

# Eyre on the side of caution: two literary heroines face life's challenges



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In life, different variables affect an individual's growth. These variables can include any aspect of a person's life, ranging from family influence to personal passions. In the novels *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the authors use certain themes to shape the lives of their female protagonists. Charlotte Brontë's wide scope of Jane Eyre's life journey creates a comprehensive emotional picture of Jane's spiritual growth. Likewise, *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys expounds on a mysterious character from *Jane Eyre*, Antoinette Cosway, Mr. Rochester's wife. As Jane and Antoinette mature, friendship, education, spirituality, and romantic love affect their growth and outlook on life.

As a child, Jane's friendships help her remain optimistic and ambitious as she faces countless challenges. At Gateshead Hall, Jane identifies the maid, Bessie, as her only friend amidst her malicious family members. Although Bessie cannot defend Jane from this injustice, she shows Jane patience and love. Bessie's friendship teaches Jane to value friends as a source of hope. This mindset sticks with Jane as she journeys on to Lowood, Thornfield Hall, Moor House, and, lastly, Ferndean. At the beginning of her time at Lowood, Jane finds solidarity in a fellow student, Helen Burns. Because of a practically loveless childhood, Jane expresses to Helen a fear of being ostracized yet again. Her fears swell when Mr. Brocklehurst warns all of Lowood's teachers and pupils to beware of Jane, relaying the lies Jane's aunt told him. In response to Jane's insecurity, Helen says, "' If all the world hated you, and believed you wicked, while your conscience approved you, and absolved you from guilt, you would not be without friends'" (Brontë 94). Helen explains how self-confidence is the key to facing adversity, for in truth, God's

judgment is the only opinion that matters. Jane accepts Helen's optimistic outlook on life. In fact, her newfound value for personal integrity helps her accrue the respect of Mr. Rochester in later chapters.

Unlike Jane, Antoinette's relationships in *Wide Sargasso Sea* bring cynicism and little happiness into her life. At the novel's opening, Antoinette lives as a social pariah in Coulibri Estate. Growing up in isolation, Antoinette befriends a young black girl, Tia. From Tia, Antoinette learns about the gossip surrounding her family. Tia talks outwardly about the murmurs of the nearby Spanish Town: " She [Tia] hear all we poor like beggar...Real white people, they got gold money. They didn't look at us, nobody see them come near us. Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger" (Rhys 22). In an unfriendly manner, Tia deprecates Antoinette's worth. Although Antoinette is kept sheltered from the outside world, she still suffers emotionally from the prejudices of her neighbors. Not even her first friend will spare her from the embarrassment. This initial exposure to her poor social status shapes Antoinette's view of herself and her family. Quality of life continues to deteriorate for her when her house is burned down and her mother dies after—allegedly—losing her sanity. Such a tumultuous background contributes to her low self-esteem and distrust of others.

In the face of adversity, Jane and Antoinette willingly accept education as a way to escape from their disappointing lives. In Antoinette's situation, her escape to the convent protects her from her family's tragic descent into mayhem. Antoinette describes her convent school as " a place of sunshine and of death where very early in the morning the clap of a wooden signal  
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woke the nine of us who slept in the long dormitory” (Rhys 51). In this quotation, Antoinette expresses her gratitude for the seclusion of the convent. Surprisingly, she remains grateful in spite of the disconcerting presence of death. Antoinette’s willingness to overlook the convent’s less appealing aspects proves how thankful she is to simply be away from her former life as a social outcast.

Similar to Antoinette, Jane initially sees the Lowood Institution as an escape from her punitive aunt. However, the theme of education bears a stronger significance in Jane’s growth than in Antoinette’s. Jane’s education opens up opportunities for her throughout *Jane Eyre* and recurs often as an important subject matter, but in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, education is mentioned once, briefly. Despite this disparity, both characters shared the same romanticized view of religious schools. To Jane, “ it implied a long journey, an entire separation from Gateshead, an entrance into a new life” (Bronte 28). Jane hopes she can start a new life at Lowood. During Jane’s tenure at Lowood, Christian education is characterized as an ascetic lifestyle. A prime example of this mindset is when Mr. Brocklehurst, Lowood’s benefactor, berates a teacher for serving the girls bread and cheese outside of their normal meal time, an action prompted by the serving of burnt porridge for breakfast. Mr. Brocklehurst preaches to her:

“ You are aware that my plan in bringing up these girls is, not to accustom them to habits of luxury and indulgence, but to render them hardy, patient, self-denying...Oh, madam, when you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge, into these children’s mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls!” (Bronte 84)

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In his spiel, Mr. Brocklehurst describes the Christian educational experience as abstemious. Christian students, according to his piety, must be self-reliant and independent of excess commodities. He believes conveniences made for the girls—in this case, an edible meal—distracts them from this principle, depriving their souls. Through Mr. Brocklehurst's callous character, Bronte establishes a negative representation of education in Jane Eyre's exposition. However, as the novel progresses and Jane matures, education becomes a useful tool. After Mr. Brocklehurst was replaced, Jane grows to appreciate her studies more, becoming an excellent student and an exemplary teacher. Her tenacious passion for learning enables her to reap opportunities voraciously. Furthermore, her education continues to benefit her in her life after Lowood. Her brilliant abilities procure her a job as Adele's nanny at Gateshead Hall, for one. Secondly, her perspicacity enraptures Mr. Rochester, a man of high standards and taste. Lastly, her background helps her find a job as a teacher in Morton and win the respect of St. John Rivers, a stoic preacher.

In contrast to the theme of education, spirituality plays contradicting roles in the two heroines' lives. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, religion has a sinister presence, appearing in tandem with negative events in Antoinette's life. Religion is specifically associated with betrayal. For instance, a Biblical allusion occurs when Antoinette turns to Christophine, begging for a love potion. After she receives the potion, Antoinette leaves Christophine's quarters and notices that "nearby a cock crew and I [Antoinette] thought, 'That is for betrayal, but who is the traitor?'" (Rhys 107). This biblical allusion of the rooster's crow refers to two of Jesus' disloyal disciples, Judas and Peter. As Jesus predicted in the Last Supper, Judas led the Romans to him in

the Garden of Gethsemane, and Peter denied his allegiance to Jesus three times before a rooster crowed. Antoinette recalls the significance of the rooster's crow and contemplates who the traitor would be in her situation. Clearly from Mr. Rochester's point of view, Antoinette acts as the traitor since the potion gives him the sensation of drowning in his sleep. This allusion recurs a few pages later when Mr. Rochester is conspiring to rid himself of Antoinette. He writes a letter to his father explaining his decision to return to England. As he writes this letter, he hears that " a cock crowed persistently outside" (Rhys 147). Unlike Antoinette, Mr. Rochester does not heed the rooster's warning. Ironically, he does not acknowledge the Biblical significance of the rooster's crow, even though he claims to be a practicing Christian.

Jane Eyre poses a different development of spirituality. At the start of Jane Eyre, Bronte introduces Mr. Brocklehurst, the benefactor of Lowood Institution. Even though he claims to be a humble Christian who only needs the bare necessities, he lives extravagantly and pampers his family with indulgences. Through this character, Bronte presents spirituality as a form of hypocrisy. Nevertheless, Bronte explores a more positive outlook on spirituality through the words of Helen Burns, Jane's childhood friend. Unlike Mr. Brocklehurst, Helen uses Christianity to engender an unconditional love in herself for all people, no matter how they treat her. At Lowood, Helen is frequently singled out by her teacher and is punished for the slightest infractions. Jane observes as Helen accepts this maltreatment with grace. Astounded, Jane confronts Helen, curious to know why Helen refuses to denounce her punisher. In responses, Helen relays Bible verse about loving

everyone, even criminals. She says, ““ I can so clearly distinguish between the criminal and his crime; I can sincerely forgive the first while I abhor the last: with this creed revenge never worries my heart, degradation never too deeply disgusts me, injustice never crushes me too low: I live in calm, looking to the end’” (Bronte 77). Helen’s religion gives her an inner peace and the ability to forgive easily, anger slowly, and love wholly. Her calm disposition remains steadfast even when she falls ill with typhus. Thanks to Helen’s influence, Jane develops a deeper connection with the purpose of Christianity, to love and be humble. Her friendship with Helen helps her grow to forgive her aunt and cousins for mistreating her. Helen showed her how to soften her heart. Another facet of spirituality concerns the inner spirit of Jane herself. Quite a few times, Mr. Rochester calls her an angel. Throughout her journey, Jane nourishes her own spirit while remaining aware of her religious upbringing.

Lastly, the theme of romantic love strongly motivates Jane, but the lack of romantic love ruins Antoinette. At the end of *Jane Eyre*, Jane finally returns to her love, Mr. Rochester, now crippled after his mansion’s burning, and marries him. She lives on happily knowing “ what it is like to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth...No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I” (Bronte 656). Jane proudly professes her love for Mr. Rochester and claims she is the most attentive and devoted lover of all. Her fidelity shows as she continues to care for him at Ferndean. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette expresses her unbridled animosity towards Mr. Rochester after bearing witness to his sexual affair with a servant. She tells him, “ I hate you and before I die I will show you how much I hate you” (Bronte 134).

Antoinette promises to make Mr. Rochester rue the day of their meeting. She will fulfill this vow eventually by burning his house to the ground. Out of all the past parallels, these heroines resemble each other strongest in their passion, even though Antoinette's is one of hatred.

Charlotte Bronte and Jean Rhys depict full-bodied characters in their epic novels. As they push their heroines through perilous struggles, they deftly capture Jane's and Antoinette's emotional growth. Friendship, education, spirituality, and romantic love help and hinder the women, but no matter their effect, these themes contribute emotive volume to the novel. Bronte uses these components to motivate Jane and to propel her from one step of her journey to the next. In a different manner, Rhys uses them to discourage Antoinette, driving her to madness. Without such elaborate themes, nothing could have moved Jane and Antoinette to reach their emotional climaxes.