

Jean Rhys: "Let Them Call It Jazz" (1961)

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Biography and Context

- Jean Rhys's Biography
 - Creole
 - Experience: arrested in 1949 for assault.
 - Holloway Prison v. Holloway Sanatorium (2369)
- England's Caribbean Windrush Generation: 1948-1972
- Contemporary British Afro-Caribbean Relations



Realism

- **Focuses on this life, this world.**
 - Use a narrative position to observe ethical issues accurately. (2361)
 - Historical Context for Selena's POY (2365)
 - What people are rather than what they ought to be.
 - Sims (2362, 2363)
 - Selina's reflection (2370)
 - Avoid the tragic or cataclysmic situation or defuse it to everyday proportions. (2365)
 - Selena's Song (2366, 2370, 2372)
 - Contemporary song: "Holloway Girl"
- **Verisimilitude: a reflection of the experience--material, psychological or both--of reality (2367, 2368)**
 - Gothic images: the house (2362) and the "castle" (2370)
- **Organic morality emphasizing the complexity of moral choice (2364)**
 - Relativistic or pluralistic truth(s) (2371)

Veronica Marie Gregg: Jean Rhys's Historical Imagination: Reading and Writing the Creole

196). The biographical information that provided, in part, the material for the writing of the story was Jean Rhys's own experience in the hospital at Holloway, a women's prison, where she spent five days after being found guilty of assault on 6 May 1949. Rhys's letters show that this happened at a time when her second husband was facing serious financial and legal difficulties. Rhys wrote to Selma Via Dias on 9 December 1949 to say that she was working on "Black Cards" but decided "whether it will be suitable for broadcasting" (Lemon, 66). This story was published later as "Let Them Call It Jazz." Yet the journey from "event" to story was to take many turns. In a 1990 letter to Peggy Kirkcaldy, Rhys says in her usual elliptical, ironic style, "One day the man in the flat upstairs was rude to me. I slapped his face. He had me up for assault. I had no witnesses. He had his wife and witnesses others. I began to cry in the witness box and the magistrate sent me to Holloway to find out if I was crazy" (96). When Kirkcaldy suggested that she start writing again, Rhys responds, "I couldn't . . . write much about Holloway because I wasn't there long enough . . . I was enough to be quite sure it's an evil and useless place—it does nothing but harm to

everybody—but that's not enough to write a true book . . . I'm searching to write an article . . . but it would not be published . . . The English clamp down on unpleasant facts and some of the facts they clamp down on are very unpleasant indeed, believe me" (Lemon, 86).
 In a letter to her daughter on 13 February 1960, Rhys says, "The other day I wrote a short story as a holiday. It's called 'They thought it was jazz' and it is not typed. A bit of a crazy story" (84). She writes to Francis Windham on 12 April 1960 that the short story is "not serious" (86). On 20 May 1960 she again writes to Windham: "The story I wrote called 'They Thought it was Jazz' is about Holloway Prison—So, all things considered, must not be taken too seriously. It is supposed to be a Creole girl talking but still—" (86).

Gregg p. 179

More from Gregg

The careful detailing of the phenotypical, racial, geographical, and socioeconomic background of the protagonist writes the subjectivity as an effect of the historical conditions of the slavery and postslavery periods of the West Indies. According to historical documents, an estimated seven thousand Dominicans migrated to Venezuela in 1893 in search of employment opportunities. The opening up of the oil fields in Venezuela in 1916 also provided employment opportunities for many West Indians, mainly from the eastern Caribbean (Trouillot, *Pasants*, 113). Another important historical referent is the building of the Panama Canal in the 1880s, for which West Indians formed the bulk of the labor force. In this century, another wave of migration to Panama from the West Indies occurred between 1904 and 1914. These historical referents, in large measure, constitute

Gregg 180
