

WIDE
SARGASSO
SEA
JEAN RHYS



EDITED BY JUDITH L. RAISKIN

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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Jean Rhys
WIDE SARGASSO SEA



BACKGROUNDS

CRITICISM

Edited by

JUDITH L. RAISKIN

UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

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List of Illustrations

Jean Rhys, photograph by Ander Gunn	viii
MAP: The Caribbean	115
"A Tread-Mill Scene in Jamaica," c. 1837	116
Corrected page proof from Part One of <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i> (<i>Art and Literature</i> [March 1964])	146
A page of Rhys's additions to the <i>Art and Literature</i> publication of <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i>	147



Jean Rhys, photograph by Ander Gunn.

Preface

Several years after *Wide Sargasso Sea* was published, A. Alvarez declared in the *New York Times Book Review* that Jean Rhys was the “best living English novelist,” a claim that simultaneously validated and misrepresented Rhys’s literary standing. Indeed, after a lifetime of writing and struggling to write while suffering the miseries of poverty, isolation, alcoholism, and illness, Rhys was gratified by the widespread recognition of her work that finally came to her late in life. But it is an irony that Rhys, who always hated England and English culture and who perceived herself to be, as a displaced colonial, the object of English disdain and hatred, should be declared a light of English culture and made, at the age of 88, a Commander of the Order of the British Empire for her contributions to literature. Jean Rhys was born in 1890 on the Caribbean island of Dominica to a Welsh father and a “white Creole” mother whose family had had great influence on the island for generations. In 1907 Rhys left Dominica, as did many colonial children, to pursue her education in England. Although she never returned to the Caribbean, except for a short trip in 1936, and although she spent most of her life in small, remote English villages, she never considered herself to be English and remained throughout her life an incisive and bitter critic of what she perceived to be English values. The circumstances that made it impossible to return to Dominica—lack of money, two world wars, several marriages, a tendency toward despondency and despair, and the changing political and cultural status of the English colonies—were also the circumstances that made it difficult for Rhys to write, particularly when she dedicated herself to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which deals directly with colonialism, European dominance in the Caribbean, and the hypocrisies of English culture. It took Rhys twenty-one years to write this short novel, years that we can see with hindsight were crucial to the development of feminist, anticolonial, postmodern perspectives that would permit critics to recognize Rhys as one of the foremost novelists, English or not, of her time.

The Text

Jean Rhys first mentions working on what was to become *Wide Sargasso Sea* in October 1945. Although the book was not finished and pub-

lished in full until 1966, she knew immediately the power of her ideas and believed that this book “might be the one book I’ve written that’s much use.”¹ Rhys was a painstakingly careful writer, never completely satisfied with her work despite her meticulous honing. As her editor Diana Athill wrote in her forward to Rhys’s unfinished autobiography, *Smile Please*, “Jean Rhys allowed no piece of writing to leave her hands until it was finished except for the very smallest details. An example of her perfectionism: some five years after the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she said to me out of the blue: ‘There is one thing I’ve always wanted to ask you. Why did you let me publish that book?’ . . . I was indignant when I asked her what on earth she meant. ‘It was not finished,’ she said coldly. She then pointed out the existence in the book of two unnecessary words. One was ‘then,’ the other ‘quite.’”

A version of Part One was published in 1964 in the first issue of *Art and Literature*, a journal edited by Francis Wyndham and dedicated to showcasing new and “in-progress” literary works. Rhys’s revisions of that version are mostly the addition of several key passages (such as the poisoning of the horse, Antoinette’s visit to her mother after the fire, and Mr. Mason’s discussion with Antoinette in the convent) and smaller changes that affect the feeling but not the sense of the narrative (see illustrations, pp. 146 and 147). While these revisions were not received in time to be included in the issue, they were included in the completed novel published by André Deutsch with a preface by Francis Wyndham in 1966. These revisions and the manuscripts of *Wide Sargasso Sea* housed in the British Library show Rhys’s long process of composition and her fierce attention to mood, rhythm, and historical detail. What read in the final version as simple, perfectly crafted descriptions, interior monologues, and dialogues, begin in exercise books and on loose pieces of paper as repetitions of key words and phrases worked in slightly different combinations, highlighted by slightly different tenses, word order, and the deletion or addition of adjectives. As Rhys commented on her own writing, “I know it seems stupid to fuss over a few lines or words, but I’ve never got over my longing for clarity, and a smooth firm foundation underneath the sound and the fury. I’ve learned one generally gets this by cutting, or by very slight shifts and changes . . .” (Nov. 9, 1949; *LJR*, 60). Her persistent desire that the novel be accurate motivated her revisions: “I’ve always *known* that this book must be done as well as I could—(no margin of error) or that it would be unconvincing” (March 3, 1964; *LJR*, 253). Instead of distracting readers with footnotes referring to the numerous slight changes Rhys made while editing her novel, I have selected a number of letters she wrote that address her process of composition and the stakes she

1. Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly, eds., *The Letters of Jean Rhys* (hereafter, *LJR*) p. 39.

saw in her literary choices. The text presented here is the one published in 1966, the only version of the complete novel.

Critical Approaches

Particularly since the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys's work has challenged easy definition and has invited intense debate. This was a surprising novel for a variety of reasons: It appeared twenty-seven years after Rhys's last novel, *Good Morning, Midnight*, which was published on the eve of World War II and had sunk, along with its author, into obscurity (many had assumed that Rhys had died sometime during or shortly after the war); unlike her earlier novels, which had all been set in England and France in the 1920s and 1930s, *Wide Sargasso Sea* was set in the 1840s in the West Indies; with an unremitting determination it rewrote the English classic, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and by shifting the focus from Jane to Bertha it challenged an array of accepted truths from the glories of Empire and English culture to the celebrations of liberal feminism.

The novel lends itself to a variety of critical approaches that have become over the past thirty years increasingly sophisticated. *Wide Sargasso Sea* has served as a touchstone text for critics interested in modernism, feminism, and postcolonial theory. This slim novel has generated an enormous amount of critical discussion, in large part because it is not easily categorized. For critics interested in modernism and postmodernism, Rhys's last novel raises some interesting questions about literary periods and style. To a great extent, modernist literature has been defined by the stylistic conventions and urban settings of the interwar period typical of Rhys's earlier four novels and short stories. While her writing shared the harsh portrayal of urban modern life with that of many of her contemporaries, critics have also read her earlier novels as a postmodern critique of the modernist visions themselves, which often were based in a nostalgia for a past that Rhys repudiated. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, appearing so many years later, retains the modernist sparseness of Rhys's pre-war work but is set a century earlier, in a time and place distinctly nonindustrial, and exploits the tropes of early nineteenth-century romanticism (passion, supernatural beauty, magic) as much as those of modernism and postmodernism.

Similarly, feminist critics have been challenged by a novel that rewrites an English classic long touted for its feminist vision. Interested in Rhys's unrelenting portrayal of the economic and sexual exploitation of her women characters in her earlier fiction, feminist critics find that the issues of race and slavery raised in *Wide Sargasso Sea* complicate not only many evaluations of *Jane Eyre* but also the readings of Rhys's "European fiction" that analyze exploitation in terms of gender only.

Some feminist critics have found recent psychoanalytic theory useful in debating the status of Rhys's heroines and understanding in particular Antoinette's disastrous choices.

Perhaps the most active and heated debate has involved critics interested in postcolonial theory who have sought to place Rhys and *Wide Sargasso Sea* in geographical, national, cultural, or racial categories to interpret the novel's representation of colonial relations. Rhys's personal history—the fact that she was born in the Caribbean but was fairly insulated within the white community that made up only one percent of the island population and that she left the Caribbean forever at the age of seventeen—has led critics to argue for and against Rhys's inclusion in collections of writings by or theoretical discussions about Caribbean, postcolonial, or “Third World” writers. Since the novel focuses on the white Creole character, these critics have debated whether that focus recognizes or silences the historic resistance of black Caribbeans to European domination. Edward Kamau Brathwaite has recently called Rhys the “Helen of our wars,” underscoring the political implications of claiming Rhys and her fiction. The exercise of placing Rhys and her work invites a larger discussion about the changing definitions of national literatures and cultural territories in a world where information, music, fashions, and money travel faster than they ever have before.

Backgrounds and Criticism

I have divided the materials in this edition into Backgrounds and Criticism. For those who have not read Brontë's novel and for those who would find a comparison useful, I have included several key scenes from *Jane Eyre* that are crucial to Rhys's revision. I have selected sections from her unfinished autobiography, *Smile Please*, to give a sense of Rhys's childhood in Dominica and her process of using that material in her fiction. The letters selected pertain primarily to Rhys's writing of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, her feelings about *Jane Eyre* and its significance, her struggles with the narrative voices of the novel and its structure, and her understanding of the role of a writer and her own contribution to literature. The unpublished essay “The Bible is Modern” articulates Rhys's belief that artistic style is inseparable from cultural training and reveals her suspicion about English culture and her understanding of herself as not-English.

In selecting critical essays for this edition, I have tried to give a sense of the wide interest this novel has generated and the variety of interpretations it has inspired. I have introduced this section with the poem “Jean Rhys” by Derek Walcott, Nobel Laureate from the Caribbean nation St. Lucia, since it offers a tribute to Rhys's vision, which was sharpened by her own status as both native and alien, as well as a

contemporary view of the Victorian white settler class Rhys preserved in her novel. Michael Thorpe's essay was one of the first of many articles to focus on the relationship between Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's use of that material in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The work of Wilson Harris, Sandra Drake, and Mary Lou Emery has contributed to placing Rhys's novel in the context of Caribbean cosmology and intellectual traditions. Lee Erwin, Caroline Rody, and Mona Fayad focus on the relationship among narrative form, female subjectivity, and feminist theory. The selections by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Benita Parry, and myself highlight a variety of questions regarding colonial domination and resistance. Although I have not been able to include many important essays, I hope that references made to them in the essays I have selected will provide guidance for further reading. For instance, Kenneth Ramchand's article refers to the important issues raised by Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Wally Look Lai, and John Hearn about the meaning of Caribbean identity and the definition of Caribbean literature. The selected bibliography is designed to direct readers to other important articles about *Wide Sargasso Sea* and to books that treat the novel in the context of the full body of Rhys's work.

Faculty summer grants from the University of Oregon and the University of California at Santa Barbara allowed me the time to complete this edition. I am most grateful to Francis Wyndham for his permission to reprint the novel, letters, and excerpts from *Smile Please* and to publish material from the Jean Rhys Collection held in the McFarlin Library at the University of Tulsa. Lori Curtis, curator of Special Collections at the McFarlin Library, was particularly helpful during my visit and later in locating specific materials and photographs for this edition. Valerie Francis at the National Library of Jamaica helped locate and reproduce the plate "A Treadmill Scene in Jamaica." Recent scholarship by Peter Hulme, Veronica Marie Gregg, Teresa O'Connor, and Carole Angier concerning the historic background of the novel and the biographical specificities of Rhys's West Indian family history has been especially useful to me in glossing the text. I am grateful to Susan Johnson-Roehr and Rachel Adams, who provided superb research assistance. For their help in identifying various references in the text I thank June Bobb, Jessica Harris, Peter Hulme, Steven Kruger, Daniel Pope, and Angela Smith. I have appreciated the opportunity to work on this edition and thank Carol Bemis and Kate Lovelady at W. W. Norton for their expertise and their careful attention to detail. I am grateful as always to Mary Wood and Eli Raiskin-Wood for giving me the space and time to think and write about literature as provocative as this novel.

Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Preface	ix
The Text of <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i>	1
Introduction by Francis Wyndham	3
<i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i>	9
Backgrounds	113
Rachel L. Carson • [The Sargasso Sea]	117
Charlotte Brontë • From <i>Jane Eyre</i>	119
[Jane Eyre and Bertha]	119
[The Ruined Wedding]	121
[Rochester's Story]	126
[Fire at Thornfield Hall]	130
Jean Rhys • Selected Letters	132
To Peggy Kirkaldy (October 4, 1949)	132
To Maryvonne Moerman (November 9, 1949)	133
To Peggy Kirkaldy (December 6, 1949)	133
To Morchard Bishop (January 27, 1953)	134
To Francis Wyndham (March 29, 1958)	135
To Selma Vaz Dias (April 9, 1958)	136
To Francis Wyndham (September 27, 1959)	137
To Diana Athill (August 16, 1963)	137
To Francis Wyndham (March 7, 1964)	138
To Francis Wyndham (April 14, 1964)	138
To Francis Wyndham (1964)	143
To Diana Athill (1966)	144
To Diana Athill (March 9, 1966)	145
• The Bible Is Modern	148
• From <i>Smile Please</i>	149
Books	149
Meta	150
My Mother	151
Black/White	152

Facts of Life	154
• From "Black Exercise Book"	155
Criticism	157
Derek Walcott • Jean Rhys	159
Mary Lou Emery • Modernist Crosscurrents	161
Michael Thorpe • "The Other Side": <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i> and <i>Jane Eyre</i>	173
Kenneth Ramchand • [The Place of Jean Rhys and <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i>]	181
Wilson Harris • Carnival of Psyche: Jean Rhys's <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i>	188
Sandra Drake • Race and Caribbean Culture as Thematics of Liberation in Jean Rhys' <i>Wide</i> <i>Sargasso Sea</i>	193
Lee Erwin • [History and Narrative in <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i>]	207
Caroline Rody • Burning Down the House: The Revisionary Paradigm of Jean Rhys's <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i>	217
Mona Fayad • Unquiet Ghosts: The Struggle for Representation in Jean Rhys's <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i>	225
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak • [<i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i> and a Critique of Imperialism]	240
Benita Parry • [Two Native Voices in <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i>]	247
Judith Raiskin • England: Dream and Nightmare	250
Jean Rhys: A Chronology	259
Selected Bibliography	263

The Text of WIDE SARGASSO SEA*



* The Sargasso Sea is an oval-shaped area of the North Atlantic Sea, bordered by the Gulf Stream and encompassing the Bermuda Islands. It is characterized by weak currents, very little wind, and a free-floating mass of seaweed called Sargassum. It was mentioned by Christopher Columbus, who crossed it in 1492. The area gave rise to many legends surrounding the fate of ships that supposedly lost their way in the weeds, became entangled, and were never heard from again. In contrast to the unfounded fears of later navigators, Columbus interpreted the floating vegetation as a sign that land was near (see Carson, pp. 117-19). Rhys also considered naming the novel "Gold Sargasso Sea," after the title of a Creole song written by her cousin from St. Lucia.



Introduction

Francis Wyndham

Jean Rhys was born at Roseau, Dominica, one of the Windward Islands, and spent her childhood there. Her father was a Welsh doctor and her mother a Creole—that is, a white West Indian. At the age of sixteen she came to England, where she spent the First World War. Then she married a Dutch poet and for ten years lived a rootless, wandering life on the Continent, mainly in Paris and Vienna. This was during the 1920s, and the essence of the artist's life in Europe at that time is contained in her first book, *The Left Bank* (Cape, 1927), which was described on the dust-jacket as 'sketches and studies of present-day Bohemian Paris'. In an enthusiastic preface, Ford Madox Ford comments on 'a terrifying instinct and a terrific—an almost lurid!—passion for stating the case of the underdog . . .' He goes on: 'When I, lately, edited a periodical, Miss Rhys sent in several communications with which I was immensely struck, and of which I published as many as I could. What struck me on the technical side . . . was the singular instinct for form possessed by this young lady, an instinct for form being possessed by singularly few writers of English and by almost no English women writers.' There is something patronizing about this preface (Ford was, in literal fact, her patron) but he must be credited with recognizing, so early in her career, the main elements which (increasing in intensity as her art developed) were to place her among the purest writers of our time. These are her 'passion for stating the case of the underdog' and her 'singular instinct for form'—a rare, but necessary combination. Without the instinct, the passion might so easily be either sentimental or sensational; without the passion, the instinct might lead to only formal beauty; together, they result in original art, at the same time exquisite and deeply disturbing.

It is likely that Ford Madox Ford was somewhat taken aback by his protégée's next book, a novel published in England as *Postures* (Chatto & Windus, 1928) and in the USA as *Quartet* (Simon & Schuster)—it is the American title that Miss Rhys prefers. The character of H. J. Heidler, a cold-eyed anglicized German dilettante, may have been in part suggested by Ford himself. In *Quartet* we find the first embodiment of the Jean Rhys heroine: for essentially the first four novels deal with

the same woman at different stages of her life, although her name and minor details of her circumstances alter from volume to volume. Marya Zelli has been a chorus girl in England and is now (the year is 1926) adrift in Montparnasse with a charming, feckless Pole whom she has married. This aimless, passive existence is suddenly disrupted when her husband is sent to prison. She is befriended by the Heidlers: a middle-aged picture-dealer and his very English, rather bossily 'emancipated' wife. It is taken for granted by this couple that Marya should become the husband's mistress. She is at first revolted by him, and then falls passionately in love with him: throughout she views him with a kind of hypnotized terror. The story describes the grisly *ménage à trois* that ensues (briskly broadminded wife, selfish petulant lover and their bewildered, uncomfortably candid victim) until the husband comes out of prison. Numbed by misery, Marya mismanages the situation and loses both men. The actual writing of *Quartet* betrays a few uncertainties that were later eliminated from Miss Rhys's style, but it is conceived with that mixture of quivering immediacy and glassy objectivity that is among her most extraordinary distinctions.

After Leaving Mr Mackenzie (Cape, 1930) also starts in Paris, about the year 1928. Julia Martin has been pensioned off by an ex-lover and is leading a lonely, dream-like life in a cheap hotel. One morning the weekly cheque from Mr Mackenzie's solicitor arrives with a letter explaining that it is to be the last. Julia has no money, and is losing confidence in her power to attract men. She decides to visit London, to look up former lovers and ask them for money. The visit (spent in boarding-houses at Bayswater and Notting Hill Gate) is not a success. She is met with patronizing incomprehension, with exasperation and moral disapproval. She has an affair with a young man called Mr Horsfield which goes farcically wrong; she returns to Paris to face an empty, threatening future. The novel is written in the third person; it has a clear, bitter quality, but it does not reach so deep into the central character as the two that followed it, in which the heroines tell their own stories.

Jean Rhys returned to England after writing this book, and it is there that *Voyage in the Dark* (Constable, 1934) is set: the date, however, revealed casually half-way through, is 1914. Anna Morgan, who is nineteen, is touring the provinces in the chorus of a pantomime. Memories of her childhood on a West Indian island, of kind coloured servants and tropical beauty, form a poignant accompaniment to her adventures in an icy, suspicious land. At Southsea she is picked up by a man called Walter Jeffries; he seduces her and offers to keep her. She falls in love with him ('You shut the door and you pull the curtains and then it's as long as a thousand years and yet so soon ended'); she moves, a shivering dreaming creature, to rooms near Chalk Farm. But her lover's house in Green Street is 'dark and cold and not friendly to me. Sneer-

ing faintly, sneering discreetly, as a servant would. Who's this? Where on earth did he pick her up?' And Mr Jeffries is clearly made uneasy by her absent manner, and sometimes shocked by her sudden directness. When he is tired of her, his handsome cousin Victor tells her so in a letter. 'My dear Infant, I am writing this in the country, and I can assure you that when you get into a garden and smell the flowers and all that all this rather beastly sort of love simply doesn't matter. However, you will think I am preaching at you, so I will shut up. . . . Have you kept any of the letters Walter wrote to you? If so you ought to send them back.' Stunned by this *coup de grâce* (although she has always expected it), Anna drifts into prostitution: in its treatment of a subject often falsified in fiction, this part of the book stands comparison with the novels of Charles Louis Philippe, and with Godard's film *Vivre sa Vie*. The story ends with Anna recovering from an abortion to hear the doctor say, 'She'll be all right. Ready to start all over again in no time, I've no doubt.'

In the next and most alarming instalment, *Good Morning, Midnight* (Constable, 1939), we see Sasha Jansen revisiting Paris in 1937, over forty, mistrustful of the men she tries to attract, expecting insults but unarmed against them, trying, as she says, to drink herself to death. Some restaurants may not be entered, because of the memories they inspire; the atmosphere of others is subtly hostile; the effort needed to buy a hat she cannot afford, to dye her hair, to follow up a promising encounter, is almost too much for her. Sasha meets a young man who turns out to be a gigolo, deceived by her fur coat into thinking her a rich woman. They embark on a complicated relationship, both at cross purposes. Sasha wants to work off on this boy her resentment at all men; she enjoys watching his desperate anxiety to please her, planning her revenge. 'This is where I might be able to get some of my own back. You talk to them, you pretend to sympathize; then, just at the moment when they are not expecting it, you say: "Go to Hell".' The gigolo is not so easy to shake off; he seems to be planning some sort of revenge of his own. What starts as mutual teasing becomes mutual torture. This involved episode is worked out with great subtlety; its climax, which brings the novel to an end, is brilliantly written and indescribably unnerving to read.

Sasha is the culmination of Jean Rhys's composite heroine. Although she is aggressively unhappy, she is always good company; her self-knowledge is exact, her observation of others comical and freezing. She is often unreasonable, and at moments one even pities the well-meaning men who found her so difficult to deal with. But she is not malicious: pity extends beyond herself to embrace all other sufferers. For her suffering transcends its cause. This is not only a study of a lonely, ageing woman, who has been deserted by husbands and lovers and has taken to drink; it is the tragedy of a distinguished mind and a