Shattering the Gaze Through the Looking-glass: Jean Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark*

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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read Shattering the Gaze Through the Looking Glass: Jean Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark* by Jamie Lynn Fox, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in English: Literature at San Francisco State University.

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Abstract

In Jean Rhys’s novel *Voyage in the Dark*, mirrors play a large role in how the protagonist interacts with the world she inhabits. The novel follows the life of Anna Morgan, an alienated Dominican-born young woman who tries to find her identity in London. Anna (a palindrome, incidentally) finds herself continuously pulled toward the looking glass reflecting on her self-image. The mirror becomes a powerful reflector of Anna’s pain and suffering, exemplifying her troubled view of herself. Thus, the thesis maps the function of the mirror in relation to Anna’s development and how she tries to come to terms with her own identity. The thesis explores how Anna’s multiple interactions with the looking glass change her perception and alter her reality, often blinding her to the paradoxicality of the mirror. The thesis will engage with Charles Horton Cooley’s theory of the “looking-glass self” to demonstrate how Anna’s self-model becomes distorted while inhabiting a space that is dominated by what Laura Mulvey calls the “male gaze.” Finally, the thesis argues that despite these challenges, Anna strengthens her resilience and shatters the glass so she can “start all over again” (Rhys, *Voyage*).
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Introduction

“I can't make things up, I can't invent. I have no imagination. I can't invent character. I don't think I know what character is. I just write about what happened. Not that my books are entirely my life—but almost …”

(Rhys, D.W. 52).

Jean Rhys was a complex individual who experienced tremendous suffering in her lifetime. She was a recluse who often changed her appearance. In her letters, she would write about how unhappy she was. Her novels were not entirely autobiographical but functioned as an extension of herself, and her deeply felt sorrows. In all the pain she endured, Jean Rhys was undeniably one of the greatest modern writers of all time. Lauded as her most autobiographical novel, *Voyage in the Dark* captures the plight of women struggling to find their voice in a world that is dominated by men. Constructed as an extension of the image of Jean Rhys, the protagonist, Anna, mirrors Jean Rhys's own life experience in some ways.

Jean Rhys's oeuvre evidences her fascination with identity and self, both of which are central themes in her novels. Daphna Oyserman, Kristen Elmore, and George Smith describe identity in their chapter “Self, Self-Concept and Identity” in the *Handbook of Self and Identity* as traits, characteristics, social roles, and social groups that define who one is (69). Oyserman, Elmore, and Smith go on to assert that the self is a cognitive structure that includes content, attitudes, and evaluative judgments and is used to make sense of one's environment, and one's goals and protect one's sense of basic worth (72). Rhys understands that an individual is constantly evolving. Depending upon new experiences, traumatic
events, memories, growth, and our environment—identities change over time. One’s identity is never entirely the same throughout one’s lifetime. One of the most complicated questions an individual may ask is, "who am I…now?" Though one may never attain the exact answer to this question, there are many ways to disentangle how one’s identity may be changed, shaped, and developed over time.

_Voyage in the Dark_ follows the life of Anna Morgan, a West Indian woman who, as a teenager, is abandoned and shipped off to England by her stepmother Hester. Both her mother and father are dead, and her uncle wants nothing to do with her, leaving her without any familial support. The narrative is structured in the first-person, often flashing back to her childhood in the Caribbean. Though she describes her past with flowery and olfactory language, she never feels like she belongs. This mirrors Jean Rhys’s sentiment as she writes in _Smile Please_: “I would never belong anywhere, and I knew it, and all my life would be the same, trying to belong and failing . . . I am a stranger and I always will be . . .” (124).

Anna’s identity is in constant flux. Anna “always wanted to be black” because she thought that “being black is warm and gay, [and] being white is cold and sad” (Rhys, _Voyage_ 31). The discontinuity in Anna’s self-hood can be traced back to her past. Anna’s early life was subject to the effects of colonization in the Caribbean. Though she did not experience life like her father’s servant Francine, Anna is a product of colonialism.

Anna, being the daughter of an oppressor, causes a disruption not only in her friendship with Francine but also a rupture within herself. Being rejected costs her a friendship she may have otherwise enjoyed had the circumstances been different. Anna is neither accepted by her motherland nor by English society because of her origins in the West Indies: “She was born in the West Indies or somewhere, weren’t you kid? The girls
call her Hottentot. Isn’t it a shame?” (Rhys, *Voyage* 13). A Hottentot refers to an individual of inferior intellect or culture (Hughes 243). Anna is alienated by the in-betweeness of her homeland and the metropole of England.

The novel's opening lines describe a sensational and emotionally charged atmosphere: "It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost like being born again. The colours were different, the smells different, the feeling things gave you right down inside yourself was different. Not just the difference between heat, cold; light, darkness; purple, grey. But a difference in the way I was frightened and the way I was happy” (Rhys, *Voyage* 7). Being born again, being frightened, being happy, and the oscillations between “I” and “you” capture the many vicissitudes we are about to experience as readers. Anna encompasses the contrast between the Caribbean and England while also conveying the split nature of her identity.

The divisiveness within her is shown with this stark contrast between the two places. On the one hand, she describes the West Indies as an open landscape, “When there was a breeze the sea was millions of spangles . . .” (Rhys, *Voyage* 7) and, on the other hand, her first impression of the English landscape as dreary with “. . . the grey-brown or grey-green sea . . .” (8). Anna continues to use language that conveys the differences between the two places while also presenting the discontinuity in her life—in herself: “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” (8).

Anna’s idealization of the West Indies is, in part, where her unstable sense of self emerges. She fails to recognize that her unhappiness in England is an extension of her life in the West Indies. Though she tries to start a new beginning by “being born again,” she
struggles to part ways with her past. Her past echoes her present circumstances. Jean Rhys herself underlines in her letter to Evelyn Scott in 1934 about *Voyage in the Dark*, “The big idea – well I’m blowed if I can be sure what it is. Something to do with time being an illusion I think. I mean that the past exists – side by side with the present, not behind it; that what was is” (Rhys, *The Letters* 24). For Anna, colonial power is inescapable, making her more susceptible to abuse and manipulation by the men in her environment. From being exiled from her homeland to alienation in England, she finds herself a victim of a male-dominated society.

Her past and present experiences thwart her development, making it difficult for her to stabilize her sense of self. Anna B. Simpson argues, in *Territories of the Psyche: the Fiction of Jean Rhys*, that the split within the Rhysian protagonists is between the “True Self” versus the “False Self.” Simpson suggests a paradox between the False Self and the True Self. She notes that the False Self typically takes the place of the True Self for the wounded individual, causing one to identify solely with this false sense of self. The True Self is then buried underneath this armor, losing sight of who one is. Simpson asserts that the individual will encapsulate their True Self so that the False Self operates to protect the True Self from a harmful environment (50).

Though Simpson’s argument is compelling, the thesis argues that Anna’s sense of self, though unstable, is constantly evolving. Therefore, the true self and false self cannot exist. Because a self-model undergoes continuous evolution as an asymmetric reflexive mapping between the individual and their environment, an individual and their environment evolve together, but the magnitude of change imposed on each other may be of unequal proportion (Bartlett). As the thesis will show, Anna’s selfhood continues to be
influenced by her environment, including those around her. Anna consistently derives meaning from what she believes others are thinking of her. This is supported by both her relationships with her stepmother and Francine. However, this is especially clear in her interactions with the men throughout the novel, in particular Walter Jeffries.

While Anna and Maudie are out one evening, Anna meets Walter, a tall, wealthy white man on whom she begins to depend. This moment in the novel shows the effect Walter has on Anna’s image in the mirror:

There was a fire but the room was cold. I walked up to the looking-glass and put the lights on over it and stared at myself. It was as if I were looking at somebody else. I stared at myself for a long time, listening for the door to open. But I didn’t hear a sound from the next room. There wasn’t a sound from anywhere. When I listened I could only hear a noise like when you hold a shell up to your ear, like something rushing past you. (Rhys, *Voyage 23*)

Leading up to the moment that Anna stares into the looking glass, Walter has made quite an impression on her. He comments about her appearance and self-worth and even tries to have sex with her—all on their first “date.” She is broken—unrecognizable when she reaches her reflection in the mirror. Of course, Anna does not see herself; Walter just spent the evening belittling her and making her feel as though she is small—childlike, dependent, without any agency. Anna has internalized not only what she imagines Walter to perceive of her but what he has said directly to her. This is the first time Anna gazes into the mirror with a judgment of who she is, or who she begins to believe she isn’t. The interaction she has with the looking-glass occurs because she has been met with the “male gaze,” which leads her to what the thesis will later define as—the “looking-glass self.” This moment of
misrecognition demonstrates how influenced she is by the male eye. The stillness of the room and the emptiness she feels is as though she is not even there herself. Both the looking-glass and Walter add to Anna’s vulnerable identity, further rupturing her self-model. As the thesis will show, this is one of many key moments, which reflect how the looking-glass plays a pivotal role in relation to the male gaze, and, at this point, the beliefs Anna holds about herself.

Mirrors serve as a vehicle to self-exposure, and this is how Anna Morgan tries to come to terms with her identity. The looking-glass is embedded throughout the narrative, often changing her reality and distorting her perception of herself. Anna is met with the confusion women experience while inhabiting a space occupied by the patriarchal gaze. The moment Anna meets Walter—the man she falls madly in love with—is the moment her mirror image undergoes drastic change. The male gaze significantly impacts Anna’s self-model, and she is pulled toward what Charles Horton Cooley describes in his theory as the “looking-glass self.” Driven predominately by shame, Anna internalizes the male gaze, causing her identity and her self-image to fracture. The separation between Anna’s identity and her self-image was shown in the aforementioned experience of her inability to recognize herself in the mirror. The thesis will show how the looking-glass self functions in relation to Anna’s self-model. In addition, mirrors play a significant role in how Anna depicts the world she lives in. The thesis maintains that tracing Rhys’s metaphor of the mirror offers deep insights into Anna’s identity and self. The mirror is a powerful reflector, which both exemplifies and exacerbates Anna’s troubled sense of being. The knowledge she gains from the looking-glass causes alienation, generating more pain and suffering.
Mirrors are illusionary as they can distort the truth of everyday life. As a visual device, the looking-glass purports to know the truth, but the left and right are flipped. The image we see also changes depending on our distance from the object. The “truth” that is imagined in the reflection is a distortion. Mirrors are ubiquitous, yet they produce no light on one’s identity because what one sees is a warped reflection of what appears in the real world. The looking-glass plays a game of trickery for the imagination; this leads an individual to believe that the mirror will allow us to see ourselves through the eyes of another. It is not surprising that Charles Horton Cooley uses the mirror image to convey the meaning of his looking-glass theory.

The thesis will address how Cooley’s concept of the looking-glass aligns with how Anna views herself in relation to the men who occupy the space she inhabits—specifically addressing how the male gaze perpetuates her unstable sense of self, trapping her in the looking-glass. In addition to Cooley, the thesis will draw from Erving Goffman’s work to elaborate more on Cooley’s theory. Though Goffman’s work is not the focus of the thesis, his concepts work well in conjunction with Cooley’s. Goffman was devoted to exploring how we, as Cooley mentions, “live in the minds of others” (Cooley, *Human Nature* [1922] 208). In discussing these concepts, the thesis will also draw from Laura Mulvey’s feminist theory to discuss the “male gaze.” The male gaze can be defined as the way a man objectifies and sexualizes a woman’s body through power and domination, much of what is seen in film, literature, and the arts. The thesis does not intend to attach to any one theory of the male gaze. There are various ways to analyze the male gaze, namely through psychoanalytic theory, existentialist feminism, and philosophy (all of which are important and belong in the discussion). Despite their theoretical differences, there is consensus that
most art produced in Euro-American traditions places the “appreciator in a masculine subject position” (Korsmeyer and Weiser). The thesis will draw from what these theorists converge on rather than their differences.

Further, the thesis will give a brief overview of the *Bildungsroman* genre. Though *Voyage in the Dark* is not typically read as a *Bildungsroman*, Anna’s experiences can be read as a coming-of-age story. The traditional *Bildungsroman* focuses on a young male protagonist’s journey through moral and psychological development into adulthood (Maroula Joannou). The reader is introduced to the protagonist, who is striving to reconcile individual aspirations with the interest of society. The reader can access the main character’s psychological development, whose sense of self is in constant flux. In the end, the protagonist overcomes the barriers they face, and they become a part of society. Anna’s arduous journey diverges from the traditional male *Bildungsroman* trajectory as she isn’t offered the same opportunities as the male protagonist. The thesis will engage with an alternative model of the *Bildungsroman* provided by the editors of *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, whose work expands the possibilities available to the female protagonist. The *Bildungsroman* is a fascinating addition to the thesis because, like Cooley and Goffman, it too explores the relationship between the self and society.

The looking-glass self was first introduced by Charles Horton Cooley in 1902 and later elaborated by him in 1922. Cooley was one of the most influential American sociologists of the twentieth century. The looking-glass plays a vital role in Rhys’s novel in relation to social interactions, which is precisely how Cooley evinces his theory. He emphasized the importance of the self in understanding human behavior and, more generally, an understanding of society (Leary and Tangney 2). He brought the notion of the
self to the forefront, promoting the study of perceptions of the self in sociology. Cooley believed that human beings are social and that a significant amount of knowledge comes from our interactions with others, including the concept of oneself (Cooley, *On Self*). He is most famously known for his idea of “the looking-glass self,” which he asserts is a perceptual process that is essential to developing our self-image. This idea encompasses three fundamental proposals: first, how we imagine ourselves to appear to another person; second, how we imagine the judgment of our appearance; and finally, how we feel in response (Cooley, *Human Nature* [1902] 119). The emotions that Cooley discusses concerning perceived judgment are shame and pride, which he calls “self-sentiments.” For Cooley, these feelings occur as a result of self-monitoring. As the thesis argues and Cooley’s theory asserts, Anna’s self-model is based on her perception of her social environment. The mirror acts as a device for self-perception, self-deception, identity, and an altered sense of reality for Anna.

At times, when Anna sees herself in the mirror, she imagines that she sees someone else, and this only occurs once the men make an appearance in the novel. The power of the male gaze transforms Anna’s mirror image, causing Anna to further question her self-model. Walter treats Anna as though she is his sexual conquest. He strips her of her agency, he takes advantage of her, and then he leaves her. However, despite these challenges, Anna’s story can be read as a coming-of-age story, as eventually, she develops a more stable identity.

As the thesis posits, Anna’s multiple interactions with the mirror break her, but when Walter leaves her (after she defies being subservient by burning his hand with a cigarette), there is a shift in her narrative. As the thesis will show, Anna, temporarily frees herself from
the looking glass while becoming a mirror for everyone else. It is through this liminal space that she inches away from the patriarchal gaze. As the thesis argues, Anna persists, and against all odds, she shatters the glass discovering a new reality—a reality born from her gut-wrenching decision to have an abortion so she can “start all over again” (Rhys, Voyage 7).

The thesis will examine how the looking glass magnifies Anna’s distortions, causing her perpetual state of confinement. The first chapter will explore how the male gaze disrupts, distorts, and breaks down Anna’s self-model. The second chapter will focus on Cooley’s “the looking-glass self” and the male gaze to show how these concepts will help formulate a deeper understanding of Voyage in the Dark. Further, the second chapter will provide a brief overview of the Bildungsroman to show how Anna’s experiences influence her individual development.
Chapter 1

He thinks, therefore I am

The “male gaze” was first introduced by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” As the title indicates, the term was initially created to critique film, and many feminist critics and historians soon adopted it in the visual arts and literature. Mulvey uses the term in conjunction with psychoanalytic theory; however, for the purpose of this thesis, we will focus on what it means for women rather than diagnosing the underlying cause of the male gaze. Mulvey asserts, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional objectifiable role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual erotic impact . . .” (19). Though Mulvey is writing about film, this can be applied to Jean Rhys’s portrayal of the men and women in *Voyage in the Dark*. Mulvey points out that women are objectified by men through the erotic gaze. Women’s bodies are defined by and controlled by the interests and values of masculinity. Men play the role of the onlooker, while women are fetishized. Theories of the male gaze iterate how vision, in its mastery, controls the aesthetic object (Korsmeyer 53). Anna Morgan can be seen as the primary aesthetically pleasing object in the novel. The gendered language used by the men conveys their patriarchal power. Anna is consistently treated as though she is a mannequin on display; the clothes she wears and her mannerisms are gazed upon, then frowned upon, early in her relationship with Walter. As Mulvey describes, Anna is injected into the male and female power dynamic where men always play the active role versus the passive role that women must play.
While Anna is trying to formulate a more stable identity, she and Maudie are living in “good rooms” (Rhys, *Voyage* 8); she’s a chorus girl, working at the theater and taking care of herself. She does not yet appear to be consumed by or dominated by the male gaze. As soon as she and Maudie meet Walter and Jones on the street in Southsea, the narrative shifts almost immediately in their presence: “The other looked at me sideways once or twice – very quickly up and down, in that way they have – and then asked where we were going” (Rhys, *Voyage* 11). Interestingly, Anna is fully aware of how men typically gawk at her, though at this moment, she doesn’t let it affect her. She even makes it well-known that she is heading to buy herself some stockings from a shop, presenting herself as an independent woman. But Walter (not even knowing Anna) offers to buy her stockings, taking her autonomy away instantly upon meeting her. Walter’s choice to purchase clothing for Anna is interesting as they are undergarments—hypersexualizing Anna from the start. Korsmeyer and Mulvey argue that the male gaze doesn’t hide its existence, and women are expected to play a passive role—stand still and look pretty for the purposes of male pleasure. This is exactly what Anna does. The moment he offers to buy the stockings and “[she] let[s] him” (Rhys, *Voyage* 11) is the moment her power is stripped away, permitting him to oppress and he essentially “gain[s] control and possession,” of her (Mulvey 21).

Simone de Beauvoir’s monumental book *The Second Sex* analyzes how women become subordinate to men. Though her writing predated Laura Mulvey’s work on the “male gaze,” her ideas are also relevant to Anna’s experience. She captures the essence of being a woman in a society that grooms girls to conform to a male-dominant world—forcing women into passive and object-like roles (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 610). Anna tries to reject the male gaze several times: “I hated them both. You pick up people and then they
are rude to you. The business of picking up people [sic] and then they always imagine they can be rude to you” (Rhys, *Voyage* 13). Something in Anna does recognize their gaze; however, she is easily manipulated by it. The male gaze is a powerful force, and when she slightly backs away from it, she is drawn right back into it: “But when I had had a glass of port I began to laugh too and after that I couldn’t stop. I watched myself in the glass over the mantelpiece, laughing” (Rhys, *Voyage* 13). This is the first time Anna sees herself in the mirror, and this is where the looking glass starts to warp her reality. The false representation is that she sees herself as happy, but the giggling is just performative for the masculine gaze. As Beauvoir explicates, girls have essentially been conditioned to perform for the man’s desire.

As Beauvoir describes, Anna turns into the passive object ingrained in her by society. Beauvoir writes, “But the fact is that her resignation comes not from any predetermined inferiority: on the contrary, it is that which gives rise to all her insufficiencies; that resignation has its source in the adolescent girl’s past, in the society around her, and particularly in the future assigned to her” (329). The male-dominated societal order has heavily influenced how women grow up and become dependent on obtaining validation from men. This is especially difficult for Anna as she comes from a background of control and patriarchal rule. Part of Anna understands how the men have created a hierarchical order between her and Maudie. However, she can’t resist submitting to Walter because now she is “[o]ppressed and submerged, [and] she becomes a stranger to herself because she is a stranger to the rest of the world” (Beauvoir 574). Beauvoir underlines how women subordinate to men do not recognize themselves in a society that only sees women as “the Other.” When Anna peers into the looking glass, she sees a different version of herself, a
face that doesn’t align with how she felt moments before. A face that poses for him, making her the perfect surrogate for the spectator’s gaze. As Beauvoir notes, young girls will try to find their identity, but in a world that has trained them to be subjective to the oppressor, they will maintain sexual desirability rather than agency (572).

The intimate interaction with her mirror image casts doubts on Anna’s first impression of Walter. The other face in the mirror splits her, causing a fickle and fractured response:

“You got off with your bloke,” Maudie said. “Mine was a bit of a no good . . .”

“. . . I didn’t like either of them,” I said.

“You gave your address pretty quick, though,” Maudie said.

(Rhys, Voyage 15)

The patriarchal influence is so strong that Anna’s standards for herself change. She presents with confusion reinforcing an unstable identity in the presence of Walter. Anna is split in two because she wants agency on the one hand, but on the other, the gaze is far too domineering. John Berger’s work Ways of Seeing analyzes visual artwork, and he interprets how he believes the male gaze functions. Like Mulvey, he argues that women’s bodies are portrayed as sexualized objects for the male gaze. While analyzing various nude paintings, he postulates, “To be born a woman has been to be born within an allotted and confined space, into keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman’s self being split into two” (56).
Like Beauvoir, Berger outlines how society places women beneath men, and they are born into the idea that they must be passive and serve men. Men constantly coerce women while they exercise power over them. This is highlighted further when Walter does not give Anna a choice in dining with him: “‘Perhaps you would dine with me one evening, Miss Morgan,’ he said. ‘Will you give me an address that’ll find you, so that we can fix it up?’” (Rhys, *Voyage* 15). He rhetorically asks about taking her to dinner before cornering her into giving him her address. The looking glass acts as the vessel to her conflicting identity, limiting her reality and disempowering her, so she does as he asks and gives him the address. Both the mirror and Walter lure Anna in. The male gaze proves to be an endless mechanical repetition of control.

Walter’s authority morphs Anna into something other than what she was before meeting him. After he captures her in his gaze and makes comments about her clothing, she begins to obsess about her appearance: “‘Do you always wear black?’ he said. ‘I remember you were wearing a black dress when I saw you before’” (Rhys, *Voyage* 19). Walter is a dictator working toward minimizing her existence into an inferior position. His objectification of Anna carries significant consequences for her: “I liked the room and the red carnations on the table and the way he talked and his clothes – especially his clothes. It was a pity about my clothes, but anyway they were black” (Rhys, *Voyage* 35). For a moment, Anna turns her gaze toward Walter. Thinking about the way he is talking and the clothes he is wearing, almost mimicking his gaze. However, unlike how he feels about her, she thinks highly of him; it is as though she is lifting him up, in contrast to him putting her down. She starts to internalize his discourse about her black dress. For example, if Anna had felt her black dress was such a pity, she would not have worn it to this fancy dinner she
knew she would be attending with Walter. He says some moments later, “You looked awfully pathetic when you were choosing those horrible stockings so anxiously” (Rhys, *Voyage* 35). Consequently, he alters the way she views herself. Her thoughts further capture how the masculine eye beholds her when she imagines walking past the shop windows:

> 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 to have 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. And the shop-windows sneering and smiling in your face. And then you look at the skirt of your costume, all crumpled in the back. And your hideous underclothes. You look at your hideous underclothes and you think, “All right, I’ll do anything for good clothes. Anything – anything for good clothes.” (Rhys, *Voyage* 25)

Anna’s thoughts crystalize under the force of the male gaze; it is the male gaze that makes her want pretty clothes. The male gaze doesn’t just want beauty; the patriarchal gaze wants to control what a woman wears, how a woman feels, and how a woman thinks. Men want women to be everything they want them to be. His language disempowers her, and the reflection in the window mimics this new mirror image she has of herself. The sneering she sees has interiorized into her self-model. His comments about her “awful stockings” blend in with her language, “your hideous underclothes.” The reflection in the window becomes so distorted that she is once again unrecognizable, dressed up in a costume—not herself. She will do anything to make herself feel whole again; she will lose herself to soften his gaze.
Berger explains that “[m]en survey women before treating them. Consequently, how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated” (57). Walter first perceives Anna as “pathetic” and “anxious,” which is how he treats her from the beginning. As a result, she views herself just the same. Further, Berger analyzes a piece of Tintoretto’s artwork: Susanna and the Elders, a painting of a nude woman looking at herself in a mirror. Berger analyzes how the woman looking in the mirror takes on the spectator’s gaze. He notes that the mirror functions as a way “. . . to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight” (Berger 63). When Anna sees the sight of herself, she thinks she is hideous and laughable because she internalizes his penetrating gaze.

Further, while she and Walter are being driven in a taxi, Anna continuously checks her mirror: “I got the glass out of my handbag and looked at myself every time the taxi passed a street-lamp. It’s soppy always to look sad. Funny stories – remember some, for God’s sake” (Rhys, *Voyage* 35). Here, the compulsion to look at herself while next to Walter in the taxi, further demonstrates how much he influences her self-worth. Walter has planted his thoughts into Anna’s mind so much that she starts to carry his gaze around with her. The pocket mirror reflects to her what Walter sees, and the language she uses parallels Walter’s own words on their previous affair: “Don’t look so sad . . . He said, ‘Come on, let’s go, for God’s sake’” (Rhys, *Voyage* 24). Both the looking glass and Walter control Anna’s thoughts, both taking on the role of the spectator’s gaze. Anna is continuously defined by and controlled by Walter’s gaze.

Mulvey and Berger attune us to the visual arts, which helps to demonstrate how the male gaze functions in relation to hypersexualizing a woman’s body. Another comparison that links a woman’s body to art and the representation of the male gaze is the 2004 catalog
“The Flower as Image.” The exhibition was at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, which compared flowers to the female body. Suggesting that perhaps flowers draw attention to the male gaze, it is noted that “[f]easting one's eyes on the beauty of flowers is an uncomplicated, easily accessible pleasure. The visual act can be repeated ad lib, and like pornography it has no other purpose than the pleasure itself. Flowers are pure eye-candy” (Holm et al. 66). Historically, flowers in literature and the arts have had a wealth of meaning, mainly female and sexual associations (Holm et al. 66).

Throughout the novel, Anna has several encounters with images of flowers, namely moments which include Walter in some way. The first time Walter and Anna have dinner, she mentions that she “saw the shadows of the carnations,” (Rhys, *Voyage* 21), and once they get back to his room, she says, “I liked the room and the red carnations on the table” (22). As the carnations transform from their shadow to red, they evoke a feeling of sexuality, as red is seductive, desirable, and sensual. Anna says, “My arms hung straight down by my sides awkwardly. He kissed me again, and his mouth was hard, and I remembered him smelling the glass of wine and I couldn’t think of anything but that, and I hated him. ‘Look here, let me go’, I said” (22). When the intimacy fails, Anna mentions the carnations a third time: “There were red carnations on the table and the fire leaping up. I thought, ‘If it could all go back and be just as it was before it happened and then happen differently’” (23). Walter perpetually treats Anna as though she is a sexual object. This emphasis shows the close relationship between a woman’s body in comparison to the flower. As Annette Stott points out in her article “Floral Femininity: A Pictorial Definition,” flowers are strategically placed in paintings of women to convey how both flowers and women are equally passive (Stott 61–77). Stott goes on to say that “[n]ineteenth century literature, from Thorstein
Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) to ladies’ magazines and advice manuals, clearly reveal that the feminine woman was expected to assume such a passive, ornamental social role” (Stott 62). Objects and passivity are easily expressed through women and flowers, as both are decorative for the masculine gaze.

Anna’s physiological response to Walter’s touch is a response to the way he objectifies her. This is one of the moments that Anna tries to reject the male gaze. Anna’s fixation and repetitive mention of the carnations correlate with the idea that flowers and women are ornamental, sexualized objects. Unfortunately for Walter, (this time) his fantasy of deflowering Anna (a euphemism for taking one’s virginity) is unsuccessful. The next time flowers appear is when Anna receives a letter, and presumably a bouquet of violets, from Walter. In his book *The Culture of Flowers*, Jack Goody explains the symbolic meaning of flowers and how flowers are valued in religion. During medieval Europe, the arts and literature visualized the Virgin Mary sometimes as a rose, often white in a garden without thorns. However, the Virgin was also seen as a lily and a violet (156). The idea of violets alluding to the Virgin Mary again ties into this idea of Anna being a purely pleasurable sexual object for Walter. His only interest in Anna is to control her into having sex with him, so he can fulfill the ultimate fantasy of taking a woman’s virginity. As Mulvey highlights of the spectator, Walter, too, doesn’t hide his gaze, and this is further underscored when he explicitly says that virginity is the only thing that matters:

> Then [Walter] started talking about my being a virgin and it all went – the feeling of being on fire – and I was cold.

> “Why did you start about that?” I said. “What’s it matter? Besides, I’m not a virgin if that’s what’s worrying you.”
“You oughtn’t tell lies about that.”

“I’m not telling lies, but it doesn’t matter anyway,” I said. “People have made it all up.”

“Oh yes, it matters. It’s the only thing that matters.” (Rhys, Voyage 36)

Walter’s obsession with Anna’s virginity is entrenched in male ownership. The way Walter idealizes virginity is linked exclusively to controlling her body. Before Walter has sex with Anna (arguably prior to raping her), he further corrodes her identity.

“I must go,” I thought. “Where’s the door? I can’t see the door. What’s happened?” It was as if I were blind.

He wiped my eyes very gently with his handkerchief, but I kept saying, “I must go, I must go.” Then we were going up another flight of stairs and I walked softly. “Crawling up the stairs at three o’clock in the morning,” she said. Well, I’m crawling up the stairs.

I stopped. I wanted to say, “No, I’ve changed my mind.” But he laughed, squeezed my hand, and [he] said, “What’s the matter? Come on, be brave,” and I didn’t say anything, but I felt cold and as if I were dreaming. (Rhys, Voyage 37)

Walter coerces Anna to go upstairs so he can do as he pleases with her body. He is fully aware that she is uncomfortable having sex with him because she keeps repeating phrases that “[she] must go.” He can see that she is afraid and crying, but he does not listen to her; he “wipe[s] [her] eyes very gently,” as though this gesture is good enough. Anna, while panicking, stops herself from continuing to walk up the stairs, and he forces her to keep
going, even taking a moment to laugh at her. Anna’s physiological response is a combination of fear and dissociation. Her body temperature changing and the feeling of being in a dream are both a response to trauma. This is the same response most women would have when their body is being taken over by a male. Walter achieves his long fantasy of possession, taking from her what is known to be sacred. Anna, forgoing her agency, looks in the mirror and says to Walter, “I don’t like your looking-glass” (Rhys, *Voyage 37*).

Anna doesn’t like the new version of herself reflected in his mirror. She has fallen victim to the entitlement that Walter believes he has over a woman’s body. Anna has been treated like an easy sexual conquest and, due to being raped, loses herself in the looking glass. Patricia Moran notes that “[s]uch emotionally and physically violent scenes pervade Rhys’s fictions, . . . [such as] the ‘date rape’ that inaugurates Anna’s downward spiral into prostitution in *Voyage in the Dark* . . .” (Moran, Patricia 115). After Walter is done with her body, he reaches into her purse and slips her money, taking even more ownership of her. As Moran underscores, Anna’s self-model is broken down further after her traumatizing experience with Walter, leading her to a distorted view of herself.

Throughout this chapter, the thesis has traced how the male gaze impinges upon Anna’s self-model. The mirror image she has of herself changes based on the way Walter manipulates her. Her interactions with the mirror play a significant role in distorting her perception of herself because of the way Walter objectifies her. He treats her as though she is his sexual prop. He is controlling and belittling, making her feel unworthy while also taking advantage of her. The male gaze has proven to foster a broken-down version of Anna’s already vulnerable identity.
The following chapter will examine how Anna internalizes the male gaze through the concept of the “looking-glass self.” The thesis will investigate how Charles Horton Cooley’s theory helps us to understand Anna’s multifaceted identity. The thesis will show how the male gaze turns Anna toward the looking-glass self, which in turn causes her an immense amount of shame and suffering.
Chapter 2

“I am who I think you think I am”

This chapter will focus on the role of mirrors, the looking-glass self, and the male gaze, exploring how they foster Anna's view of herself. The thesis will use Charles Horton Cooley’s looking-glass self as a framework to help us understand the vulnerabilities of Anna’s identity. The thesis will also look at Erving Goffman’s ideas which align with Cooley's in that they both understand how society plays an integral role in how individuals perceive themselves. Both Cooley and Goffman’s work will help us develop a deeper understanding of Anna as a character. Further, the chapter will draw from the *Bildungsroman* genre to illustrate how Anna's character develops. Anna breaks free from hegemony after making a life-altering decision, a decision that pushes back against the male gaze and formulates a more coherent self-model—making her story a coming-of-age narrative.

Charles Cooley was one of the most influential sociologists of the twentieth century, and he is most well-known for his looking-glass self concept. However, he is also known for demonstrating a vision of sociology during a time when sociological theorizing and writing were not as professionalized and fixed as they are today (Junco and Baptiste Brossard). Cooley envisioned a sociology that encompassed the imagination while integrating psychology and sociology to understand the human condition. In doing so, Cooley’s theories exhibit that human behavior is a social process from which the self emerges. Cooley’s formulations were heavily influenced by the American psychologist and philosopher William James. James believed that individuals have socially multiple selves, and Cooley follows this sentiment in his writing. There is a strong correlation between this
idea and the multiplicity we see in Anna; she tends to change her identity and behaviors based on her environment. Cooley notes: “A separate individual is an abstraction unknown to experience, and so likewise is society when regarded as something apart from individuals” (Cooley, Human Nature [1902] 22). Cooley highlights how socially integrated the self is. People develop their sense of self due to social processes, not apart from them. That is to say that individuals cannot intimately view themselves without looking at the social environment in which they have a position (Junco and Baptiste Brossard 20). Using Cooley’s ideas, we can further elucidate how the male gaze and the looking-glass self shape the way Anna behaves in her environment.

Cooley coined the looking-glass self based on his observations of human behavior and first introduced this concept in his book Human Nature and the Social Order published in 1902. Central to his idea is one’s dependence on their social self and how one believes one may be viewed by others. Cooley writes:

As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another’s mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it. (96)

This is to say that our self-concept depends upon our social self or social identity. The ideas and feelings that an individual has of themselves are developed in response to their perception of how others in their immediate environment view them. This is true in the way that Anna depicts her appearance. Walter taps into Anna’s self-conscious emotions, and what she believes he sees impacts how she feels:
I was wondering if I looked all right, because I hadn’t had time to dry my hair properly. I was so nervous about how I looked that three-quarters of me was in a prison, wandering round and round in a circle. If he had said that I looked all right or that I was pretty, it would have set me free. But he just looked me up and down and smiled. (Rhys, *Voyage 76*)

This moment captures the notion of the looking-glass self. According to Cooley, an individual will imagine how they are perceived by another; then, they will observe themselves depending on the assessment. This will manifest into thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about what they imagine another’s perception to be, which in turn affects how they judge themselves. When Anna internalizes what she believes Walter is thinking of her, she becomes trapped. She, as Cooley offers, is living in the mind of Walter. She becomes imprisoned by her thoughts while also becoming captive to the imagined thoughts she perceives him to have of her. Walter, in a sense, becomes her mirror; just as the mirror traps her in its frame, she is trapped in the prison cell of his mind. On several occasions, Walter portrays Anna as inadequate, so the male gaze continues to hold her hostage. This is one of the various moments that capture the idea of both the male gaze and Cooley’s looking-glass self. She has become accustomed to how the male gaze analyzes and judges her regularly, so she internalizes this view, even when Walter says nothing.

For Anna, her image of herself changes based on the vision she understands others, mainly Walter, to have of her. The mental processes that she goes through are a direct result of her social interactions. The theory of the male gaze and the looking-glass self explain how Anna’s identity changes over time. As Cooley argues, “The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the
imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind. This is evident from the fact that the character and weight of that other, in whose mind we see ourselves, makes all the difference with our feeling” (Cooley, *Human Nature* [1902] 96). Anna continuously relies on what she imagines herself to be through the eyes of the male gaze. Consequently, the patriarchal gaze leads her down the path of shame.

Walter has made it clear to Anna that men dominate the social order and that women are secondary in status. So, because of his power, his beliefs become significant to Anna’s belief system of herself. The idea of the looking-glass self entails that we are influenced by how others perceive us and that we cannot see ourselves without this looking-glass concept. The looking-glass self is composed of various forms of feedback from others that are imagined, replayed, and distorted through the internal conversation (Junco and Baptiste Brossard 20). Anna’s looking-glass self is a product of the male gaze, and Walter plays an active role in shaping how Anna thinks about herself.

Various dimensions of Anna’s self-model have transformed since meeting Walter. When she thinks about what she sees in Walter’s looking glass, we get a glimpse of how much she has changed since meeting him: “I would think about when he made love to me and walk up and down thinking about it; and that I hated the looking-glass in his room – it made me look so thin and pale” (Rhys, *Voyage* 40). On the one hand, being with Walter makes her physically ill; on the other hand, she imagines that Walter loves her. Part of her conceptualizes how this relationship is causing her harm, while the other part obsesses over the love she so desperately believes he has for her. The duality within her reveals itself to the reader though Anna cannot, at this point, realize how much she is metamorphizing:

“What have you done to yourself?” Maudie said.
“You look different. I’d have been round to see you before, but I’ve been away. You’ve done something to your hair, haven’t you? It’s lighter.”

I said, “Yes, I’ve had henna shampoos. Do you like it?”

“In a way I do,” Maudie said. “It’s not bad.” (Rhys, *Voyage* 43)

Anna changing her appearance underscores how Walter has caused Anna enough self-doubt that she feels the need to assimilate to his standards. This is a significant moment because it illustrates how even Maudie notices the difference in Anna. Richard Harvey Brown, in his discussion of Cooley’s looking-glass self, writes, “We are shown that our response to the mirror’s reflection is in terms of what we think others would think of that image. Hence the metaphor is shown to be more fitting than we initially perceive; our selves really are looking-glass selves, and not the sui generis entities we usually (literally) imagine them to be” (Brown 110). This captures the further deterioration of Anna’s already unstable identity. Presumably, Anna looked at herself in the looking-glass after coloring her hair and thought about how someone (most likely Walter) would approve or disapprove of her lighter-colored hair. Hair is a powerful symbol of one’s identity. Anthony Synnott, in his article “Shame and glory: A Sociology of Hair” notes that “. . . changes in hair are rapid and ubiquitous and express not only status change, but also ideological differences and changes in many spheres of social life” (410). This could be a way for Anna to imagine that she is of a different social class now that she is sleeping with Walter. However, Synnott also mentions that blonde hair is a sex symbol (410). This is especially interesting as Anna has become Walter’s sexual object. Anna is defining herself through the eyes of Walter, even by the color of her hair, and presumably not only in the way of social status but through servitude. Both the male gaze and the looking-glass self are simultaneously working side by side.
As Cooley notes, “we live in the minds of others without knowing it” (Cooley, *Human Nature* [1922] 208). Cooley believed that intersubjectivity is deeply embedded within society:

As is the case with other feelings, we do not think much of it so long as it is moderately and regularly gratified. Many people of balanced mind and congenial activity scarcely know that they care what others think of them, and will deny, perhaps with indignation, that such care is an important factor in what they are and do. But this is illusion [sic]. If failure or disgrace arrives, if one suddenly finds that the faces of men show coldness or contempt instead of the kindliness and deference that he is used to, he will perceive from the shock, the fear, the sense of being outcast and helpless, that he was living in the minds of others without knowing it, just as we daily walk the solid ground without thinking how it bears us up. (Cooley, *Human Nature* [1902] 107)

Cooley highlights that many individuals unknowingly judge themselves based on what others may think. Though Cooley only mentions individuals with a “balanced mind,” this passage is also relevant to those with a “wounded mind”, like Anna. Throughout the text, Anna’s language demonstrates how she is affected by those around her. She repeats words and sometimes entire sentences mimicking those in her environment. At other times, she understands that she has changed, but she can’t conceptualize why. Moments after Maudie comments about Anna’s hair; Anna begins to think: “When I remembered living with her it was like looking at an old photograph of myself and thinking, ‘What on earth’s that got to do with me?’” (Rhys, *Voyage* 43). Anna reflects on her recent past as though she is an
entirely different person. Unbeknownst to her, it is Walter that has been so influential in her changing appearance and behaviors. The male gaze has infected her being, causing her identity to fluctuate more so than before she was met with Walters's patriarchal gaze. Cooley’s idea captures how Anna interiorizes Walter’s beliefs as if they are her own, so through the looking-glass self, she materializes into something she cannot recognize. This new perception that she has of herself facilitates her downward spiral.

Walter’s male status plays a large role in Anna’s societal image. He orchestrates an environment that breaks her down; in doing so, he expects she will rely solely on him, and in return, he controls her and her body. Various moments throughout the novel portray Anna as childlike to those around her. When Anna meets Walter and Jones, Jones uses language that implies she is just a child. When the men accuse her of being younger than eighteen, and she wants to prove that she isn’t with her birth certificate, Jones remarks, “No, my dear child, no” (Rhys, *Voyage* 13). Her friend Maudie, moments later, refers to her as a kid: “She was born in the West Indies or somewhere, weren’t you kid?” (Rhys, *Voyage* 13). Moreover, when Anna is out to dinner with Walter, he treats her as though she is a child and cannot make decisions for herself: “‘Wait a minute,’ he said. ‘Don’t drink that’” (Rhys, *Voyage* 19).

These moments are crucial to understanding how Anna starts to see herself differently, childlike, in the mirror. After Walter sends her money and tells her to buy new stockings (again, hypersexualizing Anna’s body), she does as he says. While there, the two women at the shop help to dress Anna: “I held my arms up and the thin one put on the dress as if I were a doll” (Rhys, *Voyage* 19). Anna’s body language mirrors a child being dressed by their custodian and her language about being a doll indicates that what she sees
is a smaller version of herself. Anna goes on to say, “Yes, I like this. I’ll keep it on. But my face in the glass looked small and frightened” (Rhys, *Voyage* 28).

Anna watches herself in the mirror, regressing to childhood. Here, we can see her agency further deteriorating not only because Walter has started to make her dependent on him financially. Because Anna internalizes what her social environment says about her, she morphs into a terrified child. When Anna leaves the shop, she momentarily recognizes that “[t]he streets looked different that day, just as a reflection in the looking-glass is different from the real thing” (Rhys, *Voyage* 29). Again, Anna tries to reject the male gaze, and she, too, tries to reject the looking-glass self. In part, she is self-reflective; she doesn’t want to be a child, she wants freedom, and she doesn’t want to rely on Walter as her sole provider, but she doesn’t yet have the strength to reject the image of herself that Walter has been building. The idea of Anna as a dependent child continues to thwart her autonomy and self-image. When Anna and Walter begin talking about her future, it becomes more apparent that he has stripped her of her agency:

“I want to help you; I want you to get on. You want to get on, don’t you?”

“I don’t know, [Anna] said.”

“But my dear, how do you mean you don’t know? Good God, you must know. What would you really like to do?”

[Anna] said, “I want to be with you. That’s all I want.” (Rhys, *Voyage* 50)

Walter has created a world where Anna doesn’t have aspirations other than being with him. Walter continues to use language that decays Anna’s independence. He further makes it appear that she must rely on him for the future that he wants for her: “‘Don’t be like that,’
[Walter] said, ‘Don’t be like a stone that I try to roll uphill and that always rolls down again’” (Rhys, *Voyage* 50). He keeps Anna in a cycle of dependency, making her believe that she needs him in order to get on. By making these comments, he is driving the idea in Anna’s mind that she cannot climb mountains herself: “He was saying, ‘You’re a perfect darling, but you’re only a baby’” (Rhys, *Voyage* 51). Again, the way he addresses Anna, calling her a baby, is only a reminder that babies do not have any agency and will always need to rely on someone else (Walter) to take care of them.

In his seminal book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman follows a similar sentiment as Cooley, which is helpful in understanding how Anna’s self-model is transformed over time. Goffman employs that the “self itself does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene from his action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses” (252). Goffman’s interest also lies in societal interaction, underlining how the “audience, whose interpretive activity will be necessary for this emergence” of the self (253). Here, Goffman’s language is significant in that it underscores how an individual’s thoughts of themselves are an interpretation of how a witness to their behaviors may portray them in their own mind. Goffman was a symbolic interactionist and his ideas parallel Cooley’s in that he, too discusses a mutual relationship between individuals “reading one another’s minds.” Goffman uses the imagery of the theater to compare the nuances of social interaction. The theory of social interaction is called the dramaturgical model of social life, which means that social interactions are like taking part as actors on stage and partaking in various social roles. Goffman’s ideas capture how influenced Anna is regarding how her social environment labels her as a child.
When the actors are on the front center stage, they can see the audience and infer what the audience expects from them in their role. Based on these expectations, their role as actors will shift and influence their behaviors: “‘Oh,’ I said, ‘it’s a bedroom.’ My voice went high. ‘So it is,’ he said. He laughed. I laughed too, because I felt that that was what I ought to do” (Rhys, *Voyage 22*). This moment supports Goffman’s idea that Anna’s behavior is performative—she is an actor on Walter’s stage. Though Anna is aware that she doesn’t have a reason to laugh, she does so as a performance for the male gaze.

Goffman’s idea suggests that the audience varies based on the environment. Individuals give meaning to themselves, others, and their situation through “performance,” and their appearance conveys social status and manner refers to how one may play the role and whether or not it contradicts their appearance (Goffman 253). Anna’s appearance and behaviors while in the presence of Walter are shaped to fit his standards. As Goffman points out, an individual’s actions are judged by onlookers, which causes the individual to change their performance based on their perceptions of others. The emergence of oneself can be traced back to one’s social environment. This continues to be true for Anna. The more she interacts with Walter, the further away she is from who she was before she met him. Though we see Anna move back and forth between the past and the present, and there tend to be inconsistencies within her thought processes, she appears to be more unstable and inconsistent after meeting Walter. As Goffman points out, the form of the self is seen as a relationship between the audience and the performer. This echoes Mulvey’s work in that the spectator always watches the performer perform. The male gaze shapes how Anna acts throughout the novel.
When Cooley first explored how individuals behave in their social environments, he based much of his work on self-sentiments. As mentioned, he argued that we would feel either shame or pride when we analyze ourselves through the eyes of others. Though he mentions these emotions, he never describes them in detail. Both shame and pride are complex emotions, varying in their descriptions. Like Cooley, Goffman focuses on how these emotions emerge. Goffman, unlike Cooley, goes into a more profound analysis describing how the individual is affected by their emotions in relation to their social environment. Goffman uses concrete examples to illustrate such self-sentiments:

Knowing that [her] audiences are capable of forming bad impressions of [her], the Individual may come to feel ashamed of a well-intentioned honest act merely because the context of its performance provides fake impressions that are bad. Feeling this unwarranted shame, [she] may feel that [her] feelings can be seen; feeling that [she] is thus seen, [she] may feel that [her] appearance confirms these false conclusions concerning [her]. [She] may then add to the precariousness of [her] position by engaging in just those defensive maneuvers that [she] would employ were [she] really guilty. In this way it is possible for all of us to become fleetingly for ourselves the worst person we can imagine that others might imagine us to be. (Goffman 236)

While out to dinner with Walter, his cousin Vincent, and Vincent’s mistress Germaine, there is a moment where Anna starts to feel a sense of shame, which leads her to react with a defense mechanism in their presence. Here we can see how Goffman’s idea of “performance” and “audience” play a role in this interaction:
“She’s going to be a great girl one of these days,” Vincent said, putting on his kind expression. “We’re trying to make a start in the autumn, aren’t we Anna? The new show at Daly’s. You ought to be able to warble like what’s-her-name after all those singing lessons.”

“She’s on the stage, is she?” Germain said.

“Yes, she is or was. You were in a show when you first met Walter, weren’t you?” Vincent said.

“Yes,” I said. They looked at me as if they were expecting me to say something else. “It was at Southsea,” I said.

“Oh, it was at Southsea, was it?” Vincent said. They began to laugh. They were still laughing when Walter came in. (Rhys, *Voyage* 86)

At the beginning of this exchange, Vincent comments on Anna being a “great girl” one day, using a discourse that one may assume is condescending. Anna appears skeptical of his “kind expression” in that she uses the phrase “putting on” rather than saying that Vincent is kind. The conversation continues, with Germaine asking if Anna is on stage. This is an interesting moment in that Anna is in the position of the performer while the audience (Vincent and Germaine) are the spectators. Next, Anna’s response is short, and when she thinks they want her to continue talking, she does. This is where Goffman’s notion of the audience and performance appears. When they begin to laugh at Anna, she doesn’t know why they are laughing, but she assumes they are laughing at her: “‘She’s been giving you away,’ Vincent said. ‘She’s been telling us how it all started. You dirty dog, Walter. What in God’s name were you doing on the pier at Southsea?’” (Rhys, *Voyage* 86). Vincent doesn’t ever say anything directly to Anna about what he is thinking of her. He only comments
about what she is presumably telling them about how she and Walter met. Walter says, “You shouldn’t let Vincent pump you. He’s as inquisitive as an old woman. You wouldn’t think it to look at him, but he is” (Rhys, *Voyage* 86).

Walter doesn’t say anything about Anna directly; he only makes comments about Vincent. But because this moment, as Goffman notes, provides this idea of fake impressions seemingly bad to Anna, she loses control. Anna feels she has been stripped of her dignity. The shame she feels at this moment drives her to react to defend herself from her social environment. As Goffman suggests, Anna understands that her social environment can form a bad impression of her, and this is what happened over dinner. When Anna and Walter had initially arrived to this dinner, Anna was greeted by Vincent saying: “Well, how’s the child? How’s my infantile Anna?” (Rhys, *Voyage* 80). This is where we see Anna defy the men in the novel. Her self-model has been broken down by the male gaze, and finally, Anna tires of it. The men have continuously oppressed her, putting her in a vulnerable state. Throughout dinner, Walter and Vincent openly belittle Germaine. Anna becomes agitated by their behavior, demonstrating how she is tired of how they treat women: “I hated the way they were looking at each other. I got up” (Rhys, *Voyage* 82). As the evening continues, Anna starts to feel increasingly uncomfortable by how Vincent treats her: “Dear old Walter, whom we all know and love, has been doing a bit of baby-snatching, I’m afraid” (Rhys, *Voyage* 85). When they start to laugh at Anna shortly after Vincent calls her a baby and a child, Anna’s self-image is at its breaking point.

Anna has taken an emotional beating throughout dinner. At this point, she becomes self-conscious and begins to feel an immense amount of shame. Not understanding why
they would laugh at her and why the men have treated her as though she is not even a 
human being, Anna’s self-hood at this moment decays:

   I said, “Oh, stop laughing at me. I’m sick of it.”

   “What’s the joke?” I said.

   They went on laughing. I was smoking, and put the end of my cigarette 
down on Walter’s hand. I jammed it down hard and held it there, and he 
snatched his hand away and said “Christ!” But they had stopped laughing. 
(Rhys, *Voyage 86*)

Though in this interaction they don’t say anything directly about her, Anna has already 
internalized the male gaze. Anna morphs into a childlike figure; though a child likely 
wouldn’t burn someone with a cigarette, she acts out like a child because, at this moment, 
she can’t regulate her emotions. She internalizes how the men perceive her, and as Goffman 
points out, she becomes the worst version of herself that the others have seemingly 
impinged upon her. Walter and Vincent see this as the ultimate defiance of the male gaze. 
Though Anna does lose a sense of control, this can also be read as a moment that she gains 
some control back into her life. The men have broken her down repeatedly, and Anna 
pushes back against the social construct of male dominance. Anna emasculates Walter, and 
for the first time, makes him feel small. Shortly after that, Walter ends his relationship with 
Anna.

Anna’s Development through the Dark

*Voyage in the Dark* is often read as open-ended or repetitive after Anna has an abortion. The 
novel concludes with Anna thinking about how she is ready to “start all over again.”
However, despite the ambiguity at the end of the novel, Anna does grow, and her story can be read as a “novel of female development.”

Development is a relative concept colored by many interrelated factors, including class, history, and gender. Theories of development tend to emphasize certain factors at the expense of others. Literature, especially the novel, offers the complexity of form necessary to represent interrelationships shaping individual growth. The desire to translate these interrelationships into a coherent narrative has produced a distinctive genre, the Bildungsroman, or the novel of formation. (Abel et al. 4)

Traditionally, in coming-of-age stories, women were expected to follow specific societal roles, and marriage would function as a metaphor for their integration back into society. Though Anna’s story diverges from the traditional guidelines of the *Bildungsroman*, she does develop as a character. Her arduous journey is different from that of the male *Bildungsroman* counterpart. As Elizabeth Baer discusses in her account of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, “Measured against the standards of the male Bildungsroman, Antoinette’s development, ending as it does in madness and suicide, is an abject failure” (Abel et al. 134). Originally, the *Bildungsroman* was concerned with the maturation of young, white, privileged heterosexual men. But the genre has gone through its own developmental stages, which now include a variety of approaches. One of the significant shifts that took place within the genre was a revision to the generic definition of the *Bildungsroman*. In 1983 Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsh, and Elizabeth Langland, introduced a new working definition of the *Bildungsroman* in the book *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* making gender a
priority and a category that had so long been ignored. Their work, as Tobias Boes calls it, is “[a] groundbreaking contribution [to the Bildungsroman genre]” (Boes 234). Boes says, “The Voyage In foreshadows several of the principal issues that have occupied recent interventions in the novel formation from within modernist studies” (234).

Through their critical revision, The Voyage In describes a model that expands the definition and redefines what it means to develop as a female protagonist while still sharing common ground with the traditional Bildungsroman:

- belief in a coherent self (although not necessarily an autonomous one);
- faith in the possibility of development (although change may be frustrated, may occur at different stages and rates, and may be concealed in the narrative);
- insistence on a time span in which development occurs (although time span may exist only in memory);
- and emphasis on social context (even as an adversary). (Abel et al. 14)

Following The Voyage In’s generic revision, the thesis argues that Anna’s story can be read as a Bildungsroman, emphasizing that it is not a traditional coming-of-age story. In the final stages of the novel, Anna’s life flashes before her eyes, and she continues to oscillate between “I” and “you,” but when she moves beyond the dark images of her past and returns to her present moment, the oscillations between “I” and “you” subside. The last we hear from Anna is her use of the pronoun “I” which signifies that she does have a coherent belief in self, her final words: “I lay and watched it and thought about starting all over again” (Rhys, Voyage 188; my emphasis). Anna does convey faith in her possibility to change: “. . . looking in the glass and thinking I was pretty, made me start again imagining that there was nothing I couldn’t do, nothing I couldn’t become” (Rhys, Voyage 157). Thinking that she
will, at some point in time, “start all over again” captures the time span in which her
development may occur. And the emphasis on social context is portrayed throughout the
entirety of the novel. Her coming-of-age story is not the traditional story of a female
protagonist Bildungsroman in that Anna does not get engaged or marry a “suitable husband,”
and her life doesn’t end in motherhood. She evolves away from societal norms, following a
different trajectory that gives her life a different meaning, one that opens different doors.
Maroula Joannou, in her chapter titled “The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth
Century,” writes, “A woman’s quest for her identity may be explorative rather than goal-
oriented, epistemological rather than teleological, relational rather than linear, circuitous or
circular rather than direct, or shifting rather than fixed” (204). Anna’s experiences aid in her
growth as an individual. Individuals should not be expected to have a so-called fully-
developed identity as individuals are constantly developing. For Anna, the obstacles she
faces are integral to her development.

When Walter has his cousin Vincent end his relationship with Anna, she leaves her
room the next day and doesn’t tell anyone where she is going. Her persona shifts and she
evolves into someone other than what she morphed into while held captive by Walter’s
gaze. Her language becomes more judgmental, and the words are more descriptive of how
she perceives the appearance of others. Anna, in a sense, becomes the looking glass,
describing her thoughts of Ethel: “She was short and fat” (Rhys, Voyage 106). She warps
images like a mirror: “She had a long face and a long body and short legs . . .” (Rhys,
Voyage 106). Anna goes on thinking: “She looked just like most other people, which is a big
advantage. An ant, just like all the other ants; not the sort of ant that has too long a head or
a deformed body or anything like that. She was like all women whom you look at and don’t
notice except that she had such short legs and that her hair was so dusty” (Rhys, *Voyage* 106). When Anna is freed of Walter’s gaze, she becomes the onlooker of others: “[Ethel’s] eyes were cleverer than the rest of her. When she half-shut them you saw that she knew she had her own cunning, which would always save her, which was sufficient to her” (Rhys, *Voyage* 107).

She directs a distorted perception toward others in the way the mirror has done to her. In order to transform, such an inversion appears to be necessary for Anna. Throughout the novel, Anna finds herself in a state of self-reflection. She cannot externalize her environment; she spends most of her time in her head—internalizing her surroundings. In order to be a properly functioning individual within society, she must learn to externalize her environment. When she turns the mirror towards others, she escapes her mirror image; and she starts to think about her future: “I was thinking, I’m nineteen and I’ve got to go on living and living and living” (Rhys, *Voyage* 109). Anna recognizes that she has her entire life ahead of her. Though her thoughts are fleeting, this moment conveys a small victory for Anna as she expresses how she wants more for her life. When Anna runs into her friend Laurie, this is how she depicts Laurie’s appearance: “She had hennaed her hair. It was cut short with a thick fringe. It suited her. But she had too much blue on her eyelids. Too much ‘Overture and Beginners’, I thought” (Rhys, *Voyage* 115). She judges Laurie just as her social environment has done to her throughout the novel. Just as the mirror constructs a different version of oneself, Anna does the same to Laurie.

When Laurie and she start talking about how Walter left her, Anna comes back to thinking about a different future, a different version of the life she could live: “There are all sorts of lives, I thought” (Rhys, *Voyage* 116). Without either the looking-glass or the male
gaze, Anna’s mind looks to new possibilities: “I stayed a long time in the ladies’ room. There was a chair and I sat down” (Rhys, *Voyage* 120). Anna doesn’t mention looking at herself in the mirror in the ladies room. She appears to be keeping the looking glass at a distance, and her only interaction with a mirror-like object is how she takes on the function of a mirror herself. Anna goes on to say,

[Laurie] came over and helped me to undo it. She seemed very tall and her face was enormous. I could see all the lines in it, and the powder, trying to fill up the lines, and just where her lipstick stopped and her lips began. It looked like a clown’s face, so that I wanted to laugh at it. She was pretty, but her hands were short and fat with wide, flat, very red nails. (Rhys, *Voyage* 123)

The idea of the looking-glass self is apparent here in that the way we imagine to be perceived by others is an act in which Anna is partaking. The way she portrays Laurie is the way one might imagine how another might be thinking of oneself, causing a self-sentiment, as Cooley highlights. Anna behaving as the mirror image demonstrates how she is imitating the looking-glass self. For Anna to find herself, she becomes the reflector. When they return to Laurie’s friend Joe’s room, Anna’s sharp eye returns and she starts to judge them after Joe lies to her about knowing her father: “You both get on my nerves, if you want to know, I said. If you could see yourselves when you’re laughing you wouldn’t laugh so much” (Rhys, *Voyage* 125). Here, Anna moves further away from a position of inferiority. By defining the worth of others, she creates a new order of hierarchy. She judges them based on her past interactions with her mirror image, which the male gaze imprinted upon her. In this
liminal space, she exerts control over her environment by granting herself a greater responsibility to be the mirror object. Anna uses this space to prop herself up:

The clothes of most of the women who passed were like caricatures of the clothes in the shop-windows, but when they stopped to look you saw that their eyes were fixed on the future. “If I could buy this, then of course I’d be quite different.” Keep hope alive and you can do anything, and that’s the way the world goes round, that’s the way they keep the world rolling. So much hope for each person. And damned cleverly done too. But what happens if you don’t hope any more, if your back’s broken? What happens then? “I can’t stand here staring at these dresses for ever,” I thought. (Rhys, *Voyage* 130)

This moment conveys Anna’s intellect in a way we have not seen before. She becomes aware of how one can be tricked by the false notion that to be happy means that you must own materialistic things. This is a strong juxtaposition between her earlier interaction with the shop window. When she was in a relationship with Walter, all she could think about was her appearance. Her language indicates a separation from these other women who stop to see their future by way of fine clothing. Anna understands that one’s future doesn’t change based on one’s clothing. When she poses the question of hope, she reveals that she is introspective about the future, but in a different way. She comes to understand that she can no longer go on staring off into the abyss. She needs to move on—and that is what she tries to do.

When she arrives at Ethel’s, she tries to start a new life for herself. She agrees to pay for her room and begins working as a masseuse/manicurist with Ethel. Though Anna isn’t very good at her job, nor is she satisfied with this new line of work, she does put in some
effort. Her relationship with Ethel begins to unravel, and Anna already sees that this will happen before it does. Earlier, when Anna would think about how others were judging her, she was unable to perceive what might happen in the future (for instance, she didn’t anticipate Walter leaving her). But now that she has taken on the mirror image of others, she is able to conceptualize others’ behaviors in a way that was impossible for her before: “‘Well, I hope you enjoyed yourself,’ [Ethel] said. But I knew from the way [Ethel] looked at me that [Ethel] had started to hate me. I knew [Ethel] was going to make a row sooner or later” (Rhys, *Voyage* 143).

When Ethel becomes upset with Anna and insults her, Anna manages this moment with humor, and she doesn’t internalize what Ethel is saying to her. Ethel has a complete meltdown while Anna keeps her composure. Anna has the most control over herself that we have yet to see. When Ethel calls Anna “potty,” and Anna wishes to free herself from the conflict, Ethel breaks down into tears. Ethel is upset that Anna hasn’t invited her out with her, and she goes on to beg Anna not to leave. This moment illustrates how Anna has climbed the hierarchal ladder and no longer finds herself beneath everyone else in her social environment. She gains a sense of control over her environment. When Anna goes on a walk to clear her thoughts, we get a glimpse of how Anna begins to understand society: “Thinking, ‘Everybody says that if you start being afraid of people they see it and you’re done for. Besides, it’s all imagination.’ I argued it out with myself quite solemnly, whether it was imagination or not that people are cruel” (Rhys, *Voyage* 147). Her development here is remarkable because she is thinking about how the looking-glass self functions in society. She conceptualizes Cooley’s idea, which illustrates how much she has grown as a character. When Anna turns back toward the looking glass, she perceives herself differently:
But there were other times when a fine day, or music, or looking in the glass and thinking I was pretty, made me start again imagining that there was nothing I couldn’t do, nothing I couldn’t become. Imagining God knows what. Imagining Carl would say, “When I leave London, I’m going to take you with me.” And imagining it although his eyes had that look – this is just for while I’m here, and I hope you get me. (Rhys, *Voyage* 157)

Anna sees a different version of herself. She looks in the mirror and sees beauty for the first time since meeting Walter. The language she uses of herself as being pretty is transformative in that she doesn’t imagine that she is pretty; she thinks this to be true. Though she imagines herself being swept away with Carl, these thoughts are imaginative, and she recognizes that this is just in her imagination that he would sweep her off her feet and take her to London.

Anna continues to think about making changes in her life: “Oh I’d love a change, I’m all for that. I think the same thing all the time gets damned monotonous” (Rhys, *Voyage* 158). Furthermore, after she sees Carl for the last time: she thinks, “(This isn’t the only place in the world; there are other places. You don’t get so depressed when you think that)” (159). Finally, when Anna brings the last man up to her room, she looks at the picture of a dog: “We started to dance and while we were dancing the dog in the picture over the bed stared down at us smugly” (161). The dog may be seen as a symbol to all men or, even more specifically, Walter (earlier in the novel Vincent calls Walter a dirty dog) (86). Walter and his male gaze were always known to be standing in a position above Anna: “I said, I can’t stand that damned dog any longer. I stopped dancing, took off my shoe, and threw it at the picture. The glass smashed. ‘I’ve wanted to do that for weeks,’ I said” (161). This moment in the novel illustrates how Anna wants to completely break free from the constraints of the
male gaze. She shatters the glass and recognizes that she no longer must be a prisoner to this mirror image. She no longer inhabits a space that is controlled by men. She is moving.
Conclusion

Throughout the novel, Anna is labeled by those in her social environment as a child, a kid, and a baby. She has been treated like she doesn’t have any autonomy. The various times she sees herself in the mirror, she is either unrecognizable or morphs into a child. The men have played a significant role in breaking down Anna’s self-image. When Anna realizes that she wants to shatter the image the male gaze has impinged upon her, she finds out that she is pregnant. Though Anna finds out that she is pregnant, this doesn’t hinder her progress in the latter part of the novel. When she chooses to write Walter and ask for the money to have an abortion, this is her final rejection of the male gaze. Walter exerted his power over her and took her agency away. Having an abortion is darkly symbolic of the death of her inner child, showing she can no longer be a child dependent on men—on Walter. Walter metaphorically pays for the removal of her inner dependent child, the death of which marks a coming-of-age for Anna, extinguishing patriarchal dependency.

Anna begins the novel with an identity that is in constant flux. The challenges she faces in a male-dominated society push her even further away from being able to formulate a stable sense of self. Throughout the novel, Anna is denied self-sufficiency. Once she meets Walter, she is captured by the male gaze, which leads her to question her mirror image. The looking-glass self plays a vital role in her image of herself. Anna finds herself stuck in the looking-glass and starts to question her appearance. Cooley and Goffman underline how society impacts how we identify with ourselves and those in our environment. We imagine how others perceive us; as a result, we may turn into the imaginary self we believe we see through the eyes of another. As Anna’s story progresses, she tires of the looking-glass self she sees.
Moreover, once Anna defies being subservient to Walter when she burns him with a cigarette, she begins a new trajectory. Her mirror image undergoes new development. The intimate moments she once found herself in with the looking glass begin to fade. Anna flips the mirror image around and uses this as a liminal space to free herself from confinement. The experiences she encounters influence her as a character and eventually help her to formulate a more stable identity. Through her journey, she develops as a protagonist; she grows, finding a new voice and confidence to stand up for herself in a way that we do not see before she is freed of the male gaze.

Jean Rhys captures how difficult it can be for women to escape the constraints of a society that treats women as though they are, as Simone de Beauvoir argues, “the Other.” The oppression women experience from men may puncture a woman’s selfhood, making it almost impossible for women to formulate their own identity. As Rhys shows, Anna finds herself trapped in a cycle of men exerting their power over her. This causes Anna to question what she sees in the mirror.

Nevertheless, Rhys also conveys to the reader that despite these challenges, Anna finds strength within herself. She pushes back against hegemony and metaphorically chooses to have Walter pay for the death of the dependent inner child of which he created. In the end, Anna’s story is a coming-of-age narrative. She chooses to start her life again:

When their voices stopped the ray of light came in again under the door like the last thrust of remembering before everything is blotted out. I lay and watched it and thought about starting all over again. And about being new and fresh. And about mornings, and misty days, when anything might
happen. And about starting all over again, all over again… (Rhys, Voyage 188; my emphasis)


