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Recalling Anna, reclaiming trauma: A psychoanalytic approach to Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*

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In Jean Rhys's 1934 novel, *Voyage in the Dark*, heroine Anna Morgan recalls a childhood instance from her Dominican upbringing in which she pokes a nest filled with woodlice. Curious and fascinated, she is a purveyor of power, wielding a stick, her instrument of exploration. Present-day Anna is passive and wonders at her life, making remarks such as "...it was like looking at an old photograph of myself and thinking, 'What on earth's that got to do with me?'" (Rhys 43). Anna's memories and dreams juxtaposed with her present narration can seem jarring and nonsensical--even, one might say, hysterical. Her vacillations, denials, and behavior call to mind another eighteen year-old heroine in literature, also grappling with unhappiness and frustration: Freud's Dora, protagonist and patient in his 1905 work on hysteria. Despite scholar Anne B. Simpson's assertion that "Rhys apparently found Freud irrelevant" (7), I find Rhys's style highly engaged with the psychoanalytic process. Anna's memories and dreams, as depicted in *Voyage*, suggest that her present life is intimately related with her past. I treat Anna's recollections as Freud treats Dora's dreams illustrating how Rhys's narrative both mirrors elements of the analytic process and allows for a psychoanalytic rendering.

Dora is brought to Freud by her father, after an incident with a family friend. An older gentleman named Herr K makes sexual advances on Dora, and she slaps him. Freud's interpretations of Dora's dreams use the concepts of condensation, displacement, and transference. He argues that Dora's actions are indicative of suppressed, unconscious desires. In *Dora*, everything contains symbolic meaning, such as the "drop earrings" that represent drops of semen, and Dora's playing with her purse, which Freud argues represents her unconscious desire to masturbate. The case is ultimately a failure in Freud's eyes, as Dora terminates treatment prematurely.

Rhys's Anna, an eighteen year old chorus girl born in the British colony of Dominica, but now adrift in London, is a character created partially from Rhys's own life experiences. Anna is misunderstood by her stepmother, struggles with alcohol and becomes sexually involved with and financially dependent on Walter, a much older man. Her self-sabotaging tendencies are repellent to many readers who are utterly unsympathetic to her plight. In memory she grieves her dead father and recalls the plant and insect life of her Dominican home. By exploring natural images associated with Anna's childhood— particularly flowers, insects and shells—I discuss how these images carry symbolic meaning related to Anna's sexuality. A few symptomatic episodes demonstrate how the emergence of recollections and dreams shape Anna's narrative. By loosely charting these dreams and recollections we can follow her sexual maturation- from the phallic as a prepubescent child, to passivity, and shame as she grows more dependent on Walter. Her narrative ends with a pregnancy and abortion—a termination that can be paralleled with Dora's leaving treatment early. We also see emerging homoerotic undertones which can be better understood by bringing in material from Hélène Cixous's *Portrait of Dora*, a theatrical re-rendering of Freud's work. In the longer version of this paper, I discuss Cixous at more length. I've authored a draft of a one-act play about Anna Morgan in the style of Cixous's work which demonstrates how closely related the three texts are. While some of my argument echoes Cixous's critique of Freud, I focus on a close reading of Anna's dreams and memories drawing on Freudian theories of dreaming and the unconscious. Often these memories and dreams conjoin sexual desire with sexual anxiety, disgust and fascination.

In Freud's essay, "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," he describes the analytic process as a literal "voyage in the dark": "An analysis of early childhood...is tedious and laborious []. Moreover, it leads us into dark regions where

there are as yet no signposts” (Freud 248). In *Voyage*, the dark regions with no signposts are Anna’s present experiences, which are constantly interrupted by memories of her lush, sensual childhood that marry the grotesque with her sexuality. Anna’s narration employs free association, demonstrates the fragmentary nature of dreams and memories, and shows active displacement of repressed material. Just as Freud asserts that a dream is “stand[ing] on two legs”; with one leg rooted in the “exciting cause” and the other in “momentous occurrence[s]... of childhood” (89), the emergence of Anna’s recollections and their intrusion into her present day narrative are highly suggestive.

Expanding upon the idea of Anna’s fear surrounding her own desires, I point to her fantasies that deal with the grotesque. Revisiting the moment I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Anna imagines her life as beastly, connecting a past memory with her present, dissociative state: “Perhaps I’m going to be one of the ones with the beastly lives. They swarm like woodlice when you push a stick into a woodlice-nest, at home. And their faces are the colour of woodlice.” (26). Anna’s remembrance of “pushing a stick into a woodlice-nest” brings to mind the act of intercourse. As a child, she holds the phallus, power she would eventually give up. That the woodlice “swarm out of the hole” denotes a possible shame, or association of her genitals with the grotesque. Anna is fascinated with these creatures: she anthropomorphizes, identifies, and appropriates their characteristics: “And their faces are the color of woodlice” (26); “the white of people’s faces—like woodlice” (54). The repetition is akin to when Anna practices rhythmic breathing, or recites her multiplication tables in order to calm herself. Additionally, this imagery, viewed in the light of Anna’s childhood in the West Indies and her displacement to England, is symbolically significant. Their metabolic rate is temperature dependent. They are not capable of “self-heating” and their environment “relates directly to their rate of respiration.” This is

startlingly similar to the way Anna comports herself, especially the way she describes her own body temperatures. We see her vacillate between hot and cold; Anna always seems to be cold. She also demonstrates passivity when it comes to her environment: “I lay in bed because there wasn’t anything else to do” (41). Anna is always waiting for something to happen; she is incapable of “self-heating” as well as “self-starting.” She is dependent on her environment and external circumstances for stimulus. This passage expresses ideas of physical displacement: the woodlice are swarming, and being displaced from their nest-home. Woodlice themselves would not have been native to where Anna is referring to as home, neither would have the homeless, dark people with “beastly lives”. She expresses fascination with these beastly people, and Anna is preoccupied that she might become like these swarming creatures, which to her represent the poor, undesirable population, but also the white Britons among whom she feels displaced.

As Anna begins to become more dependent on Walter, her recollections begin to denote more sexual shame than power. Joseph, the black groom of her family’s plantation during her childhood, is present in a few of these. These episodes surround the stable, and horses: often with the use of words such as “sweat” “mount” and “tear” (151). One episode lends itself to an examination of Anna’s repressed sexuality and racial anxieties. We see Anna dressed in all white in preparation for a church service. She is dressed in proper clothing, with “white drawers tight at the knee and a white petticoat and a white embroidered dress – everything starched and prickly” (Rhys 41). This outfit is yet another image of purity she is conjuring from her childhood, and “starched” and “prickly” connote restraint and discomfort. We see the black groom, Joseph, working to shine her shoes: “Joseph had heaps of spittle and when he spurted a jet into the tin of blacking he never missed” (41). Joseph calls Anna a “naughty girl” and accuses her of splitting her gloves on purpose, an image that arguably denotes sexual shame. The glove- splitting

accusation is followed by the discussion of Anna's perspiration while she attempts to "carefully" put on her gloves. Even in memory, she is disgusted by and preoccupied with her own perspiration: "The thought of having a wet patch underneath your arms—a disgusting and disgraceful thing to happen to a lady—makes you very miserable" (42). One might suggest that in this recollection, sensations and ideas surrounding arousal have been, in Freud's words, "*displaced from below upwards*" (102). Anna's preoccupation with wetness echoes Dora's supposed shame and attempt to conceal admissions of childhood masturbation. Freud connects bedwetting with childhood masturbation and the shame that arises from the act, and an attempt to obscure it. At this point in the novel, Anna is already receiving money from Walter. She is in an abject position, and it makes sense that she would be having anxieties about her own sexual arousal and desires.

One of Anna's recurring dreams invites sexual, bridal, and grotesque interpretations. She describes her dream about swimming in a pool back at home: "I was always dreaming about that pool" (90). She describes "Those big white flowers that opened at night grew round it" They are described as having a heavy- sweet scent, as we've seen in the first episode I discussed. My first inclination was to assume that these plants described are also stephanotis, because Anna describes them as white and fragrant. However, since they only bloom at night, and are "shaped like lilies," I think that she is referring to the Casablanca lily, which, interestingly enough, is also a common bridal flower. It is also interesting to note that Anna says Hester hates the way that these flowers smell; they make her feel faint. Hester's distaste for the scent of these flowers, which represent marriage and thusly sexuality², reflects her distaste for the way that Anna

² We also see fragrant white flowers as reflective of sexuality in Cixous's *Portrait of Dora*. Dora describes a dream to Mrs. K: "I saw the 'interior' of the forest, as though my eyes could pierce right through it. From far away, I saw flowers.... beds of white flowers. Suddenly I was a woman. A young woman." (Cixous 61).

conducts herself. Hester's disapproval reinforces Anna's sexual anxieties and self-disgust: she calls her unladylike, and is a harsh critic of Anna's comportment.

In this recurring dream, the crab is a crustaceous intruder in an otherwise pleasant scene: "There were crabs under the rocks by the river" and "They have small eyes at the end of long feelers, and when you throw stones at them their shells smash and soft, white stuff bubbles out." (Rhys 90). Here, we again see images that evoke self-disgust and the idea of a woman as an empty shell, or exoskeleton. Additionally, the white viscous material that bubbles out of the crab shell can be compared to the woodlice that swarm out of the nest. The visceral, disgusting material inside of the shell is the grotesque, a representation of things Anna does not want to acknowledge. On an even deeper psychoanalytic level, the white stuff bubbling out can be seen as representative of repressed material from Anna's past that continues to interrupt her present-day narrative. In her dream/ memory, Anna throws stones at the crabs, perhaps evoking a repression of material that disgusts her. In Anna's past, we see shells that still contain living things. In Anna's present day, we see shells without their living things—a conch that sounds like emptiness. We see a series of facades, fires which emit no heat, menacing storefronts, and hollow shells. Indeed, Anna is a hollow shell; Freud might say that this is how a hysteric moves through the world.

These images of shells signify female lack and inadequacy. However, as my close readings indicate, the shell imagery is also an entry point to reading potential multiple valences. By this I mean to say that in addition to insufficiency of the female, the shells also indicate something of desire and associations of the grotesque with female sexuality. This may have something to do with the fact that "woman as object" is much more appealing to men than "woman as sexual agent" with her own complex set of urges and desires. Anna is constantly

referring to mirrors and reflective surfaces to gauge her experience and affirm her existence. A reflection in a mirror is the most removed from the woman herself. Unlike the empty shell, it does not even hint at life or substance. While Anna could have all-along benefitted from some *genuine* self-reflection, she continues to be trapped in a caricature of sorts. Just as her obsession with reflective surfaces is a distortion of actual self-discovery, her “relationship” with Walter is a perversion of love.

With abject powerlessness comes a sense of emptiness. After Anna sleeps with Walter for the first time, she feels no emotion, and has no apparent reaction. She uses the image of a shell to describe her lack: “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 23). Here, the emphasis is on silence, and the mention of a shell equates silence with emptiness. Shells encase, and protect once living things. Anna is a shell of a person, and her emptiness is contiguous with silence.

Delving deeper into the psychoanalytic implications of these images, I argue that this action, of holding the shell to the ear evokes and symbolizes homoerotic desire, just as Freud supposed, at the end of his analysis of Dora, his failure to entertain the idea that Dora might harbor homosexual feelings for Frau K. Hélène Cixous directly addresses these possibilities in *Portrait of Dora* when Dora exclaims to Frau K: “Let me kiss you!” (41). There is a homoerotic moment in *Voyage in the Dark* when Anna fondly remembers Francine: “The thing about Francine was that when I was with her I was happy. She was small and plump and blacker than most of the people out there, and she had a pretty face” (Rhys 68). She then goes on to describe how Francine would eat a mango: “What I liked was watching her eat mangoes. Her teeth would bite into the mango and her lips fasten on either side of it, and while she sucked you saw that she was perfectly happy” (68). This moment, in addition to its homoerotic evocations, points to the

pattern of Rhys only allowing Anna to experience desire and agency in her dreams and recollections. The shell that Anna holds to her ear in her current reality is empty, and representative of the empty void that constitutes her present internal life. The ear and the shell are like things, both vaginal in nature. This action is much different from Anna poking her stick in the woodlice nest, which Freud would argue is representative of the transition from clitoral³ to vaginal desire with sexual maturation. In this moment, she is placing something symbolically vaginal against its counterpart, subtly suggesting desire and sexual agency. To continue with this conceit, the act of listening to the shell symbolizes listening to the feminine. Throughout the novel, Anna is not heard. Perhaps this moment with the shell represents what she wishes someone would do for her—simply listen. The shell imagery evokes repressed homosexual feelings, with two like signifiers pressed together, yet also conveys a desire to be heard.

When Anna meets with Walter out of a place of desperation she recalls her father's funeral: "The candles crying wax tears and the smell of *stephanotis* and I had to go to the funeral in a white dress and white gloves and a wreath round my head and the wreath in my hands made my gloves wet—they said so young to die . . ." (97). Anna's vivid remembrance of the candles "crying wax tears" displaces her own grief and loss. She does not admit to crying herself in the recollection. This flashback occurs when Anna meets with Walter, hoping to change his mind about ending things with her. Anna could not bring her beloved father back from the dead, just as she cannot force Walter to love her. She recalls the strong scent of *stephanotis*, a beautiful plant that blooms in strongly perfumed, and hates sudden changes in temperature. This image recalls Anna's "transplantation" from her tropical place of upbringing to barren England. These flowers are also typically wedding flowers, connecting sex and death in Anna's mind. In addition, the

³ I would also argue that Anna's coral brooch from childhood is a clitoral symbol, and when Anna's father "crushes" it in a comforting hug—the evocation of Oedipal desire is very strong.

name of the plant, *stephanotis*, is related to St. Stephan, the first martyr of Christianity who was stoned to death. This, in respect to Anna's memory, evokes death and sacrifice. The strong scent of the flowers masks the scent of death, just as Anna's unpleasant memories and associations are deeply repressed.

This scene fuses marriage with death and repressed sexuality; the funeral circumstance combined with all the dressings of a wedding conflates love and grief. Freud might say that this denotes Anna's unconscious desire to be her father's bride. Grief at the loss of her father and repressed sexual desire might inform her Oedipal, dependent relationship with Walter. Freud might say that Anna is mourning the loss of her father by romancing an older man. This could also be, as Freud says of Dora, "summoning an infantile affection" to "protect against [a] present affection for a stranger" (105). The two possible readings express Anna's conflict between Oedipal attachment to her father and sexual desire for Walter. Some of Freud's words to Dora are also applicable to Anna in this instance: "you are summoning up your old love for your father in order to protect yourself against your love for Herr K. But what do all these efforts show? Not only are you afraid of Herr K., but that you are still more afraid of yourself, and of the temptation you feel to yield to him" (Freud 88). Freud's statement, applied to *Voyage*, begs the question: why does Anna fear her own agency? Why is she unable to recognize and act upon her own desire? This may stem from a fear of her sexuality, and an unwillingness to see herself as a sexual agent as opposed to an object.

Anna's aborted and post-abortive narrative leaves the reader unsatisfied, just as Dora's sudden withdrawal from treatment leaves Freud to grapple with her reasons for doing so. According to Freud, Dora's truncation of her own treatment was "an unmistakable act of vengeance on her part" (131). Freud reasons that leaving treatment early has two components:

self-injury and revenge. He attributes this to the transference of Dora's vengeful feelings towards her father and Herr K onto him. Dora's premature termination of her analysis can also be paralleled with Anna's abortion, although Dora has the last word in her story— she rejects the imposition of a male narrator, Freud, and “[brings] her own business to a satisfactory conclusion” (Freud 143). Anna, on the other hand, allows her male doctor to have the last word. He appears menacing, with hands that “looked enormous in rubber gloves” (Rhys 187), as she lies supine and subservient to receive an abortion. She observes: “He moved about the room briskly, like a machine that was working smoothly,” and the doctor even comments “‘you girls are too naïve to live, aren't you?’” (187). It is almost as if the doctor is affirming Anna's self-destructive impulses.. She can't possibly fathom the prospect of having a child—a productive outlet for her narcissism. After the procedure is complete, the doctor remarks: “she'll be alright...ready to start all over again in no time, I've no doubt.” (187). This comment reinforces Anna's self-destructive, dissociative state at the end, of wanting to start over but ultimately being trapped in a cycle of self-harm.

In her *Black Exercise Book*, rough autobiographical prose that would later become a draft of *Voyage in the Dark*, Jean Rhys recounts early teenage abuse by someone named Mr. Howard, a seventy-year-old British man. This narrative is interrupted by an account of going into a bookstore and looking for a book on psychoanalysis: “Once I went in Sylvia Beach's bookshop in Paris rue de l'Odeon I think it is or was I wanted a book on psychoanalysis.” She goes on to quote the book she picks up as saying, “Women of this type will invariably say that they were seduced when very young by an elderly man. In every case the story is fictitious.” She responds by writing “No honey I thought it is not fictitious in every case. By no means. Anyhow how do you know.” She writes, “Then I put the book down. No dear no you don't play fair if you're

going to reject the evidence of one lot who contradict you you ought certainly to reject the evidence of the other who agree with you” (Series 1, Box 1, Folder 1, McFarlin Special Collections, University of Tulsa). That she puts the book down shows perhaps her unwillingness to accept a male-authored narrative about the female psyche, particularly not one that denies her lived experience. Her curiosity about psychoanalysis segues into exasperation and dismissal (“No honey... it is not fictitious in every case”). These men writing books on psychoanalysis aren’t telling her story. The exasperation she feels reading those passages suggests that she is not dismissing psychoanalysis on the whole, but rather the way in which certain analysts write about women. Just as Dora resists Freud, Rhys resists the male stab at explaining a woman’s sexual experience. While Rhys may have found Freud “irrelevant,” her narrative shows an engagement with the psychoanalytic process regardless.

In just one example we see Anna’s self-conscious, maybe even playful engagement with the concepts of free association. Anna reads a letter and then says: “I thought, ‘What the hell’s the matter with me? I must be crazy. This letter has nothing to do with false teeth.’” (94). It is as if Anna is inviting us to play analyst with her. She acts ignorant to the significance of her recollections, much as Dora evades Freud’s probing questions. She even goes on to say: “But I went on thinking about false teeth...” (94), even after she identifies how odd this seems. This invites the reader to investigate the significance of teeth, and why this seemingly unrelated image from her past keeps intruding into her thoughts. We bear witness to Anna’s habits of displacement—her substitution of painful thoughts with images, memories, and symbols, in real time. As readers, we have more access to Anna’s psyche than Freud does with Dora. Ironically, I think this proximity prevents most readers from fully understanding Anna.

Simultaneous disgust, fascination, and identification with Anna seem to cause many readers to find her repellent. In my view, a large part of this repulsion stems from the repressed material that is dredged up again and again in Rhys's narrative. The constant intrusion from Anna's past places her in a dark, stagnant place in which she is anything but autonomous. I believe that this makes readers uncomfortable because it is what we all fear—paralysis, and lack of control. By applying Freud to *Voyage and the Dark*, we have the tools to better understand Anna's inner world. Analyzing Rhys's text through a Freudian lens, objects become resonant and salient—they don't exist on their own. Each image has significance; its own place in the fabric of Rhys's narrative, independent of place and time. These images exist as a part of Anna's unconscious to which we, as readers have full access. There is a constant flux, a rippling, and fluidity in both Rhys's prose and our own attempt to understand and grasp its intricacy. By pairing Freud, an analyst who wrote like a novelist and Rhys, a novelist who write like an analyst, we can better understand Rhys's profoundly intimate view of her heroine's psyche and sexuality. By becoming familiar with methods of Freudian psychoanalysis and dream interpretation, we are better equipped to unravel Anna, know her, and perhaps even love her.

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