

wide sargasso sea novel

wide sargasso sea novel is a critically acclaimed work that reimagines the backstory of the enigmatic character Bertha Mason from Charlotte Brontë's classic novel "Jane Eyre." Written by Jean Rhys and published in 1966, this novel explores themes of identity, displacement, colonialism, and madness through a postcolonial lens. The narrative is set in the Caribbean and delves into the complexities of race, culture, and gender, providing a voice to a previously marginalized character. This article provides a comprehensive overview of the wide sargasso sea novel, examining its plot, characters, themes, literary style, and cultural significance. It also highlights the novel's impact on literature and its continuing relevance in contemporary discussions about postcolonialism and feminism.

- Plot Summary of Wide Sargasso Sea
- Main Characters and Their Roles
- Themes Explored in the Novel
- Literary Style and Narrative Structure
- Cultural and Historical Context
- Impact and Legacy of the Novel

Plot Summary of Wide Sargasso Sea

The wide sargasso sea novel unfolds in the early 19th century Caribbean, primarily Jamaica and Dominica, and serves as a prequel to "Jane Eyre." The story is divided into three parts, each offering different perspectives and deepening the understanding of the protagonist's tragic life. The narrative follows Antoinette Cosway, a Creole heiress struggling with her identity and her tumultuous marriage to an unnamed Englishman, who is widely interpreted as Mr. Rochester from "Jane Eyre."

The first part introduces Antoinette's childhood in Jamaica, highlighting her isolation and the tensions between the white Creole community and the black Jamaican population. The second part shifts to the husband's perspective, revealing his alienation and mistrust, which lead to the deterioration of their marriage. The final section recounts Antoinette's descent into madness and confinement in the attic of Thornfield Hall, paralleling Bertha Mason's fate in "Jane Eyre."

Main Characters and Their Roles

The wide sargasso sea novel features a cast of complex characters whose interactions drive the narrative and illuminate its themes. Below are the principal figures:

- **Antoinette Cosway:** The protagonist, a white Creole woman of mixed heritage, whose identity crisis and societal alienation form the core of the novel.
- **The Englishman (Mr. Rochester):** Antoinette's husband, whose perspective reveals colonial attitudes, cultural misunderstandings, and personal insecurities.
- **Annette Cosway:** Antoinette's mother, whose tragic life and mental instability set a precedent for Antoinette's fate.
- **Tia:** A childhood friend of Antoinette, representing the racial tensions and divisions within the Caribbean society.
- **Christophine:** A servant and healer, embodying Caribbean spirituality and resistance to colonial oppression.

These characters collectively portray the intersections of race, class, and gender that shape the narrative's conflict and tragedy.

Themes Explored in the Novel

The wide sargasso sea novel addresses several profound themes that enrich its narrative and contribute to its literary significance.

Identity and Displacement

Central to the novel is Antoinette's struggle with her mixed-race heritage and her sense of belonging. She is caught between the white European colonial culture and the black Caribbean community, leading to feelings of alienation and confusion. This theme reflects broader postcolonial concerns about identity in a fragmented world.

Colonialism and Power

The novel critiques the colonial system and its impact on individuals and societies. It exposes the racial hierarchies, exploitation, and cultural clashes that define the Caribbean during this period. The Englishman's mistrust and domination over Antoinette symbolize colonial control and its dehumanizing effects.

Madness and Oppression

Madness in the novel is portrayed as a consequence of psychological trauma and social oppression. Antoinette's descent into madness is linked to her isolation, betrayal, and loss of identity, challenging traditional representations of mental illness.

Gender and Patriarchy

The novel explores the limited roles and agency afforded to women, particularly in the context of marriage and colonial society. Antoinette's experiences highlight the intersection of gender and colonial oppression.

Literary Style and Narrative Structure

The wide sargasso sea novel employs a distinctive literary style and narrative technique that enhances its thematic depth and emotional impact.

Multiple Perspectives

The story is told through shifting narrators and viewpoints, including Antoinette, the Englishman, and other characters. This multiperspectivity allows readers to see events from different angles, emphasizing the subjectivity of truth and memory.

Symbolism and Imagery

Rich symbolism permeates the novel, with recurring images such as the sargasso sea, fire, and the natural Caribbean landscape. These symbols reflect themes of entrapment, destruction, and cultural hybridity.

Language and Style

Jean Rhys's prose is noted for its lyrical quality and use of Creole dialects alongside standard English. This blend of linguistic styles mirrors the cultural fusion and tensions within the novel's setting.

Cultural and Historical Context

The wide sargasso sea novel is deeply rooted in the historical and cultural context of the Caribbean during the post-emancipation era. Understanding this background is essential to appreciating the novel's significance.

Post-Emancipation Caribbean Society

The novel is set shortly after the abolition of slavery, a period marked by social upheaval and racial tensions. The legacy of slavery affects relationships between former slaves and the white Creole population, shaping the characters' experiences.

Colonial Legacies

The novel critiques the lingering effects of British colonialism, including economic exploitation, cultural domination, and racial prejudice. These factors contribute to the characters' conflicts and tragedies.

Literary Context

Wide Sargasso Sea is part of a broader postcolonial literary movement that seeks to revisit and revise canonical texts from marginalized perspectives. Its intertextual relationship with "Jane Eyre" exemplifies this trend.

Impact and Legacy of the Novel

The wide sargasso sea novel has had a profound influence on literature, criticism, and cultural studies since its publication.

Reinterpretation of Classic Literature

By giving voice to Bertha Mason, traditionally depicted as the 'madwoman in the attic,' the novel challenges and expands the understanding of "Jane Eyre." It has inspired numerous critical essays and adaptations that explore marginalized perspectives.

Contributions to Postcolonial Literature

The novel is considered a pioneering work in postcolonial literature, addressing issues of race, identity, and colonial history. It has opened doors for other writers to explore similar themes and narratives.

Influence on Feminist Criticism

Wide Sargasso Sea has been embraced by feminist scholars for its exploration of female subjectivity, oppression, and resistance. It highlights the intersections of gender and colonialism in shaping women's lives.

Key Reasons for Its Enduring Relevance

1. Its challenge to dominant literary narratives and historical perspectives.
2. Its nuanced portrayal of cultural hybridity and identity crises.
3. Its exploration of power dynamics in personal and political contexts.

4. Its lyrical and innovative narrative style.
5. Its continuing resonance with contemporary issues of race, gender, and postcolonialism.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of the novel 'Wide Sargasso Sea'?

The main theme of 'Wide Sargasso Sea' is the exploration of identity and displacement, focusing on postcolonial tensions, racial inequality, and the complexities of cultural heritage in the Caribbean.

Who is the author of 'Wide Sargasso Sea' and when was it published?

'Wide Sargasso Sea' was written by Jean Rhys and was first published in 1966.

How does 'Wide Sargasso Sea' relate to Charlotte Brontë's 'Jane Eyre'?

'Wide Sargasso Sea' serves as a prequel and a response to 'Jane Eyre,' providing the backstory of Bertha Mason, the 'madwoman in the attic,' and offering a postcolonial perspective on her character and circumstances.

What narrative techniques are used in 'Wide Sargasso Sea'?

The novel employs multiple narrators and a fragmented narrative structure, using shifting perspectives to deepen the complexity of characters and to highlight themes of confusion, alienation, and cultural conflict.

Where is 'Wide Sargasso Sea' set and how does the setting influence the story?

The novel is primarily set in Jamaica and Dominica in the Caribbean. The lush, exotic setting contrasts with the characters' psychological turmoil and symbolizes the colonial tensions and cultural clashes central to the story.

Why is 'Wide Sargasso Sea' considered an important work in postcolonial literature?

'Wide Sargasso Sea' is significant in postcolonial literature because it challenges colonial narratives by giving voice to marginalized characters, critiques colonial oppression, and explores the impact of colonialism on identity and relationships.

Additional Resources

1. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë

This classic novel tells the story of the orphaned Jane Eyre, who becomes a governess at Thornfield Hall and falls in love with the mysterious Mr. Rochester. It explores themes of social class, morality, and the struggle for independence. "Wide Sargasso Sea" serves as a prequel to this novel, giving a backstory to the character of Bertha Mason, Rochester's wife.

2. *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier

A gothic novel centered around a young woman who marries a wealthy widower, only to find the memory of his first wife, Rebecca, dominates their lives. The novel delves into themes of identity, jealousy, and the power of the past. Its atmospheric tension and exploration of complex female characters resonate with themes in "Wide Sargasso Sea."

3. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë

This novel follows Helen Graham, a mysterious woman who arrives at Wildfell Hall and reveals a troubled past. It addresses issues such as women's independence, alcoholism, and domestic abuse, making it a pioneering work of feminist literature. Its focus on female struggle and resilience complements the themes in "Wide Sargasso Sea."

4. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison

Set after the American Civil War, this novel tells the story of Sethe, a former enslaved woman haunted by the ghost of her dead daughter. It explores the legacy of slavery, memory, and trauma. Like "Wide Sargasso Sea," it gives voice to marginalized characters and examines the impact of history on identity.

5. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

This epistolary novel chronicles the life of Celie, an African American woman in the early 20th-century American South, as she overcomes oppression and finds her voice. Themes of racial and gender oppression, resilience, and sisterhood are central. The novel's exploration of female empowerment echoes the struggles faced by characters in "Wide Sargasso Sea."

6. *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf

A groundbreaking work of modernist literature, "Orlando" follows the life of its protagonist who lives for centuries and changes gender from male to female. The novel explores themes of identity, gender fluidity, and the nature of time. Its exploration of identity and societal roles provides a fascinating contrast to the themes in "Wide Sargasso Sea."

7. *Dracula* by Bram Stoker

This gothic horror novel tells the story of Count Dracula's attempt to move from Transylvania to England and the efforts of a group to stop him. Themes of the uncanny, colonial anxiety, and the clash between modernity and tradition are prevalent. The gothic elements and colonial tensions in "Dracula" offer a complementary backdrop to the postcolonial themes in "Wide Sargasso Sea."

8. *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende

A multi-generational saga blending magical realism with political and social commentary, this novel recounts the lives of the Trueba family in an unnamed Latin American country. It addresses themes of memory, family, and political upheaval. The novel's rich portrayal of colonial and postcolonial legacies aligns with the historical context of "Wide Sargasso Sea."

9. *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad

This novella explores a voyage up the Congo River into the African interior, revealing the darkness of colonial exploitation and the ambiguity of civilization and savagery. It critically examines imperialism and moral corruption. Its critique of colonialism and exploration of psychological depth connect deeply with the themes presented in "Wide Sargasso Sea."

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wide sargasso sea novel: Penguin Essentials Wide Sargasso Sea Jean Rhys, 2011-05-24 One of the BBC's '100 Novels that Shaped the World' Jean Rhys's spell-binding novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, inspired by *Jane Eyre* and winner the Royal Society of Literature Award is beautifully repackaged as part of the Penguin Essentials range. 'There is no looking glass here and I don't know what I am like now... Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I?' If Antoinette Cosway, a spirited Creole heiress, could have foreseen the terrible future that awaited her, she would not have married the young Englishman. Initially drawn to her beauty and sensuality, he becomes increasingly frustrated by his inability to reach into her soul. He forces Antoinette to conform to his rigid Victorian ideals, unaware that in taking away her identity he is destroying a part of himself as well as pushing her towards madness. Set against the lush backdrop of 1830s Jamaica, Jean Rhys's powerful, haunting masterpiece was inspired by her fascination with the first Mrs Rochester, the mad wife in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. 'Compelling, painful and exquisite' Guardian 'Brilliant. A tale of dislocation and dispossession, which Rhys writes with a kind of romantic cynicism, desperate and pungent' The Times 'Rhys turns a menacing cipher into a grieving, plausible young woman, and one whose story says whole worlds about global mixtures, about the misunderstandings between the colonized, the colonizers and the people who can't easily say which they are' Time Jean Rhys was born in Dominica in 1890, the daughter of a Welsh doctor and a white Creole mother, and came to England when she was sixteen. Her first book, a collection of stories called *The Left Bank*, was published in 1927. This was followed by *Quartet* (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 and with the outbreak of war they went out of print. Jean Rhys dropped from sight until nearly twenty years later she was discovered living reclusively in Cornwall. During those years she had accumulated the stories collected in *Tigers are Better-Looking*. In 1966 she made a sensational reappearance with *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which won the Royal Society of Literature Award and the W. H. Smith Award. Her final collection of stories, *Sleep It Off Lady*, appeared in 1976 and *Smile Please*, her unfinished autobiography, was published posthumously in 1979. Jean Rhys died in 1979.

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wide sargasso sea novel: "Wide Sargasso Sea" by Jean Rhys as a Postcolonial Response to "Jane Eyre" by Charlotte Bronte Malgorzata Swietlik, 2011 Seminar paper from the year 2008 in the subject English Language and Literature Studies - Literature, grade: 2,00, University of Koblenz-Landau (Anglistik), course: Colonial and Postcolonial Literatures, language: English, abstract: Wide Sargasso Sea is one of the best-known literary postcolonial replies to the writing of Charlotte Bronte and a brilliant deconstruction of what is known as the author's worlding in Jane Eyre. The novel written by Jean Rhys tells the story of Jane Eyre's protagonist, Edward Rochester. The plot takes place in West Indies where Rochester met his first wife, Bertha Antoinette Mason. Wide Sargasso Sea influences the common reading and understanding of the matrix novel, as it rewrites crucial parts of Jane Eyre. The heroine in Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea, Antoinette Cosway, is created out of demonic and bestialic Bertha Mason from Jane Eyre. Rhys's great achievement in her re-writing of the Bronte's text is her creation of a double to the madwoman from Jane Eyre. The heroine of Wide Sargasso Sea, the beautiful Antoinette Cosway, heiress of the post-emancipation fortune is created out of the demonc and bestialic Bertha Mason. The author transforms the first Mrs Rochester into an individual figure whose madness is caused by imperialistic and patriarchal oppression The vision of Bertha/Antoinette as an insane offspring from a family plagued by madness is no longer plausible to the reader. In this essay I would like to focus the factors which led to the madness of the protagonist. Although Bertha Mason and Jane Eyre seem to be enemies and contradictory characters in the Victorian novel, many critics find several similarities between the two heroines, their life and finally between Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea. Seeing Jane Eyre and Antoinette Cosway as sisters and doubles is very popular with some critics who dealt with the works of Charlotte Bronte and Jean Rhys. Nevertheless, I would like to focus in this essay on Gayatri Chakravort

wide sargasso sea novel: Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys (Book Analysis) Bright Summaries, 2018-12-13 Unlock the more straightforward side of Wide Sargasso Sea with this concise and insightful summary and analysis! This engaging summary presents an analysis of Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys, which was inspired by Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre and tells the story of the most frequently overlooked character in that novel: Bertha Mason, the infamous "madwoman in the attic". Rhys's novel takes the reader back to Bertha's childhood in the Caribbean, when she was known by the name Antoinette Cosway, and explores how her status as an outcast, her unhappy marriage and the pernicious influence of rumour and slander eventually transform her from a quiet child into the deranged character from Brontë's novel. Wide Sargasso Sea was the last novel published by Jean Rhys prior to her death in 1979, and is generally considered her masterpiece. It was also partially influenced by Rhys's own childhood in the Caribbean. Find out everything you need to know about Wide Sargasso Sea in a fraction of the time! This in-depth and informative reading guide brings you: •A complete plot summary •Character studies •Key themes and symbols •Questions for further reflection Why choose BrightSummaries.com? Available in print and digital format, our publications are designed to accompany you on your reading journey. The clear and concise style makes for easy understanding, providing the perfect opportunity to improve your literary knowledge in no time. See the very best of literature in a whole new light with BrightSummaries.com!

wide sargasso sea novel: Wide Sargasso Sea at 50 Elaine Savory, Erica L. Johnson, 2020-11-03 This book revisits Jean Rhys's ground-breaking 1966 novel to explore its cultural and artistic influence in the areas of not only literature and literary criticism, but fashion design, visual art, and the theatre as well. Building on symposia that were held in London and New York in 2016 in honour of the novel's half-century, this collection demonstrates just how timely Rhys's insights into colonial

history, sexual relations, and aesthetics continue to be. The chapters include an extensive interview with novelist Caryl Phillips, who in 2018 published a novel about Rhys's life, an account of how *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be read through the lens of the #MeToo Movement, a clothing line inspired by the novel, and new critical directions. As both a celebration and scholarly evaluation, the collection shows how enduring Rhys's novel is in its continuing literary influence and social commentary.

wide sargasso sea novel: On the Question of Identity in the Novel "Wide Sargasso Sea" of Jean Rhys Julia Straub, 2019-04-30 Seminar paper from the year 2017 in the subject English Language and Literature Studies - Comparative Literature, grade: 2,7, University of Constance, course: British and American Studies, language: English, abstract: This work focuses on the question of identity in the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette, the female protagonist of Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is struggling with those questions of her identity all her life. As a Creole girl, who lives in Jamaica during post-colonialism, she finds herself caught between two identities not knowing where she belongs. On the one hand, there is the black community which she knows and grows up with, on the other hand the white community which her mother tries to be a part of and forces Antoinette to fit into as well. This life between two contrasting cultures forces Antoinette into a situation of confusion and doubt which makes her question not only where she belongs but if she belongs at all. It drives her into a crisis which she is not able to escape. Jean Rhys published her novel in 1966. *Wide Sargasso Sea* tells the story of Antoinette Cosway who is also, known under the name of Bertha, a character of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rhys is giving Bertha/ Antoinette a story and a reason why she became mad in the first place. The story starts in her childhood and moves on to the marriage to Mr. Rochester. The last part is set when she is already imprisoned by her husband and is setting the house on fire which accords with the story told in *Jane Eyre*. For the background of the novel it is important to know that Rhys herself grew up in a situation like Antoinette's. She as well had troubles with identifying herself when she grew up. So Rhys shares part of Antoinette's history which is probably why she was that interested in telling her story which is completely uncared-for by Brontë.

wide sargasso sea novel: Wide Sargasso Sea Jean Rhys, 1987 Her grand attempt to tell what she felt was the story of *Jane Eyre*'s 'madwoman in the attic', Bertha Rochester, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* is edited with an introduction and notes by Angela Smith in Penguin Classics. Born into the oppressive, colonialist society of 1930s Jamaica, white Creole heiress Antoinette Cosway meets a young Englishman who is drawn to her innocent beauty and sensuality. After their marriage, however, disturbing rumours begin to circulate which poison her husband against her. Caught between his demands and her own precarious sense of belonging, Antoinette is inexorably driven towards madness, and her husband into the arms of another novel's heroine. This classic study of betrayal, a seminal work of postcolonial literature, is Jean Rhys's brief, beautiful masterpiece. Jean Rhys (1894-1979) was born in Dominica. Coming to England aged 16, she drifted into various jobs before moving to Paris, where she began writing and was 'discovered' by Ford Madox Ford. Her novels, often portraying women as underdogs out to exploit their sexualities, were ahead of their time and only modestly successful. From 1939 (when *Good Morning, Midnight* was written) onwards she lived reclusively, and was largely forgotten when she made a sensational comeback with her account of *Jane Eyre*'s Bertha Rochester, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in 1966. If you enjoyed *Wide Sargasso Sea*, you might like Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, also available in Penguin Classics. 'She took one of the works of genius of the nineteenth century and turned it inside-out to create one of the works of genius of the twentieth century' Michele Roberts, *The Times*

wide sargasso sea novel: Modern Classics Wide Sargasso Sea Jean Rhys, 2000-08-29 One of the BBC's '100 Novels That Shaped Our World' 'Rhys took one of the works of genius of the 19th Century and turned it inside-out to create one of the works of genius of the 20th Century' Michele Roberts Jean Rhys's masterpiece tells the story of *Jane Eyre*'s 'madwoman in the attic', Bertha Rochester. Born into the oppressive, colonialist society of 1930s Jamaica, white Creole heiress Antoinette Cosway meets a young Englishman who is drawn to her innocent beauty and sensuality. After their marriage, however, disturbing rumours begin to circulate which poison her husband

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wide sargasso sea novel: Rochester and Bertha in "Jane Eyre" and "Wide Sargasso Sea": An Impossible Match Laura Deneke, 2007-11 Seminar paper from the year 2005 in the subject English Language and Literature Studies - Literature, grade: 1.0, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, course: The Victorian Afterlife, 12 entries in the bibliography, language: English, abstract: Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is a character without history or personality. She is depicted as a mere beast, bent on destroying her husband. The reader knows -and dreads- her from both Jane's and Rochester's perspective. Rochester claims that Bertha's lunacy was the sole trigger for the disaster that followed, but the narration reveals hints that suggest other factors may have contributed to the destruction of their marriage. Jean Rhys proposed a past for Bertha and her husband. Her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* creates a life for Bertha, on the background of which her madness is neither surprising nor inevitable. Whereas there is no doubt that she does become insane at the end of Rhys's novel, the reason for this is not her evil nature but a destructive relationship along with her transportation away from everything she ever knew into the cold of England. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is more than a prequel to a famous Victorian novel. It speaks out not only for Bertha but for all the other West Indian women who found themselves in similar situations.

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wide sargasso sea novel: Jean Rhys Carl Plasa, 2003-08-16 In this Reader's Guide, Carl Plasa provides a comprehensive survey and analysis of the most stimulating critical responses to *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The opening chapter outlines initial reactions to the novel from English and Caribbean critics, charting the differences between them. Chapter Two explores *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s dialogue with *Jane Eyre* and the theoretical questions it has raised. Succeeding chapters examine how critics have assessed the racial politics of Rhys's text, discuss the novel's African Caribbean cultural legacy, and explore how critics read the work both in terms of its moment of production and the early Victorian period in which it is set.

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wide sargasso sea novel: An Enhanced Reading of Jean Rhys' "Wide Sargasso Sea". Considering Source Texts Other than "Jane Eyre" Sophia Sharpe, 2016-04-12 Essay from the year 2012 in the subject English Language and Literature Studies - Comparative Literature, grade: Distinction, The Open University, course: M.A. English, language: English, abstract: This essay interrogates the way in which Jean Rhys utilises a backdrop of potent gothic mechanisms and echoes the stricken anarchy of post emancipation colonial rule in '*Wide Sargasso Sea*' to enhance the audience's reading and to enable her protagonist to hold a slanted mirror to the world of '*Jane Eyre*'. Rhys utilises a backdrop of potent gothic mechanisms and echoes the stricken anarchy of post emancipation colonial rule in her writing to enhance the audience's reading and to enable her

protagonist to hold a slanted mirror to the world of 'Jane Eyre'. At first, it seems incongruous that the vibrant, post colonialist backdrop of 'Wide Sargasso Sea', soaked by the 'brazen sun' (1) should be so richly entangled with the shadowy landscapes of the European gothic. 'Jane Eyre' is punctuated by claustrophobic English imagery to add an atmospheric sense of terror, particularly noticeable in Brontë's description of the violent Thornfield countryside, where the landscape seems animated by some nameless, feral horror; the beck is 'a torrent, turbid and curbless: it tore asunder the wood, and sent a raving sound through the air, often thickened with wild rain or whirling sleet; and for the forest on its banks, that showed only ranks of skeleton.' (p.64)

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