



# Silence to Self-Identity: Psychological Traits of Cath Avery Hinders Identity Development in Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl*

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Manuscript ID:  
BIJ-SPL2-NOV25-MD-050

Subject: English

Received : 23.07.2025  
Accepted : 24.10.2025  
Published : 14.11.2025

DOI: 10.64938/bij.v10si2.25.Nov050

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## Abstract

*The research paper aims to analyse Rainbow Rowell's Fangirl, with a focus on one of the significant issues in young adults today. It analyses Cath Avery's psychological development and growth as an individual. Young Adult Literature serves as a significant genre in literature as it represents the crucial age in a person's life where development of an individual takes a significant shift. Rainbow Rowell is an American writer known for dealing with the issues of young adults in her novels. This research paper investigates how anxiety issue and introvert nature lead the character to live in an imaginary fiction world as a means of escapism from encountering the psychological fear. Fan fiction writing serves as a coping mechanism which reflects the reality of many young adults who retreat themselves either into food, books, media or technology. The paper employs qualitative analysis of close reading of the primary text and inclusion of theoretical concepts, such as attachment theory and Mowrer's two factor theory. Attachment theory examines how the absence of one parent affects the emotional characteristic of the protagonist. Mowrer's two factor theory analyses the underlying factors behind the psychological problems of Cath Avery. Series of confrontations with people and situations mold Cath to come out of solitude and exhibit her talent as writer that eventually leads to individuality.*

**Keywords:** identity, displacement, attachment theory, social anxiety

## Introduction

Rainbow Rowell is an American author of young adult and adult contemporary novels. *Fangirl* is a 2013 contemporary young adult novel. The novel is about the twin sisters Cath Avery and Wren Avery whose character traits are opposite as they belong to introvert and extrovert nature respectively. While Wren becomes socially active and enjoys learning new things Cath socially isolates herself and engages in fan fiction world. This very nature makes Cath to develop feeling of inferiority, anxiety and emotional distress.

## Objectives of the Study

The objective of the study is to explore the effects of spoiled relationship on the family bonding as well as individual's character development. The paper aims to analyse the struggles an individual goes through to adapt to the people and situations. It analyses the emotional and psychological growth of the protagonist from seclusion to genuine relationships.

## Material & Methods

The primary text, *Fangirl* has been closely read and analysed qualitatively to understand the plot and characters development. The secondary sources that include research papers and journal articles add depth to the qualitative methodology of the text.



Theoretical approach has been employed to support the ideas of the author and to clearly understand the depth of the subject dealing with.

### Discussion

Cath Avery is a teenage character who suffers from psychological issues and emotional gap with the people around. She falls into the category of introverts. Many life incidents create emotional pain in her. She has disorders such as social anxiety, feeling inferior, lack of trust, and meeting new people. Lilla Rizky Gareti says, Sigmund Freud defines anxiety as “a felt, affective, unpleasant state accompanied by a physical sensation that warns the person against impending danger” (27). When in public, she remains conscious and undergoes anxiety. Shombit Sengupta says, “Worrying about what others will say is the most indecent social education system in our country because it puts you in a cage you cannot break free from” (47).

The background of Cath Avery’s family gives an insight into the character traits of Cath. Cath and Wren, the twin sisters have grown up under the same roof with their father as their mother Laura, left them when they were around eight years old. Arthur Avery, the father of the twins has a medical issue known as bipolar disorder. So, the only person Cath maintained strong relationship is with Wren. She spends most of the time with Wren and depends on her for emotional peace. The lack of emotional bonding with the parents influences her character trait. Bowlby explains the importance of the parent and child relationships to shape the behaviour of the child through the words of Phillip R Shaver:

Human infants are born with a repertoire of behaviors (attachment behaviors) “designed” by evolution to assure proximity to supportive others (attachment figures), who are likely to provide protection from physical and psychological threats, promote safe and healthy exploration of the environment, and help the infant learn to regulate emotions effectively. (18)

The way Cath and Wren Avery handled and perceived situations were different. Cath feels emotional burden as her father suffers from bipolar

disorder. She feels lost after her mother abandons her. There develops an emotional void in her and she tries to fill the void by being close with Wren. But she too leaves her to suffer from emotional gap once they enter the college. As Igbinosa Victor Omoruyi says, “The family is the child’s first place of contact with the world. The child as a result, acquires initial education and socialization from parents and other significant persons in the family. (10)

Apart from a good bonding with Wren, Cath has an interest in writing a fan fiction. She writes fan fiction on Simon Snow Series, a fictional work written by a fictional author, Gemma T. Leslie. The author, Gemma T. Leslie is modeled on J. K. Rowling. It is the only way for her to escape from loneliness and interact with society in online. She uses it as a coping mechanism to escape from the society as said by Roy F. Baumeister in the words “Displacement refers to altering the target of an impulse” (1093). The only way she communicates with the society is through online comments that she gets for her writing.

A new phase begins as Cath and Wren enter the college life. Wren, an extrovert wants to make new friends and chooses to live in another room in a dorm asking Cath to stay in another room with new people. Cath’s new beginning at University of Nebraska adds worries to her as it is a new surrounding for her added to that Wren is not ready to stay with her in the same dorm room. Brad Bowins says, “Adapting to changing environmental conditions requires motivation, concentration, and problem-solving abilities that all suffer when severe adverse emotions take over” (2). As days pass, everyone in the dorm as a friend except Cath, who does not even speak to her roommate, Reagan. She considers Reagan to be a stranger. Wren, who initially spoke with Cath, completely avoids Cath and begins to form close bond with Courtney, her roommate. Wren is totally opposite to Cath from the personality point of view. For Cath, college life is “The whole prospect is already terrifying” (7). Cath tells, “I don’t need new people” (7).

Phillip R. Shaver says, “During adolescence and adulthood, other relationship partners often become



targets of proximity seeking and emotional support, including close friends and romantic partners” (19). Cath inherently is disturbed because of the lack of the mother’s presence in her life. This makes her to attach herself closer with Wren. But Wren’s decision to be in a separate dorm increases the social anxiety of Cath. She feels inferior thinking whether she will be able to live with new people. As she did not spend time with other people except for Wren and her father, meeting new people makes her anxious. This affects her in the University as she has to face new people and speak with them. The University and the dorm triggers fear in her.

The writing class brings out the creative talent in Cath. She is capable of writing more than the fan fiction. When asked by piper, the professor about what the novel is, Cath says, “To be somewhere else.... To stop being anything or anywhere at all.... To disappear” (23). Nick Manter, the writing partner of Cath in the college finds out Cath’s talent and writing skill. Cath develops a liking for Nick who reciprocates same love to her. He cheats her to score good grades in the college. Later Nick betrays her and Cath realises he was just using her to get a higher grade in the fiction writing class. It again hits Cath to not believe in people as her school boyfriend, Abel has also broken with her for his new girlfriend, Katie.

Cath suns herself from going to the dining hall. She is perfectly okay to live her life in Lincoln by eating protein bars and peanut butter in her room. She keeps all her eatables in her tiny containers. The tiny container in which she preserves her eatables is similar to that of the tiny place in which she is present most of the time in her room. She feels relaxed to stay in that tiny place. After few months, Reagan questions Cath about dustbin filled with wrappers of protein bars. Cath realises “that this was one of those times when the truth would be simpler than a lie” (39). Cath does not know where or how the dining hall will be. When Reagan forces her to come to the dining hall, Cath replies “I don’t like new places. New situations. There’ll be all those people, and I won’t know where to sit – I don’t want to go” (39). Reagan understands the issues Cath has

been undergoing silently and helps her to overcome it.

Michaela Buck says about Hobart Mower’s two-factor theory proposes that “1. An organism associates stimuli in the environment with aversive stimuli, and this allows these stimuli to evoke fear; 2. The avoidance response is reinforced by eliminating these warning stimuli or by escaping from them, and therefore causes fear reduction” (333). Cath suffers from social anxiety right from her childhood because of the absence of mother figure in life. It continues in her young adult age as Wren moves far from her now. This lack of being present with many people or public instills in her the social anxiety disorder which explains the first factor proposed by Mower. The only way she copes with her inferior and anxious feeling is to dwell into fanfiction world. According to Cath, fiction is written “To be somewhere else.... To stop being anything or anywhere at all.... To disappear” (23). The second factor that deals with avoidance response fits the behaviour of Cath as she skips the dinner to avoid meeting people. She did not like when all the people in the dining room looked at her and does not like being the center of attraction. She immediately runs to her room. She eats protein bars to satisfy her hunger. She does not take part in any events and parties that take place in university or dorm. The only thing that comforts her is the world of fan fiction that she writes *Carry On*, *Simon*. This avoidance behaviour increases her social anxiety and prevents her from being emotionally stable.

Levi, Reagan’s friend and Cath begin close bonding. Levi and Cath decide to go out somewhere. Cath tells him that they do not have anything in common. Cath tells, “I don’t trust anybody. Not anybody. And the more that I care about someone, the more sure I am they’re going to get tired of me and take off” (298). Levi does not force Cath to be closer to him. He gives the time and space that she needs.

Wren gets admitted in the hospital which becomes a turning point in the novel for many good things to happen in the novel. Cath and Wren unite again same as before. Cath gets the chance to meet her mother. An encounter with her mother Laura in



the hospital changes Cath's longing for her mother and her absence in her life into acceptance as she observes Laura's intention to leave the hospital despite Wren being admitted in the hospital and their meeting after ten years. Laura does not reflect any emotion or kindness which Cath expects when she sees her mother after a decade.

R and Deepa quote the words of Claire McCarthy who says, "According to the National Institutes of Health, nearly 1 in 3 of all adolescent ages 13 to 18 will experience an anxiety order" (544). But it requires right people and situations to slowly overcome the feeling of anxiety which happens with Cath Avery. Cath feels happy when everything is setting right and coming back to normal. Gradually Cath Avery undergoes change in her behaviour and the perception of the world. Her relationship with Levi and Reagan serves as a major part in her behavioural development. Unlike Wren, Levi helps Cath to overcome unfavourable situations and try to adapt to the surrounding. Cath also does not depend on Levi as she depended on Wren. Cath expresses her wish to share room with Reagan when Wren asks whether she wants to be her roommate. Cath has learnt to connect with new people which reveals her evolution in her behaviour after enduring different emotional pain. In the end, Cath shift her attention from fan fiction to write a book about her own life.

## Conclusion

The paper is an attempt to exhibit the growth of the protagonist emotionally as well as mentally. It brings out the factors that lead to the evolution of the character traits in the protagonist. The paper stresses the importance to have the right person in life for the emotional well-being of the person. She begins to navigate the people and the world around her relationships and writing. The growing self of the protagonist happens giving way to the process of self-discovery.

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