

I Used to Live Here Once

Literary Analysis

“I Used to Live Here Once” is a somewhat mysterious story of a woman who seems to be a ghost visiting her childhood home. The narrator follows the woman on her journey from a nearby river and down an old unfinished road that leads to the home where she grew up. Once she reaches the house, there are two young white children playing outside and the woman tries to tell them that she used to live there. The big question that the reader is left with at the end of the short story is why didn't the children who were playing outside acknowledge that the woman was there? The woman seems to like children because in the story, she tries to talk to them, but they ignore her. This is probably because the woman does not realize that she is dead, but upon doing research on the author and her life, I found there could be many other reasons why the children did not talk to the woman. From the research gathered, I learned that since the author did not have strong attachments to where she grew up, Jean Rhys probably used this story as a way to show how she and others in her situation may have felt disconnected throughout life.

The main reason I feel that the author is writing herself into this story is because while she lived in the West Indies, Rhys was cut off from the black community in Dominica. Jean Rhys was born in the British Colony of Dominica in the West Indies in 1890. She had an English father and a Creole white mother, meaning that she was a white woman born in Dominica, but her ancestry came from an English background. **At age 17, Rhys moved to England to attend school and even though she spent the rest of her life there, Dominica was**

still an important thing to her because she wrote about it in a lot of her work. Moving to England probably made her feel different because of where she came from. Not having a strong connection to her roots could have made Rhys feel very alienated (Hulme).

In the story, the main character, like Rhys, seems to be in between two separate worlds. When reading the story the first time, I got the feeling that the woman is most likely dead. The story starts by explaining how the stepping-stones by the river are not safe. Then the character describes her journey from the river to the house where she grew up. **She also described her surroundings as a “blue day” and that they sky looked “glassy” (Rhys 24)**, which can suggest that she had drowned in the river and the water clouds her view of the sky. The woman also feels happy and this may be because she is free and has the chance to connect to where she came from. The woman is stuck in between two worlds, because the weird description of her surroundings almost seems surreal and ghostly, and when she reaches her childhood home there is a small sense of belonging that is taken away almost as soon as she felt it.

Since Jean Rhys was essentially like other exiles who are cut off from their roots, land, and past (Wilson par.3), she probably felt as though she was stuck in between two worlds. The main character in this story could be attempting to find a connection between being white and black in the West Indies. The main character is also trying to find a connection to her old home by reaching out to the children. At the end of the story, the woman tries to talk to two children who are playing outside the house. The woman addresses the children a few times but they do not respond at all. The third time the woman says something to them she almost reaches out to the children, but they run inside the house because they suddenly felt cold. This is something that people usually describe happening to them when they are exposed to ghosts and

spirits and the children could have also used this as an excuse not to talk to the woman because she is a stranger that doesn't look like them.

When the narrator describes the children she mentions how fair their skin is and that many European children born in the West Indies look that way, almost as if their **"...white blood is asserting itself against all odds"**(Rhys 25). This line of the story stands out the most. When I read it a second time, I realized that it is a strong statement that could explain the awkwardness between the woman and the children. It shows that there is definitely a power struggle between the British and the West Indian natives. This line is most important because the main character in the story may not be white. If the main character were also of European decent, she probably would not have talked about their skin and suggesting that they are privileged. This is one of the most important details in understanding the story because the author actually lived during the colonizing period, witnessed the struggles herself, and was affected by it even though she moved away.

The overall theme of this story is the importance of feeling connected to the outside world. It can be very difficult to understand something when someone is completely sheltered from having interaction or association with certain people outside an accepted culture. If the main character were able to do that in her lifetime, she probably would not have returned to her childhood home. This moment of the white children ignoring her made the woman realize that she lived a life that was different from theirs because she may have been part of a lifestyle where she was always given attention. This is similar to Rhys's life because not only was she different and sheltered from a different group of people, the children not acknowledging the main character can be seen as a demonstration of how Rhys felt whenever she tried to identify herself with the black culture even though she could not be a part of it.

Works Cited

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