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978-0-521-69543-5 - The Cambridge Introduction to Jean Rhys

Elaine Savory

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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 Kumbia: Women and Caribbean Literature* (1990) and many essays on Caribbean and African literatures.

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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

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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 rackety 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

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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

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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.

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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.