

# The polished hoe essay sample



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The story center opens in 1950 and the plantation, which was a slave plantation. The story is told mainly in first person by the main character, Mary Gertrude Mathilda. She tells the story of a lifetime of abuse, sexual exploitation, incest and love that led up to why she killed Mr. Belfeels, her lover. Mr. Belfeels was the manager of that plantation and her forced lover since the young age of 13 when her mother, who was his previous mistress, gave her to him.

Being the manager of the plantation and white has privilege and power not only over Mary but over the whole village. The police officer that is called to investigate the murder Sgt. Percy Stuart is in love with Mary and has been for a very long time. They had been friends since childhood and he understands, to some degree, why Mary had killed Belfeels. He feels torn between his duties to her and his responsibilities as an officer. Being black himself he understood the way of life on the island and the unspoken mentality of slavery that was always present in their lives.

Being Mr. Belfeels mistress is where the book begins. Mary tells the story that led up to the confession of her killing and describes a life of brutality from being an indentured sex servant with no love or tenderness. This type of duty and life did enable her to have some material comforts and privilege.

But sadly Mary describes how this had separated her early in life from the white establishment and even from her own people. She felt that her home, the plantation was a prison that she could never leave. Mary chronicles how she began as a field hand moving up to kitchen help and then to maid finally becoming Mr. Belfield's mistress. She was well kept and lived in the Great

House of the plantation that was the center of her exploitation. She endured this kind of life for over 35 years and even gave her abuser a son that would later become a well respected doctor for this island.

Although Mary had many children only one lived, her son she had with Mr. Belfeels. He was given a good education and became a well respected doctor in that community because of his father. But it was how her son was conceived that gave Mary the most stress and eventually to her breakdown deciding to kill Belfeels. This was the pain of her having a baby by her own father along with being his lover for so many years was just too much for Mary to accept and mentally broke her. As a victim she becomes almost detached from her emotions when relaying the story to the first officer.

The story shows how the conditions of life during that time servitude, racism and colonialism were intertwined in the lives of Barbadians. And it was this reality that caused Mary to grab a hoe and killed Mr. Belfeels with it. While she is waiting for Sgt. Percy Stuart to arrive in a stage of shock her story unfolds and truths are found. In detailing her life she describes not only the evils she endured because of slavery but also the decadence of colonialism that was a way of life on the island. Mary's status, as a mistress, shows how she was systematically separated from her own community and how she could never be accepted by the elite society as well making her totally isolated in this Grand House a good recipe for a breakdown.

To understand this murder and why it should be justified I researched colonialism in Barbados first. This being the society Mary was living in and to help me to understand the possible influences that guided her decision to

kill. When Mary talks of Christopher Columbus came to the Caribbean he brought with him slavery. “ Slavery, indentured servitude and colonialism have all played an important role in shaping the history of oppression in the Caribbean” (Mitchell & Bryan, 2007 April).

That was because when Columbus charted the route to the Caribbean many Dutch, English and French settlers arrived to make their riches with sugar. The sugarcane fields are a labor intensive industry and needed laborers. It wasn't long before the indigenous populations of the island were put to work, whether they wanted to or not. Once the native population died off because of “ harsh treatment and European diseases five million enslaved Africans, under a brutal chattel slavery system were brought to the Caribbean as captive labor” (Mitchell & Bryan, 2007 April).

It has been in just recent times, 2007, that many of the island nations have achieved independence. But the ramifications of slavery are still being felt today by African Americans. During Mary's time, 1950, much of this brutality was still a fact of life and because of the isolation of the islands this only intensified her need to feel free of the symbol of her oppression, Mr. Belfeels. The other factor in Mary's life that should be examined is Racism.

This is a very emotional influence that was probably and important key to the motive as to why Mary killed Belfeels. Millions of Africans made e journey to the Caribbean island as slaves. Set to work on plantations that gave their owners wealth and that wealth can even been seen today if you were to visit the Caribbean. It was during this time that slavery was allowed and justified using Africans color as the reason.

Racism formed the basis of Caribbean society and is still present today. “ That thread which begins centuries ago with racial enslavement, reappears and persists today in the United Kingdom and other inner cities throughout this country where Caribbean’s live” (Howe 22). This concept of racism is a direct factor in the cause of Belfeels death. Caribbean culture makes these individuals very proud and have a strong sense of self the only way for Mary to relieve this conflict was to kill the problem.

Another factor I came across while researching this book and topics that could have been an influencing factor was her “ rebel consciousness by recalling the folk wisdom, resilience and survival strategies of their foremothers” (Springer 43). In the article I researched it was on women’s response to oppression. It discussed women’s move from powerlessness of exploitation to the power of rebel consciousness. This rebel consciousness was shown when Mary was telling her story. The killing was an attempt to regain power.

After reading the bio on the author it is clear he has written the book from his own experiences he was exposed to while he was living in Barbados in the 50’s. He is known for his political situations in his books and has referred to himself as a writer interested in social realism. Although the book was hard to read because of the Caribbean dialect it also gave the reader a realism that most writers find difficult to catch. I found the book enjoyable and would recommend this book to historians and the general reader alike. I felt the theme accurate on showing what life was like in the 1950’s showing that colonialism and slavery were still present and very much overlooked just like today.