**Rhys, Jean (1890-1979)**

Dominican novelist and short-story writer. Her career can be divided into two main periods: her modernist fiction of the 1920s and 1930s, which depicts the bohemian demi-monde in Europe of the time as experienced by vulnerable female protagonists on the margins of respectability, and her later work, which came after a long hiatus with the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). This, her best known novel, is a prequel to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, and an important text within postcolonial studies.

Jean Rhys, née Ella Gwendoline Rees Williams, was born on 24 August 1890, in Roseau on the Caribbean island of Dominica, to a Welsh father and white Dominican Creole mother. She moved to England at the age of 17 for her schooling, and at 18 briefly trained at the Academy of Dramatic Art in London, before embarking on a precarious and peripatetic existence, involving work as a chorus girl, artist’s model, mannequin, children’s tutor, translator and ghost writer. She married the Dutch writer and journalist Willem Johan Marie (Jean) Lenglet (literary pseudonym Édouard de Nève) in 1919, with whom she moved around Europe, and had two children: a son who died in infancy, and a daughter. While in Paris in the 1920s, she began to write short stories under the patronage of FORD MADOX FORD, with whom she had an affair (fictionalised in her first novel *Postures* [1928], republished as *Quartet* [1929]). Following her separation from Lenglet she moved to London in 1928, where she met her second husband, Leslie Tilden Smith, and entered her most productive literary period. The critical failure of *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), and Tilden Smith’s death in 1945 was followed by a literary hiatus, when, plagued by depression, alcoholism and financial problems, she failed to publish any further works. Her work went out of print, and she fell into obscurity, living in poverty with her third husband Max Hamer. She was presumed dead by many, until her rediscovery by the actress Selma Vaz Dias in 1949, who adapted *Good Morning, Midnight* as a radio play for the BBC. The publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) brought her belated international acclaim at the age of 76. She died in Exeter on 14 May 1979.

Although in her early writing career Rhys gravitated to the European metropolitan centres of MODERNISM, and especially Paris, she remained on the margins of Anglophone expatriate communities. Her ambivalent colonial relationship to England is reflected in the rootlessness of her central female protagonists, and her novels of the 1920s and 1930s – *Quartet*, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1931), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) – are semi-autobiographical in nature. Rhys’s masterpiece of the period, *Good Morning, Midnight*, is a fragmented, elliptical and darkly comic narrative that uses flashbacks and adapts STREAM-OF-CONSCIOUSNESS techniques to depict its narrator’s descent into loneliness, depression and alcoholism, against the tense and threatening backdrop of Paris on the eve of war. In 1966, Rhys published *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which draws on her Caribbean heritage to re-imagine and give a voice to Rochester’s mad Creole wife Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre*. The novel was begun during Rhys’s early period, and is a culmination of the concerns of the earlier modernist work, including a sympathy for the exiled and dispossessed, a sensitivity to racial, economic and sexual politics, and the representation of emotional and psychological instability. *Wide Sargasso Sea* brought Rhys international acclaim, and was followed by the reprinting of her early work, as well as the publication of three further collections of stories: *Tigers are Better Looking* (1968), *My Day* (1975) and *Sleep It Off, Lady* (1976). Her unfinished memoirs, *Smile, Please* were published posthumously in 1979.

**List of works:**

**Novels**

*Postures* (1928), republished as *Quartet* (1929)

*After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1931)

*Voyage in the Dark* (1934)

*Good Morning, Midnight* (1939)

*Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)

**Short story collections**

*The Left Bank* (1927)

*Tigers are Better Looking* (1968)

*My Day* (1975)

*Sleep It Off, Lady* (1976)

**Letters and Memoirs**

*Letters: 1931-1966* (1984)

*Smile, Please* (1979)

**Translations**

Carco, Francis, *Perversity* (1928)

De Nève, Édouard, *Barred* (1932)

**References and Further Reading:**

Angier, Carole (1992) *Jean Rhys: Life and Work*, London: Penguin.

Carr, Helen (1996) *Jean Rhys*,Plymouth: Northcote House.

Emery, Mary Lou (1990) *Jean Rhys at “World’s End”: Novels of Colonial and Sexual Exile*, Austin: University of Texas Press.

Howells, Coral Ann (1991) *Jean Rhys*, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Savory, Elaine (1999) *Jean Rhys*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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