


4. 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.



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- **1890:** born at **Roseau** (Dominica) the daughter of a Welsh doctor and a Creole (white West Indian) mother, she spent World War I in England.

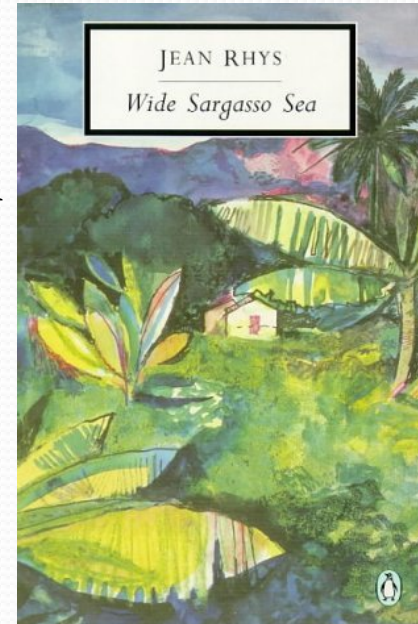
- **1920s:** she lived a rootless, wandering life on the Continent (mainly in Paris and Vienna) working as a chorus girl, a mannequin, an artist's model before publishing her first collection of stories *The Left Bank* (1927).

Enthusiastic comments came from the literary critic **Ford Madox Ford** but her first **four novels** were not successful: with their female characters exploited for and exploiting their sexuality in a brutally honest manner and their “*passion for stating the case of the underdog (=perdente)*” they were **decades ahead of their time** in *theme* and *tone*.



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- **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living reclusively in Cornwall – in the twenty years which had gone by she had accumulated a collection of unpublished stories.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 critic A. Alvarez described her as “*one of the finest British writers of this century*”.



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**.



Wide Sargasso Sea



- 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...



Comparison to *Jane Eyre*

- *Wide Sargasso Sea* transforms Rochester's first wife from Bertha Mason, the infamous “*madwoman in the attic*”, to the **lively yet vulnerable Antoinette Cosway**. 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**.
- Both novels are *Gothic texts* (mystery and madness haunting the lives of the characters) but
 - in *Jane Eyre* the series of **mysteries** are **resolved** following a narrative trajectory which is clearly defined;
 - 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...*



Jane Eyre – Antoinette

- The characters of Jane Eyre and Antoinette are very similar in some ways ...

independent, vivacious, imaginative, passionate young women **with troubled childhoods**, they have both been **educated in religious establishments** and looked down on by the upper classes; they **both marry Mr Rochester** and realise his inner tendency to possess not only objects but also people...;

but extremely distant in others

Antoinette is more rebellious and less mentally stable than Jane; she gradually loses the notion of who she really is; **alienated and menaced** in her own land, despised everywhere else, 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”**. 7

“Obeah”: Antoinette vs. Bertha.



- **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:

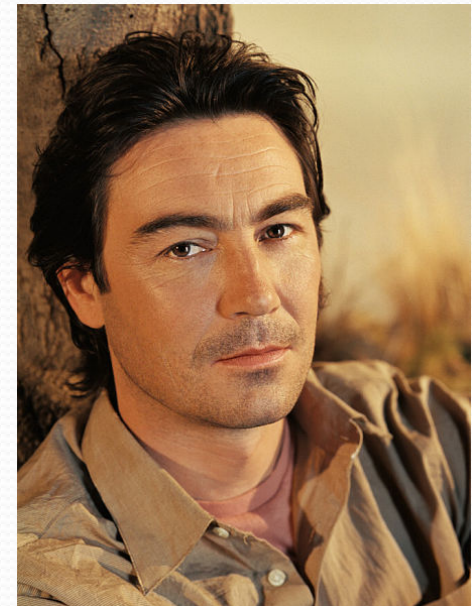
“Bertha is not my name” [Antoinette cries] “You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that’s obeah too.” (Part 2)

Mr Rochester: perpetrator or victim?

“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)

- This is how the Rochester of *Jane Eyre*, who is never actually named in this novel, introduces his marriage to Antoinette, and later he writes:

“... 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)



Who is the real perpetrator and who the victim?