

The 'Dreamlike Downward Career of a Girl': Compounding Trauma in Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*

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10 April 2020

Anna Morgan, the teenaged protagonist in Jean Rhys's novel *Voyage in the Dark*, is not a traditional literary heroine. In 1934, the year the novel was published, Rhys wrote in a letter to Evelyn Scott that her goal in writing *Voyage* was to show, "the present dreamlike (downward career of girl)—starting of course piano and ending fortissimo. Perhaps I was simply trying to describe a girl going potty." Throughout the course of the novel, Anna, an 18-year-old West Indian immigrant who supports herself as a chorus girl until she catches the eye of a wealthy older man, repeatedly undermines traditional feminine codes at her own expense and consequently unravels with increasing intensity. Anna, a young girl on the cusp of adulthood, does mature over the course of the novel, but she does not experience the maturation and growth that one usually sees in bildungsromans. Anne Cunningham describes *Voyage* as a "failed bildungsroman"; Anna experiences many hardships, but instead of overcoming them and learning something about herself and the world, she shuts down and implodes.

In this Senior Capstone Experience, I examine how varying types of trauma, specifically postcolonial and sexual trauma, accumulates and consequently weighs down and destroys Anna. Much Rhys scholarship fails to go beyond Anna's seeming unwillingness to "get on" in her life; still less analyze her status as a colonized citizen and as a sexual object alongside one another. I analyze these two together because Anna's experiences as a young woman and a colonial immigrant leave her vulnerable to sexual exploitation, limit her opportunities in life, as well as complicate her sense of self and suffocate her personal growth.

Furthermore, I argue that it is because of Anna's compromised social status as an outsider and a single woman of low economic class that thrusts her into a never-ending cycle of misery, one that Rhys has fated from the outset. This gradual disillusionment, made obvious through Anna's unhealthy coping mechanisms, is present in the narrative itself through fragmentation,

ellipses, and repetition. The text's mirroring of Anna's emotions and how she deals with them allows readers to map Anna's compounding trauma throughout the novel. Maren Linett argues that Rhys intended to "make trauma legible" in writing *Voyage*. Building on Linett, I assert that Rhys writes trauma in a hauntingly idiosyncratic way: she weaves the psychology into the narrative itself, compressing and expanding time, warping memory, and omitting thoughts, scenes, and actions that would create a clearer, more linear narrative. As a result, both Anna and the text itself devolve as the novel progresses.

Rhys intended for all of these compounding factors to coalesce in a destructive manner. The inherent trauma of being a colonized citizen living amongst colonizers sets a futile cycle in motion: Anna's compromised social position begets sexual trauma, and the compounding traumatic experiences force her to form unhealthy coping mechanisms that are represented in the narrative itself. These mechanisms only serve to further stymie her personal growth; Anna's inability to change her circumstances leads to the fracturing of her identity and personal ruin. For Anna, trauma is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Rhys scholarship and elision of trauma

Jean Rhys and her fiction are often categorized as pessimistic, and, as such, have been discounted by critics and scholars. While she does not receive the same accolades as other modernist writers like James Joyce or T. S. Eliot, she uses modernist techniques to craft texts equally worthy of the literary canon. However, she is often reduced to a biographical reading of her work. The inspiration for *Voyage in the Dark* comes from Rhys's own experiences; because of this, Rhys's heroines are often compared to or conflated with Rhys herself, and scholars commonly use autobiographical and fictional material interchangeably, especially with regard to

Voyage, which is often viewed as her most autobiographical novel. Her formal experimentation, including fragmentation, stream of consciousness, and manipulation of time and memory that she uses to explore notions of trauma, hopelessness, and unbelonging, provide powerful insights into the human condition. Despite this, *Voyage*-specific scholarship is sparse, and the few dozen articles solely devoted to her work mostly focus on the mental condition of her heroines, which is often misconstrued in ways that undermine her novels' literary merit. Elizabeth Abel, for example, explains away Anna's trauma as symptoms of schizophrenia. Such dialogues are not helpful in furthering analysis of the text itself. Trauma pervades Rhys's novels, and because of this scholarship has a hard time going beyond the trauma and analyzing its greater significance. Indeed, trauma informs all of her main characters' narratives, and it is a central focus of this SCE, but there are more facets to Rhys novels than her unhappy protagonists and more ways to understand and interpret these characters' thoughts and actions. Because all of Rhys's protagonists have similar struggles, most scholarly work discusses two or more Rhys novels in conjunction. Even then, they usually only focus on her two most notable works, *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). These novels, recognized as her best, are less connected to their author. *Voyage in the Dark*, which was borne from Rhys's journal entries in her black exercise books, is discounted as autobiographical, and therefore, less literary. The authorial focus of older scholarship is on Rhys's biography and uses psychoanalysis to connect the dots between her life and her writing. Scholars have begun to utilize different methodological approaches to examine these novels in ways that were not previously explored, but there are still more ways to understand and interpret Rhys's work.

Trauma is a central theme in Rhys novels, and it manifests in the language and style of the text. This is a point of agreement in most scholarship; there is no denying the emotional

fragility of the lead women and how that pervades the entire novel/s. However, scholars differ on the causes and effects of that trauma. In her article “‘New Words, New Everything’: Fragmentation and Trauma in Jean Rhys,” Maren Linett focuses her argument on Rhys heroines’ powerlessness as being a function of trauma. Linett writes, “Rhys worked with fragmented text in part because she desired to make trauma legible in the precarious, partial ways it can be done. Her fragmentary style is, in my view, strategic and mimetic rather than symptomatic” (Linett 439). Linett defines the different phenomena of trauma and their corresponding types of fragmentation. This view uses trauma studies, a way to investigate trauma through literature, to refute critics who have claimed that Rhys’s characters’ passivity is a sign of moral weakness. Linett often quotes the work of Cathy Caruth, a scholar who uses literary psychoanalysis to examine trauma, to support her arguments. Linett argues that the fragmentation in the text is a concrete representation of psychological trauma and that the Rhysian protagonist’s inability to move on from that trauma makes insights into the protagonist’s mental state accessible.

Because of this literal representation of trauma, critics often do not know what to make of Anna’s passivity and thus try to ascribe more empowering motivations behind her behavior. In her article “Failure and Negative Femininity in *Voyage in the Dark*,” Anne Cunningham argues that Rhys heroines’ perceived failures to cope and to adhere to social standards work as a kind of indirect activism critiquing feminine expectations. Cunningham writes, “I argue that failure is a feminist response in Rhys novels because it jettisons patriarchal femininity, albeit through negation. In other words, I examine how negation points toward the problematic construction of this mode of femininity and show how Rhys employs a negative feminism that serves to question less resistant, positivist feminist accounts” (Cunningham 374). Cunningham uses Sianne Ngai’s affect theory and her book *Ugly Feelings* to rationalize the Rhys protagonist’s negative, passive

mentality, which she compares to that of Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*. She explores how failure in Rhys's novels is actually a "productive form of resistance" and frames it as a progressive subversion of patriarchal femininity.

This "productive resistance" is seldom recognized as such by other critics. While much has been written on the Rhysian protagonist and her traumatized mental state, for example, it seems that scholars always want to either undermine her protagonists and lament their inability to function (often using psychoanalysis) or vindicate them and fit their struggles to a more optimistic narrative (using feminist principles to do so). Ironically, in trying to ascribe more agency to Rhys's heroines, criticism ignores the ways they do not conform to acceptable modes of being. There is so much pressure to be a "good" heroine, and Jean Rhys's leading women do not adhere to any of these standards: they repeatedly fail to act ladylike, maintain their composure, make money, or engage in healthy romantic or sexual relationships. Most female characters who deviate from social norms are often punished for it, but Rhys's already-tortured heroines also deviate from this pattern: there is always punishment, not just at the end, which causes critical confusion. Mary Lou Emery writes about this in her book *Jean Rhys at "World's End": novels of colonial and sexual exile*: "For feminist readers, the problem becomes especially acute since we wish to draw well-deserved attention to Jean Rhys as a woman writer and perhaps feel that to do so we must somehow redeem her seemingly 'failed' female characters. If we are unable to view them as victorious, we become trapped in victimology" (Emery 64). These assumptions are especially prevalent and problematic when discussing *Voyage in the Dark's* ambiguous ending and overlook Rhys's techniques of experimental modernism. Anna's narrative fragmentation and multiple narrative registers cause critics to look for conflict resolution and self-unification to solidify Anna's success as a heroine. Emery says, "most often they must

concede her ‘failure,’ commenting on her nostalgic or ‘childish’ return to her past and wishful thinking as substitutes for successful integration and adaptation to the present” (Emery 64). I argue that this failure is precisely the point and understanding the mechanisms behind the character’s shortcomings and misfortunes will provide a richer, more accurate portrayal of the novel’s intentions.

Anna’s identity is shaped by her femininity as well as her status as a West Indian immigrant to the imperial center. Besides gender critique, the other integral focus of scholarship is on Rhys’s depiction of her protagonists’ postcolonial struggles. The tension of being a West Indian immigrant living in London is one of the causes of Anna’s trauma and inextricably marks her as “other” to the other characters. This comingling of her two dueling identities negates the possibility of fully belonging to either one, leaving her vulnerable to experience trauma. April Munroe writes in her article “‘Haunted and Obeah’: Gothic spaces and monstrous landscapes in Jean Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark*” that “Anna’s inability to locate herself within the spatial logic of this monstrous landscape signifies a more universal failure to read coherence into the imperial narrative as it is told from the European colonial woman’s point of view” (Munroe 128). In other words, Anna is inherently unable to reconcile her identity with culturally homogenous England and assimilate. This imperial narrative pervades even the language itself. Ania Spyra in “Language and Belonging in Jean Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark*” points to the ways in which language is used to perpetuate racial hierarchies in colonial societies in the novel. She writes, “Difference is a double-edged sword: a mechanism of self-protection, it is also a way to exclude” (Spyra 81). More often than not, difference is an exclusionary factor in the novel.

Others attempt to categorize aspects of Rhys novels in order for them to fit a prescribed narrative. J. Dillon Brown’s article, “Textual Entanglement: Jean Rhys’s Critical Discourse,” is

no different, only he attempts to sort out the differences in the categorization of Rhys's novels as a whole as either expressly Modernist or postcolonial. Quite literally, the article's focus is not on the texts themselves so much as how they fit in with the surrounding scholarship. This is a dilemma addressed in much Rhys scholarship, though in recent years scholars have begun to move away from a strictly binary interpretation of the novel: feminist or not, wholly autobiographical or free-standing work. Urmila Seshagiri, in her article "Modernist Ashes, Postcolonial Phoenix: Jean Rhys and the Evolution of the English Novel in the Twentieth Century," argues that the novel reflects fault lines in aesthetic modernism while developing a postcolonial focus, mainly through its Creole narrator, Anna Morgan. Seshagiri writes, "And as Rhys turns the Empire's colonizing gaze back on itself, she unravels the violent cultural epistemologies that give form to so much experimental modernism, thereby reimagining English fiction along a new — and transnational — axis" (Seshagiri 489). This reimagination of English fiction as a whole, as Seshagiri calls it, is probably why Rhys and her work is so routinely misunderstood or shunted to the side in favor of more straightforward works.

Rhys's concern in *Voyage in the Dark* is a radical revision of the fictional limits of space and time in order to convey unconventional identities. Munroe argues that depictions of geography in space are defined by liminality, which she describes as the "defining characteristic of Rhys's writing" (Munroe 108). I agree that liminality is at the heart of the narrative, and it is because of this slippery quality that much of what Rhys is doing slips through the cracks of criticism. In this SCE, I will provide a more nuanced perspective of psychological trauma, race, class, and gender, and how these issues impact — and ultimately destroy — Anna's character.

Women and femininity in the early 20th century

Scholars often posit *Voyage in the Dark* as a feminist novel and try to fit Anna into the mold of a more conventional, emboldened female heroine. However, Anna undermines this assumption at every turn, as she both deviates from societal expectations but fails to find a sufficient alternative. Whereas in a traditional feminist narrative Anna would be successful in her efforts to find belonging in British society, Anna's story rapidly devolves and ends in misery. To understand Anna's position in the novel, it is necessary to examine the position of women during the early 20th century. Women's roles in society were changing in the 1910s and 20s. Britain women gained the right to vote in 1918 and full suffrage was granted in 1928. Still, women were far from equal. Old expectations of femininity still stood, so modern ideals and traditional patriarchal rule clashed, blurring the lines of what was acceptable feminine behavior. Changing ideas of what a woman could be or do is one of the key components in *Voyage in the Dark*.

Anna's occupation at the start of the novel is chorus girl, which was one of several new, viable career options for unmarried women. Still, being a chorus girl was not necessarily socially respectable, and Anna and her fellow dancers are frequently mistaken for sex workers. At the novel's beginning in Southsea, Anna experiences this prejudice when a boarding-house landlady refuses to let to Anna and her friend Maudie:

We had good rooms. The landlady had said, 'No, I don't let to professionals.' But she didn't bang the door in our faces, and after Maudie had talked for a while, making her voice sound as ladylike as possible, she had said, 'Well, I might make an exception for this time.' Then the second day we were there she made a row because we both got up late and Maudie came downstairs in her nightgown and a torn kimono. (Rhys 8)

Their mannerisms and clothing mark them as lower class; Maudie's torn kimono was not acceptable for a respectable woman to wear, even in a (mostly) private space like a boarding-

house. Because two unmarried young women show up looking for rooms, the landlady assumes they are sex workers and denies them. Although working as a chorus girl is certainly a more respectable profession than sex work, the two were often conflated due to long-standing stereotypes about actresses. However, working-class women in any capacity were looked down upon. These already-limited ways for unmarried women to earn a living and support themselves were further degraded by the assumption that they were then unladylike. Maudie is only able to convince the landlady to let them stay when she makes her voice “sound as ladylike as possible.” Being a lady, or at least being perceived as one, is more convincingly respectable than being independent and is the only real way a woman could get ahead. Compared with Maudie, Anna cannot as easily masquerade as a lady. She is from the West Indies, which inextricably marks her as a colonized other. Several characters throughout the novel comment on Anna’s voice, which is described as “drawly,” and “awful sing-song...exactly like a n****r”¹ (Rhys 30, 65). Her voice is a giveaway to Britons that she is not a native, so no matter where she goes in England she will always be received as an outsider. The other characters cannot separate her from her immigrant status, so she will never receive the kind of respect or concern that a “lady” would. Anna’s many identities do not register or matter to any of the other characters. She struggles against this, but the other characters repeatedly attempt to erase her West Indian identity, especially in her relationship with Walter. Emery says that, “Walter’s upper-class masculine and very English preferences silence Anna’s voice, which contains the voices of multiple cultures and races, a multiplicity that gives her comfort and a sense of identity,” (Emery 74). She “can be one of two or at most three things”: a virgin, a sex worker, or a kept mistress, which still leads to sex work. Emery says, “in this scenario, the official dichotomy of lady/whore works forcefully to obliterate

¹ In the novel, this is not censored.

all the voices within Anna, all the selves she once was or might have become” (Emery 75). Later in the novel, when Anna is living with Ethel and giving manicures, Anna voices her frustration with the societal expectations of feminine respectability. She thinks, “A lady — some words have a long, thin neck that you’d like to strangle. And [Ethel’s] different voice when she said, ‘A manicure, dear.’” (Rhys 140) Just as with Maudie in the boarding house, Ethel changes the sound of her voice so she sounds more genteel and respectable when dealing with customers. Even lower class, working women are expected to act ladylike, including how they speak, if they want to get ahead.

Anna, who was a member of the upper class in Dominica, is inherently excluded from even pretending to be a lady because she is unable to blend into British society. Her strained relationship with her stepmother Hester highlights Anna’s inability and unwillingness to adapt to British standards. Anna describes Hester’s voice as having “a sharp, cutting edge,” and ascribes a personality to it: “Now that I’ve spoken you can hear that I’m a lady. I have spoken and I suppose you now realize that I’m an English gentlewoman. I have my doubts about you. Speak up and I will place you at once. Speak up, for I fear the worst” (Rhys 57). Spyra says that Anna’s stepmother Hester’s “ideal” King’s English represents, and highlights, the disparity between proper, colonized language and language of the Other. This exclusion from a more acceptable inflection, Spyra says, causes Anna to associate “constraint with lady-like speech and behavior” (Spyra 74). Her hatred towards the word lady, and being ladylike, then stems from this language disparity, as well as the cultural associations connected with that disparity.

Despite the fact Anna has a job, working as a chorus girl cannot fully support Anna, and she consistently needs money throughout the novel. During Part One, Anna receives financial support by becoming a kept woman. When Anna meets Walter Jeffries, a wealthy middle-aged

man, Maudie insists that she should “swank a bit”: “The more you swank the better. If you don’t swank a bit nothing’s any use. If he’s a rich man and he’s keeping you, you ought to make him get you a nice flat up West somewhere and furnish it for you. Then you’d have something” (Rhys 45). Maudie highlights the purely transactional nature of Anna’s affair with Walter, even if Anna doesn’t see it as one. Maudie recognizes the power imbalance inherent in sleeping with a wealthy older man. While being a kept woman is far from ideal or respectable, a woman can make the best of the situation by exploiting it for more tangible, financial gain rather than the fleeting security of male affection. The distinction between profitable sex and love is one Anna struggles with, especially as Walter confuses the two for her. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Jean Rhys*, Elaine Savory notes that, “for Anna, sex is about becoming protected, loved and cherished” (Savory 61). Walter, whom Anna sees as a lover, is essentially paying her to sleep with him, which posits her as more of a sex worker than a mistress. She does not really take Maudie’s advice because she does not see their relationship for the transaction that it is. After Anna has sex with Walter for the first time, when she goes to leave, he tries to placate her by telling her, “You mustn’t be sad, you mustn’t worry. My darling mustn’t be sad.” In response, she thinks, “I lay quite still, thinking, ‘Say it again. Say “darling” again like that. Say it again.’” (Rhys 37). Although Walter cares about Anna, she takes his comment to heart and starts to see herself as more than a mistress. Because this happens while they are still in bed together post-coitus, it perpetuates the fleeting sense of security that Anna gains from her relationship with Walter. Anna is so desperate for love and affection that she misunderstands his concern for her emotions when it is really because her sadness is not conducive to sexual activity. These constant misinterpretations of her interactions with Walter, which can be attributed to her past trauma as

well as her different cultural upbringing, blind her to the reality that she is an inconsequential piece in a larger system of power and control.

Walter cares about his own interests more than anything else, and Anna is just a means to an end for him. He never lets her stay the night at his home; he always gets her a taxi under the cover of darkness, and once Anna has outlived her use in his life, he abandons her entirely, using his cousin Vincent as a surrogate to do the work for him. This blindsides Anna because she is lost in the delusion that he reciprocates her affection for him. There are moments, though, where Walter's objectification of Anna is noticeable even to her. Once, while she gets drunk with Walter in a hotel room, Anna recalls an old slave list she saw back in Dominica, and remembers an entry for "Mailotte Boyd, aged 18, mulatto, house servant" (Rhys 53). While she has sex with Walter, she repeats to herself, "Mailotte Boyd, aged 18. Mailotte Boyd, aged 18. ... But I like it like this. I don't want it any other way but this" (Rhys 56). According to the ledger, Mailotte Boyd was the same age as Anna. The repetition of her name and age that occurs while Anna is having sex conflates her with the slave girl, with Walter in the role of her master. This is an unhealthy comparison to make, something Anna knows but pushes back against by maintaining that she "likes it like this." By inherently subjugating herself, Anna is both reliving traumatic sexual experiences while also creating new trauma for her to grapple with. Emery describes her relationship with Walter as one of "slavelike dependency and submission." (Emery 74) The comparison posits Anna as subhuman once again, with her interests suppressed by those of the men from whom she is seeking affection and safety.

Although Anna is seemingly oblivious to the real nature of her relationship with Walter, there are moments of clarity that suggest she implicitly understands but is willfully ignorant of it. After getting back to her rented room late one evening after having sex with Walter, Anna thinks,

“Of course, you get used to things, you get used to anything. It was as if I had always lived like that. Only sometimes, when I had got back home and was undressing to go to bed, I would think, “My God, this is a funny way to live. My God, how did this happen?”” (Rhys 40). Although Anna is falling in love with Walter, fleeting thoughts like these show that she is at least somewhat aware of their transactional relationship. “How did this happen?” suggests that Anna feels powerless in this situation, as if there was never any choice that she would end up the mistress of a much older man. This powerlessness is a function of the sexual trauma she experiences through her relationship with Walter. Anna’s seeming moment of clarity here both posits the situation as inevitable while also interrogating its impetus. But regardless of this awareness, Anna is content to “get used to things”: her complacency reads more like denial. Her brief questioning of their relationship, and then the prompt abandonment of the topic, suggests that it is too painful and too honest for her to dwell on for long.

The fallout from her transactional sexual relationship with Walter leads Anna to search for the same sense of love and security in sexual encounters with other men. When Walter abandons her, Anna begins her descent into sex work, further commodifying her and diminishing her humanity. Unlike Walter, the men she has relations with throughout the rest of the novel do not care at all for her, and she is only valued for her appearance and her sexuality. Her inability to separate sex and love continually disappoints her and re-traumatizes her, which leads her into alcoholism as she tries to self-medicate. As a result, Anna internalizes this lack of regard for her well-being and her self-worth plummets. She can finally recognize the objectification and dehumanization she experiences in her interpersonal relationships, to the detriment of her mental well-being.

Even before this realization occurs, Anna is aware of the influence the male gaze has on female behavior and presentation. As a commodity, a woman's value was based on her appearance and sex appeal. Anna's emphasis on, and anxiety about, clothing throughout the novel is treated with the utmost importance. As a result, Anna internalizes the male gaze, and she must attempt to look as put-together as possible in order to move forward in life. After she returns from Walter's one night and gets into bed, she thinks about the consequences for women who do not have anything nice to wear.

About clothes, it's awful. Everything makes you want pretty clothes like hell. People laugh at girls who are badly dressed. Jaw, jaw, jaw. ... 'Beautifully dressed woman. ...' As if it isn't enough that you want to be beautiful, that you want pretty clothes, that you want it like hell. As if that isn't enough. But no, it's jaw, jaw and sneer, sneer all the time. ... You look at your hideous underclothes and you think, 'All right, I'll do anything for good clothes. Anything — anything for clothes.' (Rhys 25)

Here, Anna highlights the all-consuming desire to be beautiful: she “want[s] it like hell.” This literal burning desire seems superficial, but without good clothes the only attention a woman could get would be negative — people jawing and sneering at her. Physical attractiveness, for poor women, can help them be more successful in finding a man to support them, and this is how Anna meets Walter. Any time Anna receives a decent sum of money — always from a man — she buys clothes. The first time she meets Walter, she is going to buy stockings and she lets him pay for them. Later, when their relationship is established, Walter gives her money for the purpose of buying new clothes, which she does happily. It is one of the only times in the novel where Anna seems satisfied with her station. Later in the novel, Anna passes a clothing store and admires the dresses in the window, thinking, “A girl could look lovely in that, like a doll or a

flower.” (Rhys 130) Anna equates inhuman perfection with expectations for women’s appearance, and her focus on how “a girl” would look instead of herself suggests that she feels she can never live up to these standards, regardless of her attire. She is clearly dissatisfied with these ideals, and her self-worth suffers as a result, but she has no choice to commodify herself if she wants to get ahead, which she continually struggles against. When Anna shows Maudie her new dresses courtesy of Walter, Maudie tells her how a man told her that a girl’s close cost more than the girl inside them. Maudie says, “And then I had to laugh, because after all it’s true, isn’t it? People are much cheaper than things” (Rhys 46). The value of material goods over a human being reinforces the notion that a woman is subhuman, and that in this society with its rapidly changing views on women’s rights, her worth is solely determined by her appearance. Anna rejects this idea, telling Maudie to shut up, but she inherently understands the necessity of attractive outward presentation. Despite this universal understanding of superficial value, Anna continues to search for affection and security through male attention and is continually disappointed by their unwillingness to provide those things.

As Anna thinks about the importance of good clothes, she turns her attention to, “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” (Rhys 26). Anna’s conflation of poor women with insects reinforces the notion that lower-class people are lesser than, are more animalistic than human. This is an ironic observation, as Anna — being both lower class and a West Indian expatriate — is clearly viewed by other characters in the novel as a similar kind of pest, and as her situation becomes more dire, she resorts to the same “beastly” methods of survival. Her blasé remarks, an attempt to set herself apart from other lower-class women, foreshadow her imminent decline. “Beastly”

resurfaces once again in Vincent's letter to Anna ending her affair with Walter. Vincent tells her that, "when you get into a garden and smell the flowers and all that all this rather beastly sort of love simply doesn't matter" (Rhys 93). The repetition of 'beastly,' this time by another character, emphasizes the purely physical and sexual connection that Walter believed he had with Anna and diminishes any sense of propriety or genuineness about their relationship. This then affects how she views herself and facilitates her breakdown. Anna has already been reduced to a beastly thing in the minds of the other characters, even before she truly begins to decline.

West Indian identity and ostracization

Anna's inhumanity, as defined by the other characters, is also due to her intersectional identity: she is a woman, a sex worker, and a member of the lower class. In addition to her flawed womanhood, Anna is continually marked as the Other because she is a West Indian immigrant. As a result, her position at the bottom of the social hierarchy has even less of a chance of improving. The inherent trauma caused by this permanent ostracization further hinders Anna's ability to function normally and causes her to regress into her memories of Dominica. Emery argues that "While memories of island celebrations thus frame the novel, they cannot provide an easy or nostalgic return to an idyllic past. ... [Anna] is estranged even from her 'home' and most painfully from the people she admires but from whom the history of colonial conquest has separated her" (Emery 66). Although Anna is out of place in England, she is fundamentally separated from the one place she feels comfortable in the world by both her distance and whiteness. Even if she were to return to Dominica, she would not be able to replicate the rose-tinted memories of her childhood.

Anna's life in England is what physically separates her from Dominica, something she is keenly aware of. Anna's intense dislike of London, and England in general, is apparent from the outset of the novel. The first lines are, "It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost like being born again" (Rhys 7). The invocation of a curtain creates a tangible separation between England and Dominica. This separation is one that Anna cannot overcome, and her immigration necessitates a façade for an English audience; she is incapable of reconciling both her West Indian identity and her inherited identity as an English citizen. For Anna, living in England is starting over, and she is unable to be the same person she was when she lived in the West Indies. Not only is she separated from her "true" identity — for Anna never feels at home in England — but she is incapable of getting back to it. This tension hollows her out, and throughout the course of the novel she becomes a shell of her former self.

The monotony of England is what bothers Anna the most. She says, "After a while I got used to England and I liked it all right; I got used to everything except the cold and that the towns always looked so exactly alike. You were perpetually moving to another place which was perpetually the same" (Rhys 8). To Anna, the uniformity of English life is everywhere; all the people adhere to strict social codes, and even the landscapes are disturbingly similar. The constant motion also prohibits Anna from ever getting comfortable in a place. As England is already foreign to her, its sameness does not help her sense of belonging.

Although Anna says in the beginning of the novel that she is used to England, all her subsequent actions and attitudes suggest she is still very much uncomfortable in her surroundings. At the end of Part Three, Anna goes to get her abortion and remarks of London, "Everything was always so exactly alike — that was what I could never get used to. And the cold; and the houses all exactly alike, and the streets going north, south, east, west, all exactly

alike” (Rhys 179). England’s monotony is a sentiment that is repeated throughout the novel, and Anna never wavers from her assertion that everything is the same. Moments like this suggest that Anna’s thoughts and opinions are staunch, and there is no textual evidence presented to convince either Anna or readers of anything else. The never-ending sense of sameness is also a byproduct of her trauma. Anna is unable to move beyond the surface to find anything worth living for in her environment. It is not necessarily that there is nothing worthwhile in England; the other characters all find her aversion to the country to be misguided. As long as Anna’s trauma continues to fester and grow, there is no way for her to overcome these misconceptions and begin to heal. Anna’s only chance for salvation, then, is in her unbecoming.

Anna’s unraveling begins in her memories. Anna’s aversion to England severs her from reality, and she must revert to thoughts and dreams to feel at home amidst alien surroundings. Whenever she is in an uncomfortable situation, she shuts out the world and retreats into memory. Nicole Flynn writes about how Anna’s first-person narration reflects her untethered sense of place. “Anna’s thoughts drift from her European present to her Caribbean past and back again, mapping the narrative onto nonlinear strands of memory. This novel demonstrates an internal version of temporality at odds with the painful progression of real time” (Flynn 42). She grounds herself in the physical sensations of Dominica in order to block out the physical reality of London. After leaving Walter’s one night, Anna thinks:

All the way back in the taxi I was still thinking about home and when I got into bed I lay awake, thinking about it. About how sad the sun can be, especially in the afternoon, but in a different way from the sadness of cold places, quite different. And the way the bats fly out at sunset, two by two, very stately. And the smell of the store down on the Bay. (‘I’ll take four yards of the pink, please, Miss Jessie.’) And the smell of Francine —acid-

sweet. ... That was when it was sad, when you lay awake at night and remembered things. (Rhys 56-7)

Anna focuses on the landscape and her memories recount the sights, sounds, and smells of her home country. The focus on smell repeats throughout the novel. Smell is the strongest sensation associated with memory, so it is no wonder that Anna focuses her energies on recalling the smells of home. Anna pays attention to scent in both her memory and in reality, but many instances of scent in the text are remembered from her past in Dominica. She is also sensitive to differences in climate and temperature especially. Sun and heat are connected to the Caribbean, and nothing about England's cold and wet weather is comforting to her. When reality comes crashing back down on her, she always comes back to her life in England, though: "that was when it was sad," she thinks.

As Anna becomes more depressed and experiences more trauma, she increasingly becomes detached from reality and lives through her memories of home. Linett writes that Anna is "haunted by fragmentary images and memories...these fragments often erupt during memories or experiences of sex" (Linett 447). As Anna reads Vincent's letter to her breaking off her affair with Walter, she begins to retreat into herself and her memories for comfort. In a long paragraph with no complete sentences that uses em dashes to separate ideas, Anna remembers her Uncle Bo removing his false teeth and being afraid of them. Immersed in the memory, Anna thinks, "— you don't scream when you are frightened because you can't and you don't move either because you can't—" (Rhys 92). Anna isn't actually reacting to her memory of her uncle's false teeth; rather, this disturbing memory is a way to respond to the pain she feels from her breakup with Walter — which she has no way to articulate healthily. This specific reaction, a hallmark of the aftereffects of trauma, is embedded in a memory but mirrors Anna's real-time reaction to reading

Walter's letter. After the flashback paragraph ends, Anna snaps out of her reverie to re-read Vincent's letter. "I thought, 'But what's the matter with me? That was years and years ago, ages and ages ago. Twelve years ago or something like that. What's this letter got to do with false teeth?'" (Rhys 92). This is one of the rare times in the novel that Anna explicitly acknowledges that she is living through her memories. Instead of fully processing a harmful moment in the present, Anna chooses to relive similarly traumatic events from her past, such as being frightened of her uncle's false teeth. Her questioning of the memory — 'what's this letter got to do with false teeth?' — suggests that this coping mechanism happens involuntarily and is impeding her from coming to terms with present actions. In other words, while Anna is aware of the evasive thought processes that are preventing her from dealing with her issues, she either does not have the mental facilities deal with her problems, does not know how to confront them, or a combination of both. Even after Anna has read and re-read the letter, she continues to think about false teeth and other random memories from her life in Dominica, sitting still and stuck in the past for two hours straight. She is obsessed with living in her memories because of a sense of belonging; nowhere in reality can she find a spot for herself.

Similarly, Anna is more at ease when she is recounting past actions. Some of her fondest memories of Dominica are of her family's old servant Francine. Francine is almost a surrogate-mother for Anna, as she gives Anna a maternal sense of security. Anna's memories of Francine always resurface when she is at her lowest points; the first mention of her comes when Anna falls ill in Part One. She remembers a time when she was sick as a child in Dominica and Francine came to care for her; although she is in physical pain, Anna says that she was happy then. Anna's happiness, even in her memories, is fleeting, but all her memories of Francine are happy ones. When Anna is talking with Hester after she reads Anna the letter from her uncle,

Anna remembers that “The thing about Francine was that when I was with her I was happy” (Rhys 67). However, the happiness Anna is remembering is a farce; she is separated from Francine by class, race, and in the novel’s present, by time. Whatever connection she once had with Francine was probably not reciprocated; she was merely fulfilling her duty as a servant. On some level, Anna recognizes this: she says, “But I knew that of course she disliked me too because I was white and that I would never be able to explain to her that I hated being white” (Rhys 72). Anna’s inability to transcend racial boundaries, and her naïve hopes that she can do just that, further separates her and Francine, and by extension, her present in England and her childhood in Dominica.

Most of the narrative fracturing occurs at the novel’s end, when Anna is bleeding out and half-dead following a botched illegal abortion. By this point, her memories and the present have almost completely intertwined, which can be difficult for readers to parse out and interpret. Her memories of experiencing Carnival at home in Dominica interrupt the present action and eventually overtake it; the present moment merely becomes the backdrop for Anna as she allows herself to be subsumed by memory. Emery argues that Anna’s increasing disillusionment is propelled by the language and memory of the Carnival celebration. These memories of Carnival, while rooted in the past, are also subtle indications of what is going on in the novel’s present. Emery writes that the white Carnival mask that Anna envisions “becomes the image that brings together all of Anna’s most immediate and fearful visions. It represents the trick played on her by Walter, by England and its white culture, and by her own naiveté” (Emery 76). Carnival masks symbolize transformation and metamorphosis, and in the final scene Anna is rapidly experiencing change. Even after the bodily transformation that is the removal of the fetus, she steadily bleeds for hours afterward and her mind continues to deteriorate; this makes it easier for

the walls between memory and real time to collapse. As Anna's health declines, her consciousness increasingly incorporates her memories into real life until she exists in isolation in a dream world of her own making. Emery says of the merging, "She associates herself with Carnival and chooses to join it, as object of disapproval and as member of a community of satirical revelers. Her understanding of the masks and their laughter, rather than the laughter of modern European cynicism, allows her to transform the meanings and values attributed to the masking of her own identities" (Emery 81). This dream world of memories is the only place that she can really claim as hers. The synthesis of memory allows Anna to reconcile her varying identities in a personalized, comforting way. But since this scene does not happen until the end of the novel, when Anna is near death, the moment is less satisfying; it is only when she has lost everything that she can even begin to find peace.

Anna's fractured sense of self

Outside forces, including societal expectations of femininity, colonial immigrant pressures, and the novel's characters who routinely misunderstand Anna or deny her a sense of belonging coalesce in Anna's psyche. In Part Four, Anna's downward spiral reaches its zenith as she hemorrhages from a botched abortion. Rhys reflects Anna's mental breakdown through narrative fragmentation, stream of consciousness, and the warping of time through frequent regressions to memories of Dominica.

In order to deal with her issues, Anna resorts to alcohol to numb her pain and put on a happy face the way others expect her to. In one of the most quoted passages of the novel, Anna ruminates on this expectation, thinking, "Everybody says, 'Get on.' Of course, some people do get on. Yes, but how many? What about what's-her-name? She got on, didn't she? 'Chorus-Girl

Marries Peer's Son.' Well, *what* about her? Get on or get out, they say. Get on or get out" (Rhys 74). Anna's clarification that "some people" get on signals that she knows she is not getting on and that she has no intention of doing so. Her emphasis on "*what*" implies that getting on is inherently inaccessible to her; she is unable and unwilling to understand how to do so. Getting on is both necessary and important for Anna to do, but her inability to overcome her obstacles depresses her further and affects every aspect of her personality. Her obstinance to adhere to the societal expectation to "get on" leaves her to repeat her past mistakes, reliving her trauma while simultaneously building on it. She repeats the sentiment of "get on or get out" several times, about which Emery says, "the repetition, however, indicates a futile irony — no matter how simplistic, how illogical, 'they' will still say it, and anyone who questions or criticizes will find no alternative" (Emery 67). On some level, Anna recognizes this and internalizes it. A few paragraphs later, Anna expands on her feelings:

But in the daytime it was all right. And when you'd had a drink you knew it was the best way to live in the world, because anything might happen. I don't know how people live when they know exactly what's going to happen to them each day. It seems to be it's better to be dead than to live like that. (Rhys 74-75).

Once again, the only way Anna can reconcile her sense of self and her current situation is by drinking. For Anna, being drunk is "the best way to live," which is another coping strategy to alleviate her mental pain. Her inability to enjoy her surroundings without her consciousness compromised is a function of her trauma. She craves an unstructured existence, which in rigid British society is impossible and consequently sets her apart from others. Anna dislikes and wants to be free from the mundane and the conventional, which she finds monotonous to the point that she would rather be dead than conform to these standards. She does not intentionally

have a death wish, but her desire is ironically realized at the end of the novel when it manifests in Anna's hemorrhaging; her body betrays her in a way that allows her to transcend the societal order — through a physical and mental fracturing that ultimately kills her.

Anna can only find happiness, and only feels comfortable, when she is drunk. One night when she is getting drunk with Walter, he tells Anna to be happy, and her response is, "All right, I'll have a whisky" (Rhys 51). Once she finishes the whiskey, she thinks, "The paralyzed feeling went and I was all right again. 'Oh well,' I thought, 'I don't care. What's it matter?'" (Rhys 52). Anna has strong emotions and fears, so she tries to become more apathetic by drinking to numb her anxiety. A symptom of sexual trauma is the difficulty or inability to be sexually intimate, which Anna clearly has issues with. The paralysis and helplessness she feels can only be overcome when her ability to make clear decisions is hampered. Even while she is with Walter, whom she supposedly loves, she still feels uncomfortable with sexual intimacy, getting drunk and insisting that the lights be turned off in an attempt to soothe her fears. Even then, her discomfort shines through, so she finds solace in her memories of Dominica. She thinks about and aligns herself with the slave girl Maillotte Boyd, her religious schooling, her familial homestead, and the climate and landscape of Dominica, all to block out the things that are happening to her in real time.

After Walter leaves her, the only way Anna can perform sex work is by drinking copious amounts before having sex to numb her and allow her to do things that she does not want to do. The last time she has sex before her abortion, Anna thinks, "Going up the stairs it was pretty bad but when we got into the bedroom and had drinks it was better" (Rhys 160). These sexual experiences are decidedly more detrimental to Anna than her relationship with Walter, as she has no emotional connection to any of the men she engages with. By the time she has sex with the

last man before her abortion, she does not even refer to him by name. She is also unaware of who the father of her baby is, as she has been having sex with men in quick succession.

As her mental and physical condition worsens, Anna sinks further into alcoholism. Even at the end of Part Four, when she is closest to death, she drinks to ease her pain. Laurie asks if she is all right when she regains consciousness, and Anna's response is, "'I'm a bit giddy,' [she] said. 'I'm awfully giddy. I'd like a drink. There's some gin in the sideboard.' 'She oughtn't to have anything to drink now,' Mrs. Polo said" (Rhys 184). Even though she is in intense pain, both physically and mentally, the first thing she wants is a drink. Anna is bleeding out; alcohol is a blood thinner, so drinking right after surgery and while she is hemorrhaging is a terrible choice. She also feels dizzy, something alcohol doesn't help with at all; if anything, drinking will make her dizzier. Indeed, further down the page, Anna describes her bed going up into the air and slanting to the side so that she feels she needs to clutch the sheets to keep herself from falling out. Despite these detrimental effects, Anna would rather get drunk, because then it is easier for her to forget, or at least numb, the trauma, both what is happening in real time and her memories of traumatic experiences.

The text, which is reflective of Anna's psyche since it is a first-person narration, devolves as Anna's sense of time warps and she retreats further into memory. Anna's powerlessness is represented in the things she leaves unsaid. Rhys emphasizes the failure of language to represent the damage accruing in Anna's psyche. Rhys employs stream-of-consciousness to signal when Anna loses herself in her memories, which she does to divert her attentions away from the painful, trauma-filled present. At the end of Part Two, Anna has just moved in with Ethel and lays in bed thinking of her life in Dominica:

...She'll smile and put the tray down and I'll say Francine I've had such an awful dream — it was only a dream she'll say — and on the tray the blue cup and saucer and the silver teapot so I'd know for certain it had started again my lovely life — like a five-finger exercise played very slowly on the piano like a garden with a high wall around it — and every now and again thinking I only dreamt it it never happened... (Rhys 135)

At first, Anna refers to Francine only as “she,” which misleads the reader to think that perhaps she is talking about Ethel. The imaginary conversation with Francine emphasizes her wish to return to her “lovely life” in the West Indies and write off her time in England as a nightmare. She focuses on the objects on the tea tray to ground herself in her memory; she would “know for certain” that she is no longer in her present state. Her desire to erase reality and live in Dominica as if “it never happened” is a naïve impossibility; there is no way for Anna to return to her old life, even if she wanted to. The childlike regression into the past is a way for Anna to ignore her trauma that is exacerbated by her life in England. Flynn says that “the desire to resist the clock’s power morphs into a desire to prevail over time” (Flynn 48). Anna’s plan to improve her situation is to turn back time, which is obviously impossible. Flynn writes, “Anna does not simply mention the possibility of a different future; she clings to it as if it were her only chance of survival ... Her desperate insistence is unnerving. It demonstrates her frantic desire to be able to alter her circumstances, to control the events of her life. At the same time, it demonstrates her inability to do so” (Flynn 49). The repetition of words, phrases, and ideas that follows creates more sameness and Anna cannot conceive of anything else, making her powerless to change her future.

Once Anna becomes pregnant, her psyche devolves rapidly and plunges her deeper into memory, almost completely obliterating her awareness of reality. As Anna’s body betrays her,

first by becoming pregnant and later by hemorrhaging following a botched abortion, the text mirrors her descent to rock bottom. The lines between the present moment and her memories of Dominica blur, eventually to the point where they are entangled with reality. Anna's memories of the chaotic Carnival celebrations she witnessed as a child merge with her current situation to create a shadow reality that she loses herself in. As her unborn child's physical body is being dissembled, Anna is trying to put herself, both mind and body, back together by retreating into memory, although the fracturing — both physical and mental — ultimately wins out. Erin Kingsley asserts that Anna's pregnant condition is a manifestation of colonial anxieties. Kingsley writes, "Pregnant Anna experiences a deeper level of colonial displacement, the constant re-enactment of existing in no-place, and always, her extreme physicality, her body marking her as other and in need of containment and control" (Kingsley 300). Her bodily instability is apparent throughout the novel and culminates at the end, when she is bleeding out from her botched abortion. Kingsley theorizes that Anna's profuse bleeding is a physical manifestation of her sea daydreams, which relate back to her desire to return to the Caribbean. Because she cannot fully immerse herself in her old life, reminders of her sexual trauma break through and she must retreat further into her memories. Anna's mind spiraling out of control is likened to a memory of instability while riding a horse in Dominica: "*The horse went forward with an exaggerated swaying liling motion like a rocking-horse — I felt very sick,*" (Rhys 186). The interjection of "I felt very sick" is reality's intrusion into her dream world, which she fights against. She continues in her reverie:

the road goes along by the sea — do you turn to the right or the left — the left of course — and then that turning where the shadow is always the same shape — shadows are ghosts you look at them and you don't see them — you look at everything and you don't

see it only sometimes you see it like now I see — a cold moon looking down on a place where nobody is a place full of stones where nobody is (Rhys 187).

Anna spends so much of the novel either unwilling or unable to recognize her failure and shortcomings, but here, her ability to block out negative events and replace them with memories of a fonder time has gone. In this passage, which is one of the last paragraphs of the novel, Anna is fully alone in both reality and in her memory. She finally recognizes that her attempts to elide her pain are ineffective and that the ghosts of her past traumas are still very much detrimental to her. On a subconscious level, she has finally realized that not even her memories can provide the perfect solace she's looking for: "*only sometimes you see it like now I see.*" This moment of clarity, however, comes too late for Anna to have a redemptive arc.

The end of Part Four is purposefully ambiguous, opening up the possibility for Anna's survival. Emery says of Rhys's revision to the ending in which Anna's death is less clear, "In giving the revised ending this suggestion of possible renewal, Rhys has completed Anna's voyage and simultaneously written beyond the apparent narrative requirement that the protagonist die" (Emery 81). While there is a possibility for renewal at the novel's end, the ending is not a very positive one. If it is assumed that Anna survives the end of the novel, she will technically gain a new lease on life, but she still must keep on surviving and dealing with all of her issues — which she has proved she is not capable of doing. As seen throughout, she is never able to find a new way of thinking to deal with her trauma, and the assumption that she will somehow find it after the novel's end is wishful thinking.

Conclusion

Anna's multiplicitous identity as a West Indian outsider and a single, lower-class young woman sets her at odds to the conventional at every turn. This societal rejection allows for trauma to breed, and as Anna has more negative experiences, the pre-existing trauma festers and multiplies, ultimately splintering her identity beyond repair. The methods Anna uses to cope with the traumatic experiences she has faced are unhealthy, but her inability to change her circumstances perpetuates her need for distractions of any kind, destructive or not. Rhys is able to incorporate Anna's psychology into the narrative, manipulating time and memory and purposely obscuring more linear narrative elements like thoughts, scenes, and actions. As a result, the text follows Anna's descent into ruin. The inherent circularity of the societal forces that allow for all of this to continue beyond the narrative leaves Anna stuck in a cycle of disappointments and subjugation. While many readers and critics cannot or do not want to get past all of the horribly depressing and negative themes and influences, it is Rhys's bold, stark commentary on this (unfortunately) realistic downward spiral of a young woman that makes this novel worthy of the literary canon. Rediscovering women writers and analyzing their texts' ways of critiquing the world around them is essential to breaking open the canon and even beyond the literary sphere, providing new ways to understand people, society, and the world in general. Too long has Rhys been left out of discussions of acclaimed modernist writers, and *Voyage* specifically has been pushed to the side in favor of Rhys's more critically acclaimed works, *Wide Sargasso Sea* or *Good Morning, Midnight*. By limiting Rhys studies to these two texts, readers and scholars lose out on *Voyage's* examination of both personal and cultural identity and trauma. Women writers, and women's stories, are important and necessary to read and discuss and disseminate if we want to live in a world that values individuals and celebrates different perspectives and experiences. The "dreamlike downward career" Anna embarks on in *Voyage in the Dark* is not just fiction; it

was the dark reality for many women in Anna's position, including Rhys herself. Minimizing this story, and women's stories, is minimizing the importance of women as human beings who have survived in spite of the world that tries to keep them down.

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I pledge my word of honor that I have abided by the Washington College Honor Code while completing this assignment.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Clayton Wargo', written in a cursive style.

8 April 2020