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# Consumerism and Social Imagination in Jean Rhys' Voyage in the Dark

Rebecca McKanna-Koon

University of Colorado Boulder, [rlkoon@gmail.com](mailto:rlkoon@gmail.com)

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Consumer Capitalism and Social Imagination in Jean Rhys' *Voyage in the Dark*

by

REBECCA MCKANNA-KOON

B.A., The Evergreen State College, 2004

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Deepti Misri

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Laura Winkiel

Date \_\_\_\_\_

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards  
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

McKanna-Koon, Rebecca (M.A., Comparative Literature Program)

Consumer Capitalism and Social Imagination in Jean Rhys' *Voyage in the Dark*

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Deepti Misri

Although Jean Rhys' works are studied in a number of different fields, the role of consumer capitalism in her novels—specifically imperialist capitalism—has not been thoroughly examined by critics. Rhys' 1934 *Voyage in the Dark* provides particularly fruitful ground for this inquiry because it reveals the imperial exploitation at the heart of British consumer capitalism, which was on the rise at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and examines the specific role of the white Creole woman in that system. A closer examination of previously unexamined allusions to imperial capitalism in the text will draw attention to the ways Rhys theorizes her protagonist's complicity in the exploitative system that oppresses her, and how her participation in that system is determined by her marginalized racial and class identities. This paper also contends that, despite what critics have claimed, Rhys' protagonist has some agency within these oppressive systems.

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Jean Rhys' works have been, since her death in 1979, objects of scholarly attention in a number of different fields including European modernism, Caribbean studies, postcolonial studies, and, perhaps most reluctantly given the lack of agency her protagonists seem to display, feminist studies. As Elaine Savory asserts in her *Cambridge Introduction to Jean Rhys*, Rhys is now canonical. However, despite the breadth of scholarship on Rhys' works, surprisingly, given its centrality in her oeuvre, the role of consumer capitalism—and imperialist capitalism in particular—in her novels has not been thoroughly explored by critics. In the introduction to the first collection of Rhys criticism in two decades, *Rhys Matters: New Critical Perspectives* (2013), Mary Wilson and Kerry L. Johnson assert that one line of inquiry that warrants new scholarship on Rhys is to read her through “the tropes of market economics [which is] a field of inquiry that is becoming newly important in modernist studies” (Wilson and Johnson 7). Rhys' 1934 novel *Voyage in the Dark* provides particularly fruitful ground for this inquiry because it explores the imperial exploitation at the heart of British consumer capitalism, which was on the rise at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a Creole woman's specific place in that system. A closer examination of these two central threads in *Voyage in the Dark* will not only expand the current scholarship on the novel, but will also supplement critics' recent efforts to credit Jean Rhys with what Andrea Zengulys calls a “social imagination.”

Arnold Davidson's 1985 book *Jean Rhys*, one of the earliest studies of her work, reads *Voyage in the Dark* using an economic framework, noting that the

protagonist Anna Morgan is “merchandise” and that “the man buying her knows for what price she can be had” (59). His reading, however, only reads Anna as a commodity and a victim and does not explore how Anna is both complicit in and resists consumer capitalism. Very little critical attention was focused on consumerism in *Voyage in the Dark* in the almost three decades following Davidson’s book. Andrea Zemgulys’ 2013 article “Menu, Memento, Souvenir: Suffering and Social Imagination in *Good Morning, Midnight*” offers a more complex reading of the ways Rhys’ protagonists interact with the market economy. Although she doesn’t deal directly with *Voyage in the Dark*, the article is instructive because it complicates previous readings, such as Davidson’s, of Rhys’ protagonists as victims of the consumer capitalist system. Zemgulys examines the experiences of *Good Morning, Midnight*’s protagonist in that system in order to argue that Rhys, who was often characterized as an apolitical author by early critics, should be credited with a “social imagination” which allows her to offer adroit critiques of “how women are both pressured by and complicit in a ‘market’ system, a system that also and inevitably zeros out those who use it to get by” (Zemgulys 22). This reading of Rhys is particularly valuable because it claims her for a “tradition of protest and possibility” from which she has often been excluded (Zemgulys 38).

Perhaps the most thorough study of consumer capitalism in *Voyage in the Dark* to date is Alissa Karl’s excellent *Modernism and the Marketplace: Literary Culture and Consumer Capitalism in Rhys, Woolf, Stein, and Nella Larsen* in which she examines, through a study of modernist literature, how consumerism

“designates and enforces social legitimacy” (30). She argues that consumer capitalism functions in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain as a central disciplinary mechanism for the nation, empire, and male domination; one that is particularly insidious because, by generating the desire to consume the products that allow consumers to conform with social norms, it entices the oppressed to be complicit in their own oppression. Karl contends that in *Voyage in the Dark*, “consumer capital works to assimilate [...] unassimilable subjects of imperialism” by “promis[ing] belonging to the foreign and in this case explicitly colonial woman” (Karl 23, 29). In her study of Rhys, Karl is interested in the ways Rhys’ novels expose how consumer capitalism disciplines colonial subjects through its “colonization of women’s bodies through commodification, fetishization, and visual appropriation” (Karl 17). Karl’s focus is on the ways that consumerism is constitutive of national, imperial, and patriarchal oppression of colonial women. My aim is to expand on her analysis by more thoroughly examining the specifically imperial nature of the market economy in which Anna circulates as both a commodity and a consumer, and her role in that economy.

My reading of *Voyage in the Dark* will reveal previously unexamined allusions to imperial capitalism in the text in order to draw attention to the ways Rhys is theorizing Anna’s complicity in the exploitative system that oppresses her, and how Anna’s participation in that system is determined by her marginalized racial and class identities. I will also attempt to show that, despite what Karl claims, Anna has some agency within these oppressive systems (beyond the power



she holds as a white member of the landowning class, a colonizer in her native Dominica) which she exercises through resistance to the norms of gender, race, and class she is pressured to adhere to. This resistance is key to an understanding of *Voyage in the Dark* as an anti-colonialist text. Karl argues that, through offering false promises of belonging to economically and culturally marginalized women like Anna: “consumer choice mobilizes punitive and violent measures upon an unplaceable white colonial” (30). This assertion effectively effaces any agency Anna displays in resisting assimilation into homogenous white middle-class femininity, positioning her, as so many critics before Karl have done, as merely a victim of an oppressive system, and in so doing erasing Rhys’ social and historical imagination. Anna *is* marginalized, but that is not the only thing she is.

Much like Rhys’ works, Anna Morgan resists categorization. She appears white but was raised in the British colony of Dominica, so she does not fit in as culturally English when she moves to London as a teenager. When the novel opens she is a virgin, but the English women with whom she works perceive her, because of her racial identity (which is not quite white), as over-sexualized; they call her “the Hottentot.” She is poor and works as a barely respectable chorus girl in a travelling music hall show but was raised with middle class values and manners. She functions in the market economy as both consumer and consumed, becoming a “tart” and then an amateur prostitute. Feeling that Anna will never become a lady in Dominica because a colonial upbringing does not allow her to fit neatly into

identity categories required for gentility, Anna's stepmother Hester moves Anna to London so that she can have a better life.

Anna, however, experiences England as hostile, homogenous, and bleak. She feels out of place in England, though her family insists that she is culturally English and raised her to conform to British social norms. The narrative, told in the first person from Anna's perspective, often lapses into memories and longing daydreams of her life back home. She doesn't quite fit in there either, however, because she belongs to the landowning (and former slave-owning) class but prefers the company of her family's black servants, a group to which she can never belong. Anna's West Indian upbringing fosters a sense of displacement in both England and Dominica; she identifies with both cultures, but is not able to reconcile them into a unified identity: "Sometimes it was as if I were back there and as if England were a dream. At other times England was the real thing and out there was the dream, but I could never fit them together" (Rhys 3). Adlai Murdoch points out that the same term—Creole—is used to identify a West Indian of either European or African origin (though not indigenous West Indians, indicating that the term can only refer to a displaced person):

A creole person can be either white or black, colonizer or colonized, as the term articulates an essential ambiguity that both mediates and ruptures the strategies of containment that have driven the dominant designations of difference that have been the traditional corollary of the colonial encounter (Murdoch 254).

Anna's Creole identity means that she is both and neither—she is read as white and a colonizer in Dominica (though she resists this position), but not in England, a point to which I will return. Anna's ambiguous identity is at the root of her feelings of alienation: "This pervasive sense of dis-ease renders [her] 'less than one but double,' in Homi Bhabha's felicitous phrase, a classic instance of colonial neither/nor binary enmeshed in the (im)possibilities of its own duality" (Murdoch 256).

I submit that the primary way Anna attempts to reconcile her sense of dis-ease is through consumerism, but she's never quite successful. Anna's ambiguous race, class, and gender identities exclude her from London society, and consumerism promises to integrate her into it by allowing her to display herself as an English middle-class lady. This is the sense of belonging that Karl argues consumer capitalism promises but can't deliver. I would further contend that Anna's attempts to reconcile her dis-ease through consumerism fail because she only wants to *look like* a lady—she doesn't actually want to *be* one. She fails to assimilate not only because she's an "unplaceable" colonial subject, but because she resists assimilation, however passively.

An allusion to this resistance is on the very first page of the novel; Rhys draws a subtle parallel between Anna and Jezebel. The first scene of *Voyage in the Dark* is Anna's memory of Market Street in her home town in Dominica, and the view it affords of the sea: "When there was a breeze the sea was millions of spangles; and on still days it was purple as Tyre and Sidon" (Rhys 3). Although critics have overlooked it, this description of the sea alludes to two important

themes in the novel: imperial capitalism and Anna's resistance to social norms. Sidon, a city in ancient Phoenicia, was the center of a major transoceanic commercial empire (the manufacture of purple dyes was central to their economy, hence Rhys's simile), and Sidonian colonizers founded Tyre (Byers). In biblical stories, Jezebel was the daughter of the king of Tyre. Her name became, and certainly was still in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when *Voyage in the Dark* was written, synonymous with sexual immorality. This foreshadows Anna's prostitution and suggests the over-sexualized image of women from the colonies. Jezebel is also associated with (failed) resistance to patriarchy: In addition to flouting sexual strictures, she worshipped "false prophets" and exercised political power. These behaviors got her thrown out a window and her corpse eaten by dogs in the street. Jezebel is often contrasted with the male prophet Elijah: "She is a Baal supporter, he is a YHWH supporter; she is a woman, he is a man; she is a foreigner, he is a native; [...] finally he wins, she is liquidated" (Brenner). Anna, like Jezebel, is the daughter of members of the ruling class. She is, despite being raised as culturally English, a foreigner in London and she is villainized for her sexual immorality. She also resists social norms, though her resistance eventually leads to her destruction. At the end of the novel she becomes pregnant by a man whose name she can't remember and undergoes a botched abortion. In the original ending, which Rhys changed under pressure from her publisher, the abortion kills Anna. In the published version the ending is arguably no rosier: the doctor proclaims that she will be "ready to start all over again in no time" (Rhys 115). In other words, just like

Jezebel's, her body will be out in the street to be consumed. I contend that this is a type of death, because Anna has become nothing more than a cheap commodity, "zeroed out," as Zemgulys puts it, by the system she relies on for survival. She's no longer resistant, but succumbs to the will of the market.

The allusion in the opening scene to the ancient towns of Tyre and Sidon also establishes the novel's thoroughgoing theme of imperial capitalism. Rhys is drawing a parallel between these ancient cities and the relationship between Britain and Dominica, gesturing toward the colonial exploitation on which the economies of both are based. Even the one product Anna remembers being sold on Market Street—"Salt fishcakes, all sweet an' charmin', all sweet an' charmin'" (3)—is a product of imperial trade. Salt fish (preserved white fish, often cod) was introduced to the Caribbean by colonizers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and became a staple of Caribbean cuisine. North American vessels brought salt fish on boats carrying lumber to the islands, and returned with sugar, molasses, and rum (Nelson). In addition, the salt fishcakes in this scene are being sold by black women, underscoring the labor performed by former slaves to produce commodities for the consumption of the colonizers.

Anna is, in Dominica, unambiguously a colonizer and a member of white colonial gentry who depend on the labor of the colonized. Her family has been on the island for five generations, her father owns land there, her family employs servants, and her grandfather owned slaves. In England, however, her class and social identities are somewhat less clear. After her father's death Anna has no income of

her own and her stepmother, Hester, who is financially responsible for her, has an income of £300 a year. This places her in what George Orwell, in his 1937 *The Road to Wigan Pier*, calls the lower-upper-middle class.<sup>1</sup> Orwell notes that: “the essential point about the English class-system is that it is *not* entirely explicable in terms of money. Roughly speaking it is a money-stratification, but it is also interpenetrated by a sort of shadowy caste-system” (122). The defining characteristic of the upper-middle class, according to Orwell, is not income but social pretensions. An income of £300 a year “meant that your gentility was almost purely theoretical [...] Theoretically you knew how to wear your clothes and how to order dinner, although in practice you could never afford to go to a decent tailor or a decent restaurant” (Orwell 123). Orwell calls the families who fall into this income bracket “shabby-genteel” and observes that they are often more intent on maintaining the appearance of gentility than the upper-middle class with higher incomes because their manners and accents are the only things that allow them to claim membership in that class.

In addition to manners and accents, the upper-middle class was, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, identifiable through their participation in mass consumption. Thorstein Veblen’s 1899 *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* offers a historical account of the social and economic systems that led to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century emphasis on “conspicuous consumption”—a term

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<sup>1</sup> Orwell states that the upper-middle class, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, had incomes between £300 and £2000 a year. With an income of £300 a year, Anna and Hester were squarely at the bottom of this class.

coined by Veblen—and conspicuous leisure as status markers. He argues that leisure has been, since the earliest human societies, associated with the ruling classes who wield power over others and are able to exploit their labor. The leisure time the ruling classes enjoy is used not on productive labor, which they disdain, but on “refining taste, manners and habits of life [which] are useful evidence of gentility, because good breeding requires time, application, and expense, and can therefore not be compassed by those whose time and energy are taken up with work” (Veblen 48-49). With the rise of industrialism and the growth of urban populations, the major status marker shifts from leisure to consumption. This is because in cities people are constantly seen and judged by strangers solely on the basis of their appearance, so the emphasis shifts from status markers that are less obvious to those that can be easily observed. The display of luxury goods therefore becomes important to the maintenance of upper-middle class social status.

Shopping, as a result, became an important leisure activity for upper-middle class women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Women were usually responsible for outfitting the household, including its inhabitants, and the rise of conspicuous consumption of course meant acquiring new luxury goods to be displayed. In response to this, the department store appeared in the major European cities in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a new public space in which women could shop and socialize unchaperoned. In *The Politics of Consumption*, Matthew Hilton and Martin Daunton note that most scholarly attention to women and consumer culture focuses on one of two things: the liberation consumerism and new consumer spaces afforded

women by allowing them to be “temporarily freed from the perceived confinements of domestic life” (7), or the ways that consumerism enforces normative ways of being and presenting oneself by offering the illusion of consumer choice that is actually limited to the products made available by manufacturers. Hilton and Daunton contend that the best scholarship on women and consumer capitalism examines the topic through the lenses of class, gender, and urban development. (I would further assert that race is a useful analytic category.) Karl notes that these analyses very frequently assume that the women discussed in these studies fit neatly into particular class, gender, or racial identity categories. This, as I have shown, is not the case for Anna Morgan. Anna’s racial and class liminality results in different patterns of circulation in the European consumer capitalist system that reveal the imperial exploitation at its heart as well as the position occupied by non-white, poor women.

Although Anna’s race, class, and gender identities cannot be accurately examined separately, as they are interdependent dimensions of the oppressions she experiences and the privileges she holds, it is nonetheless productive to examine the ways that Anna is both excluded from and resists the norms of each of these categories using examples from the text in which each dimension is, in turn, foregrounded. An intersectional approach is crucial to understanding how and why Anna tries and fails, through participation in the market economy as both consumer and commodity, to integrate herself into English middle-class femininity. Her failure to perform this femininity correctly reveals not only her marginal status but



also her resistance to these normative identity categories. Anna doesn't actually want to become a lady, even though she wants to present herself as one, because it would require rooting out the aspects of her identity cultivated by her upbringing in her beloved Dominica, and she knows that deracination results in destruction.

Anna's stepmother, more than anyone else, is invested in Anna becoming a lady, which means ensuring Anna's racial and sexual purity. During a visit to Hester, during which Anna is nervous that Hester will ask her how she's earning money, Anna sees an advertisement on the back of a newspaper: "What is Purity? For Thirty-Five Years the answer has been Bourne's Cocoa" (Rhys 36). Critics usually interpret this ad as an allusion to Anna's sexual purity. Karl, for example, argues that the ad exercises sexual discipline, in the form of purity, through advertising, therefore locating "social and sexual regulation" in the realm of consumer capitalism (32-33). Steve Pinkerton links the ad to Anna's anxiety about maintaining the illusion of purity in order to be more marketable in the sexual economy (105). I contend that Rhys is also alluding to imperial capitalism and Anna's racial (im)purity.

The fact that Anna sees an advertisement for cocoa is significant because Rhys is, again, suggesting the importance of the relationship between Britain and the colonies to the success of consumer capitalism. Cocoa was an important imperial product, cultivated in many African and Caribbean colonies, including Dominica. The Dominican imperial road, construction of which began during Rhys' childhood in 1902 (this date also coincides with Anna's childhood in Dominica; she is 19 in

1914 when the novel is set), was supposed to bisect the island in order to make travelling through it easier. Although the road was never completed, its construction “persuaded 30-40 European settler families to take up cocoa, and the governor himself bought an estate on the new road. These enterprises struggled against falling cocoa prices” (Clarence-Smith 110). When Hester laments the state of her finances during her visit with Anna, she blames Anna’s father for buying an estate in Dominica, which she later sold at a loss: “The way English people are cheated into buying estates that aren’t worth a halfpenny is a shame” (Rhys 38). Although Hester doesn’t specify what kind of estate it was, it’s plausible that Anna’s father was “cheated into buying” a cocoa estate. And even if it wasn’t a cocoa estate, it certainly cultivated some product intended for export to and consumption in Britain. Rhys is using this detail to underscore the both/neither nature of the white Creole in imperial capitalism: On the one hand, although Hester’s indignation is in earnest, it’s clearly ridiculous to claim that a British person could be “cheated” into buying land that was invaded and forcibly seized from indigenous West Indians by the British, land that would be cultivated by descendants of slaves who were abducted by the British, in order to produce cocoa for British consumption. On the other hand, white Creole landowners, although in an undeniably privileged position in the colonies, were nevertheless relatively disadvantaged in relation to landowners in Britain. They were participants in a system of imperial exploitation in which goods and materials were produced in the colonies but intended to augment the wealth of those in the metropole.

Just like cocoa, Anna is “produced” in Dominica and sent to Britain to be “purified” and consumed. Although she appears white, she also repeatedly insists that she is a “real West Indian,” underscoring the black racial and cultural influences that have been important in shaping her subjectivity. Anna Snaith tells us that Creoles at this time in England were often referred to as “white niggers” and that “A multi-generational West Indian identity—and Anna in *Voyage in the Dark* is keen to stress that hers is five generations on her mother’s side—makes interracial liaisons a distinct possibility” (Snaith 83). Hester is clearly acutely aware of this, and her anxiety about the purity of Anna’s family lineage is evident throughout the scene in which Anna sees the cocoa ad, much more so than any concern about Anna’s sexual purity, which she only mentions in passing. Hester brings Anna to London because she’s worried about her “growing up more like a nigger every day” (Rhys 38), but quickly decides that she no longer wants to be financially responsible for Anna because she is “turning out badly.” In other words, Anna couldn’t be satisfactorily “purified” of her colonial upbringing. Hester denounces Anna’s uncle for fathering interracial children and insists that he is not a gentleman, highlighting the idea that only people with “pure” family lineages can claim membership in the gentry. In Hester’s endeavors to make a lady of Anna she is particularly concerned with erasing every trace of black influence from Anna’s appearance, voice, and behavior:

I tried to teach you to talk like a lady and behave like a lady and not like a nigger and of course I couldn’t do it. Impossible to get you away from the

servants. That awful sing-song voice you had! Exactly like a nigger you talked—and still do. Exactly like that dreadful girl Francine (Rhys 40).

Although Hester's criticism of Anna's voice is damning since, as Orwell points out, shabby-genteel families "cannot afford to let their children grow up with vulgar accents" (125), presumably Anna's speech and behavior are changeable. However, Hester also intimates that Anna's mother was of interracial origin, thereby suggesting that Anna can never become a lady because of her innate racial impurity.

Anna protests Hester's assertion that her mother was not white, but also recurrently proclaims that she wants to be black, indicating her resistance to being identified as a lady. She tells Walter—the man with whom she has her first affair—in response to his assertion that she is "rum" (odd or peculiar): "Oh, I was always rum [...] When I was a kid I wanted to be black" (Rhys 32). Anna's closest companion growing up was one of her family's servants, Francine. However, she clearly didn't understand the power dynamics underlying their relationship. She remembers fondly a time when she was ill in Dominica and Francine cared for her:

She changed the bandage round my head and it was ice-cold and she started fanning me with a palm-leaf fan. [...] I wanted to be black, I always wanted to be black. I was happy because Francine was there, and I watched her waving the fan backward and forwards and the beads of sweat that rolled from underneath her handkerchief. Being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad (Rhys 18-19).

In this scene Anna conflates wanting to *be* black with wanting to be cared for by a black servant. Francine's labor is invisible to Anna, despite the sweat on her forehead. Though Francine is clearly doing her job as a servant, and though it's probably not terribly pleasant, Anna claims that she is warm and gay, revealing the deep naivety and misunderstanding of the lives of her family's servants that her position as a member of the white elite engenders.

It's not until a few years later, when Anna sees Francine in the "horrible" kitchen washing up, that Anna realizes Francine is not her friend but her servant, and they can never really be peers: "But I knew of course that 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 44). Snaith argues that Anna's desire to be black is a simplistic, childish wish and should be read in contrast to her feelings about race when she is in London and is treated as racially other herself. Snaith points out that Anna's empathy for one of her grandfather's slaves, 18-year old Maillotte Boyd, which surfaces during one of Anna's first acts of prostitution, illustrates how Anna has "altered her conception of and identification with racial difference from nostalgia and envy to empathy through suffering" (Snaith 84). Although I disagree that Anna's wish to be black is simply a product of childish thinking—I read it as a manifestation of Anna's resistance to the norms of English middle-class femininity and the whiteness this role requires—Snaith's reading supports my view that Anna, even as she matures and her views on race evolve, and even after she has spent

some time in London under the pressure of assimilation into English middle-class femininity, resists identification with whiteness.

Anna is under pressure not only to appear purely white, but also to appear upper-middle class. As Veblen asserts, this requires her to dress in a way that makes her social status visible to others. Anna's first act of consumption in the novel, the purchase of a pair of cotton stockings, reveals her ambivalence about looking the part of an English lady. Anna's family was very invested in appearing upper-middle class and Anna was raised to adhere to the norms of that class. An important component of that was how she was expected to dress: among other things, an English lady wears stockings. Anna's memory returns her to a Sunday morning in Dominica, getting dressed for church. Despite the tropical heat, one of the requisite items was a pair of wool stockings. The clothes she is expected to wear are completely inappropriate for the climate in Dominica, and her attempts to meet the expectations of ladylike comportment are therefore also thwarted:

While you are carefully putting on your gloves you begin to perspire and you feel the perspiration trickling down under your arms. The thought of having a wet patch underneath your arms—a disgusting and a disgraceful thing to happen to a lady—makes you very miserable (Rhys 25).

Anna wants to meet her family's expectations of ladylike behavior —not being able to do so makes her “very miserable”— but her location as a colonial subject is antithetical to the performance of English femininity.

She doesn't fare much better in England, as she can't afford, on her chorus girls' salary, the silk stockings a lady would buy, revealing a tension between Anna's class and her social status. Anna's purchase of these stockings (actually Walter buys them for her, a point to which I will return, but he does not offer to do so until she's chosen them, so I treat them here as her purchase because it was her intention to pay for them herself) has been largely overlooked by critics, but there are several significant details in this act of consumption that help the reader identify Anna's marginal class status, as well as her uneasy relationship with her "Englishness." It's worth noting, first of all, another allusion to imperial capitalism. Anna chooses a pair of stockings made of "lisle thread with clocks up the sides" (Rhys 5). Lisle thread is made of cotton, an important commodity for imperial Britain. The British cotton industry (which revolved around manufacturing cotton goods from imported raw cotton) was at its peak in 1912, just before the novel is set. Cotton's history is intimately connected with the histories of empire and slavery; it was a central motivating factor for the British invasion and colonization of India. The rise of British textile mills precipitated the Industrial Revolution and resulted in an increased need for raw cotton, which India produced, along with finished cotton goods like clothing. After the British seized control of India they prohibited the manufacture of cotton goods by Indian textile manufacturers. So, they exploited Indian labor in order to secure cheap raw cotton, exported it to England where it was turned into fabric, clothing, linens, etc. They then sent those products back to India for sale to the Indian people, who were forced to buy the products of British

textile mills since they were not permitted to manufacture their own cotton goods. Indian cotton was also used to “subsidize [England’s] slave trade: Indian cotton was bartered for slaves, who were then shipped by the British to American plantations in return for sugar, cash, or both” (Yafa 34). Rhys is again drawing the careful reader’s attention to the imperial exploitation on which British consumerism depended, and the ways that Anna, in this case by buying cotton stockings, is made complicit in that system.

Anna’s choice of stocking is also influenced by both her class and social statuses. Although stockings for sale in London at this time were manufactured in France, Germany, and England, lisle thread was associated with English stockings (Putnam). The clocks also indicate that she is buying an English style stocking, since the French style had a single seam up the back. French stockings were more expensive, and were preferred by “well-bred” people (Putnam). Rayon was invented in 1911-12 and rayon stockings would have been available, but they were “prone to sagging” and not considered as nice as cotton (History of Hosiery). Anna does not choose the cheapest rayon stockings, as a lower-class woman probably would have, nor does she choose the silk stockings, as a “well-bred” woman would have; she chooses the middling option, cotton. Her class status prevents her from affording silk, but her social status precludes her purchase of rayon, perhaps especially in front of Walter given that her roommate Maudie encouraged her, just before this scene, to “swank a bit” in order to attract a man. Later, when Walter sends her a good deal of money after their first dinner together, she buys a pair of silk



stockings, indicating that these would be her choice if she could afford them, so as to present an image of being “well-bred.”

In addition to gesturing toward Anna’s place in the imperial capitalist system and revealing the tension between her class and social statuses, this purchase suggests Anna’s (un)ladylike gender identity. Stockings are a fairly intimate garment; more so than, for example, a pair of gloves, so her purchase of them hints at once at her sexuality and her adherence to norms of proper dress for ladies. It’s significant, then, that Walter buys them for her. The purchase is her entrée into the sexual economy in which she will later become entirely financially dependent on Walter and men like him. Once Walter begins supporting her financially, Anna quits her job in the music hall show. Her livelihood is contingent on her appeal as a commodity, which Walter conspicuously consumes.

Returning to Veblen’s concepts of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure will help to clarify how Anna circulates as a commodity and why it is important that she display herself as an upper-middle class English lady in order to appeal to Walter. Veblen argues that one form conspicuous consumption can take is the employ of “personal or body servants” who only perform a few highly specialized tasks. This is an indicator of wealth because it demonstrates that the employer can afford enough servants to be able to assign only a few tasks to each, so that “the utility of these [servants] comes to consist, in great part, in their conspicuous exemption from productive labour and in the evidence which this exemption affords of their master’s wealth and power” (57). Veblen calls this vicarious leisure. I

suggest that Anna is positioned as this type of highly specialized “body servant” to Walter. He “hires” her, at a price he sets (in contrast to a prostitute, who would set her own price), to provide him with the highly specialized service of company and sex. When they’re not together, Anna does nothing but wait for him, thus displaying the vicarious leisure that proves Walter’s wealth. She quits her job in the chorus, depending entirely on his financial support, and even stops reading to pass the time. When Walter’s cousin Vincent tries to talk with her about books she says: “I haven’t read any of these books you’re talking about. I hardly ever read.’ ‘Well, what do you do with yourself all day?’ he said. ‘I don’t know,’ I said” (Rhys 54). She could well have said that she hardly ever reads *anymore*; we know she used to read, since she was reading Zola’s *Nana* in the first scene, and she refers to reading about England as a child. Although critics tend to focus on the intertextual use of *Nana*,<sup>2</sup> the significance of the fact that Anna is reading at all, and the significance of the fact that she stops, has been overlooked. This detail is notable not only because it reinforces Anna’s performance of vicarious leisure for Walter, but also because it reiterates her position outside the leisure class. In Veblen’s analysis, the leisure class spends their time cultivating their tastes and manners and bettering themselves, which includes reading. The fact that Anna is no longer interested in “bettering herself” through reading indicates her resistance to being part of that class, and her new position as part of the servant class.

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<sup>2</sup> Veronica Gregg (1995), for example, argues that Rhys is pointing to the ways that Anna’s subjectivity is shaped by various race, class, and gender discourses. Anna Snaith (2005) posits that Rhys is conjuring an association between black female sexuality and prostitution by reading *Nana*, like Anna, as a white character who is seen as black by those around her.

Veblen argues that one of the duties of the servant class is vicarious consumption which is intended to display the wealth of the employer rather than that of the servant: “The most obvious form in which [vicarious] consumption occurs is seen in the wearing of liveries and the occupation of spacious servants’ quarters. Another [...] form of vicarious consumption [...] is the consumption of food, clothing, dwelling and furniture” (Veblen 68). Walter rents larger, nicer rooms for Anna and sends her money to buy clothes at least in part in order to display his own wealth. He can afford to clothe, house, and feed a person who performs no productive labor for him. Although his motives may be, in part, altruistic—he does seem to show some genuine concern for Anna’s well-being, and even pays to abort a pregnancy he had no part in—his treatment of Anna is intended to mark him as a man of means. Veblen also argues that Walter, in order to display his status, must consume the right kind of goods: “[the gentleman of leisure] must also cultivate his tastes, for now it becomes incumbent on him to discriminate with some nicety between the noble and the ignoble in consumable goods” (74). Anna, then, must present herself as a “noble” good. Her livelihood depends on her appeal as a valuable commodity, which is in turn contingent on her role as a consumer because she must buy specific clothes and products in order to conform to the ideals of beauty and feminine comportment promoted by advertisements and cultural expectations of middle-class femininity. These ideals prove impossible to achieve, in part because of Anna’s marginal status and in part because they simultaneously expect her to be both virginal and sexually appealing.

On the one hand, Anna was raised to behave and dress like a lady, and in addition to the social and family pressures to conform, this social position is central to her ability to circulate as a commodity among English gentlemen. Walter would not be able to take her to one of the best clubs in London, as he does for their first dinner together, if she was not able to behave and present herself in an appropriately ladylike way. Maudie, noting this just before Anna meets Walter, remarks: "There's one thing about you, you always look ladylike" (Rhys 5). On the other hand, an English lady would not need to exchange sex for money, and would consider it against her morals and beneath her dignity to do so. Anna has no such compunctions. On her first date with Walter, Anna, still a virgin, discovers that there is a bedroom attached to their private dining room and thinks: "You can do it now and you can see what it's like and why not?" (Rhys 13). Anna doesn't get to "see what it's like" that evening but later, after she and Walter have had sex, although she knows she has done something that violates middle-class sexual strictures for women she experiences no guilt or reservations about her behavior, but observes in a detached manner that she has transgressed social norms: "I am bad, not good any longer, bad. That has no meaning, absolutely none. Just words" (Rhys 35). A memory of Dominica immediately precedes this thought, implying, since the narrative is filtered through Anna's consciousness, that her perception of English sexual mores as meaningless is related to her colonial upbringing.

Anna's ability to appear ladylike and therefore attract rich men should allow her to "get on," but Anna shows little interest in doing so. Here again we see a

glimmer of her passive resistance to social norms. Someone who adheres to the “get on or get out” philosophy that is repeatedly foisted on Anna is, according to Orwell, following a bootstrap capitalist mentality: “This is the type [...] who starts off with half a crown and ends up with fifty thousand pounds” (Orwell 113). For a woman, getting on means getting married to a man with money. Just after realizing that Walter will become tired of her and leave her Anna thinks: “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.’ [...] Get on or get out, they say. Get on or get out” (Rhys 46). This chorus girl is a woman Anna read about in the paper (indicated by the headline “Chorus-Girl Marries Peer’s Son”). Not only is it not someone she knows, she finds it such a remote possibility that she can’t remember the woman’s name, nor does she think that marrying a peer’s son is a common fate for a chorus girl. Rhys is exposing the gendered aspects of the phrase “get on or get out”, as well as the impossibility for a Creole to “get on” in the metropole. When Walter’s cousin tells Anna, “You’ve only got to make up your mind that things are going to be different and they will be different” (108), he’s offering her another version of the advice to “get on or get out.” What he doesn’t realize is that even if Anna made up her mind to get on, her marginal status would hamper her, because she never quite succeeds at performing the English middle-class femininity that would be necessary to marry a peer’s son.

Despite this, however, and despite Anna’s dismissal of Maudie’s observation that she always looks ladylike—“Oh God,’ I said, ‘who wants to look ladylike?’”

(Rhys 5)— Anna’s acts of consumption suggest that she thinks being seen as a lady will allow her to feel less alienated in London. Because she experiences London as homogenous, and her cultural and class statuses marginalize her in conspicuous ways, she wants to appear to integrate herself into English society in order to experience it as less hostile. The main way she endeavors to do this is through her clothes. After her first date with Walter, whose clothes she admired, she feels particularly miserable because she didn’t fit in to his world of ladies and gentlemen. One of the first things he says to her at dinner is an uncomplimentary remark about her dress. The dinner is a disaster, and afterwards she thinks:

When I thought about my clothes I was too sad to cry. About clothes, it’s awful. Everything makes you want pretty clothes like hell. People laugh at girls who are badly dressed. [...] it’s jaw, jaw and sneer all the time. And the shop-windows sneering and smiling in your face. And then you look at the skirt of your costume, all crumpled at the back. [...] You look at your hideous underclothes and you think, ‘All right, I’ll do anything for good clothes.

Anything—anything for clothes” (Rhys 15).

Anna, despite her assertions that she doesn’t want to be ladylike, and despite her refusal of middle-class morality, doesn’t want to be “sneered” at. She wants, if nothing else, to *look* the part of the English lady. So the next morning when Walter sends her 25 pounds, an enormous sum,<sup>3</sup> she thinks only of buying new clothes. She goes to an upscale shop, Cohen’s, that she had been to once before with Laurie

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<sup>3</sup> Anna makes 35 shillings a week as a chorus girl. At the time, there were 20 shillings to a pound. 25 pounds was equivalent to a little more than 14 weeks’ wages for Anna.

Gaynor, a more successful and experienced woman from her music hall show. The choice of that shop reveals Anna's desire to imitate this woman's version of English femininity, as well as Anna's own lack of knowledge about how to navigate the world of London shopping on her own, something she has never been able to afford to do.

Karl notes that it is significant that Anna chooses the coat and dress in the window at Cohen's despite the variety of dresses available in the shop, arguing that she is actually purchasing the fantasy of a new life. Anna is responding to her perception that the shop windows are "sneering" at her by buying the clothes they are presenting as the ideal image of an English lady. Anna believes that looking like a lady will allow her to be perceived as one, and that this will afford her the social mobility Hester dreams of for her: "This is a beginning. Out of this warm room that smells of fur I'll go to all the lovely places I've ever dreamt of. This is the beginning" (Rhys 16). Despite buying the exact clothing in the window in order to imitate the advertised version of a proper English lady, Anna is not perceived that way by her landlady, who, upon Anna's return, evicts her for being a tart. Karl observes that: "Though they wear identical dresses, Cohen's mannequin isn't deemed a tart" (32). She reads this difference as the result of Anna's failure to stay within the bounds of "English sexual purity," but I would contend that it is also a result of Anna's colonial status and her resulting exclusion from the category "lady" because of her racial "impurity." When she evicts Anna, the landlady accuses her of having a "drawly voice," recalling Hester's references to Anna's accent, which sounded more

like Francine's than Hester's "English lady's voice." Anna's "vulgar accent," as Orwell puts it, gives her away, despite her fancy clothes.

Anna not only wants her clothes to present ideal English femininity, she wants her body to do so, and she considers buying a product that would, according to the advertisements, make her breasts more appealing. In the dressing room of her music hall show Anna, comparing her body to the women around her, thinks about how she differs from the ideal and what she might be able to do to conform: "my collar bones stick out in my first act dress. There's something you can buy that makes your neck fat. Venus Carnis. 'No fascination without curves. Ladies, realize your charms'" (Rhys 9). Venus Carnis was a real patent medicine marketed to lift and enlarge the breasts. Patent medicines—proprietary "remedies" concocted by pharmacists that were "neither legally patented nor clinically proven to cure disease"—became quite popular in Britain in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, thanks in large part to their use of advertising. Prior to this advertisements were rarely used, and were considered an indication of an inferior product. Patent medicine producers were innovators in advertising strategies, and the industry was central to the proliferation of advertisements for consumer products of all kinds (O'Reilly). Through Anna's desire to buy Venus Carnis, Rhys is drawing the reader's attention to the power of advertising, a relatively new phenomenon, and the belief it can engender that buying a particular product allows one to embody cultural expectations of beauty—at a price, of course.



In this case, beauty means having curves in the right places, which the “medicine” promises to deliver. And having curves means being “fascinating,” presumably to men.<sup>4</sup> In order to be successful in the theatre the chorus girls have to be visually appealing, which requires them to have a particular look determined by English cultural norms and reinforced by advertisements. The Venus Carnis advertisement proclaims one body type as desirable, echoing the popularity of mass-produced commodities. Anna’s nonconformity to this body type further identifies her as a marginal figure. She wishes to integrate herself into this ideal English femininity through a consumer act, but is not able to because of her income: “But it costs three guineas and where can I get three guineas?” (Rhys 9). Three guineas are worth about 60 shillings, or almost two weeks’ wages, putting this particular consumer promise out of reach for Anna.

Despite her lack of curves, Anna is nevertheless positioned in the novel as a mass-produced commodity by Walter’s friend Mr. Jones and by the other girls in the chorus of her show. When Anna first meets Walter he asks how old she is and she tells him she’s eighteen. Mr. Jones remarks: “He knew you’d be eighteen or twenty-two. You girls have only two ages. You’re eighteen and so of course your friend’s twenty-two. Of course” (Rhys 7). This not only signals to the reader that these men are in the habit of picking up young women, and that they seek out a particular type, but also that they see the women as interchangeable, lacking their own

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<sup>4</sup> The word “charms” in the Venus Carnis slogan, which seems to have been imagined by Rhys, is also worth noting. The same word was used in Anna’s memory of the women in Dominica selling salt fishcakes on Market Street. Rhys is drawing a parallel between the fishcakes, a product of mixed colonizer/colonized origins, being sold for literal consumption, and Anna, also a “product” of mixed origins who would like to be “charming” in order to become a desirable commodity for consumption.

identities. People are also constantly forgetting Anna's name; all of the girls in the chorus refer to her as either "the Hottentot" or "the Virgin." These nicknames, which also allude to Anna's mixture of virginity and sexual availability, underscore the way Anna is perceived as lacking unique subjectivity, a perception that she both seeks to reinforce (through her desire for clothing and body modification that will allow her to align with the homogenous ideal) and resist.

Anna's resistance is subtle and perhaps not even conscious, but it is apparent to the reader. Immediately following the passage about Venus Carnis is a description of Dominica, but it's a description that uses only the language of the colonizer and does not mention the island's name. Although the novel is narrated in the first person through Anna's consciousness, this short passage seems only to be filtered through—not originating from—her, and gives the reader Christopher Columbus' observations of Dominica, not Anna's. Many critics, including Karl, assert that Anna is from an unnamed island in the Caribbean, but Dominica's coordinates are given, followed by an unattributed quotation from Columbus' description of the island to the king of Spain in 1493 (Thacker 211): "Lying between 15°10' and 15°40' N. and 61°14' and 61°30' W. 'A goodly island and something highland but all overgrown with woods'" (Rhys 9). Rhys' omission of the name of the island and Anna's memory of Columbus' description of its position from the point of view of the colonizer, suggesting a parallel with the way that Anna herself is defined in the terms of the colonizers in London. Snaith points out that Anna "seems to come from an invisible place (hence the unnamed island). As her

friend Maudie puts it: ‘She was born in a hot place. She was born in the West Indies or somewhere’” (Snaith 77). In contrast, Columbus’ description of Dominica is immediately succeeded by Anna’s memory of her arrival in England, which is narrated in a stream of consciousness style and very clearly represents Anna’s direct observations and thoughts about her new home:

This is England Hester said and I watched it through the train-window divided into squares like pocket-handkerchiefs [...] I had read about England ever since I could read—smaller meaner everything is never mind—this is London—hundreds of thousands of white people white people rushing along and the dark houses all alike frowning down one after another all alike [...]—oh I’m not going to like this place I’m not going to like this place I’m not going to like this place (Rhys 9).

Anna’s perceptions of London reflect her resistance to its ordered homogeneity. The style of the passage, with its lack of punctuation and breathless stream of impressions that stumble over and interrupt each other, reinforce this resistance. Anna’s observations unfavorably contrast Dominica’s wildness—it’s “all overgrown with woods”—to England’s ordered division of land into “squares like pocket-handkerchiefs.” Anna is also concerned about the crowds of undifferentiated white people and the houses, which are “all alike.” Although she later tries to integrate herself into this ordered, homogenous society through her acts of consumption, Anna mourns the loss of the individual subjectivity afforded her in Dominica.

Despite her sense of loss, Anna's livelihood is dependent on her ability to suppress her individuality and become like all of the other English girls. Aligning her performance of femininity with English cultural ideals of beauty and ladylike behavior allows her to position herself as a marketable commodity. There are, however, two contrasting things about Anna that make her particularly appealing in the sexual economy: her virginity, which makes her a new and novel commodity in an economy that values novelty, and her Creole identity, which associates her with hyper-sexuality and sexual availability. Although much scholarly attention has been paid to Anna's sexual availability<sup>5</sup>, the importance of her virginity to her value in the sexual economy, with the exception of readings of the Bourne's cocoa ad as an allusion to Anna's sexual purity, has garnered much less critical attention.

The importance of virginity not only to Anna's value as a commodity but also to English culture in general is signaled by a print on the wall of the "swanky" rooms Walter rents for Anna: "Cherry Ripe" hangs over the washstand. "Cherry Ripe" is an 1880 portrait of a little girl by John Everett Millais, originally published in the *Graphic*, a popular illustrated London newspaper. The girl is white, with light hair and eyes, rosy cheeks, wearing a white dress and hat. Mass-produced prints of the portrait were made available for sale and were extremely popular, and many critics have claimed that this popularity was a result of the portrait's promotion of a virginal image of English middle-class femininity:

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<sup>5</sup> Critics tend to focus, in particular, on Anna's nickname "the Hottentot," and on the intertextual allusion to Zola's *Nana* (see footnote 1). For an excellent gloss of the "Hottentot" nickname, see Murdoch (2003).

Clearly this pretty child in old-fashioned dress is meant to embody the positive attitudes of English culture. Her benign, Madonna-like presence [...] spreads peace and goodness across savage and civilized lands (Laurel Bradley, quoted in Reis 201).

Judy Suh claims that “Cherry Ripe” is just one of many advertisements and pictures referred to throughout the novel that represent the culture to which Anna is supposed to aspire to belong. Suh sees these images as “enticing, colorful distractions [...] emotional havens distant from [London’s] alienating cityscapes” (99). I would argue that Anna does not view “Cherry Ripe” as an image of “comfort and care,” as Suh claims, but as a reminder of her failure to embody the identity that is being pressed on her, and of her place in the sexual economy.

Pamela Reis argues that in addition to the values of English femininity, the portrait also conveys an unmistakable erotic subtext of sexual availability. Although portraits of this type were common at the time, Reis argues that it is this subtext that made “Cherry Ripe” so popular. In addition to the visual clues she describes as support for her reading, Reis also points the viewer to the title of the portrait: “because the word ‘cherry’ meant young girl and also referred to the hymen and virginity, Millais’ title announces, none-too-subtly, that the little girl, like the cherries, is ripe and ready to be plucked” (Reis 203). The presence of this portrait in Anna’s room is significant because it recalls the wishes of Anna’s family that she should “embody the positive attributes of English culture” just like the girl in the portrait. She should, in other words, erase all traces of difference in order to imitate

this mass-produced image of white, middle-class English femininity. At the same time, the portrait refers to her sexual availability as well as her child-like nature and virginity (she is called a child, especially by men, throughout the novel). The display of these attributes together makes her a particularly attractive sexual commodity, just as it made “Cherry Ripe” popular in homes across England.

Walter repeatedly references Anna’s virginity in the beginning of the novel, saying it’s the “only thing that matters” (Rhys 22). The fact that chorus girls in Anna’s show call her “the virgin” highlights how unusual it was for a girl in a music hall show to be sexually inexperienced and also positions Anna as an outsider—both by calling her this nickname and forgetting her name, and by drawing attention to her lack of experience in the sexual economy in which many of them circulate. Laurie Gaynor, one of the more successful and worldly women in the chorus, says to Anna after Walter invites her to dinner at “an awfully swanky club” for their first date: “Tell him to borrow the club tin-opener. Say ‘P.S. Don’t forget the tin-opener’” (Rhys 10). Pinkerton suggests that this enigmatic remark is meant to imply that Anna’s intact (virginal) body “amounts to little more than an airtight tin that will soon have its chaste contents consumed” (103-104). Though he is interested in references to Anna’s sexual purity and their relation to the religious imagery in the novel, this reading also points to Anna’s status as both a commodity and a marginalized figure. After making the tin-opener remark, Laurie says that she’s teaching Anna etiquette, implying that she’s explaining to Anna that when a man takes her out to a nice dinner it’s good manners to have sex with him; dinner at a

“swanky” club is the price of her virginity. Laurie is laying out the terms of the sexual economy for Anna who, being both a virgin and an outsider in terms of nationality and social status (which, recalling my earlier argument, is distinct from class, since Anna shares class struggles with the other chorus girls), does not understand them.

Comparing her to a tin also positions Anna as a mass-produced commodity, and not a very valuable one. Pinkerton points out that once Walter “opens” the metaphorical tin the contents will start to spoil and Anna’s value as a commodity in the sexual economy will begin to decrease. After Walter leaves her, Anna picks up a succession of men who are positioned progressively lower in the social hierarchy, and therefore pay her less and less. Without her virginity Anna is no longer a novelty and therefore less desirable. Paradoxically, Anna must conform to expectations of middle-class femininity in order to be an attractive commodity, but she must transgress the attendant sexual constraints in order to deliver on her promise to her consumer. This, however, decreases her value as a commodity, and precipitates Anna’s descent into amateur prostitution and her resulting abortion.

Karl contends that Anna’s “wretchedness” at the end of the novel is a result of her failure to “adopt a social and sexual discipline on the marketplace’s terms.” This failure is inevitable, according to Karl, because Anna’s “undisciplined” sexuality is unassimilable into the “material regimes that the marketplace obscures” (34). This argument can be productively extended to include an analysis of Anna’s marginal class and race statuses, which are glossed over in Karl’s focus on

Anna's sexual (im)purity. Anna's resistance is also, once again, obscured in this reading. Karl frames Anna's undisciplined nature as it is perceived by the dominant culture, and though her view is sympathetic it fails to account for the important possibility that Anna is "undisciplined" as a result of intentional cultivation of subjectivity that resists normative identity categories.

An examination of Anna's reaction to an advertisement that appears near the end of the novel will help to illuminate the ways that a more fully intersectional analysis of the text, like the one I undertake in this study, can broaden our understanding of Anna's position in the market economy and account for her limited—but existent—agency within that system. The passage is worth quoting at length:

The white furniture, and over the bed the picture of the dog sitting up begging—*Loyal Heart*. I got into bed and lay there looking at it and thinking of that picture advertising the Biscuits Like Mother Makes, as Fresh in the Tropics as in the Motherland, Packed in Airtight Tins, which they stuck up on a hoarding at the end of Market Street.

There was a little girl in a pink dress eating a large yellow biscuit [...] and a little boy in a sailor-suit trundling a hoop, looking back over his shoulder at the little girl. There was a tidy green tree and a shiny pale-blue sky [...]. And a high, dark wall behind the little girl. [...]

But it was the wall that mattered. And that used to be my idea of what England was like. 'And it is like that, too,' I thought (Rhys 91).



The themes I have been discussing—imperial capitalism and norms of white middle-class femininity in England—are all represented in this advertisement. English consumer capitalism looms over the local economy, literally, on a billboard on Market Street. The biscuits, “like mother makes,” are positioned as a product of the maternal domestic sphere, a manifestation of ideal femininity, from which Anna is excluded by her abortion, which she undergoes due to social policing of her “undisciplined” sexuality. The dubious claim that the biscuits are as “fresh in the tropics as in the motherland” recalls Anna’s family’s expectation that she wear wool stockings in the Dominican summer heat without sweating. The fact that they are packed in “airtight tins” evokes Laurie Gaynor’s remark about the club tin-opener, thus bringing to mind sexual purity. The biscuits, then, are meant to bring the ideals of British femininity to Dominica. This is underscored by the fact that the face of the product is a young white girl, not unlike the girl in “Cherry Ripe,” who, in consuming this emblem of domesticity, freshness, and purity, attracts the attention of a boy. The boy is dressed in clothing that recalls the military, which is representative of the nation, thus emphasizing that internalizing and displaying the correct feminine characteristics garners the approval and desire of British men.

The “high, dark wall” behind the little girl denotes Anna’s exclusion from the English middle-class femininity depicted in the advertisement. Just before this scene, Anna considers renting a hotel room but knows she can’t get one without any luggage because of the assumption of sexual impropriety. She imagines the hotel staff sneering at her: “The damned way they look at you and their damned voices,

like high, smooth, unclimbable walls all round you, closing in on you. And nothing to be done about it either” (90). These walls, like the one in the advertisement, bar Anna from entering a space she wants access to, and she realizes that there’s nothing she can do to change that. Suh, in her reading of the biscuit advertisement, argues that the wall “expresses a xenophobic fear of contamination, [...] exclusivity that signals not protection but a means of imprisonment” (103). Anna’s declaration that England “is like that, too” is not a confirmation of the idealized representation of British life presented by the advertisement, but of the unclimbable wall which excludes her from that life. Anna has become, over the course of the novel, increasingly aware of the racism, sexism, and classism undergirding the seemingly ordered and respectable surface of British culture.

Her response to this awareness, in the culmination of all of her small acts of resistance throughout the novel, is to shatter the glass in the frame of *Loyal Heart*. Anna associates *Loyal Heart* with the biscuit advertisement and all it represents, so by smashing it she is symbolically smashing the narrow cultural norms by which she is imprisoned. It is worth noting that she breaks the glass by throwing her shoe at it; she uses an article of clothing, the means through which she has been trying to gain access to this culture, in her attempt to demolish it. Much like her failed endeavors to perform English middle-class femininity correctly, her efforts to destroy it are ineffectual. Aside from a brief moment of surprise expressed by the man with whom she is dancing, who protests mildly that they are “making a row,” nothing happens. They go on dancing. Anna, despite her efforts, remains in the

same position in the sexual economy and the culture more generally. Just after this Anna discovers the pregnancy that leads to her near-lethal abortion. She hasn't succeeded in vitiating the system, but it has almost destroyed her.

This act, though unsuccessful, is an unmistakable act of resistance and agency that is very often overlooked by critics, who tend to characterize Anna as a passive victim. Suh, one of the few who recognizes Anna's resistance, claims that her failure is a result of the "limits of individual agency" which particularly apply to Anna because as a white Creole "she has one foot on either side of the imperial divide" (104, 105). Suh then asserts that Anna's "strategy of confrontation" is based on the creation of "a future community of women across races" (105). Although I also read Anna as a character with limited agency due to her colonial status, I think it's both generous and problematic to ascribe a creative sense of transnational solidarity to Anna. It is generous because Anna's resistance, as I have shown, is largely passive. The only exception is when she breaks the glass of the picture, which is an act of destruction, not creation. It is problematic because (leaving aside the larger theoretical challenges to the idea of global sisterhood, which Suh seems to be proposing here), although Anna does identify with the struggles of both black and white working-class women, her interest is not in uniting them, but in undermining the exclusions engendered by specific restrictive norms of English middle-class femininity. Although one of my goals has been to reveal Anna's resistance to oppressive systems, crediting her with the kind of activist

consciousness that Suh seems to want to claim for her seems to me to overshoot the mark.

Similarly, reading Anna as a resistant (but not revolutionary) subject credits Jean Rhys with a social imagination without unjustifiably claiming her for political or social movements into which she does not easily fit. Stella Bowen, the long-term partner of Rhys' first editor Ford Maddox Ford, said that Rhys' work "stood often for a rather feeble and egotistical kind of anarchism without any of the genuine revolutionary spirit which would seem to be the logic of reflective destitution" (Bowen quoted in Pizzichini 182). While it's true that Anna does her best to "get on" in the system as it is and displays no "revolutionary spirit," Rhys' vivid portrayal of the devastating effects of poverty, imperialism, racism and sexism in the life of a marginalized woman contributes to the repair of a broken social system by exposing the cracks through which its most vulnerable fall.

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