Much has been written about the entire Jean Rhys corpus; most writers, however, tend to stress the same issue: the consciousness of the Rhys protagonist as a single character, vulnerable and male-dependent, tracing the psychological disintegration of this character from the fragile innocence of Anna Morgan in Voyage in the Dark to the madness of Bertha Mason in Wide Sargasso Sea. Without much interpretation they mention the long hiatus between the bulk of Rhys' work, four novels and a collection of short stories, all published before World War II, and her last and most praised novel, Wide Sargasso Sea, published in 1966. They expend their efforts in establishing a continuity, in identifying thematic and subject concerns that continue from one book into the next, despite changes in setting or more important changes in technique. In a quest for critical unity, critics ignore or de-emphasize some significant differences.

It is these differences between the works written before and after the gulf of silence that I shall examine. Also, while not ignoring the relationship of autobiography to her works, I shall consider them as well in relation to the time in which she wrote them. Rhys said that she wrote about herself because "I am the only truth I know." That statement may have seemed the whole answer to her, but the fact is that one participates in the age in which one lives and one's truth reflects the truths of an age as well as of one's deepest self. As I examine the novels, I shall postulate a new sort of modernism to contain Rhys' early novels of the thirties. The final novel, Wide Sargasso Sea, exemplifies not only a change of theme but a marked change of technique, that characterized by a more familiar modernism, as practiced by Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot and James Joyce.

If one examines Rhys' work in its literary-historical context and considers as a unit her early work, all written between 1924 and 1939, one sees clearly its affinities with the writing of others of the period, writers such as Graham Greene, Christopher Isherwood, George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway. While not ignoring the single-mindedness of her themes, one can see that she is concerned as a writer with images, issues, and ways of speaking that occupied her contemporaries as well.

Like Isherwood, Rhys angrily rejected the bourgeois condescension she found in a crumbling yet pretentious London. Like Greene, she recognized that hostility and fear permeate the lives of ordinary people and turn them against innocent neighbors. Like both Isherwood and Greene, she dramatized perceptions through techniques learned from film. Like Orwell, she chose to learn about the seedy side of modern life and exposed with honesty, insight and compassion the lives of those on both sides of the slender line of respectability. Like Hemingway, she presented characters unwilling to engage in or
incapable of analysis or philosophical speculation. Rootless and sensual, they act primarily on whim, suggesting by their narrow focus on the drives toward sex, drink, temporary companionship a fearful attitude toward a world either meaningless or threatening. Their private selves are fragile and easily hurt and are all they have; these selves are unknown, even to themselves, unstable and uncontrollable. There is also, in the work of all these writers, including Rhys, a curious relationship between author and narrator, a tendency toward autobiography without the fixed goals of previous writers. Seeking both self-awareness and self-justification, forced instead to look outward at a world not only philosophically chaotic but economically depressed, they look both outward and inward with less depth than did their literary predecessors, the great modernists. With precision of surface detail, but uncertainty of inner cohesion or meaning, they record what is there at a given moment, substituting emotional intensity for intellectual analysis, concrete impressions for symbolic significance.

These are characteristics which unite Rhys with her contemporaries. Wide Sargasso Sea, on the other hand, exhibits the characteristics not of this thirties modernism but rather classic or high modernism. This modernism, which reached its apogee in the 1920s in Ulysses, Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, and The Waste Land, is characterized by an emphasis on depth not surface, on life as a series of epiphanies rather than impulses, reliance on symbol and metaphor rather than on concrete detail, and elaborate structures of allusion to traditional worlds and values. The author moves farther away from the narrative in an attempt at detachment and thus control; the artifact becomes independent of its creator. This contrast between the novels Rhys wrote in the thirties and the single novel she produced so much later will be clear when the novels are studied closely. Their differences probably stem from the close interrelationship between Rhys' life and her work. It seems clear that Rhys both needed to and was long unable to move away from her basic subject and drama, the predator-victim relations between the sexes, and the destructive nature of these relations. Her subject came painfully close to the bone of her own self, and with it she had failed to reach sufficient sympathetic readers. It was by changing not her subject but the narrative mode through which she expressed it that she managed to break through her creative impasse. Through the devices of classic modernism, ironically enough available to her many years before when she began to write in the 1920s, but ungenial to her expressive needs then, she was enabled finally to produce another novel, a rich, allusive and evocative work and one which indeed found an audience. Another irony in the career of this most independent of writers is that the audience she won with this many-layered and sensuous work would return then to the thinner and more acid novel of the thirties and find them sharply communicating, clear and unforgettable.

It is with such works in mind as Orwell's Down and Out in Paris and London (1933), and Keep the Aspidistra Flying (1936), Graham Greene's It's a Battlefield, (1934), English Made Me (1935), and This Gun for Hire (1936), Isherwood's Berlin Stories (1935), and Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms (1929) and To Have and to Have Not (1937), that one should examine the early novels of Jean Rhys: Quartet (1929), After Leaving Mr Mackenzie (1931), Voyage in the Dark (1934), and Good Morning, Midnight (1939). Their unity of concerns emerges clearly.

One of these concerns is a skepticism about the efficacy of personal relations in filling the void left by the twentieth century's loss of faith. For the modernist writers E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, the issue of personal communication and sympathy had been central, and if some unity of perception or experience was difficult to achieve, such attempts were worthy goals and subjects for fiction. For writers in the thirties this issue is viewed much more pessimistically; transience and unsatisfactoriness in human relations are assumed. External events and considerations exert tremendous pressures on the attempts of human beings merely to live privately and peacefully. A second pervasive element of thirties fiction is fear, a fear presented as a natural response to a world increasingly experienced as hostile, even dangerous. Most noticeable in the politically
conceptualized novels of Graham Greene, but present in the work of apolitical novelists like Rhys, the sense of malevolence in others, coupled with an awareness of power as a central issue in any relationship, produces an atmosphere recognizably ominous and recognizably of the thirties.

Finally, and most importantly for this essay, is the movement to the surface identified by Alan Wilde in his study, "The Epistemology of Late Modernism," as "the rise of something like a new sensibility." As if accepting the futility of the modernists' search for some central truth beneath appearances, the thirties writers moved to a place where man must carry on, and explored the observed details of the phenomenal world with the seriousness if not the hope with which their predecessors plumbed the depths. This shift to the surface is observable in the areas of prose style, of narrative technique, of characterization, and frequently becomes the subject of fiction itself.

David Lodge has already pointed out a basic stylistic division between the modernists, who lean toward Jakobson's pole of metaphor in their prose style, and the prose writers of the thirties, who exhibit a preference for metonymy. Thus an airplane, so obviously a symbol of unity in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, becomes in Greene and Orwell metonymic, part of a real and ominous landscape with which their characters will have to deal in the near future. For both Orwell and Greene, the events of life, those which affect the outer as well as the inner person, have become too apparent to be overlooked. The objects of the world do impinge on people, not merely in triggering imaginative ramblings or in stirring buried memories to life, but in foretelling future conditions - both The Confidential Agent and Coming Up for Air are saturated with the coming war - giving information vital to the safe conduct of one's life, and, at the least, providing necessary elements of one's world, unglamorous though they may be.

The thirties, then, show a movement away from a metaphorical prose style to one which focuses on the details of the empirical world. This is not to say that the writers of the thirties shared the faith of the Georgians that by surrounding a character with masses of physical detail one has perforce presented his totality. On the contrary, physical detail in the novels of the thirties is less dense, less revealing of truth, more likely to stress gaps of knowledge about person or place. Greene's conscientious Assistant Police Commissioner (It's a Battlefield) comes to mind, a character whose obsessive collecting of facts clearly is a defense against his stronger realization of the huge gaps in his knowledge and hence control of his world. Frequently the thirties writers may have found the exigencies or trivialities of phenomenal reality as unsatisfactory or as frustrating as Joyce or Woolf may have felt them. The important difference is that they made no attempt to transcend them; on the contrary, they believed one could not escape them and acknowledged this fact in a leaner, less metaphoric prose, a style which insists on the reality of the objects it describes.

Rhys' four thirties novels share this metonymic style and insistence on gaps rather than on totality of the knowledge her concrete details present. Like Greene and Orwell, Rhys insists on the validity and the inescapability of the phenomenal world. The details of her hotel rooms and cafes are not metaphors for an emotional state; they are synecdochic of the lives of the characters. They remain themselves, and something else could not as easily be substituted for them. Unlike the mark on the wall which provided Virginia Woolf with so many analogues, the spots on the walls in Rhys' novels are roaches, and they do not go away; they work with the other elements of the room, all of which "belong to the same general context" of shabby, down-at-the-heel living. Woolf's observer-narrator uses the mark for a set of interior experiences; she dominates and transforms it. In Rhys, the observer-narrator is dominated by the reality of the mark. The relationship with the external world is reversed.

Rhys' technique in her thirties novels is to build up no more information than is necessary to prepare for the next event in a brief and visual scene, always economically told and always imparting a strong sense of detail withheld. A scene from *Quartet*, the
single motivating scene for Marya's marriage to the devious Stephan, will illustrate.

"It's a pity," said Monsieur Zelli. "It's better when a woman has some money, I think. It's much safer for her."

"I owe for the dress I have on," Marya informed him, for she was determined to make things perfectly clear.

He told her they would go next day and pay for it.

"How much do you owe?"

"It's not worth that," he remarked calmly when she told him. "Not that it's ugly, but it has no chic. I expect your dressmaker cheats you."

Marya was annoyed but impressed.

"You know — you'll be happy with me," he continued in a persuasive voice.

And Marya answered that she dared say she would.

Rhys' striking economy is well illustrated in this scene, told bare of metaphor, brief, simple sentences and plain diction. She relies heavily on dialogue with a minimum of analysis or comment of any sort. The movement of the paragraph is linear; it moves toward action, while simultaneously stressing the minimum of information each character has or expects to gain of the other. This linear prose contrasts powerfully with the interiority of Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, which links people far away from one another in a single moment of time. Even in her two latter thirties novels, which make extensive use of flashback and the stream of memories, Rhys tends to employ a straightforward narrative flow within each given memory.

An element of her world which influenced several of her contemporaries, especially Greene and Isherwood, was film. Both novelists wrote for the films and testify to its influence on their styles, which became more economical and visual after they experienced the medium. Film, through the technique of the close-up, brings its viewer nearer to the surfaces of concrete objects, even human faces and bodies, without necessarily allowing the viewer to enter the consciousness of the contemplated being or to penetrate the object. Film achieves closeness without certainty of knowledge, exploring minutely a world of surfaces, yet reminding the viewer of what he does not know. Framing an arbitrary section of life, film emphasizes the inexorableness of the concrete surface of life and insists on the significance of and continuous relation between man and his environment which the thirties writers stress. Clarissa Dalloway's mental processes constantly remove her from contemporary, physical reality; she and Septimus Smith both seek something beyond external phenomena. The camera, on the other hand, stresses man's physical relation with the world.

Adapting the techniques of film to their narrative style, writers of the thirties also adopted the philosophical implications of film, that surface, the signals they and their environment send to one another, and to which they must respond are what men and women live by. Like Greene and Isherwood, Rhys seems clearly to have been influenced by both the techniques and assumptions of film, and learned early to prune her prose, visualize her scenes, and treat her dialogue with a dramatist's economy while implying the frustrations and dangers inherent in such a predilection for surface and incompleteness.

Consider the opening chapters of After Leaving Mr Mackenzie and how visually Rhys presents scenes of the daily life of her protagonist: her depression and desperation are made clear through shots of late rising and meals in shabby restaurants, cuts from Julia at her make-up to Julia passing an old woman with grown-out dyed hair, Julia reading the solicitor's letter announcing the last of the payments, Julia seeking out Mackenzie's home and then following him for the confrontation in the restaurant. The reader watches Julia as a camera would. So visual is Rhys' narrative technique that she includes a scene of another person watching the confrontation. Although the two later novels, Voyage in the
Dark (1934)\textsuperscript{7} and Good Morning, Midnight (1939),\textsuperscript{8} contain less action and dialogue than the two earlier novels, the treatment is still quite cinematic, and the author insists on keeping narrative comment to an ironic minimum. Indeed, Rhys is more truly cinematic in her novels than Greene, for in spite of his adroit use of the shifting camera, Greene relies heavily on an omniscient narrator, who always knows his characters and intervenes for them with the reader. Rhys is more reticent. She is likely to let the confusion remain and inconsistencies stand unjustified.

This world seen cinematically is thus a world of surfaces, and the characters in Rhys' novels are both sharply observant of the surface elements of life and inevitably frustrated by them. Clothes, make-up, drinks, hotels, and hotel rooms are noted and quickly classified for the message each reveals of psychological and socio-economic states. These personal effects, however, are signals, not symbols. Shabby clothes both announce and are part of the state of being poor. Wearing an excess of make-up both hides the signs of age and announces the reality. On the other hand, such signs reflect only a partial truth, for poverty and aging may form the whole person to a small degree. But since no deeper or compensating truths are offered, one must deal with these surface messages, for they are all one will receive.

As a significant example, Rhys makes small tragedies out of the physical aging of women. The series of events is as inevitable as cruel: bad love affairs lead to drink and luminal, which lead to signs on face, body, and clothing, which lead to loneliness, ridicule, and cruelty. Even Marya, in Quartet, who is young, is physically marked by the unhappiness of her passion:

Her eyelids were swollen and flaccid over unnaturally large, bright eyes. Her head seemed to have sunk between her shoulders, giving her a tormented and deformed look. Her mouth drooped, her skin was greyish, and when she made up her face the powder and rouge stood out in clownish patches.\textsuperscript{\textit{p.124}}

After she visits her imprisoned husband, thus clearing up her conscience, her looks change and she is again attractive to her lover.

The two sisters in After Leaving Mr Mackenzie, meeting one another after an absence of some years, each immediately type the other from the signals their faces and bodies send forth. "She doesn't even look like a lady now," notes the sister who stayed at home, while the one who left sees that "Norah herself was labeled for all to see. She was labeled 'Middle class, no money.'" (After Leaving Mr Mackenzie, pp.73-74). Both observations imply that there is much more to the sisters' characters than is revealed by these physical marks, but the world will assess them on the basis of the physical labels. Inner traits produce the feelings of suffering, but externals produce the world's judgments and attendant responses and in turn increase the suffering. The novel which makes this point most painfully clear, Good Morning, Midnight, renders internal pain almost entirely in terms of surface signals. An encounter begun with a gigolo's misreading of Sasha Jensen's fur coat becomes an ironic exercise in gamesmanship as both characters, experts in reading signs, grope toward an honest intimacy. Rhys' pessimism precludes a satisfactory resolution of the relationship.

Attention to surface rather than depth extends beyond action to Rhys' presentation of character. Character is known only partially, exposed primarily by action and rarely by the revelatory techniques characteristic of the modernist novel of the twenties. Woolf, who had appealed to modern authors to portray character from the inside looking out\textsuperscript{9} and who herself created highly subjective and selective visions of reality reflected by the consciousness of single individuals, sought in her characterizations a completeness as well as of importance. If she shifted her emphasis from the
material to the imaginative and spiritual, from environment to consciousness, she sought
to give these issues weight and significance. Thus Lily Briscoe’s momentary vision of
inclusion provides the climax of the novel: “Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in
extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.” In like attempt, Woolf concludes Mrs. Dalloway
with two rhythmically portentous sentences: “It is Clarissa, he said. For there she
was.”

Such completeness of portrayal and implicit knowledge of character become less and
less common in the novels of the thirties. If a Rhys character observes herself acting or
comments on others, the moment is discrete, separate, not necessarily integrated with
others. Unlike Woolf, whose narrators hover knowingly over characters, Rhys’ narrator
refuses to summarize or to integrate or to look for larger significance. The question
Woolf asks repeatedly, “What does it all mean?” is never posed. It is beyond the scope
of either narrator or character.

Rhys’ insistence on remaining on the surface or at least refraining from Woolf’s assertions about her characters resembles the practice of Isherwood in his Berlin Stories.
Isherwood’s alter ego, Bradshaw, refuses to make judgments about the equivocal figure
Norris long after the reader has begun to make them. The novel’s ambiguous conclusion
finds Bradshaw taking the train to England and far from drawing any conclusion about
experience. Rather than probe his narrator either casually or in depth, Isherwood
provides glimpses of other characters who, as Alan Wilde has pointed out, dazzle on the
surface but do not present themselves as characters with depths to be discovered. Isherwood shared with Rhys and with Hemingway an unwillingness to speculate on or attempt to integrate his characters. The author does not intervene.

Rhys’ partially glimpsed characters, like Isherwood’s, are not necessarily consistent either. They are self-contradictory; knowing what may be helpful to them, they do its reverse. Possessing intelligence and intuition, they nevertheless act upon whim or, more frequently, do nothing. Mr. Mackenzie, a man of conforming morals and social habits, is drawn into an affair with Julia Martin. Upon its completion, having turned the relationship over to a solicitor, he cannot understand how it even began. “An act of insanity! Looking back on it, he thought, ‘My God, why did I do it? Why did I want to sleep with her?’” (After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, p.23). Julia Martin returns to England because a taxi hoots before she counts three. Knowing exactly what about her dress conduct irritates her conventional, middle-class family, she makes no attempt to guard her raffish looks, talks about past lovers, and generally irritates those from whom she wishes to receive help. Julia emerges as a character of contradictions rather than complexities. While Rhys castigates respectable society’s defensive manoeuvre of negatively labeling the deviant or nonconformist, this person is presented as neither compellingly complex nor philosophically integrated. Anna Morgan’s experienced lover, negatively described as rich, cowardly, and irresponsible, Anna acquires insight from Walter Jeffries and his kind, but the insight does not help her to handle her future. One sees no significant change or growth in Anna; impotence, inertia, and self-destructiveness dominate. E.M. Forster’s observations about Isherwood’s My Changes Trains is equally apt regarding the characterizations of Jean Rhys. “It was the contradictoriness rather than complexities of character, and seems to reveal one facet by facet rather than... strata.”

Like Isherwood, Rhys refuses to sum up or to evaluate; she does not fill in the
leaves. If Woolf sees in human character a complexity and multiplicity which
be communicated in full to any single person in one’s life, Rhys sees gaps and
even the characters themselves do not bridge to themselves. This refusal to allow
characters to analyze themselves, in the mode of middle class heroines from Bronte’s
Eyre to Margaret Drabble’s Jane Gray, caused early reviewers to compare Rhys
to Zola’s. Actually, rather than distancing herself from her characters as Zola
stands very close to them and shares with them a skepticism and conviction in the
of analysis.
This presentation of character as contradictory and only partially knowable is reinforced by point of view. In the first two novels, point of view shifts just sufficiently to undermine reader identification with the central character, but not enough to create a strong understanding of any of the other characters. In the two later novels, Rhys maintains a single point of view, which intensifies emotional force but hardly clarifies character motivation. In this practice too she is both honest and reticent, unwilling to say more than she can know with certainty. In Rhys' novels, as in many other works of fiction of the thirties, one has some difficulty in separating narrator from author, and this difficulty complicates the reading of point of view. While Rhys directs irony against Mary Zelli, Julia Martin, and Sasha Jensen, one feels strong author empathy working as well, which is difficult to separate out. This double view contributes to the sense of insecurity combined with ruthless honesty one experiences in reading these books.

Finally, another characteristic of Rhys' fictional world shared by her contemporaries is a strong sense of her characters' being surrounded by hostility. If the twenties writer saw the world as largely chaotic, with the artist's function being the imposition of some precarious order, writers in the thirties viewed their world as downright dangerous. This tendency may have resulted from the events of the decade, which did indeed turn writers from exclusive focus on interior experience to relations with external reality. Whatever the cause, hostility and violence permeate the fiction of the period, whether the subject is war and ideology or merely the struggle to live from day to day.

One thinks of Greene's Stamboul Train and This Gun For Hire, of characters such as Isherwood's Schmidt, who physically intimidates his boss, and of Greene's murderous tycoon Eric Krogh. A sense of menace is accompanied by a skepticism toward conventional morality. The doomed hero of Hemingway's To Have and Have Not is a bootlegger, and the values viewed positively in the novel resemble those of Rhys' thirties works: camaraderie, sexual love, sharing one's last crust, the chic that so annoyed Stella Bowen. These are overcome by a predatory and rather ill-defined hostility emanating from the powerful and overtly respectable. It is characteristic of the thirties that many of its literary characters are less than respectable, some examples being Orwell's tramps and plongeurs, his hop pickers and miners, the male and female prostitutes of Isherwood's Berlin, Greene's failed con man Anthony Farrant.

The ironies and complexities of the age produce a pessimism in thirties writing as characteristic of the period as the romantic socialism of such writers as Steinbeck, Odets and Edward Upward. Their pessimistic vision is shared by Rhys, whose world, small as it is, is equally permeated by hostility. In Quartet, the overt respectability of the soldiers is ironically contrasted with an image of H.J. as brutish and lustful in his pursuit of Marya, and of Lois as equally large, cruel and insensitive. Julia Martin's family is presented as overtly hostile to her; men are both predatory in their physical pursuit of women and cruelly judgmental afterwards. Even store managers, bourgeois women, and foreign tourists exercise malignant power. In its entirety, thirties fiction projects an association of power and respectability with evil and danger, an association which insensibly prefigures the horrors of the coming war, in which the innocent and powerless would suffer by the millions at the hands of a society which had made respectable the unconscious perpetration of evil.

The novels which Rhys wrote in the thirties then are characterized by linear prose, a non-allusive style, a cinematic, highly visual narrative technique, focus on surface and signs, involved but non-analytical narrators, and a conception of character both fragmented and contradictory. Her four male contemporaries who shared characteristics with her, Isherwood, Greene, Orwell and Hemingway, continued their work during the Second World War and after, continuing to work with political themes and subjects which Rhys had eschewed. Rhys' career entered a long if temporary period of silence, for reasons both personal and literary. Others have traced the special personal problems that plagued her throughout the rest of her life. My next concern will
be to focus on the novel she was finally enabled to write, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, published in 1966, twenty-seven years after *Good Morning, Midnight*.

Most general studies of Rhys view *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a culmination of the concerns revealed in her earlier novels, implying that despite its lush atmosphere and significantly increased complexity, it is more like than unlike its predecessors. On the contrary, this later novel, so long in the making, marks a significant departure from Rhys’ earlier works; in almost every way except for the portrayal of a weak heroine and her victimization by men, this work belongs to a totally different notion of the novel. In style and narrative technique *Wide Sargasso Sea* significantly differs from its predecessors. With a new use of metaphor and symbol, a complex narrative technique featuring several narrators, all highly subjective, and a much-distanced author; its interest in creating complex characters and in tracing the roots of character change; its conscious use of the English literary tradition through revision of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, it belongs to the tradition of the novel called by many high modernism.

Perhaps the most obvious contrast which *Wide Sargasso Sea* makes with its predecessors and which suggests its affinity with the modernism of the twenties is its complexity. This complexity derives from a rich combination of many elements: its sustained use of multiple points of view; its inclusion of nineteenth century values and institutions such as English primogeniture and West Indian slavery; its ironic use of most significant novel of female achievement and self-valuation of the nineteenth century; and finally, its psychologically astute playing on the clash of cultures, not simply between black and white but between colonial and British. In a book little longer than Rhys' other novels has been incorporated such density and diversity of material that the novel reverberates in a way reminiscent of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*.

Evidence for this novel's complexity is the fact that *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been written about more than any other of Rhys' works. Many critics have studied its structural presentation of the psychological destructiveness of colonialism. Rhys' vivid portrait of the ambiguous position of the white West Indian, resented by blacks and condescended to by the English, vividly renders the cultural complexities of post-emancipation island life. Antoinette Cosway grows up closer to blacks than to whites, at home in the luxuriant tropical world; white exploitation of blacks, however, isolates her from them and her experiential kinship with them gradually isolates her from her husband, the cold and defensive Englishman, Edward Rochester. For the first time, comments Wally Lamb, Rhys saw character and situation symbolically, as an encounter between two worlds.

Rhys developed mythic complexities through her highly original use of *Jane Eyre*. Ford Madox Ford had noted long ago, Rhys shows a “passion for stating the case of the underdog.” Carole Angier records that Rhys read *Jane Eyre* in 1939 and immediately conceived the idea for her last novel. It is not difficult to imagine her reaction to Brontë’s melodramatic treatment of the West Indian heiress, and her subsequent decision to develop that unjustly treated character herself. It is in this flight into art that she affinity with the great modernist authors shows itself most clearly. T.S. Eliot’s well-known statement that Joyce’s use of *The Odyssey* had helped him find “a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history,” is appropriate to describe Rhys’ use of *Jane Eyre*. The need to create an order from contemporary materials felt to be chaotic engages all the great early modernists. *Jane Eyre*, archetypal in its general meanings, symbolic in plot, played for Rhys some of the roles that older myth had for modernists: providing plot structure, and becoming, as Wasson summarizes, “a mode of perception, even vision, which provides the unstable subjective self with a world order that transcends individuality.” Jane Eyre gave Rhys a narrative structure with characters and resolutions, thus providing her with an objective reality into which she could pour her own emotions and experience without being drowned by them – as she seemed to have been in *Good Morning, Midnight* – and providing her with a strong value system in
which she could strike, parallels and contrasts for the modern reader.

The Brontë novel, passionate and large in scale, had its own mythic dimension and power - "mythic" in its use of universal archetypes of angel and devil, Byronic hero and tested heroine, but even more significantly in its creation of a new feminine archetype, the self-respecting, achieving woman. *Wide Sargasso Sea* uses *Jane Eyre* to extend its own meanings, which are largely ironic commentary on the values implied in *Jane Eyre*.

Inevitably, Rhys, with her own experience of colonialism and of exploitation by men, would identify with the sensual and ruined Bertha. Showalter points out that even Brontë herself recognized that some of Bertha’s savagery stems from her imprisonment by Rochester; Rhys, with her personal knowledge of British male exploitation and condemnation of female sexuality, could set her own imagination to work exploring the background to Bertha’s fate.

Rhys for the first time wrote toward a preset goal: Bertha Mason’s self-immolation. For the first time she could dignify the non-coping, sexual, dependent female and the condescended-to West Indian by setting them against the earlier novel’s larger-than-life heroine and treating them with understanding. The male’s ambivalent reaction to such women - to need and desire, to use, to cast off and indeed frequently to destroy - Rhys understood much better than had her Victorian predecessor. Thus Rhys finally made fully articulate the fatal chasm between what she viewed as two separate races, the British or ultra-civilized, and the colonial (as distinguished from the native), as well as that other more universal chasm between male and female. Through her meditation on the relation between Bertha Mason and Edward Rochester she fused the two polarities into male/British and female/colonial. Such divisions create an insoluble dilemma which Rhys sees as totally destructive for the female and, in this novel, as a partial but real loss for the male.

A significant difference in *Wide Sargasso Sea* from her thirties novels is Rhys’ new handling of point of view. With her successful creation of three separate narrators, none of whom can be identified with the novelist herself, Rhys produces an impressionistic novel, one in which all narrators reveal more about themselves than they intend and whose perceptions must be integrated by the reader. This creates appropriate voices for her three narrators, Antoinette, Rochester, and Grace Poole. Antoinette’s voice early in the novel is in a free first-person that slips easily into the speech patterns of others, especially black speech, thus pointing up the closeness of the Creole and black cultures in the islands:

They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks: The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother, “because she pretty like pretty self,” as Christophine said.

(page 17)

Also characteristic of her style are directness and concreteness, and a terseness resulting from her refusal to state more than necessary or to analyze; her speech is remarkably bare of causative connectives. Gradually it creates the psyche of a sparsely-educated, fearful, unloved girl who prefers not to make explicit connections or to draw conclusions, as they are too painful. The gaps in her narrative gradually become fragments of sensory details as she moves toward mental collapse and finally toward self-destruction. Rochester’s voice contrasts with that of Antoinette, as does his character; his is questioning and analytic. Whereas Antoinette fears conclusions, Rochester wants them, and having drawn them, he immediately acts upon them. His opening reveal his tendency to polarize and to draw too-rapid conclusions: “So it was all the advance and retreat, the doubts and hesitations. Everything finished, for better or worse” (p.65). He enumerates details as though careful naming and counting will some control over a world totally foreign to him. His tendency to irony masks and his fears of the new world in which he is alone and an outsider, and his hurt atanner in which his father and brother have manipulated him. Even Grace Poole, in a
brief section of narration about her mad charge, is effectively characterized, a lonely, mildly sympathetic but practical lower middle class woman: "After all the house is big and safe, a shelter from the world outside which, say what you like, can be a black and cruel world to a woman," (p.179). The many voices of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, like the many of *Ulysses*, show its author in control of a complex world. Antoinette, Rochester, and Grace Poole are alike in their loneliness and sense of inhabiting a hostile universe. Their differences make them natural and inevitable enemies. It is this separateness that creates the aesthetic distance from her characters which Rhys sought and achieved in this single work.

In characterization as well *Wide Sargasso Sea* differs significantly from Rhys' previous novels. In this last novel she turned her attention to both revelation of character in depth and investigation of the causes of certain character traits. *Wide Sargasso Sea* has for its very subject the tracing of causal elements to their inevitable conclusion; for the first time Rhys exhibits a detailed concern with the motivation behind character change. For both Rochester and Antoinette she provides formative experiences which create a sense of inevitability and of understanding of character change lacking in her earlier novels.

Many factors then indicate that Rhys had made her way in her later years to another type of novel. While the earlier novels appeal through a harshly honest portrayal of the inconsistencies and impenetrability of the human psyche, the late one achieves its power through its imaginative revitalization of familiar and formalized materials. Rhys had always sought economy and control in organizing her blend of truth and imagination. *Wide Sargasso Sea* she moved from surface to depth, from subjectivity to objectivity, representation to myth, from metonymy to metaphor; in short, she produced a modernist novel.

The career of Jean Rhys thus moves in a direction which is the reverse of that of her contemporary, Virginia Woolf. Woolf, whose novels of the twenties take for their subject the quest to know character, probing for it, exploring in an allusive and symbol prose style, was moving in her last two novels, *The Years* and *Between the Acts*, toward accommodation of the world of surface and solid objects. Rhys' vision begins on the surface, emphasizing the frustration inherent in the interrelationship between the self and the world. Her narrators record but do not probe; they feel but do not seek to understand or explain what may be beneath the surface. The gaps Woolf perceived appear in Rhys' work, but they are never bridged by either the narrator's or a single character will or creative imagination. Rhys' thirties novels stress the reality of a world which contains hard and concrete objects significantly affecting her characters, and other beings who couple malevolence with power over the fragile selves of her protagonists. Such a vision proved too pessimistic for readers to assimilate and too subjective for herself to maintain indefinitely. She withdrew from writing and returned only when she had found a new mode of expression.

This mode, that of Eliot and Joyce and Woolf, had been available to her from the time she had begun to write. Its depths and intellectual complexities evidently had proved ungenial to a writer motivated in her earliest novels by a desire to express feelings of personal pain by transmuting them through language and form. Later, however, these same depths and complexities, as well as the modernists' adoption of an objective mythos against which to set their vision of contemporary society, allowed her to return again. Her pessimism in regard to personal relations did not diminish; what changed was the world she created to contain her pessimistic vision. In some powerful mental process Rhys came to integrate her own island experiences and memories with her adult traumas, and fused them with the Victorian world of Charlotte Brontë. The process, returning to a past more distant than her own, coupled with the distancing possible handling purely fictional characters, allowed her to project depths and explore in a way she had never done before. This final work possesses a textual richness of depth of characterization that Rhys' novels of the thirties did not. What the eari
works possess is a gritty and unsparking honesty in the presentation of their limited vision.

NOTES


4 Lodge, p.191.


