

Elaine Savory



The Cambridge **Introduction** to

Jean Rhys

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ELAINE SAVORY

The New School University, New York City



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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Jean Rhys*

Since her death in 1979, Jean Rhys's reputation as an important modernist author has grown. Her finely crafted prose fiction lends itself to multiple interpretations from radically different critical perspectives, formalism, feminism, and postcolonial studies along them. This Introduction offers a reliable and stimulating account of her life, work, contexts and critical reception. Her best-known novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is analyzed together with her other novels, including *Quartet* and *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, and her short stories. Through close readings of the works, Elaine Savory reveals their common themes and connects these to different critical approaches. The book maps Rhys's fictional use of the actual geography of Paris, London and the Caribbean, showing how key understanding her relationships with the metropolitan and colonial spheres is to reading her texts. In this invaluable introduction for students and faculty, Savory explains the significance of Rhys as a writer both in her lifetime and today.

Elaine Savory is Associate Professor of English at the New School University. Her publications include *Jean Rhys* (Cambridge, 1998), *Out of the Kumbla: Women and Caribbean Literature* (1990) and many essays on Caribbean and African literatures.

For Stacy, 1963–2008

*Mais elle était du monde, où les plus belles choses
Ont le pire destin,
Et rose elle a vécu ce que vivent les roses,
L'espace d'un matin.*

François de Malherbe

Preface

This story begins with a powerful literary lion, Ford Madox Ford, loving and mentoring a beautiful, much younger, very gifted woman in the heady literary atmosphere of 1920s Paris. The connection between them did not last but the woman became the writer Jean Rhys. Her literary style was immediately highly praised but, after a collection of short stories and four novels, she sank into obscurity for almost three decades. Then her fifth and last novel catapulted her into literary stardom in her middle seventies. Her timing was perfect. This exquisitely crafted text appealed to readers interested in the exploitation of women, in race and in colonialism, all important issues in the mid-1960s, a time when West Indian immigration to Britain also brought the Caribbean more into the consciousness of the reading public.

It was gradually discovered that the life of the woman behind the writer was also a gripping story. The given name of Jean Rhys was Ella Gwendoline Rees Williams. She was from an elite family in the colonial Caribbean. She went to England to find her future, became an unsuccessful chorus girl, suffered the death of her father, and almost immediately afterwards, she got her heart broken by a rich gentleman and subsequently fell into a period of rackets living before her first marriage. She had strained relationships with most of her original family. Her first child died as a young baby, and she was separated from her second child for long periods of time. She had three husbands, two of whom went to jail for petty fraud, while the other was an unsuccessful literary agent. Neither they nor she were much good at sustaining a steady income, so her life was very often a struggle for basic shelter and daily necessities. She gradually became a serious alcoholic and in middle age was arrested for disturbing the peace and was briefly confined in a women's prison for psychiatric evaluation. Many assumed she had died when she disappeared from public view for decades, so when she reappeared, there was talk of a "reincarnation." She thought neighbours in her village in Devon imagined her a witch, which she enjoyed. Her refusal to give in or give up finally gave her an aura, as if she were capable of magical transformations

and reincarnations and possessed mysterious powers. She did nothing to dispel this idea.

But the life story can mislead the new reader of Rhys. She lied about her age and fooled her early critics if they failed to think carefully about the timeline of her life. Then the unwary reader may be lured into thinking her protagonists are Rhys herself, and that there is really therefore only one “Rhys woman,” recycled through different texts. But Rhys’s texts ask her readers to absent themselves from the novel’s frequent affiliation with unexamined middle-class values and prejudices and live in her much less comfortable fictional world. She challenges us to take nothing for granted and to read her closely.

She lived long (1890–1979), and it is less than forty years since she died, a literary blink of the eye. Separating the life story from the literary achievement is easier as time goes on: it has been nearly seventy years since James Joyce, Rhys’s rough contemporary (1882–1941), died prematurely. T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) was only two years older than Rhys, and lived to his late seventies, but he sternly ordered his readers to forget about his personality when reading his work. Significant writers offer clues as to how to read their work and need their readership to learn their writing games. But the problem with Rhys was that she was far ahead of her time. When her early work appeared, some people thought she was thirty or forty years ahead, which would have made her moment the mid-1960s, when her greatest success happened. But she is coming into full focus now for a new generation, in a new century. Whilst the readings of Rhys’s work so popular at the height of the feminist movement can be insightful, neither they nor other one-dimensional readings of her work (such as modernist-aesthetic or postcolonial) do justice to her texts by themselves. As we realize more multifaceted ways of reading her, we also ask ourselves to be conscious that our own responses to the world are complicated and changing. So, despite periodic predictions that her meteoric rise to fame must inevitably be followed by a fall in her reputation, she continues to fascinate those who enter her fictional world.

The new reader will therefore benefit from a guide to Rhys. This introduction to her work offers a map that is both extensive and detailed. Chapter 1 sorts out biographical fact from fiction, Chapter 2 locates her work in important contexts that help us become more savvy readers of her work and Chapter 4 explores important trends in Rhys criticism. But the longest chapter here is a close reading of Rhys’s published texts, which demonstrates her consummate skill at crafting fiction. Her texts, whilst telling stories located in particular times and places and imaginatively

drawing on her own experience, are nevertheless timeless, something she deliberately sought to achieve.

There is a short booklist of useful further reading (for a discussion of Rhys criticism broader than this book can allow, see my *Jean Rhys* (1998, 2000, 2001, 2006). My purpose here is to share my own pleasure in reading Jean Rhys, a pleasure sharpened by knowing the work of many fine scholars and critics who have also found her irresistible. She is a writer of many identities and aspects. This is my second book on Rhys and it has taken me along different paths from the first, because Rhys's work is rich and subtle enough to offer new experiences in successive readings, a clear sign of the quality of her work. I wish you the joy of discovering this unusual and finely developed literary talent for yourself.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I thank Ray Ryan, who is the most productively and insightfully impatient of patient editors. He initiated the idea of this project when I thought I was done with Rhys. He has also been there for me during the personally difficult time of its completion.

My first book on Rhys (Cambridge, 1998) brought me the world of Rhys scholarship, and my thanks to all who assisted me then remain even now. I thank my students at Eugene Lang College, New School University, over a number of years, for their willingness to become better readers of Rhys (as of other texts), and my colleagues at NSU, who are always supportive. For Rhys scholars and Caribbean writers she is always a key topic, even when they are done with writing about her: they smile when I say I am haunted by Mis' Rhys, because they are too.

Thanks are due to the Rhys Collection at the University of Tulsa for permission to quote from unpublished manuscripts.

This book had to be completed during our beloved Stacy's long and hard-fought battle against ultimately terminal illness, and so has been by far the most difficult project I have ever had. To Austin and Todd, my thanks for accepting what your extraordinary sister also was very clear about, that a task undertaken has to become a task completed, however challenging it proves to be. To my love, Robert, thank you as always, for everything, especially in this most wounding of times.

Abbreviations

These editions of Rhys texts are referenced. Their titles in the references are abbreviated as follows:

- ALMM *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (first published 1931), New York: Carroll and Graf, 1990.
- CS *The Collected Short Stories* (includes all of Rhys's three story collections, *The Left Bank* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1927), *Tigers Are Better-Looking* (London: André Deutsch, 1968) and *Sleep It Off Lady* (London: André Deutsch, 1976). These three titles are abbreviated as *TLB*, *TABL* and *SIOL* respectively.
- GMM *Good Morning, Midnight* (first published 1939), New York: W. W. Norton, 1986.
- L *The Letters of Jean Rhys* (edited by Francis Wyndham and Diana Athill), New York: Viking Penguin, 1984.
- Q *Quartet* (first published 1929), New York: Carroll and Graf, 1990.
- SP *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography*, Berkeley: Donald S. Ellis, 1979.
- V *Voyage in the Dark* (first published 1934), New York: W. W. Norton, 1982.
- WSS *Wide Sargasso Sea* (first published 1966), New York: W. W. Norton, 1982.

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Life

1

Administrator of Dominica (1899–1905), tried to build the “Imperial Road” to facilitate colonial plantations on the island: it was never finished.³

Dominica was a colony of Britain with a long history of slavery and a white English hegemony. But, unusually in the Caribbean at the time, this was challenged by a powerful, mixed-race elite, whose slave-owning ancestors had migrated from Saint Domingue around 1790.⁴ In 1838, they were known as the “Mulatto Ascendancy” when they became the majority in the House of Assembly. They held onto this power until Crown Colony Rule was imposed by the British to obtain more direct colonial control in 1898.⁵ The Lockharts, Gwen Williams’ mother’s white Creole family, belonged to the Anglican, British faction, established prominently in Dominica for five generations by the time of Rhys’s birth, since James Potter Lockhart emigrated to Dominica to first manage a sugar plantation, Geneva, and then by the mid-1820s to own it, along with 258 slaves.⁶ He became a powerful political figure in Dominica. His wife Jean was reputedly a Spanish princess from Cuba, though the young Gwen did not believe this story (SP:26). She was perhaps of mixed race, not uncommon among Creoles, but an issue for Rhys’s mother’s family, who liked to think their bloodline was only English.⁷

Gwen Williams was eight when the English made Dominica a Crown Colony. Property qualifications for voting were very high in Dominica at the time, so few could vote, but elected representation was prized and defended. Crown Colony rule replaced elected representatives with a Legislative Council made up of six officials and six members nominated by the Administrator.⁸ Jean Rhys still remembered in old age how Administrator Hesketh Bell (known for charming those who were still angry about the political change) gave a very enjoyable fancy-dress ball for children in honor of his niece and paid her special attention (SP:73–4).⁹ In that period, a thriving newspaper rivalry expressed the competing interests of the colonial English and brown skin elite, demonstrating the power and value of verbal skills: that she knew about this is clear in her short story, “Again the Antilles” (CS:39–41).¹⁰

Rhys’s Welsh father, William Rees Williams, ran off to sea at fourteen and was quickly taken home, but eventually joined the Merchant Navy. He later completed medical school.¹¹ One of the feisty local papers, *The Dominica Dial*, reported that his medical career had begun inauspiciously on board a ship repairing telegraph communications, but his luck changed when he got a colonial appointment as a doctor in Roseau, Dominica’s capital. He later temporarily acquired two estates in the interior of Dominica to which the family went via coastal steamer and horseback. The larger one Rhys remembered was called Bona Vista (SP:15) It had a wide and impressive view of Dominica’s forested Morne (the term for mountains in Dominica as in the French Caribbean), but also across valleys to the sea. In “Mixing

Cocktails,” Rhys recalls the view from “the house in the hills” (CS:36–7). Though the house has all but vanished, the site affirms the spectacular view. In Roseau, the family lived in a pleasant, colonial-style house not far from the waterfront, with a jalousied balcony overlooking the main street and a courtyard at the back. It was here that Dr. Williams had his practice.¹² The opening of Rhys’s third novel (*Voyage in the Dark*) describes looking down a street from “the house at home” to “the Bay”: standing in front of Rhys’s family home in Roseau, this is the view down to the sea.

The majority of Dominica’s population are of African descent, mainly speaking French Creole and of the Catholic faith. Slavery ended there earlier than in neighbouring Guadeloupe and Martinique, from where slaves then fled to Dominica.¹³ Race and shade permeated Rhys’s child consciousness. When given a fair doll (her sister got the dark-haired one she wanted), she took it into the garden and ritually smashed its face with a rock (SP:30–1). She had a dark-skinned nurse, Meta, who, by Rhys’s account, often played on her child’s credulity, and told her terrifying stories of spirits and demons. She had to witness the annual Carnival procession from within her house, since it was an expression of the black Dominican community, though she was sent out with money to give to the stilt-man called the Bois-Bois. She had a close friendship “with a Negro girl called Francine” (SP:23) who was a very good storyteller. The Anglican church in Roseau, where the Williams family worshipped along with others willing to be affiliated with Britain, had segregated seats and entrances: whites sat at the front with a space between them and black congregants, who were fewer in number. Rhys remembered not having any problems with this arrangement as a child (SP:72), and reported yelling “Black Devil” at Meta. She had both what Ford Madox Ford called her “passion for stating the case of the underdog”¹⁴ and a capacity to sound thoroughly white English colonial: “I never tried to be friends with any of the colored girls again . . . They hate us. We are hated” (SP:39). Rhys was contradictory about race. She was romantic about black culture as a child (she thought it more fun than white), but in old age she could sound resentful at the loss of white power in Dominica.

Race and colonialism figure in two stories about Gwen Williams’ adolescent life, one a highly suspect rumor and the other recorded in one of Rhys’s writing notebooks. The rumor is that Rhys might have had a love interest in someone partly Carib (this is based on a piece of fiction which her brother Owen wrote).¹⁵ It seems, however, unlikely that such a violation of racial mores could have gone unnoticed in a world where adolescent white girls were constantly under supervision and servants noticed everything. But there is a sense of forbidden love across racial caste lines in the submerged story of Sandi and Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Then, in the

Black Exercise Book, Rhys wrote an account of being sexually and psychologically abused by an old Englishman, Mr. Howard, who touched her breast once, and then developed a sadomasochistic serial story about her sexual submission to him.¹⁶ The married Howard was an emblem of colonial English privilege. Rhys's mother, thinking him a charming old gentleman, sent her daughter out with him to the Botanical Gardens in Roseau. Thus Rhys did not dare to tell her mother. The incident could easily have been amongst those aspects of her life that Rhys erased. But though she only wrote of it clearly in one story, she never lost her notebook account of it (and she lost much else). The narrative of a young female victim of sexual abuse is clearly one source of the sexual inhibition or emotional masochism that most of Rhys's protagonists display. Another is the devastating end of her first serious love affair.

Gwen Williams and Ella Gray 1907–1919

Gwen Williams left Dominica to complete her education under the guardianship of her English aunt, Clarice.¹⁷ In Roseau, she had attended a convent school as a boarder, and in England she would again be a boarder at the Perse School for Girls in Cambridge, leaving in 1908. In 1909 she enrolled at what would become the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (then called, after its founder Beerbohm Tree, Tree's School). She left the same year and defied her family's wishes to go on the stage as a chorus girl, choosing Ella Gray (or sometimes, Vivien or Emma Gray) as her stage name. Though Rhys said she left Tree's School because her father died, Angier points out that he died in 1910, and that the real reason was that her West Indian accent was not acceptable for serious theater in England at the time (SP:86–91).¹⁸

Rhys writes about her chorus-girl experience in her autobiography (SP:86–91). The life she lived was both gloriously fake (makeup, costumes and make-believe during the performances), and brutally real (tawdry boarding houses in which the chorus spent their leisure time). In old age, Rhys was often seen as an elderly siren, always made up and responsive to male attention: this was the way she had learned to face the public as a shy young woman. Chorus girls were also very often working class, and took part in the pub culture of Britain. This may have been where Rhys first began to drink: there may have been a tendency to alcoholism in her family, because her father was described in the Dominican press as being too fond of the bottle. Chorus girls were also prey for men of means. Lancelot Grey Hugh Smith took up with Rhys, but she fell very much in love. He was well to do,

single, well connected, a successful stockbroker by profession at a time when that was breaking ground, and he had a London town house and a significant family home in the country. He was also twenty years older. Their relationship followed the usual pattern of such a man's casual sexual arrangements. He saw her when he felt like it, took her out to dinner, gave her money, had her visit him at his grand London town house but sent her home in a taxi before dawn, and was usually away at the weekends seeing his own family and friends at his parents' country house.¹⁹ The relationship with Smith was in a sense a stage set, a place where the young Rhys could taste an English life she would have enjoyed, and forget that it was not anchored in real life.

Smith ended the affair before it got too serious for, whatever Rhys thought and hoped about her suitability for him, he would never have considered a white Creole chorus girl a likely long-term partner (moreover he never found any satisfactory candidate and remained unmarried). Following the social custom for men who indulged in cross-class affairs but wanted to be gentlemanly, he arranged for her to be financially supported, through money sent by his lawyer, for a number of years. But Rhys was emotionally devastated. Many years later she reflected: "It seems to me now that the whole business of money and sex is mixed up with something primitive and deep. When you take money directly from somebody you love it becomes not money but a symbol" (SP:97). Money and sex are often deeply intertwined in her fiction.

Her emotional collapse at the end of the affair is presented in her autobiography as triggering her entry into obsessively writing a journal, experienced as an extraordinary event: "My fingers tingled, and the palms of my hands . . . I wrote on until late into the night . . ." (SP:104). Writing thus became a release – but her portrayal of this as having the force of a conversion is likely a fiction, having the sort of shape actual experience would not: Diana Athill, Rhys's devoted editor for *Wide Sargasso Sea*, remarks that Rhys felt she had to rework experience to fit "the shape and nature of the work of art."²⁰

Rhys's admission in her autobiography that she had an abortion ("after what was then called an illegal operation," SP:95) is located just after her lover leaves for New York (the end of the affair). It is followed by a suicidal period, and then the release into writing. Angier feels the timeline is the end of the affair in 1912, and the drift into a risky demi-monde life in 1913, including pregnancy and abortion early in that year.²¹ She locates a particular intensity in Rhys's habit of writing notebooks from late 1913 into early 1914: these would become key sources for her fiction.