

## Paul and Virginia Response

This odd and delightful novel tells the story of the developing love between Paul and Virginia, who grow up and live on the French ruled island of Mauritius. Life on the island is like a paradise for Paul, Virginia, their mothers (Margaret and Madame de la Tour), and even their slaves (Domingo and Mary), where they are free to work and wander among the delights of the island (20). While they may not have wealth in the traditional sense, the island provides them with a wealth of food and comfortable living conditions, which is more than enough to keep everyone happy.

Paul and Virginia, raised as brother and sister and also destined to love each other romantically, have an idyllic childhood. Detached from the restrictions of modern society and religious norms, the children have almost an animal purity to them. They are described early on as “quite naked, as is the custom of the country, tottering in their walk, and holding each other y the hands and under the arms, as we see represented in the constellation of the Twins. At night these infants often refused to be separated, and were found lying in the same cradle, their cheeks, their bosoms pressed close together, and sleeping locked in one another’s arms” (23). Although the affection seems pure and genuine, there are sexual undertones to the physical expression of their bond.

There is much that is noteworthy in this first section. First, the telling of the story is interesting. It is narrated by some visitor to the island, but he is met by an old man who was close to Paul and Virginia, and the majority of the story is told in his words. Also, the treatment of slavery caught my attention. Domingo and Mary are portrayed as your very typical happy and devoted slaves—truly a product of the Western imagination. They even get married, because “why not?” (18).

Nature is depicted in *Paul and Virginia* with romantic zeal. It is a place of beauty, of God, and it is something that is capable for providing for all your needs. Nature is harmonious, and gardening allows man to interact with this harmony, as we see in the many passages where Paul works with plants: “in arranging these vegetables to his own taste, he wandered not too far from the designs of Nature. Guided by her suggestions, he had thrown upon the elevated spots such seeds as the winds might scatter about, and near the borders of the springs those which float upon the water. Every plant thus grew in its proper soil, and every spot seemed decorated by Nature’s own hand” (54). It is also noteworthy that nature is gendered here.

Beyond nature, life, society, wealth, and status are all superficial. And by being in nature, Paul and Virginia’s virtue is allowed to shine: they never lie, steal, or become angry, because they had nothing to conceal, no sense of private property, and no sense of feeling deprived (26). In a sense, they are blissfully ignorant – as they don’t even understand Madame de la Tour’s words when she states, “You are the cause of my affliction, my children, but you are also my only source of delight!” (33).

Based on this first section, do you agree with the novel’s depiction of island life in contrast to modern society? Are people more happy, pure, and capable of self-sustenance when out alone in nature, or is this just a European fantasy?

## **ENGL 306 Response Paper/Presentation Assignment Assignment (5%)**

### **Assignment**

The response paper is a semi-weekly essay that analyzes a set of issues related to the reading on a given day. Students are expected to demonstrate serious engagement with one or more points taken from the text. You may focus on particular themes, issues, rhetorical choices, connections with other texts or outside materials, and more (ask if you are unsure). Typically, to receive an A for this assignment, posts must meet the length requirement, demonstrate in-depth analysis (not just plot summary), and include at least one direct reference/citation from the reading.

### **Requirements**

Length: 500-700 Words (about 2 pages)

Due: Must be emailed to the rest of the class before the designated class period. Please consult the syllabus for the exact dates responses are due.

To receive a check-plus for this assignment, students must

1. meet the length requirement
2. demonstrate in-depth analysis (not just summary)
3. include at least one direct reference/citation from the reading
4. present their paper (either by reading or summarizing its main points)
5. raise a provocative question to initiate class discussion

### **Details**

Length: 500-800 Words (about 2 pages)

Due: Must be posted on Blackboard by 11:59pm on the night before the assigned class session.