

## Navigating the Borders of Social Respectability: Sartorial Class Consciousness in Jean Rhys and Carolyn Steedman

"...[C]hanges in the market-place, the growth of real income and the proliferation of consumer goods... were used by mother to measure out her discontent: there existed a newly expanding and newly endowed material world in which she was denied a place."

--Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: a Story of Two Lives*

In describing her mother's social discontent, Steedman, an English social historian, could be describing a Jean Rhys heroine—or Rhys herself. Steedman's work understands "class consciousness" for working class women as a "structure of feeling that is learned in childhood" (7), one that should include "proper envy," a "desire" for material things... and "a subterranean longing for that which one cannot have," emotions neglected as productive categories of social class analysis.

The parallel between Steedman's and Rhys's writing involves working women's unsuccessful sartorial navigation of social class boundaries. For Steedman's mother, crossing boundaries required a "New Look" suit; for Rhys, it required new clothes: both of which function as a *sartorial panacea*. Like *Landscape*, Rhys's fiction describe negative emotions (i.e. abjection, alienation, and self-deprecation) women not sartorially equipped to navigate social boundaries experience. Anna Morgan's distress about the condition of her clothes in *Voyage in the Dark* ends in despair:

When I thought about my clothes I was too sad to cry. About clothes, it's awful. Everything makes you want pretty clothes like hell. People laugh at girls who are badly dressed...you look at the skirt of your costume, all crumpled in the back. And...you look at your hideous underclothes and you think, 'All right, I'll do anything for good clothes...I'm poor and my clothes are cheap and perhaps it will always be like this...' (14-15).

In *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, after learning of her mother impending death, Julia Martin finds that "the idea of buying new clothes comforted her" because new clothes disguise her as socially acceptable to her middle class family (267). Rhys's exploration of lower-class women's inability to sartorially navigate social boundaries anticipates Steedman's analysis of working class women's pursuit of the "material stepping stones of escape" provided by clothing—what I refer to as a *sartorial panacea*. Though Rhys's heroines fail to escape, her fiction and her life story forecasts the kind of humanistic portrayal that Steedman argues is missing from scholarship on women and class (16).