

## Race and Empire *in Jane Eyre*

A book called *Orientalism* appeared in 1973. It was a volume of literary criticism written by Edward Said, a leading American scholar of Palestinian origin. The book changed the way many students and scholars approached the reading of English literature written during the period of the British Empire. Many books and essays focusing on the issue of literature and imperialism were published in the decades that followed. *The Colonial Rise of the Novel*, by literary critic Firdous Azim, appeared in 1993. The best part of the book is the discussion of references to empire in *Jane Eyre*.

At the time *Jane Eyre* was written, Britain was the strongest naval power in the world. Even though it had lost its North American colonies, it was still the centre of an expanding empire, with colonies in Africa, Asia and Oceania. Generations of readers have considered *Jane Eyre* a great love story – which indeed it is – but more recent critics, looking at it from this point of view of literature and imperialism, have discovered new and disturbing elements in the story.

At the beginning of the novel, we are told that Jane has an uncle in Madeira. In Part Eight, we discover that Rochester has a wife from Jamaica. Later we meet a character who is going to India as a missionary. So even though the main interest and focus of the novel is clearly the love story, the details of that story make repeated reference to the British Empire.



Queen Victoria with her Indian servant Abdul Karim (1893)  
by Hill & Saunders.

Even though *Jane Eyre* is very progressive as a feminist novel, the views on race and empire expressed in it are clearly those of its time. Bertha is seen as subhuman, bestial and violent. When Jane describes Bertha in Part Eight, she uses the pronoun 'it' rather than 'she'. Later in the novel, the idea of going to India as a missionary is seen as the heroic act of someone from a superior culture who is willing to suffer hardship<sup>1</sup> in order to help those of an inferior culture. The idea that imperialism is perhaps damaging to the subject peoples is never considered.

1. **hardship** : the condition of having very little money, so that life is very difficult.



Jamaican women carrying baskets on their heads (19th century).

In 1966, a novel called *Wide Sargasso Sea* was published. Its author Jean Rhys was born in the Caribbean. She retells Charlotte Brontë's story from Bertha's point of view. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Bertha is seen as fully human, and her madness is seen as the result of her suffering. Rhys's novel was a great popular success and has made into two films and one television series.

### 1 Comprehension check

Read the following statements and say whether they are true (T) or false (F). Then correct the false ones.

- |  | T                        | F                        |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 Edward Said's book <i>Orientalism</i> discussed the relationship between British literature and history.       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 <i>Orientalism</i> did not excite much interest among other scholars.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 <i>Jane Eyre</i> was written when the British Empire was declining.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 Critics like Said denied that <i>Jane Eyre</i> was a great love story.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 Critics inspired by Said have written that <i>Jane Eyre</i> also talks about how the British saw their empire. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 <i>Jane Eyre</i> can be considered a feminist novel.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7 <i>Jane Eyre</i> can be considered a racist novel.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8 Bertha is the only important character in <i>Jane Eyre</i> directly connected with the British Empire.         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9 Bertha is the narrator of <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i> .   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10 Charlotte Brontë criticizes sharply missionaries in her novel <i>Jane Eyre</i> .                              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11 Jean Rhys refers to Bertha as an 'it'.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12 <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i> was a bestseller.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13 Rhys shows Bertha's madness to be a result of her culture.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14 <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i> has also inspired works in other media.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

## INTERNET PROJECT

The writer Jean Rhys wrote a very successful novel from the point of view of Bertha Mason. It is called *Wide Sargasso Sea*. To find out more about this intriguing book and its equally intriguing author connect to the Internet and go to [www.blackcat-cideb.com](http://www.blackcat-cideb.com) or [www.cideb.it](http://www.cideb.it). Insert the title or part of the title of the book into our search engine. Open the page for *Jane Eyre*. Click on the Internet project link. Go down the page until you find the title of this book and click on the relevant link for this project.

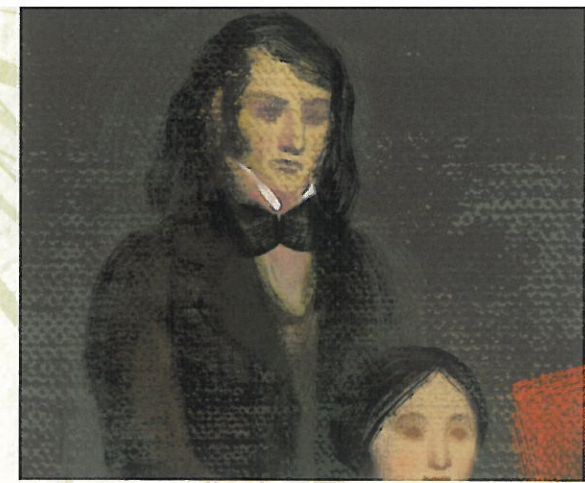
Write a short report about Jean Rhys and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Include the following information:

- ▶ where the author was born
- ▶ how she started writing
- ▶ what the story is about
- ▶ how Bertha Mason is presented
- ▶ how Mr Rochester is presented.

The screenshot shows a website titled "World Literature in English" with a sub-header "Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea". It features a portrait of Jean Rhys and a list of "Leading Questions" and "Major Themes".

**Bio:** Jean Rhys (mainly from the *World of Penguin*)

- **Creole identity and a drifting life:** Jean Rhys was born in Dominica in 1890, the daughter of a Welsh doctor and a white Creole mother. She came to England when she was sixteen and then drifted into a series of jobs - chorus girl, mannequin, artist's model - after her father died.
- **Start to write in her thirties:** She began to write when the first of her three marriages broke up. She was in her thirties by then, and living in Paris, where she was encouraged by Ford Madox Ford, who also discovered D. H. Lawrence. Ford wrote an enthusiastic introduction to her first book in 1927, a collection of stories called *The Left Bank*. This was followed by *Quarter* (originally *Postures*, 1928), *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939). None of these books was particularly successful, perhaps because they were decades ahead of their time in theme and tone, dealing as they did with women as underdogs, exploited and exploiting their sexuality.



### PART NINE

# Temptation

@ [www.blackcat-cideb.com](http://www.blackcat-cideb.com)

When the flood waters of my grief subsided, it was late afternoon. 'What shall I do?' I asked myself.

A voice inside me said clearly, 'Leave Thornfield now.'

I couldn't bear to hear those words. 'It's painful enough to know that I'm not Edward Rochester's bride, but I can bear that. What I can't bear is the idea that I must leave him now - immediately. It's intolerable. I can't do it.'

Then the voice said, 'You can do it; you will do it.'

'All right!' I replied. 'I know that's what I should do, but I can't do it alone. Someone must help me!'

'No,' said the voice. 'There is no one to help you. You must do it alone.'

I stood up. I felt weak from grief and shock and I'd eaten nothing since breakfast. I unlocked the door and stepped out. Mr Rochester was sitting in a chair outside in the corridor.

'You've come out at last,' he said. 'I've been waiting here a long time. Jane, I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm so sorry. Will you ever forgive me?'

Reader! I forgave him at that moment. There was such sadness in his eyes, such sorrow in his voice, such unchanged love in his look that I forgave him everything, but not in words — only in my own heart.

‘You know I’m a very bad man, Jane,’ he said after a few moments, when I continued silent.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Then tell me so. Shout at me. Show your anger.’

‘I can’t. I feel tired and weak. I want some water.’

He took me downstairs to the library, sat me down and brought me a glass of water and some food. I tasted it and felt a little better. I thought, ‘I wish I could die now, with no pain. Then I wouldn’t have to leave him, which will break my heart.’

He leaned forwards to kiss me, but I turned my face away.

‘Why, Jane? Because I’m a married man? You won’t kiss me now. You’ll be cold to me. And all because I was tricked into marrying a devil, a mad woman — ’

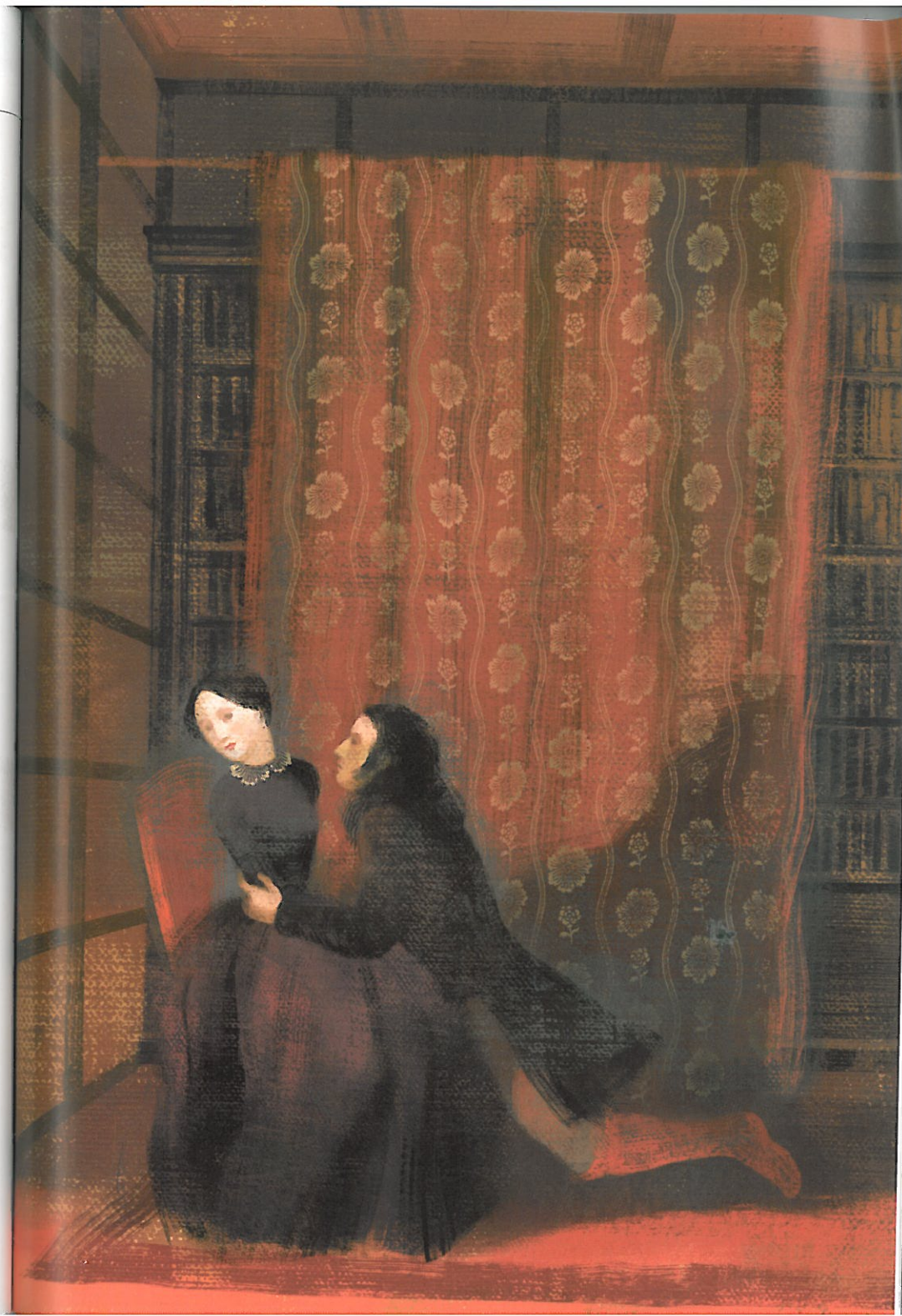
‘Sir,’ I interrupted him. ‘Don’t say such terrible things about that unfortunate lady. You sound as if you hate her. It’s cruel. She can’t help being mad.’

‘Jane, my little darling, you don’t understand. It’s not because she’s mad that I hate her. If you were mad, do you think I would hate you?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re wrong. I love you, and if you were mad I would love you still. We’ll leave Thornfield tomorrow, Jane. I have a place we can go, far away from these miserable memories. I have another house called Ferndean, deep in the countryside, where no one will disturb us. Or we could go to my villa in the South of France —

‘No, sir,’ I said.



He leaned close to me and said, 'Jane, will you listen to reason? Because, if not, I'll try violence!'

I wasn't afraid of him. I felt a power within me. The moment was dangerous, but it was also exciting. I took hold of his hands and began to weep. I had been restraining my tears for some time, but now I felt it was best to let them flow freely.

'Please don't cry,' he said.

'You're so angry!' I replied, weeping still.

'I'm not angry. It's just that I love you too much to lose you, and there was such a cold look in your little pale face that I couldn't bear it. Please, wipe your tears away.'

His voice was calmer, so I could be calm too. He tried to put his head on my shoulder, but I moved away.

'Jane!' he cried. 'You don't love me! It was only my money and my family name that you valued! Now that you know I can't make you a lady, you won't let me touch you!'

'I do love you,' I said, 'but I can never show it again. That is why I must leave Thornfield now and leave alone.'

'Are you mad? They tricked me into marrying Bertha Mason. I was young and ignorant. My father wanted me to marry her because she was rich. He knew about the madness in her family, but he didn't care — all he cared about was the money. That's not a real marriage, Jane! As soon as I was married, I realised I could never love her. Her mind was vulgar and inferior. But I was trapped! I couldn't escape. Surely you think that is wrong, Jane! Surely you pity me.'

'Yes, I do. I pity you with all my heart, but that doesn't change the fact that I can't stay with you.'

'This is cruel, Jane! What will I do without you? I'll be like a dead man. There'll be no one to comfort me.'

'Do as I do: trust in God and yourself. Believe in heaven. Hope to meet again there.'

'If you leave me, Jane, I will be in despair. Is it better to drive someone to despair than to transgress a mere human law? No one would be injured if you broke that law, Jane. You have no family who would be offended by it.'

This was true. As he spoke, Conscience and Reason accused me, they joined Feeling and all three cried out to me, 'He is right! Do as he says! Think how unhappy he will be if you leave him! Comfort him, save him, love him! No one in the world cares for you and no one will be injured by what you do.'

But then the voice inside me said, 'I care for myself. The more solitary I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God and followed by man. I'll follow the principles I learnt when I was sane, before I was driven mad by love. Laws and principles are not for the time when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this. And I'll follow them now.'

Mr Rochester looked into my eyes. He could see that I had decided what to do and that I couldn't be persuaded to change my mind. He grabbed my wrist. 'Look how thin her wrist is!' he cried. 'I could break it easily, but what good would that do? I look into her eyes and know that I can never break her spirit — that resolute, wild, free thing looking out at me. It is your spirit I want, Jane. Oh! Come to me, please come!'

He let go of my wrist and looked at me. It was much harder to resist the look than his strong hand on my wrist, but only an idiot would have given in now.

'I'm going,' I said.

He put his head in his hands and cried, 'Oh, Jane! My hope — my love — my life!'

I had already reached the door, but, reader, I walked back. I knelt down by him, I raised his face to me, I smoothed his hair. 'God bless you, my dear master!' I said. 'God keep you from harm and from sin. God comfort you and reward you for all your past kindness to me. Goodbye!'

Then I stood up and left him.

In July the nights are short. Not many hours after midnight, the sky begins to get pale again. I left Thornfield with the things I had brought as the light rose in the east. I walked along the road to the nearest village. After I had been walking some time, a cart stopped.

'Do you need a ride, Miss?' asked the driver.

I asked him where he was going. He named a town far away.

'How much do you want to take me there?' I asked.

'Thirty shillings,' he said.

'I only have twenty shillings,' I replied.

'All right, then. I'll take you as far as I can for twenty shillings,' said the driver, and he helped me into the cart. I sat in the back, where the driver couldn't see me. As we drove away, out of the familiar countryside around Thornfield, far away from my dear master, the tears streamed down my face.

## The text and beyond

### 1 Comprehension check

Say whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F), and then correct the false ones.

- |  | T                        | F                        |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 Jane was certain that it was wrong to stay with Mr Rochester.                            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 Jane knew that Mr Rochester had done nothing bad when she saw his sad eyes.              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 Jane thought it was wrong to say bad things about Bertha.                                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 Jane cried because Mr Rochester threatened her with physical cruelty.                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 Mr Rochester accused Jane of wanting to marry him for money.                             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 Jane never felt tempted to stay with Mr Rochester.                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7 Jane thought she respected herself by respecting God.                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8 Mr Rochester did not block Jane physically because he knew that she would escape anyway. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9 Jane spent all of her money to get away from Mr Rochester.                               | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

### 'I wish I could die now, with no pain'

We can use **wish** followed by the **simple past** to say that we are sorry about something in the present and we would like it to be different.

Look at these sentences:

Jane is suffering greatly because she has learned that Mr Rochester is married. So: *She wishes she could die now, with no pain.*

John Reed has spent all his money playing cards. He needs money desperately. So: *He wishes he had a lot of money.*

**2 Wish + past tense**

Complete the sentences using *wish* and one of the verbs in the box in the affirmative or the negative according to the context. There is an example at the beginning (0).

live work speak live worry about  
have more money go away ~~hit~~ have

- 0 Jane is terrified of her cousin John. She thinks,  
I wish he didn't hit me all the time.....
- 1 Mrs Reed can't stand Jane. She thinks she is a horrible, ungrateful monster.  
..... with my children and me.
- 2 Miss Temple sees the girls suffering and getting sick.  
..... to buy them food.
- 3 Miss Temple hears Mr Brocklehurst talking about religion and God's mercy.  
..... the girls health and well-being.
- 4 Bertha misses her home.  
..... in the Caribbean again.
- 5 Grace Poole hates taking care of Bertha.  
..... in the kitchen.
- 6 Miss Fairfax is curious to learn about Adèle's life before she came to Thornfield.  
..... French.
- 7 Adèle is sad when Mr Rochester is not at home.  
..... all the time.
- 8 Mr Rochester tells Jane that she has to leave Thornfield because he's getting married. She thinks,  
..... to find a new position. I like living at Thornfield.

**3 'Come to me, please come!'**

Fill in the table below showing how Mr Rochester tries to keep Jane from leaving and Jane's reaction.

	What Rochester does	How Jane reacts
Physical violence	<i>He grabs her wrist.</i>	
Logic		<i>Jane considers it a law given to people by God. She says that it is love that makes her think God's law is not important.</i>
Emotional persuasion	<i>He tells her that she is cruel and that he will be like a dead man when she is gone.</i>	
Emotional violence		<i>She replies that she does love him, and that is exactly why she must leave Thornfield.</i>

T: GRADE 8

**4 Speaking: personal values and ideals**

It is perhaps difficult for many readers to agree with Jane's decision to leave Mr Rochester, the man she loves. Present in a short report to the class your opinion about her decision and some personal values or ideals of your own which you would never betray. Use these questions to help you.

- 1 Jane says, 'Laws and principles are not for the time when there is no temptation.' Do you agree?
- 2 Jane also says, 'I care for myself. The more solitary I am, the more I will respect myself.' What do you think about this?
- 3 Can you think of a modern situation that could correspond to Jane's moral dilemma?
- 4 Can you see yourself acting like Jane in a similar moral dilemma?