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# Wide Sargasso Sea



## Synopsis

This *œtour de force* • (New York Times Book Review) celebrates its 50th anniversary. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a masterpiece of modern fiction, was Jean Rhys's return to the literary center stage. She had a startling early career and was known for her extraordinary prose and haunting women characters. With *Wide Sargasso Sea*, her last and best-selling novel, she ingeniously brings into light one of fiction's most fascinating characters: the madwoman in the attic from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. This mesmerizing work introduces us to Antoinette Cosway, a sensual and protected young woman who is sold into marriage to the prideful Mr. Rochester. Rhys portrays Cosway amidst a society so driven by hatred, so skewed in its sexual relations, that it can literally drive a woman out of her mind. A new introduction by the award-winning Edwidge Danticat, author most recently of *Claire of the Sea Light*, expresses the enduring importance of this work. Drawing on her own Caribbean background, she illuminates the setting's impact on Rhys and her astonishing work.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Jean Rhys, the troubled author who was far ahead of her time in the 1920's, felt a strange kinship with Antoinette or Bertha Mason, the madwoman locked in the attic in Brontë's "Jane Eyre." From the first time Rhys read "Jane Eyre" she knew she would someday write her story because she felt she'd lived it. Like Antoinette, Rhys grew up in the Caribbean, a troubled and hermetic world of Creoles, colonists and former slaves. Antoinette is truly a loner--the reversal of family fortunes causes her to be rejected by her own people, and despised by those who previously were on a

lower rung of society. Throughout the novel, Antoinette is used, buffeted and never in charge of her own life. She feels that, as a woman, she is an object, not a person. As a woman, she is not in charge of her ultimate destiny, and this provides the conflict for the novel. Her madness is only an extension of this isolation and rejection. What makes Rhys a masterful novelist is her use of conversation and immediate events to describe the world in which Antoinette lives. There are no long passages of exposition; we see the world only through the eyes of the characters, mostly at the same time that they experience it. However, the immediate events and conversation or narration are so cleverly constructed that the reader sees through the narrator's eyes and can really see and feel the surroundings. This intimate point of view puts the reader in the skin of the character, but can be a bit confusing because we cannot always rely on the veracity of the narration. The point of view itself switches in the novel from first person to third person, in the second part, and back to first in the third and final portion, where Antoinette is locked in the attic. The novel is in no way a re-write or version of "Jane Eyre."

Jean Rhys may be one of the greatest underrated writers of the century. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is her masterpiece. In a short 140 pages, Rhys creates a multi-layered story that deserves a few re-readings in order to fully appreciate its scope. It's not "anti"-Jane Eyre, it is an exploration of that theme Brontë created but never examined- the madwoman in the attic. Rochester is not "evil"- he is a confused, weak man who blindly follows the values of his society (money, emotional repression), and is in fact portrayed to be a victim of them. That is what makes this story a tragedy; the oppressors are not hellions, they are simply ignorant and arrogant. There are so many themes in this book it is impossible to touch upon them all; men & women, slaves & slave-owners, rich & poor, industrial & rural, the known & the unknown, the conqueror & the colony. The first part is narrated by Antoinette Cosway, her memories of growing up in post-Emancipation Jamaica. It is written as though we have direct access to her thoughts, or she telling us her memories verbally. The prose is rhythmic, not static. The second section is mostly narrated by Rochester, his voice is a little more restrained, he is prissy and frustrated and confused as he describes their marriage and life in the Islands. Sometimes Antoinette (whom Rochester has re-named Bertha) breaks his narrative and we are shown her own growing frustration and desperation. The last section brings the story to England- a few paragraphs are given to Grace Poole, then it is Antoinette's now "mad" voice as she is locked in the attic.

'Jane Eyre' was one of my favorite books when I was a teenager and if I had read 'Wide Sargasso

Sea' right after reading 'Jane Eyre', I would have hated it for deconstructing the heroic image of Mr. Rochester. I'm glad I discovered WSS much later. It's an intriguing, fascinating study of Mr. Rochester and his first wife, Antoinette Mason, the prototype of the 'mad wife in the attic' who played a minor but vital part in 'Jane Eyre'. Antoinette's mother descends into madness following the loss of the family estate to a slave rebellion. To shore up the family fortune and save her from becoming an old maid, and thus a burden, she is married off to Mr. Rochester, newly arrived from England, who knows nothing about her mother's insanity. WSS shows us the other side of Mr. Rochester that Jane Eyre couldn't or wouldn't see: his coldness, his selfishness, and his opportunism. We can understand how, as he did in 'Jane Eyre', such a man would lie to an innocent young woman about his marital status and nearly trap her into unwittingly participating in a sham marriage. Rochester is attracted to Antoinette at first; he is dazzled by her beauty as well as her money and eager to marry her. Once the honeymoon phase is over, he is unable to adjust to his surroundings. Jamaica is antipathetic to everything he grew up with, it's wild, untamed, a study in extremes, anathema to a tidy, organized, narrow-minded European, and Rochester is the typical insular-minded Englishman who despises what he is unable to understand.

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