

SYNOPSIS

Title of the book : Wide Sargasso Sea
Writer : Jean Rhys
The book page : 190 pages
Publisher : W.W. Norton & Company Inc. New York
Year : 1982
Feature : Paperback

Wide Sargasso Sea is a damning history of colonialism in the Caribbean. The story is set just after the emancipation of the slaves, in that uneasy time when racial relations in Caribbean were at their most strained.

Antoinette Cosway or Antoinette Mason (the main character) grew up in a lust and insecure world in the Caribbean after the liberation of the slaves. A white Creole whose parents had been slaveholders. Antoinette is a child in an atmosphere of fear, recrimination and bitter anger. She can be accepted neither by the Negro community nor by the representatives on the colonial centre. As a white Creole she is nothing. The taint of racial impurity, coupled with the suspicion that she is mentally imbalanced brings about her inevitable downfall. Her mother's second marriage to Mr. Mason brings her family a large amount of fortune. But this fortune turns to be disaster when the hatred of the former slaves drives them burning the family's house, which becomes the cost of her little brother's death and her mother's captive and insanity. Antoinette then becomes Mr. Mason's ward and get his name and half of his wealth when he died.

Antoinette is then betrothed to Edward Rochester, who is never named in novel. He is not portrayed as an evil tyrant, but as a proud and bigoted man. Thinking that he has been betrayed by his family into a loveless marriage, he finds another woman as a refinement of his dull marriage. His double standards with regards to the former slaves and Antoinette's family involvement with them are exposed when he chooses to sleep with the maid, Amelie, thus displaying the promiscuous behaviour and attraction to the Negro community which he accuses Antoinette of harbouring. Their brief days of happiness at Grandbois are halted by his willingness to believe the worst of Antoinette. His betrayal of her is set up before he received the information from Daniel Cosway.

She becomes increasingly isolated—this isolation is broken by her scheming stepbrother who signs Antoinette's inheritance over to the naïve Rochester is a terrifying study in sexual manipulation and cultural misunderstanding. Antoinette is forced to leave the home she loves for the cold misery of England, where the book reaches its shattering climax.

As an already canonical text, the merging of Antoinette's fate into that of Bertha's is inevitable, but Rhys allows us to interpret the fate of Antoinette differently by having the ending open. Antoinette's dreams of the fire and leap to her death, but the novel ends with her resolution to act rather than a description of her death.