

Sun Fire — Painted Fire: Jean Rhys as a Caribbean Novelist

LOUIS JAMES

“FOR if this novel does not occupy a central place in the growing body of West Indian literature — if it is not a touchstone against which we assay West Indian fiction before and after it — then West Indian literature is in a bad way.”¹ John Hearne’s comment on *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) was not characteristic of earlier criticism of the novel, and it would not be universally accepted in the Caribbean today. Jean Rhys had earlier been considered a European novelist. She had left Dominica, where she was born into a white Creole family, in 1911 when she was sixteen, and her writing was largely set in Europe where, with one short return to the West Indies, she has lived ever since. Although *Wide Sargasso Sea* was set almost entirely in the Caribbean, its first critics were more interested in its links with the Victorian classic, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), for it told the story of Rochester’s mad wife kept in the attic of Thornfield Hall. The point that Jean Rhys’ book was a radical *reevaluation* of *Jane Eyre* and its European attitudes from the perspective of a West Indian Creole was largely missed.

In 1968 Wally Look Lai, a Jamaican, claimed the novel belonged to West Indian literature. This was not because of its West Indian setting, but because the setting and the characters were used as a poetic dramatization of basic Caribbean concerns — the conflict between European and West Indian consciousness, the roots of Caribbean society and history. *Wide Sargasso Sea* was different in kind from Jean Rhys’ previous explorations of isolated womanhood — here the individual concerns were symbolic of the West Indian predicament. The poetic intensity with which this

was done "must surely place this novel among the major achievements of West Indian literature."² Some six years later both the novel and Look Lai's claims were attacked by Edward Brathwaite in a monograph *Contrary Omens* (1974). For Brathwaite, the real centre of West Indian culture is that of the folk: a novel dramatizing the dilemma of a white Creole cannot penetrate the experience of the predominantly black and poor West Indian peoples.³

As Kenneth Ramchand has noted, Brathwaite's criticism indicates "the danger of prescription that exists whenever we attempt to base definitions upon social and political content."⁴ As Proust knew, memory can intensify and make clearer childhood experience, and it is no paradox that Jean Rhys' novel furthest in time from her Caribbean life should also be her most profoundly West Indian. The speech rhythms, the total imaginative context, from the sense impressions to the minutiae of social relationships, have an accuracy that give particular pleasure to those intimate with the Caribbean, and this is validated by the relevance of the themes to aspects of West Indian culture. Jean Rhys' vision is not that of Edward Brathwaite, although in important ways the two do overlap — notably both reject European materialism in favour of the vitality of the black folk culture. Yet Caribbean culture can never be narrowed to one perspective. Coupling Jean Rhys with the Guyanese writer Wilson Harris, Hearne writes "They *belong* [to the West Indies]; but on their own terms. Guerrillas, not outsiders."⁵

Jean Rhys was born in Roseau into a large family, the daughter of a Welsh doctor, William Rhys Williams, and Minna Lockhart, a third-generation Dominican Creole.⁶ The house in which she was brought up — on the corner of Cork and St. Mary's Streets — and the family holiday house Dr. Williams built in the hills above Massacre, can be seen today. Jean, then Gwen Williams, was a sensitive, frail child, overshadowed by her elder brothers and by her vivacious younger sister, Brenda. Her mother largely left

her to herself. Her profound link was with her father, a romantic figure — not only in Gwen's imagination — who loved venturing into high seas in a rowing boat, and shocked the local white population by his relaxed attitudes to the blacks, whom he accepted as equals.

Gwen's childhood days formed the basis for her imagination (as surely as Wordsworth's mountains and Dickens' early memories of London haunt their best work). They reappear intermittently throughout her writing, and sometimes the same details recur. Her great love was the mountain house — transformed into the honeymoon house of Granbois in *Wide Sargasso Sea* — “very new and very ugly, long and narrow, of unpainted wood, perched oddly on high posts.” On the verandah was an “enormous brass telescope,” upon four legs. She would lie in the hammock and watch the sea. In the early morning the sea was a “very tender blue, like the dress of the Virgin Mary, and on it were little white triangles. The fishing boats.” By midday the sun could only be looked at by screwing up the eyes for the glitter. “Everything was still and languid, worshipping the sun.” When the sun slipped below the sea, night came suddenly, “a warm, velvety sweet-smelling night, but frightening and disturbing if one was alone in the hammock.”⁷ Her nurse, Meta, added to the intuitive fear of the other world of the night. She must not sleep in the moon. She was terrified by stories of jumbies, *soucoyants* (vampires), and great spiders that would creep above the sleeping child and drop onto its face.⁸ She gained her imaginative understanding of *obeah* that give such hallucinatory vividness to the love potion scene of *Wild Sargasso Sea*.

Jean Rhys' early writing about the Caribbean has a wide range. Some of it is vivid recreation — mixing cocktails for her father in the holiday house,⁹ or portraying an illiterate Roseau newspaper editor.¹⁰ Other pieces are short stories, Chekhovian in their depth and economy. “The Day they Burnt the Books”¹¹ encapsulates not only a con-

flict between mulatto and European, but between two ways of life. Mr. Sawyer, settled in Dominica with private means, tries to preserve his old way of life by filling his house full of books. He resents and insults his mulatto wife, and she, silently, resents and hates him. After his death, years of subdued anger explode. She builds a fire and has a ritual burning of his books, leaving for sale only those with fine bindings — and where the writer was a woman, even leather binding cannot save it. The scene is counterpointed against the attitude to the burning of their son — himself culturally divided — and the white girl who loves him. The relationships of white Creole and expatriate Dominicans with the black community are explored with even greater complexity in two more recent stories, “Oh Pioneers, Oh, Pioneers”¹² and “Fishy Waters.”¹³

Imaginatively, perhaps the most remarkable achievement among her Caribbean stories is “Let them Call it Jazz”, which appeared in *The London Magazine* for 1962.¹⁴ In it, Jean Rhys writes — in dialect — from the point of view of a black girl from Martinique, living in Notting Hill, London. She finds herself estranged and friendless. Her Caribbean sensibility makes England alien: “not much rain all the summer, but not much sunlight either. More of a glare.” Her easy attitude to money makes her an easy prey to her landlady, who robs her of her savings, then ejects her for not having money. She finds temporary refuge in an otherwise empty house speculatively bought by a shady property developer, but growing tensions with her “nice” neighbours explode when she finally gets drunk and answers their insults by breaking a hideous stained glass window. She ends in gaol, a shock of final rejection that destroys her spirit. “It all dry up hard in me now. . . . There’s a small looking glass in my cell and I see myself and I’m like somebody else.”

One way in which she maintains her identity in prison is through her Caribbean songs, and her singing is one habit particularly annoying to her white neighbours: “I’m

here because I wanted to sing," she thinks in prison. In gaol she hears a song composed by her fellow prisoners — the prison song. Hearing it she feels the relief and release slaves must have felt hearing negro spirituals at another time and place. It becomes her adopted song. Released from prison, pursuing a series of jobs, she allows a white composer to hear the tune, and he makes it a hit song. At first she feels betrayed and desolate; then realises that nothing can take away what the song means to her, just as the exploitation of black music cannot remove the black sense of jazz. In its evocation of black emotional warmth and essential awareness of musical rhythm, the story has an unassuming relationship to the insights of *negritude*.¹⁵

The range of Jean Rhys' writing about the Caribbean has not been previously fully noticed, and when it has been taken into account at all, it has been seen as the primary material from which the masterpiece *Wide Sargasso Sea* was to be fashioned. Kenneth Ramchand's recent essay on the subject,¹⁶ for instance, while noting that Jean Rhys' *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) is "one of the most moving of the West Indian novels of exile," considers how the later work distances and develops the "too simple" divisions of *Voyage in the Dark*. While this is largely true, it can lead to a diminution of the importance of the earlier book. It was the first-written of all Jean Rhys' novels, and is still her favourite. It bears the same kind of relationship to *Wide Sargasso Sea* as Dickens' autobiographical *David Copperfield* bears to *Great Expectations*. Not only is one the mature reworking of the other, but what the earlier work lacks in symbolic objectivity, the first-written makes up in the freshness and poignancy of the personal element. *Voyage in the Dark* was composed from exercise-book diaries kept by the young Jean Rhys when living the desolate life of a chorus girl touring minor theatres in England.¹⁷ As it is less known than *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I intend to explore its achievement in the remainder of this essay.

Voyage in the Dark concerns Anna Morgan, a fifth-generation Creole, with a Welsh doctor as a father, cast adrift in England and struggling for a living in a third-rate touring theatre company. She is from Dominica. The story is in four parts. In the first, she enters into a relationship with a young man, Walter Jeffries; when he nurses her through a minor illness there is a brief flowering into love; when he leaves her, she is broken. In a short section, we see Anna footloose in London. She sets up as an assistant to a one-time chorus girl friend, now a form of prostitute, operating a "massage" clinic in Bird Street, London. This venture is likewise doomed. In the third section, Anna conceives a child by an American, Carl, and finally has to appeal to Walter for money for an abortion, an agonizing and sordid operation in which the baby, killed within her, is still-born. In the final terrible climax she has the dead child, and the doctor says briskly, "She'll be alright . . . Ready to start all over again in no time, I've no doubt."¹⁸

Such a summary does essential violence to the book, which is a delicate counterpoint of Anna's London experiences against her inner memories of the Caribbean. The skill with which this is done defeats analysis. According to Diana Athill,¹⁹ Rhys' method of composition is the painful writing and rearrangement of "an almost incredible mass of tangled notes and drafts" which continues until the work "feels" right. The process suggests, on one hand, a form of self-analysis, and on the other hand a kinship with musical composition. Ford Madox Ford accurately called it Rhys' "singular instinct for form."²⁰ Each emotion and theme has to have its appropriate and unique rhythm. This process is vividly described in a short story, "Tigers are Better-Looking,"²¹ in which the writer, Mr. Severn, finds he cannot write about the Jubilee until he has spent a dissolute night experiencing the mixture of celebration and despair. Then, and only then, do the style and the experience coincide. "The swing's the thing — otherwise the cadence of

the sentence . . . ” Sitting down to his typewriter the morning after he finds himself released, he “has got it.”

It is this sensitivity of style that makes what may appear a simple contrast between England and the Caribbean so moving. Anna, on coming to England, writes: “It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost like being born again. The colours were different, the smells were different, the feelings things gave you right down inside yourself was different. Not just the difference between heat, cold; light, darkness; purple, grey. But a difference in the way I was frightened and the way I was happy” (p. 7).

The difference not only in what is felt, but in the *ways* of feeling, is crucial to the effect of *Voyage in the Dark*. When Jean Rhys recreates the West Indian house with its verandah and latticed jalousies, dazed by the sun at noon, haunted by the moon at night, the prose itself becomes luminous. We see through the eyes of a child, reacting with responses of wonder and fear to a moonlit boat-ride; and to the discomfort of Sunday, prickly in starched white drawers tight at the knees, white petticoat and embroidered dress, with brown kid gloves ordered from England and, by the time they arrived, one size too small — “Oh, you naughty girl, you’re trying to split those gloves; you are trying to split those gloves on purpose” (p. 36). There is the misery of feeling the perspiration trickling under the arms and knowing that there will be a wet patch under the armpit, “a disgraceful thing to happen to a lady” (p. 36). Then, after the boredom of the service, a moment of release walking through the still palms in the churchyard. “The light is gold and when you shut your eyes you see fire-colour” (p. 38). In the passages of memory the senses are all fully alive — sight, smell and touch.

And the sky close to the earth. Hard, blue and close to the earth. The mango tree was so big that all the garden was in its shadow and the ground under it always looked dark and damp. The stable-yard was by the side of the garden, white-paved and hot, smelling of horses and manure. And then next to the stables was a bathroom. And the bath-

room too was always dark and damp. It had no windows, but the door used to be hooked a little bit open. The light was always dim, greenish. There were cobwebs on the roof. (pp. 36-37)

By contrast, descriptions of England are lacking in these qualities. The fields are "squares like pocket-handkerchiefs; a small tidy look it had, everywhere fenced off from everywhere else." The few sensuous details of England express alienation: "The streets like smooth shut-in ravines and the dark houses frowning down." There is monotonous sameness. "There was always a little grey street leading to the stage-door of the theatre and another little grey street where your lodgings were, and rows of little houses with chimneys like funnels of dummy steamers and smoke the same colour as the sky" (p. 8). In the Caribbean, even a cobweb was a significant detail.

The lack of warmth and detail in the English landscape is echoed, for Anna, in the people. English people "touch life with gloves on,"²² Jean Rhys was to write elsewhere. There is little concern for other human beings, and in particular for women. "Most Englishmen don't care a damn about women" (p. 70). Values are focussed on money and clothes. "You can get a very nice girl for five pounds," one man explains to Maudie, "a very nice girl indeed; you can even get a very nice girl for nothing if you know how to go about it. But you can't get a very nice costume for her for five pounds. To say nothing of underclothes, shoes, etcetera and so on" (p. 40). The evaluation is that of an exploited, single girl in London. But extreme as it is, it is the reflection of a difference between life in a closely-knit island community and the impersonal materialistic life of an English city.

The division, however, is not only between Dominica and London; it existed in Dominica itself. The family circle, ruled over by Aunt Hester, caught in the straight-jacket of being white and respectable, is a cold climate for the sensitive Anna. So Anna forms her deepest relationships with Francine, the black kitchen girl, a little older than

she, and both mother and sister to her. Francine is extrovert, laughing and singing. Anna listens to her songs and joins in the stories. "At the start of the story she had to say 'Timm, timm,' and I had to answer 'Bois sèche'" (p. 61). When Anna has her first period, it is significantly Francine who tells her what is happening, and it all sounds natural; Hester then lectures her on it, making her feel soiled and ashamed.

The white family resents Anna's friendship with blacks. "Impossible to get you away from the servants. That awful sing-song voice you had! Exactly like a nigger you talked — and still do. Exactly like that dreadful girl Francine" (p. 56), explodes Hester. Anna is marooned between being white and being black. (In England, some friends call her a "Hottentot" (p. 12), and she has fantasies of being of mixed blood as she remembers seeing the name of an illegitimate mulatto girl on a slave list, Maillotte Boyd.) She loves Francine, but race dictates that Francine will hate her. She wants to be wedded to the sun, burnt black, or die. She goes deliberately under the midday sun without a hat and waits. "The sun at home can be terrible, like God." The sun punishes her for her presumption, and she is ill with sunstroke and then fever for some months. She turns, not black, but "thin and ugly and yellow as a guinea" (p. 63). The simile identifies her with the European commercial world, in which she is stamped and coined irrevocably.

Throughout *Voyage in the Dark*, the two worlds interweave, the imaginary remembered world more real than the actual present. When Walter takes out the girl he has just met, he opens the door behind the dining room and it is a bedroom. She is shocked and frightened; he covers his awkwardness with forced casualness. She goes in, shutting the door against him. The room, the bed, even the fire, are cold — "The fire was like a painted fire; no warmth came from it" (p. 48). But she is drawn to Walter, and her flickering, incipient emotion is reflected in her observation

of the brighter colours, the red of the lampshades. This evokes a sense of the Caribbean, and at the same time, significantly, of childhood. It had "a secret feeling — quiet, like a place where you crouch down when you are playing hide and seek." Love, when it comes, brings a web of warm memories. "Thinking of the walls of the Old Estate House, still standing, with moss on them. That was the garden. One ruined room for roses, one for orchids, one for tree ferns." And the sleep that follows is like the little death, sleep, taught in the Convent. "Children, every night before you go to sleep you should lie straight down with your arms by your sides and your eyes shut and say: 'One day I shall be dead. One day I shall lie like this with my eyes closed and I shall be dead.'" Sex brings a flicker of Aunt Hester's condemnation of Maillotte Boyd, the illegitimate slave girl: "*But I like it like this,*" she thinks; "*I don't want it any other way but this*" (p. 79).

The childhood innocence she knew, both in Dominica and in her love for Walter, are betrayed, and the two levels run together in a startling image. Reading the letter in which she learns Walter is casting her off, she thinks suddenly of the verandah at home, and of creeping by her sleeping Uncle Bo to pick up a magazine.

I got up to the table where the magazine was and Uncle Bo moved and sighed and long yellow tusks like fangs came out of his mouth and protruded down to his chin — you don't scream when you are frightened because you can't and you don't move either because you can't — after a long time he sighed and opened his eyes and clicked his teeth back into place and said what on earth do you want child — it was the magazine I said — he turned over and went to sleep again . . .

The image comes and goes. "What's this letter got to do with false teeth?" (p. 82) she asks herself. But the relevance is complex. At one level the sudden transformation of her genial uncle into a toothed monster associates her betrayal by Walter with her rejection by the family, a rejection she may not fully realize as a child but which becomes clear in a heartless letter he writes later to her Aunt Hester refusing to help Anna. Deeper, it brings a

terrifying crack in her whole sense of reality. Things are not what they seem. At another time, the image is reversed: an inanimate mask becomes alive; Uncle Bo's face becomes a hideous mask. But in the island masquerade, Meta, Anna's black nurse, is wearing a huge white mask when, suddenly, she looks at the child and thrusts a contemptuous pink tongue out through the slit. Again, the child is terrified. Both occasions are moments when the shock breaks out of a conflict of structures of reality, a trauma seen, in its widest sense, in Anna's confused cultural and racial identity. The shock splits her psyche at the roots. Her very personality is betrayed. "I saw that all my life I had known that this was going to happen, and that I'd been afraid for a long time, I'd been afraid for a long time. There's fear, of course, with everybody. But now it had grown, it had grown gigantic; it filled me and it filled the whole world" (p. 82).

Towards the end she has a nightmare of sailing through doll-like islands in a glassy sea. One of the islands is her island, but the trees are wrong, they are English trees. Someone has fallen overboard. Drowning appears in the book as an image of abstraction and spiritual death. Thus, when Walter had ditched her, "It was like letting go and falling back into water and seeing yourself grinning up through the water, your face like a mask, and seeing the bubbles coming up as if you were trying to speak from under the water" (p. 84). When Anna returned to a party after hiding herself in a ladies' room her friend Laurie had told her, "We thought you'd got drowned" (p. 103). But this time it is not Anna. Or is it? Is she dreaming of a scene of her own death? A sailor brings a coffin which opens and a child rises, a doll-like child-bishop. She wonders if she should kiss its ring. But it has a cruel face and eyes, and sways woodenly in the grasp of the sailor. Perhaps her child — her own childhood — is dead and condemns her. She tries to walk to the shore, thrusting

through confused figures, but the deck heaves and she struggles helplessly.

The images of falling, of violation, of drowning, of the mask, come together again in the terrifying climax of the book, the birth of her dead child. Physically, she experiences the giddy sensation of the world heaving and dripping away. The pains of sex, birth and death merge, and her protests against the fumbling midwife — “stop, please stop” — mingle with remembered cries against violation by a white-faced lover. The fear, the remembered white face, bring together another moment of terror experienced in childhood in Dominica. She and her family were watching the masquerade of the black community through the *jalousie* slats. The dancers’ masks are painted pink, with mocking blue eyes, straight noses and little heart-shaped red lips under which are slits for the dancers to thrust out their tongues. They are masks of mockery and hatred. Ironically, the white onlookers cannot see the satire directed against them — they see the dance only as proof of the blacks’ lack of decency and self-respect. “. . . *You can’t expect niggers to behave like white people all the time Uncle Bo said it’s asking too much of human nature — look at that fat old woman Hester said just look at her — oh yes she’s having a go too Uncle Bo said they all have a go they don’t mind . . .*” (p. 157). Not only are the maskers imitating white people, one remembers that it was the hideous mask of the sleeping Uncle Bo that terrified Anna.

The remembered scene is punctuated by the cries of Anna — both as the terrified child and as the woman giving birth to her own stillborn baby — “I’m giddy.” And the first person “I” of Anna the watcher changes to the “we” of the dancers as she merges, in her imagination, with the dancers. “*We went on dancing forwards and backwards backwards and forwards whirling round and round*” (p. 157). The surging pains intensify, and she is now on a horse, swaying dizzily, with no stirrups to hold to, and the

road leading along the sea and up through ghostly shadows to see "a cold moon looking down on a place where nobody is a place full of stones where nobody is" (p. 158). She is falling, but still she clings with her knees feeling very sick. She wakes. The dead child is born.

The scene, like that of the nightmare with the doll-bishop, cannot be explained in terms other than itself. It brings together, with terrifying conviction, the actual agony of abortive childbirth and the levels of experience, the qualities of pain, that have emerged through the book, and lead them to the ultimate void, the wasteland in the cold moonlight. The ending echoes the beginning: both describe childhood impressions of Dominica. Her past is her future fate, waiting like a trap to destroy her. But the lonely ruin is not only a profound image of her own desolation. The image reminds us of Eliot's in *The Waste Land*; like Eliot's desert, it is the expression of a spiritual state and the symbol of a culture laid waste by its history:

In this decayed hole among the mountains
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.²³

The haunted, ruined plantation house had appeared earlier in the story, a memory associated with a moment of love, planted with flowers. Anna's tragedy leads her intuitively back in time before even her birth, before the ruins were made into gardens. She is led into the collective consciousness of her history, its historical and psychological roots. But for a fuller exploration of this intuition, we must examine *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

For the ruined house not only looks forward to the burning of Coulibri which is a climax of the later book, it looks backwards to a moment in Jean Rhys' personal history. In 1824, John Potter Lockhart of Old Jewry, London — Jean Rhys' great-grandfather — acquired "several plantations and estates in Dominica . . . now known by the name of Genever Plantation," some twelve thousand and thirteen acres and two hundred and fifty-eight souls.²⁴ The journey

to Genever from Roseau then was very like that described in *Voyage in the Dark* in Anna's child-bearing vision: "The road goes along by the sea. The coconut palms lean crookedly down to the water. . . . You turn to the left and the sea is at your back, and the road goes zig-zag upwards. . . . When you see the sea again it's far below you" (p. 129). There, the other side of Loubière and Morne Eloi would have been the stone plantation house, with its broad verandah, the little wooden slave huts, and the coffee plantations struggling against the encroaching bush. The Lockharts had to face the bitter effects of the Napoleonic wars, which had turned French against English settlers, and the black population against both; the disruption of the Emancipation of the slaves; and the 1829 coffee blight. Personal tragedy also struck. In 1837, James Lockhart died. His wife courageously remained, but in 1844 riots broke out over the census, and Genever Plantation was sacked and burnt. It was rebuilt, and a garden planted in the ruins.²⁵ The young Gwen Williams visited the plantation and was fascinated by its history. These were the ruins of *Voyage in the Dark*; this was the burning of the Great House that had such tragic results in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

The point is worth making, not to reduce either book to history — which they are not — but to emphasize the imaginative interfusion of the Caribbean context with the personal themes which are the content of Jean Rhys' books, and to underscore a difference between *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* that is as important as the fact of poetic reworking of earlier themes: *Voyage in the Dark* ends with the silent agony of the ruined house. *Wide Sargasso Sea* ends with the fire. Fire is the ambivalent symbol of both destruction and passion. The young Anna suffers; the mature Antoinette *rebels* against the life-denying imprisonment of the English Rochester, and asserts her human need for colour, for passion, for love. And this development of theme not only shows Jean Rhys developing her treatment of the white-black dilemma in the West Indies; it also

shows a deepening understanding of the West Indian predicament itself.

For in the later novel, Jean Rhys returns to the experience of her grandmother in the burning of Genever, and explores the meaning of the ruins. Her heroine, Antoinette Cosway, is exiled in Jamaica from her homeland on a smaller island in the Antilles. Jamaica is portrayed with the beauty of Eden, but after the fall. "Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible — the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild."²⁶ The alienation Antoinette senses is caused partly by the social disintegration that follows the breakup of the old slave system — "All Coulibri Estate had gone wild like the garden, gone to bush. No more slavery — why should *anyone* work?" (p. 17). The Creoles face not only hate from the Blacks, but their contempt as well, for they are now powerless and poor. The racial situation undermines Antoinette's friendship with a black girl, Tia. When Antoinette's mother marries the Englishman, Mr. Mason, who has no understanding of the Blacks, violence breaks out. The ex-slaves burn down the Great House, killing Antoinette's brother. Antoinette runs to Tia, who cuts her head open with a stone, then stands crying. The Creole family is saved only because their pet parrot falls from the house in flames, and the rioters pause in superstitious fear.

The cycle of history holds Antoinette as its victim. When the young Rochester marries her for her money, they return for their honeymoon to the island of Antoinette's childhood; like Jamaica, it is a world of intense tropical beauty, but a garden before the Fall. For a moment they are profoundly happy. But Rochester's cold, materialistic nature is tantalised and tormented by the sensuous warmth and beauty. When he hears allegations that Antoinette's mother was depraved and mad, it confirms his desire to withdraw from what he cannot fully enter. Antoinette, desperate for his love, turns to her black one-time nurse, Christophine, who, against her will, gives her a love potion

for Rochester. It is the last thing his cold temperament can take. Driven into depravity and violence, he makes love not to Antoinette, but, with deliberate cruelty, to her maid; he then sets about emotionally killing Antoinette. "I saw the hate go out of her eyes. And with her beauty, her hate. She was only a ghost" (p. 140).

He takes her back to England, ostensibly insane, and imprisons her in the attic of Thornfield Hall. Here, finally, she senses that she knows "what I have to do" (p. 156). She goes out with a candle to burn down the house. The end is complex and profound in its meanings. From one perspective, Antoinette has been absorbed into the destructive cycle of Caribbean history: her home was burnt; now she in her turn destroys. From another view, her act is positive: Rochester has not annihilated her, and she asserts her passionate spirit with hot fire. The novel does not show her death: we are left with the image of Antoinette carrying the light through the darkness that cannot overcome it.

Wide Sargasso Sea and *Voyage in the Dark* are interrelated. The movement from Anna to Antoinette is a progression in Jean Rhys' heroines from passive suffering to passionate strength, just as the exploration of the cold ruins of Anna's nightmare back to the burning of Coulibri is the deepening of her insight into West Indian history. The one novel lies at the beginning of her writing career; the other at its mature culmination. Yet the early book does not suffer in the comparison. *Voyage in the Dark* remains her most personal and evocative book. Not only does it capture a Caribbean childhood with delicacy; it also intensifies it within a powerful exploration of the experience of exile. And this is an experience known by many West Indians, both white and black.

NOTES

¹John Hearne, "The Wide Sargasso Sea: A West Indian Reflection," *Cornhill Magazine* (Summer 1974), pp. 323-24.

- ²Wally Look Lai, "The Road to Thornfield Hall," *New World Quarterly* (Croptime 1968); reprinted *New Beacon Reviews I* (London: New Beacon, 1968), p. 44.
- ³Edward Brathwaite, *Contrary Omens* (Mona, Jamaica, 1974), pp. 34-38.
- ⁴Kenneth Ramchand, *An Introduction to the Study of West Indian Literature* (London: 1976), p. 99.
- ⁵Hearne, p. 323.
- ⁶See, for example, Elgin W. Mellow, "Character and Themes in the Novels of Jean Rhys," *Contemporary Literature*, 13 (Autumn 1972), 458-77; for more detail, based on new research, see my study *Jean Rhys*, forthcoming from Longman Caribbean.
- ⁷Jean Rhys, "Mixing Cocktails," in *The Left Bank* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1927); reprinted in *Tigers are Better Looking* (London: Deutsch, 1968), pp. 173-75.
- ⁸Personal information.
- ⁹'Mixing Cocktails,' *Tigers*, pp. 173-76.
- ¹⁰'Again the Antilles,' *Tigers*, pp. 177-180.
- ¹¹*Tigers*, pp. 40-46.
- ¹²*Sleep it Off, Lady* (London: Deutsch, 1976), pp. 11-22.
- ¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 45-62.
- ¹⁴Reprinted, *Tigers*, pp. 45-67.
- ¹⁵Cf. Ramchand's similar point, *op. cit.*, p. 100.
- ¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 100.
- ¹⁷Personal information.
- ¹⁸*Voyage in the Dark* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 159. All subsequent references will be made to this edition.
- ¹⁹Diana Athill, "Jean Rhys and the Writing of *Wide Sargasso Sea*," *Bookseller* (August 20, 1966), pp. 1378-1379. *Wide Sargasso Sea* took nine years to write.
- ²⁰Ford Madox Ford, Introduction to *The Left Bank*, reprinted *Tigers*, p. 148.
- ²¹*Tigers*, pp. 68-82.
- ²²Jean Rhys, *Quartet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 9.
- ²³T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land, Collected Poems 1909-1935* (London: Faber, 1936), p. 76.
- ²⁴Information, Archives, Roseau, D, no. 5, fol. 600-603.
- ²⁵S. W. Boyd, *Historical Sketch of the Grand Bay Area* (Roseau, Dominica, 1976).
- ²⁶Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 16. All subsequent references will be made to this edition.