JEAN RHYS (1890-1979)

LIFE

Dominica to England

Born at Roseau, Dominica, of a Welsh doctor & a Creole (white West Indian) mother – moved to England (WWI) – 1st marriage &.a rootless life on the continent (mainly in Paris & Vienna)..

Disappearance

Four novels: enthusiastic critical comments but little success (ahead of her time) – after her 5th novel she disappeared - her books went out of print – generally thought she was dead..

Success & death

Rediscovered, living reclusively in Cornwall – had written a collection of unpublished stories – sensational success of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (comment: *It has come too late*) – -died in Exeter.

WIDE SARGASSO SEA

Genre & setting

A ***post-colonial novel*** set *in the 1840s* (time), in Jamaica; *the Windward Islands; England* (place)

The title

Vast area of northern Atlantic Ocean home to sargassum (a kind of seaweed), legendary as an oceanic black hole - a **metaphor** *for characters entrapped between two worlds/racial identities.*

Tone of the novel

Nightmarish; violent; foreboding; sensual; exotic; romantic; passionate; ecstatic; mysterious.

KEY POINTS

A precursor

Novels decades ahead of their time in theme & tone: *women exploited for and / or exploiting their sexuality, the case of the underdog,* presented in an *exquisite & deeply disturbing* form.

A new point of view

Rhys saw herself as *a displaced colonial* and **vehemently opposed English culture**: her point of view, *distinctly Caribbean*, provides a brutally honest critique of colonialism & capitalist values..

A peculiar position

Her marginality as a white creole woman writer who shunned the literary circles in both Paris and London, her notably twisted editorial history, her disappearance for twenty-five years and the retrospective rediscovery, in the 1960s, make her canonically unplaceable!

WIDE SARGASSO SEA (1966)

STRUCTURE & THEMES

Content

The story of the first Mrs Rochester, Antoinette Cosway, a white Creole heiress, from the time of her youth in the Caribbean to her unhappy marriage and relocation to England.

Structure

A **prequel** to Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847) in **three parts**: 1. Antoinette's childhood in Jamaica; 2. Mr Rochester's arrival, marriage & sequel; 3. Antoinette's seclusion in the attic.

Themes & points of view

Themes: racial inequality the harshness of displacement, assimilation, slavery & entrapment..

Points of view: 1st part Antoinette's – 2nd part Mr Rochester's – 3rd part mainly Antoinette's.

THE TWO NOVELS

Similarities / Differences

Jane Eyre: clear narrative trajectory, mysteries solved, guiding narrative voice, happy ending.
Wide Sargasso Sea:, tangled plot, recognition (not solution) of mysteries,
Independent, vivacious, imaginative young women, with a troubled childhood – educated in religious establishments – married to Mr Rochester & aware of his tendency to possession..

Antoinette = Jane

Antoinette ≠ Jane

Antoinette more rebellious & less mentally stable (loses the notion of who she really is), with a deep vein of morbidity which leads to a death wish (believes in *obeah*).

FEATURES

Obeah /ˈəʊbɪə/

A folk religion of African origin that uses the tradition of sorcery – meaning: *occult power*. it is *"spirit theft"* which can reduce human beings to the state of puppets, dolls or zombis,.

A new heroine

From *Bertha Mason*, the scary *"madwoman in the attic"* , to the **lively yet vulnerable Antoinette Cosway**, a **real woman** with her hopes, rears, desires, **telling us her side of the story** .

Significance

Rhys's novel gives a voice not only to her protagonist but to all the people in the West Indies.