

provides a sense of the succeeding generations of response to which she herself contributes.

The very riddling and doubling techniques which Howells finds in Rhys' writing can easily be related to Caribbean awareness of the duplicity of language, an awareness much heightened by the complex interweaving of class, race and gender tensions in the context of colonial attempts to contain and define reality in Caribbean societies. A Eurocentric perspective on riddling, particularly in *H.D.* but also in Rhys, can be found in Deborah Kelly Kloepfer's interesting study *The Unspeakable Mother: Forbidden Discourse in Jean Rhys and H.D.* (1989), though Howells treatment of this theme is much more detailed and very insightful.

Also Howells remains in her discussion of Rhys within the by now conventional perception of colonial identity as manichean and postcolonial writing as centrally concerned with resistance. It is becoming clearer that collaboration, assimilation and resistance are complexly related in much postcolonial writing, just as in the case of Rhys' conception of female responses to male power, resistance is mingled with an exploitative willingness to assume a docile posture, as Howells rightly realizes.

This brings us back to our (and Howells') starting point: as Howells points out in relation to other critics, everybody tends to read a given text according to their own interests and insights, and we might add here that those are deeply reflective of an individual's cultural contexts. This does not mean that nobody but a critic whose experience involves the Caribbean and England can properly read Rhys (no more than we should anticipate a given text being refused to all but the reader who most clearly reflects the culture(s) it portrays). But it does mean that we should maintain a certain expectation that all criticism is limited and self-interested and only provides us with one or two facets of insight into the full complexity of a writer's skill and vision. Howells has written a very useful and readable text on Rhys' fiction, and I do not want to minimize this, only to remind us all that everything we say about Rhys is likely to have bias and to exclude. It is in the productive discussions which arise from response to limited points of view that we arrive at rereadings and reassessments, never singly encompassing the whole. Thus we can appreciate the contribution of a serious and careful critic like Howells whilst at the same time beginning the work of reviewing her vision of Rhys and thus reentering Rhys' world. I say this in the belief that the best criticism is that which brings us back to the text and the writer, creating a productive dialogue of interpretations. Howells has written a fine work which does just this.

CAROLE ANGIER: *JEAN RHYSS: LIFE AND WORK*
 BOSTON: LITTLE, BROWN & COMPANY, 1990, 762 PAGES, \$35.00

Betsy Berry

It was the wish of Jean Rhys, formally stipulated in her will, that no account of her life be written unless authorized by her personally in her lifetime. But biography will out, and Carole Angier's *Jean Rhys: Life and Work*, published eleven years after Rhys's death, is an important contribution to the Rhys critical canon - even if Rhys and Angier had no such agreement and in fact never met.

Background material is particularly relevant in the case of Rhys, whose heroines so often suggest distillations of her own life.

For the most part, Angier doesn't offer new surprises or unearth scandalous secrets about Rhys that weren't already known or suspected. Instead, she fleshes out, fills in gaps, further documents, and in general rehearses more thoroughly the major markers in the life and publishing career of Rhys that she has already presented in an earlier, shorter work on her subject: *Jean Rhys* (Penguin series, "Lives of Modern Women," 1985). Certainly the biographical aspects of *Jean Rhys: Life and Work* comprise the most closely researched and comprehensive retelling of Rhys's tumultuous existence and career.

Peeling back the layers of Rhys's surface like an onion, Angier reveals sadness upon sadness in Rhys's life, as well as a poignancy of spirit which prevailed despite the odds, hidden beneath a frail, whispery voice that would make itself heard. For Rhys took life, raw and unforgiving, and fashioned it into art. What Ford Madox Ford famously labeled her "singular instinct for form" was also an instinct for self-preservation and perhaps for the last laugh. She survives the society she viewed as cruel and calculating, which used up Rhys and those like her and then tossed them aside. Rhys used them in turn, as foils for the heroines of her fiction.

Angier finds in the circumstances of Rhys's colonial upbringing - she was born in Roseau, Dominica, in 1890 - much that is formative in the shaping of her life. The book begins: "Nothing brings violence and death closer than an extreme abundance of life and beauty. And nowhere on earth are life and beauty more abundant than on the island of Dominica where Jean Rhys was born" (3). Angier writes well of Dominica's duality - the vividly colored landscape, the lush tapestry, the tenacity of its oppressed people; and a darker, more sinister side - colonies of parasites and their urgency of decay, an overgrowth of species to drown the individual, the violent inner-rumbling beneath "this careless, cannibal life" (3). Dominica becomes emblematic of the young woman to whom it gave birth: "The beauty is mainly on the surface, the violence beneath" (3). Sadly, the frustration born or bred within Jean Rhys would break through again and again, sometimes manifesting itself in violent acts throughout her life. Her early sense of place, of Dominica's external nature, would shape her conception of human nature as well. The appealing surfaces of people hid not-so-pretty things.

The chapter on Rhys's youth is intriguing, particularly in Angier's details of her pivotal experience with "Mr. Howard," an older, married British colonial who turned his carnal attentions upon the beautiful young daughter of Dr. Rees Williams. During this period, Rhys's teens, reading played a significant role. In a mixture of awe and disgust, she devoured what stories she could find about prostitutes, women from a larger world outside Dominica's small island society. "She lived in books and in her imagination now," writes Angier, "and she was wildly romantic. All the books she read were English, so England became her dream of glamour and excitement" (21). Soon Rhys would see for herself this country that loomed so large in the imaginations of others.

In 1907, accompanied by her aunt, the seventeen-year-old Rhys set sail for England. Her destination would be the Perse School for Girls in Cambridge, an unhappy setting of dark *Jane Eyre*-style corridors and red curtains about which Rhys later commented "'The school part of my life explains so much'" (40). Except for a brief visit later in her life, Rhys was leaving Dominica forever. Perhaps because her mother was ill, only her father came to see her off, and though she loved him dearly she began to dismiss all thoughts of home the moment she entered her cabin. "I was forgetting them," Rhys remembered; "They were the past" (35). The unknown lay beyond, full of promise.

But after disembarking in Southampton and queued up for the London train, Rhys met the face of the enemy. The image is stark and memorable, unintentionally reminiscent, as Angier paints it, of Pound's "In A Station of the Metro" - those "pale blue eyes, the pale white faces" of the English commuters. But the

expressions do not suggest petals against the machine; for Rhys their aim is collective and robotic, to "turn and watch as she fell over" (37).

Here begins a vaguer period in *Life and Work*. Apparently neither much documented evidence nor acquaintances from this time in Rhys's life are extant; unfortunate for the reader and especially for the critic, for undoubtedly it must represent a singularly formative period for Rhys the writer - indeed when she first began to record her impressions in exercise books. (Those who turn to *Life and Work* for Rhys's literary influences, or specific titles she may have read, will be disappointed at the dearth of information Angier presents on the subject.) Surely the obscurity of this time is a result of the reasons suggested above and not because Angier is not as interested in this period in Rhys's life. There are so many seductive avenues to explore: Rhys's training at the Tree's Academy of Dramatic Art (now the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts), her stint as a chorus girl travelling the English countryside, her love affair with Lancelot Grey Hugh Smith - an older, well-placed Englishman who first showed Rhys what would become one of her most important themes, that sex and love, happiness and sadness, indeed all human emotions are inextricably bound with money. Then there was her early relationship with her first husband, the French-Dutch journalist Jean Lenglet, and the heady Paris period, in which as a true expatriate writer she frequented the clubs and cafés of the Latin Quarter - dancing, drinking, talking until dawn. Angier discusses such subjects, naturally, but her atmospheric details are decidedly stronger and more carefully crafted in the sections on Rhys's childhood and old age.

Instead Angier does here what she does almost exclusively in her first book: turns, say, to Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*, to read Anna Morgan as Rhys herself. These sometimes unspecified segues from factually documented biographical narrative to speculation based on fiction and back again, plus the sheer volume of material and the organizational dilemma involved in attempting to balance the two, are the weakest point of *Jean Rhys: Life and Work*. Any deliberate, point-by-point comparison of a fictional character and its creator is a tenuous critical practice. While Rhys herself acknowledged the close connection of scenes in her books to those in her life, she worried about the naïveté of those who read "'I' [for] 'I' and not [as] a literary device'" (485). Even Rhys's own autobiographical observations in *Smile Please* require verification by a biographer. The temptation to read the artist for the protagonist may exist more with Rhys than some authors, but literature is never so one-dimensional as that. And in *Life and Work* the area most rife with this critical fallacy consists of Angier's chapters on Rhys's work. When Angier sticks strictly to biography, using sources outside of Rhys's fiction, her own writing is at its most clearly defined and well-presented. But her literary criticism, the methodology of which is a close reading of imagery, symbolism, and what she labels "technique," falls short of the mark. In this work, as in her first, she is also sometimes ungenerous to other critics and scholars.

She does a good job with the affair between Rhys and Ford Madox Ford, given the complicated and emotional details of her subject, and the fact that her admitted speculation about this period is bolstered by the quartet of participants, all of whom left written versions of what happened. Rhys would agree with Angier's contention that "it was Ford who made her into a writer" (175). Though at this point Rhys was married to Lenglet, Ford living with Australian painter Stella Bowen, and the literary lovers doomed to failure, the resonance of their collaboration was resounding for Rhys. Ford told her whom to read (French writers), and instructed her in style, rhythm, and execution, warning her above all to avoid cliché and melodrama; his influence on behalf of the young writer cannot be overemphasized. On a personal level, theirs was a story featuring all the characters of the gender entanglement à la Rhys: an impoverished husband and his needy young bride; a sophisticated, older Englishman masquerading as emotional rescuer; and his understandably bitter

(common law) wife. The story they played out was exotic, scandalous, and hopelessly melodramatic; Lenglet, arrested for illegal currency transactions; a bewildered Rhys deserting him for Ford; Ford, short on amorous attentions, pensioning her off while the helpless Lenglet serves out his sentence in a Paris gaol.

Although Rhys does seem later to have found some measure of satisfaction and success in her relationships with men, the security they brought her continued to stifle her, even enrage her. She saw herself as a "savage individualist," and her independent spirit was compromised when others saw her as needy. While Angier contends that Rhys, out of necessity, was forever being "rescued," I would suggest that she was not nearly as incompetent as she might have wanted others to think. To continually paint her as a damsel-in-distress, in my opinion, is to misread her. (Neither do I agree with those, including Angier, who maintain that Rhys's writing was passive and uncalculated, a kind of spontaneous magic act which she "fell into" quite by accident, again and again.) At any rate, having been divorced from Lenglet in 1926, in 1933 she married Leslie Tilden Smith, who both "rescued her" and later served as her literary agent of sorts. He was kind and patient, and - intervening between her profound lethargy and now notorious drinking bouts - was, Angier contends, the driving force behind her writing. Tilden Smith spent the early years of their marriage looking after his wife, sending out the work she revised obsessively and seemed reluctant to let go and, more pathetically, getting her out of verbal and physical rows with her neighbors. (He and Rhys were both arrested in a pub brawl.) He loved literature and he loved Rhys, but he was not without his faults: he lacked strong will and an ambition of his own. As a result, the middle-aged couple were constantly moving from dreary flat to dreary flat, drinking and ill; it is a testament to Rhys's strength that through crises like these she continued to add to her body of work. During her relationship with Tilden Smith Rhys published three novels, *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1930), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), *Good Morning, to Midnight* (1939), and a number of short stories. As his health worsened, she resented the caretaker's role she increasingly had to assume and sometimes out of rage and frustration, according to Angier, Rhys would strike him. While *Life and Work* is largely sympathetic to and admiring of Rhys, Angier never shies away from the harsher realities of Rhys's life.

Tilden Smith died in 1945 at the age of sixty. Two years after his death, Rhys married for the final time. George Victor Max Hamer (known as Max), a retired naval officer and solicitor, in fact a cousin of Tilden Smith's, allegedly met Rhys when he served as executor of his cousin's will. This marriage was even more tortured, if possible, than her first two. Hamer, the physical embodiment in his youth of the handsome, upright Englishman that Rhys, despite her attitude towards the British, was known to fall for, was sixty-five when they married. He was a fringe character who served in the RAF during World War II; having tried his hand at an honest profession and failed, he dreamed up wild money schemes and roamed late-night London with various *amis dangereux*. More unfortunately for Rhys's career, Hamer was uninterested in reading and literature. During this time Rhys was called up before the magistrate nine times in a two-year period for various charges, including throwing a brick through the window of a neighbor (who complained to the police of a vengeful woman impersonating a dead writer named Jean Rhys), biting another, leaping upon a policeman sent to haul her to the station and, as ever, on charges of drunk and disorderly, often after she was spotted in the street, shaking her fist at her head and bellowing about the bloody British. Max was arrested for "larceny and obtaining money by false pretenses" and sentenced to three years in prison. This was in 1950; before he returned home Max would be seventy years old and desperately ill.

Rhys's marriage to Hamer falls under the section Angier titles "The Lost Years." Sometimes she means literally lost: for a full year after her husband

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incarceration Rhys vanished entirely, eventually writing her daughter surprising news - that she hadn't been drinking and was writing a bit. After Hamer's release, the couple's health and marriage spiralling ever downward, Rhys reestablished contact with Selma Vaz Dias, the London-based actress who became famous for "rediscovering" Rhys through an ad in the *New Statesman*, and with whom she shared an unstable personal and professional relationship. The Hamers moved to Cornwall, to a tiny seaside resort called Bude. There, contracting the flu and other ailments during the long, cold winters, Rhys took out the draft of a novel with the working titles "Le Revenant" and "Mrs. Rochester." Nine years in the making, it would be renamed, and critics would hail *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) as a masterpiece.

The account of the nine years that comprise the writing of Rhys's final novel, and the thirteen years afterward until her death, details the inevitable sadnesses of advancing age and loss. She moved, for the last time, to Cheriton Fitzpaine, in Devon, to a small crumbling cottage bought for the Hamers by a brother of Rhys. It was an almost inaccessible little village, with no libraries or bookstores, and, as usual, her neighbors misunderstood her, magnifying her eccentricities. (Even after her death, her work widely recognized, some of the villagers professed not to have known she was a writer.) After years in and out of nursing homes, Max Hamer died, in 1966, the same year that *Wide Sargasso Sea* was finally published. Rhys suffered a great deal of guilt about his death. She was lonely when he wasn't there, incompetent as a nurse when he was, and she resented the attention he required, abusing him, sometimes physically, out of the dreadful frustration that she would never finish what was nearest her heart. Even though Rhys professed *Voyage in the Dark* to be her personal favorite among her novels, it was her beloved "Mrs. Rochester," the culmination of all she had learned about literary technique, and the unlikely, indeed doomed, wedding of Dominican richness and English sterility, that resurrected her career and made her famous. She had at last realized that writing was her *raison d'être*, the sole thing that she felt would "earn" her death, the final peace she had always felt eluded her. She bemoaned her worsening health and capacity to create, and her fading looks - especially now that, at last, the literary world had found her.

Angier writes too of triumphant moments: literary awards and recognition, income from book sales and grants, new friendships (with Sonia Orwell, for example) and, while she was able, the shopping trips to London that she loved. At the astounding age of eighty-six she published a collection of stories - six revised from earlier drafts and six completely new - *Sleep It Off Lady* (1976). That year she also took a cherished trip to Venice, with longtime friend Diana Melly. All the while she looked to her writing, determined to focus - no matter how tortuously, and now with the help of others, principally David Plante - on the autobiography which would be published posthumously but remain unfinished at her death.

Though Rhys once stated "I do not know others. I see them as trees walking" (462), towards the end of her life she began to appreciate human attention and the affection of those close to her - even while protesting the opposite or mistreating her helpers. With those friends who sacrificed much for Rhys in her final years, she found true moments of pleasure. Escorted through London streets Rhys would indulge in a kind of fantasy window shopping. Once when she spotted a red dress in a boutique window, she thought less of its unsuitability for her advancing age than how perfectly it fit her own private picture of herself. Though "happy" was forever a foreign-sounding word, Rhys was never altogether without hope. She once wrote to her daughter, "My dream is to finish my book, get a face lift, and a bright red wig" (485). But even her best moments were undercut by the nagging disappointment that everything good had come too late.

For the most part Angier paints a grim picture of her subject, leading A. Alvarez, a champion of Rhys's artistic standing, to the surprising conclusion that Angier's biography of Rhys argues against biography in general. "Jean Rhys was one of the finest writers of the century but the best way to read her work is to know nothing about the woman who wrote it" (*The New York Review of Books*, 10 October 1991, 10). Even though Angier blurs the boundary between the two, Rhys's life did inform her fiction. Her will to survive as well as create, however unconscious or fragile it might appear to the outsider, is equal in its way to the quality of her prose. Jean Rhys's life might have been at times poor, nasty, and brutish, but still it had its luminous moments. Francis Wyndham's summation of Rhys's special grace is worth remembering:

For me the ghost of Jean Rhys is not the hunted, lonely woman who figures in her novels, nor the restless spirit so often near despair ... but the slant-eyed siren with whom one could enjoy the full intensity of a treat as with no one else - those sacred moments of frivolity (an old tune, a new scent, a perfect cocktail, a wonderful joke) which for her nearly made life worth living. ("Introduction," *Jean Rhys: Letters 1931-1966*, 12.)

Such intensity in Rhys, her passion in joy as well as in sorrow, is the heart of her life's story.

§ § §

BEHIND BARS: THE LITERARY RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN THE FICTIONS OF JEAN RHYSS & EDOUARD DE NEVE

Thorunn Lonsdale

Sue Roe suggests that Rhys's writing represents a particular kind of psychological quest which is dependent for its force on the motionlessness and demotivation of her heroines, that no external actions can alleviate the internal distress experienced by the heroines, and that there is no direct relationship between economic and moral forces. Furthermore, Roe de-emphasizes P.A. Packer's assertion that poverty seems to be the root cause of the hardships encountered by Rhys's heroines. She asserts that they have lost more than just money and that it is this larger area of deprivation which is paramount.¹

Although the psychological element is fundamental to the interpretation of Rhys's female portrayals, economic factors must also be acknowledged. The preoccupation with money in all of her work, and the characters' keen knowledge that money talks, must be seen as a key to their psychological make-ups. The demotivation and motionlessness of the characters can be understood as purposeful methods towards the attainment of economic security. From Anna Morgan's passive acceptance of a pair of stockings to Sasha's identification with a gigolo is the suggestion of a knowledge of how the stakes line up. Being a victim ready to be snared may be seen as a tactical manoeuvre to achieve a desired end, and Rhys's characters may be seen as deploying very sensible strategic moves given the social environment in which they operate. Their unhappiness can be read as a dissatisfaction with the methods they have to employ, but a cynical recognition that they are also the most effective. *Sous les verrous* helps in the unmasking of this element in *Quartet*, which, in turn, allows for the same connections to be made with Rhys's other work; it also helps to allay the frustration the reader feels, all too often, at the passivity of Rhys's female characters, since their behaviour can be read as actually motivated.