



Women Writers: Voices in Transition

Jean Rhys

Steve Padley, Associate Lecturer in English:

“Like most people it was through the novel “Wide Sargasso Sea” that I first came across the work of Jean Rhys. It was the first novel that she’d published for 27 years. She had really fallen out of the public view, so this novel made her almost an overnight sensation at a very late age. But one of the things that “Wide Sargasso Sea” did for me was to make me want to go back to look at the earlier novels which I think speak more to me and more to my particular concerns with particular kinds of outsider-ness. The passion for the underdog is I think a theme that runs throughout Rhys’ work.

The kinds of people that Rhys writes about were not the kind of people that were deemed to be the stuff of literary fiction. They are female protagonists, on the margins of society, who are displaced and dispossessed, characters at emotional and psychological extremes.

They’re often thought of as very autobiographical texts and she does use events from her own life. Born to a Welsh father and a white Creole mother in Dominica, she was sent to school in Cambridge at the age of seventeen. She lived in England for a long time but hated England. She drifted from job to job, and from place to place. She was a chorus girl. She was an artist’s models. In all those kinds of ways she was an outsider and all those kinds of experiences feed into the novels as well.

But the stories are told with a very scrupulous, meticulous style, and I think one of the great things about Rhys is that she maintains an order and a structure and a shape.

What she inherited from other writers I think is the same kind of modernist techniques that one might see in Woolf and one might see in Mansfield. Her style is elliptical, fragmented, discontinuous, very poetic and uses a lot of repetition.

But also of course her most famous novel inherits its raw material from Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. The piece I'm going to read is from *Good Morning Midnight*. The character of Sasha is constantly on the move from rented room to rented room.

It also shows Rhys' use of modernist techniques; her use of repetition and the cycle of the character's experiences always ends up right down at the bottom. "A room. A nice room. A beautiful room with bath. A very beautiful room with bath. A bedroom and sitting room with bath. Up to the dizzy heights of the suite. Two bedrooms, sitting room, bath and vestibule. (The small bedroom is in case you don't feel like me, or in case you meet somebody you like better and come in late.) "A beautiful room with bath. A room with bath. A nice room. A room."

I think she's now still seen as an important writer from a feminist perspective and from a post-colonial perspective. I think that her work can be read in a wider sense as well, in relating to anyone who's alienated from or excluded from mainstream society. Anyone who is in that position can get something from a Jean Rhys novel, and that's what appeals to me about them.

If I had to sum up her achievements in five words it would be with this phrase: a voice for the voiceless."