

The importance of setting within "mama day" by gloria naylor essay sample

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The novel *Mama Day* by Gloria Naylor explores both the intriguing relationship between a young city boy and a culturally confused girl, George and Ophelia, and the simple yet supernatural life of an old, wise woman on an isolated island entirely detached from the civilized world around her. Ophelia, or Cocoa, becomes a link between the chaotic world and hustle and bustle of the mainland and the life of Willow Springs that connects her into a cultural and much different identity. The setting of a novel and the distinct portrayal of the time, place, and environment of what is occurring are often essential to the understanding of the true essence of a novel. In this case, the element of the setting is most important to the novel as a whole, establishing the grounds for the several diverse perspectives and "realities" for Naylor's significant characters. The importance of setting within *Mama Day* is shown through the vivid description of the island of Willow Springs, the use of New York City as an opposing world to that of the cultural island, and the distinct environment and boundaries that are created regarding the spiritual "other place."

The island of Willow Springs becomes a place throughout the book that is very real and full of life for its inhabitants, even though it realistically does not even exist. The first person narration by George becomes the basis for the outside depiction of Willow Springs, and his lack of knowledge and connection to the island brings about a vital perspective for the reader. George becomes aware of the unique aspects of the island and reveals some of the most cultural and spiritual parts of its existence. "My suspicions were confirmed when we drove over that shaky wooden bridge: you had not prepared me for paradise...I had to be there and see- no, feel- that I was

entering another world. Where ever the word paradise failed once I crossed over The Sound...how do I describe air that thickens so that it seems as solid as the water, causing colors and sounds and textures to actually float in it?" (p. 175) George recognizes the beauty of the quaint, ancestral, slow-paced, and traditional life of the somewhat "un-westernized" island. Those that live and are a part of Willow Springs sometimes seem unable to realize that beauty within the simplicity.

There is something about Willow Springs that Mama Day knows continues to bring Cocoa back to- "Home. You can move away from it, but you never leave it. Not as long as it holds something to be missed." (p. 50) The setting created of Willow Springs is also unique because not only is the duration of the book a flashback from the present, but it seems as if the book could easily take place in a time period much earlier because of the simple and traditional way of the people. The island had not seemed to change that significantly since over a century before when the place was founded. The days of 1823 were long gone, however, the culture of the time still left a historical spirit on Willow Springs and its people. Emphasis is also placed on the lack of a need for time. Life exists more around the lives of the people and the changing of the seasons, rather than living by the clock as the people "beyond the bridge" are said to. "Living in a place like Willow Springs, it's sorta easy to forget about time. Guess 'cause the biggest thing it does is to bring about change and nothing much changes here but the seasons." (p. 160) the setting is most important for understanding the true tranquility and reality of Willow Springs.

People are in constant communication with one another because the island is so small, and word spreads quickly the way people gossip. Naylor makes elements of the setting very vivid and natural, and images of the butterflies, woody forests, and mysterious graveyard seem more than real to the reader. Culturally, the environment of Willow Springs is one in its own. Mama Day uses herbal medicine to keep people well, others use supernatural voodoo and dark forces, and ceremonies like Candle Walk bring these people together to honor ancestors that came over as slaves. The cultural setting of this island is responsible for setting these unique people apart the most and creating the captivating world that Willow Springs is for the reader. The bridge is important within the setting because it exists as a symbol throughout the book, not only physically connecting Willow Springs to the mainland but showing the distinct separation and transition between the two worlds. For George and Cocoa, the bridge was a true link and Cocoa knew that " any summer we crossed over that bridge would be the summer we crossed over." (p. 165)

Yet another significant setting within Mama Day is that of New York City and the structured, chaotic world beyond the bridge into Willow Springs. The ways and people of Willow Springs exist at a complete contrast to the natural, peaceful, and slow-paced life on the island. George, a New York native, puts a lot of insight onto the life that he has had growing up in " all the incredible space." (p. 98) The environment and people of New York are all that George has ever known and he finally comes to a great realization about this life that he has had. " Standing there under and over all that incredible space, I saw how small and cramped my life had been...I

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had told Mama Day I knew New York- God, what a fool I had been." (p. 98)

The outside depiction of New York and the busy American life by Mama Day relays the stereotypical view that is common of large cities, especially those such as New York City. " New York City is full of con artists. Muggers, pickpockets, and God knows what else? Why didn't Cocoa come home and get herself a husband, somebody she could trust?" (p. 132)

Naylor does not at any point say that Willow Springs or New York life is better than the other, however, a great affinity for the ways of Willow Springs is held by all of the significant characters in some way. Mama Day sat watching American talk shows and could only wonder the craziness that lied beyond the only place she had ever really lived. Cocoa found herself able to get away from Willow Springs, but she also found herself with an attachment to the place that she could not help but return to. George developed an interesting attraction to Willow Springs mostly because of the incredible history and culture that the island was home to, especially because of his own isolated, unaffectionate childhood. Because of the busy lifestyle that most city dwellers have, life runs quickly by the clock and George was forced to make a great transition when he attempted to become accustomed to the life of his wife and her family. The portrayal of the setting of New York City and Manhattan is most important in existing as a place of extreme comparison to the world of Willow Springs, and the people that are in the " gray area" between both of these isolated, unique places are an integral link between the modern world and traditional ways.

A final significant setting that is a part of Naylor's novel is that of the "other place," the small, secluded section of the island that was an extremely important spiritual place to Mama Day. As the novel proceeds, a sort of boundary seems to be created around this place, holding in the sometimes frightening spirits that only Mama Day seemed to face and keeping out those that just were not able to understand the deep ancestry with which the place was full. The "other place" is important to the novel because the mystery of this place holds a great portion of the culture of Willow Springs. Mama Day identifies herself with the history and legend that both the graveyard and the old house contain, however she still is not able to grasp it all at points. "No comfort in that graveyard for Miranda tonight. She heads on toward the other place, but her steps are slow and halting...Nobody, drink or sober, would come this far into the west woods at night. It's too near the other place...It's an old house with a big garden that's all." (p. 117) The boundaries of the "other place" are a very real part of Willow Springs, but, in addition, this place represents a much deeper aspect of the island and symbolizes the important ancestry of the Willow Springs inhabitants.

Gloria Naylor's novel *Mama Day* effectively creates a very real place of Willow Springs for the reader. The novel exists in the modern day, however the traditional and sometimes old-fashioned ways often pull the reader into days of a much earlier time. Most importantly, the differing settings created throughout the book are the basis for the great and unique spirit of Willow Springs that is captured by the reader.