

How to Write a Thesis Statement

Settings in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*

In Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the setting is the hot and colorful West Indies in the post-colonial days. In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* the setting is murky gray England: the heart of the empire and Mr. Rochester's home. Thornfield in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is depicted as dark and ancient, while Antoinette's surroundings in *Jane Eyre* are often green and dream-like. **The contrasting climates and settings in the two novels showcase how different Antoinette's concept of home is from Jane's, yet they also add parallel qualities to the two novels.**

There is a similarity between Antoinette and Jane. Both share the same social context they were birthed into. Antoinette is a creole, she did not fit in with the black or the white population. She is surrounded by ex-slaves who hate her family, and she could never be a proper English girl. One of the ex-slaves has this to say: "Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger" (Rhys, 10). Her immediate family consists of her mother Annette and her retarded brother Pierre—aside from that, she is completely alone. The author paints a picture of Antoinette's home: "Mr. Luttrell's house was left empty, shutters banging in the wind. Soon the black people said it was haunted, they would not go near it. And no one came near us. I got used to the solitary lifestyle..." (Rhys, 24). Similarly, Jane faces social restrictions of a similar kind. She has no immediate family left. The family that she did have was rich and upper class, while she has now has nothing, and therefore is poor and lower class. Jane says: "I was a discord in Gateshead Hall; I was like nobody there; I had nothing in harmony with Mrs. Reed or her children, or her chosen vassalage" (Brontë, 15).

Jane Eyre's and Antoinette Cosway's childhood homes are quite similar, and they shaped their perceptions for the way they see the rest of their lives. Coulibri, for

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Antoinette, was a place of extreme isolation, not only from the social standpoint, but also from the relations she had with her family.

The color red seems especially prominent in both novels. In *Jane Eyre*, when Jane encounters the ghost of Mr. Reed, she is locked inside a red room. She describes it as having a “terrible red glare with thick black bars” (Bronte, 17). In Antoinette’s home in Coulibri, red is prominent in fire and blood; the first mention of blood appears here in the novel: “We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers” (Rhys, 24).

Parallelism continues throughout the two novels in the next set of locations: at the convent and Lowood school. Both of the settings are bleak and gray. Antoinette elaborates about her convent: “This convent was my refuge, a place of sunshine and of death where very early in the morning the clap of a wooden signal woke the nine of us who slept in the long dormitory” (Bronte, 31). The convent itself is very religious, and often makes Antoinette question why she’s alive. It is the only place in the novel that is described as gray or dark. The author points this out when she states that “Everything was brightness or dark. The walls, the blazing colours of the flowers in the garden, the nuns’ habits were bright but their veils, the Crucifix hanging from their waists, the shadow of the trees, were black” (Bronte, 32). Lowood is very similar in description, it has both the flowering garden and the plain religious internal setting:

While disease has thus become an inhabitant of Lowood, and death its frequent visitor; while there was gloom and fear within its walls; while its rooms and passages steamed with hospital smells, the drug and the pastille striving vainly to overcome the effluvia of mortality, that bright May

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shone unclouded over the bold hills and beautiful woodland out of doors.
(Bronte, 77).

The religious setting makes both girls question their existence, and why they were born into the world. This is explicitly apparent as Antoinette states: "I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all" (Bronte, 34).

Likewise, Jane also questions her religion: "Again I questioned, but this time only in thought. 'Where is that region? Does it exist?'" (Bronte, 83). This brief overlap in their lives makes the reader question how different the two actually are, if they ask themselves such similar questions and have come from such similar religious backgrounds.

Nature is a very important component of both of the heroines' lives. Jane incorporates nature and spirituality into her art, and she is inspired by nature: "The subjects had, indeed, risen vividly on my mind. As I saw them with the spiritual eye, before I attempted to embody them, they were striking; but my hand would not second my fancy, and in each case it had wrought out but a pale portrait of the thing I had conceived." (Bronte, 89). The nature described in Jamaica and Dominica, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is filled with lush scenery.

Dreams are another very important setting, more so in *Wide Sargasso Sea* than in *Jane Eyre*. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane's dreams often foreshadow or represent desires. Jane recounts her dreams of infants: "during the past week scarcely a night had gone over my couch that had not brought with it a dream of an infant: which I sometimes hushed in my arms, sometimes dandled on my knee[...] It was a wailing child this night, and a

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laughing one the next: now it nestled close to me, and now it ran from me”. In these dreams, Jane might fear that marrying Mr. Rochester will alter her identity, and she will lose herself.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, dreams often leak into the real world, like the way a schizophrenic person’s mind might mix up hallucinations with reality. The fear and intensity of the dreams are portrayed in the following quote:

“I dreamed that I was walking in the forest. Not alone. Someone who hated me was with me, out of sight. I could hear heavy footsteps coming closer and though I struggled and screamed, I could not move. I woke up crying.”

Wide Sargasso Sea’s settings are often overly saturated with color, as Rochester points out: “I began to wonder how much of it was true, how much imagined, distorted” (Bronte, 84). Dreams infest both of the heroines’ lives, clouding their perception or hinting at what’s really going on behind the curtains. When Jane encounters Bertha Mason, she asks herself if it was really a dream. When Rochester is in Granbois, he also states that the setting is “unreal and like a dream” (Bronte, 49). When Antoinette decides to burn the house, she first has a dream recalling all the events. Dreams seem to be the driving force of decision making and warns the heroines of what’s to come.

The most important settings in the two novels are Thornfield in *Jane Eyre* and Granbois in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Granbois serves the story as the dream ‘honeymoon house’ (as Amelie refers to it). According to Amelie, everything is always saturated with color: “The earth is red here, did you notice?’...I looked up at the mountains, purple against the very blue sky” (Bronte, 43). To Antoinette, this is her creole home: a place she feels most safe. To Rochester however, it is vile and outworldly: “I hated the

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sunsets of whatever color. I hated its magic and its beauty” (Pll p. 111). From his perspective, the place has almost a feverish sense to it, as if someone drugged him and forced him to stay there. When finally he decides to make a choice to go to England and lock Antoinette in the attic, he refers to the weather changing: “Here’s a cloudy day to help you. No brazen sun. No sun... No sun. The weather’s changed.” (Bronte, 107). He uses this phrase to imply how the setting has changed, as his intentions had.

When Rochester reminisces about what winter is like in England, he recalls a detail of Thornfield, referring to it as a place that is cold and not belonging:

After summer the trees are bare, then winter and snow. White feathers falling? Torn pieces of paper falling? They say snow makes flower patterns on the window pane. I must know more than I know already. For I know that house where I will be cold and not belonging, the bed I shall lie in has red curtains and I have slept there many times before, long ago. How long ago? In that bed I will dream the end of my dream. (Bronte, 70)

Thornfield is a foil to Granbois. The hallways of Thornfield are unwelcoming and cold, while Granbois is a honeymoon dream house. Jane’s and Antoinette’s perceptions of the house are completely different however. Jane describes it as having “steps of oak”. She states that “Everything appeared very stately and imposing to me; but then I was so little accustomed to grandeur.” She adds that she was “seeming to embrace Thornfield with a seclusion I had not expected to find existent so near the stirring locality of Millcote” (Bronte, 101). By Jane’s description, Thornfield is the ideal English home. Snug and secluded with oak staircases and a fire burning away in the chimney.

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Antoinette's perception of Thornfield is radically different, however. Her dark, secluded attic room is always cold, with just a table, a bed, and a closet with her old red dress in it. "The thick walls, she thought. Past the lodge gate and a long avenue of trees and inside the house the blazing fires and the crimson and white rooms. But above all the thick walls, keeping away from all the things you have fought till you can't fight no more." All the passages in Thornfield were dark for Antoinette. When she burns Thornfield, it is as if her whole life flashes before her, much like it did in that fire in Coulibri, as the color red comes back again as well: "And the sky so red", "It was a large room with a red carpet and red curtains." She notices the color even more: "I looked at the dress on the floor and it was as if the fire had spread across the room. It was beautiful and it reminded me of something I must do." (Rhys, 89) The duality of the color red is that it could imply both love and seduction, as well as blood, fire, and even death itself. The color red represents Antoinette's persona and her relationship with Mr. Rochester: seductive, yet explosive and deadly.

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* contrast in the settings and cultural contexts of the novels. Coulibri is bright and colorful, while Gateshead is bleak and full of dark colors. When Rochester enters Coulibri, the bright colors and hot weather strike him as dream-like and absurd, while when Antoinette enters Rochester's home in England, everything seems dark and cold to her. The stark contrasts between the two novels and the perceptions with which they are described truly reinforce both: parallelism of the two novels, and the difference between Antoinette and Jane.

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