

COLD AS LIFE

The artful lucidity of Jean Rhys

By Evelyn Toynton

Discussed in this essay:

The Blue Hour: A Life of Jean Rhys, by Lilian Pizzichini. W.W. Norton. 312 pages. \$29.95.

“Oh, Peggy, I can’t bear much more of my hideous life. It revolts me quite simply.” So wrote Jean Rhys to a friend—one of her very few friends—in 1941, thirty-eight years before her death at the age of eighty-eight. But she could just as well have written those words when she was thirty, or when she was sixty: she was never one to celebrate the joys of existence, either privately or in her fiction. “Cold—cold as truth, cold as life. No, nothing can be as cold as life,” thinks a character in one of her novels.

Nor did she find much consolation in practicing her art. She had never wanted to be a writer, she insisted; she had never gotten any pleasure from it at all. (And yet she always went on writing, even when nobody cared if she did or not: if she stopped, she told an imaginary prosecutor in her diary, “I will not have earned death.”) What she really wanted, she said, was just to be an ordinary, happy, protected woman, a feat that should not have been too difficult, given her undoubted beauty. Instead, she went ricocheting from one disaster to another throughout the course of a long life.

That life has been explored before, in an authorized biography by Carole Angier published in 1990, eleven years after Rhys’s death. Now Lilian Pizzichini, though she acknowledges her debt to Angier’s extensive research, has elected to retell the story in a looser, more impres-

sionistic fashion. Her aim, she informs us in her author’s note to *The Blue Hour*, is “to present the facts of Rhys’s life in such a way that the reader is left with an impression of what it was like to have lived such a life.” One might almost call it a novelistic approach to a novelist’s life—in Rhys’s case, a spectacularly messy one.

A convent-educated doctor’s daughter from the island of Dominica, in the West Indies, Rhys came to London in 1907, at the age of seventeen, to complete her education, and two years later signed on as a chorus girl in a touring theater company that traveled around England performing musicals and light comedies in seedy provincial towns. In 1910 she became the mistress of a wealthy, much older man—her “one true love”—and when he discarded her (with pledges of financial help she was to take up at times of particular desperation for the next twenty years), she started selling herself to men she picked up on the street. It was probably then that she began to drink too much, as she continued to do for the rest of her life.

Of her three husbands, two wound up in jail: the first one in Paris, in 1924, for fraud and embezzlement; the third one in England, in 1950, for misappropriating funds from the law firm where he worked as a solicitor. (Her second husband was more respectable: a kindly publisher’s reader who passionately believed in her work and did everything possible to help her to write, he was such a gentleman that he even pretended his periodic black eyes and the scratches on his face were the result of falls and other mishaps, though in fact they

had been inflicted by Rhys herself when she was in a drunken fury.) At the age of fifty-eight, she was briefly sentenced to Holloway Prison for a paranoid attack on a neighbor she felt was insulting her. On numerous other occasions, she was brought up before magistrates in England on charges of drunk and disorderly conduct or assault. The evidence suggests that, at various times, she was also committed to so-called nursing homes that were really, as she called them, “looney bins.”

Much of her adult life was spent in near-destitution, something her middle-class girlhood had ill prepared her to deal with. Her first child, a son born in Paris in 1919, died there, in a hospital for the indigent, at the age of just three weeks. Her daughter, born in 1922, had to be farmed out to a series of clinics, since Rhys and her first husband were living in a cheap pension where they could not have her with them. (It seems worth noting, though, that even during Rhys’s second marriage, when she was in a position to have the child live with her, she never did . . . because it would have interfered, according to her daughter, with the writing she claimed she’d never wanted to do.) When Max, Rhys’s third husband, was released from prison in 1952, they were so poor—his conviction had cost him both his government pension and the right to practice his profession—that they wound up living in a series of dank, flimsy summer cottages on the English coast; with each move, she found that more of her possessions, and more of her manuscripts, had somehow gone missing. She and Max were rescued from actual homelessness only through the intervention of Rhys’s estranged brother, who, though he wanted nothing to do with his disreputable sister, bought them a ramshackle cottage in the Devon countryside, to which they moved in 1960. In 1966, Max died, after which Rhys lived there on her own, terrified of rats and loneliness and convinced that her neighbors were plotting against her, until shortly before her death in 1979.

Having published four novels and a collection of short stories between

Evelyn Toynton’s most recent essay for Harper’s Magazine, on the Wittgenstein family, appeared in the March issue.

1927 and 1939, she then fell almost completely silent for twenty-seven years. All her books, which had found some modest critical success but never commercial favor, went out of print; her few admirers assumed she was dead. But in 1966, her last novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*—the story of the mad wife in *Jane Eyre* (an heiress from the West Indies), told, sympathetically, from the madwoman’s point of view—appeared to huge acclaim. Suddenly Rhys was a celebrity, sought after by journalists (but she dreaded questions about her past and hated the photographs that showed her age, however many hours she spent applying makeup) and championed by feminists (but she refused to align herself

with them: it was splendor and love and chivalry she wanted, not equal rights). All her previous books were reprinted, all the London literati wanted to meet her. She was hailed by the critic Al Alvarez as “quite simply, the best living English novelist.” It had come too late, she said, when asked how she felt about her fame. She was seventy-six, although, having lied about her age for most of her life—even her obituarists would report it wrong—she pretended to be only seventy-two. And still she went on drinking, still she went on ranting about the meanness and cruelty and ugliness of human beings and human life. She could be charming and gracious and funny with people for only so long; in the end, she always turned

even on those who were trying hardest to help her.

Arum life, as Rhys might have said. Yet out of this great disorder came some of the most lucid and luminous prose of the twentieth century. In telling her story—for the novels she published between the two world wars are essentially the tale of her own passage through life, from her chorus-girl days to the mocking disillusionment of her middle age—her voice has an emotional clarity, a seemingly artless transparency that does not date. Here is the first paragraph of her 1934 novel *Voyage in the Dark*:

It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost like being born again. The colours were different, the smells different, the feeling things gave you right down inside yourself was different. Not just the difference between heat, cold; light, darkness; purple, grey. But a difference in the way I was frightened and the way I was happy. I didn’t like England at first . . .

The central figure in Rhys’s autobiographical fiction is always alone, though often involved with some uncaring man she depends on for her survival. The reader is privy to what she’s thinking and feeling, but in the eyes of the other characters she is nothing more than an object for use or sale or show, and as such is steadily losing her value as she ages. If we read these four novels, we find the same isolation, the same fear of her fellow humans—women as much as men—in all of them, but the pure sadness of the young girl gives way to rage, bitterness, hatred. (In *Good Morning, Midnight*, the last book Rhys published before her long silence, her narrator even tries to take revenge of a sort, with tragic results.)

Yet a jeering wit keeps rising to the surface. The Rhys woman sees much farther into those complacent members of “organized society, in which she had no place and against which she had not a dog’s chance” than they will ever see into her. Above all, she sees, as they do not, the true nature of the social and sexual transactions between herself and



CHINA CAFE
FOOD RESTAURANT

For only a
criminal mind
can escape
mass mind.

www.gangsterlit.com

LEARN JUST ABOUT ANY LANGUAGE

ABROAD—All ages and levels, homestay or hotel, one week to several months. Also: volunteer/internships, programs for professionals, families, teens, semester abroad.

www.amerispan.com (800) 879-6640

UNORTHODOX EROTICA, Catalog \$2.

Synergy Book Service, POB 8, Flemington, NJ 08822. www.SynergyBookService.com

(908) 782-7101

DATE SMART/PARTY SMART. Join the

introduction network exclusively for graduates, students, and faculty of the Ivies, Seven Sisters, Stanford, U of Chicago, and others. All ages.

The Right Stuff (800) 988-5288

www.rightstuffdating.com

AFRICA • CHINA • INDIA • JAPAN • NEPAL
SRI LANKA • TAIWAN

Since 1989
**UPTON
TEA IMPORTS**
Purveyor of the World's Finest Teas

1-800-234-8327 Free catalog listing
www.uptontea.com over 350 varieties of
garden-fresh, loose tea

34A Hayden Rowe St. # Hopkinton, MA 01748

www.AzureGreen.com Products for a more magical life (413) 623-2155

David King reunites lovers, removes evil blocks. 98% successful. (832) 978-1032.

Free question.

DR. ALKAITIS HOLISTIC ORGANIC

Skin Food. www.alkaitis.com

Award-winning editor/ghostwriter helps make your ideas, manuscripts, shine.

(954) 429-9373

Chance that an
American would
rather be mugged
than audited :

1 in 2

THE

INDEX BOOK

— VOLUME 3 —

Order online at www.harpers.org/store

the true nature of the social and sexual transactions between herself and them. They exercise their power with unthinking cruelty; she, the powerless one, mercilessly dissects what's going on. Thus, in *Good Morning, Midnight*, the battered middle-aged narrator, sent to Paris by a friend to recuperate from a long bout of drunkenness and despair, remembers her humiliation at the hands of a Parisian employer long ago and all the things she might have said to him but didn't:

Well, let's argue this out, Mr. Blank. You, who represent Society, have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month. That's my market value, for I am an inefficient member of Society, slow in the uptake, uncertain, slightly damaged in the fray, there's no denying it. So you have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month, to lodge me in a small, dark room, to clothe me shabbily, to harass me with worry and monotony and unsatisfied longings till you get me to the point when I blush at a look, cry at a word. We can't all be happy, we can't all be rich, we can't all be lucky—and it would be so much less fun if we were. . . . Some must cry so that the others may be able to laugh the more heartily. . . . But I wish you a lot of trouble, Mr. Blank, and just to start off with, your damned shop's going bust.

When Rhys is taught in college courses—for she has entered the canon now—it is often in those on postcolonial literature, and usually it is *Wide Sargasso Sea*, largely set in the West Indies of the early nineteenth century, that is assigned. But the sense of exile that permeates and haunts her work may have less to do with being a colonial transported to the seat of Empire than with being cast out from the class in which she was raised—or with those shadowy feelings of banishment from some unnamed Paradise that have their roots in the psyche rather than in any geographical displacement, and are therefore not confined to émigrés alone. (Only one of the protagonists in the novels based on Rhys's life is from the West Indies, yet they all seem equally adrift in the world in which they find them-

selves.) And although it is undoubtedly true that her characters—again, like her—are most particularly unfit to make their way in life, thin-skinned and vulnerable and pathologically fearful as they are (not to mention totally lacking in any practical skills), the situation in which they find themselves is one that many “nice” young women have had some inkling of in the past hundred and fifty years. As recently as the 1970s, it was a mantra among feminists that “any woman is just one man away from welfare”; it sometimes seemed, in those days, that every unmarried female in New York City woke in the night to visions of herself as a bag lady.

The horror of that particular abyss may have faded at last: a friend who teaches at a university in California tells me that her students often ask why Rhys's characters don't simply find themselves jobs, instead of smarting under the miseries of their dependence on men. Yet it seems possible that even a modern young woman with an advanced degree and a solid professional life might recognize what Rhys is describing in lines like the following:

“Poor little Anna,” making his voice very kind. “I'm so damned sorry you've been having a bad time.” Making his voice very kind, but the look in his eyes was like a high, smooth, unclimbable wall. No communication possible. You have to be three-quarters mad even to attempt it.

Or even here:

Really all you want is night, and to lie in the dark and pull the sheet over your head and sleep, and before you know where you are it is night—that's one good thing. You pull the sheet over your head and think, “He got sick of me,” and “Never, not ever, never.” And then you go to sleep. You sleep very quickly when you are like that and you don't dream either. It's as if you were dead.

The voice in these passages is that of Anna Morgan in *Voyage in the Dark*, the youngest of Rhys's fictional alter egos (though the novel was published after *Quartet*, in which she told of her first husband's arrest and of her

humiliating affair, while her husband was in prison, with Ford Madox Ford). Anna has been ditched by Walter, her older lover, and has embarked on her career of picking up men, which leads to an unwanted pregnancy and a near-fatal abortion for which Walter pays, though the child is certainly not his; Anna has no idea who the father might be.

Even Walter's way of rescuing Anna is so remote and impersonal—he makes his cousin his emissary, rather than coming to see her or bringing her the money himself—that it is itself a form of degradation, reinforcing the gulf between those with money and power and those without. And this figure of the distant rescuer—the Walter character, under different names—recurs several times in Rhys's fiction; he may save her from starvation, but he does nothing to dispel her loneliness, as in this scene from *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*:

He had lent her a good deal of money, first and last. And she had always said: "This money I have borrowed. I will pay you back one day."

And then he would reply: "Of course you will. Don't you worry about that..."

But she felt a little as though she were sitting in an office waiting for an important person who might do something for her—or might not. And when she looked round the room it seemed to her a very beautiful room, and she felt that she had no right to sit there and intrude her sordid wish somehow to keep alive into that beautiful room.

Clearly, this figure is based on Rhys's adored first lover. Yet, as Angier discovered when she was researching Rhys's life, he is different from his real-world counterpart in a way that serves to remind us how conscious an artist Rhys really was. In the books, he is simply a rich London businessman. The man Rhys fell in love with when she was twenty was a far grander personage, a member of a wealthy and distinguished family. No doubt Rhys chose to play down her lover's social position in her fiction because she knew it would have made him seem too much like a character from a cheap romance.

So although Rhys acknowledged

that all the fiction she published before the Second World War was closely based on her own experiences—"I can't make things up. I can't invent. Not that my books are entirely my life—but almost"—it was very much shaped by her sense of artistic rightness. (She had, as her erstwhile lover Ford wrote in his preface to her collection of short stories, "the singular instinct for form . . . an instinct for form being possessed by singularly few English writers.") The fact that he wrote those words long after their affair had ended in disaster, at a time when he had come to loathe her almost as much as she loathed him, is a testament to both of them.) It is therefore dangerous to assume that everything we read in even her most autobiographical fiction is the literal truth.

Yet it would appear that Lilian Pizzichini often assumes exactly that. Much of *The Blue Hour* consists of details lifted directly from Rhys's own work. In *Voyage in the Dark*, for example, before Anna has ever slept with Walter, he sends her some money, and she goes and buys a dark-blue velvet coat and dress and a blue-and-white velvet hat; Pizzichini attributes these purchases to Rhys herself. Even worse, she sometimes takes feelings expressed by Rhys's characters at one point in their lives and puts them into her own words (which are generally far less graceful than Rhys's), attributing them to Rhys at a very different period. Before beginning her affair, Anna thinks,

The ones without any money, the ones with beastly lives. Perhaps I'm going to be one of the ones with beastly lives. They swarm like woodlice when you push a stick into a woodlice-nest at home. And their faces are the colour of woodlice.

Here is Pizzichini on Rhys, well after Rhys's first affair ended:

That winter of 1913 she was teetering over the cliff edge. When she walked down the street she was drifting. The approaches of men on the street startled her into contemplations of violence. She was like all the other people she saw there; the ones without money. Not the beautiful ones with pretty clothes; instead, she was mirrored by those people with beastly lives; who swarm

Your name, your website.

Moxie.com

Shadow Lane Spanking Erotica

In "Ashley Pratt is a Brat" a badly behaved coed is spanked and disciplined by masterful Tom Bryon. 40 min. video or DVD \$29.95. Mention "Harper's Ad" and get a second outstanding spanking DVD free with your order! Call (702) 395-0783 or remit to: Shadow Lane-H, 8414 Farm Rd. #180-281, Las Vegas, NV 89131. Color spanking brochure collection \$5. Or visit: www.shadowlane.com

reform media.
transform democracy.

freepress 
www.freepress.net

"The most promising 'small-d'
democratic revolution now taking place."
BILL MOYERS

SMALL SHIPS, FREIGHTERS, Expeditions, Educational Cruises, Clippers, River Boats, Barges. Deluxe. Save with TravLTips Association Fares, (800) 872-8584, info@travltips.com, www.travltips.com

Use **BidonTravel.com** tips for the lowest prices on great hotels.

DO YOU WORK?

You are halfway to earning
your Bachelor, Master or
Ph.D degree at home

www.washint.edu

Disclaimer: *Harper's Magazine* assumes no liability for the content of or reply to any personal advertisement. The advertiser assumes complete liability for the content of and all replies to any advertisement and for any claims made against *Harper's Magazine* as a result thereof. The advertiser agrees to indemnify and hold *Harper's Magazine* and its employees harmless from all costs, expenses (including reasonable attorney fees), liabilities, and damages resulting from or caused by the publication placed by the advertiser or any reply to any such advertisement."



WEEKLY REVIEW

a feature available at

www.harpers.org

Updated every Tuesday.

Subscribe to the *Harper's Weekly Review* and receive a weekly email bulletin of world news and events.

To sign up via email, send a message to join-harpers-weekly@pluto.sparklist.com

**CLOTHING OPTIONAL & NUDE
GETAWAYS** tanr.com/hmWomen's

ACADEMY OF REMOTE VIEWING

HOME TRAINING PACKAGES

AS SEEN ON TV: *NIGHTLINE* AND *REAL X-FILES*. REVOLUTIONARY MIND-EMPOWERING TECHNOLOGY USED BY INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES. INCREASES INTUITION 1000x. FORECAST PERSONAL/WORLD/FINANCIAL FUTURE EVENTS. PERCEIVE ANY TARGET IN SPACE/TIME. COOPERATIVE REMOTE INFLUENCING. TAUGHT BY FORMER OPERATIVE. THOUSANDS SATISFIED TRAINEES WORLDWIDE. (888) 748-8386 VISIT: WWW.PROBABLEFUTURE.COM

Welding Workshop in beautiful Taos, NM.

Learn to weld, forge and De-mystify metal!

July 5-11 2009. www.spitfireforge.com

AFRICA • CHINA • INDIA • JAPAN • NEPAL

Since 1989

**UPTON
TEA IMPORTS**

Purveyor of the World's Finest Teas

1-800-234-8327 Free catalog listing
www.uptontea.com over 350 varieties of
garden-fresh, loose tea

34A Hayden Rowe St. * Hopkinton, MA 01748

Loving female who enjoys nature more than booze seeks healthy male who has survived The Sixties with elan. Box #1305.

For classified rates and information, please contact Irene Castagliola, Classified Sales Manager, at (212) 420-5756 or email irene@harpers.org

TEXT ADS: Minimum ten words. RATES per word: 1X \$5.10; 3X \$5.00; 6X \$4.85; 9X \$4.65; 12X \$4.55. Telephone numbers, box numbers, URLs and email addresses count as two words. ZIP codes count as one word. Classified Display ads: One inch, \$310; Two inch, \$600; 1/12, \$730; 1/9, \$860. Frequency discounts available. 15% agency discounts for display ads only. Closing dates: 1st of the 2nd preceding month. For example: August 1st for the October issue. Prepayment for all text ads and first-time display advertisers is required. Make checks payable to Harper's Magazine, 666 Broadway, New York, NY 10012, or charge your ad to MasterCard, Visa, or American Express. Include telephone number on all correspondence. For size requirements and inquiries, call Irene Castagliola, Classified Sales Manager, at (212) 420-5756 or email irene@harpers.org. PERSONAL ADS: Minimum ten words. RATE per word: \$5.10. Check, Mastercard, Visa, or American Express only. TO RESPOND TO AN AD: Harper's Magazine Personals, Box # (4-digit #), 666 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

like woodlice when you push a stick into their nest.

Or she will take a passage from *Smile Please*, Rhys's posthumously published "unfinished autobiography," and simply reword it. This is Rhys, talking about writing what would become *Voyage in the Dark*:

I filled three exercise books and half another, then I wrote, "Oh, God, I'm only twenty and I'll have to go on living and living and living." . . . I can't say I felt happy or relieved, more as if something had finished and a weight had gone.

And this is Pizzichini:

Finishing this first book was like a weight being lifted from her. But she was left feeling a dull despair that she was only twenty-three* and there were years of living ahead of her.

Since Pizzichini does not include any endnotes in her book—a strange omission for a biographer—readers unfamiliar with Rhys's writings might not realize how much of what they are being told is straight paraphrase.

Such sloppiness could be forgiven if Pizzichini offered any great insights into her subject. Instead, when she is not simply reworking passages from Rhys or restating Angier's ideas in her own clumsy prose, she is given to such banal formulations as "Jean did not have the pragmatism or long-range forecasting facilities that direct women into high-earning marriages"; "The more men she slept with, and the less money they had, the more she devalued herself"; "Jean got rid of words in order not to become congealed in them." At other times, without really building a cogent argument, Pizzichini serves up reductive psychological interpretations of Rhys's work: "Underneath the story of Anna and her gentleman lover and the procession of less and less gentlemanly men is the story of a child's consuming need for her mother." Really? Are we absolutely sure of that?

As for giving us an "impression of what it was like to have lived such a life"—for that, we have only to read

*Pizzichini is right there: Rhys had been lying about her age again.

Rhys herself. She may have omitted or changed or fabricated certain details; her paranoia may have led to various distortions in her depiction of others; but nobody could read her without knowing how it felt to Jean Rhys to lead the life she did. What is so extraordinary is that, despite her seeming self-absorption ("I do not know them. I see them as trees walking," she told the imaginary prosecutor in her diary when he asked about her feelings for others), she also shows us a larger truth about the world. It is not the whole truth: there is more to the world than just predators and prey, the powerful taking pleasure from crushing the vulnerable. But it is undoubtedly a truth. If Pizzichini's book, or the review attention it generates, sends people back to Rhys's own writings, it will have served a useful purpose. Otherwise, I am afraid that, in the words of one of Rhys's chorus-girl characters, it's "a lemon." ■

June Index Sources

1 Curran Career Counseling (Providence, R.I.); 2 Adecco North America (N.Y.C.); 3 Spectrem Group (Bloomfield, Conn.); 4 U.S. Department of Labor; 5 Pinellas County Sheriff's Office (Largo, Fla.); 6 Federal Reserve Board (Washington); 7 Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (Washington); 8 Civic Enterprises (Washington); 9 Perry Local Schools (Massillon, Ohio); 10 Harper's research; 11 Spectrem Group (Chicago); 12 Julie Logan, Cass Business School (London); 13 Peter W. Bernstein (N.Y.C.); 14 MotorIntelligence.com (Woodcliff Lake, N.J.); China Association of Automobile Manufacturers (Beijing); 15 Harper's research; 16 Anti-Slavery International (London); 17 U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; 18 The World Bank (Washington); 19 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Paris); 20 MSCI Barra (N.Y.C.); 21,22 Dow Jones (N.Y.C.); 23-25 Middle Tennessee State University (Murfreesboro); 26,27 White House Press Office; 28,29 U.S. Attorney's Office (Lexington, Ky.); 30 Netherlands Chamber of Commerce (Amsterdam)/Harper's research; 31 Rod Stephen (London); 32 Hampton Police Division (Hampton, Va.); 33 Council of Europe (Strasbourg, France); 34 Xytex International (Augusta, Ga.); 35,36,37 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Atlanta); 38 David Wiley, Texas State University (San Marcos); 39,40 The Urology Team (Austin, Tex.).