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A High Wind In Jamaica

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Introduction: A Storm of Innocence and Experience

In the vast ocean of twentieth-century literature, few novels capture the unsettling transition from childhood to a darker understanding of the world quite like Richard Hughes's masterpiece, **A High Wind In Jamaica**. Published in 1929, this novel swept across the literary landscape with the force of its titular hurricane, challenging Victorian notions of childhood innocence and offering readers a profoundly ambiguous moral universe. Set against the backdrop of the Caribbean Sea and the high seas of piracy, the story of the Bas-Thornton children remains as fresh, disturbing, and thought-provoking today as it was nearly a century ago. This article explores the novel's plot, its complex themes, its unusual narrative voice, its lasting legacy, and the reasons why **A High Wind In Jamaica** continues to captivate readers and scholars alike.

The Genesis of a Classic: Richard Hughes and His Caribbean Vision

Richard Hughes was a British poet, novelist, and playwright who began his literary career with considerable acclaim. Before writing **A High Wind In Jamaica**, he had already established a reputation as a gifted writer of short stories and plays. The novel, originally published in the United Kingdom as *The Innocent Voyage*, was inspired by Hughes's own travels through the Caribbean and his fascination with the psychology of children.

Hughes spent time in Jamaica in the 1920s, absorbing the atmosphere of the island and observing the lives of British expatriates who had settled there. This firsthand experience lent the novel a vivid sense of place and a keen understanding of the colonial mindset of the era. More importantly, Hughes was deeply interested in how children perceive the world—a world that adults often sanitize and sentimentalize. **A High Wind In Jamaica** was his radical attempt to depict childhood not as a period of angelic purity, but as a time of amoral, instinctual, and often frightening clarity.

Plot Overview: A Voyage into Darkness

The Bas-Thornton Family in Jamaica

The novel begins on a decaying plantation in Jamaica, where the Bas-Thornton family ekes out a precarious existence. The father, Mr. Bas-Thornton, is an ineffectual and somewhat detached figure, while the mother struggles to maintain some semblance of order in their chaotic household. The children—Emily, Edward, Rachel, Laura, and the youngest, John—live a semi-wild existence, free from the strictures of English society. Their days are filled with adventure, squabbling, and a kind of feral freedom that Hughes portrays with both charm and unease.

The Fateful Voyage

When a devastating hurricane destroys their home, the parents decide to send the children back to England for their safety and education. They are placed aboard a schooner called the *Clorinda*, captained by the kindly but

weak Captain Jonsen. The journey should have been a routine transatlantic passage. Instead, it becomes a descent into chaos. The ship is captured by a motley crew of pirates, led by the pragmatic and surprisingly ordinary Captain Jonsen (who is more of a reluctant pirate than a bloodthirsty villain) and his first mate, Otto.

What follows is not a swashbuckling adventure in the traditional sense. The pirates are incompetent, miserable, and unsure of what to do with their young captives. The children, for their part, adapt to their new circumstances with a chilling resilience that gradually strips away any romantic notion of childhood innocence.

The Unravelling of Morality

As the voyage continues, the children's behavior becomes increasingly disturbing. They commit acts of casual cruelty, and their moral compass, already weak, seems to shatter entirely. The climax of the novel arrives when Emily, in a fit of panic or perhaps something darker, kills a captive Dutch captain. The pirates are horrified, but the children seem largely unfazed. When the pirates are eventually captured and put on trial in London, the children give testimony that directly leads to the pirates' execution. The children emerge as the true survivors, having adapted to a world without conventional morality, while the adults—the pirates, the legal system, the parents—are left to grapple with a reality they cannot comprehend.

The Central Theme: The Myth of Childhood Innocence

The most powerful and controversial aspect of **A High Wind In Jamaica** is its savage deconstruction of childhood innocence. Hughes challenges the Romantic ideal, most famously articulated by Wordsworth, of the child as a pure soul trailing clouds of glory. Instead, Hughes presents children as amoral beings, driven by instinct, ego, and a kind of primal logic that has no room for adult concepts of guilt, empathy, or responsibility.

The children in the novel do not become evil in any deliberate sense. Rather, they exist in a moral vacuum. Events that would traumatize an adult—piracy, murder, death—are absorbed into their world without the emotional weight that civilization imposes. Hughes suggests that children are not innocent because they are good, but because they are *pre-moral*. They are creatures of pure experience, and it is only through the slow, often painful process of socialization that they learn to differentiate right from wrong. The journey of the Bas-Thornton children is not a voyage to England; it is a voyage away from this state of natural amorality, and the novel questions whether that journey is truly a positive one.

Narrative Style: The Cold Eye of the Observer

One of the most striking features of **A High Wind In Jamaica** is its narrative voice. Hughes writes in a detached, almost clinical third-person style that refuses to pass judgment on the characters. He describes horrific events with the same calm, precise prose he uses to describe the weather or the color of the sea. This narrative distance creates a profound sense of unease in the reader. We are forced to observe the children's actions without the comfort of a moralizing narrator to tell us how to feel.

This technique is particularly effective in the trial scene at the end of the novel. The children's testimony is presented with stark clarity. They do not lie, exactly, but they perceive events so differently from the adults that their truth becomes a kind of lie. The pirates are condemned not because the children actively seek vengeance, but because the children's version of reality is incompatible with the legal and moral framework of the adult world. Hughes leaves the reader to sit with the discomfort, forcing us to ask: Who are the real monsters here?

The Pirates: Victims of Circumstance

In a brilliant inversion of literary tradition, the pirates in **A High Wind In Jamaica** are among the most sympathetic characters in the book. Captain Jonsen and Otto are not the flamboyant, one-eyed villains of Robert Louis Stevenson. They are tired, anxious, and profoundly out of their depth. They never intended to

kidnap children; they simply did not know what else to do when they found them on the captured ship.

The pirates treat the children with a kind of bewildered kindness, trying to keep them entertained and fed. They are horrified by the children's amorality and terrified of the legal consequences of their actions. By the end of the novel, the pirates have become the victims—trapped in a nightmare of their own making, destroyed by the very children they tried to protect. This reversal of roles is one of the novel's most subversive and enduring achievements.

Literary Significance and Historical Context

A High Wind In Jamaica was published in a period of significant literary modernism. It appeared in the same era as works by Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and D.H. Lawrence, all of whom were experimenting with narrative form and psychological depth. Hughes's novel fits squarely into this tradition, even if its subject matter—children and pirates—seems more aligned with adventure fiction.

The novel was immediately recognized as something new and disturbing. Critics praised its originality, its psychological insight, and its fearless exploration of dark themes. It has never been out of print and is considered a classic of twentieth-century literature. It is often studied in university courses on modernism, postcolonial literature, and the literature of childhood.

The 1965 Film Adaptation

In 1965, the novel was adapted into a film directed by Alexander Mackendrick, who is perhaps best known for *The Sweet Smell of Success*. The film starred Anthony Quinn as Captain Chavez (a character who replaces the more diffident Jonsen from the novel) and a young Deborah Baxter as Emily. The screenplay was written by Stanley Mann and Denis Cannan, with a score by the legendary composer Larry Adler.

The film is a visually stunning and spirited adventure, but it differs significantly from the novel in tone and content. While the novel is a dark, psychological study about the amorality of children, the film leans more heavily into the swashbuckling tradition. The ending was also substantially altered to provide a more conventional resolution, with the pirates meeting a more heroic fate and the children's darker actions being softened or omitted entirely.

Despite these changes, the film is a worthy companion to the novel. Anthony Quinn brings a roguish charm to the role of Chavez, and the cinematography captures the beauty and danger of the Caribbean setting. For readers who love the novel, the film offers a fascinating alternative vision—a version of the story that is more comfortable with its own adventure tropes, but that still retains a hint of the original's subversive spirit.

Legacy and Enduring Relevance

Nearly a century after its publication, **A High Wind In Jamaica** continues to resonate with readers. Its exploration of childhood psychology has been validated by modern developmental psychology, which recognizes that children's moral reasoning is fundamentally different from that of adults. The novel also anticipates contemporary debates about trauma, memory, and the narratives we construct to make sense of our lives.

Furthermore, the novel's postcolonial elements—its depiction of the Caribbean as a place of decay and dislocation, its critique of the colonial mindset—have attracted increasing scholarly attention. The Bas-Thornton children are products of a dying imperial system, and their journey to England can be read as a metaphor for the return of the repressed, the colonial periphery coming home to unsettle the metropolitan center.

The novel also influenced a generation of writers. Authors such as William Golding, whose *Lord of the Flies*

explores similar themes of childhood savagery, acknowledged the debt. The tradition of the "child as other" in literature owes much to Hughes's groundbreaking portrayal.

Conclusion: A Storm That Still Rages

A High Wind In Jamaica is not a comfortable book. It does not offer easy answers or reassuring morals. It is a novel that asks difficult questions about the nature of innocence, the fragility of civilization, and the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. Richard Hughes wrote a book that was ahead of its time, a work of literary modernism that disguised itself as an adventure story. Its power lies in its ambiguity, its narrative control, and its willingness to stare into the darkness of the human heart—even the heart of a child.

For readers approaching it for the first time, the novel offers a unique and unsettling experience. For those returning to it, it reveals new depths with each reading. Whether you read it as a psychological thriller, a postcolonial allegory, or a modernist masterpiece, **A High Wind In Jamaica** remains a vital and unforgettable work of literature. It is a high wind that has not yet passed, a storm of meaning that continues to challenge and disturb, and a testament to the enduring power of great storytelling.

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