

INTRODUCTION

Jean Rhys was born Ella Gwen Williams on 24 August, 1891 in the island of Dominica, West Indies. She was the fourth of five children born to Minna Williams (née Lockhart), and William Rees Williams.

William Rees Williams was a Welsh doctor who went to Dominica in the late 19th century, as a young man. He had been to sea for some years as a ship's doctor, and finally decided to settle in Dominica. He died in 1908 while Jean Rhys was a student at the Academy of Dramatic Art in London.

Minna Lockhart was born in Dominica in the mid-1800's, the offspring of a white creole family that had once owned land and slaves, but whose wealth had declined over the years. Jean Rhys's great-grandfather, James Gibson Lockhart, went to Dominica at the end of the 1700's from Scotland.

The Lockharts still owned a large estate called 'Geneva,' near Grand Bay in the south of Dominica, when Rhys was a child. The great house on this estate was burnt down more than once after the Lockharts established themselves there, and one of these burnings was recaptured by Jean Rhys in Wide Sargasso Sea. She also wrote about the garden at Geneva estate in this novel.

When Jean Rhys was a girl, her family lived some of the time at Geneva estate, and sometimes in Roseau, the capital of Dominica, about ten rugged miles away and two hours on horseback. Dr. Williams, her father, owned a house at the corner of Cork and Queen Mary Streets in Roseau where he had his office, and where the family lived when they were in town.

Dr. Williams also owned two small estates called 'Bona Vista,' and 'Curry's Rest,' on the south-west coast of Dominica. The family sometimes went there during the holidays.

In 1907, when she was sixteen, Rhys left Dominica in the company of an English aunt (her father's sister), and went to England to attend the Perse School in Cambridge. She was very homesick and uncomfortable at first, troubled in particular by the cold, dreary English weather.

Rhys took part in amateur theatricals at school, and after one year decided she wanted to be an actress. She wrote her father to that effect and she entered the Academy of Dramatic Art (later the Royal Academy). She was happier there but shortly after she started the course, her father died in Dominica and she had to leave. This was the end of her academic career.

There was some discussion as to whether she should go back to Dominica at this stage, but she did not want to, and signed up with a touring musical called, 'Our Miss Gibbs.' She appeared in the chorus line of several other musicals, including 'Chanticleer.' She travelled about England, appearing in music halls, was an artists' model, a mannequin (a photograph of her face appeared in one advertisement for Pear's Soap), and sometimes lived a life that some people might think dissolute.

She lived in cheap boarding-houses (often unhappily) and, with her first love affair in 1909, apparently abandoned the strict sexual morality she had been taught as a child.

During World War I, Rhys worked in a canteen for servicemen. While staying at a boarding-house with a number of European refugees, she met her first husband, Jean Lenglet; at a tea party. She described this meeting with 'a young man sitting in a corner who was staring fixedly at me,' in Smile Please, her autobiography.¹

She went to Paris with Lenglet and preferred it to London. They lived a Bohemian life in Montparnasse, and she worked on and off as a governess. Lenglet tried journalism and then got a job as a diplomat in Vienna and they went to live there for several months. When they returned to Paris, Lenglet was arrested for a currency offence and sent to prison.

While Lenglet was in prison, Ford Madox Ford took Rhys under his wing. She had met him through the wife of the 'Times' correspondent in Paris, Mrs. George Adam, to whom she showed some of her work after unsuccessfully trying to get some of Lenglet's journalism published. Ford instructed Rhys in the art of writing and published one of her early stories in his Transatlantic Review. They also had an affair. She published her first collection of short stories, The Left Bank, in 1927, with a long preface by Ford.

When Lenglet came out of prison, he and Rhys were together again for a while. But she told him about the affair with Ford, and he would not forgive her. They went to Amsterdam with their daughter Maryvonne, and then they separated, and were later divorced. Rhys left Maryvonne with Lenglet and went to England. There she wrote and published her first novel, Quartet, in 1928, and there also she met and married her second husband, Leslie Tilden-Smith.

Between 1930 and 1939 Rhys wrote three more novels, After Leaving Mr. McKenzie, Voyage in the Dark, and Good Morning Midnight.

None of these novels was very successful, perhaps, as is suggested on the fly-sheet at the front of the Penguin edition of Smile Please, because they were "decades ahead of their time in theme and tone."

In 1936, Rhys and her husband visited Dominica. They stayed there for a month and this was important for Rhys as a means of reliving memories of her childhood.

During World War II, Jean Rhys "disappeared," and lived reclusively for several years. In 1945, Leslie Tilden-Smith died, and in 1947 Rhys married his cousin, Max Hamer, whom she also outlived. Rhys and Hamer lived in Cornwall and then in Devon.

In 1966, some time after Rhys had been "re-discovered" (by Diana Athill of André Deutsch, among other people) and was encouraged to begin writing again in earnest, she published Wide Sargasso Sea. This novel was very well received. In 1966 also, she was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Rhys published two more collections of short stories; Tigers are Better-Looking in 1968 and Sleep it off Lady in 1976.

While Jean Rhys lived and worked most of her life in Europe, returning to Dominica only once, she will be treated as a West Indian writer in this thesis. This is not only because she was born and lived her formative years in the West Indies, but also because an important segment of her work is set in the West Indies, contains West Indian characters and reveals a keen West Indian sensibility, even, it can be argued, in those stories and novels set entirely in Europe.

In this thesis, attention will be focused on Rhys's short stories, and in the discussion and assessment of her West Indian stories it is hoped that her place as a West Indian writer will be indicated with supportive detail.

An assessment of Rhys's West Indian short stories will allow us to understand better the claim that she is a West Indian writer. Thematically, at least, it is possible to link this body of work to the West Indian literary genre in general. Her treatment of race, exile, and the historical background to West Indian society, are all important.

If the manner in which she approaches some of these themes is rare in West Indian writing, it is because she came from a social and racial group which has produced few writers. Very little has been written either by or about

this group.

It is important for a writer to write about what he knows. Rhys has done this, and provided an insight into this particular social group in the West Indies, and, to a certain extent, into the way they interact with other groups. Both mulatto and black characters appear in Rhys's work, as do white creoles and white expatriates.

What Rhys has written about is part of the West Indian experience, and because some experiences (and therefore literary themes) are common to all West Indians - exile is a good example - she has sometimes managed to avoid being tribal.

Most critical attention has been paid to Rhys's novels, but it is important to consider and assess her short stories, and her West Indian short stories in particular, in order to get a full sense of the range of her work.

It is worth noting at this stage that the West Indian short story as such, has not had much attention, and it is hoped that this study of Rhys's West Indian short stories will help to fill this critical gap.

However, it is impossible to isolate Rhys's West Indian short stories from the rest of her work and in particular, from those short stories that cannot be described as West Indian. So, although the focus of this thesis is on the West Indian short stories, brief comparisons will be made, and continuities in all her work will be indicated.

In this thesis, I will first define Rhys's West Indian short stories, then place them in their contexts, and finally, make a critical assessment of them.