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‘Doesn’t that make you laugh?’: Modernist Comedy in Jean Rhys’s *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* and *Good Morning, Midnight*

By Laura Wainwright¹

Abstract

This essay seeks to challenge critical analyses that view Jean Rhys’s early fiction as unrelentingly bleak and melancholic. I propose that in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* and *Good Morning, Midnight*, Rhys – often through her own distinctive brand of dry humour – experimentally dissolves the boundaries between comedy and tragedy, destabilising the social and cultural stereotypes of the funny man and the humourless, inadvertently comic woman. The image of the humourless woman writer in particular, I go on to suggest, is fundamentally undermined in these texts: I argue that Rhys’s unsettling tragicomedy subtly implicates the reader in the ‘comic’ moment, drawing attention to the fictionality of her narratives and foregrounding the wry joke inherent in Modernist art.

Keywords: modernism; feminism; comedy

‘A London Lavabo in black and white marble’, Sasha Jansen recalls in *Good Morning, Midnight*; ‘fifteen women in a queue, each clutching her penny, not one bold spirit daring to dash out of her turn past the stern-faced attendant. That’s what I call discipline’ (10). Jean Rhys’s early novels are punctuated with funny moments such as this. Irony, farce and comic internal monologue are all features of Rhys’s narratives, problematising, as Helen Carr notes, ‘the melancholy haze through which her work is . . . often read’ (77).² Just as Sylvia Plath’s ‘poetry was – and often still is – read as a preface and key to her suicide’, Carr suggests, ‘Jean Rhys’s fiction has been read as the retelling through her heroines of her own melancholy tale of defeat’ (5). Rhys, however, is not straightforwardly concerned with making the reader laugh. Indeed, this essay will examine how, in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930) and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), Rhys explores and experiments with the very notion of comedy itself in a way that challenges both social and literary convention. In this sense, comedy emerges as a key facet of her Modernism.

Rhys’s interest in what constitutes comedy is evident early in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, when the novel’s protagonist, Julia Martin, meets Mr Mackenzie in a Paris restaurant:

He listened, half-smiling. Surely even she must see that she was trying to make a tragedy out of a situation that was fundamentally comical. The discarded mistress – the faithful lawyer defending the honour of the client. . . .

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² Carr argues that ‘this mythic portrayal of feminine distress . . . has occluded . . . [Rhys’s] irony, wit and satire’ (5).

A situation consecrated as comical by ten thousand farces and a thousand comedies. (23-4)

Katharine Streip draws attention to the established view that ‘women can provide models for comedy, but . . . cannot themselves produce comedy. A funny woman can only exist as the object of humour, not its subject’ (117).³ Frances Gray also comments on the persistence of this stereotype: ‘*Women have no sense of humour*’, she writes. ‘Men and, indeed, some women have been reiterating this ever since the word “humour” began, about three hundred years ago, to denote a capacity for laughter’ [emphasis in original] (3). Rhys seems to explore this tradition during Julia’s encounter with Mr Mackenzie. Mr Mackenzie regards a situation in which a woman has been ‘discarded’ as ‘fundamentally comical’. Furthermore, he bases his opinion on ‘ten thousand farces and a thousand comedies’ – on, it would appear, a long cultural tradition that views women as the object of humour. Mr Mackenzie’s consideration that ‘even she must see’ the hilarity of the situation also evokes the view of women as essentially humourless.

In fact, Rhys seems not only to deconstruct, but also to deride this cultural stereotype. She uses free indirect style in order to articulate Mr Mackenzie’s idea of a ‘fundamentally comical’ situation – a technique that, in combining the thoughts of character and narrator, necessarily signifies the presence of two different narrative voices. Moreover, these voices are conducive to what Sylvie Maurel describes as ‘the co-presence of two semantic levels necessary to the creation of irony’ (71). The language of the passage seems to confirm its ironic tone. The phrase ‘ten thousand farces and a thousand comedies’ appears consciously exaggerated, suggesting Rhys’s use of hyperbolic irony.⁴ The narrator’s description of Julia’s predicament as ‘consecrated as comical’ – as so entrenched in comic tradition as to be sacred – also creates this impression. As Kathleen Wheeler suggests, Rhys’s novels expose the ‘set traditions . . . and unthought-about conventions’, as well as the ‘imagination-deadening, stereotyped responses’ that characterise contemporary society (120). In *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, Rhys’s ironic narrative voice both invokes and subtly mocks the disregarded assumptions inherent in the laughter of that society.

This is similarly evident in *Good Morning, Midnight* when Sasha drinks whisky with a man named René in her hotel room:

He laughs
You love playing a comedy, don’t you?
How do you mean – a comedy?

³ Streip provides examples of this stereotypical view of women’s relationship with comedy from William Congreve’s essay, ‘Concerning Humour in Comedy’ (1695), and Reginald Blythe’s book, *Humour in English Literature: A Chronological Anthology* (1959). She argues that in *Good Morning, Midnight*, Rhys invokes ‘a special category of humour originating from resentment’, which ‘demonstrates how women . . . can achieve the paradoxical goal of revenge that succeeds in establishing the superiority of its perpetrator when their humour is not recognized’ (118).

⁴ Maurel defines hyperbolic irony as ‘a number of devices, ranging from exaggeration to oversimplification, that all say more while meaning less’ (70).

I shouldn't have taken whisky on top of brandy. It's making me feel quarrelsome. Sparks of anger, or resentment, shooting all over me. . . . A comedy, what comedy? A comedy, my God!

The damned room grinning at me. The clock ticking. (150)

The questions 'You love playing comedy, don't you?' and 'How do you mean - a comedy?' again have the effect of destabilizing the concept of comedy in Rhys's narrative. Once again, the view of women as dour figures of fun seems to be her focus. Sasha, unaware that she has, in the eyes of René, been 'playing a comedy', emerges as the object rather than the subject of laughter. Furthermore, feeling 'sparks of anger' and thinking 'A comedy, what comedy? A comedy, my God!', she enacts the stereotype of women as lacking a sense of humour. Echoing *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, however, Rhys also implicitly mocks this assumption. Sasha perceives 'the damned room grinning' at her and 'the clock ticking'; she senses that she is being scrutinised by an amused audience and appears acutely conscious of elapsing time, suggesting that, despite her claims to the contrary, she is, in fact, on stage acting a part in a comedy. This discrepancy signifies Rhys's use of the split narrative voice. Sasha informs René, categorically, that she is not 'playing a comedy', but tells the reader that she is.⁵ This bisection of the narrative voice is reflected in the fabric of the text; Sasha's observations of the 'room grinning' and 'the clock ticking' appear in the form of an isolated, indented line. As Donna J. Haraway suggests, 'irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes' (69). Sasha's second, contradictory and conspiratorial voice seems to be Rhys's ironic voice – a voice that quietly derides the received ideas entrenched within contemporary notions of the comic.

The wry smile with which Rhys regards the ideology underlying established definitions of comedy finds expression in increasingly subtle ways. In *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, for example, the narrator reveals how

Mr Horsfield lowered his eyes moodily, so that as Julia and her partner passed his table he saw only her legs, appearing rather too plump in flesh-coloured stockings. It was like watching a clockwork toy that has been run down. (107)

Mr Horsfield, deliberately lowering his eyes so as to perceive Julia as a pair of 'rather too plump' disembodied legs, very obviously enacts the stereotypical perception of women as objects rather than subjects of laughter. More specifically, Rhys draws attention here to the way in which, as Gray suggests, 'comedy positions the woman not simply as the object of the male gaze but of the male laugh – not just to-be-looked-at but to-be-laughed-at – doubly removed from creativity' (9). But Rhys also seems to be drawing attention to another received idea about comedy here. In 1900, the French philosopher Henri Bergson argued in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* that 'the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine' (32). According to Bergson, 'the comic is . . . that side of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression

⁵ Streip also notes Rhys's use of the technique of split narrative voice (120).

of pure mechanism . . . of movement without life' (82). Mr Horsfield compares the movements of Julia's body to those of 'a clockwork toy', a machine that has been 'run down'. Having conventionally transformed a woman into a comic image, he automatically regards her movements as mechanised and, by implication, as laughable. Moreover, Mr Horsfield himself appears, in his conspicuous and mindless conformity to the ideology underlying contemporary notions of comedy, a kind of caricature, an embodiment of the trite, regimented humour of society. The narrator's sardonic claim that 'Mr Mackenzie's code, philosophy or habit of mind' was 'perfectly adapted to the social system and in any argument . . . could have defended it in any attack whatsoever' seems to confirm this idea (18). Comedy, then, plays an important role in Rhys's subtle development – to cite Shari Benstock – of 'a feminist argument based on the . . . physical and psychological exploitation of women by patriarchal society' (439). Not only does Rhys expose how such exploitation of women is made socially acceptable in the name of comedy, but she does so through her own sardonic humour – a method that, itself, functions both as an ironic comment on, and challenge to, the view of women as unsmiling, comic objects. To use a phrase from Hélène Cixous's essay, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976), Rhys 'break[s] up the "truth" with laughter', adopting a progressive, experimental approach both to comedy and to feminist thought (258).

This is similarly evident in *Good Morning, Midnight* when a drunken Sasha slips into a daydream:

All that is left in the world is an enormous machine. . . . It has innumerable flexible arms made of steel. . . . At the end of each arm is an eye, the eyelashes stiff with mascara. When I look more closely I see that only some of the arms have these eyes - others have lights. The arms that carry the eyes and the arms that carry the lights are all . . . very beautiful. . . . And the arms wave to an accompaniment of music and song. Like this: 'Hotcha - hotcha - hotcha. . . .' (156-57)

With its 'very beautiful' arms and 'eyelashes stiff with mascara', this image appears generically feminine. Moreover, part woman, part machine, and with 'eyes at the end of each arm', it is incongruous, farcical, or, more specifically, grotesque. In associating femininity with the grotesque, the narrator depicts women as essentially comic objects; femininity is – to use Mikhail Bakhtin's phrase – 'transformed into a funny monster' (49). The image of this bizarre woman-machine, waving its arms around in time to a song, and the narrator's nonsensical, dialogic evocation of this movement – 'Like this: 'Hotcha - hotcha - hotcha' – enhance its comic effect. Equally, as in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, the comic object is explicitly associated with the machine. It conforms to and exaggerates the assumption identified by Bergson that the apparently mechanised body is necessarily funny. As the art of the Dadaist, Expressionist and Surrealist movements in Europe demonstrates, the grotesque, in the Modernist context, is invoked as a mode of iconoclasm and satire. Through the construction of a Modernist dream narrative, Rhys transgresses the rational, exterior world and conjures a grotesque and comically hyperbolic image that ridicules the dogma which compounds patriarchal society's vision of comedy.

Rhys's Modernist deconstruction of comedy, however, is more expansive than this. As previously demonstrated, in revealing the exploitation inherent in contemporary notions of comedy, she elicits both laughter and serious thought. Indeed, Rhys generates the same effect when, in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, she uses the experimental technique of internal monologue to convey Julia's thoughts as she walks 'through the fog into Tottenham Court Road': 'During the war. . . . My God, that was a funny time. The mad things one did – and everybody else was doing them too. A funny time' (49). Ostensibly, in describing the catastrophic First World War as 'a funny time', Julia does not mean 'comic', but uses the word 'funny' in the colloquial sense – that is, to denote 'strange' or 'odd'. But Julia then repeats the phrase 'A funny time'. It is as if Rhys is drawing attention to the everyday, yet paradoxical linguistic pairing of comedy with uncertainty, melancholy and even tragedy. The fact that this phrase forms an entire sentence in the text lends it a particular resonance and, therefore, strengthens this impression. Moreover, it is as if the 'fog' at Tottenham Court Road is not simply physical, but also metaphorical. Comedy and tragedy suddenly appear indistinguishable, indistinct, 'nebulous', like 'the houses and the people passing' by (49). Rhys seems to be invoking a new, more complex and more vital notion of comedy – a tragicomedy arising from the modern, post-war world.

Good Morning Midnight creates a similar impression:

The fat man and I are in a corner by ourselves. He says: 'Life is too awful. Do you know that story about the man who loved a woman who was married to somebody else, and she fell ill? And he didn't dare go and ask about her because the husband suspected her and hated him And then one day he went and asked, and she was dead. Doesn't that make you laugh? She was dead, you see, and he had never sent one word. . . . That's an old story, but doesn't it make you laugh? . . .' (117)

The fat man's question, 'Do you know that story about the man who loved a woman?', evokes the introduction to a joke or comic anecdote. It is immediately reminiscent, in both tone and syntax, of what James Wood calls those 'forced moments when someone says, "Do you want to hear a joke?"', at which point most of us freeze . . . nervously aware that we are now inhabiting 'a comic moment' (3). As in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, however, laughter and despondency, comedy and tragedy, coalesce. Rhys embeds, within the familiar framework of a joke or amusing 'old story', a paradoxically melancholic account of impeded love, illness and death. The redundant phrase, 'she was dead you see' has the same effect; although the fat man is emphasising the tragic nature of the story, his enthusiastic, even buoyant tone is more reminiscent of a comedian alerting the listener to the punchline of a bad joke. Echoing *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, this sense of the essentially tragicomic nature of life is enhanced through the narrator's use of ordinary, informal language. The fat man asks, 'Doesn't that make you laugh?' – a phrase that epitomizes the notion of tragicomedy through, on the one hand, representing a confession to finding something funny, and an enquiry as to whether another person agrees, and, on the other, a rhetorical question intended to express bitterness, resentment

or disapproval. Rhys self-consciously fuses comedy with tragedy, destabilizing any fixed notion of genre in a manner characteristic of Modernist writers.

Moreover, in destabilizing the binary opposition of comedy and tragedy – humour and humourlessness – in this way, Rhys effectively nullifies the cultural stereotypes of the actively funny man and the humourless woman. Her subversive tragicomedy – or, to use Sigmund Freud’s phrase, ‘broken humour . . . that smiles through tears’ (232) – is evident again in *After Leaving Mackenzie*, when a man approaches Julia as she walks ‘towards the Châtelet’ in Paris:

He was young – a boy. . . . He gave her a rapid glance.

‘*Oh la la*’, he said. ‘*Ah non, alors*’.

He . . . walked away.

‘Well’, said Julia aloud, ‘that’s funny. The joke’s on me this time’.

She began to laugh, and on the surface of her consciousness she was really amused. But as she walked on her knees felt suddenly weak, as if she had been struck a blow over the heart. . . .

She thought again: ‘That was really funny. The joke was on me that time’.

(135)

This account, in which Julia is mistaken for a prostitute, encapsulates Rhys’s evocation of the tragicomedy that infuses the modern world. The young man’s embarrassing error is, on one level, as Julia’s initial reaction of amusement suggests, funny. But his rejection of Julia, her subsequent physical weakness, and her feeling of having ‘been struck a blow over the heart’ are pathetic and distressing. Again, colloquial language performs a key role in emphasising the fundamentally tragicomic nature of this situation; the adjective, ‘funny’, is used to denote both ‘comic’ – as Julia’s subsequent laughter suggests – and disconcertingly ‘strange’, as demonstrated by her preceding vulnerability and dejection. This is also true of the clichéd phrase, ‘the joke’s on me’, which Rhys uses firstly to suggest Julia’s amusement and then, contrastingly, to indicate her deep humiliation.

This commingling of comedy and tragedy, then, has a profoundly unsettling effect. The reader, like Julia, experiences a confusion of amusement and pity. We are left unsure as to what is the appropriate response. This sense of uncertainty escalates in *Good Morning, Midnight* when Sasha watches a comic film at ‘the Cinéma Danton’ (89):

The film goes on and on. After many vicissitudes, the good young man . . . has permission to propose to his employer’s daughter. He is waiting on the bank of a large pond, with a ring that he is going to offer her. . . . He takes it out to make sure that he has it. Mad with happiness, he strides up and down the shores of the pond, gesticulating. He makes too wild a gesture. The ring flies from his hand into the middle of the pond. He takes off his trousers; he wades out. . . .

Exactly the sort of thing that happens to me. I laugh until the tears come into my eyes. However, the film shows no sign of stopping, so I get up and go out. (90)

As Rhys’s episodic, present-tense narrative indicates, the reader is positioned, like Sasha, as a member of the cinema audience, observing, first-hand, events unfold on the screen.

We are implicated in the comic moment, reacting, alongside Sasha, to the action. Indeed, the behaviour of ‘the good young man’ is initially amusing. His over-exuberance and clumsiness evoke farcical, slapstick comedy. Sasha, however, thinking that this is ‘exactly the sort of thing that happens to’ her, reacts introspectively; she identifies with, rather than laughs detachedly at, the scene. Furthermore, she laughs ‘until the tears come into [her] eyes’. Rhys again utilises the latent tragicomic element in everyday conversational language here. The expression, ‘I laughed until the tears came into my eyes’, is usually used to stress a hysterically funny situation. But tears are, of course, also inherently tragic. Indeed, Sasha’s compulsion to ‘get up and go out’ of the cinema when the film ‘shows no sign of stopping’, as if unable to continue to be reminded of her own haplessness, suggests that hers are tears of despair and frustration rather than amusement. As Gray suggests, ‘to define a joke, to be the class [or group] that decides *what is funny*, is to make a massive assumption of power’ (8). Rhys’s readers, however, are paradoxically both empowered and disempowered: they are confronted with conflicting invitations to laugh and condole, left uncertain as to how the text intends them to react. In essence, the tragicomedy that Rhys creates is one in which we find ourselves strangely and helplessly involved.

The reader’s compulsory participation in the ‘comic’ moment establishes comedy as a central element of Rhys’s Modernism. James Wood argues that ‘the comedy, or tragicomedy of the modern novel replaces the knowable with the unknowable, transparency with unreliability, and this is surely in direct proportion to the growth of characters’ fictive inner lives’. We are, according to Wood, as a result, ‘solitary novel readers, somewhat unsure of whether we are in the stalls or on the stage’ (8). Wood’s analysis illuminates the relationship between comedy and Modernism in Rhys’s novels. Through depicting the psychological lives of her heroines, Rhys dissolves the boundaries between comedy and tragedy. More specifically, these ‘knowable’ genres are replaced by a paradoxical and, in this sense, ‘unknowable’ tragicomedy. In essence, Rhys, as Wood suggests, consciously substitutes narrative ‘transparency’ with ‘unreliability’. The reader is not positioned safely ‘in the stalls’ – not told, reliably, by an omniscient narrator when it is appropriate to laugh – but situated ‘on the stage’, drawn into the ‘comic’ moment and invited, like the characters in the novel, to either laugh or cry. As Wheeler suggests, ‘Rhys’s novels . . . represent first, a continuing experiment with the possibilities of what fiction might be and what it might become’ (101). Rhys’s tragicomedy is central to this Modernist experiment because it explores the possibilities of the relationship between the reader and the text.

Given that Rhys’s tragicomedy results from her attempts to, as Virginia Woolf suggests, ‘trace the pattern . . . which each sight or incident scores upon the unconsciousness’, it is unsurprising that it is most striking in *Good Morning, Midnight*, the pinnacle of Rhys’s experimental representation of the psychology of her heroines (190). This is exemplified in Sasha’s epiphanic response to the proposition, ‘Why not take life as it comes? You have the right to; you are not one of the guilty ones’:

While he is talking I have the strange idea that perhaps it is like that. . . . Now then, you, X – you must go down and be born. Oh, not me, please, not me. Well then, you, Y, you go along and be born – somebody’s got to be. Where’s Y? Y is

hiding. Well, come on Z, you've got to go and be born. Come on, hurry up, hurry up. . . . (55)

Rhys's narrative technique is particularly innovative here. 'Now then you X' signifies a transition from first person narrative to internal monologue. Moreover, this interior monologue is itself the object of Rhys's experimentation; it is polyphonic, featuring the voice, presumably, of God ('Well then, you, Y, you go along and be born'), the voice of X ('Oh, not me, please, not me'), and the voice of a narrator ('Y is hiding'). These voices comprise an imagined scene that is very funny in its farcical depiction of life before birth. Sasha, however, is actually responding to the assertion that 'we are not one of the guilty ones', to a disturbingly irresponsible, even nihilistic attitude to life. This is echoed in her imagined scene. God endeavours to force X and Y, and succeeds in coercing Z, to 'go and be born', suggesting that people enter the world against their will and are, therefore, not accountable for their actions. Equally unsettling is X, Y and Z's reluctance to be born as it portrays life as a fundamentally unpleasant experience. Not only is Rhys's blurring of comedy and tragedy noticeably consistent with her representation of the complexities of psychological experience here, but the reader is also, once again, embroiled in the tragicomedy. Echoing the scene at 'the Cinéma Danton' (90), Rhys conveys Sasha's imagined scene in the present tense. Just as the reader is positioned in the cinema audience, observing, first-hand, the comedy unfold on the screen, here, it is as if the reader is seated in a theatre, witnessing a strange, tragicomic sketch; as in the opening scene of Luigi Pirandello's Modernist play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), we 'have the feeling of being present . . . at a play that happens spontaneously' (1). Ultimately, however, we are not located 'in the stalls', but positioned 'on the stage'. The reader is poised between laughter and serious meditation, implicated, once again, in Rhys's Modernist experiment.

This is a recurring pattern in *Good Morning, Midnight*:

This is another lavatory . . . another of the well-known mirrors.

'Well, well', it says, 'last time you looked in here you were a bit different, weren't you? Would you believe me that, of all the faces I see, I remember each one, that I keep a ghost to throw back at each one . . . when it looks into me again?' (142)

Through using internal monologue, Rhys demonstrates how a mirror 'speaks' to Sasha, how the world is subjectively perceived in the mind. Furthermore, the mirror's matter-of-fact, authoritative tone and, indeed, the very idea of an inanimate object speaking at all, are comical. The mirror's claims to remember every face that peers into it, and to 'keep a ghost to throw back at each one', however, evoke the irreversible advance of time, and the dismaying loss of youthful beauty. The overall effect that Rhys creates evokes Pirandello's suggestion in *On Humour* that 'in the conception of a work of humour, reflection is . . . a mirror, but a mirror of icy water, in which the flame of feeling not only looks at itself but plunges in it and extinguishes itself: the sizzling of the water is the laughter the humorist evokes' (118). Echoing the scene in 'the Cinéma Danton', or

Sasha's imagined comic sketch, the reader is, in turn, subtly implicated alongside Sasha as the flame of her feeling plunges into the 'icy water' of her reflection – torn between conflicting impulses to laugh and empathise, gloomily. Indeed, in providing the mirror with its own distinctive voice, rather than conveying its subjective impression on Sasha, for example, through free indirect speech, Rhys detaches its monologue from her heroine. In essence, the mirror seems, temporarily, not only to interrogate Sasha, but also to address the reader. Rhys's repetition of the pronoun, 'you', and, indeed, the very nature of a mirror itself – an object that reflects whoever studies it – add to this impression.

It could, in fact, be argued that this Modernist experiment itself represents a form of comedy in Rhys's work – an idea that deals a final, fatal blow to the stereotype of women, and, in particular, the woman writer, as essentially humourless. In 'The Dehumanisation of Art', an essay that explores the nature and significance of Modernist and, in particular, Cubist art, José Ortega y Gasset describes the modern work of art as 'doomed to irony' (46). According to Ortega y Gasset, 'to look for fiction as fiction – which . . . modern art does – is a proposition that cannot be executed except with one's tongue in one's cheek. Art is appreciated precisely because it is recognised as a farce' (47). Rhys, in deliberately implicating the reader in the 'comic' moment through the fusion of comedy with tragedy, draws attention to the artificiality of her novels. In short, she looks 'for fiction as fiction'. In this sense, she recognises her work as a farce – as, by its very nature, a kind of sardonic joke. Rhys's tragicomedy, therefore, infuses the very essence of her novels because they are, ultimately, as Ortega y Gasset suggests, 'doomed to irony', executed with a wry smile.

In a letter to Peggy Kirkaldy from July 1948, Rhys writes:

Valiant Max is still around. He always has some music hall act or other which he imagines will get rid of all the sea of troubles. But they (the acts) sound a bit dud to me – for instance a robot car which is driven by a little robot man who opens and shuts his mouth while a gramophone record 'roars' comic songs. Sounds like the last word in weariness and dreariness doesn't it? But maybe it's just what the great heart of the people is yearning for and so on. (*Letters* 46)

This passage encapsulates Rhys's Modernist treatment of comedy in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* and *Good Morning, Midnight*. In her characteristically dry, ironic tone, she expresses her disillusionment at the unimaginative laughter of 'the people', undermining contemporary, patriarchal society's vision of comedy. She also challenges the assumption that comedy and tragedy – humour and humourlessness – are irreconcilable; comedy cannot, as Rhys implies, 'get rid of all the sea of troubles' because it is itself immersed in it. It is this idea of comedy that pervades Jean Rhys's novels: a distinctive, searching tragicomedy that is both innovatively feminist and vitally Modernist.

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