

# Critical review of william harris's wide sargasso sea criticism



In Dr. William Harris's *Carnival of Psyche: Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea*, an analysis of Rhys's 1966 postmodern "prequel" to *Jane Eyre*, Harris attempts to evaluate the significance of "intuitive myth" on the novel's psyche. "Attempt," however, is the operative word here. Without a thesis or clear argument, Harris's essay feels more like a meandering, purposeless discussion of his thoughts about *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which range from its connection to *The Invisible Man* to the role of structuralism in nihilist philosophy. This would not be such a problem if Harris's individual points were well-argued, but, unfortunately, they are not. Predicated on very little textual evidence and worsened by convoluted syntax, Harris's claims amount to little more than opinion and badly-articulated opinion at that. Furthermore, Harris's central argument — that Jean Rhys's allusions to myth are intuitive, not intentional — is extremely difficult to prove. And Harris does not rise to his own challenge. He fails to define the difference between intuitive and intentional allusion, offer any coherent evidence to suggest the Jean Rhys's allusions were intuitive, or explain why it matters whether Rhys intended these allusions or not. Ultimately, Harris's convoluted style, meandering structure, and lack of textual evidence makes proving an impossible claim even harder.

Harris's central argument about "intuitive myth" is, for the most part, predicated on one quotation alone, neither of which are particularly well-analyzed or used to prove his point. Harris rests most of his case on Antoinette's reference to a "tree of life in flames" in her dream, which Harris (indirectly) connects to a South American creation myth. This allusion is not difficult to recognize; Rhys's description of the burning tree of life is very

plausibly a reference to Arawak and Macusi legends of the “The food bearing tree of the world, which is fired by the Caribs at a time of war when the Arawaks seek refuge in its branches. The fire rages and drives Arawaks up into space until they are themselves burnt and converted into sparks which continue to rise into the sky to become the Pleiades.” However, the heart of Harris’s argument — that these myths are intuitive — he never proves. Instead he simply states that they are, using italics for emphasis, saying “*Wide Sargasso sea...has a profoundly intuitive spirit*” and asserting that the “tree of life myth” (and other myths which he references only in vague, single-word quotations) “are intuitively woven into the tapestry of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.” Furthermore, in addition to never demonstrating why he believes Rhys’s inclusion of these myths was not “deliberate,” Harris fails to explain why the intuitive vs. deliberate inclusion matters. He mentions briefly that “one cannot avoid the ambiguities that pull at that [allusion to the “sky of fiction” and “tree of life] and suppress it still into the sphere of symbolic widowhood.” This ambiguity may be one implication of intuitive myths, but Harris makes this point so briefly and indirectly that it becomes negligible. Ultimately, Harris’s argument, while interesting, lacks in any real substance.

Harris further obscures his already-lacking argument with convoluted syntax, unclear metaphors, and a meandering structure. Despite promising to “confine himself on this occasion to Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*,” Harris begins his argument with a two-paragraph digression about *Invisible Man*, which he does connect in any way to *Wide Sargasso Sea*. When he does get to the novel at hand, he begins by saying, “*Wide Sargasso Sea* varies the

rainbow arc between cultures in a foundly intuitive spirit. To appreciate that variation we need to recall the bridge between sky and earth that is implicit in the rainbow arc from Central to South America in Quetzalcoatl and Yurokon. Then we need to revise that arc or bridge into a rather different compression of features." What, exactly, "the rainbow arch" is or why he expects readers to "recall it," Harris does not explain. However, he sets up his most important point — the reference to the creation myth — upon this confusing metaphor, making the rest of his argument equally as confusing. After a short but baffling discussion of this "intuitive myth," drenched in convoluted syntax and unproven statements, Harris segues into an analysis of the relationship between Rochester and Antoinette. This discussion is lengthy and hard-to-follow — focusing on the "psychical and immaterial re-marriage of Rochester and re-dressed Bertha into Antoinette in the 'sky of fiction' — and, other than the 'sky of fiction' reference, is not at all connected to intuitive myths. After some discussion of Obeah, Harris then caps off his argument with the greatest departure from this topic yet: the relationship between structuralism and nihilism. Not only is *Wide Sargasso Sea* not mentioned once in the last two pages, but the discussion itself feels utterly irrelevant to the larger theme of the essay.

William Harris's *Carnival of Psyche: Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea* is an unfortunate example of the way flowery language and a commitment to originality can obscure the true substance of an argument. Densely abstract, Harris's piece stops being an analysis and starts becoming a piece of work that needs analyzing itself. Filled with unexplained metaphors and run-on-

sentences, Harris may spend a paragraph explaining what he means by “inarticulate” but he clearly can’t recognize the trait in his own work.