

# Subversive Wanderings in the City of Love: Constructing the Female Body in Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*

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**Abstract:** In this article I analyse the deconstruction of the public/private dichotomy in the city of Paris in Jean Rhys's *Good Morning Midnight* (1939). Through the exploration of Sasha's aimless wandering through Paris in her failed quest for romantic love, this paper aims to explore Rhys's Paris as a city which is hostile to women who fail to perform conventional standards of femininity. These standards are in turn encouraged and set by the promise of happiness; thus, the mimicry of femininity—whether intentional or not—exposes ongoing power dynamics in gender roles, the construction of the bodies of others through political ideals of happiness and love, and the subversive potential in Rhys's novel, even if the protagonist is crushed at the end by the private side of the emerging totalitarian regimes on the eve of the Second World War.

**Keywords:** Jean Rhys; urban studies; gender studies; interwar fiction; British fiction.

**Summary:** Introduction. Women walking the city. Women in Paris: The city of love. *Une femme convenable*: "Making a Spectacle" out of patriarchy. Authoritarian love in an authoritarian city. Conclusion.

**Resumen:** En este artículo, analizo la deconstrucción de la dicotomía de las esferas pública y privada en la ciudad de París en *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) de Jean Rhys. Examinaré los paseos sin rumbo de Sasha en su búsqueda fallida del amor romántico. De este modo, analizaré cómo el París de Rhys es una ciudad hostil para aquellas mujeres que no alardean de feminidad. Estas formas de feminidad las inspiran promesas de felicidad. Por ello la imitación, deliberada o involuntaria, de los patrones y modelos de conducta de dicha feminidad deja al descubierto las dinámicas de poder que subyacen tanto bajo los roles de género como bajo la construcción de los cuerpos de otros. Dichas construcciones están mediadas por los ideales políticos que elaboran los conceptos de amor y felicidad. La novela de Rhys ofrece un potencial subversivo, incluso aunque la protagonista sea finalmente vencida por los regímenes totalitarios que hicieron estallar la Segunda Guerra Mundial.

**Palabras clave:** Jean Rhys; estudios urbanos; estudios de género; ficción de entreguerras; ficción británica.



**Sumario:** Introducción. Mujeres paseando por la ciudad. Mujeres en París: La ciudad del amor. *Une femme convenable*: “Hacer un espectáculo” del patriarcado. Amor autoritario en una ciudad autoritaria. Conclusión.

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## INTRODUCTION

In his essay “Walking the City” (1984 [1980]), Michel De Certeau contends that spaces are transformed and produced by human practices such as walking (107). However, as some scholars have noted, he completely overlooks intersections of gender, race, and class in these practices, which are of course essential to determine which spaces are created, for whom, by whom, and what impact they have upon non-normative entities, that is, everybody else who does not “make” space.<sup>1</sup> One of the most articulate responses to De Certeau’s project is Elizabeth Grosz’s essay “Bodies-Cities” (2012 [1995]), where she argues that cities play a key role in the production of bodies, particularly of sexed bodies (242). According to Grosz, the city is the best representation of space that acts as an agent of power over bodies, since it is a construct in between the village—the *communitas*, or social body—and the state, or legislation (“Bodies-Cities” 243). Starting from her claim that the body is “naturally ‘incomplete’” and organically constructed (Grosz, “Bodies-Cities” 243), I explore the impact of cities on women at the beginning of the twentieth-century, when they had access to so-called “pink-collar” jobs which granted them more freedom but in turn made them objects of consumption in the capitalist market. I then apply this analysis to Jean Rhys’s novel *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), where Sasha, a single, poor, middle-aged woman wanders around Paris searching to fulfil the fantasy of romantic love—the paramount expression of female identity—which is closely linked to hegemonic political and economic power, as this paper will try to demonstrate.

### 1. WOMEN WALKING THE CITY

As Elizabeth Lunbeck points out, the industrial revolution, the creation of “pink-collar” occupations and most significantly, the need for women

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Collie.

workers during the First World War, made it possible for women to live on their own in cities—themselves a by-product of industrialisation. Lunbeck claims that “[t]hey challenged, if only for a few precious years, the familiar, patriarchal paradigm that saw them moving from their fathers’ to their husbands’ homes” (189). Yet the incorporation of women to the urban public sphere was not unproblematic. As Elizabeth Wilson argues, the spread of cities made society more difficult to control, unlike villages and feudal arrangements (*The Sphinx in the City* 6). Women, who had been taught to aspire to Victorian bourgeois ideals of femininity—that is, domesticity, maternity and purity—were facing opposite predicaments as the need for both women workers and consumers rose in an industrialised society. As a result, this created chaos in the well-established eighteenth-century division between the public and the private realms, which merged in the city: “the problem in nineteenth-century urban life was whether every woman in the new, disordered world of the city—the public sphere of pavements, cafés and theatres—was not a public woman and thus a prostitute” (Wilson, “The Invisible Flâneur” 93).<sup>2</sup> A woman on her own, unaccompanied and unchaperoned, was not uncommon in the city, but it did not make her seem less of a peril: her sexuality was unowned, that is, unrestricted, and this posed a problem for men who might be “lured” into disease, a life of vice and immorality, and a loss of identity.<sup>3</sup> Women, who belonged to the private sphere, were now out in the public. This loss of boundaries between the domestic and the public, between a tamed sexuality and a feral one, threatened the sovereignty of men. As Wilson affirms, “[t]he city offers untrammelled sexual experience . . . many writers . . . posed the presence of women as a problem of order, particularly *because* their presence symbolised the promise of sexual adventure. This promise was converted into a general moral and political threat” (Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City* 5–6; original emphasis). This contesting figure is no other than the *flâneur*.

The *flâneur* appears as a response to the modern city: he is the nostalgic individual who distinguishes himself from the crowd, an observer, a stroller, a spectator who watches the city crowd with a

<sup>2</sup> See Habermas (1989) for an account on the birth of the private sphere as a product of eighteenth-century bourgeois ideals.

<sup>3</sup> See Andreas Huyssen’s “Mass Culture as Woman” (1987), where he directly identifies the perils of homogenising, totalising masses with mass consumption embodied in women.

mixture of contempt and cynicism, yet, ironically, a direct product of it (Nord 237). In this sense, the *flâneur* establishes himself, in De Certeau's terms, as an "author" of society, commenting upon it in a detached and critical manner (Nord 1–15; Buck-Morss 111). As Wilson has argued (*The Sphinx in the City*; "The Invisible Flâneur"), the *flâneur* is, by definition, a middle-class white male who can wander freely and unobserved in the city streets. Writers such as Walter Benjamin, Charles Dickens or Charles Baudelaire identified themselves with this type—the social observer. But was it possible to be a female *flâneur*, a *flâneuse*? There are divided opinions: Deborah Nord (*Walking the Victorian Streets*), for instance, posits middle-class women writers such as Elizabeth Gaskell or Flora Tristan as female social observers, deploying the constraints of their sex (namely, femininity) as tools for social justice in order to fight against "poverty, disease and fallenness" (Nord 12), being at once sufficiently detached from their domestic outlook and emotionally involved enough to perform this task with success; Janet Wolff (1985) claims the impossibility of the *flâneuse*, arguing that in the nineteenth century the public and the modern was equated with the masculine; and Wilson ("The Invisible Flâneur") posits the prostitute as the ultimate *flâneuse*, for they inhabit the streets, although in unequal terms with regards to men (Wilson, "The Invisible Flâneur" 105). More recent scholarship, such as D'Souza and McDonough's (*The Invisible Flâneuse*), agree with Wolff and try to step outside of the *flâneur/flâneuse* paradigm in a way that accounts for female negotiations between public and private spaces in modern cities. In sum, the city posed problems and threats for women, who were sought to be banished from the public space, but it also offered them a new kind of freedom—both financial, and identitarian (Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City* 7). The paramount city emblem of sexual freedom, mobility, and enjoyment could not be other than Paris—nowadays also considered the city of love.

## 2. WOMEN IN PARIS: THE CITY OF LOVE

However, was Paris a free space for *everyone*? As Shari Benstock explains in *Women of the Left Bank* (1986), regardless of the modernity found in the artistic *quartiers* of Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century, the modernists occupying the left bank also "reinforced the normative" (Benstock x), privileging the white, heterosexual male, then the lesbian, and finally the wife of the artist. There is no place for the

heterosexual, single woman, whose vulnerability Paris enforces (Benstock 433). This is the case for Sasha Jansen, the protagonist of Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939). Sasha is a middle-aged woman, probably English or with family ties in England, who returns to Paris in 1937 and reminisces about her past failures in the city: a lost love, a lost child, and lost jobs. These are precisely the failures that prevent her from coming back to London, where she is ostracized, and which trap her in Paris. Having depended on the financial support of men through her life, as well as on her meagre earnings in pink-collar exploitive occupations, and on her dismissive family, penniless Sasha faces the plight of having to perform the "masquerade of womanliness," as Joan Riviere (1929) first termed it, in order to achieve financial and existential support. Following Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One*, originally published in 1977, this performance means the "mimicry of femininity," whereby, according to Mary Russo, "[f]emininity is a mask which masks non-identity" (223). It becomes a kind of carnival that reinforces and evinces the cultural construction of femininity, both the limit and the viability of living in the world as a woman, as the ending of the novel suggests.<sup>4</sup> The idea of the carnival traditionally means subverting hierarchies, but as Mary Lou Emery claims, it may also reinforce them, repeating them in reverse: "[Sasha] becomes a mistress of disguise in two senses of the word 'mistress': she both manages disguise and submits to it sexually. . . . Sasha attempts desperately to wear with success the masks that she believes other will perceive as respectable femininity" (Emery 4–5). Sasha's mimicry is by no means perfect: she repeatedly fails at the performance of femininity, which in turn allows her to shed light on how femininity fails at fulfilling its promise of "the good life"—namely, romantic love.<sup>5</sup> Her mimicry uncovers the political and economic consequences that the performance of femininity entails for women. As Irigaray claims:

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself simply to be reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side

<sup>4</sup> The idea of mimicry in Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight* has also been looked at, from different theoretical standpoints, by Mellown, Emery, Howells, Maurel and Zimring.

<sup>5</sup> On the connection between femininity, the fantasy of romantic love and the promise of the "good life," see Lauren Berlant's *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*.

of “perceptible,” of “matter”—to “ideas,” in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by masculine logic, but so as to make “visible,” by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means to “unveil” the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply reabsorbed in this function. (76)

In effect, if the only language available to women is the language of the oppressor, to be at least conscious of using it may open up a breach to undermine the hegemony by subverting its rules. Sylvie Maurel claims that Sasha “chooses controlled, parodic mimicry of the master discourse. Mimicking the mimicry imposed upon woman, she tries to undo the effects of patriarchal logic by overdoing them” (128). Whether the tools of the master are the way to undo the master’s house is yet to be seen. Sasha roams the streets of Paris in search of a lover who will pay her bills and keep her company. In the meantime, she spends what she calls “her little life”—her irrelevant life—in an impersonal cheap hotel room:

“Quite like old times,” the room says. “Yes? No?”

There are two beds, a big one for madame and a smaller one on the opposite side for monsieur. The wash-basin is shut off by a curtain. It is a large room, the smell of cheap hotels faint, almost imperceptible. The street outside is narrow, cobble-stoned, going sharply uphill and ending in a flight of steps. What they call an impasse.

I have been here five days. I have decided on a place to eat in at midday, a place to eat in at night, a place to have my drink in after dinner. I have arranged my little life. (Rhys 9)

Emma Zimmerman identifies the hotel room as a kind of liminal space of modernity that “embodies the confusion of the private and public spheres that is so crucial to the development of the modern city” (79). The hotel room is a space of domesticity, yet it is impersonal and only temporarily owned upon a monetary transaction. However, its impersonality is at the same time marked by who can inhabit it: the room is, in fact, gendered and marked with class as well as nationality, for the patroness often frowns upon Sasha for being foreign, and she is denied a better room precisely for this reason (Rhys 32–33). For Sasha, a room is, in the end, “a place where you hide from the wolves outside and that’s all any room is” (Rhys 33). Bereft of a domestic space that feels like home, any room serves Sasha the purpose of hiding from the difficulty of trying

to walk the streets as a woman on her own—for a *flâneuse*, if she does exist, does not only observe, but is constantly watched. As I will later show, Sasha's traces of vulnerability turn the hotel room into a space which can be transgressed by violence, which cannot even grant her the safety from the streets that she desperately wants.

The streets of Paris, where a busker sings “C’est l’amour qui flotte dans l’air à ronde” (Rhys 13) are not safe for her, nor are they full of love.<sup>6</sup> Whenever she wanders the streets at night or enters cafés to dine by herself, Sasha is stared at with suspicion by both men and women, so that she constantly has to reassure her status as a “respectable woman, une femme convenable” (Rhys 88) to appease the anxieties that arise in others when they see her and which may have negative consequences for her. The threat of violence, of being expelled out of the system, whether physically or symbolically, may always appear at the turn of every corner for a lone woman in the city. For this reason, Sasha is well aware that her performance of femininity is a means of survival: “I am trying so hard to be like you. I know I don’t succeed, but look how hard I try. Three hours to choose a hat; every morning an hour and a half to make myself look like everybody else” (Rhys 88). Sasha is very conscious of the act she puts on, including the very action of clothing and trying to look like “respectable people.” Indeed, whenever she suffers from a crisis—rejection, attempts at being tricked or the throwback of sad memories—, she either buys new clothes or dyes her hair (Rhys 44; 59–60) in order to cover up her “undesirability” as an old woman. As Christina Britzolakis argues, “[f]or Rhys’s women, the masquerade of femininity provides, via cosmetics and fashion, a form of protective/aggressive anonymity within a public space characterized by the hostile gaze of others” (462). Identity can thus be bought, worn, performed.

A performance, in Judith Butler’s words, “must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names” (2). However, the fact that “this reiteration . . . is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled” (Butler 2). In other words, the need for the performance itself reveals its artificiality—its being a social norm, a cultural construct, a disguise to fit in. Butler’s

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<sup>6</sup> See also Cortés Vieco and Carbayo López de Pablo for discussions of the construction of urban spaces and femininity in Rhys’s interwar fiction.

idea is further elaborated by Elizabeth Grosz's claim that bodies "are the products, the direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself. It is not simply that the body is represented in a variety of ways according to historical, social, and cultural exigencies while it remains basically the same; these factors actively produce the body as a body of a determinate type" (*Volatile Bodies* x). The female body and its definitions are subject to social structures of power and they are greatly invested with cultural meanings. Yet, if the city as a social practice produces and governs the bodies that inhabit it, can bodies contest and even change the city? According to Grosz, they can: "[f]ar from being an inert, passive, noncultural and ahistorical term, the body may be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual, and intellectual struggles" (*Volatile Bodies* 19). While some critics claim that Rhys's work is autobiographical and non-political, I believe that Rhys's fiction, and specifically *Good Morning, Midnight* undoes the illusionary barrier between the public and private spheres and confronts the multiple ways in which women are oppressed and disempowered.<sup>7</sup> Sasha's failed performance lays bare the mechanisms of power that impel her to perform femininity in the first place, and, despite the novel's bleak ending, it can be read as an act of subversion.

### 3. *UNE FEMME CONVENABLE*: "MAKING A SPECTACLE" OUT OF PATRIARCHY

Although Sasha tries hard to perform the identity of *une femme convenable*, she does not manage to comply with the normative narrative of the respectable daughter, wife or mother—her new-born child dies, her husband abandons her after their infant's death, and her family back in London refuses to support her anymore. These events leave Sasha exposed to both symbolic and physical violence (Emery 11); she depends on lovers to provide for her, and thus keeps hopelessly looking for love. In fact, Sasha transgresses the public/private boundary by displaying excessive femininity on the public sphere in order to make up for her lack of a conventional domestic narrative. As an older woman without independent means, Sasha wanders the streets of Paris looking for a lover who will financially support her in exchange for her intimacy. Yet she is

<sup>7</sup> See for instance Staley (84) or Howells (20).

denied this exchange as well: she is too old to be desired, and, as a woman, she cannot desire. Her presence in the public space disrupts the social fabric: “Qu’est-ce qu’elle fout ici, la vieille? What the devil (translating it politely) is she doing here, that old woman? What is she doing here, the stranger, the alien, the old one?” (Rhys 46). Even her close relatives back in London suggest she drowns in the Seine: “We considered you as dead. Why didn’t you make a hole in the water? Why didn’t you drown yourself in the Seine?” (Rhys 36); and the last friend who lent her money said that she “‘couldn’t bear to see [her] like this.’ . . . which means: ‘She’s getting too old. She drinks.’” (Rhys 11). This excessive femininity is automatically labelled as “a spectacle, a scene,” since it disrupts public codes of sexual behaviour for women and challenges patriarchal authority. “Making a spectacle out of oneself,” Mary Russo comments, is a feminine danger which

ha[s] more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, aging and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap. It was my impression that these women had done something wrong . . . and yet anyone, any *woman*, could make a spectacle out of herself if she was not careful. (213; original emphasis)

Making a spectacle out of oneself is, in other words, to lay bare the mechanisms whereby femininity—and thus, gender inequality—becomes an enforced performance that must be kept under control, either by internal or external means. Everything that exceeds that performance poses a challenge to the norm and will be dismissed as hysterical but paradoxically natural (“the way a woman is”), thus eventually abiding to the status quo. Sasha makes a spectacle out of herself: she cries in public when she has had a drink and has women around her telling her that “[they are] just as unhappy as [she is]. But that’s not to say that [they] let everybody see it” (Rhys 10). A woman’s anxiety with one’s one material and existential situation should not be seen in public, for this does not but reinforce the idea of female weakness and hysteria—a woman must not complain, otherwise it means that “she brought it on herself, she’s weak, that’s just the way she is” (Berlant, “The Female Complaint” 243–44). As Lauren Berlant points out, what she terms “the female complaint”—which departs from a female subjectivity that has been wronged (that is, denied the “good life” promised in exchange of fulfilling one’s own role

as a woman)—lacks political momentum “because she articulates her position within the dialectic of desire that produces her rage” (“The Female Complaint” 243). That is, she desires that which has subjected her in the first place, and therefore, “her resistance is also easily absorbed into that economy, and easily transformed into a kind of nonsense, chatter, hysterical or seductive patter” (Berlant, “The Female Complaint” 243). Although at the beginning of the novel Sasha claims, “[n]ow I no longer wish to be loved, beautiful, happy or successful. I want one thing and one thing only – to be left alone” (Rhys 37), she inevitably keeps pursuing “the good life”—love and material comfort, which go hand in hand in the novel— and will end up consenting to the trap of femininity, as the ending shows. As Lauren Berlant explains:

The *a priori* marking of female discourse as *less serious* is paradoxically the only condition under which the complaint mode can operate as an effective political tool: the female complaint allows the woman who wants to maintain her alignment with men to speak oppositionally but without fear for her position within the heterosexual economy—because the mode of her discourse concedes the intractability of the (phallogentric) conditions of the complaint’s production. (“The Female Complaint” 244)

The female complaint—that is, “making a spectacle out of oneself”—can exist *precisely* because it is not taken seriously, because it is actually asking for what it complains about: not being loved, in the fantasy mode of romantic love. Therefore, while the complaint voices female oppression, it is also “contained” within the very discourse that it is criticising—that of sentimentality—, functioning, thus, more as a “safety valve” than as a useful tool for political action (Berlant, “The Female Complaint” 245). “God, it’s funny, being a woman!,” Sasha thinks, ironically, after a waiter stares at her funnily when she orders a Pernod in a bar (Rhys 87). Her mere presence provokes laughter and suspicion because it is disruptive. She is not taken seriously and is read as “a spectacle” even if she precisely acts out because she wants to comply with the rules: for Sasha, to have a successful outing means “no crying in public, no crying at all if you can help it” (Rhys 14). Thus, her aimless wandering becomes at once subversive and a trap; she is an outcast in the public space, in an endless succession of days looking for the promise of love to be fulfilled: “After this it becomes a nightmare. I walk upstairs, past doors, along passages—all different, all exactly alike” (Rhys 23).

Old, alone, and sad, she is of no use to society for she can neither be a mother nor a prostitute. Emotional and economic wealth go hand in hand in a capitalist society where the narrative of the “undeserving” is used to punish those who suffer from structural oppression or whose happiness is conditioned to fulfilling their role in society:<sup>8</sup> Sasha’s failure as a mother—the death of her infant son—was a consequence of her lack of means to provide her baby son with the needed care (Rhys 50–52). Yet the death of her child is followed by the abandonment of her abusive husband—to her shame and economic breakdown. The link between the economy of love and of material survival comes to the fore in *Good Morning, Midnight* as a way of denouncing the emotional and actual hungers that gnaw the oppressed.

#### 4. AUTHORITARIAN LOVE IN AN AUTHORITARIAN CITY

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed explains that the construction of feminine bodies in the public space is limited by the narrative of women’s vulnerability: women must be on guard if moving outside of the house, for the outside is posed as “inherently dangerous” (69). Thus, Ahmed argues that “norms surface *as* the surfaces of bodies; norms are a matter of impressions, of how bodies are ‘impressed upon’ by the world, as a world made up of others” (145; original emphasis). By way of repetition, some bodies and gestures are legitimized and posited as desirable and deserving, whilst others are not.

Indeed, Sasha often feels for women and other destitute people in a similar position, like the old, bald woman who comes to buy a hair accessory at the shop where Sasha briefly works and is laughed at (Rhys 20), or the girl in the tabac who “does all the dirty work and gets paid very little for it” (Rhys 87), about whom Sasha ironically says: “Why should I be sorry for her? Hasn’t she got sturdy legs and curly hair? And don’t her strong hands sing the Marseillaise? And when the revolution comes, won’t those be the hands to be kissed?” (Rhys 88). Sasha is well

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<sup>8</sup> On the political meanings and uses of happiness, see Ahmed (2010). According to Ahmed, “[t]he very promise that happiness is what you get for having the right associations might be how we are directed toward certain things” (2). In other words, “being happy” is associated with a set of social norms in order to make people conform to the rules “for their own good”—i.e. the happy housewife or the happy slave are examples of how, throughout history, happiness has been used as a political tool to make others live according to the rulers’ wish.

aware that society dictates that there must be oppressed and oppressors, and that the criteria about who deserves what is randomly ruled by those in power, like her employer Mr. Blank—obvious pun intended—who forces her to admit that she is “a fool” (Rhys 24). Despite her endless search for romantic love and cosmetic beauty, or precisely because of it, Sasha knows how society works:

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 . . . 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. (Rhys 26)

Not everyone can indeed be happy if they do not orient themselves towards the right feelings and actions—but even if they do, the narrative shows that this can fail as well: “Love is one thing; marriage—alas!—is quite another” (Rhys 53). Yet the powerless are blamed for the faults of the system: “All you young women . . . dance too much. Mad for pleasure, all the young people. . . . Ah, what will happen to this after-war generation” (75). Not following the norms, whether willingly or not, poses a threat for society.

However, Sasha manages to create some temporary safe spaces throughout her wanderings where people are able to show kindness and sympathy towards one another regardless of their conditions. One of such spaces is the lavabo, where she hides herself when she is crying in a café, and where women take care of each other by sharing food, drugs or make-up, “something to heal a wounded heart” (Rhys 10). The lavabo is a temporary place to rest from and recompose femininity—a place of comfort, but also a safety valve for the female complaint: “They have a drink, these women, and then they have another and then they start crying silently. And then they go into the lavabo and then they come out—powdered, but with hollow eyes—and, head down, slink into the street” (89). Another instance is when she watches the paintings made by her friend, the Jewish painter Serge (another outcast), and imagines a room “as empty as this. Nothing in it but a bed and a looking-glass . . . the stove lit at about two in the afternoon—the cold and the stove

fighting each other” (Rhys 83). These are spaces where emotional and material stability are unconditional and not subject to gambling—a room of her own, furnished both physically and emotionally.

Yet these spaces of hope are not bound to last: Sasha’s Paris is the Paris of 1937, the Paris of the Great Exhibition and no longer the city of freedom and pleasure of the ‘20s and ‘30s. The public space, thus, is unmasked as intolerant and totalitarian by use of the symbol of the Great Exhibition, which was set up by the *Front Populaire* and gathered exhibition halls from such radically different political stances such as Communist Russia, Nazi Germany, Mussolini’s Italy or Republican Spain, where the Civil War had already broken out.<sup>9</sup> It became the emblem for France’s and Europe’s tense division and upcoming ideological fragmentation. The Exhibition is first mentioned in relation to another space—a dream she has set in a London tube station:

I am in the passage of a tube station in London. Many people are in front of me; many are behind me. Everywhere there are placards printed in red letters: This Way to the Exhibition, This Way to the Exhibition. But I don’t want the way to the exhibition—I want the way out. . . . I touch the shoulder of the man walking in front of me. I say: “I want the way out.” But he points to the placards and his hand is made of steel. I walk along with my head bent, very ashamed, thinking: “Just like me—always wanting to be different from the other people.” (Rhys 12)

Thus, even though Sasha may want to escape from the narrative of the society she lives in (“always wanting to be different from the other people”), there is no way out. And if she attempts to escape, the rules will be enforced via totalitarianism. René, the gigolo, who seems to function as a foil to Sasha trying to conquer her for her money, is prove of this shift towards hopelessness. At first, René seems, in Judith Gardiner’s words, “her fairy-tale prince” (242)—he makes her feel desired and desirable again, he is young, attractive, poor. Yet he becomes at once “her antidote and her oppressor” for “when he kisses her, she does not wake up and live happily ever after” (Gardiner 242). Rather, he dispossesses her of her last remainder of hope by trying to assault her, finally deeming her unworthy of that, not even stealing her money (Rhys 154–56), and leaves her alone in her room to become prey to the *commis*.

<sup>9</sup> See Britzolakis (2007) for a full discussion on the importance of the Great Exhibition of 1937 in *Good Morning, Midnight*.

The *commis* is described from the beginning of the novel as a ghostly, threatening figure who has been allocated in the room next to hers. He wears a white nightgown that barely reaches his knees and tries to trespass Sasha's boundaries in several instances when they cross at the lobby of the hotel: "When he sees me he grins, comes to the head of the stairs and stands there, blocking the way" (Rhys 30). His figure points to a sacrament or a sacrifice: "He looks like a priest, the priest of some obscene, half-understood religion" (Rhys 30). He ends up raping Sasha after René leaves the room and she calls after him, thinking that "[i]t isn't too late . . . For the last time" (Rhys 157); that is, he is her last chance at love and mercy. It is not René who comes back, but the *commis*.

Many authors interpret Sasha's surrender to the *commis* as a sign of harmony and compassion (Staley 1979; Wolfe 1980; Nebeker 1981; Mellown 1990 [1972]; Howells 1991), whereas others read it in a less positive light (Davidson 1983; Emery 1990). I align myself with the latter reading: for Sasha surrenders to the *commis* after she is abandoned by René and the promise of romantic love has failed. Bereft of any hope for the future, Sasha is assaulted in the only safe space that was left: her hotel room, which, as Zimmerman points out, "is anything but a safe retreat from history" (86). As the room does not grant her the true impersonality or real domesticity that she needs, a more powerful figure forces himself from the public (the lobby) into the private (Sasha's room). In Zimmerman's words, "the *commis* impinges on Sasha's consciousness, constantly revealing her subordinated position as a single woman, vulnerable to the opposite sex" (84). Mary Lou Emery sees the ending as a "moment of submission to the role of fool/victim in which the fascistic authority of Mr. Blank casts her" (Emery 171). She explains that Sasha's sexual surrender to the *commis* can be read as a sacrifice demanded by fascism (Emery 171). But not only that; I would go further to suggest that Sasha's final submission to this old man that she has always despised means her realisation of the futility of the female complaint and her giving in to her fate. The *commis*, thus, forces her to sexually submit her body devoid of any narrative or fantasy—just by means of violence, revealing how powerless she is in the face of an authority that is turning harsher and more violent over Europe. Her last words: "Yes—yes—yes..." (Rhys 159) have been linked by many critics to Molly Bloom's "yes" in the last chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses*—which is widely interpreted as the embrace and acceptance of life by the feminine—, so have critics read the scene in *Good Morning, Midnight* in

a similar way, as a symbol of union and transcendence (Staley 1979; Frickey 1990; Mellown 1990 [1972]). In other words, these critics also return Sasha to the place of the eternal feminine, whose task in the world is that of spreading love and compassion regardless of what she gets back. However, in the light of my previous analysis where Sasha is aware of her performance of femininity throughout the novel, this last cry becomes a silence, as it is swallowed by the patriarchal and imperialist regime which has deprived her of affect, material means, and a language of her own. It is a resigned acceptance of a force against which she cannot fight—the great metropolis where totalitarian forces are rising ends up constraining and overtaking the bodies that inhabit them.

## CONCLUSION

As I hope to have shown in my analysis, Jean Rhys's novel *Good Morning, Midnight* lays bare the mechanisms whereby femininity is enforced in urban pre-Second World War spaces. She presents the city as an entity which threatens women wandering on their own, who try to escape the narrative of femininity by taking refuge in the anonymity promised by early-twentieth century metropolis. However, the lack of material means and the contempt received when going out into public spaces by herself, make Sasha perform femininity even to an extreme—when it becomes a mimicry. Her discourse is at once contradictory and subversive, for while she expresses that she is fine left on her own, she keeps pursuing the fantasy of romantic love—the paramount justification, prize and demand of femininity—in a failed, carnivalesque fashion. While these failures show ruptures in the normative discourse of romantic love and compulsory heterosexuality and femininity, the novel's ending signals that, if not voluntarily, this narrative will be enforced through violence, as no alternative is viable. With the rise of Nazism and other totalitarian identities, and the onset of the Second World War, Sasha cannot choose her own path in the city at the end.

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