

FINDING RICHNESS IN BARBARA PYM'S LEONORA EYRE

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FINDING RICHNESS IN BARBARA PYM'S LEONORA EYRE

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Abstract
of
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Literary critics admire Barbara Pym's *The Sweet Dove Died*; however, they often find its heroine, Leonora Eyre, as problematic in that she seems so different from those in Pym's previous novels. Although Leonora, like many of Pym's heroines, is a spinster, she is not Pym's typical "excellent woman" who finds validation for her life through her support of others in the community or church. Leonora, a beautiful woman in her late forties, emphasizes perfection in her appearance and home and likes to be in control in her relationships with others. Often misunderstanding Leonora's deeply reserved nature, readers believe her to be aloof and self-absorbed and have trouble empathizing with her character. They find Leonora to be an unlikely and unlikable heroine. Critics, in fact, usually judge Leonora as narcissistic. Unfortunately, the label of narcissist continues to haunt Leonora's character. Readers and critics tend to accept and perpetuate this label rather than question its validity and explore the complexities of Leonora's character or the possibility that she is more alike than different from Pym's other heroines.

Pym's famous "rediscovery" in January 1977, when she was twice-named as one of the most underrated writers of the twentieth century after a fourteen-year period in which she could not find a publisher for her work, prompted critics to again focus on her

work. *Quartet in Autumn* and *The Sweet Dove Died*, written during this fourteen-year period and published in 1977 and 1978 respectively, especially drew literary interest as Pym's newest novels. A resurgence of interest in Pym's entire canon followed in England, leading to the publication of Pym's novels in the United States in the late 1970s as well. Many articles and books of literary criticism and analysis were subsequently published during the 1980s and 1990s as critics explored various aspects of Pym's work including various analyses of Leonora's character as the heroine of *The Sweet Dove Died*. This thesis relies on many of the sources published during this twenty-year period, although it also incorporates current literary criticism from the 2000s as well.

By comparing Leonora with other Pym heroines with an eye toward her similarities rather than differences, this thesis finds that Leonora, like all of Pym's heroines, incorporates certain characteristic Pym attitudes toward love, marriage, and the spinster. Leonora also has a strong tendency, like most of Pym's heroines, to indulge in romantic fantasy, and her focus on self-validation through self-care and nurturance places her among the "elegant" rather than the "excellent" women in Pym's canon, who validate their lives by helping others. By analyzing Leonora's character and relationships in the novel and finding evidence of her character's growth and development, this thesis concludes that many critics have judged Leonora too hastily and harshly by labeling her

as a narcissist, further contending that Leonora is deserving of a more sympathetic reading as a true Pym heroine whose nature is significantly similar to Pym's.

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PREFACE

Writing an enthusiastic letter to her friend Prudence about her observations of the small village where her husband is to be the new vicar, Jane, in *Jane and Prudence*, effuses “Dearest Prue, such *richness* here!” (Pym 46). Perceiving many possibilities for interesting observations and a satisfying fullness in village life, Jane is brimming with curiosity and excitement. “Satisfying fullness” is an apt description of Barbara Pym’s novels. Pym’s keen perceptions, expressed through her narrators and characters, afford many possibilities for finding richness in her writing. Her wry and detached comic style invites the curious reader to share in her astute observations of the surprisingly small everyday world in which we all live. Like the archeologist who makes meaningful discoveries about previous civilizations by digging to unearth their treasures or the anthropologist who reveals the richness in another culture’s traditions and way of life through studied observation, Pym, writing with similar detachment, but with humor and compassion, affords valuable glimpses into the richly textured landscape of ordinary life. This reader enthusiastically rereads Pym’s novels year after year, always finding her work comforting as well as engaging. Pym thus seemed the obvious choice when choosing a subject for my master’s thesis in an attempt to discover why and how Pym’s novels remain so satisfying. Perhaps like Jane, I am fascinated by finding possibilities for “richness.”

I began the research for my thesis on Pym with the idea of studying her heroines, focusing especially on her “excellent women” and their ability, through curiosity, imagination, irony, detached observance, and good humor, to reconcile society’s

expectations for their lives with their own. Pym's heroines are ordinary women, many of whom are older and unmarried and therefore regarded by society as spinsters. In Pym's time, the label of spinster still carried the implication that a woman remained unmarried because of her inability to "catch" a husband, rather than because she consciously chose to remain single. Although society recognized and afforded the secondary role of community "service and support" for the spinster, at the time of Pym's writing, society continued to consider marriage to be a woman's most fulfilling role. Pym's novels, however, work to reinvent the label. As Laura Doan observes in *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters*, Pym redefines the spinster by working to "transform the negative and thereby reclaim an old identity," in novels that offer "an opportunity to undermine traditional notions of the spinster and to create a positive self identity" (153). Pym presents a different view of the spinster's life by creating single women who are able to find validation in their own lives outside of marriage, thereby refuting society's opinion of the spinster as lonely and powerless. Doan terms Pym's classic unmarried heroine as "a self-reliant and autonomous single woman" (10). Although as spinsters they are alone, these women are not therefore necessarily lonely. They find possibilities for creating meaningful and satisfying lives by choosing to appreciate the simple but fulfilling pleasures of life found in friendship and good food and conversation; by finding something or someone to love; and by being charitable and helping others.

Pym's spinsters realize the disparity of their position as respects society's regard, but typical of excellent women, they take it in stride. These women, as Katherine Anne Ackley writes, "may realize the necessity for settling for second best and finding

compensations where they can, but they have a wise and comic vision of their world. They are sensible and compassionate women who do the best they can under difficult circumstances” (4). Pym’s excellent women quietly accept the circumstances of their lives, finding strength in their optimism and in the connections they make with others. Their ability to see potential for change and thus hope in life’s possibilities gives Pym’s heroines a natural resiliency that overreaches any despair. There is something both compelling and reassuring about these women who choose to live life on their own terms, recognizing that their own lives are enough for personal fulfillment. The realization of “enough” is a cornerstone of Pym’s philosophy as an awareness of opportunity even in apparent lack or limitation and as an appreciation for what exists in one’s life despite loss. Pym recognized that although life’s inevitable losses bring grief and sadness, they also afford opportunities for growth and change if one has the courage and willingness to explore them.

Tightening my focus, I decided to look at the themes of loss and loneliness as respects Pym’s heroines. Critics have found these themes as regularly occurring throughout Pym’s canon. Michael Cotsell, for example, notes that “it has been widely observed” that Pym’s fiction “has as a central focus the shock of disappointment and rejection. Her heroines have repeatedly to cope with feelings of neglect, desolation and loneliness” (5). I wanted to explore and compare how Pym’s heroines coped with loss and loneliness, deciding to examine just three of Pym’s heroines from this perspective: Mildred Lathbury in *Excellent Women*, Leonora Eyre in *The Sweet Dove Died*, and Marcia Ivory in *Quartet in Autumn*. Mildred, chosen as representative of the “excellent

women” in Pym’s earlier novels, was intended as a contrast to Leonora and Marcia from Pym’s later novels who represent a very different type of heroine. Leonora and Marcia are not excellent women. Living outside of the usual support of the church or larger community that Pym’s excellent women enjoy, Leonora and Marcia are even more alone. The three heroines thus represent exploring loss from the various standpoints of Mildred’s quiet acceptance, Leonora’s manipulation and avoidance, and Marcia’s defiance.

Inexplicably I chose to begin with Leonora. Knowing it might be easier if I began with Mildred, perhaps Pym’s most popular excellent woman, I also sensed intriguing possibilities with Leonora, finding this problematic Pym heroine a challenge. I soon found myself in a very different world than that of the cozy and friendly excellent woman, however, and viewing loss and loneliness from an entirely different point of view. With Leonora, reportedly one of Pym’s most unlikable heroines, I was in the unfamiliar and less friendly landscape of a novel with an acute sense of loss and loneliness. However, as I began to study Leonora, I became more and more fascinated by this different type of Pym heroine: a fastidious perfectionist, isolated by her strong will and determination, who insists on viewing the world through her own impossibly romantic lens. Readers may find Leonora an unlikable heroine, but her character is finely drawn and commands recognition from Pym critics. Mason Cooley, for example, finds Leonora fascinating, observing that “the greatest achievement of all in *The Sweet Dove Died* is its remarkable heroine: cold, elegant Leonora Eyre, incapable of passion but capable of heartbreak, strong-willed but finally miserable and helpless in her self-

absorption” (205-6). Leonora’s detachment does not invite coziness or friendship, and by perceiving her attitude as selfish, one can easily be put off by her character. Leonora does not invite the same sympathy from the reader as other favorite Pym heroines, such as Belinda in *Some Tame Gazelle*, Mildred in *Excellent Women*, or Dulcie in *No Fond Return of Love*. Indeed, despite finding her a remarkable heroine, Cooley also concludes that “Leonora is fascinating but unsympathetic” (216). Ellie Wymard similarly finds Leonora “one of Pym’s most complex heroines,” but also “unappealingly selfish and snobbish” (118), and Ackley deems Leonora “the least likeable woman in all of Pym’s fiction” (94). The views of these critics are understandable, given Leonora’s sense of detachment, her reserved nature, and her emphasis on perfection that tends to isolate her and make close relationships with others more difficult. Leonora’s difficulty in connecting with other characters in the novel may influence readers, who consequently may also find it difficult to connect with Leonora, such as Cotsell who writes that “it is not always easy to care about Leonora, who, for much of the novel, seems simply elegant and selfish” (113).

I found myself of a different opinion, finding Leonora a sympathetic heroine and siding with Pym herself, who shares in a letter to Phillip Larkin: “I started not at all in sympathy with Leonora, who began by being a minor character but as the book progressed I got more interested in her and really enjoyed writing about her best in the end” (*VPE* 247). Pym, however, also had suspicions that Leonora as a colder, more removed heroine might present a challenge to her readers, especially those fond of her friendly and loveable “excellent women.” Echoing Jane Austen’s similar fears about her

equally self-absorbed heroine Emma, Pym voices her fear about Leonora being unlikable in another, later letter to Larkin: "I've just finished a very rough re-doing of that *Sweet Dove Died* novel about Leonora, etc, but what reader would want to identify herself with Leonora?" (VPE 250). Pym perhaps felt that readers might find Leonora's aloof and circumspect nature troublesome and have difficulty identifying with her character. Pym's fears seem to have some validity, for several of her critics, as previously noted, admire the novel but find Leonora difficult to understand or like. Although I too admit that Leonora is not readily likable, I find her character compelling. Through Pym's skilful, revealing portrayal, I became sympathetic to Leonora's nature and the circumstances of her life, finding an unexpected respect for her strength and determination. Some readers, put off by Leonora's detached nature, may inevitably consider her a narcissist and therefore inaccessible in her self-absorption, but Leonora's reserve does not necessarily make her inaccessible to the reader, for Pym affords valuable glimpses into Leonora's humanity even as she examines Leonora's isolated world.

Leonora's world is decidedly different from that of Pym's excellent women. With Mildred, for example, Pym examines how the social niche of the excellent woman provides a way for the spinster to validate her life outside of marriage. With Leonora, the social niche of the excellent woman is stripped away as Pym examines the loneliness of an older, unmarried heroine who, isolated by her perfectionism and fear of aging, tries to construct a niche of her own by creating her own belief system about herself and the world around her. As an attractive, elegant woman approaching fifty who values youth, beauty, and perfection, Leonora's view necessarily involves a good deal of denial as well

as fantasy as she determinedly works toward controlling her environment and keeping old age at bay. Leonora's complex and subtly textured character presents definite possibilities for richness, and I found myself wanting to explore these possibilities as well as defend the viewpoint of this seemingly problematic heroine whom everyone finds so easy to dislike. Surely Leonora has more to offer readers than just a study in isolation and narcissism. As a Pym heroine, Leonora's character draws upon the expanse and richness of Pym's perspective. Exploring Leonora's character from a broader perspective reveals that she indeed possesses many of the trademark characteristics of Pym heroines, such as imagination, sensitivity, courage, stoicism, vulnerability, and optimism that opens up the possibility for a more sympathetic reading of her character.

Focusing intently on Leonora, I found myself back at Pym's cornerstone philosophy of enough. In the midst of the loss and loneliness, yet also the determination and resiliency, of this unusual heroine's life was the opportunity to discover and learn more about Pym's point of view. What exactly was Pym saying about loss and loneliness with Leonora? Given Pym's strong sense of optimism, also a major theme throughout her work, is there hope for Leonora? These questions demanded a closer look. The heroines were accordingly narrowed from three to one as I chose for the subject of my thesis Pym's unlikely and least likeable heroine. Leonora was enough.

DEDICATION

For Laura, with love

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Titles of Barbara Pym's novels have been abbreviated for the purpose of citations in this thesis. The relevant page numbers follow the abbreviation in the citations.

<i>EW</i>	<i>Excellent Women</i>
<i>FGL</i>	<i>A Few Green Leaves</i>
<i>GB</i>	<i>A Glass of Blessings</i>
<i>JP</i>	<i>Jane and Prudence</i>
<i>NFRL</i>	<i>No Fond Return of Love</i>
<i>QA</i>	<i>Quartet in Autumn</i>
<i>STG</i>	<i>Some Tame Gazelle</i>
<i>SDD</i>	<i>The Sweet Dove Died</i>
<i>UA</i>	<i>An Unsuitable Attachment</i>
<i>VPE</i>	<i>A Very Private Eye: An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters</i>

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Barbara Pym wrote *The Sweet Dove Died* during the fourteen-year span in which she could no longer find a publisher. Cape had previously published her first six novels; however, in 1963 they summarily rejected her seventh, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, and Pym's publishing success abruptly ended. In *A Very Private Eye*, a collection of letters and journals published after Pym's death, Hazel Holt, Pym's literary executor, shares Pym's reaction to this rejection, stating that the "unexpectedness and finality of this blow . . . severely damaged her self confidence. She felt that it was her failure as a writer that was the reason for the rejection rather than that the times were unpropitious for her kind of novel" (213). With the advent of the more culturally sophisticated sixties, the publishing world possibly considered Pym's quiet, introspective novels as seeming out of touch with the times. Pym, however, took the rejection personally and questioned her abilities as a writer. This fourteen-year span, perhaps the most difficult time in Pym's literary career, tested her mettle as a writer, but Pym remained dedicated to her art and continued to write with the hope that someday she would again be published. Her letters to fellow author and friend, Philip Larkin, with whom she began corresponding in the early 1960s, reveal her frustration and sometimes discouragement from numerous rejections by publishers who considered her work old-fashioned. After beginning *The Sweet Dove Died*, Pym wrote to Larkin: "I have written seven or eight chapters of a new novel. Of course in the end it will turn out not to be any good, perhaps, but I may as well write something even if only for private circulation among a few friends" (Holt 205).

Pym began writing *The Sweet Dove Died* in 1963, working through several drafts as well as many revisions and edits until the novel's final completion in 1969. Mason Cooley notes how Pym approached this novel differently, responding to her publishing troubles "by adopting a more severe and self-critical artistic standard" and working "during the years of silence" by "cutting, polishing, and recasting with a passion for perfection apparently deepened by her inability to find a publisher" (205). The result is a novel that Pym considered "one of the best I have ever done" (VPE 302). The publishing world was slow to recognize Pym's masterpiece, however, and *The Sweet Dove Died* was rejected by over twenty publishers, including Cape, before finally being published in 1978 after Pym's now famous "rediscovery" when she was cast in the literary spotlight after being named as one of the most underrated writers of the twentieth century by both Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil in a *Times Literary Supplement* survey published in January of 1977. *The Sweet Dove Died* and *Quartet in Autumn*, also written during Pym's non-publishing years, are considered by most critics to be her most finely written, *The Sweet Dove Died* making the Best Sellers List in the *Sunday Times* during 1978 and *Quartet in Autumn* on the shortlist for the Booker Prize for Literature in 1977.

Both novels have a stronger emphasis than Pym's previous work on her integral themes of loss and loneliness, possibly due to Pym's own feelings of rejection as a writer during the time these later novels were written. Katherine Anne Ackley supports this view, stating that "both *Quartet in Autumn* and *The Sweet Dove Died* examine at length the issues of aging, loneliness and isolation. They were written during the period when Pym was feeling her own alienation, at least from the publishing world" (115). Pym,

however, found ways to use these feelings of alienation and loss in her novels, the strong autobiographical nature of her writing naturally encompassing this experience and translating it into fiction as with other experiences in the past. Pym was a writer whose work reflected her experience, and she tended to base her novels on her own observations and experiences that she carefully recorded in her journals. Writing was the way through which Pym viewed, ordered, and understood her world. Orphia Jane Allen is one of many critics who address the autobiographical element that is so important in Pym's work. In "Reading Barbara Pym Autobiographically: Metaphors of Aging and Death in *The Sweet Dove Died*, *Quartet in Autumn*, and *A Few Green Leaves*," Allen observes that both *The Sweet Dove Died* and *Quartet in Autumn* were "written with little hope of publication, possibly because Pym needed to write as a way of seeking order and meaning in her life" (102). Pym perhaps recognized this aspect of herself, acknowledging that she would continue to write even if she did not continue to be published, although she still tried to publish her work after Cape's rejection. Allen argues that Pym's novels, beginning with her first published work *Some Tame Gazelle*, "provide a metaphorical account of her personal development" (100). Writing novels was a way for Pym to develop self understanding, and Allen maintains that Pym's novels provide valuable glimpses into how Pym developed as a person as she worked through experiences and personal issues in her life. Allen believes there is an especially "close connection" between Pym's life and the fiction of her last three novels, where Pym worked towards reconciliation with such issues as aging and death (100). Aging, for example, is a prominent theme in *The Sweet Dove Died*; *Quartet in Autumn* incorporates Pym's experience with breast

cancer in 1971; and *A Few Green Leaves*, Pym's last novel, was completed just before she died.

In "A Life Like a Novel: Pym's 'Autobiography' as Fiction," Anthony Kaufman similarly observes the strong tie between Pym's life and her work, noting that throughout Pym's journals "there is the realization that her vocation is to write and that the detached observation of life which she finds necessary will be the means to transmute feeling into art" (196). The close relationship between Pym's literary work and her life is apparent when comparing her novels with her letters and journal entries, and Kaufman sees a story emerging about Pym from her journals: a "fiction analogous to the core narrative of Pym's published and unpublished fiction" (187). The story or "core narrative" according to Kaufman in both Pym's journals and her novels is that "of a rejected woman whose need to love is frustrated and who seeks to defend her sense of self, to control her response, by means of defensive, ironic comedy. We see Pym constructing a narrative in order to gain a sort of power over her vulnerable sense of self as . . . 'one of the rejected'" (187). Kaufman, like critics Janice Rossen and Anne M. Wyatt-Brown, maintains that Pym's feelings of loneliness from her rejection by fellow student Henry Harvey during her Oxford years find their way into the feelings and outlook of many of the heroines in her fiction, who tend by choice to be spinsters. Although Pym was involved in many romantic relationships during her lifetime, like many of her heroines she ultimately did not marry. Pym seems to champion the role of the spinster throughout her work, presenting the spinster's role in a new light, or as one of positive choice rather than as one of resigned acceptance of rejection or of inadequacy. Agreeing that "for Pym, the act

of writing and the process of self-definition are inextricably connected,” Laura Doan observes that “Pym’s determination to put the single woman at the center of her narrative suggests that writing becomes the process to facilitate her own personal reconciliation with the unmarried state” (141). Choice, as reflected in Pym’s positive portrayal of the role of the spinster, is an important underlying theme throughout her work.

Perhaps Holt, Pym’s colleague, friend, and literary executor, best understood the autobiographical nature of Pym’s writing. Holt met Pym in 1950 at the International African Institute in London where they worked together for thirty years and also became close friends. After Pym’s death in 1980, Holt compiled and published in 1984 *A Very Private Eye*, an autobiography from Pym’s diaries and letters, and in 1990 *A Lot to Ask*, a biography of Pym’s life that also included excerpts from Pym’s journals. Both works provide glimpses into Pym’s feelings and personal life as well as reveal her determination to be a writer. They also provide helpful insight into Pym’s talent for turning her life experience into art. Noting that “there is much that is autobiographical” in Pym’s novels, Holt shares that Pym “was not only a born writer, but also a writer born with a unique view of life” (ix). Holt describes Pym’s view as a writer as one

which only deepened through experience and suffering, came from her own character and personality: a complex mixture, as are her novels, of ironic observation and deep feeling, of frivolity and high spirits and a sensitive understanding of the unspoken unhappiness, the unformed wish that can never be fulfilled. The stoicism, courage and endurance that she gave to her heroines were qualities that she herself had in abundance. She

also shared their vulnerability . . . together with their ability to make the best of things (ix, x)

Pym was a quiet, resourceful writer who used her own observations and experiences to create a literary world that reflected her understanding not only of life's uncertain and often poignant nature but also of its beauty and possibilities for hope. Her heroines embrace Pym's own quietly optimistic attitude toward life, accepting their vulnerability with grace and relying on their courage, humor, and wit to see them through.

Pym's complex view of life gave rise to a complexity of themes that overlap in her work, including loss, loneliness, and frustration, as well as desire, curiosity, humor, hope, and the importance of choice. Ellen Tsagaris agrees, observing that Pym's "unique view was comprised of examples from the well of her own experience" and that Pym's many themes include those "involving loss, suffering, and desperation" (6). Pym's complex view was comprised not only from her own experience from which she freely drew but also from her observations of the lives of those around her. Deborah Donato notes that "this is what Pym novels do, that is, describe what is going on in the world . . . they raise and engage issues of loneliness and love and futility and significance and despair and joy" (18). Rather than focusing on dramatic aspects of plot and action, Pym raises these issues in her novels by observing and exploring the trivial and mundane aspects of daily life that invariably draw forth various human emotions from life's inevitable daily losses and frustrations. Life's losses need not necessarily be large. Mildred in *Excellent Women* perhaps best expresses this view of daily life as she observes that "life was like that for most of us – the small unpleasantnesses rather than the great

tragedies; the little useless longings rather than the great renunciations and dramatic affairs of history or fiction” (*EW* 90). Pym gives a clear and compassionate glimpse into the lives of ordinary people as they struggle with life. Her novels, as Rossen writes, “often deal with characters who encounter frustration, suffer from unfulfilled hopes and lead dull lives” (174), a description that could apply to many lives at some point.

Agreeing that Pym’s experience is reflected in her novels, Rossen also sees the poignant nature of Pym’s writing, observing that Pym’s “high spirits and great ambitions from early on became subdued; yet they never entirely died. Thus what she captures in her novels is this simmering tension . . . the poignancy of thwarted effort and energy . . . the loss of the things that never do happen. Unfulfilled possibilities keep hanging in the air” (174). Pym’s themes certainly include those of hope and possibility, whether as hope for possibilities still “hanging in the air” or as arising out of circumstances on the horizon yet unseen. With Pym no valuable life experience is wasted, becoming not only reflective wisdom for her own life but also translating into the outlook and lives of her heroines, who like Pym tend to be quietly optimistic. Pym, with a talent for recognizing possibilities in any situation, balances the theme of loss and loneliness in her novels with one that sees potential for change and growth even in life’s more mundane aspects. Letty Crowe, for example, whose life appears as restricted and unfulfilled at the end of *Quartet in Autumn*, is still able to recognize possibilities for her life. Encompassing Pym’s expansive view, Letty realizes the potential for growth despite her losses and apparently limited options. Her choice at the end of the novel – of where she might ultimately live –

may be a small one; however, for Letty it signals hope, greater freedom, and the possibility for growth, thus for her opening up “infinite possibilities of change” (QA 218).

Pym’s view of life was fueled by an eager curiosity about people and their behavior as well as by her own life experience. Her notebooks and journals are full of her observations and ideas for future characters and scenes in her novels. Noting that Pym was obsessed with curiosity, Charles Burkhart remarks that that “she never stopped seeing, noting, deducing” and that “surely, in no novels ever have so many windows been looked out of” (10). Observing human behavior in her environment came naturally to Pym, whose sharp eyes caught the less conspicuous details easily missed by others. She liked to picture herself as the unseen spectator silently recording her observations and interesting bits of information in her notebooks, or possibly even as a character in a novel herself as she observes her own actions and feelings, such as in the following journal entry: “2 July. In the train, I can’t have a Pepsi, she thought. A woman of my age and appearance would be expected to order coffee. Yet she longed for the dark icy liquid and the prickle of its bubbles” (VPE 274). Pym also had a talent for noticing people who were less conspicuous in society, once remarking in a BBC interview: “I always find a certain interest in people who are failures or deprived or in some way unsuccessful” (Kaufman 50). Pym liked to study people on the margins of society, and her novels are full of such characters, including her spinsters, who live their lives mostly unobserved by society. Fran Lenckos comments on Pym’s choice of characters, observing that “Pym also observes, records, and renders remarkable lives that would otherwise go unnoticed, unread and unloved” as she makes “visible certain personalities that in most works of

mid-twentieth-century fiction remain on the margins – the aging, the lonely, the odd” (18). Those on the margins can experience uncertainty, displacement, and isolation, their disconnection from larger society resulting in feelings of loss, loneliness, and sadness. English society was also in the midst of change at the time of Pym’s writing as postwar England began to adapt to more modern times, reinforcing feelings of isolation and displacement in society at large.

Pym notes these changes, as well as their effect on those who continue to live simple, quiet lives during a difficult time of transition. Burkhart calls Pym’s novels “nostalgic much of the time, of an order, a world, a way, a past that impinges – comic and sad and indefinite – upon the grayness of the present” (14). Pym wrote and published in the twentieth century, but the tone and subject matter of her novels often recall the Victorian world of the nineteenth. Pym’s writing, however, is also thoroughly modern in its notably ambiguous treatment of her characters and subject matter as well as in the typically unresolved endings of her novels. Rossen notes that Pym “creates a twentieth-century society with roots in Victorian times, where traditional stereotypes receive a slightly comic twist” (7). Pym’s writing thus forms a type of “bridge” that spans from the more known and predictable parameters of Victorian society to the open-ended and often discomfiting landscape of the modern. With a quizzical eye that is quick to recognize the enigmatic and ironic, Pym brings a sense of comfort to modern writing by creating a point of view that is reassuring in its calm, detached observance. Pym’s point of view also wryly recognizes the comedy inherent in any life situation. Pym chose to see the comedic possibilities in life, thus often countering loss with humor. Pym balances as

Ackley notes, “the sad and indefinite aspects of her characters’ lives with objectivity and wit” (3). Pym enables her characters, especially her heroines, to face loss and uncertainty in their lives with dignity and acceptance.

Pym’s novels honor the lives of ordinary people, bringing to light their struggles, frustrations, and losses as well as their hopes, her nonjudgmental nature enabling her to demonstrate care and compassion for her characters. Perhaps because Pym, first and foremost a writer, looked at her own life with a certain detachment, she naturally adopted a wider, less judgmental view of others, a view that translates into how she creates the characters in her novels. Jane Nardin observes that “for Pym there is no right or normal way to live, only a multitude of more or less peculiar accommodations between nature and circumstance, which her novels with generous tolerance explore” (29). Pym neither moralizes nor preaches, showing a remarkable talent for detached observance as well as an understanding and acceptance of the inevitable foibles and peculiarities of the human condition. Although the church and religion are also prominent themes in Pym’s work, they do not have a didactic tone, for Pym also approaches the religious aspect of life with humor, tolerance, and an eye toward the ironic. Ackley remarks that “Pym does not ‘insist’ on any viewpoint other than that characters and situations be seen with understanding” (10). Barbara Brothers similarly writes about Pym’s viewpoint on understanding, noting Pym’s desire for readers to assess a character by “individuality and not by some idealized concept of what a life or a person is supposed to be” because “destiny, for Pym, is clearly a private matter, and her fictions ask us to take people on their own terms” (79). Pym’s characters are wonderfully complex in their humanity,

complete with little idiosyncrasies, faults, and insecurities that often endear them to the reader. Some of Pym's characters are easier to take "on their own terms" than others however. Many critics and readers consider Leonora Eyre in *The Sweet Dove Died*, for example, to be especially aloof and self-absorbed, therefore finding her to be a much less endearing and likeable heroine.

The Sweet Dove Died reflects Pym's decision to "concentrate on the darker side" and write something less "cozy" than her previous novels (VPE 244). The novel is loosely based on Pym's own experience of being in love with and then rejected by Richard Roberts, a young man whom Pym first met in 1962 when he was thirty-two and Pym forty-nine. Robert Long observes that the novel draws from Pym's relationship with Roberts "quite significantly" and that "the special nature of the attachment and a number of details of the friendship were also incorporated into the novel" (162). Calling the novel "a study in feminine wounding and isolation," Long contends that "Pym could only be, and in fact was, wounded by her attachment" to Roberts and that "later the experience transmuted and transformed, enters into her fiction" (19-20). The basic theme of *The Sweet Dove Died* is that of an older woman's affection and love for a younger man and her loneliness from his subsequent rejection. Most critics find the novel's tone and style more somber and bleak than Pym's previous novels and lacking in her usual comedic perspective. Tsagaris, for example, notes that the novel has humorous moments but that it is a humor "laced with sadness" and even sometimes "laced with regret or bitterness as well" (133). Although the novel still retains Pym's fine touches of wit and humor, captured by her keen eye for observation, these touches, tinged by irony and sadness, are

more subtle and often bittersweet. There is also an overall feeling of restraint in *The Sweet Dove Died*, a constant tension between characters who seem to be sizing each other up as they keep their distance from one another as well as between the characters and the reader, who can find it a struggle to empathize with them. Although the novel was very warmly received by the public and critically acclaimed by the literary world when it was first published, much has been written since about how *The Sweet Dove Died* differs from Pym's previous work. Pym acknowledged this difference herself. Several months before the novel was to be published, she shared in a letter to her friend Bob Smith: "I expect people will find the *SD* totally different from *Quartet* and I daresay it will not be liked, but you can't win, really, because quite a lot of people don't like *Quartet at all* because it isn't light and funny like some of my earlier ones. But the whole thing makes one wonder about the 'literary scene'!" (VPE 313). After witnessing her sudden resurrection in publishing after a fourteen-year absence, a frustrated Pym maintained a skeptical attitude towards how her novels would be received by literary critics, an attitude that possibly accounts for some of the darker tones of her characters in *The Sweet Dove Died*.

Some literary critics seem to have difficulty finding a comfortable place in Pym's canon for this novel which seems so decidedly different from her previous. The novel's heroine, Leonora Eyre, also seems uncharacteristically cold and unsympathetic, appearing to be as Diana Benet observes, "a woman obsessed with perfection in objects, in herself, and in relationships" (120). Although there is an almost universal consensus among critics that the novel is indeed finely crafted and written, invariably critical focus seems to be on the novel's darker tone and stronger theme of loss and loneliness. This

focus, however, isolates *The Sweet Dove Died* from Pym's other novels as critics either compare it by its differences to her previous work, or view it in light of its influence on her next novel, *Quartet in Autumn*. Critics, for example, have variously labeled *The Sweet Dove Died* as "the bastard child of her canon and a product of the rejection of [*An Unsuitable Attachment*]" (Weld 171); "the coldest and most unforgiving of Barbara Pym's novels" – although also "a triumph of artistic consistency and economy" (Cooley 206); "an aberration in Pym's career" – although "widely praised when it appeared" and "influential" in Pym's composing of *Quartet in Autumn* (Long 174); "something of an oddity among Pym's works" (Nardin 61); and "a fascinating variant" but "inauthentic," "tentative and apologetic" (Bayley 168-9). John Bayley also complains that "comfort is missing too" in this novel, stemming from "the absence of authenticity" (169) as he determines authentic Pym readers according to whether or not they are able to discern the novel as inauthentic. Dissatisfied critics who highlight the novel's differences from Pym's previous work in a negative way risk overlooking interesting similarities the novel or its heroine might have with others in Pym's canon. A deeper appreciation of *The Sweet Dove Died* comes from exploring shared themes with Pym's other novels as well as discovering how this novel similarly reflects Pym's autobiographical stance, including her attitudes, observations, and beliefs.

A comparison that highlights only the differences between the novels also accentuates the perception of Leonora as being so distinctly different from other Pym heroines. Some critics, perceiving Leonora as an aloof and cold heroine, may argue that it is Leonora herself who sets the novel apart. For example, critics comfortable with Pym's

previous heroines as being excellent women, or at the very least *potential* excellent women, are disconcerted by Leonora's focus on her own life and needs, rather than on the lives or needs of others. They are dissatisfied with Leonora as a heroine because she does not look to being of service to others to validate her life like Pym's excellent women whose lives are defined and validated by their service and support to the church or community at large. Annette Weld, for example, states that "Leonora is no excellent woman" because she is "distanced from the traditional communities of Pym's novel of manners – family, neighborhood, church" (174). Weld believes instead that Leonora is "defined by her possessions, her clothing, and her highly developed sense of the appropriate" (174). Leonora seems to come across as selfish and vain in comparison with such excellent women as Mildred from *Excellent Women* or Belinda from *Some Tame Gazelle*, making it difficult for the reader to detect Leonora's vulnerabilities or to form any empathy for her character. Leonora seems more alike than different, however, in a comparison with Prudence in *Jane and Prudence* or Wilmet in *A Glass of Blessings*. These latter Pym heroines all seem to be more self-absorbed in their own private worlds and less anxious to please. Because these heroines seem more aloof and are more difficult to get to know, they also seem to receive more criticism for any perceived "flaws" in their characters. For example, critics tend to mistake Leonora's natural reserve and need for privacy as aloofness and pride, finding her attention to detail and wish for beauty and perfection in her life as indicative of a self-absorbed and selfish nature. Such critics are therefore inclined to determine Leonora as narcissistic and incapable of love. Bayley, for example, claims that Leonora has "the unreality of a good forgery" (168), and Cooley has

harshly labeled her as a “chill-hearted narcissist” (207). Unfortunately for Leonora – and readers – the label of narcissist has stuck as Leonora’s character continues to be judged mainly by appearance, or by her aloof manner and reserved nature, and because readers, continuing to rely on past judgments of Leonora’s character, continue to perpetuate the narcissistic label. The label is unfortunate for it not only deprives Leonora of reader sympathy, but also continues to keep her isolated from other Pym heroines. The perception of Leonora as a narcissist obscures how Leonora is more alike than different from other Pym heroines.

Leonora may not be one of Pym’s excellent women but she shares a myriad of characteristics with other Pym heroines, including an independent nature, courage, intelligence, sensitivity, vulnerability, curiosity, a natural stoicism, and an appreciation of the value of choice in life. Like other Pym heroines, Leonora is a quiet English gentlewoman with a strong sense of decorum who firmly believes in the English “stiff-upper-lip” attitude towards life. As such, she also has a very reserved nature, maintaining a strict sense of privacy as well as a detached observance of her own life and that of others. Leonora’s stoic attitude and sense of privacy also reflect her desire to maintain an outward appearance of perfection regardless of her inner feelings. Cooley also notes several general similarities between Leonora and other Pym heroines, observing that Leonora “is a single woman of good education living on her own as she enters middle age. She has a private income so that she does not have to work. And in the course of the book she experiences an unrequited passion for a man” (206-7). Ackley observes that Pym’s heroines “all undergo their own personal crises, often with the result that they

learn something about themselves that they had not previously known” (13), indicating even Leonora’s ability for self-awareness and thus the ability for her character to grow.

The most important similarity among Pym’s heroines, including Leonora, is that they all embody aspects of Pym’s observations of her own life experience, always in some way representing a facet of Pym’s view as an autobiographical writer. For a better understanding and appreciation of Leonora, the reader can look for ways in which Leonora represents Pym’s views and insights. Perhaps readers who opt for a broader and more detached outlook like Pym’s, who develop a “certain interest” in Leonora’s character, and are willing to take Leonora on her “own terms,” will be able to see Leonora more clearly. A more comprehensible vision of Leonora that sees past the label of narcissism to discover the vulnerabilities as well as the strengths unique to her character gives the reader a clearer vision of the importance of compassion and acceptance in Pym’s writing as well as an appreciation for her ability as a writer to find interest and value in lives that others might dismiss as unremarkable. Leonora, flawed yet remarkably resilient, represents Pym’s belief in the opportunities inherent in the human capacity for perseverance and imagination. A Pymian approach to *The Sweet Dove Died* and its heroine would therefore also include the recognition of Pym’s characteristic underlying theme of possibility and hope, despite the novel’s strong theme of loss and loneliness. Attempting such an approach, and examining Leonora’s life and “terms,” this thesis will argue for a more sympathetic reading of Leonora’s character as it highlights her similarities with other Pym heroines, analyzes her behavior and relationships in the novel, and reveals possibilities of hope in the growth and development of her character.

Chapter 2

COMPARING LEONORA WITH PYM'S OTHER HEROINES

A more sympathetic reading of Leonora should perhaps begin by searching for how she is similar to other Pym heroines in order to find an appropriate place for her among them. Discovering Leonora's similarities will give critics and readers alike a better appreciation not only of Leonora's relationship to Pym's other heroines but also of Leonora herself as her character becomes more understandable. As indicated in the introduction, critics tend to isolate Leonora from Pym's other heroines either because they also tend to isolate the starker, less friendly *The Sweet Dove Died* from Pym's other novels or simply because they find Leonora's character less warm and friendly and therefore less approachable and likable. The novel, written at a difficult time in Pym's life, is also more spare and detached in its writing than her earlier ones whose excellent women with their comic foibles in dealing with the small challenges of daily life endear themselves to readers. Although Leonora is not a particularly endearing character and too refined to appear as comical, she nevertheless shares important attributes with other Pym heroines, especially certain characteristic attitudes toward love and marriage that form that basis of her character. Developing a better understanding of Leonora therefore begins by determining how her character incorporates some of Pym's characteristic attitudes, including Pym's attitude toward love and marriage as well as toward the spinster, a major focus in her novels. The first part of this chapter will explore how Pym's attitude toward love, marriage, and the spinster informs and thus connects all her heroines, including Leonora, in significant ways. Addressing Leonora's specific place among Pym's heroines

as one of Pym's elegant, rather than excellent, women, the latter part of this chapter will also examine how Pym's heroines tend to create romantic fiction in their lives.

Pym's focus on the spinster reflects her desire to write a different, more compelling story about these socially marginalized women. Pym, like so many of her heroines, did not marry, perhaps giving her a special affinity for spinsters and their struggle to find a valued place in society. Pym used her experience and personal understanding of an unmarried woman's life circumstances in her writing, creating heroines infused with such attributes as intelligence, courage, curiosity, wit, and humor who helped reshape society's and literature's negative attitude toward the spinster. Ackley observes that "the prevailing image of spinsters for centuries in both British and American literature had been to denigrate them" and that "usually they were pitied, ridiculed, or despised, seldom admired and even less frequently emulated" (26). Miss Bates in Jane Austen's *Emma*, whom even the novel's heroine cannot resist ridiculing at one point, comes to mind. Pym's novels work to expand awareness of the spinster's life and change the traditional notion that it is unfulfilled and one to be pitied by exploring the relationship between society's expectations for women and the spinster's ability to develop and validate a sense of self rooted in her own expectations rather than society's. Countering society's strong expectations that women would naturally find fulfillment in marriage, spinsters had to find other means to validate their lives. Allen writes that "Pym was keenly aware of the contradictions implicit in the social narrative by which many women live, the myth of romantic love and deification of motherhood that says, in short, that a woman's life must be validated by a husband. She knew that validation didn't . . .

necessarily come with a marriage certificate, but that sooner or later each woman must validate her own life and that validation may come with or without marriage” (*Barbara Pym: Writing a Life* xiv). Thus although Pym deals with marriage in her novels, she also seeks other means of validations for her heroines as they struggle with the social pressure to marry.

Pym’s “excellent women,” the supportive and self-deprecating heroines in her novels who look to the needs of others before their own and define themselves by their service in the church or community at large, represent an alternate means of validation to marriage for spinsters. Society, assessing the supportive function of these women, grants them additional social standing accordingly. Intelligent and well educated, with a dry sense of humor and a quick wit, Pym’s excellent women are fully capable of creating a fulfilling and meaningful life on their own outside of marriage. Cooley looks at how Pym has successfully reworked the stereotypical character of the old maid in literature and life into an excellent woman:

Pym transforms a minor character from farce into a central character to be taken seriously as well as comically. These heroines retain the traditional old-maidish qualities; they are love-starved, timid, moralistic, and intensely curious about other people’s affairs. But they are also gallant and kind, intelligent, many-sided and possessed of a subtle consciousness. The broadly drawn figure of farce is changed into a comic heroine endowed with dignity and formidable powers of ironic observation. (9)

Pym's excellent women are interesting, complex characters who often surprise the reader with their sharp perceptions of human nature. Excellent women abound in Pym's early novels, such as Belinda and Harriet Bede in *Some Tame Gazelle*, Mildred Lathbury in *Excellent Women*, Dulcie Mainwaring in *No Fond Return of Love*, and Esther Clovis in *Less Than Angels*. As excellent women, these spinsters have created a meaningful niche for themselves in society outside of marriage, thus validating their choice to remain single as well as Pym's belief in other options for women outside of matrimony.

Pym seems to have an ambivalent attitude toward marriage at best. Although she fell in love many times, had numerous love affairs, and entertained marriage proposals, Pym chose to remain single. Allen speculates that "a part of Barbara Pym must have wanted desperately to fall in love, get married, and live happily ever after," but that "perhaps her own integrity, her inability to play the roles the men she loved expected her to play, and their inability to accept her as she was were some of the reasons for her remaining unmarried" (*Barbara Pym: Writing a Life* xiv). Although Pym was very social and outgoing, enjoying the company of admiring young men, she also enjoyed her solitude and was strongly committed to her writing. Perhaps Pym, who was fiercely independent, could not envision making the inevitable compromises marriage would require of her as an individual or of her creative abilities as a writer. Writing was also the means of self-discovery and self-validation for Pym, enabling her to better understand her life experiences, as well as justify her place in the world. Doan contends that "for Pym, the act of writing and the process of self-definition are inextricably connected" (141). Thus when Pym at twenty began her first novel, *Some Tame Gazelle*, a story about

herself and her sister Hillary as spinsters in their fifties, she may have already been considering the possibility of remaining single and beginning her self-definition as a spinster through her writing accordingly. Doan also observes that “Pym’s determination to put the single woman at the center of her narrative suggests that writing becomes the process to facilitate her own personal reconciliation with the unmarried state and to resolve her ambivalence toward marriage and sexuality” (141). Thus for Pym, writing was not only a means through which to validate her life but also her choice to remain unmarried. Allen makes a similar observation when she states that “Pym may have chosen, either consciously or unconsciously, the role of spinsterhood in the face of conflicting desires and social expectations,” also observing that “this conflict provides a tension that recurs throughout her novels” (*Barbara Pym: Writing a Life* xiv). Pym, like other early modern women who chose to have a career, was naturally torn between finding fulfillment by supporting her own desire to be a writer and finding fulfillment in the supportive role of wife in marriage. Pym’s own ambivalence toward marriage is perhaps born from this tension between conflicting desires and is reflected in her heroines in various ways. Niamh Baker notes that Pym’s “ambivalence is expressed through her heroines, who fall in love with men out of reach, at the same time remaining uncomfortably aware that, given the opportunity to marry, they might not be as pleased to give up their spinsterhood as they imagine” (27). Mildred, for example, reflects the attitude of some of Pym’s heroines who seem to be torn between their desire to be married to men to whom they are genuinely attracted and their ambivalent feelings about the same. Often taking a rather dim view of men’s expectations of women, these heroines

often seem to wonder if marriage is really what it seems or if men are indeed worth the effort.

As the somewhat naïve heroine of *Excellent Women* who struggles with being independent while also trying to help others, Mildred realizes the sacrifices women make in their relationships with men. In the last chapter of the novel, Everard, for whom Mildred has developed an interest, invites her to dinner. As they sit by the fire afterwards, their conversation turns to the article Everard is writing for a learned journal, and Mildred, with no previous editing experience, finds herself agreeing to proof his article as well as help with the index, for as Everard explains, “The index would make a nice change for you” (*EW* 230). Mildred finds herself agreeing again, wryly thinking “and before long I should be certain to find myself at his sink peeling potatoes and washing up; that would be a nice change when both proof-reading and indexing began to pall. Was any man worth this burden? Probably not, but one shouldered it bravely and cheerfully and in the end it might turn out to be not so heavy after all” (230). Mildred’s attitude towards her future relationship with Everard reflects her awareness of its inevitable compromises, yet Pym’s ending also appears to hold the possibility that Mildred and Everard will eventually marry. The reader subsequently learns in *Jane and Prudence* that Mildred does indeed marry Everard, as Pym once again reminds the reader, albeit in a lighthearted, humorous way, of marriage’s inevitable compromises. In a conversation shared by Miss Doggett, an elderly unmarried woman, Jesse Morrow, her unmarried companion, and Jane Cleveland, the clergyman’s wife, Miss Doggett tells of the news of Mildred and Everard’s marriage, confiding that Mildred “helped him a good deal in his

work” and “even learned to type so that she could type his manuscripts for him.” Jesse’s insightful response to this revelation is the sharp retort, “Oh, then he had to marry her” (*JP* 126). This “tongue-in-cheek” humor about why men really marry women expresses the realization of many of Pym’s heroines that they are the stronger sex as they good naturedly admit they must take care of men, again reinforcing Pym’s recurrent theme of the compromising and often unromantic nature of marriage.

Later in the same chapter when Jesse leaves to get tea, Miss Doggett and Jane have a brief, yet illuminating conversation about what men really want from women. This short exchange, although illustrating Pym’s characteristically humorous approach to life’s little mysteries between men and women, also perceptively reveals misgivings about how women inevitably fare in marriage:

‘We know that men are not like women,’ went on Miss Doggett firmly.

‘Men are very passionate’ she said in a low tone. ‘I shouldn’t like Jessie to hear this conversation,’ she added, looking over her shoulder. ‘But you and I, Mrs. Cleveland, well, I am an old woman and you are married, so we can admit honestly what men are.’

‘You mean that they only want one thing?’ asked Jane.

‘Well, yes, that is it. We know what it is.’

‘Typing a man’s thesis, correcting proofs, putting sheets sides-to-middle, bringing up children, balancing the housekeeping budget – all these things are nothing really,’ said Jane in a sad thoughtful tone. ‘Or they would be

nothing to a man like Fabian Driver. Therefore it is just as well that Prudence is an attractive young woman. (127-28)

Pym teases the reader by giving the familiar adage that men “only want one thing” an unexpected twist, where the “one thing” that men want turns out to be not sex but instead a woman who will take care of them. Miss Doggett and Jane’s conversation also reflects Pym’s perception of the conflicting nature of marriage where, rather than being the idealistically romantic state of “happily ever after,” marriage is realistically also hard work and full of compromise for women. Women may know that men want a woman who is attractive and young, yet Jane, as a married woman, also knows that men want a wife who can run the household, raise the children, and see to his myriad other needs. Pym wrote at a time when women had great social pressure to fulfill the secondary, supportive role of marriage. Some might argue that women still do. Normative cultural behavior pressures women to take a subordinate role in marriage, and women are torn between finding social validation and possibly romantic fulfillment in marriage or retaining their independence by remaining single and finding romantic fulfillment and social validation in other ways.

Most women, however, are inevitably drawn to the romance of falling in love, and thus inevitably toward the idea of marriage. Rossen observes that “much of Pym’s work is Austen’s *Persuasion* writ modern; yet while her twentieth-century Anne Elliots remain worthy and constant, no Captain Wentworths appear in order to reward them. Because of the relative lack of admirable men, spinsterhood may represent a welcome alternative to marriage, but it does not preclude or prevent the inevitable state of

infatuation” (45). Whether or not from a lack of suitable men, Pym’s heroines often choose spinsterhood but still find that they cannot help being infatuated by or falling in love with men. By exploring the relationship between spinsterhood and the idea of infatuation or romance in her novels, Pym shows how women can choose to remain unmarried and independent yet still struggle with ideas of idealized, romantic love that often pulls them toward marriage, for as Rossen also notes, “spinsterhood remains inseparable from loving” (45). Pym’s heroines, although not necessarily wanting marriage, still want the excitement of romance in their lives. Pym’s unmarried heroines – and even her married ones – often make up for the lack of romance in their lives by creating their own, often elaborate, romantic fantasies, thereby symbolically writing a more romantic text for their lives, a subject that will be explored more fully later in this chapter. From her own personal experience, Pym understood a woman’s continual struggle to reconcile her expectations and desire for love with her marital status.

Even her married heroines seem to embody Pym’s ambivalent attitude towards marriage. Jane, for example, one of the heroines in Pym’s *Jane and Prudence*, has a difficult time fulfilling the expectations of her role as a wife. Although Jane has fulfilled society’s expectations by being married, she does not seem to have fulfilled her own personal expectations of herself, and she struggles with validating her life. Educated at Oxford, Jane is an intelligent woman with a lively imagination who nevertheless berates herself because she considers herself a failure at being a clergyman’s wife. She is less than proficient at the mundane tasks required of her role, such as decorating the church for the harvest festival, attending church council meetings, or even running her own

household. Also unbecoming a clergyman's wife, Jane is frequently outspoken as well as given to sudden recitations of random lines of poetry from her Oxford days, a habit others often tend to find bewildering and disconcerting. Jane sometimes muses about how her life has turned out so differently from what she envisioned it would be as a young, passionate coed at Oxford. During a conversation with her husband, for example, she reflects: "Mild, kindly looks and spectacles . . . this was what it all came to in the end. The passion of those early days, the fragments of Donne and Marvell and Jane's obscurer seventeenth-century poets, the objects of her abortive research, all these faded away into mild, kindly looks and spectacles" (*J&P* 48). Although Pym makes it clear that Jane loves her husband dearly, there are poignant undertones of loss and missed opportunities in the novel. Later, on an evening when Jane is again in low spirits, she tries to console herself with "creative work," resurrecting her old Oxford notebooks and sharpening her pencils with an eye towards losing herself in her old notes on the poet Cleveland. But the notes are difficult to read and Jane has forgotten many of the poems, so she sits "for a long time among the faded ink of her notebooks, brooding, until Nicholas came in with their Ovaltine on a tray and it was time to go to bed" (131). Jane seems confused about how to reconcile her desire for creative work with her role as a wife and mother, almost as if she believes the two cannot exist in her life simultaneously. Jane's difficulty in reconciling her own need for creativity with the expectations of her social role as a wife perhaps also reflects Pym's difficulty in imagining that the two could co-exist in her own life, or even her belief that they in fact could not.

Pym's ambivalent attitude toward marriage is reflected in varying degrees in all of her heroines. With some, as with Mildred, Pym's attitude is a good-natured realization of marriage's compromise between the romantic and the practical. Mildred's realization of what marriage entails, for example, does not prevent her from trying to reconcile her romantic hopes for love with what she knows marriage will inevitably require of her. Others, such as Jane, struggle with the social role of marriage as they also try to maintain a sense of self and nurture their own creative endeavors. Both of these heroines look to marriage for validation, but both also reflect the problems inherent in that decision, for Mildred and Jane seem to be resigned that by marrying they must accept a secondary, more supportive role, thus making it more difficult to validate their lives through other, individually creative means. Leonora, however, represents a different aspect of Pym's attitude toward love and marriage – a more wary, less compromising view, where rather than surrendering her own needs and desires to perform a secondary, supportive role that validates the importance of the man's needs and desires before her own, the woman maintains and respects her own individuality. Her relationship with a man is therefore a compliment rather than a complement to her life. Leonora, who only chooses a subordinate role when it in some way benefits her, is also more controlling. She is willing to have relationships with men, especially since their admiration makes her feel young and attractive but only on her own terms, and she is usually careful not to get too emotionally attached, knowing that this type of attachment would undermine her control in the relationship. Leonora may have been drawn as more detached because she was created during a very difficult time in Pym's literary career when perhaps Pym remained

more emotionally detached to hide her feelings of frustration and disappointment.

Leonora's need for control may also be symbolic of Pym's feelings of having little or no control over the publishing world's unfavorable responses to her work at that time.

Like other Pym heroines, Leonora is a spinster by choice, although she would undoubtedly strongly object to the dreariness implied by society's label, believing that her enduring beauty and desirability surely set her aside from those women whom society considers marginally attractive and unmarriageable. Leonora accepts the bias of society's usual assessment of the older, unmarried woman but does not apply it to herself, reasoning that after all she could have married had she wished. Leonora reconciles society's expectations for her to marry with her continued single status as a matter of her own positive choice. Leonora does not see anything wrong with remaining unmarried; to the contrary, she seems proud of it, refusing as Tsagaris states "to be insulted by people who wonder why she has not married" (138). Leonora is proud of her previous romantic encounters as well. Her former relationships seem to exemplify satisfying "what ifs" in her past as a series of fond memories, like a string of perfect pearls that she fondly caresses and wears with pride as evidence of her desirability. Pym's narrator speaks to Leonora's past suitors, sharing that she "had had romantic experiences in practically all the famous gardens of Europe, beginning with the Grosser Garaten in Dresden where, as a schoolgirl before the war, she had been picked up by a White Russian Prince" (*SDD* 48), and especially during her work in the war, where she had had "brigadiers making passes at her, and even honourable proposals, among . . . luxuriant flowering shrubs" (38). Reflecting on these past relationships, Leonora sighs to remember "the marriages

she could have made, brilliant marriages . . .” (38). They are contented sighs, however, for Leonora is happy to remain single. She enjoys her “tranquil solitude,” preferring to “think of her life as calm of mind, all passion spent” (16). Leonora does not welcome the reality of a demanding partner or the inevitable and tiresome compromises that marriage would bring, and she is content that “her men friends were mostly elderly cultured people who admired her elegance and asked no more than the pleasure of her company” as they take her to expensive restaurants and lavish her with compliments (17). Leonora’s admirers make her feel cherished and that she is still the fascinating, charming woman of her youth, important feelings for Leonora as they reinforce her own image of herself as young and alluring.

Some critics, however, find the fact that beautiful Leonora has remained unmarried, or as the narrator shares “almost untouched” by all her previous romantic rendezvous, as troublesome (*SDD* 48). Reflecting society’s strong bias that women, especially attractive ones, should be married, they tend to dismiss Leonora’s unmarried status as one of her own choice and instead look for other reasons why Leonora remains single. One conclusion is that something must be “wrong” with Leonora. Nardin, for example, believes that Leonora is the type of woman “whose great beauty has proved an obstacle to the development of her ability to love,” further describing her as a narcissist, who is “incapable of emotional generosity, and totally unsuited to marriage” (114). Nardin may be right about Leonora’s unsuitability for marriage, for Leonora does not compromise her standards and expectations for herself easily. Being a very private person, especially emotionally, Leonora does appear distant. But rather than view

Leonora's reserve as proof she is simply narcissistic and unsuitable for marriage because of her beauty is to ignore other real possibilities for her remaining single. Allen's earlier quote about Pym's remaining single because "of her own integrity, her inability to play the roles the men she loved expected her to play and their inability to accept her as she was" could very well apply to Leonora as well (*Barbara Pym: Writing a Life* xiv).

Perhaps despite all her suitors, Leonora has never found anyone whom she really loved enough to make her want to relinquish her valued solitude and independence. Rather than investing in marriage, Leonora finds pleasure and satisfaction in investing in herself by maintaining an impeccable appearance of calm elegance and creating a tasteful and pleasing home that gives her the added pleasure of feeling in control of her life.

Robert Liddell terms Leonora, like Prudence in *Jane and Prudence* and Wilmet in *A Glass of Blessings*, as one of Pym's "elegant women" (182), giving Leonora her rightful place among Pym's heroines in the company of women who share a very similar nature. Like excellent women, elegant women are intelligent, educated, and independent. Unlike excellent women, elegant women focus more on their appearance, wearing fashionable, stylish clothing and maintaining an impeccable and elegant home. They also tend to appear more self-concerned and are less likely to seek validation in their lives by conforming to society's expectations that the spinster be helpful by diligently and quietly working in a supportive role. They are less likely, for example, to be a stalwart member of the church council or do volunteer work. Noting that "the two types had always existed side by side in [Pym's] 'canon,'" Liddell also believes that "each expressed part of the author's nature" (182). Belinda, for example, as the excellent woman heroine from *Some*

Tame Gazelle, gives the reader an idea of how Pym perhaps saw one side of herself. Acknowledged by Pym as having been shaped with an eye as to how she saw herself in the future, Belinda, a “fifty-ish” and very confirmed spinster, is quietly observant, capable, loyal, helpful, sometimes shy, intelligent, and a lover of English poetry, all attributes shared by Pym. However, Pym also had a natural inclination toward elegance and refinement, including a soft spot for beauty treatments and stylish clothes. Her journals, especially during her Oxford years reading English literature, reveal a young woman enchanted with all that life had to offer as demonstrated in the following entries from 1933:

27 August. I was reading the diaries I kept when I was 15 and 18, and profoundly depressed by them – I’m glad time goes on. But I mustn’t forget “Soir de Paris’ perfume reminds me of John Mott – that ‘Peche Marie Rose’ was the nicest sweet we ever had – and I shall never be able to smell the fascinatingly sweet smell of Cyclax special Lotion without being carried back to last term and the Lorenzo atmosphere. As I write this I have a Boncilla beauty mask on my face – tightening my skin – nice if uncomfortable feeling.

15 September. More work. At lunchtime while I was eating my ham, chicken roll and HP sauce, a band on the wireless was playing the waltz ‘But for You’ from the Lilian Harvey film. . . .Spent the evening variously. I had to decide between giving my face a steam beauty bath and doing ‘Beowulf’. I chose the former and I think the result justified my

choice. After a baked beans supper I embroidered my red satin blouse and did some knitting. (*VPE* 25, 26)

Pym's awareness of her appearance, her cultivated sense of taste and style, and penchant for luxurious self-care reveal a self-nurturing side of her nature. While at Oxford, Pym also developed a new persona for herself, calling this more romantic, indulgent self Sandra, a name as Holt writes in her biography *A Lot to Ask* that was "in those days a rather romantic East European name, an abbreviation of Alexandra" (28). Holt notes that Pym's "notebooks were labeled with the name, the cushions and evening bag embroidered with it" (28). Holt also shares that Pym considered some of her more exciting outfits, such as her "scarlet satin blouse and tight black skirt," "very Sandra," adding that "Sandra was, in fact, rather 'fast'" (28). Pym used the name Sandra in her diaries to reveal the more daring parts of her character (*VPE* 9). The persona of Sandra seems to have provided Pym with a carefree outlet in which to indulge her fantasies of romance, including that of leading an exciting life while a young coed at Oxford. Shades of Sandra later reappear in Pym's novels, especially in her elegant women heroines: Prudence, Wilmet, and Leonora. Liddell, who knew Pym well, knew that she had characteristics of both the excellent and elegant woman, also sharing that "Barbara was a good woman – brave and patient and firmly religious. A good parishioner at a rather dull church, she would not despise a handsome High Mass and Procession, or a Solemn Evensong and Benediction" (184). Pym was, above all else, tolerant and respectful of the attitudes and beliefs of others and able to encompass divergent views. The same open attitude that allows individual choice between a "high" or "low" mass without judgment

on another's spirituality also recognizes the difficulty in reconciling the social complexities of women's roles, such as the potential conflict between a woman's desire and need to care for herself versus her desire and sense of obligation to care for others. Thus Pym's elegant women, who focus more on self-care and nurturance, can exist peacefully in the same canon with the excellent women who focus on helping and nurturing others, each seeking self-validation through a different means.

Pym was actually quite fond of her elegant women. In a letter to Larkin as she was working on *The Sweet Dove Died*, Pym confides, "Catherine used to be quite a favourite heroine of mine but she now seems less real to me than Wilmet and Prudence (my own favourites)" (VPE 223). After completing the novel, Pym also wrote to Larkin about how interested she became in Leonora, and how much she enjoyed writing about her most in the end (VPE 247). Some readers may be surprised that Pym's excellent women were not her favorites although she certainly seemed to be fond of their characters as well. Pym does not say why she favors her elegant heroines, but a natural speculation would be that the "Sandra" in Pym identified with them. She would admire their cool elegance, their sense of detachment, and their appearance of being in control of their lives. She would also appreciate their fashionable sense of style. Critics who find it easy to dismiss Pym's elegant woman as cold and self-absorbed are subsequently also dismissing Pym, by ignoring or trivializing a very real part of her own nature. By failing to recognize Pym's elegant woman in their own right, critics miss the vulnerability and self-assertion that lies beneath their elegant appearance. Pym's elegant women may be less endearing than her excellent ones, but their glamour, style, and cool detachment

gives their characters a greater sense of mystery and fascination. These heroines, like Pym, also have a definite flair for the romantic as, also like Pym in her novels, they actively create romantic fiction in their lives. Most of Pym's heroines seem to have a natural tendency toward indulging in romantic fantasies. Tsagaris notes that Pym was well acquainted with the work of earlier romance novelists such as Austen and the Brontes, and that Pym "borrows and rewrites the standard plots and characters of romance novels to create her own version of the heroine's quest for a meaningful life" (9). Pym's strong and independent heroines still need romance in their lives, and create their own romantic fantasies accordingly. Pym's heroines, however, subvert romantic notions of women finding validation in marriage by frequently choosing to remain single despite marriage proposals, or by having a more practical eye towards the state of matrimony when they do marry.

Even Pym's excellent women harbor secret romantic fantasies, although their penchant for romance can be sometimes be hidden behind their openly pragmatic attitude and approach to life. Mildred, for example, secretly yearns for romance in her life and creates her own fanciful text of romance by pretending she is *not* like Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre despite obvious evidence to the contrary throughout the novel. The astute reader, for example, sees through Mildred's quick disclaimer in the opening pages of the novel where Mildred shares her perception of herself as "mousy and rather plain," even as she also insists: "Let me hasten to add that I am not at all like Jane Eyre, who must have given hope to so many plain women who tell their stories in the first person" (EW 3). The very fact that Mildred so promptly disclaims any similarities alerts the reader to

Mildred's familiarity with romantic fiction, arousing her suspicion that Mildred might be engaged in creating some romantic fiction of her own and not as plain and dull as she claims. Mildred proves to be very imaginative and of course very romantic, her subsequent behavior in the novel confirming the reader's initial suspicions in such telling behavior as her impulsive purchase of a tube of "Hawaiian Fire" lipstick after having lunch with the elegant, fashionable Allegra Gray and observing her "smooth apricot-coloured face" that produced "such a striking effect" (116), in her playful fantasies about Helena's handsome and charming husband Rocky after meeting them as the new tenants in the flat below, and in her experimentation with different types of clothes and hairstyles to appear more attractive.

Similarly Dulcie, Pym's practical, somewhat plain heroine in her early thirties in *No Fond Return of Love*, is not the dull spinster she appears to be. Although she makes her living by doing indexing and editing jobs, Dulcie is also a dreamer who thrives on romance. Dulcie strives to be practical yet is an incurable romantic. She also has an avid curiosity and a very active imagination. Her favorite pastime is observing and researching people whom she considers interesting and then creating possible stories about their lives. Recovering from a break-up by a fiancé who considered "that he was not worthy of her love," Dulcie attends a learned conference where she will have "an opportunity to meet new people and to amuse herself by observing the lives of others" (*NFRL* 11). She does meet two interesting people there, Viola Dace, an odd and somewhat sullen young woman who later comes to live with her, and an acquaintance of Viola, the older, elegantly handsome Alwyn Forbes, to whom Dulcie immediately becomes attracted.

Dulcie begins to romanticize about Alwyn after he faints during the delivery of his paper at the conference. Leaning over Alwyn to administer smelling salts, Dulcie exclaims to herself, “Why, he’s beautiful . . . Like a Greek marble, or something dug up in the garden of an Italian villa, the features a little blunted, with the charm of being not quite perfect” (28). Dulcie continues to be fascinated by Alwyn after the conference, gathering random tidbits about him to satisfy her curiosity, researching his family, and even traveling with Viola to visit his mother’s hotel where she tries to piece together his family history, imagining him to be of “noble lineage” because of his “fine features” (185). Dulcie’s fanciful notions about Alwyn are a creative outlet for her curiosity and reveal a desire for romance in her life. Tsagaris remarks that one can “see Dulcie as a romance heroine transplanted to British suburbia. Like many romance heroines Dulcie is orphaned and unmarried. Through an initial chance encounter . . . she meets the man of her dreams” (111). At one point in the novel when she happens upon Alwyn walking on the beach and confronts him about his inappropriate advances to her young niece – a complacent Alwyn is separated from his equally young wife Marjorie who has left him to go home to her mother – Dulcie even imagines herself as a heroine in a romance novel. “Hot with embarrassment” at her outburst, she realizes “she was by no means at her best this morning, though if it had been a romantic novel . . . he would have been struck by how handsome she looked when she was angry, the sea breeze having whipped some colour into her normally pale cheeks” (223). Dulcie impulsively invents romantic fantasies that enrich her life, imagining herself as her own life’s true romantic heroine.

Dulcie's creation of romantic fiction in her own life mirrors Pym's creation of romantic fiction in her novels, with heroines such as Dulcie.

Pym's elegant women heroines likewise engage in romantic fantasies, creating romantic fiction for their lives that is even more glamorous and elaborate than that of Pym's excellent women. The weight and complexity of the texts of Pym's elegant women sometimes threatens to overtake reality in their lives as they become increasingly engrossed in their romantic fantasies. Like Pym the writer who remains the detached observer as she creates the fiction of her novels, Pym's elegant women tend to become detached observers of the reality of their own lives as they write the texts of their romantic fiction. Pym's elegant women thus seem to more closely represent Pym's self as a writer. Like those of excellent women, elegant women's romantic fantasies frequently begin as means of searching for validation in their lives. Wilmet, for example, the attractive and fashionable thirty-three year old heroine in *A Glass of Blessings*, is bored in her idleness and discontent with her married life and her husband Rodney. She seeks romance outside her marriage, weaving fantasies about being genuinely needed by someone. She chooses to focus on Piers Longridge, the attractive, young, charming but aimless and recalcitrant brother of her best friend Rowena. Piers's romantically handsome good looks, intelligence, and wit spark Wilmet's imagination. Wilmet finds romance in her fantasies about helping Piers reform and find purpose in his life even as she seeks to find purpose in her own, imagining to herself "that Piers really needed me as few people did. . . . Piers needed love and understanding, perhaps already he was happier because of knowing me" (*GB* 160). Wilmet feels "contented and peaceful" in her

fantasies that she can be of service (160). Wilmet's fantasies make her feel that she has a purpose in life other than shopping for tasteful clothes or making elegant floral arrangements for the home she shares with her mother-in-law and her husband Rodney, with whom she seems to share an emotionally distant relationship. Wilmet may be one of Pym's elegant women, but she leans towards becoming an excellent one by yearning to be of service to others to help her find meaning in her life. Wilmet romanticizes being of service by enthusiastically embracing an idealized, altruistic idea concept of what it means to help others. For example she finds the prospect of giving blood exciting and looks "forward to the experience like a kind of treat" (75), imagining herself "lying on a table, blood pouring from a vein in my arm into a bottle which, as soon as it was full, would be snatched away and rushed to the hospital to save somebody's life" (47). Interestingly, Wilmet is one of Pym's few married heroines, yet like Jane she finds it difficult to find validation and purpose in her life within her marriage. As Ackley notes, "Wilmet is an illustration of the fact that a 'full life' does not magically and immediately follow marriage" (57). Married to a practical and predictable man, a civil servant who also seems to be self-absorbed and preoccupied by his work, Wilmet looks for romance elsewhere. Unable to find a satisfactory niche in the community for self-validation, Wilmet focuses on herself and her romantic fantasies of helping and being needed by others.

Unlike Wilmet's, the romantic fantasies of Prudence in *Jane and Prudence* do not include visions of being of service. An attractive, stylish, carefully groomed, single woman of twenty-nine, Prudence enjoys the freedom of living alone, as well as the

romance of numerous love affairs. The novel opens with Prudence and her friend and former tutor Jane strolling in the Oxford gardens where they have come to attend a reunion. Noting Prudence's "red dress that sets off her pale skin and dark hair," Jane muses why Prudence has never married, also noting that "although she had been, and still was, very much admired, she had got into the way of preferring unsatisfactory love affairs to any others, so that it was becoming almost a bad habit" (*JP* 9). Currently Prudence is enjoying the romance of a "negative relationship" with her boss, Arthur Grampian, an older, married man, who gives Jane, upon meeting him, an "impression of greyness, in his clothes and face and in the pebble-like eyes behind his spectacles" and making Jane wonder what Prudence sees in him (75). But Prudence imagines Arthur to be needy and lonely, and she creates satisfying fantasies about how their relationship can never really go anywhere. Prudence tries to explain her relationship with Arthur by telling Jane that "it isn't so much what there *is* as what there *isn't* . . . the complete lack of *rapport*, if you see what I mean" and "that underneath all this . . . there really is something, something *positive*" (14-15). Jane introduces Prudence to Fabian Driver, a handsome, forty-something widower in the hopes that they will be a suitable match, and Prudence, admiring Fabian's classic good looks, finds herself flattered by his attentions. Fabian makes all the requisite romantic overtures, bringing Prudence roses and taking her to nice restaurants where they gaze soulfully into each other's eyes over delicious food, but Prudence also finds herself disappointed with Fabian's "banal" and "disappointing" remarks, having imagined that their romantic trysts would flow with "sparkling conversation" (101-102). Prudence, however, keeps her romantic fantasy alive by

reconciling herself with the important fact that Fabian was “good-looking,” and that “they would make a handsome couple” (102). She also admires the romantic way that Fabian’s good looks compliment her fairy-tale like flat with its tasteful, elegant Regency furnishings.

Like Prudence, Leonora derives great personal satisfaction from being admired and cherished. More than one critic has noticed the similarities between the two heroines. Benet, for example, remarks, “an older version of Prudence stands before us in Leonora Eyre” (119), and Nardin notes that “Leonora resembles Prudence in more than her good looks. Both women are extremely well groomed, more interested in possessions than in people” and “addicted to flattery” (114). Leonora finds self-validation through her romantic fantasies that she is an ageless beauty. Tsagaris remarks that “perhaps because she considers herself to be ageless, Leonora is one of the most romantic of Pym’s heroines,” observing that “in some ways, Leonora seems to have stepped right out of a Barbara Cartland romance novel” because “like many Cartland heroines, she belongs in a nineteenth-century culture” (136). As a heroine from a nineteenth-century romance novel, however, Leonora’s Victorian ideals and style make her appear more remote and out of touch with the present, thus possibly making her seem less accessible and sympathetic to readers. Leonora does embrace all things Victorian, from her steadfast resolve and pride in self-sufficiency to her preference for Victorian poetry, art, and furnishings. Leonora loves the flawless beauty of antique furniture, and imagines her own beauty as a timeless treasure. Leonora’s home, behind one of the “discreetly glistening cream or white facades” in a fashionable district of the city, is full of “pretty Victorian furniture and

objects with which she had surrounded herself” (*SDD* 16). Her possessions, meticulously chosen and artfully arranged, bring her continual pleasure and satisfaction, their flawless beauty an absolute necessity in supporting her romantic illusion of perfection in her home as well as herself. Nardin astutely observes that Leonora not only enjoys her possessions but actually “identifies her very being with the objects that surround her” to the point where she “thinks of herself as if she were a beautiful object, dependent for its full aesthetic success upon the proper setting” (114). For example, Leonora responds to James’s remark about her obviously liking Victorian things on his first visit to her home by replying, “Yes, I adore them. Somehow I feel they’re me” (*SDD* 23). Leonora is comfortable in her Victorian surroundings, finding that their beauty compliments her own. James notices, for example, how Leonora looks younger in the light of her converted Victorian oil lamps and that she looks “exactly right” (24) sitting in her Victorian chair.

Leonora is completely immersed in the perfect romantic fantasy she has written for her life and strives to make everything in her life “exactly right,” carefully weeding out anything common or imperfect. In her bedroom, for example, “no Bible, no book of devotion, no alarm clock marred the worldly charm of her bedside table” (*SDD* 17). Leonora proudly displays the photograph of her grandparents, “a handsome man and a sweet-faced woman in late Victorian dress” on her nightstand instead of one of her parents, having decided that her grandparents were more distinguished looking (17). Having inherited money from her parents, Leonora does not face the reality of having to work for a living and is free to live fully and comfortably in the romantic fantasy she has

written for her life. She uses her abundance of free time to construct an elegant story of how she thinks her life should be, including how one should look and behave, how one's friends should behave, and how one's home should look. Leonora's imaginative construct even includes how one should die. After all, Leonora reasons, "there was no reason why one's death should not, in its own way, be as elegant as one's life, and one would do everything possible to make it so" (18). Leonora's fantasy of her own elegant death allows her to imagine the possibility that she can always be in control, the same control that Leonora exercises over her life as she focuses on its pleasing, artistic details. Weld sees Leonora's need for control as a manipulation of "her environment, her acquaintances, even her own family history to showcase herself" (174), further noting that "although hints of mortality occur to this heroine, she is able to brush them aside, concerning herself more with the aesthetic arrangement of her current life" (179). Leonora's need for control does underlie the text of her fantasy; however, it is less a conscious manipulation to showcase herself as Weld believes than the natural expression of Leonora's desire and need for her fantasy to seem completely real. Leonora knows what she wants from life and imagines her life accordingly. She tries her utmost to ignore any unpleasant realities that happen to intrude and is ever aware of her appearance, being careful to always maintain an illusion of ageless beauty and style. Judy Little observes that Leonora "is stuck in her own version of a great text of romantic, attractive feminine elegance" (104), an apt description of the story Leonora is creating for her life. This romantic text makes Leonora happy, however, as she performs the role she has written for herself.

Like Pym's other heroines, Leonora is also very imaginative. She is able to create pleasing fantasies from ordinary circumstances as, for example, when a warm goodnight and a smile from a black taxi driver bring her visions of being "a beauty of the Deep South being handed from her carriage . . . in the days when native servants were humble and devoted" (*SDD* 16). Leonora imagines that because she is beautiful all men are happy to help her. Reminiscent of Tennessee Williams's heroine Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Leonora depends on the kindness of strangers, having "always seen herself as a weak woman relying on men . . . to help her through the daily round" (147). Leonora relies on her attractiveness and appealing vulnerability to engage a man's willing nature to help her. After dinner at a friend's house, for example, Leonora, who doesn't drive, refuses a ride home from Meg, telling her "with an enigmatic smile as if she had a magic carpet waiting" that she will manage to get home. Leonora believes that "one simply didn't drive and that was that, but other people were always so kind" (14, 15). She tells Meg that she will take a taxi, countering Meg's complaint that cabdrivers can take longer routes and expect large tips, with "I've never found that . . . Taxi drivers are usually *sweet* little men" (15). Likewise in a later scene on an evening walk in the park, Leonora complacently tells her companion James, who is concerned about the lateness of the hour and the park gates being locked, not to worry, for the man locking the gates is "a sweet little man and he's often opened the gate for me. There's no need to hurry" (48). Confident in her fantasy that she is still an attractive and alluring woman and that men are therefore pleased to help her, Leonora relies on her appearance for deferential treatment. Burkhart notes that Leonora "sees 'a sweet little man' in every male from a park

attendant to a black taxi driver to the foreman of a furniture repository, thus reducing all males to non-threatening impotency” (48). Sexual overtones are not a part of Leonora’s idealized fantasy of perfection, and she prefers to consider the men who help her as sweet and considerate, her beauty and charm ample payment for their services. Rather than finding validation through social involvement with the church or community like Pym’s excellent women, or through a supportive role in marriage, Leonora finds strength in her fantasies, constructing an inner world for herself where she feels valued and appreciated. Leonora’s illusions enhance her sense of control and validate her sense of self-worth.

Elegant women tend to thrive on their perceived illusion of a romantic relationship rather than on having an actual physical affair. Michael Cotsell notes this similarity among Pym’s elegant women: “Leonora is in the line of Pym female characters who carefully preserve themselves from intimacy whilst cultivating romantic relationships, a line which includes Wilmet . . . and is best represented by Prudence” (110). Jean Kennard makes a similar observation regarding Pym’s heroines and their illusionary rather than physical intimacy, stating that Pym’s “characters like the fantasy of romantic love but not the discomforts of an erotic relationship” (50). The illusion of romance creates the illusion of intimacy, allowing these heroines to happily indulge in the idea of romantic love without actually making love, thus preserving their control over the text of their romantic fantasies and helping them avoid the vulnerability the intimacy of a physical relationship creates. Physical intimacy threatens the romantic ideal of their fantasies whereas illusion represents control. As Weld observes of Leonora: “physical sex, which involves a willing abdication of power, appalls her” (174). Leonora

appreciates the attention and admiration of men but shies away from physical attachment. Recalling her “one or two tearful scenes in bed – for she had never enjoyed *that* kind of thing,” Leonora finds that “now it was such a relief that one didn’t have to worry anymore” (*SDD* 116). Leonora intuitively steers clear of physical attachment as a threat to the elegant perfection of her romantic fantasy. She may envision herself as the heroine actively pursued but certainly not as the heroine caught in the complications of the hero’s hot embrace. Reality has a way of puncturing the romance in fantasy. As a self-confirmed spinster, Leonora relies on the implied virtuousness of her single status to ward off unwanted advances and keep her admirers at a safe, comfortable distance. Leonora’s romantic fantasies of beauty and ageless perfection in her imagined world of perfect order and control make it difficult for her to navigate a relationship in which she actually falls in love, as evidenced in her relationship with James. Like Wilmet’s embrace of a romantically idealized fantasy of being of service to others, Leonora embraces a heavily romanticized, idealized version of love. In Leonora’s abstract vision of love, one does not suffer a mussed appearance from physical contact or vulnerability from emotional intimacy. Perhaps Leonora’s high premium on perfection and beauty, with its necessary focus on tight self-control, also of necessity isolates Leonora, making her appear as aloof, cold, or even narcissistic, when in fact this outward appearance also reflects Leonora’s need to protect her emotions and find validation by preserving her romantic fantasies.

The theme of love’s often painful price also runs throughout Pym’s canon as once again Pym draws on her own experiences in creating her heroines and demonstrates how romantic fantasies often painfully conflict with life’s realities. Pym experienced several

unrequited love affairs, most notably with Henry Harvey during her Oxford years, with Gordon Glover during World War II, and later with Richard Roberts in her late forties. Rossen notes that through these “disillusioning experiences, Pym became a self-appointed specialist in the subject of unrequited love,” remarking that “the vision of love reflected in her novels is . . . wistful and bittersweet” and that “it appears from her private writings that she struggled constantly with unrequited love and its attendant frustration and uncertainty, adopting various remedies and poses, from nonchalance to denial to pursuit” (48). Pym’s struggle with unrequited love is played out in the circumstances and emotions of her heroines. Some of her heroines, for example, experience difficulties in finding a suitable partner, such as Prudence, who seems doomed to continually repeat her unhappy love affairs, or Emma in *A Few Green Leaves*, who seems indifferent to the possibilities for love in her life. Dulcie denies that she is in love with Alwyn even as she actively pursues her research of him, reluctant to make her feelings known. Pym’s heroines often feel the pangs of rejection from unrequited love, such as Belinda from *Some Tame Gazelle*, who continues to faithfully love the handsome, egotistical, and pompous Archdeacon Henry Hoccleave despite losing him in marriage to Agatha thirty years earlier. Belinda accepts the circumstances of her unrequited love for Henry “to the point of making a virtue out of her renunciation and self-denial” (Rossen 49). And Leonora, feigning indifference and self-sufficiency, is actually emotionally crushed, distraught, and depressed when James leaves her for Ned. A happy resolution in love is never a certainty in Pym’s novels, where love’s uncertainty poses the constant threat of

rejection. Love is fraught with peril for Pym's heroines as they seek love from men who often seem indifferent or unworthy of their affections.

Rejection in love reverberates throughout the webs of the various fantasies that Pym's heroines have spun to create romance in their lives as each heroine reacts differently to this cold and often bitter reality. Pym's elegant women seem especially vulnerable to being hurt by rejection in love as they tend to be more deeply engrossed and involved in their romantic fantasies and thus less aware of encroaching reality. Wilmet's fantasies about a possible romantic affair with Piers come to an abrupt halt, for example, when she realizes that he is gay although she goes on to befriend his lover Keith and ends up establishing an ongoing friendship with both men. Wilmet also manages to gain considerable insight into herself and her behavior through her experiences with others, and by the end of the novel, she begins to take a more realistic view of life. The surprising revelation (only to Wilmet) that Piers is gay, the news that handsome Father Ransome loves and is to marry dowdy Mary Beamish, and the information that her mother-in-law Sybil is remarrying all make Wilmet realize that her romantic fantasies have hindered her ability to see the actual truth about her own life and that of others. As Ackley observes, it is Wilmet's "inclination to fantasize that leads to humiliation but ultimately to self-knowledge. Wilmet repeatedly envisions things that turn out to be not true; she misjudges just about everyone she knows" (200). Humbled by her insight, Wilmet becomes more open and honest about her own life and also more self-reliant, which ironically brings her closer to her husband, who she also surprisingly discovers had twice dined with an attractive secretary in his office, Prudence Bates. When Sybil

remarries, Wilmet and Rodney must establish their own home, giving Wilmet a greater sense of independence and helping her find purpose and validation in her marriage as she creates a new home and a new relationship with her husband. Wilmet begins to validate herself outside her marriage as well as she establishes more authentic and thus satisfying relationships with others, such as Piers and Keith.

Unlike Wilmet, Prudence does not relinquish her fantasies or develop self-knowledge from them. Prudence, enjoying novels that are “well written and tortuous . . . with the inevitable unhappy or indefinite ending, which was so like life” (*JP* 156), likewise seems to find an odd type of comfort, as well as emotional safety, in the continuity of her own unsatisfactory love affairs. By remaining emotionally detached from prospective suitors, she protects herself from real disappointment in love. Although Prudence entertains the expectation that Fabian will eventually propose marriage, when she finds that he is to marry Jesse Morrow instead, Prudence admits to herself that their relationship was less than the perfect romantic tryst she had envisioned. Fabian is even more self-centered than Prudence. When his first wife Constance passes away, Fabian places a framed photograph of himself on her grave rather than a headstone. Prudence realizes Fabian’s egotistical nature, as well as his romantic inadequacies and intellectual inferiority, noting his perfunctory love letters – “Fabian was not at his best as a letter-writer” (155) – and his unsatisfactory attempts at stimulating or romantic conversation, sharing with Jane, “Fabian isn’t what you’d call a brilliant conversationalist” (163). Prudence suffers a blow to her pride, and she is disappointed to lose Fabian to the mousy little Jesse Morrow, but she consoles herself by romanticizing her disappointment. She

languishes around her picturesque apartment in her becoming dressing gown and indulges in a few bouts of romantic tears over the weekend as well as in a “fanatical tidying of her flat, in much polishing and dusting and in buying herself all the nicest things she could think of to eat and drink” (199). Prudence also turns her attention to the next suitor on the horizon, young, co-worker Geoffery Manifold, confiding to Jane, “We shall probably hurt each other very much before it’s finished, but we’re doomed really” (217). Baker notes that Prudence’s “disappointment over the loss of one lover resembles more the symptoms of flu than those of heartbreak, and she is soon distracted by finding another” (28). Prudence seems to thrive on the idea of rejection in love as romantic. Even as she anticipates her next romantic love affair, she is also already relishing its romantic demise as she imagines and creates the text of its satisfyingly unhappy ending.

Leonora’s rejection by James is her first experience with rejection in a romantic relationship. She is unprepared and therefore unsure how to deal with either the situation or her emotions, and for the first time her ability to fictionalize a pleasing romantic text for her life begins to break down. Leonora’s love for James and his subsequent abandonment bring an unwanted but unmistakable element of harsh reality into her life that she cannot deny or ignore that threatens to destroy the text of Leonora’s romantic fiction. Leonora literally does not know how to contextualize this experience. She has previously successfully coped with life’s realities, such as aging, by creating pleasing romantic fantasies of perfection and beauty, but James’s abandonment challenges her coping mechanisms. The calm and elegant backdrop she has diligently created in her life, including the pleasing and artistically arranged Victorian furnishings in her home, her

cadre of admiring suitors who lavish her with food, wine, and compliments, her trips to various gardens and art galleries, and of course her relationship with James, has seen Leonora through any unpleasant difficulties with reality by providing her with a source of comfort and safety and giving her life order and meaning. Leonora seeks self-validation in beauty, which is one reason growing older presents such difficulty for her. Maintaining an illusion of perfection and lasting beauty has become increasingly important for Leonora as she has aged, giving her a deep sense of satisfaction as well as a sense of control over the often harsh and ugly realities of an uncertain world from which she mostly feels estranged. Leonora finds reality troublesome. Unable to find a place for reality's harshness in the romantic fiction she has created for her life, Leonora copes by becoming detached and distant, retreating more deeply into her fiction and trying to make the beautiful more perfect.

Leonora defends her haven of beauty by persistently clinging to her romantic visions of what she wants life to be. In a conversation with Humphrey, for example, she confides that "one feels that life is only tolerable if one takes a romantic view of it . . . and yet it's wicked, really, when there's all this misery and that sort of thing, but one feels so helpless" (*SDD* 91). Leonora sees that there is human suffering, but again there is no place for this reality in the romantic text she has created for her life. Like Wilmet, Leonora idealizes the concept of helping others, yet in an even more detached way. Instead of having romantic visions of personal involvement with another like Wilmet who envisions literally giving her life blood to save the life of another, Leonora envisions a much more emotionally safe approach where one can lead a "good life" by appreciating

the arts, contributing money to charity, and loving people to the “best of one’s ability” (91). Although Leonora is miserable and lonely after being hurt by James and her fantasies frayed by her confrontation with the reality of his rejection, her unhappiness also helps Leonora find resolve. Relying on her strong will and determination, Leonora decides to rewrite the romantic fantasy for her life – without James. Ironically, as will be apparent in a subsequent chapter of this thesis, the very experience with reality that brings Leonora so much unhappiness – the love and loss of James – also opens her up and enables her to create a happier and more believable and optimistic fiction for her life in the future. Like Pym, who has learned to transform real life into the fiction of her novels, Leonora is learning how to incorporate her life experiences in the romantic fiction she creates for her own life.

Chapter 3

ANALYZING LEONORA'S BEHAVIOR AND RELATIONSHIPS

Leonora's determination and strength of will are the strongest self-defining characteristics of her nature. Pym, drawing from her own life experience, has created a heroine with a will equal to her own, and one who, like Pym, looks inside herself to find the strength and resiliency to meet disappointments in love and life even as she presents an image of calm detachment to others. Also like Pym, Leonora is intensely private and inclined to keep her feelings to herself. Leonora draws strength from her resolve and her stoicism, created by Pym with an eye towards the Victorian English pride in stoicism and the English gentlewoman's unwavering commitment to the staunchness and resolve of her own character that is reinforced by affirming her English heritage. "I am Leonora Eyre," Leonora tells herself after knocking on Phoebe's door and waiting for an answer and a possible confrontation with Phoebe regarding her relationship with James. Pym's narrator shares that "the declaration gave her courage and a feeling of security" (*SDD* 114). Leonora's declaration is reminiscent of Miss Pross's "I am an Englishwoman" to the infamous Madame Defarge in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* when Miss Pross, protecting Lucie Manette, boldly and determinedly stands up to the Frenchwoman, also declaring, "you might, from your appearance, be the wife of Lucifer . . . nevertheless, you shall not get the better of me" (Dickens 380). Leonora's affirmation of her selfhood and resolve also occurs to her later in the novel as again she seeks to remind herself of who she is and what she is made of when she begins to experience complications in her relationship with James because of Ned (*SDD* 161).

This vision of Leonora as strong and determined is very different from that of Tsagaris's, who likens Leonora to one of the "dainty, crème-filled *gateau*" that Leonora likes to have with her tea. Tsagaris, finding Leonora "brittle, harsh, vain, and elegant" and with "no compassion for anyone but herself," concludes that Leonora, like the small pastry, is "fancy, but without much substance" (134). Tsagaris's simile is an interesting one, for her assessment of the nature of a *gateau*, like her assessment of Leonora's nature, is based mostly on appearance. But appearances can be deceiving. The *gateau* is an elegant and rich cream-filled pastry, but it is also wonderfully complex in its construction, requiring the skill of an experienced pastry chef. Also, contrary to Tsagaris's assessment that the *gateau* lacks much substance, this delicious small pastry is actually a concentration of the best ingredients and yields a light, yet intensely rich and full flavor. A delightful pastry that is meant to be savored slowly, the *gateau* is very satisfying. Given the *gateau*'s elegant and refined taste it seems appropriate as Leonora's preferred pastry. Like the *gateau* that Tsagaris dismisses based on its appearance as fancy and lacking in substance, Leonora is often dismissed by critics as elegant in appearance but empty in character.

Again, however, appearances are not what they seem. Leonora's character is actually emotionally extremely complex. Wyatt-Brown calls Leonora "one of Pym's most complex characters, a thoroughly human mixture of strengths and weaknesses" (118). Because of Leonora's private nature, she reveals little of her weaknesses, and she may appear as inaccessible to readers who evaluate her character based on appearance only and label her as simply narcissistic. Taking a cue from Pym's own tolerant nature,

readers must not rush to perpetuate the assumption that Leonora can be so easily labeled, and instead patiently observe Leonora's nature and her relationships with others to find the satisfying richness of her character. In her analysis of *The Sweet Dove Died*, Weld states that "this study of a woman of an age and situation similar to her own shows Pym at her most psychologically penetrating" (179), an observation that also indicates that readers should not view Leonora superficially. Having partially based Leonora on her own experience with Richard Roberts, Pym understood Leonora's vulnerability and how Leonora's carefully constructed fantasy of perfection helps her cope with reality. The emotional cost of stoicism is high, requiring real strength from Leonora to maintain the illusion of calm perfection as she suppresses or denies her feelings. One might even speculate that Leonora's stoic façade *is* her strength, for its artifice is a part of her nature. Readers who take Leonora at face value see only her lack of emotion and judge her accordingly. However, the assumption that Leonora is therefore unfeeling because she does not share her feelings is far from the truth, for as Leonora, correcting Meg's assumption that she is never upset, states: "People react in different ways. One may not *show* emotion, but that doesn't necessarily mean that one doesn't *feel* it" (*SDD* 56). Taking Leonora's feelings into account, as well as her nature to keep them to herself, this chapter will examine various of Leonora's relationships in the novel and interpret them in a more sympathetic light as respects her character. A look behind Leonora's façade of calm indifference reveals her vulnerability as well as the strength of her character. As with Pym, there is more to Leonora than meets the eye.

The Sweet Dove Died opens with a seemingly frail and overwhelmed Leonora being “rescued” by Humphrey and his nephew James from the rigors of successfully bidding at an antique book sale. Humphrey and James take Leonora to lunch, and they all strike up a friendship. Humphrey is very attracted to Leonora and openly solicitous in his regard for her. Nearing sixty, Humphrey is also closer in age to Leonora, and seems the obvious choice as the one with whom Leonora would possibly have a romantic relationship. Leonora, however, considers the company of Humphrey as “really not much different from being with any other of her elderly admirers,” and finding the company of “good-looking young men was always particularly agreeable” (*SDD* 20), she is instead immediately attracted to twenty-four year old James. There is something about James that sparks Leonora’s imagination, and she responds to him accordingly, or as Benet astutely notes, Leonora’s “heart chooses James” (122). Leonora is clearly infatuated with James and seeks to develop a closer relationship, drawn to the perfection of his good looks and flattered by his attention. When Humphrey follows up their initial meeting with a luncheon date, Leonora is “ridiculously disappointed” (*SDD* 20) to find that James is not included. Afterwards she invites herself to Humphrey’s shop where James is working so she can see him again and even manages to catch a ride home with James and invite him in for a drink.

James responds to Leonora as well, admiring her elegant beauty, even as he notes its ephemeral nature, noticing at their first meeting “the old fashioned elegance of her wide-brimmed hat which cast fascinating shadows on a face that was probably beginning to need such flattery” (9). From the beginning James is aware of the age difference

between them; however, it seems inconsequential to his genuine regard for Leonora. Indeed, his awareness of Leonora's age, coupled with her reliance on his friendship, elicits a protective response in James. Having recently lost his mother, James finds older women comforting and "easier to talk to" (12), finding Leonora especially to be "remarkably sympathetic" (25). Although James seems to be attracted to her "in the way that a young man may sometimes be to a woman old enough to be his mother" (9), he actually sees Leonora more "as a confidante . . . somebody to whom he could reveal his hopes and ambitions, such as they were" (29). Unaccustomed to being with women his own age, James's affection for Leonora is also partly based on his own need for a relationship with someone older and more experienced. Although James is protective of Leonora, he also sees that she possesses quiet strength and resiliency, traits that Leonora herself perhaps has not yet fully recognized or appreciated. James admires not only Leonora's beauty, but also her cleverness and discretion as well as her impeccable sense of style.

Leonora, in turn, is very much enamored with James, finding his easy-going nature and devoted attention to her both charming and satisfying. Young, affable, good-looking James is an easy fit in Leonora's life and just the tonic she needs to feel young and attractive. James comes into Leonora's life as she is anxiously approaching the age of fifty and especially vulnerable. He seems to embody the youth and vitality she cherishes as well as being genuinely fond of her. Leonora and James also have common interests, both appreciating beautiful antiques, art, and furnishings as well as sharing a refined sense of style and an appreciation of fine food. James is perfect in Leonora's eyes, and

she finds him extremely desirable. Responding to her strong attraction to him and wanting to be closer, Leonora becomes emotionally involved with James, unlike with previous suitors with whom she has had more distant and emotionally safe relationships. James, as Cooley observes, “rouses her as no one else ever has” (212). Ackley makes a similar observation, noting that despite James’s dubious attraction as “perhaps the most ambivalent and malleable of all of Pym’s men” and as being “impressionable, and extremely weak willed” that “even so, the elegant, cool Leonora Eyre finds herself affected by him in a way no other man has touched her, despite the vast difference in their ages” (43). Part of Leonora’s strong attraction to James is also because he validates her image of herself. She senses that James sees her as she imagines herself to be – youthful, beautiful, and alluring. Benet writes that “what Leonora experiences with James, and for the first time, is an objective, external view of herself in a guise that charms her and coincides with how she wishes to be seen – the mirror shows her the ‘ageless’ woman that James actually sees in the first flush of affection. James *sees* Leonora and she sees that he does” (122). Leonora is extremely gratified by James’s perception and attention, loving him “for the impression she senses she has made on him, for the reflection she sees in his eyes and his mirror” (Benet 122). The mirror Benet references is a beautiful antique fruitwood mirror that James owns and Leonora admires. Noting her interest, James loans it to Leonora, and it quickly becomes one of her favorite possessions. The glass in the mirror is slightly flawed, and by placing it at a certain angle to the light, Leonora sees “looking back at her the face of a woman from another century, fascinating and ageless” (*SDD* 87). James’s mirror helps Leonora maintain an illusion of

youthfulness and deny the fact that she is aging. That the mirror belongs to James makes it even more magical as it reinforces the flattery of his attentions.

The mirror becomes, as Allen observes, “symbolic of Leonora’s search for perfection” (*Barbara Pym: Writing a Life* 106). Leonora’s relationship with the mirror also reflects not only how Leonora wants to see her own life, but also how she wishes her life to be seen by others – as one where she is a youthful and beautiful heroine in a Victorian text of romantic fiction. The mirror’s reflection underwrites Leonora’s fantasy, for as a delightful, magical fairytale mirror, it confirms an aging and vulnerable Leonora’s fanciful image of herself as still vibrantly young, and it helps spare her “some of the painful discoveries she had been making lately – those lines where none had been before, and that softening and gradual disintegration of the flesh which was so distressing on a spring or summer morning” (*SDD* 87). Leonora is keenly aware of any slight imperfection in her appearance, carefully noting each one, whether new lines on her face or emerging brown spots on her hands. Each imperfection, no matter how small, is a devastating little puncture in Leonora’s fiction, filling her with despair, and compelling her to grasp her fantasy of being younger even more tightly as she tries her best to ignore the reality that her appearance is changing. Proud of her beauty and elegance, she resolutely continues to believe in her fantasy, despite sensing the increased difficulty in sustaining an illusion of youth and perfection as she grows older. Rossen remarks that “Leonora determines to preserve elegance at all costs” and that “this goal is significant because with age, the strain and cost of maintaining such perfection increases” (173). Leonora’s beauty and elegance have traditionally been her currency in her relationships

with others as well as an integral part of her self image. As Leonora ages and her beauty diminishes, the social currency she has mainly relied on – her looks – diminishes as well, undermining her romantic storyline of youth and perfection. Leonora faces an uncertain future unless she can somehow redefine the parameters of her romantic text to include the reality that she is growing older.

Leonora's relationship with Miss Foxe, an elderly, quiet, well-mannered spinster who lives in the flat above, provides valuable insight into the extent of Leonora's fear of aging and how she copes with it. Leonora fears growing old because she knows her appearance will continue to change. She fears the imperfections that aging brings because any imperfection threatens the beauty of the romantic fantasy that she has created for her life. Nardin observes that Leonora has a "pathological fear of aging and death" because she expects perfection in herself as well as her possessions, and that she finds it unacceptable that "a beautiful object, well cared for, need not decay, but a beautiful woman must" (115). Decay and imperfection have no place in Leonora's romantic fiction. She attempts to deal with her fear of aging and death by literally transferring it to a fear of the elderly, whom she therefore generally finds abhorrent and tries to avoid. Leonora especially detests Miss Foxe because of her visible proximity, and Leonora's ill behavior toward Miss Foxe is symbolic of her aversion to being too near a fear she desperately wants to avoid. Nardin also observes that "Leonora's violent, ruthless hatred of the frail, elderly Miss Foxe . . . seems attributable only to her own fear of the ravages of time of which Miss Foxe is such a forcible reminder" (115). Miss Foxe, representing the living image of Leonora's fear, is a mirror in which Leonora cannot afford to look.

The extent of Leonora's intolerance toward Miss Foxe reveals the depth of Leonora's own fear of becoming old, and Leonora is annoyed by any interaction between them. Almost as if she believes old age can be contagious, Leonora irrationally seems to believe that if she avoids Miss Foxe she can protect herself from growing old. She therefore avoids any unnecessary interaction, telling James, for example, when he kindly carries Miss Foxe's heavy can of paraffin upstairs to her flat, that he is making an unnecessary fuss and that "One has to be tough with old people . . . it's the only way – otherwise they *encroach*" (*SDD* 30). Leonora is adamant in her belief that "one just did not want people like Miss Foxe impinging on one's life" (26). Miss Foxe not only constantly reminds Leonora of the frailty of old age but also of its inevitable accompanying neediness, a horror that strikes at the heart of Leonora's romantic text by threatening to deprive her of control.

Ironically Miss Foxe, however, like Leonora, is very accomplished, efficient, and self-reliant. When Leonora, planning to evict Miss Foxe in order to make room for James, sends her a letter advising her to make "alternate arrangements," she is surprised to find that Miss Foxe has already done so by planning to move into "a delightful country house for elderly people run by Anglican nuns" (110). Leonora's irrational fear of aging prevents her from seeing Miss Foxe clearly, or as a "person of gentle birth and refinement living in reduced circumstances" (26) to whom she could extend some sympathy. Leonora's hatred for Miss Foxe, as well as her indifferent, and at times even cruel behavior toward her, may appear to be clear evidence of Leonora's narcissism. Such an assessment of Leonora's behavior, however, only reveals humankind's tendency, not

unlike Leonora's, to judge, dismiss, isolate, or label characteristics or behavior one fails to understand and therefore fears and wishes to avoid. Narcissism thus becomes an easy label for Leonora's behavior for readers unwilling to consider other possible reasons for her actions, and, by readily accepting this label for Leonora, the reader ironically behaves toward Leonora much as Leonora does toward Miss Foxe, with neither attempting a more tolerant view of one they do not understand.

Leonora's relationships with her friends Meg and Liz also reveal insights that can evoke sympathy for Leonora's character in that she tries to be a friend to both women despite a limited understanding of how friendship actually works. Unsurprisingly, Leonora's emphasis on perfection makes it difficult for her to form and enjoy friendships with other women, for she tends to hold similarly high standards for behavior in friendship as she does for her own personal behavior. Leonora believes in being not only impeccably polite but also always in control of one's appearance and emotions, a belief that she of course always strives to manifest in her own life. Thus Leonora is frequently disappointed, for more often than not the behavior or appearance of others does not live up to her expectations. Leonora copes with her disappointment by hiding it behind polite disdain, but it is a behavior that only further isolates her socially. Leonora has not yet sufficiently developed enough sympathy for herself to extend it to others, and being so judgmental of her own behavior and appearance, she similarly does not know how to adopt a less judgmental one of others. Cotsell observes that Leonora is the kind of woman who "has difficulty forming friendships with other women because she has difficulty in accepting her own feelings" (110). Cotsell's observation is an accurate one, for Leonora,

believing she must always appear as calm and in control, also therefore believes that she must suppress or deny her feelings rather than express them. Emotions, which by their nature tend to be unpredictable, messy, and often difficult to control, tend to scare Leonora. Leonora believes one should always be in control of one's emotions, and she is therefore very uncomfortable around people such as Meg, who freely and openly express how they feel. Leonora perceives Meg's behavior as a lack of emotional control and a type of emotional neediness. Her discomfort with Meg's behavior predictably takes the form of disdain as Leonora seeks to differentiate from Meg and what she does not understand about Meg's behavior based on how each handles their emotions. Leonora therefore becomes disdainful not necessarily of Meg but of what she perceives as Meg's lack of emotional control just as she tends to be proud of her ability to hold her own emotions tightly in check. An intensely private woman, Leonora does not feel comfortable sharing intimate thoughts or feelings. She views the need to confide one's feelings to other women as a sign of weakness and, again, as a lack of self-control. Sharing secrets with others also implies the presence of imperfections in one's own life, a discordant note in the perfect romantic fiction Leonora works to create for her life. Leonora therefore has "little use for the 'cosiness' of women friends" (*SDD* 53) as she is uncomfortable with intimate and confidential relationships that threaten to expose her own emotions. Although Leonora seems to believe in the idea of friendships, she has difficulty coping with their actual reality, finding their intimacy problematic. Leonora likes to think of herself as completely self-reliant, but it is a self-reliance born of her inability to trust and rely on others. She thus tends to understate the importance of

friendships in her life because she does not like to think of herself as emotionally reliant on others. The thought of being emotionally needy is deeply unsettling to Leonora as it threatens her image of herself as being perfectly in control of her life. Therefore, emotionally Leonora is very alone although almost intuitively she seems to have wisely chosen as friends two women whose natures are very tolerant of her own.

Leonora, who has not learned how to form an intimate, “best friends” type of relationship that the romantic heroines of novels frequently enjoy, keeps the illusion of being the perfect heroine in her own romantic fiction alive by regarding her women friends “rather as a foil for herself, particularly if . . . they were less attractive and elegant” (*SDD* 53). Liz, her neighbor, and Meg, a former co-worker, fit this description as both women are examples of how Leonora would definitely choose *not* to look or act. Both around Leonora’s age, Liz and Meg are complacently frumpy in appearance, presenting a stark contrast to Leonora’s: Liz, whose frayed skirts bear testament to the sharp claws of her many cats, and Meg, with her unkempt, baggy clothes and unruly hair. Meg is openly vulnerable, anxious to be liked, and solicitous of Leonora’s company whereas Liz, a bitter divorcee and judgmental by nature, relates to Leonora in a brisk, no-nonsense way. Leonora does not seem to mind Liz’s company, but when they are together she becomes bored with Liz’s frequent recounting of her past unhappy marriage and put off by the presence of Liz’s cats, which she carefully tries to avoid. Nevertheless, Leonora considers Liz a friend. She also finds it difficult to relate to Liz’s bitterness about her ex-husband and her continual remarks of “All that love, *wasted*” (58). Leonora, “having never been badly treated or rejected by a man,” and therefore “having no

experience of her own to match it,” cannot relate to Liz’s experience in love, although she has enough insight into her own life to concede that “perhaps she had never loved another person with enough intensity for such a thing to be possible” (58). Leonora is unsure how to react during these conversations with Liz and either offers platitudes or remains silent out of politeness. Liz “for her part would be equally bored by Leonora,” with her continuous recounting of past suitors, “yet at the end of the evening each woman would feel a kind of satisfaction, as if more than just drink and food had been offered and accepted” (58). Leonora and Liz may have an unusual friendship, but based on the reciprocity of shared information and a type of mutual recognition of the circumstances of one another’s lives, it seems to work for them. Leonora and Liz enjoy a certain comfort from one another. Benet remarks that Leonora and Liz’s satisfaction at the end of these talks “derives from a similarity apparent to neither woman. The details of their plots differ, but they exchange the same information: each tells what led her, at this point of her life, to be alone” (120). Leonora may be as disdainful of Liz’s life and her relationship with her cats as Liz is of Leonora’s pride in her appearance and her “inconclusive romances” (Benet 120), but both women, knowing what it means to be alone, provide a type of companionship for one another. Leonora, for example, shares Christmas dinner with Liz every year. Although she tells Humphrey that she feels it is “a kind of *duty* to give [Liz] a Christmas dinner” as she has “only those cats and unhappy memories . . . for company” (*SDD* 180), Leonora also unconsciously counts on Liz’s company so she also will not spend Christmas day alone.

Leonora and Meg's obvious commonality in their friendship is that they are both older women having relationships with young men in their twenties although Leonora again seeks to differentiate herself from Meg by minimizing any similarities between her own relationship with James and Meg's with Colin. By doing so, she is able to write a more controlled and perfect romantic version of what an older woman's relationship with a younger man could be, especially between two such perfect people as herself and James. As she becomes closer to James, however, Leonora becomes "increasingly curious about Meg's relationship with Colin" (*SDD* 53) but seems unwilling or unable to discern any similarities between the two relationships or between her behavior and Meg's. Instead Leonora only sees the differences and finds Meg and Colin's relationship as extremely unsatisfactory. She is scornful, for example, of Meg's absolute devotion to Colin and of how Meg constantly fusses over him through his numerous breakups with variously ill-suited young men, finding Colin to be "a very selfish young man" (31). Leonora's assessment of Colin would seem to be appropriate, for as Nardin confirms, Colin is "something of a mess: emotionally unstable, in constant romantic turmoil," and "frequently unemployed" (122). When Colin is involved in a relationship he tends to ignore and thus hurt Meg, who, ever hopeful of his return, faithfully keeps his favorite wine in the fridge, and eagerly embraces and comforts him when he inevitably returns. Although Meg bravely tells Leonora, "you have to let people be free," for "in that way they come closer to you" (*SDD* 55), she is defensive about her relationship with Colin, confiding to Leonora at Christmas time when Colin once again fails to appear that he is like a son to her and that "he's all I've got" (31). Just as Leonora abhors what she

perceives as the neediness of old age, she abhors what she perceives as Meg's neediness and her willingness to be humiliated by Colin. She cannot understand Meg's lack of pride or her lack of control over her behavior and appearance.

Nevertheless, again Leonora tries to be a good friend. She is supportive of Meg, for example, when Meg appears at her door agitated and in tears after another hurtful snub by Colin and invites her in and tries to comfort her. Leonora attempts to soothe Meg with reason, telling her that he will turn up again and advising Meg that "you make far too much fuss" and that "I'm sure things will soon be all right" (*SDD* 31). Leonora also tries to cheer Meg up by inviting her to have lunch together soon, and Meg leaves "apparently comforted" (31). Although Leonora handles the situation with Meg smoothly, she is uncomfortable with Meg's display of feelings, averting her eyes from Meg's disheveled appearance, her uncombed hair, and red, swollen and tear-streaked face, as she hands her a whiskey, wondering "how can she bear to be seen in such a state?" (30). Leonora finds Meg's neglect of her personal appearance distasteful and has difficulty understanding how Meg can be comfortable with such disorder in her appearance as well as in her relationship with Colin. Leonora's pity for Meg masks her fear that she too could be vulnerable in her relationship with James or that it also could be disorderly and imperfect. Believing that "there could really be no comparison" between her relationship with James and Meg's with Colin, Leonora considers Colin to be disagreeable and selfish and Meg, unlike herself, to be needy and vulnerable. Leonora refuses to admit that she and Meg have anything in common, for such an admission suggests the possibility that Leonora too could be lonely and needy. Again Leonora deals

with the reality of her fear by fictionalizing it within a text that she controls. In the role of romantic heroine that she writes for herself, Leonora is invulnerable because, unlike Meg or Liz, she will not allow herself to be used or hurt. Considering her friends as having allowed themselves to be “reduced” by their attachments – Liz, with her cats, and Meg, with Colin – Leonora resolutely refuses to believe the same could happen to her, especially in her relationship with James. She is confident that, unlike Liz or Meg, she is in control of her life.

Leonora’s need for control is also evident in her relationship with James where again her emotions remain safely hidden behind a calm and detached appearance that belie Leonora’s actual needs and feelings. And again Leonora is frequently criticized, this time in her relationship with James, as narcissistic and uncaring by critics who mistake her natural detachment and emotional reserve as indicative of a lack of emotion. Meg’s overly emotional relationship with Colin also tends to understate Leonora’s with James by comparison. However, a closer examination of Leonora and James’s relationship – and one that does not pre-judge Leonora’s nature – reveals Leonora’s vulnerability as she tries to rewrite the romantic fiction for her life to include a hero for whom she has very real feelings. Leonora is used to controlling admiring suitors as she engages in her romantic fantasies, always maintaining her control by remaining safely detached emotionally. But it is different with James, and control, of the relationship and her emotions, becomes even more of an issue with Leonora as she tries to reconcile the reality of her emotional vulnerability within the text of her romantic fantasy. Leonora’s actual relationship with James is not what she imagines it to be, and she struggles

accordingly. Her relationship with James ultimately challenges Leonora's determination, strength of will, and romantic imagination as she gradually becomes aware of the very real, and unromantic, side of its nature.

Leonora and James quickly become close, developing what Humphrey terms "a curiously intimate relationship" in his belief that James is like a son to her (*SDD* 28). Leonora and James do enjoy a platonic, but romantic, relationship although, as Long observes of Leonora's growing involvement with James, there is "a sexual fascination that she cannot admit to herself lying just beneath the surface" (20). Leonora never allows this fascination to develop, however, afraid of the vulnerability that physical intimacy would bring to their relationship. Unsure of how to handle her sexual attraction to James, and unwilling to risk losing control, she chooses instead to base her relationship with James on idyllic notions of romance and friendship and a mutual admiration of one another. The energy of Leonora's sexual attraction to James is thereby subverted into the romantic text she is creating for their relationship, reinforcing the strength of its illusion. James is flattered by Leonora's attentions, receiving, as Cooley observes, "her love offerings with detachment and slight surprise, a response he generally accords to the love offerings inspired by his good looks" (212). James, like Leonora, is used to receiving attention because he is attractive. Cooley also notes that both Leonora and James "are relieved that no physical relationship is expected, and they are free to play at 'adoring' one another" (212). These adorations take many forms, including giving one another small gifts, "love tokens" as Leonora calls them (*SDD* 50), enjoying each other's company over the delicious dinners that Leonora skillfully prepares, and sitting quietly

together afterwards in Leonora's flat while James reads aloud. Leonora especially enjoys having James read to her, whether Victorian poetry or even descriptions from the Sotheby's catalogue, since "there was nothing Leonora liked better than to hear James's pleasing voice reading out the seductive descriptions which brought the beautiful pieces before her eyes . . . the poetry of the phrases flowed over her in a delightful confusion so that she hardly knew what was being described, only that it was something exquisitely desirable" (52). For Leonora, being with James as he reads aloud is akin to making love, but without the threat of physical involvement puncturing love's illusion of romance. James's "pleasing voice," the "seductive descriptions," and the "delightful confusion" of what is "exquisitely desirable" all combine to allow Leonora to completely escape into the romantic fantasies of an idealized and perfect world of the imagination where she can vicariously experience sexual desire and pleasure in a completely controlled and safe way. At these times reality and fantasy blend perfectly together for Leonora as her fantasy world truly comes alive for her.

As time passes and James and Leonora continue to become closer, James's presence in her life becomes more vital to Leonora's happiness and sense of youthful well-being, and the balance of control between them begins to shift away from Leonora and toward James. Benet writes that "Leonora, who so craves admiration, comes to need James's in particular. . . . his unthreatening and undemanding affection sparks a response in her the more ferocious for lying dormant for so long. The entirety of her capacity to love, focused exclusively on him, grows riotously, and as James discovers other interests, she imperceptibly becomes the lover and he the beloved" (123). Leonora's emotional

investment in James has given the romantic fantasies of her imagination a real, physical form, and James has become the living manifestation of her romantic dreams and desires. Inexplicable as it may be to others – and even to Leonora – Leonora really does love James. Leonora is thus vulnerable in a relationship for the very first time. Sensing her vulnerability, and unaccustomed to being emotionally exposed, Leonora again hides her fear beneath control as she seeks to reassert power over her life and her relationship with James. Leonora seeks to regain the firm control she has always had over her emotions. For Leonora, the greater the fear, the greater the amount of control required, and as she tries to reestablish better control over her emotions regarding James, she also unknowingly begins to be more possessive and controlling of James as well. With such a tight focus on control in their relationship, Leonora has difficulty understanding the emotional give and take that a close relationship requires. Rossen writes that “Leonora illustrates the ultimate danger of isolating oneself from human contact in order to achieve a perfectly arranged life; when she does discover ‘something to love’ in the figure of James, she is unable to moderate her affection for him because of her overwhelming need” (173). In her belief that she is completely self-reliant, Leonora is unaware of her need to love and would have difficulty accepting this knowledge if she did become aware, for she tends to equate having needs with being needy. She considers Meg and Colin’s behavior in their relationship, for example, as being rooted in neediness, especially Meg’s for Colin and therefore as pathetic and lacking in self-respect. Leonora has too much self-respect to imagine that she could ever be like Meg in her own relationship with James. But Leonora also senses the instability of her relationship with

James, even as again she also remains unaware that it is in fact her own insecurities and possessiveness that undermine it. Instability creates real fear for Leonora, for she knows that losing James threatens not only her happiness but also her ability to feel in control of her life. A fearful and insecure Leonora instinctively tightens her grasp on James any time she feels threatened that she may lose him. For example, when Humphrey tells her that James has been seeing Phoebe, a young woman his own age, Leonora is stunned although she feigns indifference to hide her emotions and to save face. Desperate to control the situation, she verges on irrationality, her fear prompting her to take drastic steps to keep James close to her. Without James's permission and while he is away for a few months, she rounds up his furniture from storage, snatches back the items he has lent to Phoebe, and moves it all into the now empty flat above her own, rationalizing her impulsive actions by telling herself that James needs a better place to live.

Leonora prudently remains in the background when James returns, careful not to be intrusive, for James is not particularly pleased to return home to his "new flat." Just as Leonora's fear prompts her to exert such overt control over James, "capturing" him as her new tenant, it also makes her instinctively realize her subsequent behavior must be more subtle. Leonora does not acknowledge her fear of losing James as the motivation behind her actions; however, she knows she may have overstepped her bounds by overestimating her power and seeks to make amends by appearing helpful but detached and respectful of James's privacy. Always conscious that "she mustn't bother him or he might fly away" (*SDD* 142), Leonora tells herself she is not infringing on James's freedom but merely being supportive and thoughtful when she empties his rubbish or sees that new flowers

magically appear in his sitting room and milk in his fridge. And she is somewhat successful in her approach, for James, overcoming his initial suspicions that Leonora will be a bother, begins to settle in comfortably after noting how “marvelous” she is about respecting his privacy. Leonora amends her romantic fantasy about James to include the belief that their regard for one another and their discretion and respect for one another’s privacy is “surely . . . the secret of their perfect relationship” (142). As Long points out, however, Leonora is deceived in her belief that her relationship with James is perfect. Noting that it “has its pleasures certainly,” Long also states that Leonora and James’s relationship “is artificial – a courtship that is something like a daydream, in which there is no dissonance in the difference of their ages and in which the coarse reality of sex can be circumvented” (164). The realities of Leonora and James’s physical circumstances and needs conflict with Leonora’s romantically idealized perceptions and visions. Leonora, however, is used to living in a carefully constructed fantasy world and is able to overlook these conflicts with reality. She is quite content with the textual rather than real nature of the romantic relationship that she has created with James. She enjoys playing the new role she has created for herself by playing the part of the invisible housekeeper, cooking the occasional dinner for him, and planning the occasional night out together.

For Leonora, this new relationship with James, where he is physically close by, is better than marriage. She relies on his company and his adoration. Seeking to keep him close, she unwittingly seems to treat him as a pet rather than as a real companion whom she loves. Long believes that Leonora conceives of love “as a form of bondage” (168) as symbolized by the restrained dove in Keats’s poem. Restraint comes naturally to

Leonora, however, as a necessary component in helping her not only to construct her fantasy world of perfection but also to control her emotions, and she views restraint as admirable and safe rather than hurtful. Because of her emotional vulnerability, Leonora seems to understand love only in terms of control and seems unaware of how much she needs to control James. As Rossen states, “from Leonora’s point of view . . . she seeks less to possess James than she does to give to him as one would to ‘some gentle dove’” (67). Truly believing that she has James’s best interest at heart, Leonora desperately wants to believe that the perfect little flat she has created for him above her own can only make him happy. Because her own world is so tightly restrained, Leonora cannot see how the flat seems restrictive to James. She is oblivious, for example, to the significance or symbolism of the bars on its windows, or to its once having been a nursery, telling an uncertain James when he points the bars out to her that “I never noticed them before” and teasing him with “I can have them taken away if you feel fenced in” (*SDD* 129). Leonora just knows that she wants James close by, and as long as she can keep him content in the flat above her, she can happily hold on to her illusions and assuage her fears of becoming old, frail, and lonely. James’s presence is reassuring, representing living proof both that she is young and attractive and that there is someone near who really cares for her.

Of course reality inevitably continues to intrude into the text of Leonora’s romantic fantasy, giving it an often bittersweet quality. Leonora’s new relationship with James, marked by his physical presence in the flat above her own, sometimes brings unwanted reality in the form of James’s behavior that confirms the real differences between their ages and thus the reality that Leonora is in fact older. This reminder is

again something that Leonora fears and desperately tries to avoid. Drawn to James's youthful vitality as an affirmation of what she imagines to be her own, Leonora sometimes finds James's lack of maturity as well as his occasional unreliability and restlessness disconcerting. When another older, unmarried woman remarks in a passing conversation that "the odd thing about men is that one never really knows. . . . Just when you think they're close they suddenly go off" (*SDD* 118), Leonora is caught unawares and broods over the remark, admitting that "she did sometimes feel slightly uneasy when James was out of her sight" (119). Again, Leonora's uneasiness makes her instinctively cling more tightly to James and pushes her into a deeper level of fantasy regarding their relationship. Looking for a safer and more permanent relationship with James, Leonora finds herself even considering marriage, finding it "amusing to toy with the idea," for "surely life – and literature – were not without precedents for such a marriage?" (119). But Leonora also instinctively knows that marriage to James would be impossible and might possibly end their perfect romantic relationship. Leonora not only dreads the complications from the expectation of physical intimacy in marriage but also knows that James, already showing signs of restlessness, might rebel and bolt at the prospect of marriage's confinements. Instinctively sensing the fragility of their relationship, Leonora does her best to maintain the delicate balance between gently controlling and trusting James. She tries to give James more freedom even as she creates fantasizes in which she has more control.

The delicate balance in Leonora's relationship with James is severely upset, however, and her romantic fantasies threatened by an unwanted reality in the unlikely

form of James's new acquaintance Ned. A young, American student doing research in England for his dissertation, Ned is also a smugly polite and cleverly self-effacing flatterer who loves to be the center of attention. Ned's engaging personality and charming ways belie his actual aloofness and cold, calculated use of others. Ackley calls Ned "one of Pym's most despicable male characters" (104) and Long "the most unsympathetic character in the novel and perhaps in all of Pym's fiction" (167). Although Ned, like Leonora, is an aesthete, a connoisseur of elegance and beauty as well as a very self-determined individual who likes to be in control, he is entirely motivated by self-interest in a very calculating and ruthless way, with no softening idealized romantic fantasies or any love for others. Ned is a true narcissist. Any lingering doubts about Leonora being narcissistic disappear in a comparison with Ned. Cooley observes that Ned's narcissism "is a cold and clear-eyed drive for power. For him, the chief interest of getting involved with James is to separate him from Leonora, just to show that he can do it" (213). Ned loves the thrill of conquest, thriving "on the drama of romance" and "the defeat of a rival, the passion of a moment, the familiar ennui, the infidelities and the theatrical partings" (Nardin 137). Any visions of romance that Ned entertains seem to involve a necessary form of cruelty. Ned easily out-manipulates both James and Leonora in his lust for power and control. Weld calls Ned "the most openly villainous character in Pym's fiction . . . because he employs power ruthlessly, with all of Leonora's acquisitiveness and none of her formal scruples" (178). Nothing in Leonora's previous relationship experience could prepare her for dealing with the likes of Ned. Leonora senses danger to her relationship with James the first time she meets Ned. She knows he is her enemy. She becomes

uneasy at their first meeting, feeling “instinctively that Ned was more of a danger than Phoebe could ever have been,” for she senses that “however charming he might appear this young man wanted to take James away from her” (*SDD* 144).

Leonora may have easily vanquished Bohemian Phoebe whose disheveled appearance, awkward manners, and untidy home gave Leonora a distinct advantage with James on the aesthetic level, despite Phoebe’s physically intimate relationship with him. Ned presents a much greater problem. Openly curious about Leonora and her relationship with James and determined to break them apart, Ned quickly insinuates himself into her life where he promptly sizes Leonora up, assessing her appearance and her emotions as he discovers her vulnerabilities and thus his advantages. Leonora, in turn, considers her course of action regarding how to control Ned. She dismisses “ruthless action” on her part as it was “apt to be upsetting and exhausting” and considers that “perhaps it would be best to reach a compromise whereby Ned could be woven into the fabric of their lives in such a way that he became an unobtrusive thread in the harmonious tapestry of the whole” (*SDD* 151). Leonora tries to expand the possibilities of her romantic text with James to include a place for Ned. Leonora’s plan of action regarding James as compared to Ned’s shows the very real difference between them. Unlike Ned, Leonora is neither narcissistic nor naturally ruthless. Her desire for control is not motivated by competitiveness for its own sake or a lust for power as is Ned’s, who feigns affection in his relationships in order to gain the upper hand and then discards his conquests when he becomes bored with them as he does with James. After all, as the narrator confides, Ned is determined that “James would be no exception to the rule that nobody tired of Ned

before he tired of them” (170). Leonora rather desires control in order to keep the romantic text she creates for her life as perfect and beautiful as possible. That she envisions being able to somehow weave Ned into the fabric of her relationship with James reveals a poignant naiveté in Leonora’s character as well as the strength of its undeterred nature. Because she is so unlike him, Leonora underestimates Ned, and it quickly becomes apparent that compromise is impossible as Ned insists on being the center of attention, “the glitter of his personality making Leonora seem no more than an ageing overdressed woman” (151). The reality of Ned’s heartlessness clearly gives him the advantage over Leonora’s romantic fantasy in the ensuing battle of control over James, for as Cooley observes of Leonora, “her genteel strategies are no match for the steely expertise of Ned in erotic intrigues” (214). Ned is not one of the “sweet” little men with whom Leonora is accustomed to dealing, and by cleverly manipulating Leonora and James, Ned becomes an enemy she cannot defeat.

Leonora’s experience with Ned and his successful takeover of James marks, as Benet observes, “Leonora’s first experience of suffering for someone she loves, of being ‘badly treated or rejected by a man’ . . . her anguish as she tries and fails to outmaneuver her antagonist is palpable, and her reaction is an imperfect attempt to retreat into her former self” (128). As one would expect, Leonora reacts to this new loss as she did with Humphrey when he told her about James and Phoebe, by striving to maintain an outward appearance of perfect calm, despite being devastated. Cooley observes that Leonora’s “only resource is to try to maintain her stoicism so that Ned cannot see, directly at least, the extent of her suffering” (214-15). Leonora is proud. The thought of Ned openly

gloating over his victory would only increase her suffering, and Leonora is determined that this will not happen. Leonora's instincts are correct, for Ned secretly hopes for the satisfaction and drama of seeing Leonora break down; however, being clever and observant because it is helpful in his manipulation of others, he also intuitively understands Leonora's character and reveals the cruel nature of his own by telling James that "she's the proud type who prefers to suffer in silence. Like a wounded animal crawling away to die" (*SDD* 159). Stoicism comes naturally to Leonora in her understanding of restraint and also in her embrace of the reserved and stoic Victorian attitude. Stoicism, with its appearance of order and control, is integral to Leonora's perception of herself and helps her preserve a semblance of her fantasy life in the face of reality although she realizes its breach by Ned with the loss of James. As Nardin explains, given Leonora's emphasis on "aesthetic considerations . . . it is not surprising that she immediately acts to preserve the beautiful, unruffled surface of her life by concealing from others and, as far as possible, from herself, the suffering she experiences" (119). Keeping her emotions to herself, however, ironically also gives Leonora a type of strength, for it gives her some comfort to know that she can at least control her emotions and present an outward appearance of calm even if she cannot control James or Ned.

Leonora also turns to her beautiful Victorian possessions for comfort and healing. Leonora's suffering gives her a more acute sense of her vulnerability, and she compensates by reaching out to perfection less changeable to keep her fantasies alive. Here is beauty that does not age or will not abandon her. Having "always cared as much

for inanimate objects as for people,” Leonora seeks comfort where she has always found comfort before and finds solace spending “hours looking after her possessions, washing the china and cleaning the silver obsessively and rearranging them in her rooms” (*SDD* 182). Leonora, in fact, does not seem to know how to comfort herself any other way. Her beautiful possessions cannot fill the void of her loneliness, however, or replace the comfort of James’s companionship. Leonora misses James dreadfully and finds her life very difficult and lonely without him. Even the barometer of her youthfulness, the fruitwood mirror, is gone, James having taken it when he left. Leonora is very upset at having lost the mirror. Humphrey somehow manages to find a replacement, “one tolerably like James’s, of a pretty design but badly neglected” (182) that Leonora dutifully and lovingly polishes and restores. Afterwards, however, she is disconcerted to find that this mirror does not give her the same reflection as James’s did, for when she looks at herself in this mirror, her face seems “shrunk and almost old,” rather than “ageless and fascinating,” and she wonders if she was “really beginning to look like that?” (182). The new mirror has no flattering distortions when held in a certain light, and Leonora, unaccustomed to this new reality, has trouble adapting to it. Allen observes that “significantly, it is the mirror furnished by the older man, Humphrey, as opposed to James’s mirror, in which Leonora sees herself realistically” (*Barbara Pym: Writing a Life* 106). But Leonora finds this reality troublesome. In her loneliness, and still relying on romantic fantasy to see her through, she cannot seem to decide if this is indeed her reflection in the mirror Humphrey has given her or just an illusion created by her unhappiness.

Leonora reaches one of her lowest points that winter while out shopping in London at Christies, “when the full realization of her unhappiness came to her.” As she looks at the beautiful jewelry, “her throat ached and tears came into her eyes, not only for herself but also for the owners of the jewelry, ageing now or old, some probably dead” (*SDD* 183). Leonora begins to see a connection between the stasis of the jewelry’s perfection and the ephemeral nature of its owners who must grow old and die. In her unhappiness, she also begins to feel a connection to others like herself who have loved perfection and beauty only to lose it. Later at the café where she stops for a cup of tea, Leonora is distressed by the sight of a tray of dirty dishes on a table as an elderly woman clears away the bits of leftover food and discarded cigarette butts. Leonora becomes “conscious that she herself belonged here too, with the sad jewellery and the old woman and the air of things that had seen better days” (184). Rather than feeling removed from her surroundings and disdainful of the careless and untidy behavior of others as she has in the past, Leonora begins to see how she too is part of this reality. Leonora’s illusion of perfection has been shattered by James’s abandonment and she feels completely vulnerable. Benet observes that before James’s abandonment, when “Leonora loved James and felt loved, the image she saw in mirrors, through the construct of pride and self-centeredness, was a façade she could approve and admire. . . . But the razing of that wondrous image destroys the façade too, and she now sees something used, ruined, and superfluous” (129). Leonora begins to see a different and imperfect picture of her life, or one in which her sense of self, previously validated by beauty, is devalued. “Debased, diminished, crushed and trodden into the ground, indeed ‘brought to a certain point of

dilapidation” (*SDD* 184), Leonora finds herself breaking down and her control over her emotions and the romantic text of her life slipping away as bits of the ugliness of real life creep in, and she begins to realize her isolation and loneliness.

But Leonora is made of sterner stuff and cannot wallow in self-pity for long. Leonora’s resolve and strong will again help her find strength to combat her loneliness and disappointment. She *is* after all “Leonora Eyre,” and as such she embodies all the strength and control that she perceives in her own identity. Leonora’s fight with Ned over James may have illuminated her weaknesses, but it also helps her to find her own strength, especially regarding her relationships with men. Resolving to fight hard for James when she first meets Ned, Leonora discovers a strength she did not know she had, and she realizes that “when it came to a real crisis perhaps she was stronger than any of them. Certainly stronger than James” (*SDD* 147). Leonora taps into that same strength when James leaves her for Ned. Leonora is naturally resourceful, with a “natural courage” (196) that enables her to face almost any situation and to do whatever is necessary to maintain control in her life. For example, when Ned comes to say good-bye before returning to America, Leonora, dreading the encounter, briefly considers pretending to be out, but she rises to the occasion and politely invites him in. Ned feigns sympathy for James’s abandonment of Leonora, telling Leonora, “I couldn’t sleep nights for thinking what you must have suffered” and tries to suggest that when he returns to America “it can all be the same again” between her and James (198). Although she does not reveal her emotions to Ned, his visit and intrusion into her privacy and personal pain are excruciating for Leonora, and she needs “all her strength and self-control to hold back

her tears” while he is there (199). It is a testament to the sheer strength of Leonora’s will that she is able to maintain her composure. In a miscalculation of her strength of character, Ned is smugly prepared to comfort Leonora in case she breaks down, “yet Leonora appeared to deal with the situation as elegantly as she did everything else. If he had hoped to see her crumble he was disappointed” (199). Even Ned underestimates Leonora’s self-control and ability to maintain an appearance of civility and decorum.

Afterwards when Ned leaves, Leonora takes some solace in thinking that “she had acquitted herself quite well” and that “perhaps she had even won a kind of victory, but it hardly seemed to matter now” (*SDD* 200-201). Leonora has again found strength in her ability to control her emotions. She cannot afford to lose her perception of her own strength by taking James back in the end. His presence would not only remind her of the loss of their perfect relationship but also be a constant reminder of her weakness and lack of control when he abandoned her. Unlike Meg, Leonora could never admit that her relationship with James was “all I’ve got” (31). Leonora finds Meg’s neediness pathetic and her outbursts of emotion embarrassing. Nevertheless, it is in front of Meg that an emotionally exhausted Leonora finally breaks down shortly after her visit from Ned: “The tears she had held back from Ned now flowed and her body was racked with sobs in the most embarrassing way” (202). Leonora simply cannot hold out against her emotions any longer, and they temporarily overtake her strong will as she physically experiences the emotional agony of her profound disappointment in love. Even so, Leonora cannot let go of herself completely: “Helpless as she was, she could still feel a sense of shame at what was happening to her,” and “she struggled to control herself” (202). Leonora feels

shame because she has reached a point where she can no longer control her emotions, and awash in its flood, she struggles for self-control as the only familiar marker in an otherwise foreign territory. Leonora seeks refuge in self-control. She may have temporarily succumbed to her emotions to express her deep grief and sadness, but her intense will and her strict sense of decorum dictate that she must regain her composure, and she tells a solicitous Meg, anxious to console her: “I shall be quite all right” (203). Leonora has regained her bearings, relying once again on her greatest strength – that of her immense self-will – to pull her through. An understanding of Leonora’s will is pivotal to understanding her character, for her greatest strength – her powerful will that makes her so capable and on which she so often relies for support and refuge – is also her greatest weakness by keeping her isolated from others. Leonora suffers as a consequence of her isolation, for as previously stated, others often misunderstand her character and perceive Leonora as cold, remote, and narcissistic when in fact she is a remarkably capable and imaginative heroine who finds it difficult to reconcile life’s realities with the fiction of her romantic fantasies.

Chapter 4

FINDING HOPE FOR LEONORA'S DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH

Literary critics have had much to say about whether Leonora is “Quite all right” (*SDD* 203) at the novel's end. Having been unsympathetic to Leonora's character all along by perceiving her as cold, selfish, and unlikable, many find her cool rejection of James at the end as further affirmation of her narcissism, as well as another indication that she is incapable of growth or change. Nardin, for example, concludes that Leonora, having experienced loss and rejection, “might well be humanized by her recognition of her own vulnerability, but instead she acts with instant determination to reject the powerful intimation of mortality she has experienced” and “ends up accepting and adjusting to the emotional limitations of her own narcissism” (120-1). All of Pym's elegant women tend to draw criticism regarding what critics perceive as their more selfish natures. But whereas critics ultimately see growth and self-improvement in Wilmet, and tend to forgive a younger Prudence her youthful, misguided indiscretions in love, they are much less forgiving of Leonora. Comparing Leonora to Wilmet, for example, Ackley states that Leonora “is a recapitulation of Wilmet, a grotesque version of what might have become of her had she not been humanized by insights into herself nor humbled by her misconceptions. The coolness of Wilmet is carried to frozen extremes in Leonora” (58). Ackley also later states in her critical review of Leonora that she “never grows out of her self-absorption as Wilmet does but remains frozen in her inability to establish meaningful emotional ties with others” (94). Likewise Long considers that “Leonora's isolation is not brought about by social conditions . . . but by

her nature” and that “Wilmet, even in the isolation she feels, has a fuller life than Leonora. What is more, she is ‘saved,’ or permitted to transcend her apparently fixed nature and circumstances” (165). Leonora’s apparent lack of emotion, especially in her rejection of James at the novel’s end, makes her appear cold, selfish, unforgiving, and unfeeling.

Critics, who tend to already be put off by Leonora’s reserved nature and strong focus on perfection, are further annoyed by what they perceive as her lack of growth in the novel as well as by her seeming inability to redeem herself by showing sympathy and taking James back in the end. Such critics continue to see Leonora as simply a narcissist, remaining unconvinced that she is ever capable of changing or developing the great self-awareness that would validate her humanity and make her seem more sympathetic.

Critics seem willing to forgive what they perceive as Leonora’s vain and selfish nature only if she, in turn, is willing to abandon her fantasy of perfection and control and admit to her narcissism. Leonora’s willingness to take James back appears to be the “sign” that many critics seek as an indication that she can at last be “humanized,” by being willing to accept imperfection in herself and others. Such critics, however, by trivializing Leonora’s nature under the blanket label of narcissism, continue to misjudge the complexity and strength of her true character as a genuine Pym heroine. James, in his final pivotal scene with Leonora in the novel, similarly misjudges the nature of Leonora’s character.

Having been abandoned by Ned, James appears at Leonora’s door expecting to resume their relationship. James behaves in this scene very much like Colin who selfishly abandons Meg periodically only to return expecting her forgiveness and resume their

relationship as if nothing has happened. James too feels secure in his return to Leonora, also expecting understanding and forgiveness, reasoning that “however badly one had behaved . . . Leonora would always be there, like some familiar landmark, like one’s mother, even” (*SDD* 205). James’s mistaken belief that Leonora’s love for him is unconditional as “one’s mother” demonstrates the depth of his misjudgment of Leonora’s behavior and her character as well as of their relationship. He mistakes Leonora’s gracious, polite, and deferential manners as indications of a compliant nature, and he interprets her gifts and gestures of love and care as indications that their relationship is weighted more towards his needs than hers, believing that she needs him as someone to cherish and care for far more than he needs her. Frances Bachelder observes that “James is a sweet young man who really cares for Leonora. But he is tied to her by conscience and by the care and comfort he receives rather than by true love. He is unsure how to escape his situation without hurting her or himself” (190). James believes that Leonora will take him back because she loves him, but perhaps because his love for Leonora is not as strong as hers for him, he does not question his own motives or whether or how the love he requires will adversely affect her. Leonora does love James but, knowing she cannot afford this type of relationship, has already let him go.

During her previous emotional breakdown in front of Meg, Leonora’s emphatic “*No . . .*” to Meg’s suggestion that James, like Colin, would “always come back in the end” (*SDD* 202) signals Leonora’s vehement rejection of such a relationship. Leonora knows “it could never be the same again” (202). The unthinkable possibility that she could become trapped like Meg suddenly looms before Leonora. But as Cotsell notes,

even after her breakdown, “Leonora’s sense of irony and distaste for Meg’s sentiments remain. She cannot accept Meg’s code of acceptance and ‘noble and unselfish sentiments.’ Her refuge is self-possession” (112). Leonora refuses to become a victim in her relationship, where she has control over neither James nor herself. Although she may have previously refused to see many similarities between her relationship with James and Meg’s with Colin, Leonora is very aware that her relationship with James must *not* be like theirs. As James stands before Leonora asking for her forgiveness, Lenora, in granting it, also finds herself wondering “how many times Meg must have enacted this kind of scene with Colin, always receiving him back so that as time went on it became easier and no explanation was needed” (*SDD* 207). Leonora cannot bear the thought that her relationship with James could be like Meg’s with Colin where she would always take James back after his unhappy love affairs and pretend that everything was the same as before. Although James is clearly willing to be embraced and restored to his pedestal, Leonora, simply cannot do so, finding “something humiliating about the idea of wooing James . . . like an animal being enticed back into its cage” (207). The “something humiliating” that Leonora instinctively finds about wooing James back is her own subsequent loss of self-esteem as well as the control she would lose over her own life by subordinating it to his. Taking James back would not only change Leonora’s perception of herself as being pitiful like Meg but also mean an abdication of control over her own life from which she might possibly never recover. Critics who see Leonora’s refusal to take James back in the end as further evidence of her narcissism overlook the effect that doing so would have on Leonora’s self-esteem and future perception of her own

character. Leonora does not reject James as a person; she willingly forgives him for hurting her. Rather she is rejecting a relationship that is emotionally unhealthy for her in that she recognizes she will likely continue to be hurt by the weakness of James's love for her.

Leonora's earlier rebuff of Ned when he comes to restore James to her foretells her subsequent rebuff of James, for as with James later, Leonora remains true to her strict sense of decorum by being calm, detached, and mostly silent. Leonora has been humiliated by losing James to Ned; however, she now recognizes that the ultimate humiliation in life is that of having no choice as represented by Meg's relationship with Colin. Meg's overwhelming need to love and feel needed in return places her at Colin's mercy. Because loving him unconditionally is the most important thing in her life, Meg rationalizes and tolerates his ill behavior accordingly, allowing herself to be used by Colin and sacrificing her self-esteem to ensure his continual return. Out of awareness and respect for her own emotional boundaries, Leonora knows she cannot accept the same relationship terms with James and thus resume a relationship with him where her need to love him and be with him takes precedence over needs of her own. James, appearing to require the same type of unconditional love as Colin, asks too much of Leonora. Although Nardin criticizes Leonora as being "so egotistical that she rejects the one human being she truly loves," Nardin also astutely notes that readers "cannot condemn [Leonora] because they must also realize that in making her decision to avoid the indignities love sometimes forces people to undergo by avoiding love itself, she has acted on a sound understanding of her own character" (29). Leonora cannot emotionally meet

James's needs without sacrificing her own, and her refusal to continue their relationship is less a rejection of James than a recognition of her own needs.

Simply put, Leonora chooses herself over James. By knowing that she has a choice, and choosing what she believes to be in her own best interest, Leonora reaffirms a positive definition of her selfhood that includes a true recognition and validation of her own nature as an autonomous individual in charge of her own life. Doan, quoting Joanne Frye, reaffirms the nature of choice: “choice becomes a part of overall defining quality of . . . character and self . . . To choose is itself an action and to be able to choose is the decisive characteristic of selfhood” (144). The realization of choice not only reaffirms Leonora's sense of self but also opens up possibilities for the growth of her character. Leonora's choice of herself over James indicates her resiliency and a willingness to act according to her own needs, despite the emotional cost. For Leonora, actively choosing to be alone is entirely different than accepting the passive role of being left alone by James, and her active choice reaffirms her self-worth. Leonora does not make this choice easily, for she truly loves James. Her decision to choose herself, born partly from the sadness and despair of losing James to Ned, seems to evolve naturally from the depths of her character, maybe surprising even Leonora a bit by its strength and by its introspective nature. Although she sees that she is back in control now as James confides in her about Ned as he seeks her forgiveness, another part of her perceives that she should be acting differently toward him. She questions herself, “why, then, did one not make some generous gesture, some impulsive movement towards him, so that all could be forgotten in the closeness of an embrace?” (*SDD* 207). Leonora loves James enough to sense the

possibility of a “generous gesture” or “impulsive movement,” but for her own self protection, she must keep her distance emotionally. At a deep, possibly even subconscious level, Leonora seems to recognize that it is more important to for her to retain the ability to have control over her own life than to regain any form of control over James in an attempt to keep him near her. If James has indeed been the sweet dove in her life that she has tethered, she is now willing to let him fly away.

Although Leonora is still very hurt by what has happened in her relationship with James – witness her subsequent breakdown with Meg after her encounter with Ned – she seems to be moving past being totally immersed *in* her relationship with James to becoming more of an observer of it, a move that helps to balance her emotionally as she gains some much needed perspective of her actions and behavior. Detached observation allows Leonora more control over her life as she seeks to recover from her relationship with James and learn from her experience. Like all of Pym’s heroines, Leonora is a skilled observer. Her continuous creation and almost total immersion in her romantic fantasies, however, often make her perhaps more adept at imagining what the text of her life should be than living and coping with what it actually is, especially concerning recent events in her relationship with James. The ability for detached observance, especially of one’s own life, is an important trait for Pym’s heroines, for it widens their perspective of humanity, allowing them to reaffirm their own sense of self even as they realize that of others. Leonora can therefore forgive James even though she can no longer envision him within the text of her life. She realizes that their relationship can no longer work. The reality of what has happened between them has forever altered the possibilities of their

perfect romantic fantasy. Leonora has risked emotional safety by loving James, and having been devastated by losing him, she is unwilling to trust him again. Leonora's choice of herself over James, restoring her control over her life as well as her sense of confidence, is also oddly humanizing, poignantly revealing her vulnerability as she seeks both safety and love for herself. That Leonora perceives she has a choice, and indeed chooses as she does, enables her to stabilize her life and face what comes, including her inevitable aging, with the dignity of self-possession. Leonora has remained true to her character, again finding recuperative power in the strength of her will as she recovers from her relationship with James and works towards restoring equanimity to her life.

Leonora's insight about her relationship with James in their last scene together is reflective of other, smaller self-realizations she has had throughout the novel that also indicate self-awareness and the potential for change and growth. She has a glimpse into the possibility that others may see her differently than she sees herself, for example, after her encounter with the woman sales assistant in the Kensington shop where she goes to buy James a pair of porcelain vases for his birthday. After an icily formal exchange with the woman regarding the flawless nature and price of the vases, Leonora, pleased with her purchase, happens to recall "somewhere from the back of her mind a ridiculous tag or motto . . . something about passing through this world but once and therefore taking care to be kind to a fellow creature" (*SDD* 121). She makes a small effort to treat the woman kindly by warmly complimenting her in thanking her for packing the vases so beautifully. Benet cites this example as indicative of Leonora's "potential for change," stating that Leonora "as a consequence of her thought for another, is led to a bit of self-awareness, a

glimpse of the disparity between what others see and what she believes she is” (126). As she leaves the shop, Leonora wonders: “Does one then seem so cold, proud and formidable . . . when one is none of these things?” (*SDD* 121). By opening up to consider another’s point of view, Leonora reflects, albeit briefly, on the discrepancy between how others view her and who she really is. What Leonora does not yet realize is that because she shares so little of her feelings with others that they usually *only* see the perfect self-image she presents and judge her accordingly. Meg, for example, attempting to be complimentary to her friend, answers Leonora’s question, “How do you think of me” by responding: “Just living in your perfect house, leading a gracious and elegant life,” and never “being ruffled or upset by anything. Not like me” (56). Although Meg does not understand Leonora, she obviously admires her. Leonora, however, is unsure “that she liked the picture of herself it suggested. Of course one wasn’t like that at all, cold and fossilized” (56). Leonora’s discomfort at Meg’s reply again indicates the dissonance Leonora perceives between how she feels and how she appears. Her discomfort also underscores her humanity; Leonora cares enough about others to care about what they think of her. Leonora knows that she too is capable of being ruffled or upset, but, having a reserved nature, she chooses to keep her feelings to herself. Her deeply reserved nature also makes it more difficult for Leonora to understand that sharing a little more of her feelings with others enhances her image rather than hinders it by helping them glimpse that she too can be vulnerable, and therefore human.

Leonora again gains self-awareness by briefly stepping outside herself to consider the point of view of another when she visits Keats’s house with Ned and James. The day

of their visit is rainy and overcast, and Leonora knows she is not at her best. She is also feeling defeated and somewhat depressed by James's inattention as he and Ned become closer. The only other visitor on this dreary, wet afternoon is "a middle-aged woman wearing a mackintosh pixie hood and transparent rainboots over her shoes" (*SDD* 155). Leonora also notices that she carries a bag full of books, with a single serving frozen dinner packet clearly visible on top. Usually disdainful of one who would make such choices, Leonora, "perhaps because growing unhappiness had made her more sensitive," instead finds herself reflecting on the woman's life. She imagines how the woman's life might be as she envisions her "going home to a cosy solitude, her dinner heated up in twenty-five minutes with no bother of preparation, books to read while she ate it, and the memory of a visit to Keats's house to cherish" (155). Leonora is struck by the thought that this woman's life, so different from her own, could also in its own way be beautiful and perfect. Long states that in this scene "Leonora is brought to the threshold of understanding" and is "able, as in a form of communion, to step outside of herself to enter the life of another person" (169). Doing so not only forms an important connection between Leonora's humanity and that of the woman at Keats's house but also opens up another perspective for Leonora of herself and of perfection as she begins to see other possibilities for beauty and solitary comfort. Noting Leonora's perception of the other woman's "cosy solitude," Liddell observes that perhaps Leonora "will learn this solution" (183), indicating that he also believes Leonora is capable of change and growth.

Leonora gains self-insight in other ways in the novel as well. She realizes for example, how humor would have helped her situation with Ned. This realization comes

to her in a conversation in the last scene of the novel where James is describing his last quarrel with Ned: “As she listened to James describing that last quarrel Leonora found herself tempted to laugh. It occurred to her now that Ned was in many ways a comic character” (*SDD* 206). Ned, like Leonora, may present himself as very self-assured and fully in control, but Leonora perhaps suddenly realizes Ned’s overly dramatic flair and aggressive need for control may also possibly hide his own weaknesses. Realizing that Ned also has his foibles, Leonora can relax a bit and find his behavior humorous rather than threatening. Having a sense of humor actually helps Leonora gain more control over her current feelings about James and Ned. Leonora also knows that “the realization had come too late” (206), for she could no longer change past events, and she even questions whether it would have made any difference if she had seen Ned differently, a further insight indicating Leonora’s awareness of her own weaknesses where James is concerned. However, a sense of the comic or ridiculous, even in retrospect, also indicates Leonora’s willingness to look with a lighter heart on an experience that has been personally devastating and is another indication that she is capable of change. The ability to find humor in suffering indicates a willingness to broaden one’s perspective. Leonora’s insight about Ned being comic and humorous, brought about by her suffering over the love and loss of James, shows her ability to step outside of herself, if only briefly, to view both herself and Ned a little more compassionately.

Leonora’s brief glimpses into her own humanity and that of others that indicate the possibility of her growth and change may go unnoticed by readers, and especially by critics who are looking for more obvious signs. Pym, however, is not known for the

obvious. Her writing, a skillful mixture of keen observation, subtle comedy, irony, and dry wit, is richly complex and understated. Donato, for example, observes that “In Pym, moments of depth and meaning are not isolated and writ large, but shimmer only passingly between the pauses and reliably and often comically polite relationships in which we traffic daily” (18). Readers must look carefully in the novels for these passing moments to grasp their significance. The same holds true for the development of Pym’s characters, whose insights and self-awareness she tends to develop slowly and quietly throughout her novels in a deft exploration of the shades and nuances of their characters. Leonora, with her intense sense of privacy and propriety, strong will, and deeply reserved nature, is drawn by Pym with an exceptionally fine subtlety that gives readers only occasional, small glimpses of Leonora’s feelings or her vulnerability. Subtle signs, such as those previously discussed, however, can give readers a different perspective on Leonora’s character, even as they also illuminate Leonora’s perception of herself. Pym’s emphasis on the importance of detached observation of the subtle, yet meaningful, changes in Leonora seems to suggest that, like Leonora, readers would also benefit from gaining the wider perspective that detached observance brings, and indeed her shimmering “moments of depth and meaning” may be training readers to do so. These subtle signs, as indications of possibilities for Leonora’s growth, are small harbingers of hope for Leonora’s character. Near the novel’s end, there is also a foretelling of a new awareness for Leonora. Just as her shopping trip to London on a cold winter morning lays bare the full extent of her unhappiness and loneliness without James, the onset of May, with its profusion of flowers – “tulips and irises in her patio and glimpses of lilac and

laburnum over distant garden walls” (*SDD* 195) – brings forth the promise of her rebirth. Leonora realizes that “although it seemed as if a part of her had died in the hard, cruel winter which had taken James from her, the spring had revived her in some way” (195). Leonora is changing, and now responds to her friends a little differently. No longer finding the same pleasure from being alone and caring for her possessions that she enjoyed before James, Leonora now “almost welcome[s] Liz’s interruptions or Meg’s cosy chats about Colin” (201). After a winter of despair, Leonora is being revived by hope. The beautiful spring flowers not only symbolize the revival of hope in Leonora’s spirits, but also foretell of a greater awareness yet to come for Leonora.

The novel ends on a note of hope as well – although, again, in customary Pym style, the note is subtle. Lenckos writes that “the reader can almost miss the faint-sounding bell of hope in . . . *The Sweet Dove Died*. . . . But it is there, in the very last sentence of the book” (50). As Leonora turns James away and prepares to go out to dinner with Humphrey, it may appear that she is resuming her old role of an elegant, detached perfectionist seeking to be admired. But Leonora has changed. Humphrey dutifully brings Leonora flowers, a large bunch of peonies, and whereas previously Humphrey’s flowers would be perfunctorily expected, Leonora now has a new perception of his offering, indicating her change in attitude as the novel concludes:

The sight of Humphrey with the peonies reminded her that he was taking her to the Chelsea Flower Show tomorrow. It was the kind of thing one liked to go to, and the sight of such large and faultless blooms, so exquisite in colour, so absolutely correct in all their finer points, was a

comfort and a satisfaction to one who loved perfection as she did. Yet when one came to think of it, the only flowers that were really perfect were those, like the peonies that went so well with one's charming room, that possessed the added grace of having been presented to oneself. (208)

Leonora's realizes that the perfection of the flowers lies not in their intrinsic beauty but in their having been chosen especially for her by Humphrey as a mark of his love and devotion. Leonora's insight changes her perspective of perfection and beauty to a dynamic rather than a static one as symbolized by flowers. The flowers in the little Victorian flower book that she so admires and buys for herself at the beginning of the novel are a representation of beauty and perfection, whereas Humphrey's living, beautiful peonies at the novel's end signify the perfection of the beauty of a shared relationship and of Humphrey's love and regard for her. Leonora's new understanding of perfection opens her up to further growth and change by connecting her to others in a positive way.

Lenckos, observing that Leonora's "insight that aesthetic representation has meaning only when it issues from the springs of affection helps her to restore her impaired self," further remarks that in the future Leonora will "rely on the liberal gesture of generosity bestowed on her by others out of the kindness of their hearts" rather than on the "tributes expected from others as a matter of course by the sheer force of her character and good looks" (50). Leonora's new perception of perfection and beauty will help her begin to understand its ephemeral nature, also symbolized by the flowers that Humphrey brings her. The flowers are beautiful because they symbolize not only the beauty of nature's perfection but also life's transitory nature. Flowers, like life, have a cycle in which they

grow, bloom, and die. Their perfection and beauty is therefore all the more poignant for being brief and all the more precious when shared. Leonora's new awareness of the feeling symbolized in Humphrey's flowers signals her new appreciation for their worth.

Significantly Leonora is not alone at the end of the novel. Although she has ended her relationship with James, she is embarking on a new one with Humphrey, with a fuller understanding of its value. There is promise in Leonora's future. It is significant that Leonora does not end up alone because this ending is not one Pym originally envisioned for the novel. As a result of Larkin's critique – Pym had sent him her original manuscript and solicited his advice – “Pym decided that Leonora would not triumph” (Cotsell 106), indicating her plan for a darker ending. Weld indicates that Pym's notes for the novel show that she considered at least two different endings in which Leonora was alone. Pym's considerations for the novel's ending were possibly impacted by her increasingly unhappy relationship with Richard Roberts, the younger man with whom her five year relationship overlapped with her writing of the novel:

Ending No I. She gives him up (like me?) and prepares to go on with her life – the things she would do – sewing and collecting old books and walking about at lunchtime alone and proud. Ending No. II. The woman waits. He said he would call. She waits and waits and nothing comes.

(Weld 179)

Ultimately Pym would use neither ending for Leonora, instead softening Leonora's break with James with “the continued attentions of Humphrey, a more appropriate suitor” as she allows Leonora the companionship and support she needs (Weld 179). The end of

James and Leonora's relationship contrasts markedly with that of Roberts and Pym's. Although Pym's notation in Ending No. I. ("like me?") seems to indicate that she envisions herself, like she originally envisioned Leonora, giving up her young man to "go on with her life . . . alone and proud," Pym's relationship with Roberts actually ended very similar to Ending No. II as he eventually just stopped calling.

In a December 1966 letter to Robert Smith, Pym writes that "as for news of Richard, I fear it is all over now," observing that "perhaps my sardonic tongue has sent him away or he has just lost interest, the latter probably" (*VPE* 240). Subsequent letters to Smith in the following months reveal Pym still trying to come to terms with her failed relationship with Roberts. In February 1967, her depression over her inability to publish her novels mingles with that of her losing Roberts, and she writes of her "failure" at this relationship: "Trying to understand people and leaving them alone and being 'unselfish' and all *that jazz* has only the bleakest of rewards – precisely nothing! Now I am incapable of taking any action at all, which is just as well" (242). And later in August of the same year she writes Smith that she almost called Richard, but then, realizing it might be awkward, did not, confiding that it was "so *unflattering* to feel that a person really doesn't ever want to see you again – I don't think it's ever happened to me before *quite* like this! Now, alas, I am too old to change myself but shall just be more cautious in future – not allowing myself to get fond of anybody" (243). Pym's candid and deeply felt observations about her relationship with Roberts reveal how she was hurt by his rejection as well as her skeptical attitude as a woman in her early fifties towards future romance and love. Critics who claim that Leonora did not love James or that he was just another

possession for a narcissistic woman obsessed with perfection fail to see how Pym's feelings for Roberts are mirrored in Leonora's for James. More significantly, they miss seeing how both Pym and her fictional heroine suffer from rejection and loss. Mirroring Pym's feelings for Roberts, Leonora genuinely cares for James. Her choice to give him up at the end because their relationship is unworkable for her is a poignant one, evoking, if not the reader's approval, then at least her understanding and sympathy. By choosing a more sympathetic and compassionate ending for Leonora's story, Pym once again embraces her characteristic outlook of hope and possibility found in her novels, even as in her own life she embraces solitude, remaining a detached observer and drawing from her life experiences to create the lives of her characters and possibly, through writing, reconcile her own unhappy experiences.

Weld posits that "elegant, cool, and fastidious" Leonora is "at least partly wish-fulfillment" for Pym who admires her heroine's appearance of having perfect control over her life (173). Holt, in her biography of Pym, agrees that Pym personally identified with Leonora, adding that Pym actually "saw herself on two levels in the book: as Leonora, cool and in control, her dignity intact even in pain and defeat, but also, in part, as Meg, whose love for Colin is the caricature of Leonora's love for James" (215). Holt's observation indicates that Pym understood both aspects of her own nature as respects Roberts and perhaps tried to be more like Leonora. Several of Pym's diary entries indicate how her own romantic, but platonic, relationship with Roberts seems to encompass aspects of both Leonora's relationship with James and Meg's with Colin, such as her conflict between appearing dispassionate to protect herself like Leonora or being

more understanding of Roberts's behavior like Meg. For example, on May 24, 1965, reminiscent of an aloof Leonora, Pym writes: "Fortunately all the fury and bitterness I sometimes feel has stayed hidden inside me and R. doesn't – perhaps never will – know!" Just a few days later, reminiscent of a compromising Meg, Pym, after talking to Roberts and receiving an invitation to dinner for her birthday, concludes, "I must learn not to take 'things' so much to heart and try to understand – don't stop loving (can't), just be there if and when needed" (*VPE* 235). Leonora and Meg seem to embody different aspects of Pym's attitude towards and feelings in her relationship with Roberts. Leonora, like Pym, is naturally reserved and has a sense of detachment. Leonora also embodies elegance and the appearance of control that serves as a protection for strong emotions. Meg embodies these same strong emotions, and a desire to express them, as well as the need for love. Pym, finding herself to be more like Meg in her relationship with Roberts, perhaps wishes she could in fact be more like Leonora, although behind Leonora's cool, detached façade, an observant reader can also see Leonora's – and Pym's – sensitive nature and vulnerability. Readers briefly glimpse this vulnerability in the scene where Leonora suffers a very emotional eruption in front of Meg. Lenckos notes this unusual occurrence, sharing that "Leonora's outburst is completely out of character, not only because of the pride she has invested in her customary composure, but because Pym's heroines as a rule do not break down in front of others" (51). But Pym may have intuitively understood how Leonora needed an emotional release from the constant tension of keeping her feelings at bay. Pym's notes for the novel suggest that "it would be artistically more satisfying if

Leonora were to break down in front of Meg” (Cotsell 107) as Leonora’s – and perhaps Pym’s – alter ego.

Wyatt-Brown contends that “writing compensated Pym for her misery with Roberts” (117). Critics have variously observed that James, Humphrey, and even Ned embody certain characteristics of Roberts. Long observes some of the ways that the novel draws from Pym’s relationship with Roberts, such as the relationship of an older woman to a younger man and the nature of their attachment, Roberts’s interest in antiques and his gift to Pym of a glass bird, and the younger man’s ultimate rejection of the older woman (162). Pym, however, carefully fictionalizes her relationship with Roberts so that the reader cannot draw a direct parallel between Roberts and James. Pym is equally scrupulously in her detached portrayal of Leonora, her narrator observing Leonora, as Long notes, “with a severe detachment” (163). Also recognizing the “atmosphere of tender melancholy” in the book, Liddell similarly observes, “the portrait of Leonora contains almost poignant self-criticism” (182), while Merritt Moseley states that Leonora is “ruthlessly anatomized, although she is a partial self-portrait of Pym” (7), and Wyatt-Brown notes that Pym leaves it to the reader “to develop compassion for her protagonist” (119). Despite Pym’s detachment, she understands Leonora’s nature as in many ways Leonora’s nature is similar to her own. Leonora, like Pym, has the same sense of the “inviolable” self and, like Pym, is also protective of her emotional privacy. With a similar “prohibition against self-scrutiny” (Wyatt-Brown 120), Pym, like her heroine Leonora, chooses not to dwell on personal psychoanalysis but to deal with life’s surface, everyday details. Wyatt-Brown thus notes that “like Pym herself, Leonora is an expert at

distracting herself from misery and often bravely disguises the signs of pain,” a behavior that leads others to dismiss as inconsequential what is in fact real pain (120). Pym, however, realized that Leonora’s behavior, like her own, was a part of her nature, and as Wyatt-Brown also explains, “understood intuitively that her heroine cannot alter her principles or free herself by force of will” (120). Even so, Pym does not judge Leonora’s principles or her weaknesses nor does she moralize about Leonora’s behavior. Rather Pym objectively presents Leonora as she finds her, avoiding, as Donato observes, “Manichean absolutes in feelings as well as in words” as well as the tendency to “moralize categories of feeling by making ‘positive’ ones good and ‘negative’ ones bad, or by making the former signs of psychological strength, the latter of psychological weaknesses” (37). Pym’s detached style, in which she neither judges nor preaches, gives her perspective on her heroine’s character and behavior as well as her own, allowing her to write with both clarity and tolerance as she draws from her own life experience and transmutes it into the fiction of her novels.

Like Pym, Leonora has an often impenetrable mask of detachment. Whereas Pym uses her emotional detachment to gain perspective of her life experience that she later distills into her novels, using her sense of detachment as a means of personal and literary growth, Leonora, longing for permanence in a world of change, uses emotional detachment to avoid reality as she creates a romantic fantasy for herself of a more perfect world. Both Leonora and Pym thus use emotional detachment as a means to create fiction: Pym in her novels and Leonora in her own life. Leonora’s fiction, however, is unlike Pym’s in that it is a static illusion of reality as she weaves an illusion of a life of

unchanging perfection behind which she can safely hide her emotions. Stasis represents perfection and beauty for Leonora, much like that of the urn's silent truth in Keats's "Ode to a Grecian Urn." As perfection that can never change or decay like Leonora's beautiful Victorian possessions, the Grecian urn represents the type of beauty and truth that Leonora seeks to help her preserve her own illusion that she also can remain unchanged and beautiful. Pym, as Leonora's creator, is careful not to judge Leonora's illusion, nor the fact that she has one, for Pym understands that Leonora needs a type of detachment in order to protect her emotions. Leonora's small changes in the novel, leading to her epiphany of hope regarding the flowers at the novel's end, indicate Pym's awareness that the illusion fostered by Leonora's sense of emotional detachment can hinder as well as help Leonora. Although it serves as a form of self-protection from the harshness of the world around her, Leonora's illusion can also keep her trapped, like the figures on the Grecian urn in Keats's poem, in a static vision of perfection and beauty where she cannot change or grow.

Pym, who does not judge Leonora, therefore does not create Leonora for the reader to judge, but as a character of interest worthy of sharing. Lord David Cecil, one of Pym's biggest fans, found Leonora fascinating, writing to Pym that "Leonora is particularly brilliantly evoked. You make it gradually clear that she is *not* a nice character; yet you do justice to her better qualities, and above all you never seem angry with her – on the contrary you enjoy her as an interesting, elegant and rare example of the human species" (Holt 265). Understanding Pym's non-judgmental relationship with Leonora, Cecil, taking the same approach, finds richness in Leonora's character.

Likewise, Larkin writes to Pym, “it is clever how you slowly bring the reader round to Leonora’s side, whom one starts by rather disliking” (Holt 266). Ardent supporters, Cecil and Larkin both intuitively understand Pym’s ability for discernment, as well as her tolerant and encompassing nature as a person and a writer. Their Pymian approach to Leonora reveals an appreciation of Leonora’s complex character, as well as their appreciation for Pym’s ability, as Nardin notes, “to suggest that beneath the surface of the blankest lives something with its own kind of interest lies concealed” (17). With Leonora, as with all Pym heroines, it is up to the reader to identify the interest that lies concealed or what she considers as interesting and worthwhile in Leonora’s life as well as in the novel, in searching for Pym’s trademark “richness.”

Many critics find Pym’s title for her novel taken from Keats’s poem an invitation to explore the richness of its symbolism in the novel’s relationships: “I had a dove, and the sweet dove died; / And I have thought it died of grieving; / O, what could it grieve for? its feet were tied / With a single thread of my own hand’s weaving” (*SDD* 5). With the quotation as the novel’s “controlling metaphor” (Allen “Metaphors” 102), critics analyze the relationships in the novel and speculate which character is the dove and which is the speaker from Keats’s poem. Perhaps most obvious is James as the dove and Leonora as the speaker. In *Barbara Pym: Writing a Life*, Allen notes how Pym uses “literary quotations and allusions at strategic points for enhancement, to inject irony, and to add depth to her characterization,” also observing how Pym “emphasizes the dove image and gives the imagery an ironic twist by having Ned, an expert in love’s cruelty, recite the poem to Leonora” (108). Noticing the alabaster dove on Leonora’s mantelpiece

– a gift to Leonora from James – the first time he visits her, Ned recites Keats’s poem to Leonora, giving the last two lines “a curious emphasis” (*SDD* 146). Ned’s obvious connection between the dove and James in his relationship with Leonora, agitates Leonora, making her feel that “now the harmless little poem seemed almost to have some obscure and unpleasant meaning,” although she tries to firmly brush her feelings aside as “fanciful and ridiculous, surely” (146). Allen finds that “the death of the dove is symbolic of the death of the self that comes from the inability to act in the interest of others, a characteristic that applies to Ned as well as Leonora” (“Metaphors” 102). Allen also posits that the caged and bound sweet dove is, in fact, “Leonora’s spirit, the sweet dove of her inner self,” thereby keeping Leonora alone and “preventing her participation in the lives of others (113). Nardin, agreeing with Allen’s latter assessment, also expands it to encompass Leonora as both the dove and the speaker, discerning that “the application of the poem to Leonora’s situation is even more unpleasant than she realizes, for she herself is both speaker and dove. It is her own aesthetic approach to life that constricts and kills her emotionally – and she has chosen this imprisonment of her own free will” (121). It is not difficult to envision and agree with these metaphorical combinations of either James or Leonora as the dove or Leonora as the dove and speaker, especially for those critics who see the Leonora’s possessive love of James as the “thread” of her hand’s weaving that leads to the death of their relationship. Critics who maintain that Leonora remains narcissistic at the end of the novel can also easily see how metaphorically Leonora tethers herself by being aloof and self-absorbed.

Lenckos, however, sees a connection between the sweet dove and Pym herself, observing that “Leonora’s story, more tragic than those of Pym’s previous heroines, obviously provided the author with a kind of catharsis and enabled her finally to kill off the sweet bird of her youthful infatuation” (54). Lenckos’s conclusion is that “the dove that dies is, of course, an image of lost innocence, the alienation of a reader from the naïve belief in the fairy tale-like spells woven by literary fantasy” (54). Written at a darker time for Pym, and perhaps symbolic of her own skepticism, the novel with its title from Keats’s poem could be a metaphor, in both a literary and personal sense, for Pym’s release of her expectations of continuing to be a published novelist, as well as for her own personal illusions of romantic love. Pym’s last three novels – *The Sweet Dove Died*, *Quartet in Autumn*, and *A Few Green Leaves* – certainly seem to have a more somber tone than the six of her previously published canon. However, these novels also exemplify Pym’s characteristic powers of discernment from her detached observance, embody her continual affirmative approach to life, and all as Lenckos observes, “conclude on a note of optimism” (50). Leonora’s perception about perfection and about herself begins to change when she receives Humphrey’s flowers at the end of *The Sweet Dove Died*. Humphrey’s flowers forecast “the warm dawn of rebirth from the cold ashes of grieving” for Leonora (Lenckos 53). Letty considers the possibilities of where she can live at the finish of *Quartet in Autumn*, and Emma contemplates writing her first novel as she perhaps embarks “on a love affair which need not necessarily be an unhappy one” at the conclusion of *A Few Green Leaves* (Pym 250). Leonora, Letty, and Emma’s self-realizations at the end of their respective novels open up their lives, in Letty’s words, to

“infinite possibilities for change” (*QA* 218). Ackley notes that Letty’s observation “despite its surface optimism . . . comes at the conclusion of a novel filled with images of decay and death, and the prospects for change that Letty is thinking of are anything but infinite.” Nevertheless, Ackley, continues, “the statement is typical of Pym’s affirmation of life and cautious optimism in the face of inevitable shifting circumstances that she never abandoned, even when conditions were at their bleakest in her own life” (143). Pym, in her continual affirmation of life’s possibilities, always preserved hope. Her natural stoicism and the calmness of her detached observance were therefore buoyed by her intrinsic sense of optimism regarding life’s possibilities, an attitude that unsurprisingly underwrites her novels. As Cotsell maintains, “one of the attractions of Pym’s novels is that we sense in them the author’s own repeated commitment to hopefulness, the repeated act of imagining possibility” (5). Pym’s novels are testaments to the continuous possibility of hope.

A belief in Pym’s deep sense of optimism that also recognizes the potential for opportunity in loss also suggests another possible metaphor for the significance of Keats’s dove as respects her heroine Leonora. Perhaps Leonora’s “sweet dove” is not her own spirit or her aesthetic approach but something else she holds very dearly: namely, her illusions of control and her romantic fantasy of who she thinks she is in the text of the perfect world she has imagined and created for herself. The death of the sweet dove is the death of these illusions, opening up the possibility for Leonora to form another view of herself. Leonora has experienced pain and suffering from the loss of James as well as from the subsequent loss of seeing herself in quite the same youthful way as symbolized

by her loss of James's mirror. The mirror's distorted view and Leonora's illusions of a romantic relationship with James have helped Leonora to feel that she is safe and in control of her life, but they have also deprived her of full self-awareness that contributes to her growth as a person. Lenckos believes that "since Leonora has lived for a long time on the verisimilitude of emotions, she is unable to tell the difference between real and imagined love not only in herself, but also in others" and that Leonora needs the "complicity of others" to preserve her romantic fantasies (52). Leonora loses much of this complicity when James abandons her, and her illusion begins to shatter, leaving her in despair. This shattering and Leonora's subsequent suffering, however, enable Leonora to "discover her failures of perception and achieve a sort of redemption" in the end (Lenckos 50). By realizing the true perfection of Humphrey's flowers as having been chosen especially for her as a symbol of his affection and devotion, Leonora begins to see past her illusions of fantasy romance to discover the reality of Humphrey's regard for her. For Leonora, the death of the "sweet dove" thus ironically becomes a positive in her life as she begins to free herself from the restraints of her romantic fantasies and open up to a more realistic vision of life.

Like Keats, whose poetry, rich in complexity and ambiguity, reveals his ability to imagine and encompass seemingly diverse images and contradictory ideas in a multi-dimensional view of life, Pym, whose novels reflect an equally encompassing view, also has what Isa Kapp terms a "many layered intelligence: the ability to see several things at the same time" (242). Pym's legacy to her readers is the generous expanse of this view, where, as Kapp also shares, Pym sees "not only the poignancy, the pity of it all (*that* most

of us can see), but the risible oddness of our behavior and the miraculous resilience of our nature” (242). Thus readers can find the richness of Pym not only in the quiet, introspective beauty of her novels or in her uniquely complex cast of characters, whose acquaintances can evoke a myriad of emotions – humor, sympathy, happiness, comfort, hope, or even irritation, but also in the richness of choice and opportunity they discover in their own lives, having benefited from Pym’s expansive view.

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