JEAN RHYS

(Dominica, 24th August 1890 – Exeter, 14th May 1979)

Mid-20th century novelist from Dominica, she is best known for her novel ***Wide Sargasso Sea*** (1966), written as a "prequel" to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, which drew equally on her own Caribbean childhood and on a reimagining of Brontë's masterpiece from the perspective of Rochester's mad West Indian wife.

SECTION SUMMARY

1. J. Rhys's LIFE & WORKS.

JEAN RHYS

- **1890**: born Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams at **Roseau**, **Dominica**, she was the daughter of a Welsh doctor and a Creole (white West Indian) mother.
- **1916**: she moved to England where she spent World War I.
- **1920s**: she married a Dutch poet and lived a rootless, wandering life on the Continent (mainly in Paris and Vienna) working as a chorus girl, a mannequin an artist's model.
- **1927:** the first of her three marriages broke up – she published *The Left Bank*, a collection of stories.

JEAN RHYS

- Despite the enthusiastic comments of the **literary critic Ford Madox Ford** (who also discovered D. H. Lawrence) none of her first **four novels** was particularly successful: they were **decades ahead of their time** in ***theme*** and ***tone***.
  - They deal with women exploited for and exploiting their sexuality in a brutally honest manner.
  - They show a *"passion for stating the case of the underdog* (=perdente)*"* and a *"singular instinct for form"* which together create an *"original art, at the same time exquisite and deeply disturbing"*.

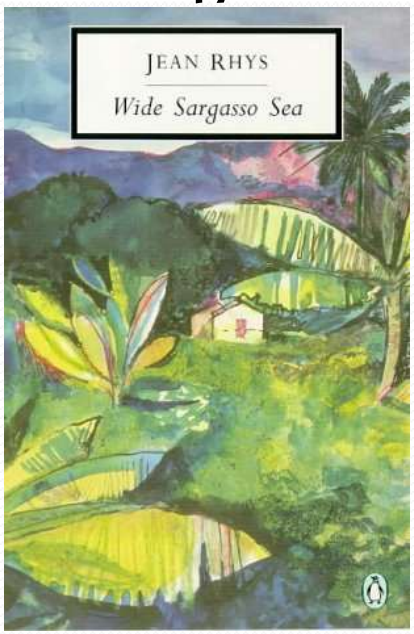
JEAN RHYS

- **1939**: after *Good Morning, Midnight* (her fifth novel) Jean Rhys disappeared and her five books went out of print – it was generally thought that she was dead.
- **1958**: she was rediscovered, living reclusively in Cornwall – in the twenty years which had gone by she had accumulated a collection of unpublished stories.
- **1966:** her *Wide Sargasso Sea* was a sensational success. Her only comment on it was *"It has come too late"*...
- **1979:** she died in Exeter – the literary critic A. Alvarez described her as *"one of the finest British writers of this century"*.

2. WIDE SARGASSO SEA.

WIDE SARGASSO SEA (1966)

- Acting as a **prequel to** Charlotte Brontë's famous 1847 novel ***Jane Eyre***, it is the story of the first Mrs Rochester, Antoinette Cosway (known as Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*), a white Creole heiress, from the time of her youth in the Caribbean to her unhappy marriage and relocation to England.



- Caught in an oppressive patriarchal society in which she belongs neither to the white Europeans nor the black Jamaicans, Rhys's novel re-imagines Brontë's devilish madwoman in the attic: she deals largely with the **themes** of **racial inequality** and the harshness of **displacement** and **assimilation**.

THE TITLE

- The title of the novel refers to *the Sargasso Sea*, a **vast area of the northern Atlantic Ocean** home to sargassum, a kind of seaweed.
- The Sargasso Sea is legendary for being an oceanic black hole, where ships get ensnared by huge forests of floating seaweed, or drift helplessly when the wind ceases to blow.
- The title thus becomes **a metaphor** of **the characters' situation, trapped in their own Sargasso Seas**. They may be suspended in the murky passage between two worlds, between England and Jamaica, for example, or between racial identities, as Antoinette struggles with her white Creole heritage.

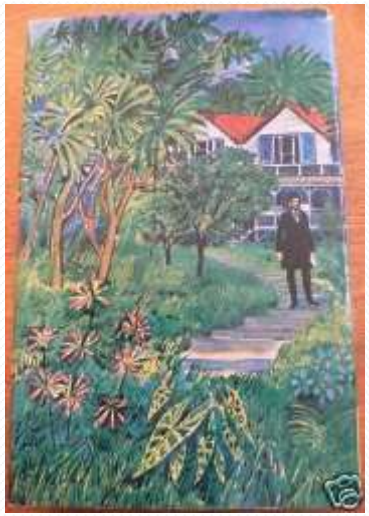
THREE PARTS

- The opening of the novel is set a short while after the 1834 emancipation of the slaves in British-owned Jamaica – the text is divided into **three parts**:
  - the **first** is told in the heroine's own words and deals with her childhood experience in Jamaica, including her mother's mental instability and her learning disabled brother's tragic death;
  - in the **second** young Mr Rochester describes his arrival in the West Indies, his marriage and its disastrous sequel;
  - the **last** part is once more narrated mainly by the heroine but the scene is now England and she writes from the attic room in Thornfield Hall…

THE TWO NOVELS

- Both novels are *Gothic texts* (mystery and madness haunting the lives of the characters) but

- in ***Jane Eyre*** the series of **mysteries** are **solved** in turn, following a narrative trajectory which is clearly defined. The authoritative security of the narrative voice guides the reader along and rewards him with a final happy ending;



- in ***Wide Sargasso Sea*** the **emphasis** is not on the solution but **on** the **recognition of mysteries**: *nothing is what it seems* because *there is always another side to everything*. The plot is like the Sargasso Sea, full of tangled weeds, teasing the reader's imagination and leaving him ultimately free to decide whether its ending should step into *Jane Eyre* or not…

3. FEMALE FIGURES in *Jane Eyre & Wide Sargasso Sea*

From BERTHA to ANTOINETTE

- Rochester's first wife is transformed from Bertha Mason, the infamous *"madwoman in the attic"* , to the **lively yet vulnerable Antoinette Cosway.**

- She is no longer a cliché or a "foreign" lunatic, but **a real woman** with her own hopes, fears, and desires, **telling us *her* side of the story**.

- Rhys's novel gives **a voice** not only to her, but **to all the people in the West Indies** whom Rochester regards with such loathing: thus Antoinette's insanity, infidelity, and drunkenness are the result of Rochester's misguided belief that madness is in her blood and that she was part of the scheme to have him married blindly.

JANE & ANTOINETTE: SIMILARITIES…

- The characters of Jane and Antoinette are very similar in some ways:
  - both are **independent**, **vivacious**, **imaginative** young women **with troubled childhoods**;
  - both have been **educated in religious establishments** and looked down on by the upper classes;
  - **both marry Mr Rochester** and realise his inner tendency to possess not only objects but also people…

… & DIFFERENCES.

- … but **Antoinette** is **more rebellious** and **less mentally stable**: she gradually loses the notion of who she really is, alienated and menaced in her own land, despised everywhere else

"a white cockroach. That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all…" (Part 2)

- She displays a deep vein of morbidity verging on a death wish and, in contrast with Jane's overt Christian faith, she holds a cynical viewpoint of God but **firmly believes** in "***obeah***".

"OBEAH"

- **Obeah** is a folk religion of African origin that uses the tradition of sorcery: the word means "occult power" i.e. a powerful way of using spells for witchcraft as well as other forms for practical magic.

- It is "***spirit theft***" which can reduce human beings to the state of puppets, dolls or zombis – a devilish capacity not limited to black witches and sourceres but practised by white patriarchal Victorian men like Mr Rochester:

> *"Bertha is not my name"* [Antoinette cries] *"You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeah too." (Part 2)*

ROCHESTER: VICTIM ….

- Bertha is, in fact, the name imposed to Antoinette by the *"English Gentleman"* (Rochester is never actually named in this novel): he is the youngest son of a wealthy Englishman.
- Immediately upon his arrival to Spanish Town, he comes down with a fever and is pressured into marrying Antoinette
  - by Richard, her stepbrother, though he knows nothing of her or her family;
  - by his own father who uses him as a pawn to obtain money as the second born penniless son. He will later write to him

    "… Dear Father, the thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. No provision made for her… I have sold my soul or you have sold it…" (Part 2)

…OR PERPETRATOR?

- Before he knows it he is a married man…

  "So it was all over, the advance and retreat, the doubts and hesitations. Everything finished, for better or for worse… I was married a month after I arrived in Jamaica and for nearly three weeks of that time I was in bed with fever…" (Part 2)

- He soon regrets agreeing to marry Antoinette and becomes cold and detached, referring to her as Bertha instead of her real name.
- He has an affair with one of the servants and eventually takes her to England and locks her in the attic where she goes mad.

4. CONCLUSIONS & LEGACY.

LEGACY

- Jean Rhys offers a singular case of a modernist writer who explodes the myth of race from within its white supremacist definition and by so doing remains ahead of our time.
- Recognition may have come late for her to enjoy but her legacy lives on and continues to inspire not only 21st-century readers and writers but many others:
  - *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been adapted for radio by the BBC, inspired a West End play as well as an eponymous song, and has been made into a movie;
  - her life as a troubled young woman trying to make her way in England during the early years of the 20th c. is at the centre of Caryl Phillips's novel *A View of the Empire at Sunset*.