**“The Narrative Mood of Jean Rhys’ *Quartet”***

by Octavio R. González

Deleuze treats differences in literary techniques ... as evidence for ostensible differences between “sadism” and “masochism.” But what are the “sadism” and “masochism” of which he speaks? Are they literary genres? Practices of living sadists and masochists? Floating formations of desire? —Gayle Rubin

It was astonishing how significant, coherent and understandable it all became after a glass of wine on an empty stomach.... The Place Blanche, Paris, Life itself. One realized all sorts of things. *The value of an illusion, for instance, and that the shadow can be more important than the substance. —*Jean Rhys, *Quartet*

**Introduction: The Trouble with Masochism**

Jean Rhys’ first novel, *Quartet* (1929), is an infamous *roman à clef* about the affair between Rhys and Ford Madox Ford, which also involved their respective partners, Jean Lenglet and Stella Bowen.[[1]](#endnote-2) Despite its real-life inspiration, however, *Quartet* has an aesthetic life of its own. Marya Zelli is the protagonist and center of consciousness of the novel. The other central characters are Hugh and Lois Heidler, a wealthy English art dealer and his wife, who is a painter; and Stephan Zelli, Marya’s husband, an art dealer of sorts himself. The Heidlers rule the British expatriate scene in 1920s Paris. Stephan is arrested soon after the story begins, for trafficking in stolen artifacts. Stephan’s imprisonment is the impetus for Marya’s accepting the Heidlers’ offer to move in with them (48). Soon after, Heidler announces his love for Madame Zelli. At first, Marya resists Heidler’s overtures, but Lois—of all people—convinces her to stay and give in to him. Marya eventually becomes Heidler’s mistress, while Stephan languishes in prison. A year later, before Stephan is released, Heidler tells Marya that she must leave her husband, or the affair is over. Torn, Marya confesses to Stephan that she and Heidler are lovers. The novel ends when, “[n]umbed by misery, Marya mismanages the situation and loses both men,” in the words of Francis Wyndham, Rhys’ longtime editor. It is the nature of this “misery” that is in contention, then as now.

Some have read the misery of Rhys’ heroines through the psychoanalytic lens of masochism. For instance, in a recent collection, *Rhys Matters,* Jennifer Mitchell builds on the plentiful readings of masochism in Rhys and *Quartet*. Mitchell’s intervention draws on Gilles Deleuze, and rehabilitates the stigma surrounding masochism by applying a feminist standpoint, seeing it as “empowering.”[[2]](#endnote-3) Rather than proposing another version of a Rhys heroine as “victim,”[[3]](#endnote-4) Mitchell argues that Marya’s affair with Heidler—and her tortured dynamic with his wife—constitutes a scenario of masochism for all three participants.[[4]](#endnote-5) “The impulse to *diagnose* Marya’s masochism as self-destructive and, therefore, victimizing undercuts the ways in which Marya accesses autonomy and satisfaction,” Mitchell writes (203–204; emphasis added). Mitchell explains that Marya “begins to relish the torturous position that she occupies” (204). Mitchell thus recuperates Marya’s “weakness” as a position of strength—albeit one vexed by the definition of masochism as self-induced suffering. And so, the novel is rescued through the agency of psychoanalytic discourse—a systematic mode of knowing fortified by institutional power, premised on categorical classification. Yet, it is this form of institutionalized knowledge that the novel itself challenges, as I will demonstrate.

I cite this example not to contest it, but because it engages in the psychoanalysis of literary characters, if not of literary style.[[5]](#endnote-6) And, while there is much vibrant work on the intersection of modernism and masochism, especially on Rhys, this paper opens a space for raising methodological questions about the use of psychopathological categorization in the context of literary analysis*.* My argument, however, is not against “clinical” interpretations of literature. Rather, I am more interested in the reading practice that I think Rhys’s novel itself invites us to adopt, in its narrative technique, as well as in its content.

**Resisting the “mania for classification”**

The novel is narrated largely from the protagonist’s point of view, which means that most the narrative is internally focalized.[[6]](#endnote-7) Given the predominance of Marya’s focalization, it is important that in the first two chapters, there are certain passages that depart from this pattern, where the narrator addresses the reader directly and sketches Marya’s background: “Marya, *you must understand*, had not been suddenly and ruthlessly transplanted from solid comfort to the hazards of Montmartre. Nothing like that. Truth to say, she was used to *a lack of solidity and of fixed backgrounds*” (15; emphasis added). The direct address to the reader, in “you must understand,” serves to frame Marya Zelli as a deracinated figure before the affair even begins, foreshadowing her sense of feeling like a “ghost walking in a *vague, shadowy world”* (57; emphasis added).[[7]](#endnote-8) What the reader “must understand” is that Marya was already “used to” living in the half-lit world of the demimonde; she is a former chorus girl, and her husband Stephan sells art works of uncertain provenance (including what he claims was Napoleon’s sword). This passage echoes one in the previous chapter, which also characterizes Marya as not only transient, but undefined: “there were moments when she realized that her existence, though delightful, was haphazard. It lacked, as it were, solidity; it lacked the necessary fixed background” (8).

These two passages, linked by their common language, and their external view of the protagonist, serve as framing devices. What is more, the singularity of the direct address suggests something about the overall *mood* of the narrative. Another narrative frame that situates Marya in a world of “shadow” and “illusion” occurs at the end of Chapter 2: “It was astonishing how significant, coherent and understandable it all became after a glass of wine on an empty stomach.... The Place Blanche, Paris, Life itself. One realized all sorts of things. *The value of an illusion, for instance, and that the shadow can be more important than the substance”* (23; emphasis added).

In what follows, I argue that this preliminary framing of the protagonist can also help us understand the novel as a whole. In particular, I focus on a narrative technique—the technique of focalization—which, I argue, models for *the reader* howto *understand* *the novel itself* as a “vague, shadowy world.” It is this world of “shadow” and “illusion” that the novel wants *readers* to “value,” to view the “shadow” as “more important than the substance.” This direct address to the reader thus signals an important moment, one that solicits the reader’s “understanding”of Marya. Note, however, that the narrator does not ask us to *diagnose*—or *classify*—her.

As the reading of masochism in Rhys indicates, many critics use formal classification or psychoanalytic diagnosis to interpret the novel. Yet, in so doing, such critics mirror the Heidlers’ way of “reading,” their mode of knowing, what it calls the “mania for classification” (60, 118). This “mania for classification” is linked to institutional forms of knowledge: normative discourses—like psychoanalysis—that function as heavy instruments of power (Marya claims that the Heidlers “bore [her] down,” at one point). The Heidlers stand for this powerful way of knowing, a mode of labeling people categorically, and, in so doing, exerting discursive control over social reality.

By contrast, the narrator’s language of “understanding” marks a mode of knowing based on *affective* connection with social experience, either first- or second-hand, by attending to subjective accounts of that experience. As Stephan, Marya’s husband, notes, “You don’t know what it is, *la misère*. Nobody knows what it is till it’s got them”(172). The only way to know his misery, Stephan claims, is to experience it (“Nobody knows what it is till it’s got them”). Barring first-hand experience of *la misère*, the narration proposes a secondary way of “knowing”—what the narrator calls “understanding.” Another example of the “mania for classification” as an oppressive mode of knowing occurs when Marya critiques the Heidlers for “[i]magining they *know a thing* when they *know its name*” (130; emphasis added). She adds that “Lois and he [Hugh] pretended to be fair and were hard as hell underneath … they couldn’t feel anything and pretended that nobody else could” (130). Here, Marya challenges the Heidlers’ propensity for labeling or “classifying” a thing (“knowing its name”) as a form of *mistaken* understanding. She adds that they share a rigid incapacity to “feel” and, by the same token, the Heidlers “pretend nobody else could” feel as well. The Heidlers are thus faulted for callousness (“hard as hell underneath”), and for a lack of sympathy (“they couldn’t feel anything”). Their lack of feeling is self-serving (“pretended nobody else could”), and ensures a studied lack of curiosity about others’ feelings. Lacking these qualities of empathy and sympathy, they project an objectifying, classifying gaze: Knowing the “name” of something, they falsely “imagine” they know *the thing itself*. This is what the narration calls the Heidlers’ “mania for classification.”

This “mania for classification” comes with the “conviction” of being correct in all matters, which makes others fall in line with the Heidlers’ chauvinistic, self-authorizing point of view—one Marya describes as “strangely without pity” (64). For, Heidler rules the colony of English expatriates in Montparnasse, a veritable “autocrat,” per his wife (65). These examples of the Heidlers’ power to assert their own point of view is contrasted with Marya, whose own “longing to assert her point of view” (60) is repeatedly thwarted by the impassable authority of the Heidlers and their cronies. The tension in the narrative, then, consists in two ways of being in—and knowing—the world: in the words of the novel, one way of being in the world is that which is demanded by the powerful and the elite, by the normative forces of society, as represented by the Heidlers. The Heidlers rule the British *Montparnos*, while the Zellis and other “fantastic” types live a “haphazard” “existence” as “vagabonds,” and are therefore socially suspect. As opposed to clinical “naming” or “classifying,” which is the *modus operandi* of the socially powerful Heidlers, “understanding” requires a capacity for “feeling” and respect for others’ feelings—a suspension of prejudgment and a desire to connect through empathy.

Reading *Quartet*, I argue, is profitably done by seeking to “understand” it as a cautionary tale against the “mania for classification” that dooms Marya at the hands of the Heidlers; the moral of this modernist novel, if there is one, is to resist this urge to classify, to try a different approach, one less beholden to existing norms and institutionally validated systems of knowing. To “understand,” in my reading, means to read sympathetically and empathetically, by going along with the experiences of the protagonist, even as she descends into “misery” during her romantic “obsession.” To objectify these experiences by classifying or diagnosing them is to violate the mood of the novel, its focus on subjective experience and empathetic understanding. Understanding that misery, rather than classifying it, is ultimately the point. Not to classify, but to understand: this hermeneutic practice is thus represented not only by the experiences of the protagonist, but also in the way they are re-presented, or narrated, in the discourse of the novel itself. In other words, we are meant to understand a “lack of solidity and of fixed background” as the novel’s aesthetic principle. The novel’s style of presentation thus values the shadow and illusion, rather than schemes of classification.[[8]](#endnote-9)

In this sense, the formal paths of the novel thus turn on two ways of knowing—either “classifying” and “naming,” or “understanding.” Hence, the meaning of *Quartet* is partially about how to read it—or how to *understand* the stories that people tell of themselves and others, and of their complex social situations. One can “know the name of a thing,” without understanding it. Or one can understand the thing itself, but only by living through it, as Stephan warns, or by the capacity to feel and understand others’ feelings, their affective reality. In sum, the narrative’s injunction to “understand” functions as a counterpoint to the “classifying” moves made by two of the story’s central characters, which are, in turn, mirrored in critical approaches to Rhys. The text responds to the false certainty of “naming,” “classification,” or even clinical “diagnosis,” with the ambiguities of subjective viewpoints and their limited purchase on social reality, including the reality of other viewpoints.

While classification is not synonymous with diagnosis, the two modes of knowing assert a normative purchase on reality, a systematic and categorical knowledge. Understanding, by contrast, is hazy, intuitive, affective, and unsystematic—as, one might say, befits the hazy, “shadowy” mood of *Quartet* and its heroine. Such shadowy form of knowing as understanding leads to over- or mis-interpretation, and so the narrative plainly elevates the problematic of how to understand without classifying or pathologizing the object of one’s interest, the object of one’s “nonce taxonomy,” to quote a memorable phrase from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*. Sedgwick uses the term “nonce taxonomy” to indicate ways of knowing that ordinary people perform as they go about their ordinary lives, as opposed to codified modes of knowing that exert the force field of institutional power. Such systems of knowledge are what Foucault termed “power–knowledge,” linked to modern discourses of sexology and psychiatry, such as “masochism” and “hysteria.” A similar ethical and aesthetic argument, I believe, is played out at the level of *Quartet*’s formal concerns with focalization and voice, and thematic concerns with intersubjective conflict—the passions and “obsessions of love and hate” that beset *Quartet*’s central characters (97). The novel employs subtle techniques of focalization, in the service of realistic representation of fraught intersubjective dynamics, and in contrast to what could be called the “sadism of epistemology” inherent in the Heidlers’ “mania for classification.”[[9]](#endnote-10)

As narratologist Monika Fludernik claims, in many fictional narratives, “we come across a strategy of repeating keywords and word fields for structuring purposes…. In [certain] texts … certain key words keep recurring, like leitmotifs. Because of the associations which they conjure up in the context of characters and plot, they become symbols which suggest connections and arguments at a higher level” (76–77). “To the best of my knowledge,” Fludernik adds, “there is no technical term for this.” I would suggest *immanent reading*, which indicates a reading based on the key words or phrasings that seem to guide our sense of the narrative meanings.

***Ménage à Trois***

At the end of the affair, underscoring the recurrent leitmotif of “backgrounds,” Marya waits for Heidler at a café—“the unvarying background” of their rendezvous after she moves out (177). The “unvarying background” provided by the Heidlers represents the “solid” or “fixed backgrounds” that we are told Marya “lacks.” In the same passage that articulates the pernicious impact of this “mania for classification,” Marya’s free-indirect thought views Heidler as

forcing her to be nothing but the little woman who lived in the Hôtel du Bosphore for the express purpose of being made love to. A *petite femme.* It was, of course, part of his *mania for classification*. But he did it with such conviction that she, miserable weakling that she was, found herself trying to live up to his idea of her. She lived up to it. And she had her reward. (118; second emphasis added)

So, the novel argues, beware of such fixity, such solidity. Such a “reward” comes at a steep price: it reduces Marya to whatever “classification” the Heidlers impose upon her—here, a *petite femme*, “the little woman who lived in” a dingy hotel “for the express purpose of being made love to.” Heidler controls her, not least, by often admonishing her not to be “hysterical” (103, 148, 149, 161), while another character calls her a “neurasthenic” (174).

A more expansive example of the Heidlers’ “mania for classification” occurs soon after Marya moves in. Lois begins to paint Marya’s portrait, “her chest well out, her round, brown eyes travelling rapidly from the sitter to the canvas and back again” (59). The reference to Marya as “the sitter” precludes Marya as the focal point. Indeed, if there is a focalizing subject, it turns out to be Lois herself:

The movement of her [Lois’] head was oddly like that of a bird picking up crumbs. She talked volubly. She would often stop painting to talk, and it was evident that *she took Montparnasse very seriously indeed*. She thought of it as a possible *stepping-stone to higher things* and *she liked explaining, classifying, fitting the inhabitants (that is to say, of course, the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants) into their proper places in the scheme of things*. The Beautiful Young Men, the Dazzlers, the Middle Westerners, the Down-and-Outs, the Freaks who never would do anything, the Freaks who just possibly might. (60; emphasis added)

Focalization in this passage is marked by the shift to free-indirect discourse, which presents not only Lois’ perspective, but also her idiom (as in the case of social labels such as “Freaks”). Lois’ free-indirect speech, however, is ironically parroted (as suggested by the simile of her head’s movement “oddly” resembling “that of a bird”). Rather than what Brian McHale calls the “lyric fusion” occurring in free-indirect discourse, between narrator and character, there is instead an *ironic* fusion, effected through the free-indirect style, anticipated by the character-deflating, external description of Lois’ speaking “volubly” and the “bird” simile. Even as Lois’ beliefs and expressions are faithfully represented, as tonally imperious, she is meant to seem a bit ridiculous, as evident in the sarcastic remark that Lois “took Montparnasse very seriously indeed”—but only as a project to advance the Heidlers’ social ambition.

But the key signal of the narrator’s ironic portrayal of Lois in this passage is the sardonic parenthetical remark about “the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants, *of course*.” Lois’ free-indirect narration doubles down on the Heidlers’ penchant to “explain … classify … and fit” their “Anglo-Saxon” brethren as if exercising god-like powers (putting them in their “proper places … in the scheme of things”). The Heidlers’ ironically pathetic arrogance, social ambition, and desire to exert social control over their own “kind” is exposed from the inside-out, as the contents of Lois’ mind—discursive and ideological—are laid bare in brazenly categorical, opportunistic terms, terms that echo the “stepping-stone” notion that begins the free-indirect report (“the Freaks who never would do anything, the Freaks who just possibly might”).

Lois’ classifying of the social milieu is a means to world domination—of the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants’ world, of course. Ironically, the narrator’s ventriloquism of Lois’ point of view seems to perform the same classifying operation it deprecates. For, by parroting Lois’ expressive ideology, the free-indirect discourse is “explaining,” “classifying,” and “fitting” *Lois* into *her* “proper place in the scheme of things.” What is more, the syntax of the free-indirect report mirrors this taxonomical point of view—the “mania for classification”—that is the subject of the passage. After the paratactic parallel series of “explaining, classifying, fitting” the inhabitants into their “proper place,” the next sentence presents another parallel series, that of the “Anglo-Saxon inhabitants” living in Montparnasse, the parallelism mirrored even in the lack of a final conjunction (“…the Freaks who never would do anything, the Freaks who just possibly might”). Hence, the double parallel series frames Lois with taxonomical precision, “fitting” Lois herself into her “proper place,” and then enumerates the social types that her taxonomy fits into their proper places, in turn.

By contrast, Marya is then described as “longing to assert her point of view,” in the next sentence (60). Lois’ ironic detachment is contrasted with the warmth of Marya’s longing. Lois represents a powerful benefactor’s control, manifested through a classifying gaze—echoing the book’s epigraph, “beware Good Samaritans.”[[10]](#endnote-11) In contradistinction to Lois, Marya has trouble “asserting” her own point of view, as she is caught in the harsh light of the Heidlers’ social gaze. While Marya struggles to describe her life with Stephan, Lois is hardly at a loss for words, characterizing it coolly and crisply, in contrast to the sentimental effusions that characterize Marya’s descriptions.

Sometimes she [Lois] would ask questions, and *Marya, longing to assert her point of view,* would try to describe the charm of her life with Stephan. The *vagabond* nights, the fresh mornings, the long sleepy afternoons spent behind drawn curtains.

“*Stephan’s a — vivid sort of person, you see. What a stupid word! I mean natural. Natural as an animal*. He made me come alive; he taught me everything. I was happy. *Sometimes just the way the light fell would make me unutterably happy*.”

“Yes, of course,” Lois would say *intelligently*. “I can quite see *how he got hold of you*. Quite.” (60; emphasis added)

The contrast in worldviews could not be more evident, nor the rhetorical precision that characterizes Lois’ curt reply from Marya’s rambling, vague, and emotional speech. On the one hand, Marya struggles to explain the “charm of her life with Stephan,” using abstract diction to describe him, such as “vivid,” a word that she realizes is too vague to describe a person (“What a stupid word!”). In contrast, Lois is represented, again, as a shrewd, calculating observer, a social climber who sees life in Montparnasse only as a “stepping stone to higher things.” In a related passage, Marya grants that Lois is “extremely intelligent,” insofar as she banks on conventional opinion to legitimize her viewpoint: “She expressed well-read opinions about every subject under the sun … and was so perfectly sure of all she said that it would have been a waste of time to contradict her” (60).

To describe Stephan as “natural” “as an animal,” in this context, is telling. Stephan is the antithesis—*in Marya’s mind*—of what the Heidlers stand for. He represents a “natural,” “vagabond” life, seemingly free from bourgeois hierarchies of social value. This is why Marya can think only of intrinsic, experiential, inarticulate attributes to describe Stephan and their life together: he is “vivid,” he “made [Marya] come alive,” “taught [her] everything,” he made Marya “*unutterably* happy.” No wonder she struggles to explain the “charm” of their former life! Their charming vagabondage is, precisely, “unutterable,” ineffable, and thus incalculable on any fixed measure of social hierarchy or material value. (Not least because such “charm” led only to Stephan’s imprisonment and Marya’s dependency on the Heidlers.) Thus, the Heidlers’ point of view dominates this scene, the first time Marya shares their household. Lois coolly responds to Marya’s inarticulate description of a life well lived: “ ‘Yes, of course,’ Lois would say *intelligently*. “I can quite see *how he got hold of you*. Quite’ ” (60; emphasis added). Lois’ repeated “quite” is as cutting as it sounds, and her social “intelligence” coldly translates Marya’s vague, shadowy web of an emotional existence into a rational social calculus, with winners and losers. Lois implies that Stephan’s “charm” was nothing but a ruse to “g[et] hold of” Marya, a conquest and trap that Marya fell for. Lois coldly deflates Marya’s description of true happiness with her husband into the transaction of a predator marking his prey—to view Marya’s “animal” metaphor from Lois’ perspective. What Lois “sees” is not exactly what Marya says, but how she says it—how she struggles to say it, and then how her words are vague and abstract, vainly trying to convey the sense of being “*unutterably* happy.” Such ineffable qualities as “unutterable,” “happy,” and “vivid” preempt Lois’ taking Marya’s point of view seriously; they speak different languages of social value, of what counts as a valuable existence.

The two cannot communicate across this ideological divide, which is presented as a tension between incommensurable points of view, each with its own language and rhetorical style. It is, thus, impossible for Marya to persuade Lois of the value, or even the truth, of Marya’s experience, for such truth cannot be expressed except as ineffable, fleeting (“vagabond”), and already lost. And Lois understands not feeling and the unutterable, but rationality and the calculable—the classifiable. It is no wonder that after this outburst of feeling, Lois seems to think Marya as merely “excitable,” an emotional creature naïve enough to fall for whatever pretty story Stephan told her about their life together. Even Stephan has a “mania for order,” indicating how Marya stands apart as “excitable,” or overly emotional, which the Heidlers view as a “weakness” (178, 77, 87). As noted, Marya is also dismissively “diagnosed” by a minor character as a “neurasthenic,” and controlled by Heidler by calling her “hysterical.” By contrast, the Heidlers have a “sense of proportion” (77).[[11]](#endnote-12)

Finally, note that Marya’s free-indirect thought returns us to the motifs of light, “shadow,” and “illusion” that we are already associate, in the earlier chapters, with the point of view that finds such conditions salutary, rather than alarming: “the long sleepy *afternoons* spent behind drawn curtains”; “ ‘*Sometimes just the way the light fell would make me unutterably happy*.’ ” In the latter instance, the direct speech seeks to express and explain the charm of such a life; this moment recapitulates the earlier narrated instance, where the narrator adopts Marya’s point of view to explain “the value of an illusion,” and that “the shadow can be more important than the substance.” Here, Marya echoes this same “point of view.” My point is not just that this confluence of free-indirect and direct discourse aligns the narrator’s sensibility with Marya’s. It is also that this passage represents a moment when the narrative discourse itself dramatizes the deep desire (“longing”) to present this point of view to an impassable interlocutor. Lois, in turn, can only see what—or, rather, how—she wants to see: “I see how he [Stephan] got hold of you. Quite,” thereby nullifying the ineffable “charm” of the life being described, and transforming it into a vision of Stephan as a manipulator taking advantage of Marya’s naïveté, to ultimately take possession of her. Such possession over others begins by the act of classifying them according to one’s own “scheme of things.” That “scheme” defines the Heidlers’ worldview as one focused on, precisely, “scheming,” and classifying others to advance those schemes.

**The Narrative Mood of *Quartet***

My main argument is that the narrative discourse anticipates the difficulties of interpretation, the reading of other people and social gestures. The novel’s key terms and symbolic meanings highlight why it might be better to *understand*, *rather than to* *classify* (or todiagnose, for that matter)*.* This formal means is encoded as the narrative *mood*, in the narratology of Gérard Genette. In Genette’s oft-cited *Narrative Discourse,* he claims a distinction between narrative *voice* (“who speaks?”) and *mode* (originally translated as *mood),* or the “regulation of narrative information,” the ways the narrator influences how we interpret that information. “Indeed,” Genette writes, “one can tell *more* or tell *less* what one tells, and can tell it *according to one point of view or another;* and this capacity, and the modalities of its use, are … what our category of *narrative mood* aims at” (162; original emphasis). Chief among these modalities is point of view—what Genette coined as *focalization* (168; *Narrative Discourse Revisited* 46).[[12]](#endnote-13) By “regulating the information” provided in narrative accounts by restricting it to the information known by focalizing characters, the figural narrative offers the illusion of maximum closeness to the characters, and maximum subjective filtering of the story through internal focalization. This filtering is perceptual as well as ideological and epistemological, as when events may or may not have happened as described, due to the fallibility of the focalizor, as in the controversial unnamed governess in Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw*, whose accounts of supernatural phenomena can be construed as mere hallucination.

Locating subjectivity through focalization, thus creating a narrative with a characteristically *figural* mood is the point of departure for my reading of *Quartet*. This novelis a triumph of *mood*, chiefly through Rhys’ experiments in focalization, related by a third-person narrator “who is not one of the characters but who adopts” their point of view (Genette *Narrative Discourse* 168). Genette indicates that narrative *mood* is a function of perspective and ideology; the structural hermeneutic distinction between understanding and classification in *Quartet*, then, is mapped by Rhys’ handling of the narrative mood, by employing extensive internal focalization, in ways that are hard to describe within existing narrative theory. But I will try, aiming to *understand*, rather than to provide a spuriously static *classification* of the novel’s techniques for creating its distinctive mood.

Indeed, in his theory of mood, Genette seems to be hypostasizing the narrative discourse itself as a text that has a certain texture, an overall quality that can perhaps not be reduced to the discrete technical categories that help to constitute it.[[13]](#endnote-14) The story of *Quartet*, Marya’s love affair with Heidler, is similarly encoded with an almost palpable mood. As a narrative of words, in Genette’s terms, the novel is as much about *how* it relates the story as about the events that constitute the story itself. The narration’s texture, or what Genette calls its mood, is achieved through its close contact with the “transparent minds” of its central characters, chiefly Marya, but also Heidler, Lois, and Stephan. But focalized narration is only the beginning of how Rhys achieves the shadowy mood of *Quartet*—the mood that the narration itself describes, in relation to Marya’s backstory, as “a lack of solidity and of fixed backgrounds.”

The novel’s narration adopts internal focalization and various modes of representing figural consciousness and point of view—including extensive use of free-indirect discourse, psycho-narration, and dialogue. But the most interesting technique that lends texture to the narration is what David Herman calls *hypothetical* *focalization*. It is this technique that, I argue, helps to imbue the narrative with its characteristic mood, and that represents the hermeneutics of understanding—versus classification—that the novel champions.[[14]](#endnote-15) But my reading of Rhys’ novel as employing the technique of hypothetical focalization (HF) depends on revising this concept, extending it from Herman’s original description to encompass the way it helps to define the novel’s characteristic mood. The hypothetical quality of several focalized passages also underscores the novel’s claims for subjective “understanding,” as opposed to objective “classification.” Hypothetical focalization at the character level, which is how it most strikingly appears in *Quartet*, entails that individual figures become narrators of other characters’ inner lives—or they project themselves as such.

But before understanding Rhys’ employment of hypothetical focalization in *Quartet*, I should explain how my account adopts and extends Herman’s definition of the term. Herman defines *hypothetical focalization* (HF) as the “use of hypotheses,” by narrator or character, “about what might be or have been seen or perceived” (231). Herman defines *focalization* per se as a “perceptual and conceptual frame … more or less inclusive or restricted, through which situations and events are presented in a narrative” (231). For Herman,

Ways of focalizing a story can thus be redescribed as the narrative representation of propositional attitudes, i.e., modes of focalization encode into narrative form various kinds of epistemic stances that can be adopted towards what is being represented in the narrative…. [W]hat I am calling HF is the formal marker of a peculiar epistemic modality, in which … the *expressed world* counterfactualizes or virtualizes the *reference world* of the text. (231; original emphasis)

What Herman calls the “expressed world” is only projected in focalized discourse—either mental or oral—that is “propositional,” or *hypothetical*, and thus opposed to the actual world (or “reference world”) as it exists in the narrative. For Herman, hypothetical focalization is legible in narrative statements invoking a hypothetical perspective, grammatically employing the conditional or subjunctive mood. Tying his discussion of HF to Genette’s theory of mood, then, Herman doubles down on the grammatical metaphor of Genette’s narrative theory—where narrative discourse is structured like a language, into *tense*, *voice*, and *mood*—to include hypothetical statements that invoke a non-existent perspective that “counterfactualizes or virtualizes” accounts of the world as it is in the story.

But Herman qualifies his initial definition of hypothetical focalization with the following limitation: HF involves statements of “what *might be* or *have been* perceived—*if only there were someone who could have adopted the requisite perspective on the situations and events at issue*” (231; emphasis added). Herman’s examples of hypothetical focalization involve, then, narrative instances that invoke non-existent or “counterfactual” focalizing agents—such as the narrator’s interpolation of a hypothetical witness to Poe’s “Fall of the House of Usher”: “*Perhaps* the eye of a scrutinizing observer *might* *have discovered* a barely perceptible fissure, which … made its way down the wall” (qtd in Herman 237). Herman notes two grammatical signs that “encode ... hypotheticality”: the “adverbial operator” *perhaps,* and the subjunctive mood expressed in the modal auxiliary *might*, which, Herman claims, “implies a lack of commitment to the truth of the expressed world relative to the reference world of the story” (237). There is no actual “scrutinizing observer,” in other words—only a *hypothetical* one, who, also *hypothetically*, “might have discovered” the famous crack in the house of Usher. Herman also adduces other types of hypothetical focalization—instances where, unlike Poe’s virtual observer, the focalizing character exists in the “reference world of the story,” but only their *function* *as focalizor* is hypothetical.

Indeed, *characters* who function as hypothetical focalizors abound in *Quartet*. Thus, when Herman defines HF as “what might be or have been perceived—if only there were someone *who could have adopted the requisite perspective*,” he seems to minimize instances where hypothetical focalization occurs at the level of the story, *between characters*—what so-and-so “might be or have been perceiv[ing],” not according to the narrator, but according to another character (231). As such, I extend Herman’s notion of hypothetical focalization to include instances of narrative “encoding” of “hypotheticality” that involve *character-based* suppositions about what another character is thinking or perceiving, which also destabilize the “reference world” by projecting an “expressed world” that “counterfactualizes or virtualizes” it.

**Hypothetical Focalization in *Quartet***

On my reading, there are at least fifteen significant instances of hypothetical focalization in the novel. Ten of these virtual focalizations adopt Marya’s point of view, presenting Marya’s focalization of another character. Normally, the adoption of a character’s point of view is an instance of what Mieke Bal would call *double focalization,* “in which [the external narrator] ‘looks over the shoulder’ ” of a character whose point of view is adopted (159). Thus, for Bal, double focalization usually entails the overlay of the external narrator and a focalizing character. In *Quartet*, however, double focalization—*one actual, the other hypothetical*—often occurs in the realm of the story, joining the fictional minds of two characters. In these ten instances, the point of view is Marya’s, while she, in turn, adopts the point of view of another character, guessing their thoughts or attitudes.[[15]](#endnote-16) These examples of *character-based* double focalizations depict Marya’s free-indirect thought, in which she presumes to understand another’s perspective. Often, this double perspective is marked as hypothetical, a supposition by a character, which can be proven right or wrong.[[16]](#endnote-17)

A key passage occurs in the very first chapter, when Marya meets the Heidlers for the first time, at a dinner. Marya’s free-indirect thought considers Lois’ eyes to be “beautiful, clearly brown, the long lashes curving upwards, *but there was a suspicious, almost deadened look in them.* ‘I’m a well-behaved young woman,’ *they said*, ‘and you’re not going to catch me out, so don’t think it.’ *Or perhaps*, thought Marya, *she’s just thoroughly enjoying her pilaff”* (11; emphasis added). Here, the free indirect report presents Marya’s perception of Mme. Heidler: first, Marya thinks that Lois’ eyes are physically “beautiful,” but also seem to have a “suspicious, almost deadened look in them.” The next moment involves Marya’s hypothetical focalization of Lois’ perception—as translated into imaginary discourse, *as if it were* *emanating from Lois:* “ ‘I’m a well-behaved young woman,’ *they said*, ‘and you’re not going to catch me out, so don’t think it.’ ” But the next sentence returns to simple focalization, with the narrator’s restricted indirect report: “Or perhaps, thought Marya, she’s just thoroughly enjoying” her dinner. Thus, the passage includes different kinds of discourse, and different kinds and levels of focalization.

But, more importantly, the passage encodes conjectures about Mrs. Heidler’s personality, based on Marya’s perception of “the look” in Lois’ eyes. These conjectures involve a hypothetical statement ostensibly representing Lois’ point of view, *imagined as direct discourse*. But Marya’s hypothetical focalization is immediately qualified, if not cancelled, by her next thought—also presented as hypothetical, with the word “perhaps” “indicating possibility and doubt,” as Herman understands the “alethic and epistemic functions” of hypothetical focalization (Herman 237, 249n17). Thus, there is an ironic double valence in representing a hypothetical perspective through direct discourse, as in what “Lois’ eyes” “said”—the indicative mood of “they said” is counterbalanced by the imaginary situation of “eyes” being able to “speak,” rendering the attribution virtual or indicative only of an “expressed world,” even if it is presented, grammatically, in the indicative mood. The virtuality of this “expressed world” of Lois’ inner life is further emphasized by the condition placed on this conjecture: the sentence beginning with “perhaps” casts doubt on Marya’s first impression.

Marya’s initial hypothetical focalization of Lois is thus immediately placed under erasure, proven to be fallible, perhaps even mistaken. But the indicative and conditional moods are not so much cancelling as balancing each other: just as the first impression of Lois’ eyes are that they are “beautiful but…” so is the point of view of Lois as “suspicious” balanced by a much more mundane explanation. This oscillation between darker and lighter impressions of Lois’ perspective is mirrored by other instances, and, in fact, are structurally indicative of the narrative theme, that of the hermeneutic uncertainty of *understanding* others’ points of view. Marya catches herself getting carried away with her intuitive first impression of Mrs. Heidler, and, although this impression is temporarily set aside for a less “suspicious” explanation, it nonetheless functions as foreshadow of Lois’ personality.

In my reading, *Quartet* contains several more instances of character-level hypothetical focalization, *by* a fictional mind, *of* *another* fictional mind. These instances involve a fictional character’s imagining of another fictional characters’ interior life—their ideas, thoughts, even their imagined speech. Such extreme cases of hypothetical focalization at the character level involve explicit, grammatical signals that the character is imagining what the other character *would* say or *would* *be* thinking.[[17]](#endnote-18) These are signals that indicate an epistemic shift from the objective “reference world” of the story to a subjective, counterfactual “expressed world.”

A related instance bears mentioning, because it shows how a similar technique is employed to represent character-level focalization *that is not at all* hypothetical. In this case, the exception proves the rule. The moment involves Heidler focalizing Marya, but not hypothetically. Given the surrounding narrative context, double focalization would be the most apt description, narrated as Heidler’s free-indirect thought: “ ‘I’m still fond of her,’ he told himself. ‘If only she’d leave it at that. But no…. ‘The most *utter nonsense*,’ *thought Heidler*. *Utter nonsense* about … the visiting cards stuck into the looking-glass over *Lois’s* *damned mantelpiece, about Lois’s damned smug pictures and Lois’s damned smug voice”* (129–30, emphasis added). Here, Heidler’s interior monologue is presented directly (“ ‘The most utter nonsense,’ thought Heidler”) and then in the free-indirect style. His monologue begins to narrate Marya’s direct speech, which Heidler views as little more than “nonsense.” There is a further reinforcement of this reading, since Marya ends her denigration of the Heidlers’ domesticity with “Lois’s smug voice,” summing up the novel’s focus—its obsession, one might say—with *voice, or a character’s unique form of expressing their unique point of view*. The free-indirect report here ventriloquizes Marya, but focalizes Heidler. It is a feat of narratorial engineering. And, it stands in stark contrast to the majority of the novel’s *doubly focalized* passages, which reveal an expressive, rather than referential, status. Thus, most of the novel’s character-level focalizations are not factual at all; they destabilize the “reference world” of the story by marking the distortions of subjectivity, achieved through focalizing attempts at *intersubjectivity*.

Perhaps the most interesting moment of hypothetical, character-based focalization occurs roughly at the midpoint of the book, at the beginning of Chapter 14 (out of 23). All three figures are riding the train to Brunoy, a fictional town in the South of France, the Heidler’s weekend getaway; for the first time, Marya goes with them. As a consequence, and also for the first time, Marya skips visiting her husband in prison. She chooses Heidler.[[18]](#endnote-19)

They sat facing her in the railway carriage and *she looked at them with calmness, clear-sightedly*, *freed for one moment from her obsessions of love and hatred.* They were so obviously husband and wife, so suited to each other, they were even in some strange way alike….

Lois sat sturdily, with her knees, as usual, a little apart: her ungloved hands were folded over a huge leather handbag; *on her dark face was the expression of the woman who is wondering how she is going to manage about the extra person to dinner. She probably was wondering just that.* (97; my emphasis)

“[F]reed for one moment from her obsessions of love and hatred,” Marya, we are told, sees the Heidlers “clear-sightedly,” as if for the first time—as if, objectively. The shift from authorial psycho-narration to Marya’s free-indirect thought tracks the deepening of perception, from external to internal; from describing how Lois sat, Marya then contemplates what Lois thought. The final sentence underlines that the focalization of Lois’s conscious thought was not necessarily objective: “She *probably* was wondering just that” signals Marya’s personal point of view and colloquial idiom, and underscores its hypothetical quality, as an observation that may or may not be true. It most likely is; for Marya is seeing “clear-sightedly.” When they reach Brunoy, Marya’s supposition about what Lois had been thinking is confirmed—as is the source of this focalization: “*Lois said,* *exactly as Marya had known she would say:* ‘I must stop on the way because there’s not much to eat in the house’ ” (98; my emphasis).

In this instance, Marya’s hypothetical focalization of Lois’s thought is proven correct. But its suspension as *merely* subjective is the important point; the reader does not quite know, yet, whether Marya is correct in her surmise. The narrator confirms that it was Marya’s point of view all along, and that this point of view is ultimately proven right (“exactly as Marya had known she would say”). Marya was the source of the narrative perspective on Lois, and we see how she *virtually* focalizes Lois’s interior thought. In this case, Marya does so with a satirical, dismissive bent: the passage with Marya’s describing what Lois “probably” is thinking ends with her interior dismissal of Lois as “Obviously of the species wife” (97).

 But perhaps the most interesting dimension of this moment on the train is how Marya’s hypothetical focalization of Lois continues, and becomes increasingly affectively charged. Lois becomes weaponized, in Marya’s eyes:

There she [Lois] was: formidable, an instrument made, exactly shaped and sharpened for one purpose. She didn’t analyse; she didn’t react violently; she didn’t go in for absurd generosities or pities. Her motto was: *“I don’t think women ought to make nuisances of themselves. I don’t make a nuisance of myself; I grin and bear it, and I think that other women ought to grin and bear it too.”* (97; emphasis added)

Transforming Lois into a “sharp” “instrument” is Marya’s doing, through her focalization of the other’s “motto” no less than of what Lois “probably was wondering.” In this case, the description bears intense emotionality: note the series of descriptions that render Lois, in implicit opposition to Marya, as a cool, rational, self-controlled, and therefore powerful—and powerfully masculinized—figure. For, the vehicle of the metaphor connotes a *phallic* object—a knife, or, better yet, a scalpel. For, the word “instrument” invokes a vision of the Heidlers as almost scientifically *classifying*—and then penetrating—the object of their interest (“sharpened for one purpose”). Rather than wounding with “tears … futile rages … [and] extravagant abandon,” as Marya does, Lois clinically cuts with discursive aplomb (117). The clear aggression in the metaphor, however, marks it as less “clear-sighted” than Marya’s previous insight. But both descriptions are presented as of a piece—or, at least, as Lois is virtually focalized in Marya’s mind. Whether this instance of character-level focalization is objective, or simply a fabrication on Marya’s part, is partially answered by the narrator’s corroboration about what “Lois said,” which was “exactly as Marya had known she would say.”

 But the meaning of this passage rests on the “probably,” more than on the “exactly.” The “shadow,” not the “substance.” After focalizing Lois, Marya turns to Heidler, who seems

like the same chord repeated in a lower key, sitting with his hands clasped in exactly the same posture as hers. Only his eyes were different. He could dream, that one. But his dreams *would not be* many-coloured, or dark shot with flame like Marya’s. No, *they’d be* *cold*, *she thought,* or gross at moments. *Almost certainly gross* with those pale blue, secretive eyes. *It seemed to her* that, staring at the couple, *she had hypnotized herself into thinking, as they did, that her mind was part of their minds* and that she understood whythey both so often said in exactly the same tone of puzzled bewilderment: “I don’t see what you’re making such a fuss about.” Of course! And then they wanted to be excessively modern, and *then they’d think:* “After all, we’re in Paris.”(98; emphasis added)

The underlined portions indicate the conditionality of Marya’s perception of the Heidlers’ “excessively modern” point of view. Again, the lens of double focalization projects into the Heidlers, while never leaving Marya’s private corner in this “three-cornered fight” (117). What is unique about this repeated use of character-based virtual focalization, is how a passage such as this mirrors the very technique, *at the level of content*, that the technique accomplishes at the level of form. What is this passage formally representing, if not the notion that Marya’s mind *is* a part of theirs—or, at least, *she thinks* so—since she can peer into them? Marya has “hypnotized herself into thinking” that her mind was “part of” their minds, just “as [the Heidlers] did”; they seem to share one mind, too. But do they *really* think so?Marya’s double focalization of the Heidlers—one actual (“It seemed to her”), the other virtual (Heidler’s eyes “would not be” like hers)—highlights the self-referentiality, the subjectivity, of these impressions, including the impression that one can enter another’s mind.

The formal dimension of the passage is also grammatical. As noted, there is a marked shift from the indicative (“there he was”) to the conditional mood (“would not be”; “they’d be”; “they’d think”). Such grammatical shifts indicate, again, the hiatus between the narrator’s access to fictional minds, and the character’s probabilistic access to these minds—access that can be proven wrong. The entire novel’s narrative interest turns on the subjectivity of Marya’s account, as we have seen, especially while this subjectivity is itself narrating what it presumes is going on in other minds. The narration thus indicates when objectivity falls and subjectivity reigns, but also when this divide is blurred, as is the case in the multiple instances where it is difficult to ascertain whether focalization is taking place at all, or whether we are accessing the narrator’s presumably objective point of view.

**Conclusion: Resisting the “sadisms of epistemology”**

The novel’s penchant for conveying Marya’s (hypothetical) focalizations, marked, as they are in the previous passage, with the conditional mood of doubt and probability, creates an interesting “modulation of intimacy,” in Brian McHale’s terms. When one character seems to focalize another, is it an attempt at empathy? Or, on the contrary, as in the “species wife” episode quoted above, is it a devastating bit of parodic focalization—by one fictional character of another? Focalization is obviously a technique usually reserved for external narration. *Quartet*’s character-level use of *hypothetical focalization*, however, in my reading, rhetoricallyreinforces the thematic “obsession” of the narrative—with narration itself. Specifically, hypothetical focalization at the story level allegorizes how narration, or storytelling, is the central theme of the novel. Not storytelling tout court (Rhys is too canny for that): but, storytelling from a point of view. Whose point of view is it? How fallible is that account?[[19]](#endnote-20) These are the kinds of questions the novel poses to the reader. It plunges the reader into the shadow, the illusion, the “lack of solidity and of fixed backgrounds” of subjective accounts, and of subjective accounts that seem objective, only to prove otherwise.

I began this essay with the well-trod background of *Quartet*: it is a *roman à clef*, and it represents a partial account, one inconsistent with those written by the other principals. The real “Stephan,” Jean Lenglet, wrote one of these, *Sous les verrous*.[[20]](#endnote-21) Rhys translated Lenglet’s novel from the French as *Barred,* cutting approximately seven thousand words from the original French, because it seemed to paint “Marya” in a very harsh light (Kappers–den Hollander 45). What interests me is not the veracity of *Quartet*, measured against the fictional and autobiographical accounts presented by the other members of the affair. It is how *Quartet* formally incorporates the thematic preoccupation—some would say, the obsession—with point of view, and with the severe limits that point of view places on the veracity, even the verifiability, of any narrative account. Members of “l’affaire Ford” sought to project their point of view, with varying success. Rhys, for many reasons, many unrelated, successfully depicts the mood of uncertainty and illusion that permeates the ethical and romantic shadows cast by the four central characters. Cast most of all, I would argue, by the narrative technique of *Quartet:* the recourse to hypothetical focalizations of fictional minds, and the representation of this very act as a principal problem, perhaps the principal problem, of the story. The seduction of Marya by the powerful Heidler is rendered, it is true, without casting much light on Marya’s own culpability and motivations, as Carole Angier argues (“Quartet,” 183–219). But the narrative techniques of the novel, especially hypothetical focalization, indicate how the psychological drama of the story lies in its telling, and may indeed be a lie in its telling—one can never be *too* sure. The novel, then, while siding with Marya, engages other aspects of narration that trouble the simple identification of the story with its narrator—or, more precisely, with its focalizor. Rhys’s narrator largely sustains Marya’s point of view, while foregrounding the complications of focalization itself. This narrative focus on narrative focus, at a technical level, corresponds to how the narrator describes *Marya’s background* *as* *the lack of a (fixed) background*, indicating the radical doubt that permeates even the objective narrator’s accounts.[[21]](#endnote-22)

An interesting example of hypothetical focalization *at the narrator level* encapsulates this existential “lack of solidity” as definitive of *Quartet’*s narrative mood. A minor character, M. Hautchamp, owner of the hotel, is reading the newspaper. With “an expression of disapproval,” the narrator adds, “he continued his article which … began thus: ‘*Le mélange des races est à la base de l’évolution humaine vers le type parfait.*’ *[‘The mixing of races is the foundation of human evolution, which progresses toward increasing perfection’]*. ‘I don’t think,’ thought Monsieur Hautchamp—or something to that effect” (32–33).[[22]](#endnote-23) The “something to that effect” briefly glimpses the uncertainty that hypothetical focalization is supposed to provide—here, even the external narrator, granted fictional access to fictional minds, is not quite sure what this character thought; is not quite sure that M. Hautchamp thought “I don’t think.” The probability that language gets in the way—for M. Hautchamp did not think in English—melts into the probability that fictional minds are not so transparent after all.

One could say that this paper over-symptomatizes one instance of verb choice (“*diagnosed”*) in Mitchell’s account of the secondary literature on Rhys. But my focus enables asking metacritical questions that may remain unasked if we elide the category-crossing of clinical and critical domains in the study of literature. Some of these questions are: What does it mean when we “diagnose” literary characters as masochistic? What does it mean when a literary novel—or corpus, as in the case with Rhys—impels us to read it as masochistic or even, more broadly, as “diagnosable,” in some vaguely clinical sense, a sense that can then be transformed into an aesthetic principle?

The narrative discourse employs character-level hypothetical focalization to render such moments open-ended. And so, the novel’s narrative technique sustains this lack of objectivity, this doubling of subjectivity—this resistance to providing the reader with a narratorial “fixed background,” in the terms of the novel. Put another way, its use of counterfactual glimpses into other minds, rendered in complex forms of focalization, combine to create a story world defined by its narrative mood, antithetical to the discourse of solidity, fixity, and classification.

Given *Quartet*’s figural narration, its reliance on key instances of *hypothetical* focalization does not merely provide multiple perspectives, but how these perspectives are often suspended—expressive, but not necessarily factual. Such multiplicity and virtuality of focus renders subjective judgments illusory, and subject to contradicting views—not only Marya’s versus the Heidlers’, but also, by extension, the reader’s. The theme encoded in the title *Quartet* and the form of the character system that it references, alerts the reader to the variability of these perspectives. Hypothetical focalizations trouble the actual world of the story, by providing competing, conjectural, at times self-cancelling, perspectives on the “true” narrative situation.

The ending of the novel, for example, leaves Marya behind, after she has a bad altercation with Stephan. Marya, after telling him the truth of her involvement with Heidler, threatens to call the police if Stephan carries through with his plan to kill Heidler (179–84). But, importantly, and surprisingly, the end of Marya’s story is not the end of the novel. Stephan leaves his wife splayed on the floor: “*Voilà pour toi,*” he says, obscenely indifferent (185). We don’t know what else happens with her. The story moves on, with Stephan and his new “girl,” who becomes Marya’s ostensible replacement on the last page of the novel (186). Marya is thus left behind, unconscious or dead—the reader doesn’t know which. But this flickering evanescence of the protagonist is encoded in the narrator’s notion of “a lack of fixity and of fixed background”: Marya’s end is not the novel’s end, and her end is ambiguous and thus *open*-ended. She is only *left* for dead; we don’t know definitively what becomes of her.

In conclusion, hypothetical focalization in *Quartet* creates divergent angles of perspective on a deceptively simple yet ambiguous story, modalizing, through imagined points of view—and points of divergence on these views—what could be, in a simpler novel, a straightforward representation of events. Hypothetical focalization renders characters and situations as hermeneutically suspended, permanently left open to interpretation. Such narrative instability through perspectival multiplicity and mobility has two effects: One, it strategically weakens the reader’s grasp of the ethical and psychological truth of the situation. This instability only deepens as the story goes on, as Marya cannot explain to herself why she continues in the affair despite her deep ambivalence. More importantly, the narrator does not explain, choosing only to service the lack of explanation. And two, narrative instability in the form of multiple, irreconcilable perspectives includes some, as we have seen, that “diagnose” the protagonist as “neurasthenic” (174) or “hysterical” (149), whereas others are merely objectifying and oppressive (“this type of woman” [177], “*petite femme”* [118]).[[23]](#endnote-24) Such pseudo-clinical terms are often, as noted, presented as unsympathetic judgments on the protagonist. By contrast, the narrator’s focus on Marya sets the partiality of the story from the outset, and provides the reader with an alternative principle for “understanding” her existence, by gauging what it lacks, or that what Marya’s experience consists of *is* a lack. Readers, too, are presented with a discourse that lacks narrative solidity and fixed background. We are told that we must simply go with it.

Hypothetical focalization thus helps to create the novel’s shadowy mood, and recapitulates the overarching theme: the intoxicating, even toxic, fumes of partial perception and problematic intersubjectivity. This nebulous realm is actualized by *Quartet*’s use of complex cases of focalization, including character-level conjectures about the contents of other fictional minds. In brief, hypothetical focalization is how “a lack of solidity and of fixed background” is encoded into the novel’s texture, one characterized by intoxicating intersubjectivity, given the ultimately fallible nature of subjectivity itself.

As noted, the social space that the Heidlers occupy is a well-ordered bourgeois existence, one held together by their “mania for classification.” However, the novel’s use of a psychopathological term (“mania”) to describe the Heidlers, ironically, impugns them as misguided for doing the same thing the narrator does: using diagnostic language to classify *them* as classifying others, in a reflection of its focus on focalization itself. Nevertheless, the narrative seems to condemn this practice, even given the irony. Rhys’ novel rests on such ambiguities of judgment, foregrounding the lack of background, showing how “shadowy” and “illusory” the world of the story is. In doing so, *Quartet* exposes the “mania for classification” that is at the root of the Heidlers’ power, which seeks to stabilize and control others through the “sadisms of epistemology.” I’m tempted to say that the novel ironically (sadomasochistically?) invites this “mania for classification” on the part of the reader, even as it denigrates such an operation in its least sympathetic characters.[[24]](#endnote-25)

One curious piece of evidence for the instability of the novel’s world, due to its focus on the virtuality or partiality of perspectives on this world—one that is missed if we focus on psychological interpretations— is the question of how to pronounce Marya’s name. “Marya” is an ambiguous spelling for this “virginal” name—and she is ironically named, of course—though the ambiguity, not the irony, is my larger point.[[25]](#endnote-26) When I last taught this novel, the class asked me how to pronounce Marya’s name. Typically, the narrative has only a belated answer to this most basic of questions—it leaves it hanging, until it quasi-reveals the answer. In their first outing together after the affair has begun, the following scene between Marya and the Heidlers occurs, again representing the hypothetical focalization of one character by another: “Lois began: ‘There was a young woman called *Marya*. Who thought, “But I must have a *caree—er” ’ ”* (88; emphasis added). There we have the answer: but it is a passive-aggressive, even sadomasochistic, response; it pretends to speak for Marya only to humiliate her. Notably, the answer is belated, elliptical, and easy to miss. The point, however, is that such a fundamental question—how to pronounce the protagonist’s name—needsto be asked at all.[[26]](#endnote-27) While this scene provides ample fodder for a (sado-) masochistic reading, the importance of the name of the protagonist suggests something more fundamental is at stake, an aesthetic that sees the “value of an illusion,” and that shows us how “the shadow can be more important than the substance” (23). Marya is forever an unpronounceable character—a shadow, if you will. And no analysis can get beyond this fact, even if the illusion of an answer—Lois’ miming Marya’s voice, rhyming Marya’s name*—*shows that masochism, *as well as* complex forms of focalization, inform its intersubjective dynamics.[[27]](#endnote-28) *Quartet’*s interpretive “shadows” remain—they may indeed be “more important than the substance.” Narrative techniques incumbent on doubt, probability, and empathy suggest that *Quartet* can be understood on its own terms. Even without diagnostic certainty, we can certainly feel its mood.

**Notes**

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1. *Quartet* was originally published as *Postures* in 1928. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. The reference is to Gilles Deleuze’s seminal essay on masochism as a clinical and aesthetic entity, “Coldness and Cruelty,” originally published in 1967. It is in this essay that Deleuze makes his strong claim that sadism and masochism are incompatible and that sadomasochism is an incoherent clinical and conceptual category. This doctrine holds great sway, but I do not follow Deleuze’s taboo against thinking sadism alongside masochism, nor his claim that sadomasochism is a nonentity. Gayle Rubin makes an important case for the lack of material evidence to support Deleuze’s claims in her interview with Judith Butler, “Sexual Traffic.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. The Rhys archive was once defined (some would say, distorted) by the so-called “composite heroine,” a construct for interpreting Rhys’ oeuvre introduced by Wyndham in the introduction to Rhys’ work he published in 1963. (This introduction still appears in the current Norton paperback edition of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), showing its continued influence.) The gendered aspects of this problematic notion are addressed in various ways, and I do so in a separate study of Rhys that is part of my book manuscript, tentatively titled “Misfit Fictions.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Readings of masochism or its counterpart, sadism, in Rhys’ work, are contemporaneous with the novels themselves. A review of *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1931) by William Soskind of *The New York Evening Post*, for example, claims that novel is “a sadistic book in that it presents the cruelty and poisonous satisfaction men take in downing” the protagonist, Julia Martin, “an already-beaten woman.” The *locus classicus* of reading psychopathology in Rhys’ work is Jessica Abel’s “Women and Schizophrenia: The Fiction of Jean Rhys.” In our own time, there is a growing field on masochism in Jean Rhys, as well as on modernist masochism. A brief list includes Carol Dell’Amico, *Colonialism and the Modernist Movement in the Early Novels of Jean Rhys*; Patricia Moran, *Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, and the Aesthetics of Trauma*, esp. Chapter 6, “ ‘A Doormat in a World of Boots’: Jean Rhys and the Masochistic Aesthetic”; and Mary Lou Emery, *Jean Rhys at “World’s End”: Novels of Colonial and Sexual Exile*. For the intersection of modernism and masochism, see Eve Sorum, “Masochistic Modernisms: A Reading of Eliot and Woolf”; Peter Howarth’s “Housman’s Dirty Postcards: Poetry, Modernism, and Masochism”; and “Modernism/Masochism,” a special issue of *New Formations*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Mitchell addresses the narrative style at length, though she does not delve into the specifics of focalization that I do here (200–202, 207). She writes: “At no point in the novel does the narrator reveal herself to be Marya. Instead, narrative control momentarily shifts to Marya so that her interpretation of Lois’ and H.J.’s behavior is the reader’s only point of entry” (202). Mitchell’s focus on limited omniscience as a form of “control” is consistent with her interest in the psychodynamics of masochism. But my argument is that resistance to psychoanalytic interpretation is a formal principle of the novel, primarily in the focalizing techniques I outline. But Rhys uses others, such as ellipsis (152, for instance), which leave meaning permanently expected, yet permanently suspended. I chose to focus on focalization in this essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. This style is also called *vision avec*, or the figural narrative situation. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. An anonymous contemporaneous review of *Quartet* states that the novel is another chronicle of “the lost generation” that Gertrude Stein described: “Here, for the first time since Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, is an un-sentimentalized development of an impossible situation in that curious corner of Paris where the spurious constantly rubs shoulders with the real.” This review ends with the notion that *Quartet* is another chronicle of “the lost generation” that Gertrude Stein described. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. One of Rhys’ early short stories is titled “Illusion,” and concerns the contents of a wardrobe of a prim and proper middle-class British woman living in Paris (*The Left Bank and Other Stories*). The story reveals a discrepancy between the woman’s dour, sober appearance and the rich riot of her fantasy life, as represented by fantastically colored gowns and negligees, that she never wore out in public. This early short story, like Rhys’ first novel, illustrates the aesthetic principle of shadow and illusion that resonates as the novel’s mood. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. The “sadisms of epistemology” is a phrase I borrow from David Kurnick, who uses it in his discussion of Leo Bersani’s body of work (402). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. This moment also foreshadows the novel’s critique of spurious Good Samaritans, as noted in the novel’s epigraph. It cites lines from “The Hermit,” a poem by R. C. Dunning that had been published in Ford’s *Transatlantic Review* (See Sue Thomas): “Beware / Of good Samaritans—walk to the right / Or hide thee by the roadside out of sight / Or greet them with the smile that villains wear.” For more on the intertextual dimensions of Rhys’ fiction, see Thorunn Lonsdale, “Literary Allusion in the Fiction of Jean Rhys.” [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. The reader of Virginia Woolf and *Mrs Dalloway* will recognize the phrase “sense of proportion” as indicative of a point of view that, in that modernist classic, also stands for the antithesis of the sympathetic viewpoint of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. The Heidlers’ “mania for classification” and “sense of proportion” are thus of a piece with the “sense of proportion” of Sir William Bradshaw, the psychiatrist whose baleful intervention precipitates Smith’s suicide. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. The other modality of *mood* is what Genette calls narrative *distance*, which denotes how obtrusive the narrator seems, or how *mimetic* (or scenic) the narrative is, from most mimetic (extensive use of dialogue and minimal narrative commentary) to least mimetic (abundant narrative commentary, supplanting the story itself). For more on mimetic versus non-mimetic narration, see Dorrit Cohn, “Signposts of Fictionality,” and Félix Martínez-Bonati, *Fictive Discourse*. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Character-based focalization and its presentation in free-indirect discourse are the chief technical means by which the Proustian narrator of *À la recherche du temps perdu*—Genette’s example—sustains the narrative *mood* while telling the story of various characters, including the famous free-indirect narration of the love affair between Swann and Odette. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Passages such as these can be classified otherwise: as instances of “ambiguous” or “double” focalization (Bal 158–59; Genette *Narrative Discourse* 209). If focusing on the discursive dimension of the passage, such moments can be described as instances of “imaginary,” “modalized,” or “complex” representation of characters’ discourse (Moore 18; Sanders and Redeker 296; McHale 277). Such moments also represent what Genette calls *metalepsis*, or the crossing of narrative levels, when, for example, an external narrator “descends” into the diegesis to speak to a character, or vice versa. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Genette’s section on “Mood” discusses *paralepsis*, his label for instances in which the narrative information exceeds the modal restrictions inherent in character-based focalization (*Narrative Discourse* 207–211). Genette discusses wildly improbably narrative passages in *À la recherche du temps perdu* in which Proust’s protagonist focalizes Mlle. Vinteuil’s thoughts while watching her through a window. As a first-person narrator, Genette argues, Marcel is technically unable to enter other characters’ thoughts, except by some “violations” of the narrative code of representation, as in the case of Mlle. Vinteuil. But, my preference for Herman’s terminology to discuss such forms of *paralepsis* in *Quartet* is the emphasis on the virtuality of the focalization—instances that explicitly and clearly indicate its “hypotheticality.” Cf. Herman (249n16) for a discussion of Genettian *paralepsis* and how Herman’s account of hypothetical focalization is consistent with, but goes beyond, Genette’s concept. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Examples of character-based insights into other fictional minds, many of which include the modal markers of doubt, possibility, or conjecture, abound in the novel (*Quartet* 11, 17, 51, 92–93, 97–98, 112, 115, 118, 161, 177). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Note that these expressions in the conditional tense (“would”) are not temporal markers of futurity, as they are in the conventional representation of free-indirect discourse. As Cohn notes in “Narrated Discourse,” the standard tenses for memory and anticipation in narrated monologues … [are] the pluperfect and the conditional[,] which correspond to the simple past and future in direct quotation” (127). The moments I am describing are contextually marked as character-level focalizations of another character, with the conditional used to denote the hypothetical status of the perception. Cf. Cohn (133–34) on “narrated perception,” which includes, in her example, a moment that Herman would characterize as hypothetical focalization in a passage from Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. See the chapter on “*Quartet*,” in Carole Angier’s biography, for an excellent reading of this moment in the Rhys/Ford affair, and its real-life significance. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. As opposed to a narrator, which can be reliable or unreliable, a character can be more fallible or less fallible. On the distinction, see Fludernik (28) and Dan Shen’s entry on “Unreliability,” *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Lenglet wrote under the pen name Édouard de Nève. He wrote his account in French, published as *Sous les verrous* (1933),and in Dutch as *In de Strik* (1932). Rhys translated itas *Barred* (1932). For an account of the discrepancies between the Rhys account of “l’affaire Ford” and Lenglet’s—as well as Ford’s and Bowen’s, in *When the Wicked Man* (1931) and *Drawn from Life* (1941), respectively—see Angier, “Ford: 1924–1927” and “*Quartet”;* and also, Martine Kappers-den Hollander, “A Gloomy Child and Its Devoted Godmother: Jean Rhys, *Barred*, *Sous les verrous* and *In de Strik.”* For more on the “scandal” of these warring accounts, see Sean Latham, Chapter 6, 153ff. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. There is no “I” statement that characterizes the narrator. The only moments are those described in Chapter 2, above, addressing the implied reader to “understand” why Marya submits to Stephan and their bohemian vagabondage, foreshadowing her submission to the Heidlers’ and their diametrically opposed existence of ordered, controlled, and controlling, bourgeois privilege, built on enforcing their rigid taxonomical views of others. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. My translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Nowhere in the narrative does the term “masochism” appear. Rather, there are other clinical terms, such as “mania,” “hysteria” and “neurasthenia,” that are used to describe the protagonist. But, of course, there are many more non-diagnostic descriptors used in the novel. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. The novel invites but denigrates the classificatory mania in the reader, just as Marya is invited and then denigrated by the Heidlers and their mania for classification. It is for this reason that I think the novel proposes an alternative aesthetic vision. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. In fact, a point that Lois makes to Marya is that “the matter with [her] is that she is too virtuous” (78, 82, 179, 180, 181), and thus the problem lies with Marya’s misperception of herself as “virginal” (a Maria, or Mary), rather than with the Heidlers’ control over her, partly effected by their oppressive classification of Marya not only as “too virtuous,” but as “this sort of woman” (103) and as “hysterical” (103, 149, 161). Marya’s nickname, “Mado,” also invokes the virginal trope. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. Though only if we notice the unconventional spelling to begin with. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. Sean Latham makes a very different argument, which focuses on the scandalous, real-life aspects of *Quartet*, arguing that critics have “generally avoided a direct engagement with *Quartet* as a *roman à clef”* (163). He views formalist analysis—such as mine, perhaps—as evading this larger and more urgent historical context. My argument, however, is that the novel’s stylistic choices evoke a certain readerly desire and carve a certain readerly path, one of “understanding” and not “classification,” which is my main interest in re-reading *Quartet*. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)