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"The Only Possible Ending":
Identity Slippage and Redemptive Love in Rhys, Trevor, and Ishiguro

In Jean Rhys's original manuscript of *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), the novel closes with Anna Morgan's death. In her final moments, Anna drifts in and out of memories: her mother's dying corpse being fanned for flies, making love and pleading to stop, the Dominica masked concertina making music under moonlight. She glimpses a ray of light like "the last thrust of remembering before everything is blotted out," and, finally, "blackness comes" (Brown 56). When editor Michael Sadlier received this manuscript, he told Rhys the conclusion was "so gloomy; people won't like it" and urged her to "give the girl a chance" (Morris 2). Rhys left the room close to tears; she was certain Anna's death was the novel's "only possible ending" (*Jean Rhys Letters* 25). Despite her disagreement, Rhys worked to devise a new conclusion that would satisfy editors without "spoil[ing] the book" (*Smile Please* 126-7). But Rhys's new, published ending is arguably no more uplifting than Anna's death. In the published novel's final scene, Anna watches light pour into the room like the same "thrust of remembering," and then succumbs to the tragic hum of "starting all over again, all over again…" (*Voyage in the Dark* 188). Anna's destiny is bleak: she wades on the edge of death but must wrest herself from exhaustion and futility and begin again. There is little hope to be found in this conclusion, which, as opposed to certain death, offers Anna a meager "death-in-life existence" (Morris 4). Both versions of the novel prompt readers to consider why Anna's story must end so tragically, and whether her melancholia is destined from the start.

Among twentieth-century British literature, this tragic conclusion is not unique. In Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Stevens is left in devastating ambivalence. Though Stevens's journey prompts him to consider the social, moral, and emotional corruption of butlering, he ultimately returns to his position at Darlington Hall, and to habits of blind loyalty and self-sacrifice. The novel's final line illuminates Stevens's enduring commitment to aristocracy: "I should hope, then, that by the time of my employer's return, I shall be in a position to pleasantly surprise him" (245). Like Anna in *Voyage in the Dark*, Stevens commits to "starting all over again." The same holds true for Mary Louise in *Reading Turgenev* (1991). As the novel progresses, Mary Louise slips further into grief and her imagination. In her final paragraphs, Mary Louise retreats into her shrine for Robert, rearranging his toy soldiers and imagining his presence. Finally, she pictures her death and then her funeral. Despite Mary Louise's longing for communion, she is hopelessly isolated and holds little stake in the material world.

For Anna, Stevens, and Mary Louise, the future is barren. Although each protagonist encounters transformative glimmers of romantic love, they end their stories by repeating old patterns: beginning again, self-sacrificing, or self-isolating. What is it that causes such inertia? Can love save them, or is misery the "only possible ending"? This paper explores the identity slippage that creates each character's melancholia, the life raft offered to each of them by romantic love, and the futility that results when that love disappears. Ultimately, this paper begs the question: Were their endings sealed all along?

Anna, Stevens, and Mary Louise share a condition that provides fertile ground for their melancholia: identity slippage. Each character floats between and among fixed racial, economic, or cultural identities, incapable of firmly rooting themselves in one. This persistent rootlessness results in an estrangement from self and others, ultimately cementing their misery.

Anna’s melancholia in *Voyage in the Dark* stems from her racial and cultural liminality as a white Creole subject. As a white girl in Dominica, Anna is neither colonizer nor colonized; she inhabits a space of racial “contamination” where “the boundaries between not only cultures but races as well are blurred” (Ezkerra Vegas 15). Anna’s ambiguous racial identity vexes the colonial regime; it destabilizes the divide between Black and white and personifies an “unnameable and unplaceable hybrid monstrosity” in the colonial mind (Murdoch 146). Anna is perturbed by her racial ambiguity. From her youth, she is repulsed by whiteness and comforted by Blackness, but embraced by neither. Anna latches onto her Black servant, Francine, fixating on the particularities of her physical form: the way her “lips fasten” around the edges of a mango, and how the soles of her feet are “hard as leather” (Rhys 71). Anna is captivated by Francine’s appearance and longs to be Black herself: “Being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad.” (31) For Anna, Blackness represents warmth and bliss, while whiteness entails “getting like Hester, and all the things you get – old and sad and everything” (72). Though Anna’s skin is white, she rejects the performative whiteness embodied by her stepmother, Hester. This early disdain for whiteness is mirrored in Rhys’s memoir. Rhys recalls perceiving Black girls as “perfectly free,” noting that “marriage didn’t seem a duty with them as it was with [white girls]” (22). For both Rhys and her protagonist, whiteness is a “cold and sad” induction into patriarchal norms (*Voyage* 31). To reject white rigidity, Anna clings desperately to fantasies of Blackness.

But she is rejected by Black West Indians, too. While living on Constance Estate, Anna peers into the kitchen quarters looking for Francine, and finds her washing dishes: “[Francine’s] eyes were red with the smoke and watering. Her face was quite wet. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and looked sideways at me. Then she said something in patois and went on washing up. But I knew that of course she disliked me too because I was white” (72). Francine speaks in a dialect Anna cannot understand through a veil of smoke. highlighting the insurmountable distance between them. When Francine looks at Anna "sideways," she reveals their divergent orientations to the world. Their relationship is clouded by histories of colonial and racial subjugation: the "suppression, exclusion and eradication that undergirds and overdetermines the temporality of encounters between white Creoles and Caribs in a colonial context" (Murdoch 157). Despite fundamental differences in culture and power, Anna projects her longing for acceptance onto Francine. In doing so, she constructs an imaginary Blackness that feeds her fantasy of escaping white patriarchy while eliding any history of colonial exploitation. Though Anna yearns to be embraced by Blackness, she has no real access to it, pushing her further into racial alienation.

Anna's identity becomes increasingly unsettled when she confronts the cruelty of English whiteness. She narrates her arrival to England in a dissociative rush of language. Ellipses on either end of the description project Anna's arrival into a dream-like state, indicating her estrangement from reality. As she watches England flit by the train window, she is overwhelmed by the stark contrast between light and dark: "Hundreds thousands of white people white people rushing along and the dark houses all alike frowning down one after the other all alike all stuck together" (17). Anna's overpowering fear and alienation cannot be contained; they crest in tumbling, unpunctuated descriptions. She senses her outsiderness, described by Hester as a "fish out of water," and descends into dread: "Oh I'm not going to like this place I'm not going to like this place I'm not going to like this place."

Anna's fears of rejection and isolation are validated by English society. Although Anna is a member of the upper class in Dominica from Constance Estate, English society does not care for a Creole immigrant from the West Indies. In England, her status is meaningless, and her race does not protect her from discrimination. Despite appearing white, her alterity is perceived and articulated. Maudie introduces Anna to friends as "always cold," explaining, "'She can't help it. She was born in a hot place. She was born in the West Indies or somewhere, weren't you kid? The girls call her the Hottentot.'" (13). Maudie does not care for the specifics of Anna's history. Her ambivalence is implied by her vague "or somewhere." Moreover, she alienates Anna by referencing the "Hottentot"—a label used for Saartje Bartman, an African woman sexually exploited by Englishmen in 1810. According to Sander L. Gilman, European society cast Bartman as the "lowest rung on the great chain of being" (5). Anna is not African, but, as Cathleen Maslen points out, the "specifics of Anna's foreignness are not that important in the application of imperialist stereotypes" (34). Because of her nationality, Anna is equated by Maudie with the imagined "lowest rung" and subjected to racist vitriol.

Later, Ethel, who has offered Anna a job as a manicurist, criticizes her outsiderness: "You're half potty. You're not all there; you're a half-potty bastard" (145). Critic Andrés Ibarra Cordero recognizes the racism in Ethel's condemnation; Ethel calls Anna half-potty because she is "half-white and half-black" (7). Ethel continues, "You're not all there; that's what's the matter with you. Anybody's only got to look at you to see that" (145). According to Ethel, Anna's alterity is a problem of appearance—a trait identified by merely a "look." At first glance, Anna is white, but not white enough to be accepted or respected. Her "crumpled" skirt and "hideous underclothes" cast her far from the high society she inhabited in Dominica (25). Suspended between her elitist childhood and bleak adulthood, Anna descends into sorrow. Estibalitz Ezkerra Vegas summarizes Anna's budding melancholia: "There is no place Anna can claim as her home. The despair following this realization leaves Anna in a territory that only melancholy can claim" (9).

Anna's sense of displacement offers an explanation for her ultimate desolation. In Rhys's memoir, she links identity slippage to inertia, writing, "There is something as unstable as water in me, and when things get tough I go away. I haven't got what the English call 'guts'" (*Smile Please* 52). That "thing" unstable as water, eternally unsettled, is Rhys's identity. Rhys and Anna have no firm sense of self or where they might belong, making it impossible to proceed.

The connection between identity slippage and despair becomes increasingly evident in *The Remains of the Day.* As Anna attempts to blend with English whiteness, Stevens strives to embody the virtues of butlering. Stevens believes a dignified butler mustn't abandon the "professional being he inhabits" for any emotional disturbance, however "surprising, alarming, or vexing" (43). Such a requirement positions Stevens's professional self in direct opposition to his emotional self. Consequently, Stevens conceptualizes himself as two competing identities: the man and the "suit" he wears (44). Stevens's narrative voice reflects this shaky self-conception. He narrates the novel in a manner described by Ishiguro as "butler-speak": a curated and passionless verbal smokescreen (Muresan 65). His tone is characterized by frequent qualifiers like "I might," "perhaps," and "it seems," all signaling his adherence to decorum and avoidance of vulnerability (3). Even while his father lies dying, Stevens's only response is to repeat, robotically, "I hope Father is feeling better now" (97). He maintains emotional distance by referring to his father in the third person and attempts to preserve the illusion of hope during an indisputably painful moment.

But Stevens's emotional self momentarily breaks through his facade when Lord Darlington confronts him: "'You look as though you're crying'" (105). Although Stevens meticulously narrates Lord Darlington's banquet—the gentlemen clapping one another on the shoulders, the bottle of port on his tray—he neglects to mention his tears. This moment of revelation illuminates Stevens's fractured consciousness. As Senar Arcak recognizes, "Although Stevens has the impression that he has managed to hide his emotions, the questions asked by Mr. Cardinal and Lord Darlington about his state [...] show that his pain is visible and readable by others, despite his attempts to brush it off as 'hard work'" (64). Stevens is so determined to suppress his emotions that they escape first-person narration altogether, making him an unreliable narrator and a fragmented self.

Stevens's identity crisis deepens through his over-identification with Lord Darlington. According to Stevens, a butler can only be "great" if he "has applied his talents to serving a great gentleman" (117). Consequently, Stevens's self-worth becomes intertwined with his employer's moral standing. This dependency causes Stevens to neglect intuitions about Darlington's corruption, making him no more than an "ideological servant" or a cog in the machine (Salecl 180). In order to comply with Darlington's ideologies, Stevens must oppose his own morality. When Darlington announces he will be firing all Jewish employees, Stevens says, "My every instinct opposed the idea of their dismissal. Nevertheless, my duty in this instance was quite clear, and as I saw it, there was nothing to be gained at all in irresponsibly displaying such personal doubts" (148). Stevens is, indeed, an ideological servant, but it is not true that he obeys without thinking. Stevens is entirely capable of passionate thoughts and feelings, but chooses to dismiss them when they threaten his dutiful cooperation as a butler.

While on his road trip West, Stevens's already fragile identity as Lord Darlington's butler begins to unravel. When confronted by a Colonel's servant who seems skeptical of Darlington, Stevens quickly adjusts to the man's trepidation, insisting that he never worked for, or even interacted with, the Lord. Contrastingly, in Moscombe, Stevens is flattered by the villagers' admiration of his fancy clothes and nice car and pretends to be a Lord himself, fabricating stories about his influence on foreign policy (187). Ironically, the doting villagers praise his authenticity:

"You can tell a true gentleman from a false one that's just dressed in finery [...] It's not just the cut of your clothes, nor is it even the fine way you've got of speaking. There's something else that marks you out as a gentleman" (185). In fragmenting and exiling parts of himself, Stevens has constructed an unstable sense of self, putting on and discarding personalities as he pleases. This slippage has bleak consequences for his destiny.

Elif Toprak Sakız interprets Stevens's road trip as an "epistemological journey where he can no longer remain a stable, ontological being" (1051). Throughout the novel, Stevens's sense of self crumbles. He frequently second-guesses or revises his memories, like when he says, "Now that I think further about it, I am not sure Miss Kenton spoke quite so boldly that day" (70). Memory is crucial to the construction of the self. As Yugin Teo says, "Memory asserts an enigmatic influence over us. It simultaneously soothes and unsettles us, linking us with our past and our histories while possessing the power to control our future" (1). Without memory, Stevens grows unstable as water, and his life becomes a chasm only melancholy can fill.

Like Anna Morgan and Stevens, Mary Louise in *Reading Turgenev* lacks a stable sense of self, priming her for ultimate desolation. Mary Louise's identity slippage originates in cultural alienation. As a Protestant in 1950s Southeastern Ireland, Mary Louise watches her religious community "wither" and "die" (7). Trevor vividly narrates the dismal state of Protestantism in the 1950s: "The Protestant fraction of the population increasingly looked as if it would never recover. There was no fat on the bones of this shrinking community; there were no reserves of strength" (14). By placing Mary Louise on the edge of a dwindling population, Trevor exposes her to internal instability. Arland Ussher describes the alienation a Protestant might face in 1950s Ireland as a result of such marginality: "The life of his country is an intricate pattern of fasts and festivals, pilgrimages and retreats, in which he has no part" (Ussher 102-3). Ussher continues, "In these circumstances, it would be surprising if the non-Catholic did not feel himself something of a stranger and a 'foreign body.'"

Mary Louise's cultural alterity as a Protestant seeps into her sense of self. From the beginning, the novel's tone conveys her sense of estrangement. In the novel's first words, Mary Louise is described, distantly, as "A woman" (2). She hovers between identities, "not yet fifty-seven" and "seeming frail" (1). Her bread is "halved" and her bacon "cut," indicating her tenuous sense of self. Like her Protestant community, which sits on the edge of death, Mary Louise's identity is fragile and liminal.

Mary Louise's Protestantism compels her into a loveless marriage with Elmer Quarry, which only erodes her sense of self further. Their union is no more than a miserable marriage of convenience, but, like Anna Morgan and Stevens, Mary Louise must perform her role of dutiful wife. Mary Louise and Elmer go through the motions of marriage; they kiss, they call each other "dear," and honeymoon at the Strand Hotel. However, throughout their romance, Mary Louise longs for the comfort of home, for the farmhouse, to be "laying the places at the kitchen table or feeding the fowls with Letty" (34). Though she is newly Mrs. Quarry, she feels tethered to her life as Miss Dallon. While in the mental asylum, she is haunted by her numerous roles: "'Mary Louise,' she whispers in the dawn that comes after the upset of her visitor. 'Mary Louise Dallon. Mrs Quarry as is'" (71). Like Stevens, Mary Louise has various "suits" she wears: roles she performs until her sense of self disintegrates.

Though Mary Louise feels miserable as Elmer's spouse, her culture makes no room for a dissatisfied wife. When she attempts to confess her pain to her mother, her mother shakes her head and says, "'You're looking well'" (53). Mary Louise learns to make herself amenable to Elmer's cruel sisters, apologizing frequently though she doesn't mean it (54). She finds it easy to lie to her

Reverend Harrington, “easy to smile and say she did love Elmer Quarry,” because she does not want to be chastised for her decision to marry (56). Mary Louise’s performativity peaks when, one morning, she wakes up crying: “For no specific reason the tears continued to slip out, soundlessly, without sobbing” (55). Her silent tears are proof of her identity slippage: even her sadness has learned to conceal itself.

Amid her despair, Mary Louise loses grip on reality, mirroring Stevens’s ontological deterioration. While continuing to live in the mundane Quarry house, Mary Louise daydreams about “going for walks with Elmer Quarry and having him tucking his arm into his,” or “card parties in the huge front room… [with] music and even dancing” (56). She even begins to recall her actor crush James Stewart and her fondness for her “delicate cousin” Robert (56). As the novel alternates between scenes of a young Mary Louise in the Quarry house and an older, institutionalized woman, it becomes clear Mary Louise is becoming increasingly estranged from reality. According to critic Gregory A. Schirmer, she is “the most powerful figure of alienation in all of Trevor ’s writing” (204).

Distressed by all of her roles, Mary Louise enters a state of sorrow that nothing can rescue her from except, perhaps, love. When Mary Louise reunites with her cousin, Robert, their romance gives her something to cling to, suggesting love might be the antidote to identity slippage. As Sister Hannah muses on the importance of love in the asylum, her words ring true: “A person’s life isn’t orderly, Sister Hannah maintains; it runs about all over the place, in and out through time. The present’s hardly there; the future doesn’t exist. Only love matters in the bits and pieces of a person’s life.” (161)

Mary Louise, Stevens, and Anna all encounter glimmers of romantic love. But is this love enough to matter deeply, as Sister Hannah suggests? Can it save them from their profound melancholia and alienation? Because each protagonist has been steeped in identity slippage, they seek out flawed, incomplete, imaginary, or destructive relationships. Even so, they are all left radically and permanently shaken by the loss of their beloved, clinging to their ghosts. Their devastation proves that amid the tumultuous waters of identity slippage, even half-love offers a liferaft, but leaves each protagonist to drown when it is pulled away.

According to Jean Rhys scholar Carole Angier, Rhys sought out love affairs as a way of securing her "identity and psychological settlement" (Faja 106). Indeed, love proves to be a method of setting one's sights on something sturdy, and, as Rhys writes in *Voyage in the Dark*, watching "everything drop away except the one moment" (36). In *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna clings to her romance with Walter, a wealthy and older Englishman, as an antidote to her identity slippage. But their affair is not true love. Walter exploits Anna carelessly for sex. He buries her in criticisms, calls her work as a chorus girl a "disgrace," and says she is "awfully pathetic" while shopping for stockings (21-2). But Anna is so desperate for the certainty of love that she accepts cruel treatment to secure it. When Walter kisses her, she feels "giddy," and when he leaves her, she confesses, "If I never see [him] again I'll die" (22, 97). Anna clings to Walter's half-love because it caters to her fantasies of sturdiness and belonging.

From their first meeting, Anna is attracted to Walter's lavish appearance: "I liked the room and the red carnations on the table and the way he talked and his clothes – especially his clothes" (22). For Anna, wearing nice clothing is a way to subdue her Creole identity and perform English whiteness. Anna feels Walter's judgment of her modest wardrobe when he asks, "Do you always wear black?" (19). But when he pays her for sex, Anna hopes that she might use the money for clothes, and the thought delights her so much that she "forg[ets] about feeling ill" (27). For the first time, Anna can envision a future in which she belongs to a stable category and her outsiderness is not identified by merely a “look.” But, even as Anna visualizes herself dressed in ribbons and chemise, she dreads catching her reflection in the mirror. On one occasion, Anna asks Walter: “‘Have you ever noticed how different some looking-glasses make you look?’” (38). Anna is haunted by the unpredictability of appearances and the insecurity they reflect.

In an effort to escape her own uncertainty, Anna clings to Walter’s meager affections: kisses, the lingering warmth of his touch, the pet names he calls her. She dreams of belonging to him forever, begging desperately, “‘Don’t forget me, don’t forget me ever’” (89). Though she longs for perpetuity, she is haunted by the “clock ticking all the time on a table by the bed,” because she knows that, with time, she will need to find something new to cling to. But she fantasizes that she might be able to stop that march of time. Like the couple she sees kissing as though their “mouths [are] glued together,” she wants to hold onto Walter eternally (34). But Walter refuses to be her anchor. When he asks how she would like to spend her future, Anna replies, “‘I want to be with you. That’s all I want’” (50). Walter sneers at her. He knows their flimsy affair cannot provide Anna with eternal stability, and urges her to “get on” with her life.

Though Anna imagines that love with Walter would grant her eternal solidity, their affair only destabilizes her further. Walter does not see Anna as a whole person with a complex past; to him, Anna is a helpless chorus girl he uses for pleasure. He eroticizes her foreignness, calling her a “rum little devil,” but does not care for her history (32). Anna notices he often looks at her “in a funny sort of way, as if he didn’t believe what I was saying” (21). In her longing to be understood, Anna attempts to tell Walter about her life in Dominica. “‘I’m a real West Indian,’” she says, “‘I’m the fifth generation on my mother’s side.’” But Walter responds with a patronizing, “‘Are you really?’” as though he is laughing (52). In the absence of true care, Anna’s identity confusion crests: “I am hopeless, resigned, utterly happy. Is that me? I am bad, not good any longer, bad’”

(57). But it is not until Walter leaves for good that Anna is forced to confront that she is truly anchorless.

When Walter leaves, Anna's fear grows "gigantic; it filled me and it filled the whole world," and she feels certain she is going to "die" (96, 97). The identity slippage Anna has faced since childhood forms a foundation for inescapable melancholia, but the hopelessness she feels after Walter leaves her cements it. In Anna's case, romance provides mere distraction from her unmoored state. It does nothing to truly lift her from her "only possible ending," and she flounders when it disappears.

Unlike Anna's exploitative affair, Stevens' love in *The Remains of the Day* has the capacity to be redemptive and stabilizing, but he cannot overcome his performativity. Miss Kenton is warm, assertive, and interested in getting to know the man behind the butler, but Stevens refuses to sacrifice his professional identity for his emotional one. Stevens is terrified of love, because it threatens his rigid professionalism. Miss Kenton seeks to probe at his carefully curated exterior and locate the emotional man underneath. In a flirtatious exchange, Miss Kenton interrogates whether Stevens has a "curious aversion to pretty girls being on the staff" because they might pose a distraction (156). She presses, "Can it be that our Mr Stevens is flesh and blood after all and cannot fully trust himself?" Stevens remains professional, asserting that he must "place [his] thoughts elsewhere" while she continues to "chatter." Though Stevens feigns professionalism, Miss Kenton observes a "guilty smile" on his face, alerting readers again to the unreliability of Stevens's narration and the fragility of his identity (156). Because Stevens is so out of touch with his emotional self, his prose remains restrained and reserved, even when his appearance manifests desire and pleasure.

Though Stevens refuses to articulate his affections, Ishiguro makes clear Stevens’s romantic interest in Miss Kenton. He grows to recognize the sound of her footsteps on the floorboards and the distinct shape of her outline. When they interact, he describes her movements slowly, as though they are suspended in time: “She took one step more towards me so that a bar of light fell across her face” (79). Years after Miss Kenton’s departure from Darlington Hall, Stevens refuses to refer to her as Mrs. Benn, demonstrating his unwillingness to accept that she has found love elsewhere. Though he asks readers to excuse his accidental “impropriety” in calling Miss Kenton by her maiden name, readers know such an accident is unlikely for a man so meticulous in his craft (48). Once again, Stevens is unwilling to articulate affections made obvious to the reader, evidencing the gap between his performed self and his true self.

Though a reader can discern Stevens's affections, these hints toward his emotionality are not enough to open the gates to love or grant him true stability. Despite brewing affections, he remains undeniably committed to his professionalism. In what Hartwig declares the most “erotic” scene in the novel, Miss Kenton catches Stevens reading a romance novel and attempts to pry it from his hands (8): “Then she was standing before me, and suddenly the atmosphere underwent a peculiar change – almost as though the two of us had been suddenly thrust on to some other plane of being altogether. [...] Miss Kenton continued very gently to prise the book away, practically one finger at a time” (167). This moment is ripe with the promise of romance, but Stevens rejects intimacy and adheres to the demands of butlering; he recalls “showing Miss Kenton out of [his] pantry quite firmly and the episode was thus brought to a close” (167). Stevens’s panicked withdrawal stems from his fear that his bare self might be perceived. When Miss Kenton enters his butler’s pantry, she intrudes upon the “one place in the house where privacy and solitude are guaranteed" (165). Only in solitude is Stevens comfortable shedding his mask, but Miss Kenton's passion, warmth, and love threaten exposure.

Years later, Stevens is haunted by his withdrawal. Finally confronted with Miss Kenton, he poses the question he's longed to ask for "some time": whether she is happy (237). In a moment of courageous honesty, Miss Kenton confesses that she occasionally thinks, "'What a terrible mistake I've made with my life'" (239). She continues, "For instance, I get to thinking about a life I may have had with you, Mr. Stevens." The poignant vulnerability of her admission, coupled with the restrained formality of his title, "Mr. Stevens," symbolizes the reason the pair could never be together. If they were to pursue a relationship, Miss Kenton's vulnerability would always come up against Stevens's performance.

In the devastating final moments of their conversation, Stevens admits to readers—though, crucially, not to Miss Kenton—that "at that moment, my heart was breaking" (239). But the shock of Stevens's uncharacteristic vulnerability is dulled by his quick return to resignation: "I turned to her and said with a smile: 'You're very correct, Mrs Benn. As you say, it is too late to turn back the clock" (239). Still, the realization that he has potentially wasted his life playing a character—never brave enough to leave Darlington Hall as Miss Kenton did, or fully embrace his emotional self—devastates him in a surprising moment of heartbreak.

Stevens's performativity is the impetus for his melancholia. But it is also his only semblance of control in a loveless world. Shedding his armor would force him to confront the grief he has long suppressed: the loss of his father, his profound isolation, and ideological servitude to Hitler's regime. Stevens is so threatened by the prospect of emotionality—of letting his true self see the light of day—that he trades the genuine stability of love for the illusory security gained in pretending. But this identity slippage costs him the most fundamental human need: connection.

Contrastingly, as Mary Louise spirals into the pain of identity slippage, she seems to find relief in love. But her love is too brief, too surrealist, to grant her true anchorage. Instead, love with Robert only intensifies Mary Louise's estrangement from the present, splitting her life into fantasy and reality. Mary Louise's love affair with Robert presents itself as an alternative utopia—an otherworldly escape from the misery of life with Mr. Quarry. In their first conversation after reuniting, Mary Louise admits to Robert that she once dreamed of working for the Quarry business. Robert asks, "'Is it paradise, Mary Louise?'" and she replies, "'Oh, all that was just a childish thing'" (78). This conversation establishes the dichotomy between Mary Louise's life at home and her utopic life with Robert. With Robert, Mary Louise can live out childhood dreams of paradise, playing with toy soldiers and inhabiting fantasy worlds. She can close her eyes and pretend she exists in the stories Robert tells—in a vivid and painless world where "swallows fl[y] high" and "sprigs of fuschia decorat[e] the hair of a woman in black" (95).

Mary Louise falls for Robert precisely because of their affair's surrealism. When Robert confesses his love for Mary Louise, she remains silent, leaving him to imagine her response. He is left wondering whether the "pressure of her fingers on his palm" could be a "sign, a statement she could not bring herself otherwise to make" (103). Though Robert interprets Mary Louise's silence as confession, this is mere fabrication. Similarly, after their first kiss, they return to Robert's house "not saying anything else" (104). Their silence encapsulates their thoroughly unspoken bond, which is rooted more in fantasy than reality. Though their relationship feels euphoric, it is, as critic Gregory A. Schirmer writes, "a poor substitute for love in the flesh," because it only leads Mary Louise "away from any engagement with the real world" and from any sturdy sense of self (205).

As Mary Louise spends more time with Robert, she detaches from her life at home. When Robert encourages her to "tell [him] anything," she parallels Robert's storytelling by detailing her life with Elmer as though it is fiction. She discusses, impersonally, “a marriage that was unconsummated, about the shock there’d been for husband and wife in the Strand Hotel, about the state they’d lived in since” (102). Here, she fails to inhabit her own life: her presence is only marked by the ambiguous descriptor “a wife.” When Mary Louise is at home with the Quarry family, she is distant. She revisits her memories with Robert with her eyes “half-closed,” imagining his toy soldiers lining the table and his voice narrating fiction (81). Though her dissociation provides refuge from her miserable marriage, her slippery hold on reality has dangerous consequences for her sense of self. Like her withering Protestant community, Mary Louise grows increasingly frail, and loses her vitality. When Robert dies, she has no self left to cling to.

Through this heartbreak, Mary Louise comes to face utter desolation and inertia. But heartbreak on its own does not necessitate devastation. As critic George Core has said, “The failure of romance [...] need not always lead to madness” (4). Heartbreak is not determinedly unsurvivable; many protagonists—and people, for that matter—lose a beloved and find ways to carry on. Anna Morgan, Stevens, and Mary Louise are left broken, detached, and hopeless not because of the failure of love alone, but because of a distinct combination of heartbreak and identity slippage. Recovery after heartbreak requires, as its definition elucidates, “regaining possession of something lost or taken away,” but Anna, Stevens, and Mary Louise do not have a stable self to reclaim or return to after loss (*OED* s.v. “recovery, n.”). Because of this preexisting instability, each protagonist is doomed from the start to meet their “only possible ending.”

Anna Morgan’s final descent is marked by an inevitable disintegration of self. In the wake of Walter Jeffries’s desertion, Anna’s identity fractures more than ever before. Critic Cathleen Maslen recognizes the connection between Anna’s heartbreak and her identity slippage, writing that her ultimate “sadness and impoverished sense of identity” is a product not only of Walter’s abandonment but of the “powerful condition underwriting these relationships: *viz*, that Anna’s sexual and national identity will be deployed on behalf of a masculine sexual fantasy in which ideologies of imperialism and paternalism intersect” (33). Anna’s romantic relationships are deeply inflected by her alterity; Walter infantilizes and eroticizes Anna’s otherness in a way that reflects imperial paternalism. When Anna is abandoned, she takes it as a banishment from English attention altogether, and is forced to grapple with her racial and colonial otherness alone.

Though Anna continues to strive toward Englishness, she retreats into memories of her childhood in Dominica for solace. Following Walter’s abandonment, Anna puts her head under the tap and pretends it is a “waterfall, like the one that falls into the pool where we bathed at Morgan’s rest” (90). She recites excerpts from an unidentified historical text on Dominica: “‘The Caribs indigenous to this island were a warlike tribe and their resistance to white domination, though spasmodic, was fierce’” (105). The dissonance between Anna’s lack of education and her academic verbiage marks an impossible “excursion out of consciousness and into the realm of public discourse,” signifying her rapidly deteriorating personhood (Emery 421).

Though Anna grasps for lifelines—memories of Dominica, prostitution, and sex—she feels the whole world closing in on her like “smooth unclimbable walls” (120). In the book’s final scene, she lays in her procedure bed envisioning the Dominica masked concertina, haunted by symbols of racial performativity: Black West Indians wearing white masks and sticking out their tongues. She feels them laughing at her, and, in the novel’s original manuscript, Rhys tells us why: “They were laughing at the idea that anybody black would want to be white” (Morris 5). For Anna, the Black Caribbean people’s scorn confirms that she will never be accepted or belong anywhere.

Even on her near-death bed, Anna feels estranged from whiteness and Blackness. Drowning in loneliness and futility, she realizes: “Nothing can save me now” (187).

Through Anna’s devastation, Rhys tells us that alterity can only produce pain. In her memoir, Rhys recognizes that her own destiny as a white Creole woman has been sealed from the start:

> “I realize that I am being gently pushed into my predestined role, the role of victim. I have never had any good times, never laughed, never got my own back, never dared, never worn pretty clothes, never been happy, never known wild hopes, or wilder despairs. I've forgotten all about it. Wailing, I have gone from tyrant to tyrant; each let down worse than the last” (70).

Anna, too, goes solemnly from tyrant to tyrant—Hester, Walter, Ethel—until she is too exhausted to live. But the end of *Voyage in the Dark* demands that she “start all over again” (187). It is no surprise that Rhys resisted this version. Rhys knew that Anna couldn’t just “recover and meet a rich man” or even “a poor, good-natured man” as editors suggested, because love could not rescue her from her inevitable end (Morris 2). Instead, Rhys fought to send Anna away with words that would grant her the relief, warmth, and, above all, the solidity of identity she lacked. In her final moments, “everything is blotted out” and, at last, “blackness comes…” (Morris 4).

Unlike Anna, Stevens finds the possibility of emotional redemption through connection. By appealing to his heart, Miss Kenton urges Stevens to free his emotional self from the constraints of aristocratic servitude and land somewhere solid. Although Stevens resists the opportunity to fall in love, the novel’s conclusion demonstrates a shift in his self-perception.

In the novel’s closing scene, Stevens finds himself on a pier surrounded by people. When a stranger invites him into conversation, his willing engagement suggests that his recent heartbreak—watching Miss Kenton’s eyes fill with tears as they said goodbye—has prompted a desire for true connection. At first, Stevens maintains superficial conversation and discusses only his career at Darlington Hall. But his attitude toward intimacy feels markedly changed when he seeks to continue the dialogue even after the stranger pulls away: “The man turned his gaze back to the sea again, took a deep breath and sighed contentedly. We then proceeded to sit there together quietly for several moments” (242). Though the stranger seems content to have ceased conversation, Stevens does not turn away as he typically would from affection or warmth. He indicates their enduring connection with the plural “we” and the acknowledgment that they sit “together.” Stevens continues to open up, spontaneously sharing that he does not “have a great deal more left to give” to his work as a butler (242). In this vulnerable admission, Stevens recognizes that there may come a time when he must terminate his duties at Darlington Hall, conceiving of his occupation not as an eternal identity, but as merely a job.

Despite momentary lapses back into habits of emotional repression—like declaring that things are “quite all right” when the stranger offers him a handkerchief—Stevens proceeds to uncharacteristically expose himself, lamenting: “All those years I served [Lord Darlington], I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can’t even say I made my own mistakes. Really – one has to ask oneself – what dignity is there in that?” (243). This emotional revelation reflects an important shift in self-conception. For the first time, Stevens confronts and reflects on his ideological servitude. He ponders not whether he has been a worthy butler, but whether he has lived a worthy life. For a man who has refused to feel anything at all, Stevens’s reckoning with regret signals significant growth.

Admittedly, Stevens’s final line feels regressive, as he expresses his desire to please his employer. However, there are glimmers of hope to be found even in Stevens’s renewed commitment to Darlington Hall. The job Stevens longs to perfect this time is not polishing silver or suppressing his emotions in moments of crisis; he seeks to improve his ability to “banter.” This desire derives from a new impulse toward connection, as Stevens recognizes that “in bantering lies the key to human warmth" (245). Therefore, love and heartbreak may not be enough to shake Stevens from his occupation as a butler, but they do drive him away from the perils of his dual identity, allowing him to become a fuller, more integrated human. Even as Stevens turns backward toward Darlington Hall, he also turns toward connection.

Mary Louise's future is not as promising as Stevens's. In the wake of Robert's death, Mary Louise is consumed by her grief. According to Angelo Monaco, Mary Louise's anguish coalesces with Sigmund Freud's definition of melancholia: "'identification of the ego with the abandoned object' [...] a process that cleaves her wounded psyche and produces a 'cessation of interest in the outside world'" (284). Indeed, when Robert dies, Mary Louise's total identification with him prompts her to withdraw from the outside world. She retreats into the Quarry attic, where she "delight[s] in the intimacies death could not touch," envisioning her cousin in his grave, or replaying their brief excursions to the graveyard in her mind (129). Robert's death intensifies the gap between Mary Louise's "two lives," forcing her to straddle the world of the living and the world of the dead.

In her desperation to reunite with Robert, Mary Louise clings to Russian literature. Turgenev's fictional worlds continue to bleed into Mary Louise's reality until they overpower it entirely. Though Trevor initially frames Turgenev's novels in italics, indicating their sharp divergence from real life, the excerpts grow increasingly indistinguishable from regular text: "The old princess complained that so much iced water could not be good for a girl with a weak chest. As for herself, she had a toothache…" (154). Moreover, Mary Louise is able to envision the "brick facade" of Insarov's house—a fictional character—"without closing her eyes," indicating her slippery hold on the present (139). Mary Louise's deteriorating connection to reality and her desire to escape her life eventually send her to the mental asylum, where she plants a garden in Robert's honor and continues to reminisce on their affair.

Mary Louise devotes her life to her lover. But such tribute does not save her: it only exacerbates her alienation. By the novel's end, Mary Louise's self-loathing is palpable. Though she claims she is "at peace," her self-effacing words indicate otherwise: "'I'm a dreadful old nuisance'" (221). Moreover, she is completely depleted of human connection. She attends church alone, and engages with her husband only when he leaves food on a tray outside her door. The Protestant church's clergyman is the only person to whom Mary Louise has divulged her continued devotion to Robert. Mary Louise's enduring dependency on Protestantism mirrors her continued reliance on her cousin: both entities have withered away, leaving her clinging only to their ghosts.

In the novel's final scene, the clergyman makes a commitment to himself: "'I have arranged it,' his own voice promises, the least he can surely do" (222) The clergyman's pledge refers to Mary Louise's desire to be buried beside Robert when she dies. Like Anna Morgan, Mary Louise knows she will only find peace and refuge from her identity slippage in death. But, unlike Anna, Mary Louise attains this relief. As the novel closes, William Trevor pans to Mary Louise's funeral.

Did William Trevor have to put up a fight to grant Mary Louise her death? Perhaps. Perhaps there was an editor who begged Trevor to "give the girl a chance"—to introduce Mary Louise to a "good-natured man" so she might overcome her sorrow. Perhaps Trevor insisted, as Rhys did, that Mary Louise had suffered enough—that, after a lifetime of slipping between worlds, all she needed was rest. Unlike Rhys, Trevor succeeds, and, at last, the "lovers lie together" (222).

At last, Anna Morgan, Stevens, and Mary Louise meet their predestined ends. Though each protagonist wades against inertia, their authors fight for their redemption. It may not be possible for Anna to carry on beyond her abortion, for Stevens to escape butlering, or for Mary Louise to let go of Robert, but their authors strive to grant them peace through human connection or even death. Jean Rhys exemplifies this struggle most poignantly. Even thirty years after publishing *Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys writes of disputes about the novel's ending in a letter to a friend: "'I still think I was right, and they were wrong, tho' it was long ago'" (Morris 6). Perhaps Rhys's protectiveness over Anna stems from her own identification with the character. Rhys, too, spent her life as an outsider, writing in her memoir, "I would never really belong anywhere, and I knew it" (*Smile Please* 52). But Rhys possessed one life-saving facility that Anna does not: writing.

If love cannot rescue a fractured character, it seems writing might have the capacity to do so. In her memoir, Rhys confesses: "All I can force myself to do is to write, to write. I must trust that out of [my writing] will come the pattern, the clue that can be followed." She continues: "I have been accused of madness. But if everything is in me, good, evil and so on, so must strength be in me if I know how to get at it" (*Smile Please* 72). For Rhys, writing is the tool she uses to unearth her strength. She believes it is possible to reconcile conflicting identities of "good, evil and so on," and locate beneath them an enduring, stable fortitude.

If Anna, Stevens, and Mary Louise are to be saved, perhaps Rhys, Ishiguro, and Trevor demonstrate the only way forward: channeling their alterity into literature, and, in Rhys's case, "arranging her 'little life' into a writing life whose dimensions we are still happily measuring" (Wood). After all, it seems perfectly fitting that the sole way of changing one's "only possible ending" is to pick up a pen and write a new one.

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