



## Dessa Rose

By Sherley A. Williams  
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### Plot Summary

In the antebellum deep South, the paths of two extraordinary women cross: Dessa, a fugitive slave, condemned to die for her role in a slave uprising; and Rufel, a white slave owner. *Dessa Rose* is the story of Dessa and Rufel as they cautiously overcome their own prejudices about one another. The growing bond between them forces Rufel to confront her deepest feelings about slavery, while Dessa must decide whether to trust a white woman, with her own life and freedom in the balance.

### Topics for Discussion

1. The use of names and titles is an important aspect of *Dessa Rose*. Find some of the points where a name or title shows the reader what a character is feeling, or marks a turning point in the novel.
2. Although Dessa and Rufel come from dramatically different backgrounds, are there ways in which their situations are similar?
3. By the end of the novel Dessa and Rufel have come to understand each other in a new way. What do they learn about one another to make this new understanding possible?
4. The prologue to *Dessa Rose* begins in Dessa's unconscious mind as she lies remembering, perhaps delirious, in the cellar at the Hughes farm. The last section, "The Negress", is narrated in Dessa's own first person voice. How do you think this adds to an overall understanding of the characters, especially Dessa?
5. *Dessa Rose* is set more than 150 years in the past. What do you think the novel has to say about freedom and race relations in our own time?

**About the Author:** Sherley Anne Williams is the award-winning author of numerous poetry collections, plays, and short stories. She was a National Book Award nominee for her first book of poetry, *The Peacock Poems*, and received a Caldecott Honor for *Working Cotton*, her first work for children. A professor of Literature at the University of California at San Diego, she frequently lectures and speaks nationwide. She lives in San Diego.