

The Characters

Hortense is a Jamaican woman. As a child she is given away by her mother in the hope that she has a better life. She is clever and proud. At the beginning of the play, Hortense has strong views about morality and the world. Hortense marries Gilbert not because she loves him, but so that she can go to England and fulfil her ambition of becoming a teacher in a country where she will be respected - 'no-one will feel sorry for I'. Hortense struggles to adjust to the reality of life in England as her dreams of being a teacher are rejected. At the end of the play, Hortense's feelings for Gilbert transform into love and pride at the end of the play when he addresses Bernard after his racist outburst.

Gilbert is a Black Jamaican man. His ambition is to become a lawyer in England. Gilbert is intelligent, charming and kind. Like Michael, he joins the RAF during The Second World War. Gilbert is a positive character who, like Hortense, has to adapt to the adverse situations he finds himself in. At the end of the play, Gilbert becomes mature and responsible by adopting baby Michael as his own with Hortense. He also realises that Hortense is worth 'more than the price of a ticket' to England. He ends the play with dignity and Hortense's admiration.

Queenie is a British woman. At the start of the play, Queenie dreams of romance and having her own family. Queenie marries Bernard, but she is unhappy in her marriage. She says 'It's not what I imagined for myself'. Queenie is overwhelmed by the stigma of raising a black child. At the end of the play, she gives baby Michael away saying, 'You know what? I don't think I've got the guts for it'. Bernard is an English man.

Bernard is quiet, nervous and old-fashioned. His ambition is to impress Queenie. Bernard is hostile to anyone who's not of his own race or class. Bernard typifies the racist attitudes that were prevalent in post-war Britain. His unwillingness to change his attitude makes him an unsympathetic character.

Michael is Hortense's first love. As a young boy, Michael annoys Hortense, but when he returns home from college as an educated sophisticate, she immediately falls for him. However, he doesn't reciprocate her feelings and instead conducts a forbidden affair Mrs. Ryder, Hortense's white employer, which Hortense takes as a personal betrayal. In the aftermath of the scandal caused by this affair, Michael joins the RAF and goes missing in action when his plane is shot down. Later, it becomes clear that during his time in the RAF, Michael had an affair with Queenie—he's the father of the illegitimate baby Michael whom Hortense eventually adopts.

Context

Windrush

The Windrush generation is the collective name given to the people who migrated to the United Kingdom from countries in the Caribbean between 1948 and 1971. The name is taken from the boat **MV Empire Windrush** which carried people from Jamaica, Trinidad, Tobago, and other islands to Tilbury dock in the south of England.

The aftermath of World War II (1939–45) meant that many jobs were available in the United Kingdom, and workers were required. Many young men and women from the Caribbean served in the British military during the war so they returned to England to take up jobs that paid better than the equivalent jobs at home. *The reception to these immigrants was not always friendly.* Many members of the Windrush generation faced racial abuse and struggled to find housing and jobs because of the colour of their skin. Their children were bullied at school, and they were abused in the streets.

The Blitz

The Blitz is the name given to the nighttime bomb attacks carried out by Germany against London and other cities in the United Kingdom during World War II (1939–45). The most destructive bombing period occurred between September 1940 and May 1941 after the German Air Force had failed to take control of the airways above Britain in the first year of the war. The Blitz as it came to be called resulted in the deaths of 43,000 British civilians and injuries to 139,000 more. The bomb attacks also destroyed houses, factories, shops, and many other buildings but had little impact on Britain's ability to wage war.

Jamaican Independence

Jamaica became an independent country on August 6, 1962. For more than three centuries the country had been a colony of the British Empire. Great Britain had colonized many countries since the 1700s which included India, Hong Kong, Canada, and Kenya. Colonies of the British Empire were administered by British colonialists, and the local populations had little or no say in the running of their countries.

Playwright & Original Author

Helen Edmundson

Helen Edmundson is a British playwright, screenwriter and producer. She has won awards and critical acclaim both for her original writing and for her adaptations of various literary classics for the stage and screen. Edmundson based *Small Island* on 2004 novel of the same name by Andrea Levy ([read more information about the original author below](#)). It premiered at the National Theatre in 2019 to critical acclaim.

Andrea Levy

Andrea Levy (1956-2019) was an internationally bestselling author whose work explored the **connected histories of Britain and Jamaica**.

In her fourth novel *Small Island*, Levy examined the experiences of those of her father's generation who returned to Britain after serving in the RAF during the Second World War, as well as the experiences of women whose voices have often been excluded from migration narratives. Alongside these voices, Levy interweaved the perspectives of the English people whom those from the Caribbean came to live amongst. For Levy, 'acknowledging the role played by all sides in this change is an important part of understanding the process so we can go on to create a better future together'.

Key Themes

Women and Patriarchy
Race
Belonging
Identity
Ambition

Key Takeaways

Small Island is a novel written by Andrea Levy. In 2019, it was adapted into a play by **Helen Edmundson**. Although a work of fiction, *Small Island* takes place in the 1920s - 1940s. It tells the story of Hortense and Michael who emigrated from the Caribbean to England on the Empire Windrush in 1948. The story explores the relationships they form and the challenges they face starting a new life in a new country.

WINDRUSH
ON

Links to Prior Learning
Analysis of language at quotation and word level. Poetry from other Cultures Analysis of a play - 'DNA'
Formative Assessment
Analysis of a character or theme from 'Small Island' linked to context.
Summative Assessment
Extended essay on the presentation of a character or theme from 'Small Island' linked to context.

These are 30 key facts we would like every student to know and understand by the end of this topic.

Each week, during your Critical Skills lessons, you will complete a knowledge quiz. Be aware that you could be questioned on any 10 facts from the 'The Big 30'.



The Big 30

1. When writing analytically, the '**point**' of a paragraph must always respond to the question.
2. When writing analytically, we must always refer to a **quotation** taken directly from the text.
3. When writing analytically, we must always explore the **deeper meaning of a quotation**.
4. A connotation is a meaning suggested by a word or an expression in addition to its exact meaning.
5. When talking about '**word class**', we mean the type of word (for example, an adjective, verb or noun).
6. When writing analytically, we must always consider the **impact on a reader**.
7. When writing analytically, we must always consider **how social or historical context might have influenced the writer**.
8. A **noun** is a word used to describe a person, place or thing.
9. A **verb** is a word used to describe an action.
10. An **adjective** is a word used to describe a noun.
11. **Colonisation** occurs when one nation *subjugates* another, conquering its population and exploiting it, often while forcing its own language and cultural values upon its people.
12. **Subjugation** is the action of bringing someone or something under domination or control.
13. **The Windrush Generation** denotes the people who emigrated from the Caribbean to Britain between the arrival of the HMT Empire Windrush on 22 June 1948 and the Immigration Act 1971.
14. **Western colonialism** refers to a political-economic phenomenon whereby various European nations explored, conquered, settled, and exploited large areas of the world.
15. **Post-colonialism** is the historical period or state of affairs representing the aftermath of Western colonialism.
16. **Discrimination** is the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of ethnicity, age, sex, or disability.
17. In a play, **acts** are created by the playwright and should divide the play as if they are chapters in a novel.
18. In a play, a **scene** refers to a single situation or unit of dialogue.
19. In a **tableau** within a play, participants make still images with their bodies to represent a scene.
20. **Stage directions** act as a set of instructions to the director and the actors and reveal important elements of the writer's stagecraft.
21. **Characterisation** is a literary device in which an author develops a character in a narrative.
22. **Pathos** is a quality that evokes pity or sadness.
23. In the play, Hortense is a young Jamaican woman who immigrates to England.
24. In the play, Gilbert yearns for a more exciting and adventurous life than the one available to him as a working-class man.
25. In the play, Queenie is a white British woman who rents lodgings to Gilbert and Hortense.
26. In the play, Bernard is Queenie's husband; an English bank clerk and RAF soldier. Bernard is the novel's most unsympathetic character.
27. In the play, Michael is Hortense's first love.
28. Small Island is a 2019 play, adapted by Helen Edmundson.
29. The play was inspired by Andrea Levy's 2004 novel of the same name.
30. The events of the narrative occur between the 1920s-1940s.

Quiz yourself! How many of these facts can you memorise?