servant begs Rochester first to try to love his wife again, and then to go back to England without her. Rochester briefly considers the latter, but changes his mind when Christophine suggests that eventually Antoinette might find marital felicity with someone else. He becomes enraged and orders Christophine to leave the premises, threatening to call the police to report her practice of obeah. She has no choice but to go.

Rochester then begins to make plans to return to Jamaica and consult with the doctors there about his wife's unstable mental condition. Symbolically, he sketches an English-style house with a woman standing in one of the third-floor rooms. They depart several days later, and Rochester insists that Antoinette will never see the island again. She betrays no emotion when they leave, but a young boy native boy cries pitifully because he wants Rochester to take him along. Of course, Rochester refuses - he hates everything belonging to the Caribbean.

The short final portion of the novella starts off with a few paragraphs from the perspective of [Grace Poole](#), the woman hired to guard Antoinette in the attic where she has been imprisoned. Grace reveals that she is being paid well for her services. Ironically, Rochester's father and brother have died and left him everything.

The point-of-view then shifts one last time, back to Antoinette. Her account reveals that she is extremely confused and disoriented: she does not know where she is and has no idea how long she has been there, and furthermore she has only vague, fragmented, and conflated memories of events both recent and long-past. Now, perhaps, she really is a madwoman. At night, she explains, when Grace Poole is asleep, she steals the keys to the attic and sneaks about the house. One night, after a recurring dream of fire, she gets up, takes a candle, and prepares to burn down the house.