

Wellesley College

Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive

Honors Thesis Collection

2019

Smile: The Feminist Vision of Jean Rhys

Margaret Roberts

mrober12@wellesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.wellesley.edu/thesiscollection>

Recommended Citation

Roberts, Margaret, "Smile: The Feminist Vision of Jean Rhys" (2019). *Honors Thesis Collection*. 699.
<https://repository.wellesley.edu/thesiscollection/699>

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Thesis Collection by an authorized administrator of Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. For more information, please contact ir@wellesley.edu.

Smile:

The Feminist Vision of Jean Rhys

Margaret Coe Roberts

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Prerequisite for Honors in English
under the advisement of Lisa Rodensky

November 2019

© 2019 Margaret Coe Roberts

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....3

“Serve her right”: An Introduction.....4

The Other Woman: Same-Sex Desire in *Quartet*.....18

“There is no justice”: Rhys’s Women as Advocates.....53

Chocolate and Whine: A Conclusion.....96

Bibliography.....99

Acknowledgments

To Lisa Rodensky. I don't know if you had any idea what you were signing up for when you agreed to be my thesis advisor – certainly not the grating combination of panicky neuroticism and incorrigible narcissism that you withstood from me for a year. I would not have been able to write this thesis without your unyielding patience, guidance, and encouragement. You are the very best at what you do, and I'm so grateful to you.

To Alison Hickey, my major advisor. You met me when I was eighteen, fresh from the Carolinian swamp, determined to attend grad school for English literature. You have spent the past three years or so guiding me towards my true interests, listening to my passing whims with indulgence. I know nothing I write will ever be as good as my “Nabokov's Obese Nanny and the Swan” essay, but thank you for agreeing to be on my thesis committee anyway.

To my thesis committee's smarmy fourth alternate, Leigh Gilmore, whose memoir seminar taught me how to read trauma and made me wish I had double majored in women's studies.

To the rest of my thesis committee: Tavi Gonzalez, a Rhys scholar himself whose suggestions helped me hone and polish my first chapter; and Jay Turner, who saved my project at the eleventh hour by agreeing to be the “honors visitor” on my committee. Thank you both.

To Barbara Hardy, who taught me to be a feminist literary critic before I knew what that was.

To Mrs. Amy Powell, whose AP Literature class made NC public school that much better.

To my dear friend Julia. Thank you for listening to me kvetch over ice cream all these years. Can you believe it's already senior year? Can you? Can you?

To my sweet, dumb Lauren. I love you almost as much as I love your apartment. Thank you for keeping me focused.

To Dad, who read *The Lorax* to me every night until I could read it myself.

To Mom, who thought *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* were appropriate literature for a seven-year-old. Your lack of judgment inspired a lifelong interest.

In memory of Grandma, who defied the patriarchy with cigarettes and lipstick.

In memory of my cousin Sam, who would have written a much better thesis than this, had he had the chance.

“Serve her right”: An Introduction

I first encountered Jean Rhys’s name as a high school junior, scanning the *New York Times*’s “20th Century’s 100 Best Books in English” list for female authors. I had wanted to read all the books on the list; more importantly, I had wanted to read all the books written by women on the list. I found that there were not many.

I ordered a copy of *Wide Sargasso Sea*—which was, of course, the only book of Rhys’s mentioned on that list—from Amazon, but, by the time it arrived, I had already busied myself with a new project: I was writing about rape culture on college campuses for my AP Language and Composition class. This was before the advent of the #metoo movement, and I cheerfully enraged the many die-hard Tar Heels fans in my class by discussing the University of North Carolina’s “rape issue,” as I called it. This project was important to me for many reasons—it led me to apply to women’s colleges, which was how I found myself at Wellesley a couple years later, and it also constituted the first instance of my natural advocacy bleeding into my literary studies. I became a conscious feminist that spring; I also became frustratingly aware of how little anyone—including women—seemed to care about the violence women face. I learned from my classmates and teachers that rape was the logical outcome for girls who wore short skirts to frat parties and drank too much; I learned nonconsensual groping, in certain contexts, was not “really” sexual assault. Later, I would hear the same lines from then-presidential candidate Donald Trump and his supporters, and then from Brett Kavanaugh and his supporters.

As *Wide Sargasso Sea* sat, abandoned, on my childhood bookshelf (or, more accurately, marooned under my twin bed, covered in dust and dog hair), I first experienced the helplessness of female rage. I say “helplessness” because, even though I excelled academically, I could do nothing about the men who catcalled me as I walked from the beach to my car (a phenomenon

that had begun when I was ten), or my boss at the Italian restaurant where I had hostessed for a summer who told me that he had only hired me because I had a pretty smile, so I “had better show it more.” I could do nothing about the boys from very wealthy families who had gang raped my brilliant friend her first semester of college and gotten away with it, leading her to drop out. Years later, I experienced a similar surge of rage as I learned that Brett Kavanaugh was to be appointed to the Supreme Court—an event that I credited for the reappearance of my smoking habit. Sure, I was studying at the University of Oxford, the so-called “best university in the world,” and excelling—but did it matter when I could not walk down the street without getting catcalled (even, on one occasion, by a police officer in Boston), or go to a nightclub without having my breasts grabbed? I was doing everything I could to one day be able to change the world around me to suit my vision, yet, in the context of a country that chose a semi-literate rapist to be President over an educated, brilliant woman, my own endeavors seemed stupid, pointless, and delusional.

I include these experiences and musings because they have largely informed my relationship to both Rhys’s work and criticism of that work. The combination of exhaustion and anger, detachment and perseverance, that her protagonists enact does not stem from masochism, as many of her critics suggest, but from lifelong trauma—trauma Rhys portrays vividly, and, I believe, consciously, in her novels. Yet, many scholars who write about her work fail to register the trauma in her writing as such, or to relate it to the seeming apathy of her protagonists. The first piece of criticism I read about her work—the first chapter of Coral Anne Howells’ 1991 book on Rhys entitled “L’Etrangère”—also happens to constitute the most blatant example of this oversight: in her discussion of Rhys’s recollections of being molested as a twelve-year-old, Howells writes that Rhys, “tells the story of her own en-gendering as a female subject and of the

intensity of her imaginative engagement with a sexual narrative of love, cruelty, and female submission, told to her by a ‘handsome old Englishman of about 72 or 73’ called Mr Howard. For Rhys, this is not a narrative derived from books; it is a narrative given her by a man, in which she participates” (14). To support this analysis, Howells cites an excerpt from Rhys’s *Black Exercise Book*:

Would you like to belong to me?
 I don’t know I gasped breathlessly heart beating looking into the eyes.
 It was then that it began.
 I’d seldom allow you to wear clothes at all—what would happen afterwards
 The serial story to which I listened for was it weeks or months?
 one day he would abduct me and I’d belong to him and we went home in
 Dream....
 Always in the end punished—that is love—And only that. To give
 yourself up entirely hopelessly not for the fear of hell not for hope of heaven
 After 2 or 3 doses of this drug because that’s what it was I no longer struggled...
 But the terrible thing was the way something in the depths of me said, Yes, that is
 true: pain humiliation submission that is for me. It filled me with all I knew of life
 with all I’d ever felt. It fitted like a hook fits an eye. (15)

In this passage, Rhys writes quite honestly about a common phenomenon among children who have been molested: they find themselves “enjoying,” at least physically, what happens to them; their bodies and brains respond to sexual stimuli, regardless of in what context the experience occurs. With Mr Howard, Rhys discovers her “bedroom orientation” in the process of being molested: like many people, she finds gratification in sexual submission fantasies. Today, psychologists understand sexual kinks to have little to do with a person’s hierarchical relationship to the “real” world: a man who pays a professional dominatrix to degrade him may also confidently run a top law firm, for instance. However, the manner in which Rhys discovered her sexual fantasy—with a pedophile who groomed her, gaining her trust and then isolating her, offering her candy after groping her breasts (15)—traumatizes her, and confuses her, for life.

Howells never acknowledges the traumatic aspect of Rhys's first sexual experience—instead, she portrays it as a sort of dark seduction fantasy that informs much of Rhys's writing, “A hidden text written in the margins (in pencil and in a notebook) and omitted from her autobiography, it pervades Rhys's own narrative of the creative life and her heroines' enslavement to romantic fantasies” (16).

When I first read, and reacted to, Howells' assessment of Rhys's experience, I of course asked myself whether my response to her analysis had been warped by my own politically correct, liberal arts-educated, Wellesley girl, Gen Z lens. I concluded that, though my perception of Rhys's trauma certainly is informed by my status as a well-educated young woman who grew up during the 21st century, my cultural distance only makes me more qualified to discuss her experience, rather than less. An older man gaining the trust of, and then isolating, a twelve-year-old so that he can touch her body and engage her in graphic sexual discourse, all the while bribing her to keep her quiet, constitutes a deeply confusing, and traumatic, experience, no matter the era. Twelve-year-old girls have not changed that much in the past century; pedophiles have not changed very much either, it seems. That Rhys berated herself for engaging in the experience years later, writing, “I lapped it up and asked for more” (Howells, 17), speaks to her trauma: she blames herself for being curious about sex as a young adolescent; she blames herself for not adequately resisting a calculated predator as a child. And, perhaps even more importantly, she had no one to explain the psychology of child molestation to her, because that discourse did not exist at the time. In so many ways, she was ahead of her time, and I believe that her attempt to grapple with her experience—to acknowledge its effects on her, and to try to parse them—constitutes an example of this cultural foresight.

Rhys's investigation of the long-lasting effects of her "seduction" by Mr Howard led her to Freud, of whom she writes, "I wanted a book on Psycho-analysis. I found one and this is the sense of what I read: 'Women of this type will invariably say that they were seduced when young by an elderly man. They will relate a detailed story which in every way is entirely fictitious'" (Howells 17). Rhys's response to Freud's claim epitomizes the reactions she has to a variety of widely-held, little-questioned societal opinions and norms regarding gender: "No honey I thought it is *not* fictitious in every case By no means and anyhow how do you know?" (Howells 17). In her pursuit of understanding herself—of understanding her trauma, which she herself does not label as trauma—she faces further invalidation. That she recognizes this invalidation as such—and shows no hesitation in flatly dismissing the opinion of a renowned psychologist—shows the extent to which she resists male authority. Rhys may have undergone a horrible, traumatic childhood experience for which she only knew to blame herself—and she may have harbored a run-of-the-mill submissive sexual fantasy which, in her mind, remained forever linked to this awful experience—but she did not submit to patriarchal authority on an intellectual level. She believed in her own authority, and her writing—and her heroines—speak to this self-knowledge.

No work of Rhys's depicts this self-knowledge more clearly than *Smile Please*, her unfinished memoir, and her final work of writing. Its very title evokes gendered harassment—nearly every woman unfortunate enough to have held a job in a male-dominated workplace, whether it be a one-star Italian restaurant or the upper echelons of a Fortune 500 company, has heard some version of the instruction "smile please" from a male boss or coworker at some point or another. Again, when I reacted to the memoir's title, I wondered if I did so through an anachronistic lens: Rhys did not come of age during an era when women complained of

workplace, or any, chauvinism. Her memory of being told to “smile please,” however, shows that she views it as not just an annoying comment, but a gendered one that registers here as the pressure of the male gaze: she recalls a male photographer commanding her to do so when she is a fidgety child posing for a picture with her mother (3). He tells her to smile so that she will look pretty in the picture; he does not care or even consider what she feels. The fact that Rhys opens her memoir with a scene in which an adult man instructs her, as a young girl, to appear happy when she is not, shows the extent to which she noticed, and resented, the more subtle ways the patriarchy exerted itself on her throughout her life.

Though Rhys does not explicitly express having felt irritated or unsettled by her childhood memory of being photographed, she does explicitly critique the male tendency to tell women to express emotions they do not feel in her short story “Til September Petronella,” when the narrator, Petronella, reflects on the way men speak to her:

That’s the way they always talk. ‘You look as if you’d lost a shilling and found sixpence,’ they said; ‘You look very perky, I hardly recognized you,’ they say; ‘*Look gay*,’ they say. ‘My dear Petronella, I have an entirely new idea of you I’m going to paint you out in the opulent square. So can you wear something gay tomorrow afternoon? Not one of those drab affairs you usually clothe yourself in. Gay—do you know the meaning of the word? Think about it, it’s very important. (131)

Such scenes enact Rhys’s rebellion against patriarchal norms: the act of complaining, of refusing to pretend to be happy in a world that objectifies women, flouts patriarchal expectations of how attractive young women should behave. Rhys dedicated her writing career to the voice of the unhappy woman, and this uncensored expression of unhappiness constitutes an act of advocacy in and of itself. In her work, she asserts that women have ample cause to be unhappy, and that unhappy women need not hide or be ashamed of their their unhappiness.

Last week, I read a *New York Times* article, entitled “Cult of the Literary Sad Woman,” that frames Sasha’s “rarefied, elegiac sadness” in *Good Morning, Midnight* as part of the “aesthetic of suffering” that draws us to the “young, beautiful, white afflicted woman: our favorite tragic victim.” However, I think it important to note that the behavior associated with Sasha’s sadness—sobbing at a bar while a stranger says to her, ““Sometimes I’m just as unhappy as you are. But that’s not to say that I let everybody see it””—elicits disgust from other characters in the novel. An openly sad woman on the page reads as a tragic heroine; an openly sad woman in reality elicits disgust by virtue of having failed at her role of sex object. The way Rhys depicts the treatment of her heroines shows her understanding of this phenomenon. Real women’s suffering is not tolerated, because it is not beautiful.

Rhys’s writing, both fictional and nonfictional, constitutes a form of testimony—a testimony Rhys knew would meet skepticism from its readers. Her response to Freud displays her awareness that women often face doubt when they tell of the injustices they face; so does a conversation with her mother she recounts in *Smile Please*:

One day, thinking to please her (this must have been long afterwards) I said, ‘I’m so glad that you make our jam and we don’t get it from England.’

‘Why?’ she said, unsmiling.

‘Because I’ve just read an article about a jam factory in London. It was written by a girl who dressed up as a working girl and got a job there. She said that carrots, scrapings off the floor, all sorts of filthy things were put into the jam.’

‘And you believed that?’ my mother said.

‘Yes, I do believe it, she saw it.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t believe a word a girl like that said. Dressing up to spy and then make money out of what you pretend you’ve seen. Disgusting behaviour!’

I said, ‘Well, it wasn’t so easy. She wrote that when she was dressed as a working girl men were very rude to her.’

‘Serve her right,’ said my mother. (27)

Rhys does not analyze this memory; like the “smile please” memory, she lets it stand for itself. The simplicity of her childhood belief in the words of other women—expressed in the earnest phrase, ““Yes, I do believe it, she saw it””—is something I believe she never lost. Her mother’s dismissal of the jam factory spy’s claims on the basis of her character—specifically: her boldness, her disruptiveness, and her apparel—felt eerily relevant as I read the memoir alongside reports on the Kavanaugh hearing. A woman willing to interfere with a man’s livelihood, whether he be a Supreme Court justice candidate or a jam factory owner, immediately faces not only doubt, but vile attacks on her personhood—and these attacks, as Rhys shows, oftentimes come from other women. Rhys’s mother knew next to nothing about the spy, but, on the basis of the spy’s lack of complacency, she felt justified in calling her a profiteering, lying little slut who deserved the inevitable abuse she received from men. Rhys’s inclusion of this memory in her memoir shows its definitive role in showing Rhys how the world understands and reacts to women who speak out. Yet, through her writing, she spoke out anyway.

Rhys resisted defeat through her writing. In this thesis I argue that her protagonists, despite their melancholy, resist defeat as well. In her first novel, *Quartet*, this resistance occurs in the form of a homoerotic bond that the protagonist, Marya, forms with Lois, the wife of Marya’s lover. The homoeroticism presents between Marya and Lois sometimes finds its way into critical works on *Quartet*, though only in passing—for instance, Jennifer Mitchell writes that Lois acts as a “courting unit” in the Heidlers’ relationship with Marya (Mitchell 196). However, Mitchell argues that the “implicit queerness” of Lois and Marya’s relationship serves Lois’s end goal of gifting Marya to her husband. I have found that academic writing on the novel uniformly places H.J., Marya’s lover, at the center of the story. Rhys clearly portrays Lois as a much more complex, and intriguing, character than her husband, and the nature of her relationship with

Marya has depth: for instance, when Heidler casts Marya off and sends her to Nice, Lois immediately sends a friend to check on Marya's well-being. The compassion that persists between the two women—who, as sexual partners of the same man, should be enemies—presents a subversion of cultural expectations in a patriarchal society. The end of *Quartet* may leave Marya crumpled on the floor of her rented room, having been beaten by her husband, but this ending does not so much depict the defeat of Marya as it does the ugliness Rhys perceives in men. Rarely does she hold back in her depictions of this ugliness, and rarely do her protagonists give in to it. They resist male authority—at least internally, if not externally—and this resistance is what gives them their depth.

One of my favorite of Rhys's short stories, "From a French Prison," exemplifies this female resistance. The story features the interactions between visitors waiting to see their loved ones in a prison waiting room and the warders overseeing them. In this story, Rhys casts two made-up, prettily-dressed young girls as the heroines—and a cackling old woman as an encouraging witness to their rebellion:

There were very few men waiting, and nearly all the women were of the sort that trouble has whipped into a becoming meekness, but two girls near the staircase were painted and dressed smartly in bright colours. They laughed and talked, their eyes dark and defiant. One of them muttered: '*Sale flic, va*'—as who should say: 'Let him be, you dirty cop!' when the warder had pushed the old man.

The queue looked frightened but pleased: an old woman like a rat huddled against the wall and chuckled. The warder balanced himself backwards and forwards from heel to toe, important and full of authority, like some petty god. There he was, the representative of honesty, of the law, of the stern forces of Good that punishes Evil. His forehead was low and barred by a perpetual frown, his jaw was heavy and protruding. A tall man, well set up. He looked with interest at the girl who had spoken, twirled his moustache and stuck his chest out. The queue waited patiently. (11)

Later, when the warder calls the girl who called him a dirty cop to come visit her husband, he stares "hard at her as she passed, but she was busy, looking into her mirror, powdering her face,

preparing for her interview” (11). This exchange highlights several themes that are central to Rhys’s work and to this thesis: the cruelty, unfairness, and maleness, of the “justice” system; the patheticness, fragility, and brutality of the men who hold the artificial positions of authority that society affords them; and the power of the downtrodden female outcast. While wearing makeup and dressing well are culturally associated with the female effort to conform to the expectations of the male gaze, for Rhys’s protagonists, they serve the opposite purpose: they provide an expression of self, for the sake of the self. As the defiant woman walks past the glaring warder, her preoccupation with her own made-up face in the mirror makes her immune to the violence of his gaze. For Rhys’s women, applying makeup involves a self-absorption that renders other people, including those who wish them ill, unimportant. In this scene, female self-expression renders male anger impotent.

Rhys’s own preoccupation with makeup possessed an explicit rebellious aspect as well, which she describes in *Smile Please*:

There were the piles of *Chatterbox* magazines bought for my brothers, and a jigsaw puzzle of the Capitol at Washington. Also several books warning us of the dangers of make-up. Strangely enough these were all American. I say strangely as one doesn’t think of Americans as being very puritanical now. They described vividly your horrible and lingering death from lead-poisoning if you used face powder And other sorts of deaths, equally horrible, if you rouged or painted your lips. Years afterwards, as I slap make-up on regardless, I think I am still defying those books. (21)

The attempt of the authors of these “puritanical” books to use fear to dissuade women from using makeup echoes, and foreshadows, the many other paternalistic tactics employed to control women’s bodies in our culture. Abortion comes to mind—in *Smile Please*, Rhys recalls her own abortion: “I didn’t suffer from remorse or guilt. I didn’t think at all like women are supposed to think, my predominant feeling was one of intense relief, but I was very tired. I was not at all

unhappy. It was like a pause in my life, peaceful time” (103). Makeup offers a way for Rhys to defiantly assert control over her own body; her willingness to report her lack of remorse over her abortion, which she unapologetically reports as not “at all like women are supposed to think,” speaks to the same mindset.

However, not every critic perceives Rhys’s women’s preoccupation with makeup and clothing as empowering: in “Fashion in Jean Rhys/Jean Rhys in Fashion,” Sophie Oliver writes, “For Giles Lipovetsky (writing a century later), fashion is a crucial expression of interpersonal bonds, but one based on novelty, fantasy, and the aesthetic assertion of autonomy, values that are ironized through Rhys’s fashion-conscious tragic protagonists” (315). I do not think that the “tragic” aspects of Rhys’s protagonists ironize the empowering nature of their relationships to fashion; rather, I think that fashion serves as a form of rebellion against their subjugated positions in society. Their enjoyment of clothing transcends the constructed, conformist nature of fashion; they have a visceral interest in clothes, a component of the beauty- and pleasure-seeking in which they engage, which I discuss at length in the second chapter of this piece. Jean Rhys expresses the viscerality of Julia’s attraction to clothes in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, which she writes that Julia, “thought of new clothes with passion, with voluptuousness. She imagined the feeling of a new dress on her body and the scent of it, and her hands emerging from long black sleeves” (20). This sensual relationship with clothing, which renders the many societal purposes it serves secondary to the physical pleasure it provides, is expressed even more explicitly in her short story “Illusion,” in which the protagonist finds that “Miss Bruce—a plainly dressed, respectable woman whom Rhys arguably codes as a lesbian—harbors a secret collection of dresses: “For Miss Bruce’s Wardrobe when one opened it was a glow of colour, a riot of soft silks...everything that one did not expect” (3). When the narrator visits Miss Bruce in the

hospital, the “gentlemanly” woman remarks, “I suppose you noticed my collection of frocks. Why should I not collect frocks? They fascinate me. The colour and all that. Exquisite sometimes!” (5). For Rhys’s women, beautiful clothes fulfill a need much more visceral than the necessity of conforming to society or appearing attractive to men. The girls in “From a French Prison” dress brightly not to conform, but to defy: clothes and makeup constitute an expression of vitality—a vitality that I believe defines them, and on which I base my second chapter.

The violence, and impotence, of fragile male rage that Rhys depicts in “From a French Prison” exemplifies another theme in her work. Male authority is something through which Rhys’s protagonists see, because they recognize it as something artificial—something given to men by other men, through constructs like law and money. The narrator’s description of the undermined warder as a “petty god” in “From a French Prison” blatantly displays disgust for the violent and pathetic men whom society chooses to prop up; the expansion of this disgust to the institution of law in general when the narrator describes the warder as “the representative of honesty, of the law, of the stern forces of Good that punishes Evil” (11) foreshadows Antoinette’s furious assertion that “there is no justice” (133) in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It is this recognition of societal unfairness—and of themselves as victims of this unfairness—that I believe so many critics misinterpret as “defeat” in Rhys’s protagonists. However, in spite of this frustrating, tiring knowledge, Rhys’s women insist on living, on dressing beautifully, on seeking warmth in other people, and on mocking—both overtly and secretly—the men who are allowed to subjugate them. It is this complex relationship with victimhood that I seek to explore in both chapters of this thesis. I believe that, in many ways Rhys’s protagonists not only survive—a brave feat itself in the world in which they live—but, through their ability to recognize and

embrace warmth and beauty in the world around them, *thrive* in a world that insists on degrading them.

In between writing the first and second chapters of this thesis, I spent a summer working at the Children’s Defense Fund in Washington, D.C. My work centered around the creation and funding of nonprofit programs designed to educate the children whom America’s education system has failed in every way. After work, I sometimes spent my evenings with Rhys’s writing, and some of the problems she identifies—her railing against the racism of the prison system in *Wide Sargasso Sea*; the emphasis she places on police brutality in her short story “Sidi”—resonated with the work I was doing that summer. One of my main projects was related to the creation, maintenance, and funding of nonprofit education programs designed to give children from low-income families in rural communities an opportunity to escape poverty, and children from low-income families in the inner city a chance to escape both poverty and the school-to-prison pipeline carefully crafted during the Jim Crow era and heartily reinforced by Ronald Reagan’s “War on Drugs.” As I witnessed one of our D.C. programs abruptly lose government funding—and as I obsessively read news stories about children being ripped away from their mothers, neglected, abused, and even murdered in concentration camps run by the American government on the Mexico-U.S. border—Antoinette’s visceral assertion that “there is no justice” cycled through my mind. In my opinion, she is correct. There is no justice, and there likely will never be. Human nature is such that there will always be oppressors and the oppressed; masculinity is such that violence will always define history. Yet, this knowledge did not prevent Rhys from seeking justice for *Jane Eyre*’s “Bertha”—and, by extension, herself and Creole women like herself. It does not prevent Annette from rebelling against her husband, or Antoinette from rebelling against her husband, in the name of their anti-colonial sentiments.

And, most prominently, it does not prevent Christophine—a victim of this injustice, who was, at one point, imprisoned by white men—from continuing to practice the spiritual magic that landed her in prison in the first place, or from continuing to protect those for whom she cares. Rhys's women may be unhappy, and, at times, even hopeless—but this unhappiness and sometimes-hopelessness does not become defeat. They persist in living, in loving, and in advocating for their beliefs even when doing so endangers them. They are complex, melancholy heroines who defy their circumstances, and in this thesis I attempt to do them the justice they have not been afforded by Rhys scholars before me.

The Other Woman: Same-Sex Desire in *Quartet*

In her debut novel *Quartet*, Jean Rhys gives a fictional account of her relationship with Ford Madox Ford and his common-law wife, Stella Bowen, that portrays both Ford and Bowen—fictionalized as H. J. and Lois Heidler—as behaving cruelly to the novel’s protagonist, Marya. However, while Marya recognizes the abusiveness of both members of the couple, Lois—and not her domineering husband, whom Marya claims to love—becomes the primary object of Marya’s declared hatred. The apparent villanization of Bowen/Lois, through Marya’s discourse, proves so damning that Bowen herself objects to it in her memoir, writing, “Life with Ford had always felt to me pretty insecure. Yet, here I was cast for the rôle of the fortunate wife who held all the cards, and the girl for that of the poor, brave and desperate beggar who was doomed to be let down by the bourgeoisie....I simply hated my rôle!” (O’Connor, 61). However, though Rhys certainly portrays Stella/Lois as an enabler of abuse in *Quartet*, critical discourse has largely overlooked the effort she makes in the novel to illuminate Lois’s vulnerability, complexity, and even softness.. Though Marya grows to view Lois as a monster, key moments suggest Lois both cares deeply for Marya and desires her: desire that Marya reciprocates. Lois proves an unstable character, corrupted by an abusive marriage and her struggle to survive in a society that favors wealth and maleness, but at her core she retains warmth and tenderness—traits she expresses most prominently in her behavior towards, of all people, her husband’s mistress. The way in which Lois and Marya interact—Lois’s ability to display strength and compassion during the novel’s crucial moments, and Marya’s ability to respond to, and reciprocate, Lois’s efforts—undermines the all-too-common reading of Rhys’s women as

masochists who define themselves only in relation to the men in their lives: a sexist reading that, unfortunately, dominates Rhys criticism.

While I argue that in *Quartet* Rhys explores Lois and Marya's relationship, most scholars place Heidler at the center of the narrative, with Lois acting as his accomplice and Marya as the couple's masochistic victim. In "The Trouble with 'Victim': Triangulated Masochism in Jean Rhys's *Quartet*," Jennifer Mitchell concludes, "Ultimately, it is Marya's attachment to the Heidlers and the promise of masochistic satisfaction that they represent that trump all other possibilities for her" (208). Significantly, in this claim Mitchell treats the Heidlers as a unit, suggesting that they operate as such, and that Marya interacts with them as such. Mitchell treats Lois as an extension of Heidler, also quoting T. F. Staley in suggesting that Lois lures Marya into her home with the intent of giving the younger woman to Heidler as a sort of sexual gift:

the Heidlers attribute higher motives to themselves and are initially half-convinced that they want to protect Marya, but the real truth is that they want Marya as a bed companion for Heidler—Lois to keep him from straying permanently, moved by some romantic gesture in his lust, and Heidler himself, not so much to protect Marya, but to feel the warmth of her small and supple body next to him (193)

Mitchell and Staley both seem to believe that Lois acts primarily in service to her husband in her efforts to bring Marya into her home. The text itself, however, contains little evidence to support this interpretation. At the beginning of the novel, Lois seems much more interested in Marya becoming a bedfellow for herself, as I will show below. During her initial scenes with Marya, her husband does not seem to occupy much of her thoughts at all: she and Marya consume each other's attention, and she expresses her erotic interest in Marya through both verbal and physical gestures that, were they attributed to a man, would read as overt. However, as Marya and Lois are both women, scholarship of the piece has largely downplayed the relationship between

them—particularly in light of the fact that Marya ends up in Heidler’s bed rather than Lois’s. Lois’s apparent willingness to “allow” her husband to sleep with Marya does not suggest a conspiracy between the couple to seduce Marya on Heidler’s behalf, as Mitchell suggests: rather, it speaks to Lois’s desperate need to remain afloat in society—to hold on to power she only possesses through her marriage. Because Lois has little social capital of her own, she must tolerate her husband’s cruel and abusive behavior in order to keep her head above water—even when this behavior involves him ripping a romantic interest away from her. And, because she cannot afford to express to her husband her anger regarding his actions—doing so would cause her to lose her source of money—she takes out this anger on Marya, and Marya responds with loathing: an intensity of emotion that only serves to emphasize the extent to which the two women are fixated on each other.

Reading against the accepted interpretation of Marya as a masochist, Octavio Gonzalez argues in “The Narrative Mood of Jean Rhys’s *Quartet*” that:

As the reading of masochism in Rhys indicates, many critics use formal classification or psychoanalytic diagnosis to interpret the novel. Yet, in so doing, such critics mirror the Heidlers’ way of “reading,” their mode of knowing, what the novel calls the “mania for classification” (60, 118). This “mania for classification” is linked to institutional forms of knowledge: normative discourses, like psychoanalysis, that function as heavy instruments of power. Marya claims that Heidler “crushed her. He bore [her] down” (119), at one point noting how “He had every- thing on his side . . . Everything. Including Logic and Common Sense” (119). The Heidlers stand for this powerful way of knowing, a logical and commonsensical mode of putting people into categories, and, in so doing, exerting discursive control over social reality. (111)

I agree with Gonzalez’s criticism of the “mania for classification” present in Rhys criticism; the parallel he draws between Heidler’s treatment of Marya and the oppressive, limiting nature of psychoanalysis reads as poignant. However, I do take issue with his treatment of the Heidlers as a unit. Heidler himself stands for “this powerful way of knowing;” Lois mimics him, but, as I

will show in this chapter, does not authentically belong to his masculine, “Anglo-Saxon” world of “Logic and Common Sense.” I also believe that the excerpts Gonzalez includes in his analysis, in addition to invalidating critical attempts to psychoanalyze Rhys’s characters, also serve to directly contradict suggestions that Marya is a masochist: “Marya claimed that Heidler ‘crushed her. He bore [her] down’” and “‘He had everything on his side...Everything.’” Critics read Marya as a masochist because she submits to Heidler’s advances; however, the narrator fails to explain exactly why allows him to “crush” her and “bear her down.” Nowhere does the novel suggest that Marya enjoys the sex she has with Heidler. Considering that Rhys drew inspiration for *Quartet* from her relationship with Ford Madox Ford, who was a powerful, well-connected man on whom she relied to begin her career as a writer, I do not think it would be ridiculous to suggest that, were Rhys alive in 2019, she might frame her relationship with him as a “#metoo” story. *Quartet* resists classification in part because Rhys used it to depict a concept well ahead of its time. As Gonzalez argues, she certainly does not invite the reader to foist Freudian classification onto it. As I show in my introduction, Rhys herself was no great fan of Freud.

I believe that Rhys depicts Marya as a victim and not a masochist; I also believe that she depicts Lois—who, at certain points in the novel, appears monstrous to Marya—as a non-masochistic victim as well. Lois’s struggle to remain afloat in society becomes apparent the moment she enters the novel: “‘Good evening,’ said Mrs Heidler in the voice of a well-educated young male” (10). Her voice suggests privilege that she does not, in actuality, have—that of an education, and that of maleness. She adopts these traits, consciously or unconsciously, as a survival mechanism. She attempts gain power within her marriage and in larger society by mimicking the behavior of her husband, who is a well-educated male in actuality. Her body, however, betrays her femininity, an observation made by Marya when she first meets her and

conveyed through free indirect discourse: “A strong, dark woman, her body would be duskiy solid like her face. There was something of the earth about her, something of the peasant. Her mouth was large and thick-lipped, but not insensitive” (12). Not only does Marya explicitly characterize Lois’s body as female in this description by directly describing Lois as a “woman” when providing her physical characteristics, but she also states that Lois possessed “something of the peasant,” which undermines the “well-educated” element of her voice. In short, Lois acts like something she is not—an upper-class man—in an attempt to glean power in a society in which she knows herself to be at a profound disadvantage.

Marya’s physical assessment of Lois introduces a racial element as well: she notes that Lois has darker skin and full lips—both traits stereotypically associated with non-Anglo-Saxon people. From a different author, this description might have had no racial connotation, but from Rhys, who, growing up in the Caribbean as a white woman with a distant Creole background, was hyper-attuned to race and all its implications, the racialness of this description cannot be ignored, especially when paired with Marya’s impressions of Heidler from the page before: “he was a tall, fair man of perhaps forty-five” (11). Though Lois is certainly a white woman, this suggestion of a less-Anglicized appearance further identifies her as an outsider attempting to blend in to the upper echelons of a society in which she likely felt she did not truly belong. Significantly, Stella Bowen herself was from Australia—like Rhys, she was an outsider in the world of the racist English by virtue of being from a colony. By suggesting that Lois does not quite belong in the world she attempts to inhabit, Rhys implicitly acknowledges the “insecurity” Stella Bowen reports having felt in her relationship with Ford.

In her claims about the Heidlers, Mitchell largely ignores Rhys's racialized characterization of Lois, and, by extension, its implications regarding the Heidlers' marriage. She cites Carol Dell'Amico as claiming that "the upper crust Heidlers are unambiguously Anglicized and masculinized as a unity, and that they are known for their classism and taxonomic predilections" (194). While Lois certainly aspires to reap the benefits of the Anglicized traits her husband possesses—as well as the benefits of his maleness, and his money—Rhys establishes firmly that Lois herself does not have these characteristics, and obviously never will. This lack of an upper-class aura and Anglicized appearance not only differentiates Lois from her cruel husband, but also provides motives for her behavior later in the novel. By describing Lois to be peasant-like, Rhys implies that she lacks money of her own—a fact that makes her husband a necessity in her life, and which prevents her ever from acting on her own desires when they might conflict with his. Any apparent complicity Lois has in his relationship with Marya later in the novel stems not from romantic feeling towards her husband, but instead from a practical desire to not find herself left impoverished and powerless. As the novel progresses, the Heidlers' motives prove as different as their backgrounds—that some scholars of the text treat the couple as a single-minded unit suggests a patriarchal outlook on the novel that has little to do with the actual content of the text and much to do with the cultural values of the critics themselves.

In the very same sentence in which she marks Lois as racialized and "peasantlike," Rhys directly shows Lois to suffer abuse at the hands of her husband: "she had an odd habit of wincing when Heidler spoke to her sharply. A tremor would screw up one side of her face so that for an instant she looked like a hurt animal" (12). Even Heidler's treatment of his wife has a racialized element, in the context of Rhys's other works: in her short story "Vienne," the narrator, Francine,

notes that “the Japanese thought a lot of the German Army and the German way of keeping women in their place” (96). Much later in Rhys’s body of work, the destructiveness of the smothering, Anglo-Saxon male constitutes the villain of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, when Antoinette’s English husband literally drives Antoinette insane. While Antoinette becomes the “madwoman in the attic” due to her entrapment by an overbearing, Anglicized male force, Lois’s more vile behavior throughout the course of *Quartet* can be attributed not to her, but to the brute husband warping her existence. The overt political agenda of *Wide Sargasso Sea* provides a lens through which Rhys’s earlier works can be viewed more clearly: even in her first novel, Rhys portrays women as being primed by society to become corrupted by the men to whom they attach themselves. In her melancholy way, Rhys makes a feminist statement in *Quartet*. *Wide Sargasso Sea* continues the undeniably women-centric focus she displays in even her earliest work, rather than an exception to the rule. *Quartet* portrays Lois with much less obvious sympathy than *Wide Sargasso Sea* does Antoinette. However, it is significant that Rhys’s first novel never depicts Lois’s life and persona before Heidler. Despite this omission, Rhys does represent enough of Lois’s “authentic” nature, and of Heidler’s cruelty, to suggest that Lois is, in fact, a product of circumstance. Importantly, these glimpses are largely allowed through Lois’s complex, erotically-charged relationship with Marya.

When she first meets Lois, Marya views her as the abused wife she is, and I believe this impression sets the stage for the reader to view Lois’s cruel behavior towards Marya—the behavior that eventually drives Marya to fantasize about violence against her—as that of a terrified woman not in control of her own life. Regardless of how Marya feels, or claims to feel, as she becomes more intimate with the Heidlers, a removed observer can see that Lois’s cruelty

towards Marya stems from a place of anger and helplessness: she hates seeing Marya—for whom she has developed deep affection—with her abusive husband, but, because she has little power of her own, she cannot stop it from occurring.

Though Lois's flinching behavior shows her to be obviously afraid of her husband, Mitchell reads her as a masochist who enjoys submitting to a powerful male force: "Lois, who does appear to 'delight in submitting' to H.J., also 'delights in displaying force' toward Marya" (197). Where Mitchell gets the impression that Lois is enjoying her position in her marriage, I cannot fathom. Her argument rests upon the assumption—embedded in Rhys scholarship—that Rhys's women are inherently masochists, though there is nothing in the text to suggest that Lois enjoys being married to someone who evidently hurts her.

That Marya ends up sleeping with Heidler and not Lois should not be read to imply that Marya fails to reciprocate Lois's feelings, or that she went into the Heidlers' home seeking a cruel, dominant male to fulfill what many scholars interpret to be her masochistic desires: like Lois, she herself is very much constrained by both a need for money and, by extension, a need to conform to societal expectations. While she does nearly go to bed with Lois—in a scene I discuss later—the fact that Heidler intervenes makes the consummation of her relationship with Lois impossible, as to offend Heidler would mean to find herself back out on the street. And so she copes with Heidler's advances by transferring all of the emotion she has gradually built towards his wife over to him: emotion that she begins developing towards Lois the second the two women meet. In the early stages of Marya's relationship with the couple, the two women focus on each other almost exclusively, while Heidler fades into the background. Marya's assessment of Lois's physical characteristics during her introduction to Lois not only provides a

portrait of Lois as a disadvantaged woman attempting to advance her place in society, but also hints at an erotic interest in Lois on Marya's part. Marya considers what Lois's body might look like underneath her clothing—"duskily solid." However, she does not feel tempted to picture Heidler naked, as she finds him repulsive. Upon first meeting him, Marya immediately recognizes the brutishness of Heidler, and even finds him unattractive, observing, "His shoulders were tremendous, his nose arrogant, his hands short, broad and so plump that the knuckles were dimpled. The wooden expression of his face was carefully striven for" (11). Lois, meanwhile, intrigues Marya, both physically and empathically: "Her eyes were beautiful, clearly brown, the long lashes curving upwards, but there was a suspicion, almost a deadened look in them. 'I'm a well-behaved young woman,' they said, 'and you're not going to catch me out, so don't think it'" (11). The guardedness she perceives in Lois, when conveyed through the "beautiful" brown eyes that continue to fascinate Marya long after she decides she hates Lois, gives Lois an air of vulnerability that primes Marya to develop sympathetic feelings for her—feelings that Lois reciprocates.

Lois invites Marya out to dinner again, and this second meeting precipitates the first of many small, tender gestures that grow to define the two women's relationship. When Marya first enters the café, Lois "observes her guest with calm brown eyes" (39). The phrase "her guest" conveys that Lois, and not her husband, wanted Marya to come to dinner with them—indicating that Lois reciprocated the interest Marya felt towards her during their first meeting. That Marya becomes the object of Lois's gaze during this scene—as Heidler talks to the patron and ignores the two women—further suggests that she, and not her husband, feels a heightened interest in Marya. Lois's behavior towards Marya—watching her in a way that could indicate desire—does

not, however, constitute a refraction of the male gaze, as a more phallogocentric criticism might suggest. Lois's gaze proves decidedly female, evidenced by the dialogue that follows her moment of actively watching the passive Marya: "'But you're wet through, poor child!' Marya answered that it was nothing, just the sleeve of her coat. 'Then take it off,' advised Mrs Heidler" (39). Lois's gaze, though it indicates an attraction to Marya, differs from the male gaze because it does not objectify. Rather than romanticize, or even take pleasure in, Marya's discomposure, Lois cares about her enough to try to make her comfortable. Her authoritative manner hints at an erotic energy developing between them; this erotic energy's failure to eclipse her ability to feel sympathy for Marya suggests she also feels tenderness for her. This protective tenderness—present even when Marya perceives Lois as being at her cruellest—long outlasts Marya's relationship with Heidler, and speaks to a transcendence of the miserable, repressed state in which both women live their lives.

Lois's attempts to care for Marya, evident in her common-sense instructions and her willingness to invite Marya into her home, could suggest a maternal rather than romantic interest in Marya, were this behavior not overlying actions and comments overtly conveying desire. In the scene in which Lois persuades Marya to come live with her and her husband, she remarks, "I shall certainly want to paint you. In that black dress, I think, and short black gloves. Or shall I have short green gloves?" (49). That Lois wants to paint Marya displays a physical interest in her: a portrait session would involve her spending long amounts of time with her, and painting her would constitute a form of intimacy with her body. This compulsion of hers, combined with her decision to invite Marya into her home, suggests a personal desire for Marya—she does not, as Mitchell puts forth, invite the younger woman into her home on behalf of her husband. Her

body language towards Marya during the invitation scene speaks to her sexual interest in her as well: “she put out her hand caressingly. Marya thought how odd it was that she could never make up her mind whether she like or intensely dislike Mrs Heidler’s touch” (48). Marya’s strong reaction to Lois touching her shows that she senses an intensity of feeling behind the gesture; her hesitation demonstrates that Lois feels more eager to act on the tension burgeoning between them than the younger woman does. Marya most certainly feels attracted to Lois, but, unlike Lois, she does not seem in any hurry to act on it. This reluctance to act on Marya’s part leads to an extended buildup of tension between the two, and that I will later argue leads Marya into the arms of Heidler—an event that throws Lois into turmoil.

The sexual tension between the two women builds as the night progresses: after Marya assents to go live with the Heidlers, Heidler deliberately leaves the two women alone together—a gesture that supports the argument that the Heidlers have long had an open marriage, and that Heidler is aware of Lois’s interest in Marya. Even Lois’s reasoning behind bringing Marya to the apartment suggests a calculated, yet transparent, excuse to have time alone with her: ““We’d love to have you and it’s all arranged. After dinner you must come round to the studio and we’ll talk things over. H.J.’s got to go over the other side to see somebody”” (49). As the two women walk to Lois’s studio, they do so “in silence, close together, almost touching each other” (49)—a physical manifestation of the tension between them. Were Lois a man, this scene would read, without argument, as the early stages of an attempt at seduction. However, because Lois and Marya are both women and therefore, according to Western cultural narrative, sexually passive—and because the scene that follows in the apartment fails to result in physical intimacy—the erotic tension between them has received little notice from literary critics. Though

Mitchell goes as far as to acknowledge the “implicit queerness” of Lois and Marya’s relationship in reference to the intimate moment that occurs in the apartment, she again ties Lois’s actions to her husband, writing that Lois “is effectively a courting unit when it comes to Marya’s involvement with the couple” (196). She attributes Marya’s apparent attraction to Lois to what she claims to be Marya’s masochism, writing, “Marya is simultaneously attracted to both Lois and Heidler, both of whom occupy positions absolutely necessary to the cultivation of Marya’s masochism within an intentionally triangulated affair” (195). She fails to take into account the fact that Marya has been physically—and, in extension, erotically—interested in Lois from the moment she met her; she fails to acknowledge the fact that Lois seeks to be alone with Marya, and that, up to this point in the novel, the women have acted exclusively interested in each other, and kept Heidler on the periphery. Even in retrospect after Heidler decides he wants Marya for himself, little evidence exists that suggests that, in these initial scenes, Lois acts on behalf of her husband’s desire. Instead, she appears very much driven by her own desire to get Marya in bed with her—and, before her husband steps in, she comes very close to succeeding.

Though Lois and Marya do not sleep together that night, they do share a moment of intimacy of an intensity that Marya never attains with Heidler. Once they arrive at the studio, Lois says to Marya, “Lie down on the divan. You look tired” (50)—a command that conveys an interest in seducing Marya; most matter-of-fact discussions of logistics do not begin with someone sprawling on a couch. Lois’s bossiness with Marya, both indulgent and dominant, continues the tone of their erotic dynamic, which began the moment she told Marya to take off her jacket during their second dinner together. With a few pointed questions, she coaxes Marya to share with her the fears and jadedness underlying her reluctance to live with the Heidlers:

“I’ve realized, you see, that life is cruel and horrible to unprotected people. I think life is cruel. I think people are cruel.’ All the time she spoke she was thinking: ‘Why should I tell her all this?’ But she felt impelled to go on” (51). Marya eventually brings herself to tears: “‘If I went to the devil it would be because I wanted to, or because it’s a good drug, or because I don’t give a damn for my idiotic body of a woman, anyway. And all the people who yap.’ She spoke very quickly, flushed, then burst into tears” (53). That Lois extracts these confessions from Marya could suggest a desire to manipulate. This interpretation would support the portrait of Lois as cruel that Marya constructs later in the novel. However, the emotional vulnerability goes both ways—as soon as Marya begins crying, Lois follows suit:

Lois said: ‘You see how right I was to tell you that you must come and stay with us, that you mustn’t be left alone.’ Her voice trembled. Marya was amazed to see tears in her eyes... ‘You know,’ Lois added, ‘H.J., I love him so terribly...and he isn’t always awfully nice to me.’

They sat side by side on the divan and wept together. Marya wondered how she could ever have thought Lois hard. This soft creature, this fellow-woman, hurt and bewildered by life even as she was. ‘She simply is more plucky than I am,’ she thought. ‘She puts a better face on it.’

Lois was saying: ‘When you told me that your husband was in jail—d’you remember?—I felt as if you’d stretched out a hand for help. Well—and I caught hold of your hand. I want to help you. I’ll be awfully disappointed and hurt if you don’t allow me to. (53)

Marya and Lois share a moment of connection and understanding in this scene neither of them share with the men in their lives. They bond over a mutual recognition of suffering—Marya’s suffering as a woman left alone and Lois’s suffering as a wife struggling to stay afloat in society. But this bonding over suffering does not indicate masochism: it constitutes a victory against the patriarchal society that holds both of them down. Lois—a woman enduring abuse in her own

home—has the resilience to recognize, feel sympathy for, and then extend help to a woman even more disadvantaged than herself. By offering help to Marya, Lois transcends the wretched state of her life. Her husband has nothing to do with it.

This scene also reveals a possible explanation for Heidler's apparent early willingness to leave Marya to Lois. While explaining to Marya why taking her in would not cause her and her husband any trouble, Lois says, "H. J.'s always rescuing some young genius or the other and installing him in the spare bedroom... Many's the one we've pulled out of a hole since we've been in the Montparnesse, I can tell you.' She added: 'And they invariably hate us bitterly afterwards'" (51). That Lois refers to the "geniuses" H. J. rescues using a male pronoun—and that the "geniuses" become embittered during the course of their stay with the Heidlers—suggests that H. J. "rescues" them for sexual purposes, much like Lois seems to attempt to do with Marya in this scene. Evidence of his homosexuality appears later in the novel, when Marya describes her sexual encounters with him: "He wasn't a good lover, of course. He didn't really like women. She had known that as soon as he touched her" (118). Heidler seems to have "rescued" plenty of young men since the Heidlers moved to Montparnesse; however, his ego is such that, when his wife turn comes to "rescue" someone for herself, he feels the need to take that person away.

Mitchell offers a different interpretation of Lois's comment about Heidler's "geniuses": "Lois uses Heidler's compulsion to rescue as a means of enticing Marya; readers, however, understand that this impulse reveals and perpetuates his status as protector, as dominator, as conqueror, as father—a presumed object of desire for a financially strapped, unqualified young woman" (193-194). Mitchell interprets Lois's behavior during this scene as highly manipulative

of Marya—manipulative, particularly, of the masochistic tendencies that Mitchell believes govern Marya’s behavior. In short, Mitchell believes Lois’s show of emotion to be, essentially, fake, and acted out on behalf of her husband’s sexual desires: “Lois’s seduction is calculated, active, and effective. Marya is as seduced by the show of Lois’s togetherness and the circumstantial appearance of vulnerability as she is seduced by Heidler’s sexual aggression and financial security” (195). Mitchell is inclined to interpret this scene as such in large part because she reads Lois and Marya as both masochists who enjoy being treated badly, rather than genuinely disadvantaged women who must make sacrifices to survive: “characterizing either woman as a victim negates all possibilities of agency and empowerment, a vital part of the novel overall” (198). Mitchell’s assertion that Lois and Marya’s actions are not devoid of empowerment is correct: Lois especially displays an ability to transcend the wretchedness of her life when she feels compelled to do so—for instance, when she sends her friend Miss Nicolson to Nice to check on Marya’s well-being. Simply because the women are victims of a sexist, classist, racist, Anglo-Saxon social world does not make them incapable of having agency. However, to suggest that Marya—a woman for whom starving to death constitutes a real possibility—chooses to be with Heidler not out of necessity, but instead to satisfy a male-dominant, masochistic fantasy that she and Lois share, speaks to a desire on the part of the critic, and not on the part of Rhys, to place the male figure at the center of the story.

Marya transfers her affections from Lois to Heidler easily, not so much because she wants to be with Heidler, but because being with Heidler becomes a practical necessity in her life, much as it is in Lois’s. Though Marya feels attracted to Lois, she has inhibitions that prevent her from being with her. These inhibitions stem from her apparent consideration of herself as

heterosexual, her need to survive in a society dominated by men, and her personal distaste for some of Lois's behaviors. The intimacy that develops briefly between the two women, both accustomed to guarding their feelings for the sake of survival, is not sustainable, and they quickly revert to the emotional distance they had before that night. Lois paints Marya, and, during these sessions, she talks "volubly" (59), and does so in a way that Marya finds off-putting: "she liked explaining, classifying, fitting the inhabitants (that is to say, of course, the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants) into their proper places in the scheme of things" (60). Marya finds Lois domineering in conversation, and she struggles to articulate her own point of view, which makes her more uncomfortable: "Sometimes she would ask questions, and Marya, longing to assert her point of view, would try to describe the charm of her life with Stephan" (60). Lois's monologues, though they fail to entice Marya, do reveal an intimacy with Paris's gay scene, and also further display her physical interest in women: Marya begins to feel that she, "knew all there was to be known about the various couples of Beautiful Young Men or the charm and chic of Plump Polly" (61). Lois also remarks on the "long, slim fingers" of clergymen's daughters" (61). Her remarks about women echo the fascination with Cri-Cri's beauty she expresses during Marya and the Heidlrs' second meeting: "'It's an angle of the eyes and mouth,' said Mrs Heidler. She repeated, satisfied: 'That's what it is. I've noticed it over and over again. It's a certain angle of the eyes and mouth'" (40). Lois never gives this much attention to men—not even her own husband. By telling Marya about her gay male acquaintances, and by sharing with her the attention she pays to the physical traits of attractive young women, she attempts to draw Marya into her homoerotic mindset. Her "conversations" with Marya as she paints her fail to entice to Marya because they show Lois to lack the thoughtfulness and empathy that Marya saw

in her the evening they spent alone in the studio, but her prattling does suggest a desire to draw Marya into her world—her social world, not the internal world Marya glimpsed that night in the studio—and, though she fails, the effort speaks to an attempt to gain a different kind of intimacy with Marya.

Lois's fascination with female beauty echoes the way in which Marya, during her solitary exploits around Paris, regularly becomes fascinated by female strangers. As she dines in a café one night, she observes a woman eating alone, musing, "She was a lady with a pale face, crimson lips, a close-fitting black hat, and eyebrows like half moons. She was indeed exactly like Pierrot and every now and then she would turn and look at herself in the glass approvingly. Eventually, gathering up her belongings, she moved out with stately and provocative undulations of the hips" (122). "Provocative undulations" suggests an erotic interest, in addition to an aesthetic interest: Marya not only notices the sexuality of the woman's body, but finds it enticing. Later, when Heidler has effectively banished her to Nice, she observes of the statues near where she stays, "the stone ladies smiled complacently from the front of the Hôtel Negresco, as if to say: 'Think what you like, curves are charming'" (156). Men, meanwhile, do not penetrate Marya's consciousness unless they insist on doing so, which explains why she only takes interest in Heidler once he overtly declares his "love" for her.

Rhys's other protagonists share the tendency Marya has to be intrigued by the appearances and affectations of other women. In Rhys's short story "Vienne," Frances recalls the personalities and appearances of various women she encountered during her time in Vienna. Of the "little dancer at the Parisien with a Kirchner girl's legs and a little faun's face," she notes, "she was so exquisite that girl that it clutched at one, gave one pain that anything so lovely could ever grow old, or die, or do ugly things" (94). Later, she muses, "I saw people differently

afterwards—because for once I'd met sheer loveliness with a flame inside, for there was 'it'—the spark, the flame in her dancing" (94). Frances does not seem to take an erotic interest in the dancer, but rather becomes enthralled by what she perceives to be the woman's transcendence of the wretchedness of the humanity around them. The fact that she ascribes such brilliant traits to a woman, in what seems to be a fit of romanticism, speaks to the hold that the feminine has on the Rhysian narrator's consciousness. Significantly, what Francine perceives to be the tragic ending of the dancer's career occurs in the form of an attachment to a man: "Finally she disappeared. Went back to Budapest where afterwards we heard of her. Married to a barber. Rum" (95). In this passage, Rhys's narrator overtly characterizes the attachment of an extraordinary woman to a nondescript man as a loss for the former—a perspective that speaks to the extent to which this particular narrator, much like Marya, tends to find women more worthy of her notice than men. In a patriarchal world, the Rhysian protagonist's gaze constantly seeks out other women, and I believe this tendency in and of itself speaks to an understated radicalism in Rhys's work.

Rhys's protagonists certainly do not perceive other women as infallible, however. Upon spending more time with Lois, Marya begins to find traits of Lois's character that she dislikes—primarily, Lois's tendency to cope with her disadvantages by pretending to have more power and confidence than she does, a trait first conveyed by her "voice of an educated young male," and which leads Marya to think, "'You talk and you talk and you don't understand. Not anything. It's all false, all second-hand. You say what you've read and what other people tell you. You think you're very brave and sensible, but one flick of pain to yourself and you'd crumple up'" (64). That she thinks that Lois would crumple up after "one flick of pain" to herself, after having listened to Lois tell her how much pain she was in, shows Marya's growing prejudice against Lois, which began developing during Lois's overbearing portrait session monologues. Lois can

cope better than she can, and she resents her for it. This resentful attitude towards Lois's ability to put on a face contradicts her reaction to Lois the night in the studio, when, after commiserating with Lois, she thinks, "'She is simply more plucky than I am'" (53). In that earlier scene, she admires Lois for her ability to distance herself from her suffering; after spending time in close proximity to Lois, and knowing that she does not share Lois's ability to survive, she begins to detest her. Marya's impression of Lois does not align with the impression of Lois that the text provides. Tellingly, Marya's own fear skews her perception of the world, and her point of view does not constitute that of the novel. Her irritation with Lois, however, grows along with her infatuation with Lois. As she walks along the Rue St Jacques one day, she imagines Lois, "lying on the divan in the morning pouring out coffee, soft and lazy in a fragile dressing-gown, her beautiful strong arms bare to the shoulder" (65). Though her discourse does not convey the feelings this image elicits in her, that she envisions of Lois in such a sensual way—a way reminiscent of the way she tries to gauge what Lois looks like under her clothes the first time they meet—shows that she feels erotic desire for her, in spite of the repulsion she feels for her social behavior. Lois half-dressed and pouring coffee is not only sexy, but also stripped of artifice: and Lois's artifice is what Marya dislikes most about her.

Marya's failure to convey the feelings that this image of Lois evokes suggests that she herself either fails to fully grasp the fact that she experiences desire for Lois, or realizes that, though she does want to sleep with the other woman, acting on this desire would constitute a risk for both of them. Both women depend on Heidler for survival—were Lois to stray too far, Heidler could decide to cast her out. Similarly, were Marya to take something—his wife—away from him while depending on him for shelter, she could find herself penniless on the streets. While the women do not often actively think of Heidler at this point, his presence looms in the

background—the impassable male with whom they both need to stay on good terms to keep starvation at bay. However, the Heidlers' actions earlier in the text—taking Marya back to her apartment with Heidler's blessing, for instance—conveys that Heidler would condone his wife sleeping with Marya, as long as the affair did not go too far; Marya's reluctance to sleep with Lois more likely stems from the fact that she does not consider sleeping with another woman to constitute a possibility for herself. Though she pays erotic attention to women, having sex with them does not seem a possibility that even crosses into her consciousness. And so, when Heidler openly asks her for sex, she readily transfers all of the emotion and tension she has built towards Lois to to him—both because having an affair with a man constitutes the safer possibility in her mind, and because, from a practical standpoint, appeasing Heidler is much more important to her survival than accepting Lois's advances. Sleeping with Lois's husband is the closest she can come to sleeping with Lois, so she does.

The night Heidler interjects himself into the two women's relationship, Marya and Lois arguably come very close to acting on their mutual—if poorly-communicated—desire for each other. That night, Marya “waited eagerly on Lois dressing for the dance and spent half an hour making her up. Ochre powder, a little rouge, the tips of the ears, just under the eyes. Huge, sombre eyes and a red mouth—that's what she was getting at” (66). This scene constitutes a role reversal. Marya, though she “waits” on Lois, paints Lois as she wishes to see her, much like Lois does to Marya, on canvas rather than with makeup. In this scene, Marya has her turn to be in control, and the resentment she has developed towards Lois since moving in with the Heidlers seems to evaporate. The scene has a foreplay-like aspect that the portrait sessions, with Lois's inane jabber, lack: Lois gives up control of a desirable part of her body—her face—to Marya,

and Marya, in turn, physically indulges Lois. And this scene might have culminated in further physical intimacy—had Heidler not been present:

‘You ought always to do it,’ said Heidler, looking at his wife with interest.

‘Do you think so?’ answered Lois. She pulled on the purple wig carefully. Her reddened mouth looked extraordinarily hard, Marya thought. When she was following Lois into the bedroom: ‘No, sit down for a minute,’ Heidler said. ‘What a fidget you are!’

He wore spectacles. She thought that he looked kinder, older, less German.

‘Don’t rush off,’ he said. And then, ‘Oh, God, I am so utterly sick of myself sometimes. D’you ever get sick of yourself? No, not yet, of course. Wait a bit, you will one of these days. (66)

Until this point in the story, Heidler has remained peripheral. The primary relationship Marya has with the couple is between her and Lois. In this scene, Heidler interjects himself—almost literally: through a harsh, verbal command, he prevents Lois and Marya from being alone in the bedroom together. The phrasing Rhys uses to convey both Marya’s attempt to follow Lois and Heidler’s command for her to stay proves ambiguous—the first part of the sentence, “When she was following Lois into the bedroom,” suggests an automatic, impulsive move on Marya’s part: it fails to provide a concrete reason for Marya to follow Lois, which implies that Marya follows Lois simply because she wants to be near Lois. The colon, followed by Heidler’s command, abruptly cuts the phrase short, suggesting that Heidler presents the completion of something that had begun without him. The phrase describing Marya’s attempt to follow Lois into the bedroom directly follows an observation Marya makes about Lois’s lips—“her reddened mouth looked extraordinarily hard”—and occurs in the context of a scene in which Marya and Lois have spent time in close proximity to each other. It also takes place soon after Marya has her erotically-charged vision of Lois sprawled semi-dressed on the sofa. Though the two may not necessarily have slept together had Heidler not been there, they would have spent time in the bedroom together, which likely would have resulted in some form of enhanced intimacy. Heidler

chooses to inject himself and his narcissistic complaining at a crucial moment. Until now, he has not had a presence in Marya and Lois's relationship, because he has chosen not to. But whether he truly feels attracted to Marya, or whether he simply feels a possessive need to prevent Lois from being with someone else beside himself, he has chosen to exert the power he holds over them as the only male in the situation in order to prevent their relationship from going any further.

A similar moment occurs in Rhys's later novel, *Good Morning, Midnight*, when Sasha Jensen, the novel's protagonist, tells a male paramour about her attraction to a prostitute she once encountered. Her companion admits that he "tried" having relations with boys in Morocco but found that "it was no use." He then asks Sasha whether she "like girls," to which she responds that she does not, and he persists, asking, "'What, have you never in your life seen a girl you could have loved?'" (134). Sasha then describes an incident reminiscent of the manner in which Heidler interrupts Lois and Marya's erotically-charged moment:

"No, never... Yes, once I did. I saw a girl in a bordel I could have loved."

"Oh, how convenient!"

He laughs, The proprietor starts, looks towards us, shrugs his shoulders and turns his back.

"Why did you love her?"

"Well," I say, "what a question, anyway!"

How on earth can you say why you love people? You might as well say you know where the lightning is going to strike. At least, that's how it has always seemed to me.

"Tell me about this girl."

"There isn't anything to tell, except that I liked her. She looked awfully sad and very gentle. That doesn't happen often."

He seemed much amused.

"Did she make love to you?"

"No, of course not," I say. "Certainly not."

"What happened? Do tell me."

"Well, while I was thinking these sentimental thoughts a fresh client came in and she rushed off to join the crowd that was twittering round him. You know how they do... I loathe bordels, anyway." (134-135)

Unlike Marya, who will not own her feelings for Lois, Sasha is able to articulate her fleeting attraction to the girl in the brothel, but both Sasha and Marya's interests in women are triggered by tenderness. Marya likes Lois best when Lois responds without artifice; Sasha is attracted to the girl in the brothel because the girl looks "awfully sad and very gentle." Meanwhile, the way in which the john interrupts Sasha's fantasizing mimics Heidler's interruption of Lois and Marya's excursion to the bedroom. These moments of connection—one momentary and overtly stated to be homoerotic, the other long-lasting quite implicitly romantic—constitute a pattern that establishes men as not just unimportant to, but in fact intrusive in, relations between women. Heidler is, essentially, just another john in a whorehouse. Notably, Rhys published *Good Morning, Midnight* eleven years after she did *Quartet*; her willingness to explicitly discuss female homosexuality in this work indicates a progression in her depiction of homoerotic relations between women, from implication to overt declaration. When viewed retrospectively through the lens of *Quartet*, the sexual chargedness of relations between certain women in her earlier works becomes more apparent, and Lois and Marya provide one of the most obvious examples of this important element of her work.

Once Heidler decides he wants Marya—once he abruptly enters the plot of the novel—he can easily "take" her away from Lois, because, as the man with money, he has the power to cast Lois out and place her in the same circumstances as Marya. And so she hands Marya over in a move that echoes the way he left her and Marya alone the night Marya agreed to move in with them: "I'm going home. Don't be too long, you two.' She disengaged herself, and walked on so abruptly that Marya stood looking after her with some astonishment. 'Come along,' said Heidler" (71). Though Marya rejects his advances—when he tells her that he knew "that somebody else will get you if I don't. You're that sort,'" she says, "'You're abominably rude and

unkind and unfair. And you're stupid in a lot of ways" (72)—this scene effectively marks the beginning of their affair, because it moves Heidler into the forefront of Marya's consciousness, and so sets the stage for him to become the new object of the emotion she has developed for Lois. When Marya asks "and what about Lois?" (77), Heidler responds that Lois is "not an excitable person" (77). Marya's question, though in the moment it seems to refer to Lois's status as a betrayed wife, could also reflect her awareness of Lois's interest in her: instead of worrying about Heidler cheating on Lois with her, she may worry that she cheats on Lois with Heidler. This interchange between Marya and Heidler ends when Heidler says, "Lois will come in, in a minute," and Marya responds "She is in," adding, "I heard her some time ago" (78). That Marya notices Lois's footsteps and Heidler does not shows just how much more attention she pays to his wife than he does.

The way Lois treats Marya when she "interrupts" her moment with Heidler speaks to the depth of her attachment to Marya. She immediately comments, "why are you sitting in this half-darkness?" (79) and then puts on a light—a little gesture that, in sentiment, echoes the earlier exchange involving the wet coat. Then she says, "I've been running round the shops all the afternoon. I've bought you this to cheer your black dress up" (79) and produces a lace collar—a present for Marya, but also something she would like to see Marya wear: an indulgence of both of them; a romantic gift. Her eyes are "swollen as if she had been crying," but, when Marya tells her that she wants to leave, she says, "All this, of course, is because H J.'s been making love to you, I know," but adds, "I don't see what good it will do if you go off. It seems such a pity to smash up all our plans for you, just because H. J. imagines that he's in love with you—for the minute" (80-81). The prospect of an affair between Marya and Heidler upsets Lois so much that she cries—yet she wants Marya to stay in her home. Though she feels disgusted by her—

thinking, “‘She’s revolting. You can see when you look at her that she’s been chewed up. God! What have I done to be worried like this?’” (81)—she feels overpowered by the concern she feels for her: “‘I don’t want to send you away and then have it on my conscience that you’ve gone to the devil and all that. Well, that’s what you said, that you didn’t care what happened to you. I thought that a dreadful thing’” (82). Lois has not been crying because she cares that her husband is cheating on her with another woman: Lois is distraught because her husband is cheating on her with a woman with whom she has fallen in love. Her concern for Marya still outweighs the anger and disgust she feels for her.

This scene, if read with the belief that Lois feels jealous out of affection for Heidler and not Marya, could read as solely an attempt on Lois’s to maintain control over her husband—which it is, to an extent, but I believe that Lois’s actions are driven by her attachment to Marya at least as much as they are by her practical need to keep Heidler her husband. The strongest support for the interpretation that Lois is solely interested her practical needs lies in a line of direct discourse from Lois, in which she thinks, “Oh, no, my girl, you won’t go away. You’ll stay here where I can keep an eye on you” (81). When taken in conjunction with Lois’s impression of Marya as “revolting” and “chewed up,” this desire to “keep an eye” on Marya reads as a desire to ensure that Heidler does not stray too far. That Lois wants to ensure that Heidler stays with her constitutes a given: she needs Heidler for survival. However, the need to keep Heidler near does not preclude the possibility that her decision to keep Marya in her home also stems from a desire to protect her—and maybe even regain her attention after Heidler tires of her—and that the disgust she she feels for her in this scene originates from a place of hurt. Lois is angry that her husband has effectively taken Marya from her, and, because she cannot

take out this anger on him, she forces Marya to bear the brunt of it—and the verbal abuse Marya endures from Lois throughout her affair with Heidler wounds her deeply.

Marya's "hatred" of Lois—and her mental rewriting of the early stages of their relationship, in which she villanizes Lois—precipitates from Lois's cruel treatment of her after her affair with Heidler begins. Lois, who, during the portrait sessions, has shown herself to possess a verbosity that escapes Marya, ridicules Marya mercilessly. In one scene, as she introduces Marya to an acquaintance, says, cruelly, "There was a young woman called Marya. Who thought, 'But I must have a caree-er'" (88); Marya lacks the cleverness to respond to this jibe, and so she begins to hate Lois. Much like Lois feels betrayed by Marya when she starts sleeping with Heidler, Marya begins to resent Lois for hurting her feelings. Their preexisting emotional attachment to each other causes the disruption of their relationship to upset them both; even after they become "enemies," they continue to obsess over each other—and the root of this obsession lies not in a true rivalry, but instead in their continued, if impossible, attachment to each other. Even as they purport to fight over Heidler, they remain the focus of the other's thoughts. While recalling her relationship with the Heidlers to Stephan, Marya tells him how she had "lain awake and longed...to smash her mouth so that she could never sneer again" (180); that a mere facial expression on Lois's part has the ability to trigger so much anger on Marya's part speaks to the extent to which she cares about what Lois thinks of her and feels betrayed when Lois fails to treat her kindly. And, despite these violent feelings, Marya still cares for Lois in actuality. When she first determines to leave the Heidlers—after a confrontation in which she slaps Heidler and Heidler in turn pushes Lois—her last words to Heidler are: "be good to Lois, be good to Lois, you must be good to Lois" (107). That her last request of him, when she believes herself to be leaving him forever, is that he not abuse Lois, speaks to the primariness of

her relationship with Lois in this narrative. Heidler has served as a vessel for her affection for Lois, rather than the true object of that emotion.

Lois, in turn, continues to care for Marya even after she starts bullying her—though most of her behavior indicates that this affection likely escapes Marya’s consciousness, as Marya has turned against her. However, these gestures most certainly exist. When Stephan dines with the Heidlers and Marya, he notes, “Madame Heidler is a woman who could be cruel, I think, and very hypocritical, but I saw her squeeze your hand under the table, so I can only suppose that she likes you very much.’ ‘Oh, she often does that,’ said Marya” (143). Though Marya tells Stephan that the hand-squeezing is a regular occurrence, none of her discourse—direct or indirect—indicates her awareness of it at any previous point in the novel. This casual attitude towards what constitutes a covert intimate act—a secret between the two women to which Heidler is not privy—suggests that, despite Heidler’s overpowering physical presence, and despite the fact that Marya insists to herself that Lois is her “enemy” (179), the two women still share something of the relationship they had developed before Heidler stepped onto the scene.

And their relationship outlives Marya’s relationship with Heidler. When Marya sends Heidler a desperate letter from Nice, Heidler ignores it, but Lois responds by immediately sending her friend Miss Nicolson to check on Marya. Miss Nicolson—who, with her “very hairy legs” (158) and lack of a husband, reads as a stereotypical lesbian—attempts to comfort Marya on behalf of her “darling Lois” (158). Miss Nicolson is Lois’s friend—or perhaps a little more than that—yet she freely speaks of her disdain for Heidler with Marya, making known her disregard for men who “get sick of their mistresses and send them away into the country to get rid of them” (158-159). Her willingness to go straight to Nice simply because Lois asks her to

check on the emotional state of her husband's ex-mistress shows that Lois truly is a darling friend of hers, and therefore most likely confides in her. Her readiness to do something so seemingly ridiculous for Lois's sake suggests that she has an awareness of Lois's true depth of feeling for Marya—and that Lois sends her all the way to Nice conveys that Lois does care deeply for Marya, in spite of everything.

Lois's continued love for Marya even after Marya has an affair with her husband while taking shelter in her home shows the insignificance of men to Lois's emotional life. However, Critic Coral Anne Howells reads *Quartet* as placing men at the center of the women's lives:

Neither Marya nor Lois Heidler nor Mademoiselle Chardin challenges the male metanarrative in *Quartet*. Instead they are all shown to be collaborators in a collective fantasy about male power and female submission. It is the paradox of Rhys's version of femininity that, though she offers a merciless exposure of women's vulnerability, her stories make no attempt to unsettle the traditional balance of power between the sexes. Rather, women's fantasies continue to sustain it. (52).

Marya's declared "love" for Heidler derives not from an investment in a male-dominant fantasy, but instead from an unconscious pragmatism that dictates that, if she is to have an affair with a member of a married couple, she should do so with the man and not the woman. Her need to stay alive—along with the heteronormative social norms she has internalized—leads her to transfer the desire she feels for Lois to Lois's husband. Were she truly a masochistic woman invested in a male-dominant fantasy, she would enjoy the discomfort he inflicts on her—and she does not.

Social male dominance constitutes a practical fact in Lois's life, too: something she endures in order to not end up like Marya, cast out on the street with no money. She suffers abuse in order to evade poverty, but she transcends the wretchedness of her oppressed life by placing her husband on her psychological and emotional periphery, and giving her emotional

attention to women like Miss Nicolson and Marya. She cares for Marya so much—and her husband so little—that she bends over backwards for Marya’s sake even after Marya, in theory, upends her marriage. Though her behavior proves twisted at times—thanks to the stress of an abusive marriage, a fear of losing what societal power she does have, and, quite possibly, the jealousy she feels seeing Marya, for whom she feels considerable affection, with her husband—Lois ultimately manages to escape the cruel, patriarchal world in which she lives through her kindness towards a woman she should, by all social customs, hate. And she is able to accomplish this transcendence through love: erotic, desirous love that, though hindered by the necessity of her husband to her survival, finds its covert outlets all the same.

Rhys’s short story “Till September Petronella” presents a relationship between women remarkably similar to the one Marya and Lois share, in which the narrator, Petronella, pines for a female friend who has left her alone in London even as she accepts the company of various men she encounters. In this short story, Petronella’s cognitive dissonance regarding her interactions with men echoes Marya’s psychological detachment from her relationship with Heidler. Much like Marya’s mental life centers around Lois even as she—mostly for practical reasons—sleeps with Lois’s husband, so Petronella pines for her friend Estelle even as she partakes in sordid encounters with random men. For Petronella, men are a means of survival—they give her food, money, cab rides, and train tickets—but she derives little enjoyment from her relationships with them: when left to her own devices, her thoughts inevitably return to her friend Estelle, whom she expects to never see again. The glimpses of the friendship with Estelle provided by Petronella’s discourse serve to break up the bleak, dirty atmosphere that permeates the story: Estelle was someone who made Petronella happy, and, now that she is gone from Petronella’s

life, Petronella clings to her romance-tinged memories of her—while at the same time fighting to suppress, and distract herself from, her own grief. “Till September Petronella” is, more than anything, an illustration of loss and its aftermath—an illustration that speaks volumes to the extent to which Rhys’s protagonists prioritize other women in their internal lives even as their external lives revolve around men.

From the moment the story begins, Petronella frames everything she does, and everything that happens to her, in the context of Estelle’s absence. The story begins with her packing for her trip with Marston, and, as she packs, she thinks not of the trip on which she is about to embark—or, more importantly, the man with whom she is to take this trip—but instead takes care to pack the “striped dress” that Estelle had helped her choose (125). Her thoughts meander to her livelihood—she now makes “nearly five pounds a week,” and this steady income provides her a source of comfort—but, for a reason she claims not to know, she feels depressed, though she feels certain, “this depression had nothing to do with money” (125). She seems to blame herself for her sadness—and emotion that leads her thoughts return to Estelle:

I often wished I was like Estelle, this French girl who lived in the big room on the ground floor. She had everything so cut-and-dried, she walked the tightrope so beautifully, not even knowing she was walking it. I’d think about the talks we had, and her clothes, and her scent, and the way she did her hair, and that when I went into her room it didn’t seem like a Bloomsbury bed-sitting room—and when it comes to Bloomsbury bed-sitting rooms I know what I’m talking about. (125)

The way in which Petronella envies Estelle’s ability to “walk the tightrope so beautifully”—presumably, to do what she needs to survive without outwardly seeming to suffer—echoes Marya’s admiration, and then envy, of Lois’s ability to cope in *Quartet*: “‘She simply is more plucky than I am,’ she thought. ‘She puts a better face on it’” (53). Petronella’s admiration of

Estelle speaks to the tendency of Rhys's protagonists to acknowledge their own inability to cope—to adroitly play social games—and to believe—rightly so, Rhys suggests—that their lives would be easier if they had these abilities. “Till September Petronella” was published more than thirty years later than *Quartet*, and Petronella's attitude towards women who “walk the tightrope” of life better than she differs greatly from the resentful attitude Marya develops towards Lois. *Quartet* fictionalizes a time in Rhys's life when she was young and in a relationship that consumed her; she seems to write her narrator “Till September Petronella” as being much more accepting of her own turbulent, detached nature than Marya is of her own. This difference may stem from the fact that, unlike Lois does Marya, Estelle seems to have shown Petronella nothing but kindness—significantly, unlike Lois, Estelle does not seem to have a patriarchal male in her life to compromise her integrity.

Petronella's musings about Estelle's “scent” and “the way she did her hair” suggests an erotic component to Petronella's feelings for her. Petronella pining for their “talks,” meanwhile, suggests that Estelle was a person with whom she was able to genuinely bond—and to Rhys's protagonists, establishing an emotional connection with anyone constitutes an accomplishment. The loss of Estelle—both as a friend, and, quite possibly, a romantic interest—precipitates Petronella's depression, a fact she almost admits to herself: “It was after Estelle left, telling me she was going to Paris and wasn't sure whether she was coming back, that I struck a bad patch” (126). Her failure to admit to herself that Estelle's absence caused her depression speaks to her need to protect herself emotionally; the rest of the short story portrays her efforts to distance herself from her grief. And, similarly to Marya, she finds an outlet for this grief in the company of men; however, unlike Marya, she stops short of declaring any sort of lasting love “love” for

any of the men with whom she distracts herself. While she does write, “I love Julian. Julian, I kissed you once, but you didn’t know” (132) on a piece of paper, she quickly destroys this piece of paper when Julian is cruel to both her and his girlfriend, Frankie, and she proceeds to forget about Julian when she leaves his company. While Marya searches for emotional solace she does not find in Heidler, Petronella seems to give up on the possibility of directly filling the emotional void left by Estelle, which shows that Petronella possesses more emotional self-awareness than Marya.

Though Petronella’s relationship with Estelle shows her to be capable of forming, and enjoying, strong bonds with other women, her interactions with Frankie suggest that, in general, she has learned to be wary of trusting other women. Frankie cannot be a good friend to Petronella because Frankie’s world revolves around the men in her life: though she certainly is not spineless, she proves herself hyper-aware of Julian and Marston’s moods and preferences, and she is happy to alter her behavior to suit their wishes. At one point, as the two women make food for the men in the kitchen, Frankie says to Petronella, ““Oh well, it’s a pity, because Julian’s in a bad mood today. However, don’t take any notice of him. Don’t start a row whatever you do, just smooth it over”” (133). Her desire to keep Julian happy at all costs echoes Lois’s willingness to bend over backwards for Heidler in *Quartet*, although Frankie’s apparent loyalty to Julian seems more than pragmatic: a fact evidenced by her willingness to betray Petronella to him. When Petronella confesses to Frankie that Marston makes her “go cold” (129), Frankie runs to Julian with this information—and Julian uses it to abuse Petronella to Marston: ““Why, do you know that she told Frankie last night that she can’t bear you and that the only reason she has anything to do with you is because she wants money. What do you think of that? Does that open

your eyes?” (137). Though Frankie seems to jump in to defend Petronella against this tirade, saying, “You’d no right to repeat that. You promised you wouldn’t and anyway you’ve exaggerated it” (137), her attempt at defense ends with an ugly, personal, misogynistic insult towards her boyfriend that has nothing to do with defending Petronella’s motives: “‘It’s all very well for you to talk about how inferior women are, but you get more like your horrible mother every moment’” (137). Frankie is not weak—she shows herself capable of standing up Julian, but she herself has so much internalized misogyny that she cannot be a friend, or even an ally, to Petronella. She herself even admits to her own hatred of women, stating, “‘The other day I spent a long time trying to decide which were worse—men or women.’ ‘I wonder.’ ‘Women are worse’” (129), later elaborating, “‘They’ll kick your face to bits if you let them. And shriek with laughter at the damage. But I’m not going to let them—oh no...Marston’s always talking about you’” (129).

Considering the warmth of the memories Petronella has of Estelle, Rhys likely means for the reader to interpret Frankie’s remarks about women as off the mark. Frankie seems to have immediately categorized Petronella as one such woman who would “kick your face to bits”—a belief made clear by her quick transition from her generalized description of women to Petronella’s relationship with Marston—and this perception further speaks to the extent to which Rhys means for Frankie’s comments to be perceived as inaccurate, as the reader knows Petronella to be incapable of kicking anyone to bits. Superficially, Frankie is much like Lois: she is compromised by her attachment to a man. However, unlike Lois, Frankie feels no genuine warmth towards other women. Frankie even has the strength to stand up to Julian—something Lois cannot bring herself to do to Heidler because she is too afraid. Rhys portrays Frankie as

choosing to be in her relationship, rather than being trapped in it as Lois is in hers, and this difference explains why Frankie and Estelle fail to form any sort of bond. Frankie herself is a misogynist, and in this way she is more like Heidler than she is like Lois.

Petronella recognizes, and mentally resists, misogyny throughout the short story with a sensitivity that seems ahead of its time. When Marston says to her, ““Don’t look as if you’d lost a shilling and found a sixpence then”” (131), she muses, ““That’s the way they always talk. ‘You look as if you’d lost a shilling and found sixpence,’ they say; ‘You look very perky, I hardly recognized you,’ they say; ‘*Look gay,*’ they say”” (131). And, sure enough, when Petronella hitchhikes with the man who later takes her out to dinner and buys her a train ticket, the first thing he says to her is, ““Well, you look as if you’d lost a shilling and found sixpence”” (139). This man—who, it seems, is just like any other man to her—passes in and out of her existence with little fanfare; so, too, does the man she meets in the taxi cab, whom she lets kiss her, but who makes little impression on her consciousness as she walks through London with him: instead, her thoughts return to Estelle, and she remembers eating with her, and how Estelle would say to her, ““You must have one good meal a day”” because ““it is *necessary*”” (148). Her indulgence of this happy memory of Estelle while she sordidly walks the streets of London in the company of a stranger displays the extent of her cognitive dissonance surrounding her actions throughout the story. With Estelle gone, she is attached to no one, and so with whom she associates does not matter to her. Her despair surrounding this fact emerges potently at the end of the story, when she passes Estelle’s old apartment on her way back to her own: ““Past the door of Estelle’s room, not feeling a thing as I passed it, because she had gone and I knew she would not ever come back”” (150). Petronella enacts the trademarks of a Rhys protagonist in the sense that

she detaches herself not only from the world around her, but also from her own feelings. Her evident ability to form relationships with other women and grieve them when they end, though she of course attempts to detach herself from this grief, meanwhile, exhibits a less-acknowledged trait of the Rhysian protagonist: a woman who, though she struggles to form connections in a dismal world, cherishes these connections when they do occur in her life. And, most of the time, these connections occur between women.

Scholarly dismissal of Lois and Marya's relationship contributes to a larger pattern in Rhys criticism: the apparent compulsion of literary critics to pigeonhole Rhys's protagonists as masochistic, mistreated women whose existences revolve around their various ill-fated relationships with men. Though men certainly constitute a practicality in the lives of these women—as sources of money, and as socially acceptable, easily accessible sexual partners—Rhys consistently portrays the most important, emotionally-charged, and complex relationships in their lives as being those they have with other women. Through these relationships with other women, Rhys's protagonists are often able to find emotional gratification, and even grace and happiness, that are otherwise absent from their lives. Rhys's women are not masochists seeking men to mistreat them: they are disengaged women, ill-equipped to thrive, or even survive, in a world that is often cruel to them, who spend their lives in search of beauty and warmth. And often they are able to find solace in their relationships—sisterly, romantic, and otherwise—with other women. That criticism so often overlooks these textually obvious relationships speaks to the devaluation of relationships between women in our culture, and needs remedy.

“There is no justice”: Rhys’s Women as Advocates

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette notes of the fourteen-year-old “St. Innocenzia,” whose skeleton lies under the altar of the chapel of the convent where Antoinette lives, “We do not know her story, she is not in the book” (48). “The book” refers to a collection of stories about female saints from which Mother St. Justine reads to the students, about whom Antoinette muses, “The saints we hear about were all very beautiful and wealthy. All were loved by rich and handsome young men” (49). Such simple observations are easily overlooked, yet the mental leap Antoinette makes on “St. Innocenzia’s” behalf—acknowledging that there is more to the bones under the altar than sainthood and “innocence”—constitutes a reflection of the entire premise of Rhys’s final and most famous novel. Much like Antoinette wonders about the life of the female child-saint under the altar, Rhys wondered about the life of the “madwoman in the attic” as she read *Jane Eyre*—whose story was also “not in the book”—and this acknowledgment prompted Rhys to write her most overtly politically-charged. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys concludes the work she began at the advent of her career: she gives an unflinching, rage-imbued account of what life is like for women with little money—particularly those of non-white or non-English origins—struggling to survive within the wilderness of English society, and she does so through sensitive and intense female characters whose presences and voices dominate her novels, and whose victimizations, rather than revealing weakness or masochism, constitute the inevitable result of living in a world that Rhys found cruel and unfair to women—particularly women who never learn to smother their own complex humanity. In tandem with her denunciation of the brutally daft British patriarchy, she unequivocally condemns British colonialism in all its piggishness. *Wide Sargasso Sea*—which ends with an arson borne of justified female rage—

constitutes Rhys's own final act of rebellion against the British patriarchy: an act to which her career had been building for decades, and which ends on a note of fierceness that, contrary to what more superficial readings of her earlier works might suggest, proves consistent with a theme of feminine strength and self-knowledge that permeates her entire body of writing.

Rhys portrays both Antoinette and her mother, Annette, as capable of clinging to, and defending, their beliefs in justice for vulnerable people—including themselves—even as they lose control of their lives. As Annette watches her home burn to the ground, she screams at her husband, ““You would not listen, you sneered at me, you grinning hypocrite, you ought not to live either, you know so much, don't you? Why don't you go out and ask them to let you go? Say how innocent you are. Say you have always trusted them”” (36). Even as she watches the black islanders destroy her home, Annette has the presence of mind and empathic ability to understand that her husband—and other white colonizers—bears the ultimate blame for the islanders' justified rage, and she does not hesitate to express this point of view to her husband: an assertion of self for which he punishes her. Mr. Mason banishes Annette to a house in the country not because she is “mad,” but because she questions his authority. Antoinette's mother is a woman whose stubborn sense of justice outweighs her survival instincts. Her eventual insanity stems not from mental weakness, but quite the opposite: Rhys's women are so resistant to sacrificing their senses of self in order to conform to the popular wisdom of British culture that they paradoxically find themselves unable to survive.

In Rhys's depiction of British society, the most vibrant women are the most disenfranchised as a direct result of white, English-born men holding power over them by virtue of the law. Marital law gave Mr. Mason the power to banish his wife after his marriage to her

linked her to colonialism in the eyes of the black Jamaicans, leading them to destroy her home—a point Antoinette makes indirectly as she accuses her own husband, Rochester, of racism, during a section of the novel narrated by Rochester himself. Antoinette makes this accusation long after Rochester has made clear both his hatred of her and his belief in his superiority over her and the other Jamaicans, black, coloured, and white—points of view made clear by his treatment of her and the servants, as well as by his infidelity with the servant girl, Amélie:

“Christophine is an evil old woman and you know it as well as I do,” I said. “She won’t stay here very much longer.”

“She won’t stay here very much longer,” she mimicked me, “and nor will you, nor will you. I thought you liked the black people so much,” she said, still in that mincing voice, “But that’s just a lie like everything else. You like the light brown girls better, don’t you? You abused the planters and made up stories about them, but you do the same thing. You send the girl away quicker, and with no money or less money and that’s all the difference.”

“Slavery was not a matter of liking or disliking,” I said, trying to speak calmly, “It was a question of justice.”

“‘Justice,’ she said. ‘I’ve heard that word. It’s a cold word. I tried it out,’ she said, still speaking in a low voice. ‘I wrote it down. I wrote it down several times and always it looked like a damn cold lie to me. There is no justice,’ She drank some more rum and went on, ‘My mother whom you all talk about, what justice did she have? My mother sitting in the rocking-chair speaking about dead horses and dead grooms and a black devil kissing her sad mouth. Like you kissed mine,’ she said. (132-133)

In this tirade, Antoinette not only echoes the accusations her mother makes of Mr. Mason as their house burns down, but also connects the evils of colonialism to the British law’s treatment of women. British law ended slavery in the name of “justice,” yet, Antoinette notes, white men still have the power to subjugate black people, especially black women. The fact that she writes down the word “justice” in order to understand it shows both her writerly inclinations—emphasizing the autobiographical aspect of Rhys’s final protagonist—and also shows that she, unlike her predecessors, gives ample thought to the societal forces at work around her. Her perspective on

her husband's infidelity emphasizes this ability to analyze the larger forces at work within her personal life: in her allusion to her husband and Amélie's dalliance, she faults him for discarding Amélie, rather than Amélie for seducing him—an interpretation that echoes her mother's blaming of Mr. Mason when the islanders destroy their home. Antoinette and her mother both have the capacity to view events in their personal lives through the lens of the broader forces they know to be at work in these situations: they both, ultimately and rightly, know to blame the invasive Englishman for the turmoil in their lives. Meanwhile, Rhys's decision to narrate the scene from Rochester's first-person point of view allows the reader to witness the effect that Antoinette's rebellion has on him: the uses of the words "mimicked" and "mincing" to describe his perception of her dialogue implies that he feels mocked, and therefore undermined. Rhys shows the triggering of masculine rage from the male perspective, and, in doing so, she shows Rochester's patheticness.

In Antoinette's discussion of her husband's treatment of Amélie, she alludes to the rape of black women by white slaveowners when she says, "You send the girl away quicker, and with no money or less money and that's all the difference" (133). Her implicit equation of her husband's treatment of Amélie—using her for sex while still finding her inferior, and while possessing power over her—to the rape of black slaves by white men shows her hyperawareness of the extent to which her husband, as a white man, has the ability to wield the socially-embedded power granted by race and money over a black servant girl. Though Amélie, played an active role in seducing Rochester, Antoinette understands that his willingness to have sex with her despite his racial hatred for her and his race-based power over her speaks to a deep-seated brutishness. That she has the empathy and sense of justice to defend her husband's seductress

against him indicates a mindset around sex, and broader relations between men and women, well ahead of her era.

Antoinette's recognition of, and anger regarding, the abuse of black women by white men complicates the racist trope Rhys employs when Antoinette mentions her mother's rape by a black man. Although Rhys's mother is not a white woman, she is white-presenting enough to have married two Englishmen, and Rhys's graphic description of Annette's sexual assault by her black "caretaker" earlier in the novel reeks of the basest racist stereotypes. The ugliness of this scene—the extent to which it appeals to, and reinforces, a disgusting and long-enduring racist trope—is undeniable, yet Rhys's depictions of black male violence towards Antoinette and her mother possess a nuance that should not be dismissed: Rhys portrays Antoinette and her mother—as disenfranchised, isolated, white-presenting Creole women—as providing convenient outlets for black male anger towards white male colonizers. Antoinette's half-brother, Daniel, displaces his rage for the white father who neglected him onto his Creole half-sister—and he ironically does so by appealing to his half-sister's English husband, who feels nothing but disgust for black people. Rhys emphasizes the extent of Daniel's willingness to sacrifice his self-respect in order to gain the trust of a man for whom he harbors nothing but resentment when he writes to Antoinette's husband, "I hear you young and handsome with a kind word for all, black, white, also coloured. But I hear too that the girl is beautiful like her mother was beautiful, and you bewitch with her" (89). Daniel is all too willing to play into the narrative of the kind, well-meaning white colonizer becoming the helpless victim of the bewitching Creole woman in order to enlist Antoinette's husband in exacting his anger towards his father—a man very similar to Antoinette's husband in socioeconomic status and power—on his half-sister, because he knows

that Antoinette, unlike their father and unlike her husband, is vulnerable enough to fall victim to his anger. The Englishmen themselves are too powerful for him to touch, so he makes do with the daughter of one—and her English husband is only too quick to believe him. Through the actions of both white Englishmen and black male islanders throughout the novel, Rhys seems to comment on the universal tendency of women to bear the brunt of male frustration—and Antoinette understands this phenomenon, too, illustrated when she screams at her husband, “My mother sitting in a rocking-chair speaking about dead horses and dead grooms and a black devil kissing her sad mouth. Like you kissed mine” (133). Antoinette recognizes that, by the word of English marital law, she is just as subject to the rage- and sex-fueled whims of her husband as her mother is to those of her caretaker—and as her mother was to Mr. Mason—and it is her inability to accept this way of being that drives her to become the “madwoman in the attic.”

Through their rage-filled discourse during the most disempowering moments of their lives, Annette and Antoinette both show themselves to be advocates for those they perceive to be downtrodden—including themselves. Their fierce commitment to, and willingness to express, their own beliefs—and their refusal to sacrifice their individualities within their marriages—shows that they themselves remain empowered, even as their circumstances subjugate them. They respond to hopelessness not with despair, but with rage—a tendency they share with Rhys’s earlier, less overtly “strong” protagonists. In *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, for instance, Julia Martin, a woman in her thirties who has spent much of life living off of money given to her by men who do not particularly like or respect her, responds to her sister Norah’s attempts to comfort her after she breaks down in tears during her mother’s cremation, ““Sorry? But it was rage. Didn’t you understand that? Don’t you know the difference between sorrow and rage?””

(134). Though Julia does not explain why she felt enraged, or at whom the rage was directed, the diatribe she delivers to Norah soon after suggests that she believes that her mother deserved a better life—and that she herself deserves a better life:

“People are such beasts, such mean beasts,” she said. “They’ll let you die for want of a decent word, and then they’ll lick the feet of anybody they can get anything out of. And do you think I’m going to cringe to a lot of mean, stupid animals? If all good, respectable people had one face, I’d spit in it. I wish they all had one face so that I could spit in it.” (135)

And Julia follows through with the beliefs she espouses in this statement—she severs ties with both Norah and their Uncle Griffiths, the latter of whom she calls an “abominable old man” (136), despite badly needing their money. Even after years of hardship, Julia chooses self-possession over her need to survive. “Spirited” is not a word often used to describe the protagonists of Rhys’s earlier works, but Julia Martin shares with Antoinette a fiery vivacity that, rather than helping her to survive a cruel world, only makes her more vulnerable to its coldness.

Rhys explicitly establishes a link between vulnerability and individuality towards the end of *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, when Julia—through free indirect discourse—observes: “When you are a child you are yourself and you know and see everything prophetically. And then suddenly something happens and you stop being yourself; you become what others force you to be. You lose your wisdom and your soul” (158). Though William Wordsworth is not a literary figure commonly associated with Jean Rhys, the idea she expresses in this passage evokes his “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” “The Youth, who daily farther from the east/Must travel still, is Nature’s Priest,/And by the vision splendid/Is on his way attended;/At length the Man perceives it die away,/And fade into the light of common day” (72-77). Rhys portrays in children an instinctive sense of justice and inherent capacity for compassion that few adults in Rhys’s

work share, but that her heroines retain. Julia herself, despite thinking that she has lost her connections to her instincts, has kept much of her own “wisdom” and “soul”—a quality displayed by the fact that she has such a thought at all. She actively resists becoming “what others force you to be,” and this stubborn and definite sense of self differentiates her from nearly every other character in the novel. When her wealthy former lover and “friend for life,” Mr. James, shows her the photographs he has taken and says, “I wish I could get somebody who knows to tell me whether it’s any good or not,” Julia notes, “He was anxious because he did not want to love the wrong thing. Fancy wanting to be told what you must love!” (115). Mr. James has every advantage in life compared to Julia—namely, wealth and maleness—yet he lacks faith in his own thoughts and feelings. He has lost his “soul.” Julia, however, with her childish stubbornness and emotionality, cannot fathom needing to be told how to feel—or even behaving in a manner at odds with her feelings. Hence, her inability to grovel to her uncle when he demeans her: she believes in her own worth, even if no one else does, and this refusal to conform repeatedly leaves her cast out of the “sacred circle of warmth” (79).

Julia’s moments of self-possession occur most often in response to aggressive or domineering male behavior—a tendency that foreshadows the overt feminism of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. One scene early in the novel communicates what I believe to be Rhys’s own anger towards the way men treat women they perceive to be vulnerable:

That night, coming back from her meal, a man followed her. When she had turned from the Place St Michel to the darkness of the quay he came up to her, muttering proposals in a low, slithery voice. She told him sharply to go away. But he caught hold of her arm, and squeezed it as hard as he could by way over answer.

She stopped. She wanted to hit him. She was possessed with one of those fits of rage which were becoming part of her character. She wanted to fly at him and strike him, but she thought that he would probably hit her back.

She faced him and said: ‘Let me tell you, you are—you are...’ the word came to her. ‘You are *ignoble*.’

‘Not at all,’ answered the man in an aggrieved voice. ‘I have some money and I am willing to give it to you. Why do you say that I am *ignoble*?’

They were now arrived at Julia’s hotel. She went in, and pushed the swing-door as hard as she could into his face. (59)

Julia chooses the word “ignoble” here, marking her justified anger towards her pursuer: it implies a level of moral judgment—the kind of moral judgment that many observers might impose on Julia for looking like a prostitute. Rhys frames the interaction between them within the larger societal norms that lead it to take place: because Julia is a woman walking by herself at night, the man believes he not only can get away with following and grabbing her, but that he has a right to do so. His “aggrieved” response to Julia’s condemnation shows the extent to which he feels justified in his behavior. In this scene, Rhys challenges the idea that women who dress or behave a certain way are “asking for it”—a concept that certainly existed in the early twentieth century, even if it had not been explicitly articulated.

Uncle Griffiths’ behavior towards Julia later in the novel echoes the overt physical violence with which the man on the street treats her—and Julia cannot abide this treatment, either. As they walk up the stairs to Uncle Griffiths’ apartment, Uncle Griffiths “gripped the upper part of her arm to guide her along the passage” (59)—an action reminiscent of the way the man on the street “caught hold of her arm, and squeezed it as hard as he could” (80). Despite this dominant gesture, Julia feels “a great desire to please him, to make him look kindly at her” (81). This impulse seems rooted in Julia’s childhood, when, “he had said that she was pretty, and this had thrilled her. At that time he had represented to the family the large and powerful male. She did not remember her father well” (80). Rhys’s explicit description of Uncle Griffiths as a “large and powerful male”—repeated during a crucial scene later in the novel—serves to frame his brutish behavior as characteristic of the general figure of the “large and powerful male.” While

Julia initially responds to his presence with a desire to please—a response she has been socialized to enact—she quickly asserts herself when he insults her relationship with her husband:

He said: ‘I thought he was supposed to have some money. He must have had some money, gallivanting about as you did. Why didn’t you make him settle something on you?’

‘When he had money, he gave me a lot,’ said Julia. She added in a low voice: ‘He gave me lovely things—but really lovely things.’

‘I never heard such nonsense in my life,’ said Uncle Griffiths sturdily.

Suddenly, because of the way he said that, Julia felt contemptuous of him. She thought: ‘I know you. I bet you’ve never bought lovely things for anybody. I bet you’ve never given anybody a lovely thing in your life. You wouldn’t know a lovely thing if you saw it.’

Because she felt such contempt her nervousness left her. (83)

Julia’s reaction to her uncle’s dismissal of something she values, beauty, shows that she not only has the bravery to defy her family’s patriarch, but also feels superior to him. She finds him lacking in sensibility—her direct thought, “‘you wouldn’t know a lovely thing if you saw it,’” suggests that she finds his mentality inferior to hers. Her realization of his brutishness allows her to feel “contempt” for him; the use of this word in her discourse emphasizes the fact that she considers him beneath her. Though she does not declare the way she feels about him, when he puts “his hand out kindly” after giving her a pound, she “walked past him without taking it.” This interaction that mirrors the way in which the man on the street feels entitled to touch Julia because he offers her money. Julia does not feel that she owes her uncle any affection, regardless of what he perceives as his “generosity” towards her. Though he is the dominant patriarchal force in her family, she believes he is beneath her. He has only given her what she thinks she is owed.

Julia’s unwillingness to allow Uncle Griffiths the position of absolute authority he believes he deserves ultimately precipitates her expulsion from the family. After her mother’s

funeral, as the family gathers in the living room, Julia engages in a subtle act of rebellion that is enough to upset the power dynamics of the family:

When luncheon was over, Uncle Griffiths sat in the arm-chair and went on talking, eagerly, as if the sound of his own voice laying down the law to his audience of females reassured him. He talked and talked. He talked about life, about literature, about Dostoievsky.

He said: ‘Why see the world through the eyes of an epileptic?’

Julia spoke mechanically, as one’s foot shoots out when a certain nerve in the knee is struck: ‘But he might see things very clearly, mightn’t he? At moments.’

‘Clearly?’ said Uncle Griffiths. ‘Why clearly? How d’you mean clearly?’

Nobody answered.

Norah said: ‘Julia, will you come out here for a minute? I want to talk to you.

(132-133)

“Laying down the law” continues a theme she introduces early in the novel: the inherent maleness of the law, as well as the weakness of the men who wield it. When Julia confronts Mr. Mackenzie in the café, she embarrasses him by loudly asking, “‘Why did you pay a lawyer to bully me?’” (32)—a question that mortifies him because it accurately describes what he did. He paid a lawyer to “put the fear of God into her”—in his discourse—so that she would not publicize the love letters he sent her containing phrases such as “‘I would like to put my throat under your feet’” (28). The scene with Mr. Mackenzie emphasizes the cowardice of the men who rely on the artificial authority the law grants them to accomplish their means. Mr. Mackenzie, through his lawyer, has the power to have Julia deported, but he himself is terrified of her—a fear illustrated by the “unutterable relief” he feels when she leaves the café (34). Similarly, Uncle Griffiths uses the artificial power granted to him by his status as family patriarch to validate his own daft opinions—and his captive audience, for the most part, bows to his authority.

Julia's "mechanical" instinct to interrupt her uncle, suggests a primitiveness that counteracts the constructed nature of his patriarchal power. She argues with him as naturally as "one's foot shoots out when a certain nerve in the knee is struck"—her childlike sense of right and wrong overrides her knowledge of her subordinate status in the household, and even her sense of self-preservation. Her unpremeditated impulse to defend Dostoevsky, of all people, does not derive from the fact that she finds her uncle irritating and disagrees with him—she likely disagreed with, and found irritating, much of what he said throughout his speechifying on "life" and "literature"—but from his dismissal the worth of a person because of a factor outside of that person's control. Julia does not so much think that this behavior is wrong, but feels that it is wrong—her reaction is automatic. Uncle Griffiths attempts to dismiss Dostoevsky's entire body of work because Dostoevsky has an illness. Julia defends Dostoevsky because she cannot tolerate witnessing someone as daft and insensitive as Uncle Griffiths denigrate the mind and work of a perceptive person who happens to fail to meet the status quo—a denunciation Uncle Griffiths, whom Rhys has established possesses little sensitivity to beauty, believes himself qualified to make. By defending a creative, mentally ill person against a stable, insensate, patriarchal Englishman, Julia advocates on behalf of the weak against the strong. That she does so "mechanically" suggests that, rather than deriving from a place of intellectual thought, this instinct to defend comes from somewhere deeper in her—somewhere related to the childish morality that both empowers her and leads to her subjugation throughout the novel. Her sense of justice compels her to challenge the family patriarch, and her doing so causes such a disruption that her sister decides to take her out of the room—and incident that leads to her expulsion from the family.

Julia's resistance to male authority stands in stark contrast to the behavior she observes in women around her. In one scene, while sitting in a café, Julia observes: "The girls were perky and pretty, but it was strange how many of the older women looked drab and hopeless, with timid, hunted expressions. They looked ashamed of themselves, as if they were begging the world in general not to notice that they were women or to hold it against them" (69-70). "Hunted" evokes the earlier scene in which the man chases Julia down the street; the "drab and hopeless" quality Julia observes in the older women seems to not stem from age itself, but instead from years of being mistreated. They look "ashamed" of this drabness likely because they no longer appeal to the male gaze, and have therefore lost their societal value. Julia, however, with her love of makeup and beautiful clothes, chooses to continue to make herself beautiful—and, in her case, this pursuit of beauty does not seem to be linked to the male gaze. Her behavior towards the man who attacks her as she walks down the street shows that she believes she has both the right to look beautiful and simultaneously be left alone—a radical concept then, and a radical concept now.

The obsession Rhys's female characters have with makeup and clothing expresses their own vitality. After spending weeks secluded in a hotel room, Julia reenergizes herself, in part, by imagining the clothes she will buy for herself: "She thought of new clothes with passion, with voluptuousness. She imagined the feeling of a new dress on her body and the scent of it, and her hands emerging from long black sleeves" (20). "Passion" and "voluptuousness" read as out-of-place in the dreary world she inhabits; the surge of emotion Julia feels when imagining beautiful clothes mirrors the surges of rage she experiences when she defies people who mistreat her. Significantly, she indulges her fantasy of new clothes shortly before she summons the courage to confront Mr. Mackenzie in a café—the thought of purchasing clothes, like the thought of getting

revenge on a man who mistreated her, shows that she values herself. Her desire for new clothes goes beyond aesthetics: her sensual description of their scent and texture gives her longing for them a visceral element, and therefore a vice-like connotation.

These “indulgences” challenge the prevailing opinion that women in Julia’s position—poor women—should not waste their money on frivolous things. Norah expresses this opinion overtly which she says to Julia, ““And who’s better dressed—you or I?”” (75), to which Julia responds: “Yes, d’you know why that is? Just before I came over here I spent six hundred francs on clothes, because I thought that if I was too shabby you’d all be ashamed of me and would give me the cold shoulder”” (75). Julia’s assertion is not entirely truthful—she bought the clothes first and foremost for the pleasure she would feel upon seeing herself dressed in them. However, she does buy them for the sake of her mother and sister to an extent, but for a different reason than she suggests to Norah. She does not worry about her family thinking of her as low-class or unkempt, as the word “shabby” implies, but instead primarily feels the need to appear beautiful to them. Her interest lies in beauty for beauty’s sake—as does her sister’s. Norah resents Julia because she herself feels smothered by the drabness of her life, and this jealousy is evidenced by her focus on her sister’s clothes during their argument. Like Julia, Norah values “lovely things,” and she resents that Julia refuses to deprive herself of “lovely things” simply because she is poor. Julia’s brief and dismal romantic fling, Horsfield, notes this aspect of her character with some disdain soon after he meets her, when he thinks of her family, “They would be members of the vast crowd that bears on its back the label, ‘No money’ from the cradle to the grave...And this one had rebelled. Not intelligently, but violently and instinctively. He saw the whole thing” (55). While the use of the phrase “this one” suggests Horsfield’s cynical objectification of Julia, he is astute enough to perceive the “instinctive” quality of her “rebellion.” The impulsive, yet spiritual

and childlike, way in which Julia interacts with the world evokes the Wordsworthian concept of children as prophets who, in becoming adults, must leave behind their transcendent lives. Julia never fully leaves this phase of existence, and it results in the externally wretched quality of her adult life: her belief that she deserves “beautiful things” prevents her from saving enough money to ascend in society, or even reach moderate stability. Norah, who has retained a similar childlike interest in beauty, has separated herself from her instincts enough to behave in a “responsible” manner—and her self-deprivation leads her to quarrel with her sister, with whom she has quite a lot in common.

Rhys explicitly expresses the cause of Norah’s resentment towards her sister when she briefly narrates Norah’s consciousness shortly before her mother’s death: “Everybody had said: ‘You’re wonderful, Norah.’ But they did not help. They just stood around watching her youth die, and her beauty die, and her soft heart grow hard and bitter” (104). However, despite Norah’s assessment of herself, Julia perceives beauty in her sister. When Norah says to Julia, “‘I expect you find all this very sordid and ugly, don’t you?’”, Julia “said: ‘No, no.’ But she stopped because she was unable to put her emotion into words. At that moment her sister seemed to her like a character in a tremendous tragedy moving, dark, tranquil, and beautiful, across a background of yellowish snow” (101-102). The feelings associated with this rich and abstract image, for Julia, transcend the artificiality of language. Language fails her because of its constructed nature; in her sister, she perceives the childish instinctualism that she herself preserves, and this perception manifests for Julia as a gorgeous, abstract image. The sisters recognize in each other the liveliness and beauty they both embody—a fact conveyed by Norah’s observation that: “she did not want to let Julia go. She hated her, but she felt more alive when her sister was with her” (106). The two possess an emotionality foreign to the bleak, cold world of

patriarchal England where they find themselves—an emotionality they inherited from their mother, who herself is foreign to English society.

As part of his argument that Julia's life consists of a series of failed relationships, Thomas Staley reads Norah as contrasting with, rather than sharing in, Julia's vivacity:

Besides Julia's two abortive relationships with Mackenzie and Horsfield, there is a third, with her sister, which also comes to a bitter end. The contrast drawn between Julia and her sister, Norah, is an important one. Norah represents the woman who played it straight and took no risks, who accepted her lower-middle-class life in all its drabness; she is among life's defeated women. Beneath her grim stoicism lurks an embittered, self-pitying woman. The narrator's opening description characterizes her:

Her head and arms drooped as she sat. She was pale, her colourless lips pressed tightly together into an expression of endurance. She seemed tired.

Her eyes were like Julia's, long and soft. Fine wrinkles were already forming in the corners. She wore a pale green dress with a red flower fixed in the lapel of the collar. But the dress had lost its freshness, so that the flower looked pathetic. (80)

Staley responds to the more superficial descriptions Rhys provides of Norah, and in doing so he fails to acknowledge the way in which Norah's self-pity illustrates the endurance of her vitality. The fact that she suffers so acutely because of the banality of her life shows that she craves something more than that life. Her attempt to look bright, though "pathetic," shows the endurance of her vivacity—of her craving for beautiful things—despite her drab life and her limited financial means. Norah may be pathetic, but the very root of that word means "feeling." She is far from Julia's opposite.

Julia's mother is the only person, besides Norah, for whom she attempts to appear beautiful: "In seven minutes she was ready, but when she looked in the glass she thought that she had never seen herself looking quite so ugly. It would be a kind of disrespect to go like that"

(119). Julia feels that looking ugly at her mother's deathbed would be a disservice to her mother, because her mother herself exudes beauty—even on her deathbed:

Julia stared at the bed and saw her mother's body—a huge, shapeless mass under the sheets and blankets—and her mother's face against the white-frilled pillow. Dark-skinned, with high cheek-bones and an aquiline nose. Her white hair, which was still long and thick, was combed into two plaits, which lay outside the sheet. One side of her face was dragged downwards. Her eyes were shut. She was breathing noisily, puffing out one corner of her mouth with each breath.

And yet the strange thing was that she was still beautiful, as an animal would be in old age.

Julia said: 'She's so much more beautiful than either of us.'

'Everybody who sees her says how nice she looks,' said Norah with pride and satisfaction in her voice. (97-98)

Julia's comparison of her mother to an "animal in old age" possesses a quality of reverence, rather than of dehumanization. Julia holds humans in low esteem—an opinion she explicitly expresses when she tells her sister, "Animals are better than we are, aren't they? They're not all the time pretending and lying and sneering, like loathsome human beings" (135), as she shouts at Norah before leaving the family. Julia perceives in her mother a transcendence of the human dullness and cruelty present in the world around her—a transcendence for which Julia's mother seems to have spent her entire life longing.

Julia's recollections of her mother revolve around her mother's yearning for South America. Significantly, these remembrances are triggered when Julia's mother mumbles something to Julia that she interprets as the word "orange-trees," which leads her to muse to her sister that their mother "must have been thinking of when she was in Brazil" (99). Norah responds, "You know, she called me Dobbin the other day. And I was feeling so exactly like some poor old cart-horse when she said it, too, that I simply had to laugh" (99-100). While orange-trees evoke Brazil, "Dobbin" evokes England and servitude—a wry comment that

suggests their mother, in her moments of lucidity, has sympathy for the plight of her more devoted daughter. Julia and Norah's mother also felt stifled by her life in England: Julia thinks that her mother accepted her move to England, "as a plant might have done. But sometimes you could tell she was sickening for the sun" (105). Like Julia's comparison of her mother to an animal, her comparison of her mother to a plant does not diminish her: in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, Rhys begins developing the ideal of nature as a near-sentient force, and those who are not afraid of it as possessing knowledge—and power—that is inaccessible and terrifying to those belonging to the structured, patriarchal world of British civilization.

Rhys's writing of the natural world in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* as something fragile, sacred, and feminine becomes most evident in the chapter entitled "Childhood." In a dreamy, vivid sequence, Julia remembers catching butterflies as a little girl—and her mother's telling reaction to her doing so:

You were walking along a long path, shadowed for some distance by trees. But at the end of the path was an open space and the glare of white sunlight. You were catching butterflies. You caught them by waiting until they settled, and the creeping up silently on tiptoe and squatting near them. Then, when they closed their wings, looking like a one-petalled flower, you grabbed them quickly, taking hold low down or the wings would break in your hand.

When you had caught the butterfly you put it away in an empty tobacco tin, which you had ready. And then you walked along, holding the tin to your ear and listening to the sound of the beating of wings against it. It was a very fascinating sound. You wouldn't have thought a butterfly could make such a row.

Besides, it was a fine thing to get your hand on something that a minute before had been flying around in the sun. Of course, what always happened was that it broke its wings; or else it would fray them so badly that by the time you had got it home and opened the box and hauled it out as carefully as you could it was so battered that you lost all interest in it. Sometimes it was too badly hurt to be able to fly properly

'You're a cruel, horrid child, and I'm surprised at you.'

And, of course, you simply did not answer this. Because you knew that what you had hoped had been to keep the butterfly in a comfortable cardboard-box and to give it the things it liked to eat. And if the idiot broke its own wings, that wasn't your fault, and the only thing to do was to chuck it away and try again. If people didn't understand that,

you couldn't help it. (159-160)

This scene constitutes a blatant, yet apt, metaphor foreshadowing the marital entrapment Rhys illustrates most damningly in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Significantly, as a young child, Julia does not realize she behaves cruelly by trapping the butterfly—she intends to keep it in a “comfortable” cardboard box and “give it the things it liked to eat.” By portraying Julia as a tormentor in this scene, Rhys exemplifies the extent to which the behavior of young children serves as a mirror for the social norms amongst which they come of age. As an adult, Julia realizes the oblivious sadism of her childhood self—an awareness displayed by her consideration of the butterfly as sometimes being “too badly hurt to be able to fly properly.” However, she seems to only come by this awareness through the wisdom of her mother, whose voice—not specified to belong to her, but implied to—punctures this tale of childhood barbarity: ““You’re a cruel, horrid child, and I’m surprised at you.”” Julia’s remembrance of her mother’s damning comment—and her demonstrated knowledge of her own thoughtless ruthlessness as a little girl—shows that her mother’s harshly-conveyed wisdom trumped the cruel, patriarchal social customs of the world in which she grew up. Interestingly, Julia’s mother’s snappish reaction to Julia’s cruelty seems to stem from her own natural, childlike instinctiveness. Julia’s mother, as a woman raised outside of English society, has more of a connection to her childhood kindness than her own literal, English child. She helps Julia retain, and even uncover, the patriarchal norms that have already begun to smother her gentleness when she is still just a child.

The way in which societal norms warp childhood thinking and behavior leads to the death of aging, alcoholic Miss Verney in Rhys’s morbid short story, “Sleep It Off Lady.” Miss Verney, having fallen by her shed, calls to a neighbor’s child for help. Instead of helping her, however, the child, Deena, says, ““It’s no good my asking mum. She doesn’t like you and she doesn’t want

to have anything to do with you. She hates stuck up people. Everybody knows that you shut yourself up to get drunk. People can hear you falling about. ‘She ought to take more water with it,’ my mum says. Sleep it off lady,’ said this horrible child, skipping away” (385). Miss Verney then spends the night out in the freezing cold, and she dies the next day. That Deena parrots her mother when she speaks to Miss Verney shows that she learned to despise Miss Verney’s weakness—which manifests as an addiction—from the adults in her life; her “skipping away” emphasizes her youth and impressionability. Her childish lack of perspective makes a caricature of the judgmentalism she has learned from adults: her mother likely would have called the doctor on Miss Verney’s behalf; an adult would not leave a woman to freeze to death in the snow. But Deena, with her childish, simplistic view of the world, has absorbed the knowledge that Miss Verney is “bad,” and therefore does not deserve any human decency at all. Adult cruelty becomes all the more ugly when distilled through a child’s view of the world.

In Rochester, meanwhile, Rhys shows the way a childhood spent absorbing patriarchal societal values can impact a person in adulthood:

There was no answer so I asked Baptiste to bring me something to eat. He was sitting under the Seville orange tree at the end of the veranda. He served the food with such a mournful expression that I thought these people are very vulnerable. How old was I when I learned to hide what I felt? A very small boy. Six, five, even earlier. It was necessary, I was told, and that view I have always accepted. If these mountains challenge me, or Baptiste’s face, or Antoinette’s eyes, they are mistaken, melodramatic, unreal (England must be quite unreal and like a dream she said). (93)

In this passage, Rhys identifies describes a form of “traditional masculinity” that, in the 1980s—the decade after Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea*—progressive men’s groups such as the “mythopoetic movement” that Shepherd Bliss describes in his 1987 essay “Revisioning Masculinity” began to criticize and attempt to escape. Interestingly, these activists attempted to

reconnect with their repressed emotional natures by spending time in the woods, and some of them even considered Henry David Thoreau a role model. In a way, they attempted to reconnect with the inner, instinctual child Rhys identifies through Julia's discourse in the "Childhood" chapter—the inner child Rhys portrays English boys as having to smother at even younger ages than English girls. By evoking the image of a little boy who is not allowed to cry and directly relating this image to the emotionally detached, frightened man he becomes, Rhys identifies a concept that, at the time of *Wide Sargasso Sea's*, had not yet been named by feminist scholars. Rhys further illustrates the extent to which Antoinette's husband's behavior can be attributed to his English upbringing—rather than failings inherent to him—a scene that echoes that of little Julia and the butterflies:

A large moth, so large that I thought it was a bird, blundered into one of the candles, put it out and fell to the floor. 'He's a big fellow,' I said.

'Is it badly burned?'

'More stunned than hurt.'

I took the beautiful creature up in my handkerchief and put it on the railing. For a moment it was still and by the dim candlelight I could see the soft brilliant colours, the intricate pattern on the wings. I shook the handkerchief gently and it flew away.

'I hope that gay gentleman will be safe,' I said. (73-74)

Antoinette's husband not only treats the moth gently, but acknowledges its beauty—its "soft brilliant colors" and the "intricate pattern on the wings." He even identifies the moth as "male"—a "gay gentleman"—which suggests a sort of defiance of gender norms: the moth, despite its prettiness, gentleness, and status as a creature in need of rescue, reads to Rochester as male. Here, Rhys shows that Antoinette's husband possesses the potential for compassion and sensitivity—in this scene, he exhibits the vulnerability he learned to hide so religiously as a little boy.

In one tragic short story, published in her early “Left Bank” collection and entitled “The Sidi,” Rhys writes about a Moroccan in a French prison who meets his tragic end precisely because he fails to exhibit the “masculine” values Mr Rochester learned at an early age. The man, whom the narrator—known to the reader as “No. 54”—perceives as “quite a young man and beautiful as some savage Christ,” who “stays awake, night after night,” chanting his “invocations to Allah, the Compassionate” (69), voicing his grief to the entire prison. His behavior prompts the other prisoners to bang the walls “with angry fists for silence” (69). Eventually, the Moroccan becomes so ill that he refuses to leave his bed when ordered by the guards, and they beat him, calling him a “lousy nigger” (71). After the beating, he dies quietly in his cell, and No. 54—a more or less uninvolved spectator during the Sidi’s last days—suddenly finds himself struck by grief:

Then No. 54, horrified, knew that his beautiful neighbour was dead. He began to imagine those big laughing eyes which had been full of images of the vivid colour and the hot light of Morocco, closing on the cold, sombre walls of a French prison, the untidy, dirty bed, the fat fist—black-nailed, the red furious face and the loose mouth that spat curses of a ‘Roumi’ functionary.’ (72)

In typical Rhysian fashion, the narrator ironically juxtaposes the beauty of warmer, supposedly less-civilized climes with the cold, cruel, supposedly more-civilized world of Western Europe in this passage. The story is certainly one about race—the Sidi cannot endure the cold brutality of a French prison; he suffers openly, and the last words he hears are dehumanizing, racist slurs from his supposedly more-civilized captors. He incites the wrath of his captors not only because he is Moroccan, but because he shows emotion—he admits to his pain, and this admission infuriates the guards, just as it infuriates his fellow prisoners, who, as men, have learned from an early age to deny their pain their attention. He has not been socialized to survive a hypermasculine environment—and a men’s prison in Western Europe constitutes the most hypermasculine

environment Rhys can envision. Appropriately, the Sidi's punishment for his gentleness is to die in the most brutal fashion possible: he is beaten to death by men whose language is violence. By showing what happens to men who fail to become desensitized to their own emotions—who ask for mercy rather than clenching their fists—Rhys exposes the plight of men in Western European society: if they do not become like Rochester, they risk being treated like the Sidi.

The moth's rescue from the fire evokes a fate that befell another winged animal earlier in the novel: Antoinette's mother's parrot. As their house burns, Annette attempts to return to their home and retrieve the parrot—an effort that causes her to fight Mr. Mason “silently, twisting like a cat and showing her teeth” (38). Again, Rhys compares an emotion-fueled woman to an animal: Annette follows her instincts in this moment, prepared to rush into the flames to rescue a beautiful creature she loved. Significantly, Coco is sentenced to death by Mr. Mason himself: “After Mr Mason clipped his wings he grew very bad tempered, and though he would sit quietly on my mother's shoulder, he darted at everyone who came near her and pecked their feet” (38). Unlike the butterflies Julia caught and crippled as a child, Coco had his wings clipped as the result of a calculated decision to remove his ability to fly. Mr. Mason's mutilation of Coco echoes his treatment of both his wife and his stepdaughter: he deliberately sends Annette to a house in the country so that she cannot humiliate him; he deliberately removes Antoinette from the convent to sell her. Antoinette's husband, meanwhile, protects the moth's ability to fly—an act that shows that Rhys does not entirely blame him for his cruelty to Antoinette. Instead, she frames him as a product of English society.

Rhys portrays both Julia's mother and Annette, meanwhile, as being shaped by societies far, far removed from the ideals of British society. The direct opposition of Caribbean culture to the stodginess and cruelty of British culture epitomized by cruel, white male British characters

such as Mr Mason, Rochester, Julia's uncle, and Mr. Mackenzie becomes apparent in Rochester's observation that the island's mountains themselves—along with Antoinette's eyes and Baptiste's face—"challenge" his commitment to suppressing his emotions (93). Rochester feels threatened by the island—by the spirit Rhys portrays it as possessing, a spirit he encounters as he walks through the woods by himself:

I don't know how long it was before I began to feel chilly. The light had changed and the shadows were long. I had better get back before dark, I thought. Then I saw a little girl carrying a large basket on her head. I met her eyes and to my astonishment she screamed loudly, threw up her arms and ran. The basket fell off, I called after her, but she screamed again and ran faster. She sobbed as she ran, a small frightened sound. Then she disappeared. I must be within a few minutes of the path I thought, but after I had walked for what seemed a long time I found that the undergrowth and creepers caught at my legs and the trees closed over my head. I decided to go back to the clearing and start again, with the same result. It was getting dark. It was useless to tell myself I was not far from the house. I was lost and afraid among these enemy trees, so certain of danger that when I heard footsteps and a shout I did not answer. (95)

The little girl Rochester encounters screams when she sees him because she—with the prophetic foresight of childhood that Julia acknowledges in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*—knows him to be an intruder. His presence on the island spells disaster. Antoinette's husband, however, does not understand that she fears him for what he is: he says to Baptiste, "A child passed," who, "seemed very frightened when she saw me. Is there something wrong about this place?" (96). Baptiste avoids Antoinette's husband's question; however, he does later remark, "It's a long time I've been looking for you. Miss Antoinette frightened you come to harm" (96). Baptiste's comment suggests that he and Antoinette had reason to believe harm would befall Antoinette's husband in the woods; the fact that he says that Antoinette was frightened—but did not mention that he himself was frightened—suggests that he perhaps hoped that harm had befallen Antoinette's husband. Like the little girl Antoinette's husband encounters in the forest, Baptiste

recognizes Antoinette's husband as an intruder—and even the forest itself responds to the presence of an Englishman—an invader—the “undergrowth and creepers” that “clawed” at Antoinette's husband's legs, as well as the “trees” that “closed” over his head.”. In this moment, Antoinette's husband encounters something more powerful than himself: a dangerous power that diminishes the artificial power given to him by English law. At this moment, he grows to truly resent the island, its people—and his wife.

While Rochester finds himself at odds with the island and all its power, Antoinette herself straddles love and fear of it—an ambiguity that echoes that of her racial heritage. From the time she is a little girl, she feels in awe of the island, but also realizes she cannot be part of it:

Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible—the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell. Underneath the tree ferns, tall as forest tree ferns, the light was green. Orchids flourished out of reach or for some reason not to be touched. One was snaky looking, another like an octopus with long thin brown tentacle bare of leaves hanging from a twisted root. Twice a year the octopus orchid flowered—then not an inch of tentacle showed. It was a bell-shaped mass of white, mauve, deep purples, wonderful to see. The scent was very sweet and strong. I never went near it. (17)

Though Antoinette fails to explain why she “never went near” the octopus orchid, she seems to avoid it because she senses it does not want her near it. Her observation that the orchids “flourished out of reach or for some reason not to be touched” constitutes a seemingly confusing statement that suggests that young Antoinette cannot tell whether she cannot reach the orchids, or whether she simply is not allowed to touch the orchids. Her sense that she is supposed to leave them alone both shows that she feels a connection to the island—she knows what it wants from her—and understands that it has not entirely welcomed her. Her disconnect from the natural world becomes especially apparent when she plays with her friend Tia, a black girl of whom Antoinette observes, “fires always lit for her, sharp stones did not hurt her bare feet, I never saw

her cry” (21). The island accepts Tia as one of its people in a way it does not accept Antoinette, despite her sensitivity to it: Antoinette is half-English, and therefore half-invader.

Antoinette’s mother, meanwhile, finds acceptance by the island—even though its people, both black and white, reject her. When her neighbors loan her a horse, she “would ride off very early and not come back till late next day—tired out because she had been to a dance or a moonlight picnic. She was gay and laughing—younger than I had ever seen her and the house was sad when she had gone” (25). Annette does not fear the island at night—unlike Rochester, who finds himself terrorized by it—and her attendance of dances and picnics suggests she maintains a relationship with at least some of the island’s black population. Annette’s deep and complex relationship to the island is reinforced by her close friendship with Christophine, who stays with her after the emancipation of slaves on the island, despite having been given to Annette as a “present” by her first husband. When Antoinette asks why Christophine stayed, Annette retorts, “Does it matter? Why do you pester and bother me about all these things that happened long ago? Christophine stayed with me because she wanted to stay. She had her own very good reasons you may be sure. I dare say we would have died if she’d turned against us and that would have been a better fate” (19). Christophine certainly would not have stayed with Annette if she did not want to—she both lives and thinks independently; she does not need Annette. Instead, she chooses to stay with and protect a woman with whom she feels a kinship, despite that woman’s original status as her owner. Annette and Christophine are both from Martinique—though Annette is light-skinned and Christophine is very dark-skinned—but the bond they share goes deeper than this shared heritage. They both belong to the island in a way that English colonizers cannot, and they both resist the intrusion of Englishmen into this realm.

The extent of Annette's understanding of Christophine's obeah magic is unclear, but she obviously understands that it takes place, and does not fear it. Antoinette, meanwhile, is frightened by Christophine's magic when she learns of it—a fear that echoes her fear of the island itself, and which she acknowledges when she visits Christophine's room after she listens to guests at her mother's wedding gossip about her:

Yet one day when I was waiting there I was suddenly very much afraid. The door was open to the sunlight, someone was whistling near the stables, but I was afraid. I was certain that hidden in the room (behind the old black press?) there was a dead man's dried hand, white chicken feathers, a cock with its throat cut, dying slowly, swoly. Drop by drop the blood was falling into a red basin and I imagined I could hear it. No one had ever spoken to me about obeah—but I knew what I would find if I dared to look. Then Christophine came in smiling and pleased to see me. (28)

Antoinette only displays a receptiveness to obeah when she wants to make her English husband love her—an effort that fails, and which emphasizes the extent to which neither Antoinette's new husband nor Antoinette herself belong on the island. However, Christophine truly does do everything she can to help Antoinette, just as she did everything she could to help Antoinette's mother; however, she cannot save Antoinette from her own Englishness.

Christophine's disdain for British patriarchal rule becomes apparent in the first few pages of the novel, when she notes as she brushes Antoinette's hair, "No more slavery! She had to laugh! 'These new ones have Letter of the Law. Same thing. They got magistrate. They got fine. They got jail house and chain gang. They got tread machine to mash up people's feet. New ones worse than old ones—more cunning, that's all'" (24). Christophine's commentary on the cruelty of British law echoes Julia's resentment of, and disdain for, Mr. Mackenzie's employment of a lawyer to bully her—except Christophine, unlike Julia, can articulate exactly how the laws are crafted to affect her, on the basis of both her race and sex. She has a well-developed

understanding of the societal forces at work around her, and this intelligence—blended with her compassion and unwavering sense of self—causes her to stand out among Rhys’s female characters. She maintains her compassion for other women, and her trueness to herself, while avoiding victimhood—survival, for her, does not entail a sacrifice of values. I believe she can accomplish this because she belongs, fully, to what Rhys portrays as the spiritual force of the island—and her connection to this matriarchal force allows her to avoid the patriarchal world of marriage.

Christophine overtly articulates her point of view regarding British marital law when Antoinette approaches her for help with her husband:

She looked gloomy. ‘When man don’t love you, more you try, more he hate you, man like that. If you love them they treat you bad, if you don’t love them they after you night and day bothering your soul case out. I hear about you and your husband,’ she said.

‘But I cannot go. He is my husband after all.’

She spat over her shoulder. ‘All women, all colours, nothing but fools. Three children I have. One living in this world, each one a different father, but no husband, I thank my God. I keep my money. I don’t give it to no worthless man.’

‘When must I go, where must I go?’

‘But look me trouble, a rich white girl like you and more foolish than the rest. A man don’t treat you good, pick up your skirt and walk out. Do it and he come after you.

‘He will not come after me. And you must understand I am not rich now, I have no money of my own at all, everything I had belongs to him.

‘What you tell me there’ she said sharply.

‘That is English law.’

‘Law! The Mason boy fix it, that boy worse than Satan and he burn in Hell one of these fine nights.’ (99-100)

Christophine, having never been expected to abide by the standards of British society, has the freedom to live by her critiques of its norms—a way of life that, through her depictions of Annette’s and Antoinette’s marriages, Rhys endorses. Rhys does complicate Christophine’s admonitions to Antoinette when she shows Christophine’s role in Annette’s second marriage earlier in the novel: it is Christophine, and not Annette, who notes that the way Antoinette “run

wild, she grow up worthless. And nobody care” (23). Christophine’s comments about Antoinette’s dress demonstrate her awareness of Antoinette’s need to appear acceptable to the wealthy, white colonists—presumably since, with her English blood, she has no hope of gaining acceptance among the black Jamaicans. Christophine’s observation, directly or indirectly, spurs Annette’s attempt to reintegrate herself into white colonial society through her marriage to Mr Mason—a ill-fated marriage that precipitates Antoinette’s own ill-fated marriage. However, Christophine’s commentary on Mr Mason in this passage—calling him “worse than the Devil”—shows her contempt for him and the colonialism he represents; she likely did not intend for Annette to marry him. Despite her savviness, Christophine does not entirely understand the unfairness of British law—portrayed by her surprise when she learns that Antoinette’s husband owns all of her money after her marriage to him—and this ignorance receives emphasis when she remarks that she does not know that England exists, because, ““I never see the damn place, how I know?”” (101). Christophine’s lack of knowledge of English customs does not connote stupidity; instead, it shows that she simply does not care about England. The world of men like Mr Mason and Antoinette’s husband does not interest her. Antoinette, meanwhile, uses Christophine’s lack of Anglocentrism to justify her dismissal of Christophine’s advice: “I stared at her, thinking, ‘but how can she know the best thing for me to do, this ignorant, obstinate old negro woman, who is not certain if there is such a place as England?’” (102). Antoinette dismisses Christophine because she has internalized the Anglocentrism taught to her by her stepfather and aunt—and even, to an extent, her mother. This way of thinking—this quickness to disregard Christophine’s advice because Christophine is a black woman who does not particularly care about the affairs of Englishmen—leads her to her downfall. She chooses her white husband over her black mother-figure, and this choice ruins her life.

Antoinette's racism surfaces whenever she finds herself unsettled or undermined by a person of color. While she ultimately defends the black Jamaicans against Rochester, and other English colonizers, of which she herself is one, her racist undercurrent—which Rhys portrays in an unflattering light—attests to the corruption of her character by the racial politics of the island. The earliest instance of this racism occurs when Tia bets her she cannot turn a somersault in the water as they play in the bathing pool. When Tia takes Antoinette's pennies even after Antoinette turns the somersault, Antoinette snaps, ““Keep them then, you cheating nigger”” (22)—an epithet that she knows to be ugly, because her mother does not allow her to use it in their home. The racism surfaces again when Amélie sings a song about white cockroaches, prompting Antoinette to comment to Rochester, ““It was a song about 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”” (93). This comment irrationally deflects the blame her family rightfully bears for slavery onto the ancestors of the victims themselves. Her desire to unburden herself of this inherited responsibility also suggests that she feels guilty about her own ancestors' role as slave owners. Her behavior echoes that of her half-brother, Daniel, who, when frustrated, takes out his rage on white women instead of white men. Antoinette, similarly, projects the anger she should direct at white, English, patriarchal forces onto people who are not only blameless, but over whom—at least in the cases of her servants—she holds power and privilege.

Antoinette is too much like her father to belong to the island, and too much like her mother to submit to an English husband, but—for a brief period of time—she finds herself content, and even empowered. This period of time occurs when she goes to the convent, where she finds herself uplifted by other women. Ironically, she also quietly rejects man-made religion while at the convent—a positive experience for her. She learns to worship beauty instead: the

beauty of the “shifting shadows outside, more beautiful than any perpetual light could be” (52). Significantly, she finds herself drawn to these shadows after the nuns ask her to pray for “perpetual light” to shine on her mother—a request that leads her to remember that her mother “hated a strong light and loved the cool and the shade.” Even when the nuns explain to her that the “perpetual light” is a “different light” from the light her mother hates, she “would not say it”—an act of defiance that speaks to the tenacity she shares with her mother. However, her refusal to comply has little bearing on how the nuns treat her, as they themselves feel apathetic about religion. Instead of becoming a Catholic, Antoinette learns to “gabble without thinking at the others did”—implying that the religiosity of the convent constitutes a sort of front for the much more complex function the convent serves: fostering, and safeguarding, female relationships. Rhys reinforces the depiction of the convent as lacking a religious focus when Antoinette tells her stepfather about, ““The Bishop who visits”” the nuns ““every year”” and ““says they are lax. Very lax. It’s the climate he says”” (53). When Mr Mason responds, ““I hope they told him to mind his own business,”” (53), Antoinette replies, ““She did. Mother Superior did. Some of the others were frightened”” (53). That Mother Superior not only defies the patriarchal Vatican, but does so overtly and triumphs, emphasizes the convent’s distance from both the Catholic church and the patriarchal structure of Western European culture. During her time at the convent, Antoinette exists in a matriarchal sphere—and she thrives.

As part of her argument that becoming sexually active leads to the downfalls of Rhys’s protagonists, Teresa O’Connor recognizes the egalitarianism of the convent, calling it, “a female cloister embodying love, peace, and harmony. It is a rarified and idealized environment where racial and class differences disappear and it stands in marked contrast to the more male world outside—both on the island and in England” (177). She believes that the convent derives its

status as a safe, nurturing place from its lack of sexuality: “In Rhys’s work, the appearance of sexuality between male and female inevitably leads to destruction and to enmity between women; the nurture that all of her heroines seek, both from males and from females, cannot occur in a world in which sexuality also exists” (178). She reads *Mother Superior* as, “to paraphrase Chaucer, a very perfect Christian gentlewoman” (177). In this analysis, O’Connor places too much emphasis on the significance of both religion and asexuality to the convent’s atmosphere. Rhys never establishes *Mother Superior* as possessing any sort of deep religious faith—the one act of *Mother Superior* that Antoinette does describe is her outright flouting of the Bishop’s authority. Significantly, O’Connor fails to recognize *Mother Superior*’s successful deflection of the Bishop’s commands, writing of “his disturbance of the peaceful female serenity and in particular, his attacks on the female teachers who are legally powerless before him” (178). She ignores the fact that the bishop’s presence seems to have had little to no effect on the way the convent functions—thanks to *Mother Superior*’s lack of regard for the Church’s authority.

The other nuns, too, lack a genuine belief in the religion to which they are supposedly wed—Antoinette’s perception of *Mother St. Justine*’s instruction reflects this apathy:

‘When you insult or injure the unfortunate or the unhappy, you insult Christ Himself and He will not forget, for they are His chosen ones.’ This remark is made in a casual and perfunctory voice and she slides on to order and chastity, that flawless crystal that, once broken, can never be mended. Also deportment. Like everyone else, she has fallen under the spell of the de Plana sisters, and holds them up as an example to the class. I admire them. They sit so poised and imperturbable while she points out the excellence of Miss H el ene’s coiffure, achieved without a looking-glass.

‘Please, H el ene, tell me how you do your hair, because when I grow up I want mine to look like yours.’ (49)

Antoinette’s description of the “casual and perfunctory” way *Mother Justine* conveys doctrine to the students suggests the lack of significance her teachings have in both the eyes of herself and

her students. She “slides on” to order and chastity—a transition that conveys the lack of thought given to each subject on which she lectures. Though she describes “chastity” as “that flawless crystal that, once broken, can never be mended,” Mother St. Justine—and Antoinette’s narratorial voice—transition to, “Also deportment,” without providing any response to this lecturing on chastity suggests its lack of an impact. The religious and moral teachings of the convent fail to preoccupy either the nuns or the students; instead, their interest lies in each other, depicted by the immediate transition of focus from the religious teachings to the de Plana sisters. The de Plana sisters draw the admiration of both their teachers and their peers because of both their aesthetic attention to themselves, as well as their general poise—religiosity has little to do with the admiration they draw. The attention they draw seems rooted largely in their earthly characteristics: “Miss Hélène’s hair,” and “the care Miss Louise took of her beautiful teeth” (50) interest the students—and, apparently, the nuns—much more than scripture.

The collective focus of the convent on the de Plana sisters reflects the Rhysian preoccupation with aesthetics—the sisters are beautiful, and Antoinette, as a Rhysian protagonist, therefore admires them. The fact that the rest of the convent seems to share Antoinette’s values suggests that this Caribbean convent constitutes Rhys’s version of a utopia—a matriarchal microcosm where beauty rules. In a Rhysian utopia, there is no place for a patriarchal God—and therefore no room for genuine Christianity. Antoinette makes clear her distrust of God early in the novel, when she narrates the burning of her home: “And God who is indeed mysterious, who had made no sign when they burned Pierre as he slept—not a clap of thunder, not a flash of lightning—mysterious God heard Mr Mason at once and answered him. The yells stopped” (39). God answers Mr Mason’s prayer by burning Coco to death—an image that the islanders interpret as an omen of bad luck. Antoinette’s attribution of Coco’s death to

God further unifies him with Mr Mason: God finishes the destruction of Coco that Mr Mason began when he clipped his wings. Coco's destruction parallels Annette's: he was her pet; when she married and had her autonomy taken from her, he had the power of flight taken from him. Later, the Christian God becomes linked to Annette's destruction again during Christophine's conversation with Mr Mason: "That man who is in charge of her he take her whenever he want and his woman talk. That man, and others. Then they have her. Ah there is no god.' 'Only your spirits,' I remind her. 'Only my spirits,' she said steadily. 'In your Bible it say God is a spirit—it don't say no others'" (143). In these scenes, Rhys seems to suggest that, if a Christian God does exist, he has taken the side of the patriarchal male. Therefore, he is absent from the convent where Antoinette finds peace. In the convent, in the absence of all forms of patriarchy, Antoinette finds that the women and girls who surround her empower and embolden her.

O'Connor writes that the convent constitutes "a world for little girls—a world without sex and without risk" (180), adding that the "'outside' contains the world of men, sexuality, and marriage" (180). She asserts that the intrusion of Mr. Mason into the convent "brings the advent of sexuality and marriage into Antoinette's life" (180). This claim proves patently false, as Antoinette, though certainly unmarried, seems to have gained level of sexual experience with her cousin Sandi—an aspect of her life alluded to by her half-brother in his conversation with Antoinette's husband: "Your wife know Sandi since long time. Ask her and she tell you. But not everything I think.' He laughed. 'Oh no, not everything. I see them when they think nobody see them. I see her when she...'" (113). Antoinette's own recollections of Sandi—triggered by a red dress she sees in the attic—confirms this accusation:

...I was wearing a dress of that colour when Sandi came to see me for the last time.

'Will you come with me?' he said. 'No,' I said, 'I cannot.'

'So this is good-bye?'

Yes, this is goodbye.

‘But I can’t leave you like this,’ he said, ‘you are unhappy.’

‘You are wasting time,’ I said, ‘and we have so little.’

Sandi often came to see me when that man was away and when I went out driving I would meet him. I could go out driving then. The servants knew, but none of them told.

Now there was no time left so we kissed each other in that stupid room. Spread fans decorated the walls. We had often kissed before but not like that. That was the life and death kiss and you only know a longtime afterwards what it is, the life and death kiss. The white ship whistled three times, once gaily, once calling, once to say goodbye. (167)

Antoinette’s relationship with Sandi undermines O’Connor’s assertion that “the initiation into sex and marriage removes” her “forever from the safe insularity of the convent which is, above all, a sexless, even antisexual, world” (187). If her half-brother’s assertion holds true—and there seems ample reason to believe it likely—Antoinette has enjoyed a sexual, or at least sexually-charged, relationship with a man before going to the convent. This relationship, because it did not include male domination, does not degrade or harm Antoinette—for Rhys, sex does not necessarily entail the subjugation of the female, contrary to O’Connor’s claim that Rhys’s heroines, “for reasons of their own psychology, cannot be excluded from knowledge of sex, and perhaps even welcome their initiation into it—even with the knowledge that in Rhys’s world it is a violent and humiliating affair for women” (187). In this assertion, O’Connor conflates Rhys’s framing of sex within a patriarchal society with the act itself. From Antoinette’s husband’s perspective, Antoinette’s enjoyment of sex constitutes a symptom of her lunacy: “‘She thirsts for *anyone*—not for me...She’ll loosen her black hair, and laugh and coax and flatter (a mad girl. She’ll not care who she’s loving). She’ll moan and cry and give herself as no sane woman would—or could. *Or could*. Then lie so still, still as this cloudy day” (149). Antoinette’s husband resents that Antoinette enjoys the act of sex itself; she does not engage in it only as favor to the man who legally possesses her. While he believes her enjoyment of the act degrades her, her

relations with her cousin Sandi show that mutually respectful, enjoyable sex is possible in Rhys's world—and that Antoinette's husband's attitude towards it constitutes a symptom of the patriarchal society in which he was raised, rather than an inherent male attitude. Through Sandi, Rhys suggests the possibility of a man who does not degrade women, and with whom sex does not require a woman to surrender her power or self. Rhys uses Sandi to show the constructed nature of patriarchal attitudes around sex; for Sandi, who was raised outside of patriarchal society, the act does not require the embarrassment or harm of the woman.

Sex, or lack thereof, has no particular bearing on the functioning of the convent. In fact, the convent facilitates sexually-, or at least sensually-, charged relationships between women. At the convent, Antoinette not only experiences spiritual and aesthetic growth, but also encounters Louise, a French Creole girl whose name echoes that of *Quartet's* "Lois," and who engages Antoinette from the moment she meets her: "Louise and I walked along a paved path to the classroom. There was grass on each side of the path and trees and shadows of trees and sometimes a bright bush of flowers. She was very pretty and when she smiled at me I could scarcely believe I had ever been miserable" (48). Rhys's placement of the description of the path—with the "shadows" Antoinette finds so beautiful—directly before Antoinette's claim that Louise was not only pretty, but usurped all of her miserable childhood experiences, adds a spiritual element to Louise's character. Louise is connected to the island, despite being from France; she also has the ability to function well in the faux-European society created within the convent. Antoinette's physical descriptions of Louise suggest an eroticism in her attraction to the other girl: "Ah, but Louise! Her small waist, her thin brown hands, the black curls which smelled of vetiver, her high sweet voice, singing so carelessly in Chapel about death. Like a bird would sing" (50). Antoinette's visceral description of Louise recalls Marya's visceral attraction to Lois

in Rhys's first novel; her interest in the other girl has an undeniably physical element.

O'Connor's suggestion that the convent derives its status as a safe, feminine place from its lack of sex is ridiculous; Rhys certainly writes the girls as sexual beings. What the convent lacks is not sexuality, but instead a patriarchal, male presence—in Rhys, sex can and does exist outside of patriarchal, heterosexual relationships. Sensuality permeates Rhys's heroines' inner worlds; it connects to the primal vitality they possess. Their trauma from sex derives not from the act being inherently degrading in nature, but instead from the misogynistic social constructs that surround it. The convent provides a world in which Antoinette can, to an extent, enjoy this vital aspect of herself without corruption.

Antoinette's experience in the convent results in the novel's most jarring, and remarkable, change of narratorial perspective. Antoinette not only finds Louise beautiful, but senses that she is destined for some form of greatness—a belief she expresses in her observation that Louise “took no part in” the disdainful airs of her sisters, “as if she knew that she was born for other things.” Antoinette's hazy, grandiose vision for Louise's future reads as out-of-place considering that her narratorial voice tells the story in retrospect, knowing all that will happen later. Yet, she maintains of the girl with “thin brown hands” and “black curls that smelled of vetiver” that, “Anything might have happened to you, Louise, anything at all, and I wouldn't be surprised” (50). In this remarkable line, Rhys places Antoinette's narrative voice in a different time from the story it tells: this line suggests that Antoinette tells of her time in the convent in retrospect, fully aware of what happens later. In *Louise*, Rhys provides the reader hope: hope in spite of what happens to Antoinette, hope in spite of the way the world is. Rhys shows the reader a girl of color with unlimited potential; she implies that, through her own extraordinary merit, Louise—a black Creole girl—has the potential to lead a beautiful, free life. Antoinette's

optimistic outlook on Louise's future, which she espouses despite what happens to her herself, does not read as ironic or clueless, but rather prophetic: through Louise, and against the backdrop of the matriarchal, multiracial utopia provided by the convent, Antoinette—and, in extension, Rhys—envisions a future where a talented, brilliant, compassionate girl of color should be able to do “anything at all.” Louise's unfinished narrative echoes that of Sandi—both figures, whom Antoinette's narration abandons in childhood, are left uncorrupted by the societal forces at work against them.

A third character shares this uncorrupted status with Louise and Sandi: Tia. Tia betrays Antoinette both when she steals her dress and when she throws a rock at her during the burning of Coulibri and when she makes a crucial appearance in a visionary dream Antoinette has at the end of the novel. Antoinette has this dream despite the fact that her last interaction with Tia was one of violence: “When I was close, I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. I looked at her and I saw her face crumple up as she began to cry. We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers it was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass” (41). Tia's hurling of the stone constitutes an iteration of the theme of childhood internalization of norms: her compulsion to throw the stone at Antoinette mimics Rochester's internalization of the norm that boys cannot cry, or Antoinette's internalized racism. Yet, Tia cries when she throws the stone—she recognizes the wrongness, the cruelty, of her actions. Through this image—of the black girl and the white girl recognizing the humanity of each other during racial conflict—Rhys shows that neither girl has had her compassion compromised by the ugliness around her.

Tia makes an appearance once more, at the end of the novel, as Antoinette dreams of both her present and her childhood—she hears her mother's ill-fated pet, Coco, call “*Qui est là, Quit*

est là?” (170) even as she hears Rochester cry, “Bertha! Bertha!” (170). In her dream, Antoinette takes the place of Coco on the night her mother’s house burns down—she considers jumping off of the house to escape the flames, because her hair “streamed out like wings” in the wind, and she thinks, “It might bear me up” if she jumps to the stones below her. However, when she does look down, she does not see stones:

But when I looked over the edge I saw the pool at Coulibri. Tia was there. She beckoned to me and when I hesitated, she laughed. I heard her say, You frightened? And I heard the man’s voice, Bertha! Bertha! All this I saw and heard in a fraction of a second. And the sky so red. Someone screamed and I thought, *Why did I scream?* I called ‘Tia!’ and jumped and woke. (170-171)

O’Connor reads Antoinette’s interaction with Tia in this dream as a remembrance of betrayal: “While at the end of this dream Antoinette rehearses much of her life prior to her marriage, it is on Tia that the last call and focus rests. It is Tia’s betrayals that have prefigured Rochester’s” (202). O’Connor does concede that “one senses that Antoinette wishes for a synthesis: to return and to become whole with her other—the mirror of herself who sheds tears while Antoinette, Christlike, stands before her, reflecting her tears in blood” (202). However, she fails to recognize the healing, even spiritual, nature of Tia’s appearance in Antoinette’s dream. While the “Christlike” image of Antoinette has an air of victimhood to it, this air of victimhood does not negate the moment of compassion the girls experience at the end of the scene. It admittedly does speak to Antoinette’s unbalanced perception of her family’s role in the enslavement of the black islanders, and, by extension, her own privileged status on the island: in this scene, she seems to perceive herself as an innocent bleeding for the sins of her forefathers. However, Antoinette’s dream image of Tia—unlike her last encounter with Tia—does not just reflect Antoinette: she bosses Antoinette around. Tia goads Antoinette into carrying out her vision in actuality—to set fire to the house that binds her, setting herself free in the only way she can. She needs the vision

of Tia, who was connected to the spirit of the island in a way she herself, with her English blood, never was, to guide her. In this scene, Rhys grants narrative power to Tia—she concludes her final novel by giving the role of “advocate” to a black, female, Jamaican child. Antoinette’s deferral to Tia in this final scene suggests a radical change in social order, of which Rhys seems to approve.

Through this vision, Rhys gives spiritual and social meaning to Antoinette’s death. On a more cynical, practical level, death constitutes Antoinette’s only option aside from a prolonged hell on Earth. And it is Tia—a little black girl—who leads her to carry out this last, dramatic act of rebellion against the English patriarchy:

I got up, took the keys and unlocked the door. I was outside holding my candle. Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage. (171)

With these sentences, Rhys concludes her final novel with an act that resolves the journey of rage and hope that unfolds across her body of work. The sentence, “now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do,” gives meaning to Antoinette’s suffering—along with Rhys’s own. Antoinette was not brought across the ocean to be the demure wife of an Englishman, or even the secret, lunatic wife of an Englishman. Instead, she weathered that miserable journey so that she could bring destruction to the ordered, gray, lawful, patriarchal country of her ancestors. That she dies in the process adheres to the reality Rhys portrays throughout her work: that women who stay true to themselves—who embrace their passions and senses of justice—within a patriarchal world inevitably destroy themselves in the process.

Of course, Rhys’s ending to *Wide Sargasso Sea* had already been written for her, by Charlotte Brontë. Through Antoinette’s dream, Rhys gives as much strength and meaning to the

suicide as possible—Antoinette does not die a death of misery, but of rage, and she destroys her domestic prison with her body. Rhys refrains from representing the wretchedness of self-immolation and instead leaves her reader with the image of a candle flickering in the dark, lighting Antoinette “along the dark passage.” In its perverse way, this ending constitutes one of hope. Every aspect of it undermines Charlotte Brontë’s version of “Bertha’s” death contributes to the powerful sense of rebellion with which Rhys leaves her reader—*Wide Sargasso Sea* Rhys’s own unsubtle effort to destroy the domestic, patriarchal, racist nightmare of nineteenth-century English literature.

I do not want to end this discussion with *Wide Sargasso Sea*, however. Though it is Rhys’s final novel, she is not entirely responsible for its ending; she had to work with the one she inherited from Brontë. Instead, I want to discuss the ending of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*—a dismal sequence of fragments that show Julia to believe herself to have become completely apathetic:

She saw a thin man, so thin that he was like a clothed skeleton, drooping in a doorway. And the horses, standing like statues of patient misery. She felt no pity at all.

It used to be as if someone had put out a hand and touched her heart when she saw things like that, but now she felt nothing. Now she felt indifferent and cold, like a stone.

‘I’ve gone too far,’ she thought. She sat down on the terrace of a little café and had another brandy.

And it was funny to end like that—where most sensible people start, indifferent and without any pity at all. Just saying: ‘It’s nothing to do with me. I’ve got my own troubles. It’s nothing to do with me. (188)

The irony of this passage undermines Julia’s belief in her own apathy: if she were truly immune to the sights of human and animal suffering, she would not register them at all. She tells herself that the cold, apathetic society in which she has spent her entire life has turned her to stone, but, were this actually the case, she would not be worrying about it at all.

Other instances in this final sequence exhibit Julia's continued vitality: for instance, when she notices a "slim woman with full, soft breasts" in a café, whose "voice was very soft" and whose "eyes were big and dark" (184). When Julia sees this beautiful woman—who, in a glance, evokes in her more erotic desire than either Mr Mackenzie or Horsfield, her male paramours, ever conjure in her—she experiences a moment of transcendence that shows her to still remain sensitive to warmth and beauty in the world around her. The thought of clothes, too, excites her: "In her mind she was repeating over and over again, like a charm: 'I'll have a black dress and hat and very dark grey stockings'" and "A ring with a green stone for the forefinger of her right hand" (182). These moments, though fleeting, are enough to keep her in the world—to lead her to ask Mr Mackenzie for money, yet again, matter-of-factly, shamelessly, when she encounters him on the street: "'Lend me a hundred francs, will you?' she said. 'Please.' This shocked Mr Mackenzie. He flushed. He said: 'Good Lord, yes'" (191). Her lack of shame in this action does not suggest depravity, but rather a perverse transcendence of a world in which—as she sees captioning a picture in a shop window of a man "encircled by a corkscrew"—"*La vie est un spiral, flottant dans l'espace, que les hommes grimpent et redescendent très, très, très sérieusement*" ("Life is a corkscrew, floating in space, that men climb and descend very, very, very seriously"). Julia lives for her moments of joy, of beauty, of warmth, of compassion, and, yes, even of connection—moments that she can experience at all because she has retained that childhood light that so few people retain past childhood. Julia lives a wretched life, but she does so without shame, and the small, beautiful transcendences that interrupt its mundanity provide her her own candles flickering in the gloom, lighting her along her own dark passage. Staying alive despite the fact that, by patriarchal, Western European societal standards, she is worthless—a choice more dramatic and rebellious than even self-immolation.

Wide Sargasso Sea is a work so overtly political that countless literary critics have written it off as manifesto, a political doctrine that does a disservice to the detached, melancholy, beautifully-wrought, “feminine,” Modernist aesthetic that marks her earlier works. Yet, when Rhys wrote “melancholy, feminine” novels, her rebellious themes received little notice. Rhys had to write *Wide Sargasso Sea* to effectively convey her ahead-of-its-time feminism—a theme encoded in her earlier works, but ignored. She had to write an exaggerated, familiar-yet-unfamiliar story of oppressed womanhood, because she realized that, when a woman complains of the daily injustices she faces, no one recognizes them as injustices, or complaints. The defiant act of living honestly and shamelessly as a woman was lost on her readers, so she gave the world Antoinette—a woman who, rather than persevering in the face of a world that believed her better off dead, burned down herself and her house: an end more obviously defiant than that of Julia Martin, and yet, tragically, more compliant. A dead rebellious woman, no matter how she dies, is ultimately less bothersome than a living rebellious woman—and therefore more palatable to a patriarchal, English audience.

Chocolate and Whine: A Conclusion

I recently read an article in *The Independent* entitled, “How literary giant Jean Rhys became a jazz songwriter.” The article discusses how, while living with musician George Melly for a brief period of time in the late 1970s, Rhys penned lyrics to a song she entitled, “Life With You.” Melly put the lyrics to music, and he and his band, “The Footwarmers,” performed the song to live audiences, who found it delightful. The lyrics include the following lines:

It's the rain without the roses,
It's the sky that's never blue,
It's the nuts without the chocolate,
It's life...with you.

Reading the lyrics, I was struck by just how “Rhysian” they were. Not only for their poignant simplicity and cynical humor, but also for their sensual imagery. Her inclusion of “chocolate” in particular strikes me as telling: whenever women express their love of food, especially fattening food, they defy societal expectations. Rhys, like her heroines, was not content with “the nuts without the chocolate,” or the English “sky that’s never blue.” She craved beauty, in both life and love. Her lyrics are more than whining; they are assertions of value.

In writing this thesis, I periodically worried that I failed to adequately separate Rhys from her protagonists in my mind and, by extension, my work. After all, her protagonists are not completely autobiographical: most of them, for instance, are not writers. However, in order to fully understand her work, I believe it is important to constantly keep in mind her personal experiences and values. A writer’s work is intertwined with her life, much like a critic’s interpretation of said work is intertwined with her *own* experiences.

Rhys’s female characters are advocates because Rhys herself was an advocate: her writing was her advocacy. I am a firm believer that whining is the first step in fighting for

justice. To whine is to insist that you deserve better than your circumstances; Rhys's protagonists, at least internally, are all whiners. At times, having entrenched myself in her work for days, I found myself laughing at the self-pitying misery of these unhappy women, and I wondered if my propensity for it derived from my own self-indulgent, narcissistic tendencies. However, I came to realize that Rhys's protagonists understood the comedy of their own circumstances. My favorite example of this dark humor is Norah and Julia's hysterical laughter at the foot of their dying mother's bed in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*. As her song lyrics above depict, Rhys found the comedy in suffering. She did not take herself so seriously—which means that we, as readers, *can* take her seriously. Rhys gave an unapologetic voice to the disenfranchised, lonely woman. By whining, they advocate for themselves; by giving an intelligent, emboldened voice to female suffering, Rhys in turn advocates for herself, and women like herself.

In her unfinished memoir, Rhys provides a jarring description of her first visit to an English zoo, when she is sixteen. She has just arrived in England, and she is, more than anything, appalled by how cold the country is. At the zoo, she encounters a variety of sights that disturb her, but one exhibit horrifies her most of all:

Then the alligators and crocodiles which frightened me so much I could barely look at them. Then the snakes. Finally we went to see the hummingbirds. The hummingbirds finished me.

I believe that it is quite different now, but then they were in a little side room, the floor very dirty. Thick slices of bread smeared with marmalade or jam of some sort were suspended on wires. The birds were flying around in a bewildered way. Trying desperately to get out, it seemed to me. Even their colours were dim. I got such an impression of hopeless misery that I couldn't bear to look. My aunt finally asked me if I had enjoyed it and I said yes I had, but then and there I decided that nothing would ever persuade me to go into a zoo again (86).

This passage evoked for me the preoccupation one of Rhys's Russo-American contemporaries, Vladimir Nabokov, had with butterflies. Catching them, killing them, pinning their wings, preserving them, displaying them. I read *Lolita* as an eleven-year-old and hated it, though not because I believe Nabokov wrote it with the intent of justifying what happens to Lolita. Through Humbert Humbert, Nabokov provides the inner life of a monster, and he expected his audience to have the morality to resist empathizing with that monster. However, he gave his readers too much credit, and *Lolita* has taken her place in our culture as a tantalizing, underaged, sexually precocious, seductive "nymphet," rather than a child who spent her adolescence being raped. As a child Lolita's age, I saw in *Lolita* what Rhys saw in Bertha when she read *Jane Eyre*: a female character superficially resembling me who, through a combination of authorial intent and readerly perception, lost her selfhood. Rhys gave Bertha, and every proverbial "madwoman in the attic," including herself, a voice in *Antoinette*—along with Marya, Anna, Julia, and Sasha. While Nabokov removed the butterflies from the wild to put them on display, Rhys understood the terror of the trapped hummingbirds, and had the impulse to return the once-beautiful creatures to the wild. While I refuse to use "butterflies" and "hummingbirds" as metaphors for women, I do believe that Rhys and Nabokov's treatment of these wild creatures reveals gendered, classed, racialized responses. As a white man born into privilege, Nabokov believed he had the right to remove the autonomy of other creatures for the sake of his own pleasure. As a white Creole woman born into financial decay in the Caribbean, Rhys recognized cruelty for what it was, and hated it. And she spent her career as a writer fighting it.

Bibliography

- Burrows, Victoria. *Whiteness and Trauma: The Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2004. Print.
- Carr, Helen. *Jean Rhys*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018. Print.
- Chilton, Michael. "How literary giant Jean Rhys became a jazz songwriter." *The Independent*. 14 May 2019.
- Gonzalez, Octavio. "The Narrative Mood of Jean Rhys's *Quartet*." *Ariel: A Review of English Literature*, 49.1 (2018), pp. 107-141.
- GoGwilt, Christopher L. *The Passage of Literature: Genealogies of Modernism in Conrad, Rhys, and Pramoedya*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.
- Harrison, Nancy R. *Jean Rhys and the Novel as Women's Text*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988. Print.
- Howells, Coral A. *Jean Rhys*. St. Martin's Press, New York, 1991.
- Jamison, Leslie. "Cult of the Literary Sad Woman." *The New York Times*. 12 November 2019.
- Johnson, Erica L. ed. and Moran, Patricia ed. *Jean Rhys: Twenty-First-Century Approaches*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015. Print.
- Kloepfer, Deborah K. *The Unspeakable Mother: Forbidden Discourse in Jean Rhys and H.D.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989. Print.
- Maslen, Cathleen. *Ferocious Things: Jean Rhys and the Politics of Women's Melancholia*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Pub, 2009. Print.
- Mitchell, Jennifer. "The Trouble with 'Victim': Triangulated Masochism in Jean Rhys's *Quartet*." *Rhys Matters: New Critical Perspectives*, 27.4 (2013), pp. 189.
- O'Connor, Teresa F. *Jean Rhys: The West Indian Novels*. New York: New York University Press, 1986. Print.
- Oliver, Sophie. "Fashion in Jean Rhys/Jean Rhys in Fashion." *Modernist Cultures*, 11.3 (2019),

pp. 312-330.

Pizzichini, Lilian. *The Blue Hour: A Life of Jean Rhys*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011. Print.

Rodriguez, Rick. "The Servant's Laughter in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*." *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 2016, pp. 275-293.

Rhys, Jean. *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. Print.

Rhys, Jean. *The Collected Short Stories of Jean Rhys*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997. Print.

Rhys, Jean. *Good Morning, Midnight*. London: Penguin Books, 2000. Print.

Rhys, Jean. *Quartet*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997. Print.

Rhys, Jean. *Smile Please*. London: Penguin Random House, 1990. Print.

Rhys, Jean. *Voyage in the Dark*. London: Penguin Books, 2000. Print.

Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016. Print.

Rhys, Jean; Wyndham, Francis; and Melly, Diane. *Jean Rhys: Letters 1931-1966*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985. Print.

Savory, Elaine. *Jean Rhys*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Print.

Simpson, Anne B. *Territories of the Psyche: The Fiction of Jean Rhys*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print.

Staley, Thomas F. *Jean Rhys, a Critical Study*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979. Print.

Voicu, Cristina-Georgiana. *Exploring Cultural Identities in Jean Rhys' Fiction*. Warschau/Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014. Print.

Wolfe, Peter, 1933. *Jean Rhys*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980. Print.

