

Phenomenological Analysis of Private Places in Modernism: Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*

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Abstract:

To expand the scholarship on Jean Rhys's works, this paper examines *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) from a phenomenological point of view. The sense of alienation that the protagonist in the novel, Sasha, suffers from is heightened in the absence of a stable location. The lack of a house narrative in the novel, which could give Sasha a sense of belonging and rootedness, further complicates her troubled self. This paper looks at how house narratives in Victorian fiction were essential for female writers, as a place of solitude and belonging. However, Rhys's modernist techniques in the novel depart from house motif that could stabilize Sasha. Instead, Rhys, like other modernist writers, accentuates the protagonist's alienation through spatial loss in hotel rooms and Paris's streets. The sense of alienation in the novel situates Rhys within late modernism when writers had cynical and fatalistic retrospect of the period between the two World Wars.

Keywords: Modernism, Jean Rhys, Gaston Bachelard, Phenomenological Theory, House Narratives.

Jean Rhys is a writer whose texts are associated with postcolonial modernism, especially *Wild Sargasso Sea* (1966). It is unfortunate that most scholars primarily focus on this novel refusing to widen the scope of interest to study her pre-war /early novels. Male voices, such as James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and others occupied the modernist scene. Hardly do we acknowledge the influence of female voices, for example, Gertrude Stein, although she was one of those who created modernism. For this reason, it is apt to excavate less known modernists, someone who is not Virginia Woolf, as representatives of the era. In *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), the novel follows the protagonist, Sasha, as she roams Paris during the period between the two World Wars. Despite the general consensus on its modernist affiliation, the novel was still perceived as too depressive. For this reason, not many scholars paid attention to the experimentation that Rhys invested in her novel, nor did they appreciate her departure from traditional Victorian fiction. *Good Morning, Midnight*, captures the essence of private domains in modernism through its content and form. Public spaces in modernist novels, shaped in the spirit of Baudelaire's *flâneur* vision as "a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness," (Baudelaire 1995 [1863]: 9) were long considered to be a characteristic trope of male writers. Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom are indeed protagonists of the public life where most of their musings occur outside. Nevertheless, although house narrative was by analogy seen as the epitome of femininity, Rhys, no less than Virginia Woolf, shows the suffocating effects of private places from a female perspective.

Sasha, a middle-aged English woman, comes to Paris and is haunted by her past. A failed marriage, a dead child, and a history of alcoholism and drugs push her further to be insecure and lost in Paris. She hopes to find a shelter in the city that might eventually fish her up from the dark river of her mind. The reader is well aware that because the city has its traumatizing past for

Sasha, it will not be a place of refuge. Since the novel is modernist, the incessant need is escalated here to break away from traditional forms and themes used in Victorian novels.

In an effort to expand scholarship on Rhys and her novels, this paper adds another interpretation of Sasha's depression from a phenomenological perspective. In *The Poetic of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard argues that one's sense of disorder increases in the city. Also, the absence of a private space, since a hotel room is still a public space, further generates Sasha's sense of displacement. In addition to the damaging effects of the painful experiences Sasha went through, her being in a metropolitan setting amplifies her confusion and loss. Through this phenomenological reading, the trails of themes in modernism can benefit from writers whose texts have been obscured thus far. The house narrative is an important feature in novels by the Brontë sisters, William Thackeray, George Eliot, and many others. In this novel, nevertheless, the female protagonist does not belong to a certain house; thus, her identity and sense of security are in flux. This paper looks specifically at the intersection between Sasha's body and the world in terms of specialty, the rooms she occupies in particular. The success or failure to find a shelter in Paris has its dire consequences on Sasha's psyche. Space in this novel is not abstracted; it is rather presented through Sasha's experience of it. Sasha's failure to cope with a public or a privatized space is an indication of her divided and disturbed psyche.

Edmund Husserl is believed to be the father of phenomenology, nevertheless, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a French phenomenological philosopher and one of Husserl's students, argues in his preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* that Husserl avoided giving a satisfying definition of phenomenology. Offering to provide one, Merleau-Ponty classifies it as a descriptive psychology at the moment of interaction between a body and a space and the evolvment of the consciousness or the unconsciousness in the process of identification and familiarization with the space. (Merleau-Ponty 1958 [1945]: ix-x) By applying this grid on the novel, we will examine if Sasha grows affiliation with places she goes to. Unfortunately, her case is much more complicated, her perception of a place concurrently bears alienation and intimacy. Each space, be it public or private, seems to be having a polarity of meanings either as a refuge, a humiliating space, or an emotionally charged and familiar domain. Merleau-Ponty explains that our relationship with a place defines our mental balance or imbalance. Although he distances himself from the "idealist turn" taken by Descartes and Kant, who "presented consciousness, the absolute certainty of my existence for myself, as the condition of there being anything at all", he agrees with the latter, that "the unity of consciousness . . . is achieved simultaneously with that of the world"(x). Our protagonist is alert to the ambivalent relationship she has with the world where her life is "a complicated affair of cafes where they like me and cafes where they don't, streets that are friendly, streets that aren't, rooms where I might be happy, rooms I never shall be, . . ." (Rhys 2000 [1939]: 46)

In *Good Morning, Midnight*, there is no permanent house for Sasha. Hotel rooms substitute house narratives found and lavishly described in other Victorian novels. How can the privacy of a house influence our psychological health? Writing on the relationship between the body and the mind in architectural settings, Bachelard believes that, from the perspectives of a phenomenologist, a psychoanalyst, or a psychologist, the balance of an individual's consciousness is purposefully linked to his/her dwelling. Bachelard explains the presence and the importance of the house especially in literary narratives:

The house, quite obviously, is a privileged entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space, provided, of course, that we take it in both its unity and its complexity, and endeavor to integrate all the special values in one fundamental value. For

the house furnishes us dispersed images and a body of images at the same time. (Bachelard 1994 [1958]: 3)

The book is called the “Poetics” of Space because not only in literary works does the dweller construct an imaginative relationship with the house, but also people in real life always have special affections for the concept of “home.” It is in human nature that we look for being sheltered, protected from the forces of nature, or distanced from the imagined perils that the world seems to be provoking. Bachelard believes that there is something poetic about one’s dwelling. Intimacy does not only come from describing and familiarizing one’s self with the items and the furniture of the house, it is also imagined and can become possessive. Most importantly, this intimacy with the house forms a stabilized identity.

Good Morning, Midnight revolves around Sasha’s perception of certain places in an oscillatory manner, sometimes she feels safe in a place, other times, that same place assumes a character of its own ready to devour Sasha’s whole existence. The novel starts with the following passage:

There are two beds, a big one for madam 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 hotel 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. (9)

In *Jean Rhys: Women in Passage*, Helen Nebeker writes that through revisiting the rooms of her life, Sasha slowly reveals to the reader the causes of her trauma. (Nebeker 1981: 104) The first page gives us a perception of Sasha describing the room where both the outside and the inside are present in her sight. The description is characterized by lack, i.e., the lack of a monsieur, the lack of proper house facilities represented only by a wash-basin, and the lack of a private place. The outside world is a narrow street encroaching upon her room. This technique of blurring the line distinguishing between the outside and inside is used in two more instances in her description of hotel rooms. In part three, where the past is re-lived, she describes the first room she went to when she was with Eunno, her husband:

The room at the Steens: It was crowded with red plush furniture, the wood shining brightly. There were several vases of tulips . . . and outside the clean, narrow streets, and the other talking Dutch and I listening, not understanding . . . (113)

It is always the case when the noise and the troubles of the outside world prevent Sasha from being peacefully isolated. Descriptions of what happens outside the window or what comes through it explain her perpetual state of duplicity; she is simultaneously inside and outside:

The room in the Brussels hotel—very hot. The bell of the cinema next door ringing. A long, narrow room with a long, narrow window and the bell of the cinema next door, sharp and meaningless. (118)

The noise coming from the street varies, it can be a child screaming or someone singing, “J’ai perdu la lumière,” but it is always “The musty smell, the bugs, the loneliness, *this room which is part of the street outside . . .*” (131) (emphasis added). Due to the absence of a private space, Sasha needs a blanket to cover herself in order to shut the world out, “much too strong—the room, the street, the thing in myself, oh, much too strong.” (129)

Bachelard's poetical description of a house is absent in Sasha's narrative. Bachelard says, "For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word. If we look at it intimately, the humblest dwelling has beauty" (4). The process of being attached to one's house is a healing operation. Sasha, most in need to find a way out of the labyrinth of her mind, develops a superfluous attachment to hotel rooms. For Sasha, all the rooms are the same:

A beautiful room with bath? A room with bath? A nice room? A room? . . . All the rooms are the same. All rooms have four walls, a door, a window or two, a bed, a chair and perhaps a bidet. A room is a place where you hide from the wolves outside and that's all any room is. Why should I worry about changing my room? (38)

The reader knows that Sasha has never had a room where she can bolt out the outside world. Bachelard believes that a house is never an object detached from those who inhabit it. He relies on topoanalysis in order to define one's personality, that is, on the psychological study of how the dweller perceives the dwelling in an intimate or a hostile perspective. As a result, the analysis brings to light the stability/instability of the unconsciousness of the dweller. The absence of a familiarized house in the novel leaves Sasha in a constant search for the room that could promise change, a room that could be a sheltered haven. Bachelard opines that "the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human being's first world." (7) Without a protected dwelling, Sasha is never ready to face the world because she has never been distanced from it in the first place. For her, room 219 can promise change and an exit out of the circular decline of her fate. Room 219 seems to be one of the rooms in Bachelard's poetical existence of harmony and safety: "It will be an omen. Who says you can't escape from fate? I will escape from mine . . ." (Rhys 37) She becomes anxious to get it because the hotel receptionist says she cannot have it. Her search for the perfect room is congruous to Bachelard's analysis of life that "begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house" (7). As long as she is not given this luxury, Sasha's world will always be confused, cold, and dark.

For Bachelard, the dwellers in a house bring their past, imaginations, and dreams to live with them. He emphasizes the relationship between the integration and the composure of one's thoughts, memories, past, present, and future to a place which allows the free dynamics of daydreaming. It is our innate capacity to assemble varied images and perceptions in a lived space (64). Daydreaming is a privileged state of mind when elements of the house stimulate and allow memories and imagination to interact together in a conscious mind. For Sasha, the "gramophone" that constantly plays in her mind is not Bachelard's liberating act of daydreaming. For a healthy mind, daydreaming is a joyful, motivational, and a conscious act. In the novel, there is only one incident when Sasha has a daydream:

Looking at the pictures, I go off into a vague dream. Perhaps one day I'll live again round the corner in a room as empty as this. Nothing in it but a bed and a looking-glass. Getting the stove lit about two in the afternoon—the cold and the stove fighting each other. Lying near the stove in complete peace, having some bread with pate spread on it, and then having a drink and lying all the afternoon in that empty room— nothing in it but the bed, the stove and the looking glass and outside Paris. And the dreams that you have, alone in an empty room, waiting for the door that will open, the thing that is bound to happen . . . (100)

This scene takes place while she is in Serge's room surrounded by his paintings. The room is full of pictures. For Sasha, nevertheless, the room gives her access to other realms. In the quote, her daydreaming is only a wishful thinking to have an ideal room where she is completely at ease. In this joyful daydream, she is only looking for a sheltered room outside Paris. She is surrounded by different paintings, but she chooses a man standing in the gutter playing the banjo. Her selection of the painting contradicts her early dream of peace. The picture constantly reminds her "of human misery" (185). The painting is of a person who is "double-headed, double-faced," and it makes her feel hungry, cold, hurt, and ridiculed.

The novel has a lot to offer on modernism. However, this paper focused primarily on the house motif in the novel, transforming modernism from a public and a masculine domain into a more private reading of the movement. Public and private spaces are important components of the plot, untraditional as it stands. The novel would have been completely different if Sasha had been portrayed to be in her house musing over the past. This novel makes use of the confusion occurring in a modern city and the lack of a place that one calls home. Sasha's presence in the world is transient and ephemeral because she is rootless; she does indeed belong to nowhere. It is true that Sasha is drinking herself to death, but this novel can also be read as a constant search for a shelter that houses her body and her fragmented self instead of being out in the cold and dark city.

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