The subversion of the romantic paradigm in three of the novels of Barbara Pym

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The subversion of the romantic paradigm in three of the novels of Barbara Pym

by

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"All this reading. . . what does it lead to?"

--No Fond Return of Love

". . . writing a thesis is an excellent alibi and a good way of keeping out of mischief."

--Less Than Angels
INTRODUCTION: PYM AND THE PARADIGM OF ROMANCE

The novels of British writer Barbara Pym (1913-1980) have been praised for their wit, gentle humor, and quiet portrayals of ordinary men and women who are given to musing upon the ways in which their mundane lives have not quite met their expectations. Most of her ten novels deal with the poignancy of day-to-day living rather than major social crises and personal upheaval. Small triumphs and minor setbacks are Pym's bailiwick. She has been seen (with some justification) as a kind of heir to Jane Austen in her treatment of the ritualized comedy of manners. Like Austen, Pym is a master of delicacy and understatement. Her books quietly reveal an acute awareness of the ways men and women perceive each other; in them she examines assumptions and expectations about sex roles and romantic love. Most of all, she points out the ways in which these assumptions are not justified in life and these expectations go unfulfilled. This unobtrusive aspect of her work is the focus of my thesis: Pym's subtle, ironic subversion of the romantic paradigm. Barbara Brothers has noted that "Pym contrasts her characters and their lives with those which have been presented in literature to mock the idealised view of the romantic paradigm and to emphasise that her tales present the truth of the matter" (Staley 62).
The paradigm that Pym's novels consistently undermine also appears in popular culture and is almost as pervasive in present-day American culture as it was in Pym's post-Edwardian England. She deals with the expectations that men have of women and that women have of men--expectations that severely restrict the opportunity for the sexes to understand each other, and that rigidly define the roles of men and women in social and business situations, in friendships, and, most importantly, in marriage. In her novels, not only do women and men unthinkingly rely on conventions to define their relationships to each other, but each individual has to cope with other characters who seek to define him or her within the parameters of convention. The conventions of the paradigm, then, are powerful social forces, even though Pym's characters may not fully understand what these conventions are.

**Origins and expressions of the paradigm**

Such pervasive conventions did not appear all of a sudden; the roots of the paradigm go back at least as far as the cultural phenomenon of courtly love. This literary tradition emerged in the Languedoc region of France in the end of the eleventh century, according to C. S. Lewis in his classic work *The Allegory of Love* (2). Courtly love stressed worship from afar and a heightened, intense passion for an unobtainable figure. The common expression in
medieval poetry and song was a knight's idealization—even worship—of a beautiful woman, often the wife of the knight's liege lord. In this literature, the lady might consent to give the knight her favors after a ritualized wooing; ultimately the relationship between lady and knight developed into an adulterous affair. It is important to note that courtly love was at first not thought possible between husband and wife, since marriage in medieval times was primarily intended to secure property rights, perpetuate family, and form political alliances. Lewis explains that in feudal times marriages "had nothing to do with love, and no 'nonsense' about marriage was tolerated. . . . When the alliance which had answered would answer no longer, the husband's object was to get rid of the lady as quickly as possible" (13). Courtly love had no place in such a view of marriage; thus, continues Lewis, "[a]ny idealization of sexual love, in a society where marriage is purely utilitarian, must begin by being an idealization of adultery" (13). Later writers such as Dante sought to reconcile religious and fleshly passion, and the ideal of courtly love eventually evolved into the concept of "falling in love." This concept of idealized, romantic love has now permeated Western thought so thoroughly that it is unquestioningly accepted as the norm, and as the only legitimate basis for marriage. It is important to realize that most other non-Western cultures make no association between romantic love and marriage, and indeed may regard a marriage based solely on erotic love as a dangerous aberration. In modern Western
culture, however, romantic passion is not only accepted, but is ardently sought after by both men and women in order to gain personal fulfillment. Pym's characters are no exception in having this desire.

Courtly love is not the sole influence upon the modern romantic paradigm, however. A second factor has been the assumptions about women's roles and behavior inherited from the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The Industrial Revolution dramatically altered a woman's economic role: once a valuable breadwinner in cottage industries, an unmarried woman later became a grave financial liability to her family. To avoid threatening her family's security, and to avoid the scorn poured upon unmarried older females, a young woman was obligated to marry. Growing uncertainty and uneasiness about this changing role of women led to a flurry of public discourse; sermons and books from this period urge that women be restricted in education and development, and that they be taught nothing more than that which would make them attractive to a husband or suitable as a wife. These attitudes toward both married and unmarried women became conventions of popular culture and part of the romantic paradigm. Many of these conventions are expressed in the literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (literature with which most of Pym's characters are highly conversant, incidentally). Several different conventions about male and female roles can be identified. Although the examples given are literary, it is assumed that the conventions exist in popular culture as well.
A primary assumption is that a woman can serve one of two functions: as a cheerful and willing helpmeet to a man, enabling him to pursue lofty spiritual or intellectual goals, or as a beautiful, inspirational muse. Either function denies woman a role in creating or acting for herself, or even fully sharing in and understanding the man’s work. The first convention emerges in diverse areas. A prevalent example from the second chapter of the book of Genesis is the creation of the woman from the rib of the man, in order that she may be a helper and companion to him. Although the Hebrew version of the myth implies a fairly equal relationship between the sexes, as Western culture has assimilated it, the myth confers a secondary "helper" role upon the woman. Tennyson evokes this helpmeet convention in In Memoriam when he compares the inability of man to understand the ways of God to the inability of the wife of a great scientist to understand her husband’s work--aware of the gulf between them, she is content to admire and dote on him. In Middlemarch, George Eliot shows the weaknesses in the convention when she has the young Dorothea Brooke marry the elderly, pedantic Casaubon. Dorothea, intelligent but uneducated, hopes to help him finish his supposed masterwork on mythology, only to find later that he has done nothing but cobble together work done by previous researchers.

The necessary corollary to woman’s helpmeet role is, of course, that men need to be helped. Men’s work is intrinsically more valu-
able than any work a woman might do, and in order to achieve the highest pinnacle of creativity, men need to be freed from the distractions and chores of everyday living. Men must be coddled and treated like children--their needs are special, important, and undeniable. In treating a man this way, a woman finds her role as helpmeet is validated--she feels needed and even indispensable. However, carrying out this convention in everyday life denies any real possibility of understanding between the sexes. Men expect to be coddled and spoiled; women, in treating men like children, obviate communicating with them as equals. Woolf derides this convention in *To the Lighthouse* by portraying the sympathy-craving intellectual Mr. Ramsay, whose ego demands that he be noticed and comforted, and the beautiful, dutiful Mrs. Ramsay, who exerts a powerful influence over her children even after death. Pym also points out the tendency of this convention to diminish both men and women. Her work is full of women who dote on curates, help male researchers with thankless tasks like indexing, and worry about their men getting enough red meat. The men themselves, both the nice ones and the vain ones, blithely accept such treatment as their due.

The other widespread convention, that of the "woman as muse," can also be found in literature. Patrocinio Schweickart, in her essay "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading," cites the epiphany scene of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as
an example. Stephen Dedalus sees a beautiful girl at the seashore: "she seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird" (Flynn and Schweickart 41). She becomes an entrancing metaphor for art, the muse that inspires writers and artists—males—to perform creative acts. "A man reading this passage," writes Schweickart, "is invited to identify with Stephen. . . and, thus, to ratify the alleged universality of the experience" (41). But this supposed universality apparently has no place for a woman with similar creative urges. A woman who adopts the muse model as her own may fall prey to narcissism and find it difficult to define herself except as a woman whom men find attractive: the fate of Prudence Bates in Jane and Prudence and Leonora Eyre in The Sweet Dove Died.

Another convention, one rarely commented upon, is the "two suitors" motif that Jean Kennard identifies in her book Victims of Convention. In Victorian novels whose main characters are women, the heroine must choose between two men, one who embodies deceptive or false values, and one who represents the real-life values of a mature adult (11). The right choice implies that the heroine has gained insight and maturity during the course of the novel; the wrong choice points to a lack of insight for which the heroine must pay with her happiness or her life. First popularized by Jane Austen, the convention is found in Hardy, the Brontës, Forster's A Room with a View, and in George Eliot. Kennard believes that the
convention, which works well in Austen's hands, can break down "when the heroine's development is central to the novel and when, at its end, she supposedly achieves a form of maturity which involves the virtues of independence and individuality" (14). Thus, the heroine's choice of the "right" suitor may contradict her depiction as a increasingly independent and mature character, if her choice implies that she merely adopt her suitor's values uncritically. The structure of the convention can weaken the development of the heroine as a mature character.

Interestingly, the "two suitors" convention is an integral part of *Excellent Women*, and, as is usual for a Pym novel, comes into question. Mildred is deeply attracted to the smooth-tongued Rocky, whose values are obviously at odds with her own, and who is not attracted to her. From him, she turns to a tentative friendship with Everard Bone, with whom she has little passion but more in common. Pym avoids the structural pitfalls found in *Middlemarch* and *A Room with a View*, however, by ending her novel on a deliberately ambiguous note. Although a marriage between Mildred and Everard is hinted at, it is confirmed only later in another novel. Even more significantly, Mildred's relationship to Everard, while it has its positive points, is not without inequities.

The conventions described above certainly do not exhaust the various manifestations of the romantic paradigm. Rather, they are the specific ones that Pym subverts so effectively and enjoyably in
her novels; by doing so, she exposes the many foibles, inconsistencies and limitations involved in applying unrealistic conventions to everyday life.
EXCELLENT WOMEN: THE SPINSTER VS. ROMANCE

One of Pym's characteristics as a writer is her willingness to choose as protagonists types of people ignored by popular romantic fiction: the elderly or middle-aged, and the unmarried older female. Far from being dowdy or uninteresting, such characters in Pym's work sparkle with wit and possess an unassuming dignity.

The protagonist of Pym's second novel, Excellent Women, is such a one. The resourceful and intelligent Mildred Lathbury is a clergyman's daughter well-versed in the art of supplying tea and sympathy in awkward social situations. Decidedly self-deprecatory, even mousy, she is past thirty and unmarried: she is thus automatically pigeonholed into the category of spinster or "excellent woman," one of the vast army of quiet unattached not-young women without whom the church would founder. The role of dependable spinster that Mildred must assume, however involuntarily, is the necessary obverse of the role played by women in the conventions of popular romance. Her role is as stylized and rigidly defined as that of the romantic couple, and it is one powerfully deflated in Excellent Women. Much of the action and comedy in the novel stems from other characters' insistence that Mildred play out her role in the romantic plot.

How then is the spinster defined in popular culture and fiction, and why does Mildred find herself playing such a role? The stock
figure of the "old maid", who is either pitied or despised, is an old one. It stems at least partially from the early days of the Industrial Revolution, when production of goods shifted outside the home and unmarried females became a non-productive burden on households. Woman's worth became entirely dependent upon the married state; those unfortunate enough to fail in making a match had to prove their usefulness to the community in other ways, such as performing "good works" (charitable duties analogous to those performed by a good wife). In his article on Pym's excellent women, Robert J. Graham describes the popular view of unmarried older women: "[eighteenth-century n]ewspapers frequently characterized them as homely, nit-picking, bad-tempered. . . jealous of wives and hell-bent on finding a husband. . . Writers have drawn her as helpful though benign--the old aunt ever at home waiting to serve" (143). Of the old maids in Charlotte Brontë's Shirley, a pre-feminist work exploring the predicament of the unmarried, Margaret J. M. Ezell remarks that "[in] the eyes of the community to be a 'good woman'. . . and fit into the community life, the old maid had to be self-supporting, but not well-to-do, and self-disciplined. She was expected to be neat (if ugly), maintain the values of her social class, have strong religious interests, and to be involved visibly while serving the community" (454). Ezell also points out that social conditions that produced spinsters and helped prescribe spinster behavior at the time of the Brontës (circa 1850)
also held sway a hundred years later when Pym was writing *Excellent Women*. Both centuries experienced a shortage of men of marriageable age, caused by a combination of war and emigration, which led to a larger-than-normal ratio of women who never married (452).

This chapter will explore the ways in which some of the characters in *Excellent Women* apply to Mildred the attributes of the spinster, whether she deserves them or not. As usual in Pym novels, plot is subordinate to the imaginative musings of her protagonists on their situation, and *Excellent Women* is no exception. Mildred lives a quiet life in the heart of London, working at an organization that aids "distressed gentlewomen" and serving with quiet competence in her tightly-knit Anglo-Catholic parish. Her friends and acquaintances are either old friends from school, like combative Dora Caldicote and her fussy brother William, or naive and cloistered church folk like vicar Julian Malory and his unmarried sister Winifred. Mildred's past is as uneventful as her present: the product of a country Anglican home, she has had, while in her teens, only one or two mild infatuations with young men as unworlly as she. She admits to not being the type of person who readily falls in love, and the sole act of rebellion in her life has been to join a "high" Anglican church after the death of her parents.
Into this serene and uneventful life come the tempestuous Napiers, who move into the flat below hers. Helena, glamorous and slovenly, is an anthropologist with a not-so-secret yen for her scholarly collaborator, Everard Bone. Her husband Rockingham, or "Rocky," is a former Navy flag lieutenant whose military career has consisted of arranging an admiral's social life and wooing a series of awkward and lovestruck Wren officers. Through Helena, Mildred also meets the aloof and dry Everard; though Mildred does not care for him at first, she appreciates his sensibleness and ties to the Anglican church. Then, as if the Napiers weren't enough, with their cigarettes and exotic bottles of Chianti, another glamorous new person enters the parish scene: Allegra Gray, conferred high status and respectability by virtue of her being a clergyman's widow. Like Helena, she is beautiful, vivacious, fashionable, and as Mildred instinctively senses, manipulative. Upon renting rooms from the Malorys, she sets her sights on Julian, who succumbs to her charms without a struggle. In the course of the novel Mildred must resist Allegra's attempts to erode her independence, attend a tedious and idiosyncratic academic presentation, orchestrate a reunion between Rocky and the dissatisfied Helena, and find time to make a tentative friendship with Everard. Along the way she must also confront the contradictory feelings about herself that this influx of new people arouses in her.
Pym manipulates the characters and events in *Excellent Women* to provide maximum opportunity to subvert particulars of the romantic paradigm. This chapter will explore the methods Pym uses: the relationships Mildred has to other people who try to categorize her as a spinster; Mildred's own role playing; and, above all, Mildred's own awareness of her position as excellent woman, both as others see her and as she sees herself.

Mildred herself is the primary undercutting force in her "excellent woman" role, although Pym uses characters such as Helena and Allegra as "non-excellent" women to weaken assumptions inherent in the paradigm. Mildred's shrewd, sensitive, occasionally naive assessments of people and situations are contrasted with the unthinking attitudes of others when they assume they understand her needs and feelings merely because she has been classified as an excellent woman or dutiful spinster. But her irony and self-awareness provide a persistent commentary not only on their assumptions, but on her own actions. She consciously adopts the very spinster persona that is expected of her, even though she sometimes chafes against it. Her awareness of the dichotomy between her rich, observant inner life and her bland, conformist outer life complicates the ways the paradigm of romance is undermined in the novel. Layers of irony build up, making Mildred a more complex character than she first appears.
Mildred vs. the "Excellent Woman"

In *Excellent Women*, all of the characters save one unquestioningly apply most, if not all, of the spinsterish attributes described previously to Mildred. She is assumed to be an insatiably curious, nosy busybody, always up-to-date on the latest parish gossip (when in fact she does her best to quell such talk). She is automatically assumed to be a good and sympathetic listener (being unmarried, she must have no particular worries of her own and plenty of extra time). She is also assumed to be as competent in dealing with moving men as she is in mediating lovers' quarrels. These stalwart roles Mildred plays with grace, even with cheerfulness, and a healthy dose of irony: "I suppose an unmarried woman just over thirty, who lives alone and has no apparent ties, must expect to find herself involved or interested in other people's business, and if she is also a clergyman's daughter then one might say that there is no hope for her" (3). Indeed, it seems as if for the most part Mildred is comfortable with defining herself this way, but through the course of the novel Mildred gradually shows herself to be more and more dissatisfied with her limited role. The conventions that people assume are part of her character become increasingly stifling to her.

The most pervasive assumption about Mildred, shared by her churched and unchurched friends alike, and the one which annoys her most, is that Mildred must be yearning for a husband--more
specifically, she must be secretly in love with the nice vicar, Father Julian Malory, who is conveniently single. Since she devotes most of her spare time to church work and is known to aid charitable causes, what better man for her than Father Julian? Like "the classic situation" described by Wilmet Forsythe in *A Glass of Blessings*, it is taken for granted that Mildred loves the vicar and he is somehow "hers." Rocky sums up the common belief when he says, "It would be a very natural thing after all. . . " (135).

Thus Julian's engagement to the sly Allegra causes dismay amongst the parishioners. "You've done too much for Father Malory and in the end you both get left," says Mildred's housekeeper indignantly, in defense also of Julian's selfless sister. That Mildred is not hopelessly in love with the good father, has never shown herself to be attracted to him, and does not feel "jilted," does not deter her friends in the slightest. After Julian and Allegra announce their engagement Rocky purrs, "Poor Mildred, this is a sad day for you," to her annoyance.

Julian himself is quite convinced that Mildred is at least "upset" at the news: "Ah, Mildred, you understand. Dear Mildred, it would have been a fine thing if it could have been," he says melodramatically, causing Mildred to wonder to herself, "Did love make all men like this?" (133). Despite her best efforts--she even bluntly tells him she was never in love with him--Julian refuses to drop the notion that Mildred must be heartbroken. Finally she
resorts to humoring him; "I do not think it will upset me" to go to Evensong this afternoon, she says, knowing Julian will not catch her understated sarcasm. As she does with the Napiers and everyone else, she bears his condescension with wry humor and quiet resignation.

It is a measure of their lack of insight that not one of her friends or acquaintances suspects the truth: she is indeed a hopelessly yearning spinster, but the object of her affections, however strongly she denies her feelings, is Rocky. Ironically, even when she lets slip indications of her feelings, no one suspects. Soon after she meets Rocky, she is describing him with more enthusiasm than rectitude to Julian and Winifred:

"...he’s charming. Good looking, amusing, and so easy to talk to. I’m very much taken with him."

"It sounds almost as if you have fallen in love with him," said Julian teasingly. . . .

"Oh, that's ridiculous!" I protested. "I've only met him once and he's probably younger than I am. Besides, he's a married man."

"I'm very glad to hear you say that, Mildred," said Julian more seriously. "So many people nowadays seem to forget that it should be a barrier."

... "You know Mildred would never do anything wrong or foolish" [said Winifred].
I reflected that this was only too true and hoped I did not appear too much that kind of person to others. (44)

The possibility of Mildred’s being so untoward is dismissed almost as soon as it is raised. Nor does an even greater lapse in Mildred’s discretion betray her attraction; during a lunch with William Caldicote she says, ". . . I heard myself to my horror, murmuring something about Rocky Napier being just the kind of person I should have liked for myself” (69). Far from picking up on this admission, William is only alarmed that she may be thinking of abandoning her spinsterhood. Her insistence that she has no wedding plans does not mollify him: “‘What about the vicar?’ asked William suspiciously” (70), falling back on the old assumption. Because Mildred is so thoroughly identified as a spinster suitably attached to the vicar, her secret is safe—not even Rocky suspects.

Hand in hand with Mildred’s supposed love for Julian is another assumption, one that Mildred does little to dispel and in fact encourages. As a spinster with no ties, plenty of time, and relatively little importance, Mildred is free to cater to others’ needs. Helena and Rocky are the worst offenders in this regard. After Helena, in a huff, has left Rocky, Mildred must sort through Helena’s chaotic belongings, pack a suitcase and deliver it during rush hour at Victoria Station. Rocky, though, is even more presumptuous:
"We may as well get it clear," he said. I shall want to have my own things with me and you can hardly be expected to know exactly which they are."

"I?" I exclaimed in surprise.

"Oh, yes, I imagine you will be here, won't you? I have asked the remover's men to come on Saturday morning so that you will be able to supervise them."

"Yes, of course," I said weakly. (166)

Her reputation of reliability makes her prone to receiving emotional confidences as well as carrying out inconvenient and unpleasant chores. Everard Bone chooses Mildred to bear the message to Helena that he does not love her; later Mildred becomes a reluctant go-between during Rocky's and Helena's estrangement, writing letters that eventually bring the two back together.

**Mildred's rebellion**

The thankless weight of so much responsibility gradually makes Mildred begin to feel increasingly restricted, even depressed, by her excellent woman role. Her ordinary surroundings and possessions take on a symbolic life of their own; while doing her laundry she thinks, "It was depressing the way the same things turned up every week. Just the kind of underclothes a person like me might wear, I thought dejectedly, so there is no need to describe them" (85).
Her restlessness is intensified when Dora Caldicote comes to visit--Dora's underwear, "fawn locknit," is even more depressing than her own, and Mildred is bemused by the unintended similarities between this drab spinster and herself. Unlike Mildred, Dora seems content with her lot, though she notices unsettling changes in her old friend: "'I don't know what's the matter with you, Mildred,' she complained. 'You never used to bother much about clothes'" (102). Significantly, while telling her story Mildred often uses the word "burden," whether in reference to the burden of keeping three people in toilet paper or bearing the burden of an unrequited love. Her burdens--the emotional and physical ones others impose on her because she allows them to--eventually make her rebel, and in her own way she attempts to subvert the image that people have of her. Ironically, though, she undercuts her rebellion by combining her "new" behavior with the same spinsterish behavior people expect of her; thus Rocky ends up thinking of her as a person who can be relied upon to make cups of tea during crises, the very impression she did not intend.

Two other incidents in the book demonstrate her contradictory behavior. Alarmed at a threat to her independence, she rebuffs Allegra's saccharine attempt to get her to take in the unwanted Winifred: "'Oh, do think about it, Mildred. There's a dear. I know you are one.' 'No, I'm not,' I said ungraciously. . ." (128). This encounter starkly demonstrates to Mildred the contrast between
herself, pale and mousy, and the vibrant Allegra, with her "smooth apricot complexion" and smiling manipulative ways. Shaken, she retreats to a department store cosmetics counter and defiantly buys a tube of lipstick called "Hawaiian Fire." Later however, Mildred behaves "in character" when she tackles the Napiers' filthy kitchen, unasked. Her resentment toward her role-playing starts to burn in earnest when Rocky has taken no notice of her efforts except to ask for a clean glass and permission to drink her brandy. She admits, though, that "nobody compelled me to wash these dishes or to tidy this kitchen. It was the fussy spinster in me." (161). She is "ready to feel tired and resentful, but suddenly something came to the rescue and I began to see the funny side of it" (162). She begins, indeed, to see where her role-playing has gotten her. Her role-playing is the crux of the book's ironic subversion of the "spinster" convention. The reasons for her adopting the spinster persona are not readily apparent. It may be the way she protects herself from having to radically reorganize her life after her parents' deaths. Also, since she has been brought up to smooth over awkward social situations, she may have adopted her role to keep from upsetting people's preconceived notions about her. It does not seem to be within her nature to radically challenge social norms; her persona may be a way of keeping that acerbic, observant part of her character hidden or under control. Thus she avoids the risk of
rejection. As her narrative shows, however, she runs the risk of being stifled by such an excellent and demanding role.

**Mildred and Rocky: the pathos of understatement**

Given her lack of worldly experience and her unfamiliarity with male attention, it should not be surprising that the inevitable happens: that against her will, and with full knowledge of its futility, Mildred's love for Rocky becomes acute and undeniable, though unspoken. Her attraction toward him can easily fall into the "lovelorn spinster" motif. But the way her affection is presented undermines the convention at the same time it makes her futile love all the more poignant. She does not express her emotion in the overwrought style of popular fiction (a style wielded with great facility by Catherine Oliphant in *Less Than Angels*), but with as much objectivity as she can muster. Her own unacknowledged loneliness and his smooth charm might have made her fall inevitable, but this objectivity and her own awareness of her foolishness turn a potentially hackneyed situation into something approaching sheer pathos. Janice Rossen, in her book *The World of Barbara Pym*, notes that Mildred's emotional restraint and emphasis on her shortcomings distracts the reader from her interest in Rocky; when Mildred "scorns herself... for being presumptuous" this "draws attention to her own sense of worthlessness rather than to her desire
to attract him" (134). Her rare objectivity and reticence serve to differentiate her from the huddle of Wrens whom she pictures; she may suffer the same fate as they, but no one will know about it.

But for all her pride, her reactions to the things Rocky says and does still reveal the profundity of her emotions. When he presents her with a bunch of chrysanthemums, it is important to her to know whether he bought them for her or merely snatched them out of his garden. Not surprisingly, the callow Rocky has done the latter, and Mildred stifles her disappointment:

"I pulled myself up and told myself to stop these ridiculous thoughts, wondering why it is that we can never stop trying to analyse the motives of people who have no personal interest in us, in the vain hope of finding that perhaps they may have just a little after all." (221)

Her objectivity also extends to a recognition of his shortcomings; when he and Julian have tea in her flat, Rocky comes off at his worst—he is flippant, even rude, and his charm has never seemed so shallow. "Rocky seemed shallow and charming in an obvious and false way, and his sprawling on the sofa seemed to me both affected and impolite" (159). Yet not long after that incident, she responds with dismay to the news that Rocky will soon be leaving for a country cottage; "... apart from anything else, I did not
want Rocky to go away," she thinks. But go away he does, after assigning her the task of supervising the moving men. His last words to her, after a casual and vague invitation for her to visit him, are these: "You will remember which pieces of furniture are to come, won't you?" Her emotional response to his departure is remarkable for the sternness with which she expresses it.

After he had gone I stood looking out of the window until his taxi was out of sight.

The effects of shock and grief are too well known to need description and I stood at the window for a long time. At last I made a cup of tea but did not eat anything. There seemed to be a great weight inside of me and after sitting down for a while I thought I would go into the church and try to find a little consolation there. (167)

Thus with her objectivity and stern control of her emotions, Mildred gives the lie to any notion that a spinster's unrequited love is foolish or laughable.

"Oh, it's you": *Mildred's and Everard's para-romance*

The bond between Mildred and Everard is the diametric opposite to the romantic tie she has to Rocky. Interestingly, Mildred's
relationships to Rocky and Everard can fall into the convention that Jean Kennard has termed the "two suitors," a consistent motif in the Victorian novel. Mildred's original deep attraction to Rocky, who is obviously unsuitable for her, is replaced by the more mundane but more proper friendship with Everard; like other conventions expressed in the novel, the "two suitors" is deflated too. Everard may be better for Mildred than the insensitive Rocky, but he is no perfect romantic hero.

Indeed, Everard offers no fluffy sprigs of mimosa or witty conversations, but to some degree, he is the only person in the novel with whom Mildred actually communicates her own feelings. Their relationship, as awkward as it sometimes is, subtly undermines not only the convention of spinsterhood but other unrealistic aspects of the romantic paradigm.

Much of Everard's capacity to undermine convention stems from the way he treats Mildred. Despite his seemingly unfriendly manner and gruffness, Everard does not categorize her as a hopeless old maid, with its attendant assumptions. To Everard, Mildred is not in love with the vicar; she has a right to express opinions; and she is not destined merely for a lifetime of passive observation. Examples of his refusal to pigeonhole her are presented so subtly as to be scarcely noticeable. Everard is different from the rest, but at first it certainly is not clear why. Rossen points out that he is probably "the only person in the novel who understands that Mildred
has a point of view, but that she does not always say what she means. His seeming brusqueness and insensitivity are offset by this perceptiveness" (141). Although she appreciates his perceptiveness, he can still annoy her by not living up to her own expectations of behavior according to the romantic paradigm. She feels that he is supposed to make thoughtful suggestions on what she should have to drink, as Rocky would, and not expect her to make the decision. But Everard simply cannot understand why she orders something she knows she does not like. Finally Mildred begins to treat him as bluntly as he does her. Her polite, automatic platitudes do not work with him and she knows it. "Oh, it's you," she says "ungraciously" one time when he catches up with her outside her office (186).

Their early meetings, though, promise no such gruff intimacy between them. She decides early on she dislikes his long-nosed profile, and unlike her first meeting with Rocky, with whom she converses with ease, she feels stilted and uncomfortable around the coldly elegant Everard when they are introduced. "'I believe you're an anthropologist,' I said, making a brave attempt at conversation. . . . 'It must be fun,' I floundered, 'I mean, going round Africa and doing all that.' 'Fun is hardly the word,' he said." (35). So forbidding is he, and so guilty does Mildred feel about her unease, that she makes a Lenten resolve to make herself like him.
Everard's conversation, in fact, is the direct opposite of Rocky's smooth social patter. Everard only rarely indulges in "phatic" speech, or language meant only to convey politeness, not information, and this quality is actually one that Mildred comes to appreciate about him. When Dora and Rocky thoughtlessly tease her about "her vicar" she says she almost wishes Everard were there: "We should make dull stilted conversation with no hidden meanings to it" (107).

However, Everard's subversion of the spinsterhood convention does not automatically mean he is the perfect romantic partner for Mildred. Pym lets him subvert the romance portion of the paradigm too. The novel's ambiguous ending, with Mildred agreeing to help him in his work, underscores this. Mildred arrives at Everard's apartment for supper; typically, he exclaims, "Oh, there you are" when he opens the door. Mildred notes, "Not exactly a welcoming kind of speech but I knew him well enough now to realise that he never did appear pleased to see anybody" (252). After a "very nice" meal and dull conversation Mildred says "the atmosphere between us was a pleasant and cosy one" (254); it is not like the conversations she has with Rocky, but it will do. This scene also shows Everard becoming more animated than he has been during the entire novel, when he gets her to agree to help him with his work:

"I was wondering..." Everard began, "but no--I couldn't ask you. You're much too busy, I'm sure." Mildred, knowing what is
in store, objects in vain. "But I don’t know how to do these things," I protested. ‘Oh, but I could show you,’ he said eagerly; ‘you’d soon learn.’" Mildred succumbs, and Everard exclaims, "Oh, splendid! How very good of you!" (255).

It appears then, that Mildred will exchange one kind of excellent womanhood for another. She will read proof, and when that gets too boring, there is always the index, as Everard suggests. Mildred has a vision then of toiling for him at the sink as well as at the desk, and asks herself, "Was any man worth this burden? Probably not, but one shouldered it bravely and in the end it might not turn out to be so heavy after all" (255). Everard encouragingly mentions the wife of the president of the anthropological society to which he belongs, a woman who was no anthropologist, yet toiled as a quiet helpmeet. But to Mildred she evokes another image, that of the wife nodding in a chair at an interminable and dull society meeting. "Why, of course, that’s a comfort," Mildred says.

So the last scene is fraught with ambiguity: on one hand Mildred appears to be achieving rapport with Everard and entering into a greater participation in a community; but she seems also destined for the paradigmatic role of helpmeet. Her beginning a "full life" hints at her losing her independence as well as gaining involvement. Everard’s role in this gradual change in Mildred is a profound one, but he is far from being free from assumptions about the roles of women and men.
Minor characters and the paradigm

The subversion of romance and spinsterhood does not end with the Mildred-Rocky-Everard triangle. Within the texture of the novel Pym has interwoven other characters who are affected by the conventions of romance or who help to point out its weaknesses. Oddly enough, Allegra Gray is one who tries to play along with the paradigm and ends up defeated by the spinster she seeks to displace—Winifred. Elegant, shrewd, Allegra plays the part of an innocent widow, all the while seeking to regain her status as a clergyman’s wife. Not surprisingly, only Mildred senses her duplicity; all the others are taken in by her smooth charm and machinations. As described by Ezell and Graham, Allegra is one of those who see the spinster as a nuisance or threat, to be disposed of as conveniently and guiltlessly as possible—hence her disingenuous attempt to get Winifred out of the vicarage. "You get along so well and she’s so fond of you," Allegra says unctuously to Mildred (128). Allegra’s later unmasking as an uncharitable, manipulative husband hunter is an enjoyable reversal of the spinster convention—she embodies the attributes popularly ascribed to the ugly old maid (Graham 142). And her exposure is given added piquance by the revelation that she is an atrocious housekeeper: "Tins half used and then left, stale ends of loaves, and everything so dirty. . . . I’m afraid she was a real viper," one of the church ladies reports in a tone of horror. Not only has Allegra failed in
husband-hunting, she has failed in the duty of cleanliness, a task that even a spinster is supposed to be able to perform.

The main object of Allegra’s denigration, Winifred, is a foil to Mildred and does not have Mildred’s saving self-irony or perception. In fact, it is Winifred more than anyone else in the book who fulfills the spinster stereotype; she is middle-aged with no prospects of marrying; she is deeply involved in good works; in the terms Margaret Ezell uses, she upholds the values of the community. And for her goodness and naivete, she is put upon, unable to resist Allegra as successfully as Mildred does. Oddly, the appearance of such an excellent woman, one who conforms so well to the conventional spinster, is undercutting in its own way; in Pym’s hands, her character is believable.

Where Allegra is a schemer who gets her come-uppance, her closest counterpart, Helena, appears to suffer a sadder fate. Like Allegra, she does not keep house, and she fails to get the man she wants—in her case, Everard Bone. Her glamour, volatility, and intelligence (anti-spinsterish qualities) are not adequate to such a task, even though it is doubtful that Everard would be suitable for her. After she storms out of her and Rocky’s apartment, it appears she will be devoting her life "to the study of matrilinear kin-groups"—an unconventional vocation indeed. Soon, though, she joins him in the country, at the cost of her career in anthropology. If Mildred and others are subtly urged to conform to the convention of spinsterdom,
then Helena, to keep her marriage, finds she must abandon her work and adopt the persona of helpmeet.

So Mildred and her comrades, the doughty Anglo-Catholic spinsters, are not the only ones whom the romantic paradigm fails. The highest goal prescribed by the paradigm, marriage, proves to be as problematic and restrictive as spinsterhood. Pym's third novel, *Jane and Prudence*, explores the fate of those who have married and those for whom marriage is less desirable than a merry-go-round of deliciously unhappy love affairs.
Rarely does Pym expose her satirical bent with such nimbleness as she does in *Jane and Prudence*. The targets for her subtle satire in this book are the egotistical men who complacently accept the privileges accorded them because of their maleness, and also the women who pursue romantic attachments as ends in themselves. Thus Pym draws attention to her women characters' use of imagination to create fictional patterns in their lives, and questions the way that men and women see each other primarily in terms of a paradigm that reduces people into manageable roles. For in *Jane and Prudence*, people try to live out the images they would like to have of themselves. The men believe that they carry special "burdens" because of their sex; women adopt roles derived from romantic fiction--the freedom-loving and attractive single woman, the bored or contented wife, or the comfortable spinster--and try to fit themselves into those conventions. An integral element of these roles is imagination: to the women in this novel, love is a purely imaginative force that transforms humdrum, boring men into beings worthy of the highest romantic passion.
Superficially, *Jane and Prudence* appears to be a fairly conventional comedy of manners, until one pays closer attention to Pym's wit and her understated way of undermining the paradigm of romance. Two women, Jane Cleveland and Prudence Bates, have maintained a lasting friendship despite the differences in their ages and marital status. Jane is a highly intelligent and educated woman, 41, a former teacher now contentedly married to a very nice, stolid Anglican vicar. Her family's recent move to a country parish has not lived up to the expectations she has formed from reading the novels of Charlotte Yonge in which brave vicars' wives run huge households on far too little money. Jane instead has to cope with petty squabbling amongst her parishioners, a delicate task for which her vivid imagination and tendency to spout inappropriate literary quotations do not serve her. Ill at ease in her role as model vicar's wife, she frequently visits her friend and ex-pupil, Prudence Bates, in London. Prudence is also trying to carry out expectations formed from literature—in her case, poignant and cultured stories of doomed love. At 29, she is strikingly pretty, and still engaging in serial relationships with unpromising men. Her formidable knowledge of literature is put to no better use than editing abstruse manuscripts in the office of a dull economics organization. As the novel opens, her penchant for unsuitable romances has taken the form of an unspoken longing for her boss, the self-important and pebbly-eyed Dr. Arthur Grampian. "It isn't so much what there *is* between us as
what there isn't," she explains to the dubious Jane. "It's the negative relationship that's so hurtful, the complete lack of rapport, if you see what I mean" (15).

As a matter of fact, Jane sees precisely what she means—that Prudence has launched yet another of her nebulous love affairs. Aware of Prudence's impractical tendencies and the necessity of a woman to marry before it is too late, Jane attempts to carry out yet another romantic role, that of matchmaker. She introduces Prudence to the parish's most eligible widower, the languid, none-too-bright Fabian Driver. This man is a preening pseudo-Byronic hero who has pursued his own types of romantic liaisons much as Prudence has—unlike her, though, he has had the ill grace to conduct them while his wife was still living. Now playing the role of the mourning widower, he is considering again taking up his mantle as irresistible lover, and for a while he and Prudence play out their roles admirably.

Jane's matchmaking hopes fall through, however, because she has underestimated the cunning of another unmarried woman: the subtle, sharp-tongued Jessie Morrow, who serves as a companion and "sparring partner" to the officious and commanding Miss Doggett. Jessie appears to be the stereotypical unmarriageable spinster like Winifred Malory in Excellent Women, but she actually has a secret yearning for Fabian and the aggressiveness to pursue him. Jessie gets Fabian to agree to marry her before anyone has even realized
that they are having an affair--least of all Fabian. Fortunately, most everything comes to good in this gently satirical novel. Jane's sense of identity as a good church wife is affirmed through her handling of the Jessie-Fabian affair, and Prudence, after getting over the shock to her pride, goes on vacation. Almost immediately, she blithely starts yet another romance--this time, with a rather bland but well-educated young man who works in her office. Thus, in the end, Prudence is "suddenly overwhelmed by the richness of her life" as she contemplates an evening celebrating her satisfyingly doomed relationship with her latest attachment.

Prudence: "Everything would be spoilt if anything came of it"

Prudence, deeply satisfied with unsuitable love affairs, is the main proponent of the romantic paradigm in this novel; like Jane, her cues are literary, based largely on the "literate" novels she loves--the ones that describe "a love affair in the fullest sense of the word and sparing no detail, but all in a very intellectual sort of way," with "a good many quotations from Donne" (47). What she does not realize is that these novels, as intellectual as they may purport to be, do not challenge unrealistic notions about male and female behavior, but affirm the assumptions Prudence has brought with her. She reads these novels, then, because they tell her what she wants to hear and what she thinks she already knows.
Prudence's literary presumptions extend to her own life. Her behavior and perception of herself depend almost entirely on her ability to play out a role: that of the romantic lover, the tender-hearted, "interesting" single woman so often found in novels. Central to her role-playing and her rapturous infatuation with the idea of romantic love is her vivid imagination, which can transform the humdrum and ordinary into the interesting, passionate and mystical. Jane recognizes this strong attribute of Prudence when she finally meets the mysterious Dr. Grampian. He turns out to be "of middle size, almost short," and gives "an impression of greyness, in his clothes and face and in the pebble-like eyes behind his spectacles" (75). Far from attempting to disillusion Prudence, Jane concludes that

it was splendid the things women were doing for men all the time. . . . Making them feel. . . that they were loved and admired and desired when they were worthy of none of these things--enabling them to preen themselves and puff out their plumage like birds and bask in the sunshine of love, real or imagined, it didn't matter which. (75)

Thus Jane accepts this manifestation of love as normal and expected, even as she also observes that Prudence seems to be gaining little from any of her romantic attachments except a feeling of importance. But Prudence's pretensions to importance (especially her own importance to Grampian) get deflated by the very ordinariness of her days in the office as she copes with co-workers
obsessed with tea-making and clock-watching. After she grandly declares to Jane that "Arthur" doesn't mind if she takes an hour and a half for lunch, she runs into him as she enters the office building. No, Dr. Grampian does not mind her long lunch; in fact, he only barely seems to remember who she is. Then Prudence is mortified and annoyed with herself for feeling she has to justify her long absence to her officious co-workers. Prudence's imaginative fancy is spurred not only by men she is interested in, but by everyday occurrences: a man in a restaurant whom Prudence first sees as a bore or a threat becomes a remote, romantic figure after she learns that he is with someone else and that they are concerned about an ill person (42).

Prudence's imaginative feelings of compassion do not facilitate pathos, but bathos, especially when her tenderness is juxtaposed against her squeamishness about being around people who are somehow not her type: when she rides in a crowded rail carriage with ordinary bowler-hatted business men, she looks at them with "resentment, almost with loathing" (77) because of their tobacco smoke. But moments later, one of these same men helps her with her luggage, and her mind instantly transforms him: "She noticed that he had some cakes in a white box--taking them home for the children, she supposed; she could hardly bear it. . . she left the carriage, her eyes full of tears" (78). Her tenderness, like her penchant for romance, is motivated by her narcissism: "Disliking
humanity in general, she was one of those excessively tender-hearted people who are greatly moved by the troubles of complete strangers, in which she sometimes imagined herself to play a noble part" (42). Her tender emotion, it seems, is entirely in the abstract and imaginary realm; artificial and remote relationships are more interesting to her than real and mundane ones.

Despite Prudence's delusions and pretensions--perhaps because of them--she is still an engaging, very likeable character, one far more sympathetic than the self-aware, realistic Jessie. In Prudence's role-playing and posturing, there is something endearing and human; her foibles are no more than the ones to which every human (especially women brought up as she has been) are susceptible. Her cyclic behavior is readily apparent as self-defeating to any character who knows her, and especially to the reader. Although her behavior is obviously play-acting and unrealistic, it remains eminently believable: Pym makes Prudence's behavior true to character and shows her pitfalls to be those of the attractive, highly intelligent woman who has been trained since childhood to behave and to respond to men in a certain way. What comes into question, then, is not entirely Prudence's behavior or her lack of self-awareness, but the rigidity of the paradigm that encourages women to behave narcissistically.

Her narcissistic behavior, in fact, conforms to the "beautiful muse" convention of the paradigm. As she is well aware, she is
playing out a role—that of the attractive and desirable woman—and she is unwilling to surrender that esthetically pleasing role for that of the "bored or contented wife," like Jane, or the comfortable spinster, like her no-nonsense friend Eleanor. So limiting is the paradigm that these will be the only other options apparent to Prudence when her age no longer allows her to be thought of as beautiful or desirable. A woman so submerged in the "muse" role is particularly vulnerable to disillusionment; the refusal to accept one’s aging can bring on a personal crisis like the one Leonora experiences in The Sweet Dove Died.

But Prudence’s role-playing, as cyclic and unproductive as it is, does draw upon her considerable imagination and intelligence. The same cannot be said for her male role-playing counterpart, the languid and dense Fabian Driver. Like most of Pym’s comic characters, he is incapable of seeing himself ironically or critically, but equally incapable of seeing anyone else besides himself. At first, it would seem that Fabian and Prudence would be a perfect match—each is deeply conscious of his or her own attractiveness and adept at playing the role of romantic lover. Role-playing, indeed, is really all that they are doing; together, their absorption in their own responses and, significantly, the setting of their romantic encounters pointedly deflate the narcissism of each. During their first meeting, after Fabian has skillfully whisked Prudence away from a tedious fund-raising party, they retire to a nearby pub: "But their
conversation did not improve very much even with strong drink, though they gradually became more relaxed and their eyes met so often in penetrating looks that it did not seem to matter that they had little to say to each other. . . " (94). The romantic rituals of drink, dinner and an evening's elegant entertainment in London are familiar and well-orchestrated by both. Underlying the perfection of such amorous attentions, however, is a serious lack of emotional content, which Prudence uneasily recognizes.

"My darling," he said as they sipped cocktails, "how very lovely you look tonight. I've been so longing to see you again." Prudence took a larger gulp of her drink. She had thought his words rather banal, disappointing even. Her imaginary evenings with Arthur Grampian had not been quite like this, but probably he would have been just as dull when it came to the point. Perhaps nothing could be quite so sweet as the imagined evenings with their flow of sparkling conversation, but this was not the kind of thing she could very well say to Fabian. All the same, she told herself sensibly, he would probably make quite a good husband for her. He was the right age, they had tastes in common and she enjoyed his company. Also, and this was not unimportant, he was good-looking. They would make a handsome couple. (102)
Prudence encapsulates here the tenets of the romantic paradigm—but the necessary ingredients for passion seem oddly chilling and calculated when stated so baldly. When Prudence thinks it is "not unimportant" that they make a handsome couple, one gets the impression that the romantic setting—one that employs a vivid imagination—is really the most vital ingredient. When she gazes deeply into Fabian's eyes, she thinks, "The chicken will have that wonderful sauce with it" (102), not a sentiment readily associated with the raptures of love. At any rate, Prudence stubbornly clings to the ritual significance of handsomeness and the elegant evening out, and even goes so far as to rationalize Fabian's painfully obvious intellectual deficiencies. "After all, what was a brilliant mind and some rather dull books that nobody could be expected to read? Not so much really when compared with curly hair, fine eyes and good features" (103). Janice Rossen identifies Prudence's adherence to the paradigm when she notes: "For Prudence, men prove indispensable in affirming her self-worth. She might enjoy very similar evenings at dinner and the theatre to Elinor's [sic], but demands male companionship to make them complete" (33).

To Prudence, then, the value of love lies not in a flesh-and-blood man, but in the ways men can be employed as romantic props; Fabian, in fact, goes so well with her apartment decorations "that he might have been no more than just another
'amusing' object" (199). Prudence's "decorative" approach to love is no match, however, for her unsuspected and more worldly opponent.

Jessie: "Triumphant in the end"

Prudence, for all her chic and sophistication, is outsmarted in the game of romance, ironically, by Jessie, a sharp-tongued, poorly-dressed spinster, who is far more subtle and worldly than the literary-minded Prudence. Jessie Morrow is a contradiction also because she has personally rejected the conventions that define masculine and feminine behavior, yet is willing to exploit those conventions for her personal gain. The end result is a character who, despite her strong self-awareness and pragmatism, is not nearly as appealing or as sympathetic as Prudence, with her melodramatic talk of doomed love. Jessie "wins" by the standards of the paradigm--the end of the book sees her safely engaged to a conventionally desirable and handsome "prince," thus avoiding the pitiable fate of the old maid, but the action she takes to achieve such an end points out the paradigm's gaps. For she has noticed, as Prudence has not, that "setting" and fanciful pretensions of romance are by no means the only ways of attracting men. Fabian is no less affectionate to Jessie when she comes to visit in old clothes than when she dresses up; Jane guesses at this when she thinks, "Perhaps this was after all what men liked to come home to, someone restful and neutral, who had
no thought of changing the curtains or wallpapers?" (193). Also unlike Prudence, who hopes to win a man by her beauty and attention to romantic ritual, Jessie has taken a more direct route to win Fabian's attentions: she has, apparently, "stooped to ways Miss Bates wouldn't have dreamed of" and granted sexual favors to him. She seems to understand that a more fundamental urge lies behind Fabian's preference for ego-boosting, and in taking advantage of this, she undermines a basic premise of the paradigm: that sex is not supposed to exist, or at least not until after the story ends.

Jessie's pragmatism extends also to her view of men--she is contemptuous of the way other women in the novel coddle and even worship men, and mocks the general opinion of the other characters that "a man needs meat." "Men seem to need a lot of food at all times," she observes sarcastically (90). And when Fabian attempts to play his usual role of the brave man unbearably weighed down by his "burdens," she will have none of it. "Now stop trying to act like Edward Lyall [the local Member of Parliament] with his burden," she snaps at him when he is posturing in front of the mirror (176).

By revealing her sharpness only to a few people around whom she feels safe, Jessie is playing the part of the eiron--the figure in comedy who pretends to be less wise than he or she really is in order to outwit others (see Frye 172-175). To people less perceptive than herself--characters like Fabian or Miss Doggett--she
seems drab, almost a nonentity, the typical spinster. Jessie reveals more of her wit and perceptiveness to Jane, whom she seems to trust, but even to her, Jessie appears unremarkable: "the birdlike little face with long nose and large bright eyes, the ordinary dark blue crepe dress with a cheap paste clip at the neck" (92). If Jessie serves as the eiron, her target, Fabian, corresponds to the alazon, the impostor who deceives himself about his own importance (Frye 365). He is much given to melodramatic flourishes in a bid for pity and attention; "One manages... one has to," he says to Jane when she asks how he gets meals for himself (33), and his tone does not go unnoticed. "The use of the third person seemed to add pathos, which was perhaps just what he intended, Jane thought." Fabian has neglected to tell her about his excellent housekeeper, who proffers him a "casserole of hearts" and other delicacies when meat is hard to come by in post-war Britain.

Much of the fun in the novel comes from the pairing of Jessie and Fabian, one so sharp and knowing, the other so unperceptive and vain. Their affair also hilariously deflates the paradigm: it seems to reflect the convention in which an attractive and desirable widower finally sees the value in the unassuming woman next door—or, better yet, an incorrigible playboy is "reformed" by the love of a good, stable woman. (The latter convention has a long history in both literary and popular culture, cropping up in works as diverse as Fielding’s Tom Jones and Disney’s cartoon movie "The Lady and
the Tramp"). But Pym's portrayal of Jessie and Fabian simply will not allow such a transparent interpretation, as Jessie's use of sexual favors indicates. Like a domesticated playboy, Fabian may indeed cease his philandering ways--but not, one may assume, because he wants to: "Life with Jessie suddenly seemed a frightening prospect, unless it could be like life with Constance all over again, with little romantic episodes here and there. But Jessie was too sharp to allow that. It was if a net had closed around him" (199).

Indeed, Jessie is far too sharp for him. She completely overpowers Fabian through the sheer force of her intelligence, and by the end of the novel even he begins, dimly, to realize it. Thus the relationship is as much about power as it is about love; she will be able to browbeat him as much as Miss Doggett has browbeaten her. "Women are very powerful--perhaps they are always triumphant in the end," she tells him early in their relationship, before he grasps the implication of her words (110).

But if she is so contemptuous of the paradigm, of men, and even of Fabian himself, why has she gone to the trouble of snaring him? What are her motives for wanting to marry? One indication occurs when the pair are walking by a jeweler's window. She asks him to buy her an inexpensive brooch. (She knows it would not occur to him to buy her something of his own accord). The piece she chooses is engraved with the word "Mizpah," meaning "The Lord watch between me and thee when we are absent one from another,"
Jessie explains. Given Fabian's tendency to have "lapses," this brooch seems appropriate. But she likes the brooch for another reason, a reason that may apply to the whole relationship with Fabian: "Now I really feel somebody," she remarks (178). A "good" marriage, one that is desirable by the standards of the paradigm, will give her the sense of identity and self-worth that she lacks when she is still "Miss Morrow," the drab and unnoticed companion to the formidable old Miss Doggett. Thus, in one stroke, she has gained the status of a married woman, and also has avoided the fate of the lonely and unwanted old maid. Giving added piquance to Jessie's triumph is the fact that she has snatched the romantic spoils from a younger and more beautiful woman.

Despite Jessie's impatience with men, she herself is not immune to one promise that the paradigm makes, that of romantic passion. For all that she treats Fabian scornfully, she has always been deeply in love with him. He has been a remote and unobtainable figure, a man all the more tantalizing because of his indifference to her. Thus her opportunity to enthrall him, and to validate her own ego, becomes even more exciting. But her attraction to him is not based on a belief in abstract perfection, as it is with Prudence's infatuations. Instead, Jessie finds that Fabian's faults do not dismay her. When she sees him wearing a cheap-looking suit, "not quite the thing," "she felt, as we so often do with somebody we love, that any little defect could only make him more dear to her" (168).
At heart, she is as susceptible as Prudence to the power of imagination, which transforms even a man as vapid as Fabian into a figure worthy of romantic love.

**Jane:** "One's life followed a kind of pattern"

The delightful Jane is a paradoxical character, one who is almost as observant as Jessie yet who is as inclined to romance as Prudence. She has the imagination and perceptiveness to notice the contradictory and often illogical way that men and women treat each other, yet she seems not nearly as capable of recognizing how her own expectations of life prevent her from being fully satisfied with herself. Like Prudence, her expectations have been formed by her literary tastes; but where Prudence's role is that of the alluring romantic heroine, Jane feels she must play the role of contented wife and mother, and play it admirably. She is also in a double bind; not only is she married, but married to a vicar, and thus feels herself subject to an additional set of rigorous, yet somehow nebulous, expectations about clergymen's wives. Of course, such unrealistic expectations are doomed from the start, and Jane feels vaguely as if she has failed:

When she and Nicholas were engaged Jane had taken great pleasure in imagining herself as a clergyman's wife, starting with
Trollope and working through the Victorian novelists to the present day gallant, cheerful wives, who ran large houses and families on far too little money and sometimes wrote articles about it in the *Church Times*. But she had been quickly disillusioned. Nicholas's first curacy had been in a town where she had found very little in common with the elderly and middle-aged women who made up the greater part of the congregation. Jane's outspokenness and fantastic turn of mind were not appreciated; other qualities which she did not possess and which seemed impossible to acquire were apparently necessary. And then as the years passed and she realized that Flora was to be her only child, she was again conscious of failure, for her picture of herself as a clergyman's wife had included a large Victorian family like those in the novels of Miss Charlotte M. Yonge. (8)

Her family's move to a small village holds promise—Jane has ideas of noble countryfolk who live close to Nature—but to her disappointment, little has changed. Her attempt at mediation between squabbling church council members, undertaken in the spirit of a good clergy wife, backfires:

"... one doesn't like to hear of any unpleasantness here. I know my husband would be sorry to hear about it."
"I am not aware that there has been any unpleasantness," said Mr. Oliver in a hostile tone. "We all have our own opinions and are entitled to them, I suppose." (115)

Jane may frequently find herself perplexed by all the ways her life has not turned out like her novels, but her bemusement does not prevent her from being a fairly reliable witness: she is even better than Jessie at providing interpretation and commentary, because, unlike Jessie, her motives are informed by agape, or charitable love. Jane, with her perceptiveness and agile imagination, is the primary vehicle with which to Pym deflates the obtuseness and self-centered pomposity that crops up in the novel’s male characters. One of the hallmarks of the book, in fact, is that satire or commentary is usually presented through the viewpoint of one of the characters, instead of in the author’s voice. Many of the wry observations on men’s extreme weariness, "burdens," and special needs come from Jane, even though she gives no indication of rejecting the usual conventions. When the proprietor of the local tearoom presents her husband with two fried eggs (not on the menu) and Jane with only one, Jane notices and is amused: "Men needed meat and eggs--well, yes, that might be allowed; but surely not more than women did?" (51). Moments later, a young man belonging to their church drops in for his lunch, and he too gets special treatment: "a plate laden with roast chicken and all the proper accompaniments. He accepted
it with quite as much complacency as Nicholas had accepted his eggs. . . Jane turned away, to save his embarrassment. Man needs bird, she thought. Just the very best, that is what man needs" (52). Neither does she really seem to be taken in by Fabian's languid posing; she is disgusted with him for the unenthusiastic way he admits to his and Jessie's engagement ("It seems to have come to that") and has a theory that the reason he tends to make love to women is because he cannot think of anything to say to them.

One of Jane's best observations, and one of her most pungent, occurs at one of the interminable church council meetings which she is expected to attend.

She herself had given up any attempt to take an intelligent interest in the proceedings. . . Indeed, there seemed to be little for the ladies to do but observe each others' hats, for their voices were seldom heard. Occasionally Nicholas would interpose with some remark. . . but as it was usually a matter such as the taxation of the Easter Offering, on which ladies could not be expected to have any sensible views, their comments amounted to very little and were soon disposed of and even made to seem slightly ridiculous by the men. (133)
But Jane's powers of observation do not prevent her from being as absorbed into the romantic paradigm as is any other woman; she seems unable or unwilling to draw the necessary inferences from her astute observations. Jane defers to Prudence in exalting the role of imagination in effecting romantic love: "He is rather good-looking, though, don't you think?" Prudence asks, referring to the gray and bland Grampian. "Yes, in a way, but if you think him so that's the main point after all," Jane replies, although she has found him completely unremarkable. "Some hollow in the temple or a square inch of flesh on the wrist that's all it need be, really. . ." (79).

And Jane is as guilty as Prudence in assuming that, because Fabian looks so right for Prudence, the two should and will marry. Jane has not considered what a trial it would be for Prudence to marry a man of such shallow egotism and with such a reputation for philandering, qualities of which Jane is perfectly aware.

Fortunately for Jane, not all is hopeless or disappointing. For instead of the "rapture and misery and boredom" of Prudence-type love affairs, she has a comforting, sometimes boring, but doubtless tender relationship with her husband Nicholas. It is not, of course, a relationship that holds any appeal for someone like Prudence, who sees only Jane's baggy clothing and Nicholas's mild complacency. And neither spouse particularly feels as if expectations have been wholly fulfilled. Jane has let lapse her once-promising research on a lesser Romantic poet, until over the years the ink of her notes
has faded. Once when she is ineffectually trying to get Nicholas's attention, it occurs to Jane, and not for the first time, that things have not turned out quite as she has expected:

Nicholas looked over the top of his spectacles with a mild, kindly look, obviously not having heard what she said.

Mild, kindly looks and spectacles, thought Jane; 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...all these faded away into mild kindly looks and spectacles. There came a day when one didn't quote poetry to one's husband any more. (48)

Nicholas himself is not immune to wry observations on the married state, as he thinks after one of Jane's more undiplomatic outbursts at a parish meeting that "there was, after all, something to be said for the celibacy of the clergy" (135).

Indeed, any romantic notions that either of them might have entertained have long ago evaporated. Kindly Nicholas, who takes unabashed delight in his animal-shaped soaps, is surely no romantic hero; Jane, with her irrepressible imagination, fits neither into the mold of the romantic heroine nor the wifely helpmeet. Instead, toward the end of the novel, both seem to be coming to a more realistic understanding of their calling:
"My poor Jane... what can any of us do with these poor people?"

"We can only go blundering along in that state of life unto which it shall please God to call us," said Jane. "I was going to be such a splendid clergyman's wife when I married you, but somehow it hasn't turned out like The Daisy Chain or The Last Chronicles of Barset." (212)

For all the foibles of the relationships between men and women in this novel—men's egotism, women's coddling, and the deflation of romantic expectations—this novel explores the human quality of love, whether it be in Jane's and Prudence's friendship, the comfortable married love of Jane and Nicholas, or even Fabian's and Jessie's self-love. The subject of my last chapter is what happens when love is emptied out of human relationships, leaving only the empty forms of convention.
THE SWEET DOVE DIED: THE INVERSION OF ROMANCE

The Sweet Dove Died is markedly different in tone from Excellent Women and Jane and Prudence. Excellent Women (published in 1952), Pym's second completed novel, is primarily comic and affirms the value of community, however much it also pokes fun at people's assumptions about the unmarried. Pym's third novel, Jane and Prudence (published in 1953), also offers a hopeful future for her characters, even though the book satirizes the silly ways men and women treat each other. These novels undermine the paradigm in a gentle way, portraying essentially good people who cannot see the predicaments they have gotten themselves into by their lack of perception. But the failures of the paradigm are not wholly tragic, nor hopeless. Love, though silly and incomplete sometimes, exists and has value. In The Sweet Dove Died (written in the mid-1960s and published in 1978), however, the value of love itself comes into question. For this reason, it may be the most powerfully undermining and subversive of her novels.

The Sweet Dove Died is the dark story of a woman for whom the romantic paradigm has utterly failed, a woman whose thinking is so molded by her role-playing that she cannot even perceive the emptiness it has brought her. This starkly beautiful novel implicitly
criticizes one of the paradigm's most profound faults: that of characterizing a woman as a beautiful muse--unobtainable, abstract, and perfect, the muse is not fully human. She is instead a goddess-like figure to whom passion is alien and repugnant. Carried to its extreme, as the book shows, the muse convention inverts love relationships into a narcissistic game of power and possession (See Cooley 42). The very thrust of the paradigm--the exaltation of the erotic relationship between a man and woman--is thus undermined to the point of negation. Leonora Eyre, who has adopted a goddess-like persona throughout all her gracious, art-filled and perfect life, is this novel's beautiful muse. She has moved through the diplomatic circles of Europe, admired and pursued by powerful men; she has daintily flirted with the most desirable of them, but in the end has chosen to remain aloof, content in late middle age with the sexless admiration of elderly gentlemen. She thinks of herself as being timeless and perfect; like the beautiful antiques and objets d'art that occupy her life, she is an object of adoration. Aside from her male admirers, she tolerates the company of her neighbors: Liz, an embittered divorced woman who lavishes love only on her Siamese cats; and Meg, who offers an abiding maternal love to a young homosexual man.

Unlike Meg or Liz, Leonora's main emotional attachment is to beautiful things, not people. It is in pursuit of art objects that she meets the Boyces: Humphrey, a sixty-ish antique dealer, and his
young nephew, James. Both men are attracted to her and eventually
Leonora, Humphrey and James form an odd triangle; Humphrey takes
her to elegant antique shows and the opera, and James buys her
exquisite Victorian love-tokens. But Leonora is always more strongly
drawn to the callow and beautiful James than to the stuffy, proper
Humphrey. With James she develops an intimate mother-son
relationship that carries the merest, most delicate hint of sexuality.
James is "attracted to her in the way that a young man may
sometimes be to a woman old enough to be his mother" (9); such
ambiguity is the hallmark of their relationship, one that seems to be
based more on esthetics than passion. James fulfills some need in
Leonora to be cherished and admired, a need symbolized by her
fondness for a certain antique mirror of his: "The glass had some
slight flaw in it, and if she placed it in a certain light she saw
looking back at her the face of a woman from another century,
fascinating and ageless" (87).

But James is not to be possessed as easily as one might a
mirror. He surreptitiously forms a sexual liaison with a scruffy, shy
young woman, Phoebe Sharpe, who has none of Leonora's dislike of
sexuality. Nor does she share Leonora's taste for genteel
surroundings--her country cottage is strewn with books, dirty plates
and a stray cat or two--yet her waifish air and simplicity appeal to
James. When he leaves for an extended business trip in Europe he
lets her borrow some of his antique furniture. The dignified
Leonora is aghast at this implied infidelity when she finds out—she enlists Humphrey’s help in taking back James’s things, and the hapless Phoebe acquiesces without a protest. Upon his return from Europe, James finds that Leonora has found a charming and well-decorated flat for him—the upper floor of her own house, complete with safety bars on the windows and the furniture taken from Phoebe’s.

Such a perfect and satisfactory arrangement does not last long. For James, susceptible to flattery, has formed a new liaison while in Europe. The intruder is the effete Ned, an American who is as manipulative and urbane as Leonora herself, which she recognizes to her chagrin. Soon James leaves Leonora’s house and, under Ned’s tutelage, cuts off all contact with the older woman. Thus Leonora enters a long winter of loneliness and misery, and the ineluctable fact of her own aging hits her full force. She remains in her tastefully arranged house with her desirable Victoriana, feeling undesirable herself, but with no serious intention of risking emotional involvement. "One would hardly want to be like the people who fill the emptiness of their lives with an animal," she thinks, unable to draw a parallel between her desire to possess James’s passionless affection and the Keats poem that Ned quotes to her:
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 hands’ weaving.

Indeed, even when circumstances change between her and
James--Ned, bored, casts James off--she will not risk the perfection
of the control she musters over her own emotions. She "forgives"
James his folly, yet will not bridge the emotional distance between
them. She turns instead to the things that validate her belief in
her own desirability: objects of beauty and artistic value, generous
gifts from admirers, and the unflagging worship of her own perfection.

Mirrors and subversion: the "demonic" novelistic structure

From Leonora's obsessive love for James to the sexual passion
between James and Ned, the novel shows relationships in which the
motivating force is power, not love. Mason Cooley points out that
"[n]one of these attractions is predominantly sexual; the motives have
to do more with possession and display" (45). The characters,
especially Leonora, cling to obsessive roles even when they cause
themselves and others psychological torment. Such a near-aberrant
set of relationships can be seen as the "demonic" society "held
together by a kind of molecular tension of egos" described by
Northrop Frye in *The Anatomy of Criticism* (147). The sexuality which in the paradigm is represented by a desire to be with the beloved is here transmogrified into a desire to possess and entrap: "The demonic erotic relation becomes a fierce destructive passion that works against loyalty or frustrates the one who possesses it" (Frye 149). Leonora, James, Ned and the others are playing out a morbid drama that is the terrible mirror image of the soaring romantic interplay prescribed by the paradigm.

Mirrors, in fact, are highly important in *The Sweet Dove Died*. Mirror images serve as a unifying structural device throughout, a device that facilitates the subversive qualities of the book. In many ways, characters mirror each other: Leonora and Ned mirror each other in their self-absorption; Meg, in her love for her gay friend Colin, is the reverse image of Leonora and her possessive love for James; and Leonora and James darkly mirror the conventional mother-child relationship. A literal mirror also serves as a potent symbol: James's fruitwood mirror serves as an objective correlative for narcissistic love. Not merely a symbol of relentless self-admiration, it reflects the constant reassurance both Leonora and Ned seek: Leonora's of her agelessness and Ned's of his dominance in all his relationships.

Leonora is always entranced by the glass's reflection of herself; in it she sees none of the distressing signs of impending age. The mirror shows not the truth, but the distorted version of reality that
Leonora needs to see. With great irony, given Leonora's insistence on perfection, the only reason the mirror suits such a need is a flaw in the glass. Significantly, after James's abrupt departure from her house, Humphrey gets her a similar mirror, but it offers no flattering reflection (182).

On a larger structural scale, the plot and characters are the reverse or mirror image of those in a typical romantic novel. Were this a "normal" book, one that adheres to accepted conventions, Leonora would be charming, selfless and lovable; Humphrey would not appear pompous or stuffy; and James would become the son Leonora never had. Romance would blossom between the older couple, and with James, they would form a family. (Even this plot development might be considered unusual, since the main romantic characters are no longer young.) There would be no question of a homosexual affair for James; instead Phoebe might even appear as a charming, bland young woman suitable as a love interest for him. Thus the characters would form a new, comic society, one that would affirm the values of the romantic paradigm (see Frye 165).

Nothing of the sort happens in this novel. The novel becomes instead the sardonic mirror image of a conventional comic romance. Love does not conquer all, and personal relationships remain merely tenuous or deeply painful.

Mirroring can also be seen in the book's substitution of narcissism--blind self-love--for eros or romantic, sexual love celebrated
in the paradigm. Each of the characters (with a possible exception in Phoebe) fails in some way to achieve the norm of erotic love. The unctuous Ned is the worst offender in this regard in his blatant manipulation of emotion and his refusal to become emotionally involved. Ironically, it is he who comes closest to expressing the risk inherent in really loving a person: "So you hurt her," he says to James, speaking of Leonora. "--but that's what loving is, hurting and being hurt. Believe me, I know" (170). The "love" Ned refers to, however, is not agape or even eros, but a narcissistic power game in which he ensures that he is never the loser. Likewise, an assignation made with a nameless man at a theater bar is described in Ned's mind as "a simple romantic encounter just as Ned's meeting with James in the Spanish post office had been" (189). In Ned's mind the word "romance," like his use of the word "love," is merely a subterfuge hiding his desire to dominate.

Humphrey has none of Ned's desire to manipulate; he in fact conforms exactly to the behavior expected of an older suitor. Yet his attitude toward romantic love is hardly more than a desire to show off his prized possessions. His attraction towards Leonora is closely akin to his fondness for his antiques. James's "romances," on the other hand, have little to do with a conscious desire to possess, or even to do anything at all. His attachments to Leonora, Ned and to Phoebe, especially, seem to happen through no volition on his part. He takes no action, but instead is acted upon. Thus
he feels no guilt after starting an affair with Phoebe; she has "thrown herself" at him, and surely, he thinks, he cannot be blamed for that. Both Leonora and Ned manipulate him into their lives--James really has no place in their erotic conflict except as an object of possession.

Leonora: the betrayal of the muse

Leonora, for all her elegance and rigidity, subverts the "beautiful muse" convention to become the object of frustrated desire described by Frye: "It [the demonic erotic relation] is generally symbolized by a harlot, witch, siren, or other tantalizing female, a physical object of desire which is sought as a possession and therefore can never be possessed" (149). Frye’s description, as accurately as it helps to classify the mode of literature to which The Sweet Dove Died belongs, cannot, of course, fully express Leonora’s subtle and complex characterization. Leonora is more than a "tantalizing female," a beautiful muse, or even an aging and beautiful woman. Her very name indicates her contradictory qualities. "Leonora" evokes the loyal heroine of Beethoven’s Romantic opera, a woman who rescues her husband from prison; "Eyre" brings to mind the passionate and plain Jane Eyre, whom the Leonora in this novel hardly resembles. Pym portrays her, though, not only as narcissistic and self-absorbed, but as one endowed with a certain tragic pathos.
This portrayal undermines the very paradigm to which Leonora so strongly adheres.

Leonora has fulfilled the requirements of the role for which she has been trained: she has developed impeccable taste, has cultivated her beauty and desirability, and, most importantly, has remained emotionally remote, as a muse of her stature must. A passage from C. S. Lewis’s *The Four Loves* applies both to Leonora’s unwillingness to love and to the "alternative to tragedy" seen in the "demonic" society of archetypal criticism.

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket--safe, dark, motionless--it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only safe place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell. (*Four Loves*, 169)

Leonora has gained nothing from her refusal to love and her adherence to the muse convention except for rigid control of her
emotions, memories of long-ago dalliances, and a sterile, superficial life:

Leonora liked to think of her life as calm of mind, all passion spent, or more rarely, as emotion recollected in tranquility. But had there ever really been passion, or even emotion? One or two tearful scenes in bed—for she had never really enjoyed that kind of thing—and now it was such a relief that one didn’t have to worry anymore. (16)

Sexuality, like any other overpowering emotion, is disturbing and repugnant to her. When Humphrey makes a clumsy pass at her (he kisses her and slips his hand inside the neck of her dress) she refuses to respond, even in protest. “He is going to kiss me, Leonora thought in sudden panic, pray heaven no more than that. . . One couldn’t lose one’s dignity of course. . . for after all one wasn’t exactly a young girl. Surely freedom from this kind of thing was among the compensations of advancing age. . . " (92).

Running parallel to the sheer incongruous humor of the scene, with Humphrey’s adolescent cloddishness and Leonora’s panicky internal monologue, is the pathos of Leonora’s psychological rigidity. Even in this moment, struggling to maintain her dignity, she refers to herself in the third person, as "one." Her emotional distance from
others extends even to the way she thinks about her own behavior and responses.

Not only has the paradigm failed to let her accept her own sexuality, but it has failed also to account for an unavoidable and natural physical phenomenon: the human aging process. Within the muse convention, personal value is assessed in terms of beauty and youth, or timelessness, as Leonora puts it. Leonora’s self-worth is derived from her beauty and desirability (even though she spurns anyone’s attempt to claim her). The inevitable changes in her own body and countenance, with their attendant reminders of her mortality, deeply threaten her identity; she, the flawless one, becomes subject to increasing imperfection. Thus the gentle lie that James’s mirror provides her is comforting: "It might be a good idea to use it when she made up her face, to spare herself some of the painful discoveries she had lately been making—those lines where there were none before, and that softening and gradual disintegration of the flesh which was so distressing on a spring or summer morning" (87).

The denial of her aging and the repression of her emotional expression have not been without physical and psychological cost. Leonora’s bedside table holds a "phial of brightly colored pills to reduce stress and strain," medicine that it would appear Leonora should not need in her graceful, undemanding life. She suffers from debilitating migraines which she pointedly refuses to connect with her
fear of age or loneliness. Once, when a migraine comes on, she thinks to herself that it is caused by "the heat and the prospect of a not very interesting evening" (81), a long evening spent without James's cool ministrations. Later, her pain begins to subside enough so that she can start to re-do her nail polish, until she makes an unwanted discovery: "But those brown spots on her own hands... were surely a sign of age? The headache began to return and she lay down again, the tears trickling slowly down her cheeks" (82).

Her proud refusal to humble herself certainly does not make Leonora lovable, or even self-aware. Yet Pym endows her with a certain tragic pathos. Leonora is a tragic figure not because she has been rejected by James but because of her obstinate blindness and refusal to be human: to feel, to love, to risk imperfection. In her compulsive-obsessive quest for perfection she has truncated her humanity and appears more akin to Frye's tantalizing, remote female than to a living person. She has discarded all her options for potential, for human growth, because of her inability to deal with human imperfection.

When she considers doing volunteer work to assuage her loneliness, as a boring woman at a party has suggested to her, she is unable to follow through: "but when Leonora came to consider them each had something wrong with it: how could she do church work when she never went near a church, or work for old people when she found them boring and physically repellent, or with
handicapped children when the very thought of them was too upsetting?" (181) Each suggestion demands a change in her world view, an acceptance of others' needs, of aging, of imperfection.

With all avenues of comfort seemingly cut off, Leonora finally has one chance to connect with another person, to express her vulnerability. Instead, the scene becomes a pathetic mirror image of an epiphany. Leonora's misery hits her with full force in a cheap cafeteria--of all places--where she begins to identify herself with the garbage left by previous customers--cigarette butts, eaten-upon bits of pastries, dirty dishes. Like the Edwardian jewelry she has seen earlier at Christie's gallery, she feels herself a castoff from another time, used up, useless, unwanted. "I am utterly alone," she thinks, discounting the friends she does have. Then her cousin Daphne, a woman who strikes Leonora as countrified, suddenly appears in the cafeteria. Leonora finds herself accepting almost gratefully an invitation to lunch at her club. There she experiences a most unusual sensation: "As the meal went on Leonora felt an absurd desire to confide in Daphne. The wine might have loosened her restraint but she was careful to drink sparingly, recognising the warmth she was beginning to feel towards her cousin as a danger signal" (186). The danger signal is not a warning of impending drunkenness, but of lowering her emotional reserve.

Leonora, in her near-total self-absorption, has undermined all that is expected of a conventional romantic protagonist. Her most painful
experiences--losing James to a man, failing to cope with her own aging--do not bring about for her any emotional or mental reorganization. She does not experience a gradual, incremental growth of self-knowledge, but rather a quiet, incremental increase in misery and self-absorption. The end of the novel shows her "forgiving James" for leaving her, but without offering him any accompanying gestures of reconciliation. "One did forgive James, of course; one was, or one saw oneself as being, that kind of person. Why, then, did one not make some generous gesture, some impulsive movement towards him . . . ?" (207). Leonora's refusal of reconciliation and change undermines not only the conventions of the romantic paradigm but also the accepted novelistic pattern of the protagonist's movement toward self-knowledge.

The irony and pathos of Leonora's life are intensified by her failure to recognize the reasons for her loneliness, the source of her anguish: her active refusal to participate, and her identification of youth and beauty solely with James, whom she cannot possess. If the romantic mode calls for the absorption of two people into the contemplation of their exclusive love, how paltry and pathetic Leonora's unreciprocated absorption in James seems! Her coldness is a paradoxical reversal of the passion lovers are supposed to feel, and her selfishness the opposite of the lover's sheer delight in being with the beloved.
CONCLUSION

One unfamiliar with Pym might conclude from reading this thesis that Pym's subversion of the romantic paradigm was a strident and unmistakable theme throughout her work. Such is not the case, of course. Instead, she tends to be detached and tolerant of her characters' foibles, and the tone of her works is one of quiet amusement. Pym's affection for her characters is apparent, especially for ones like Jane, Nicholas, or Prudence, who tend to be optimistic in the face of disappointment or unfulfilled expectations. Much of the delightfulness of her novels stems from the contrast between the ironic undermining of her characters and her gentle, elusive presentation of them. But she rarely, if ever, suggests that conditions between men and women must or should change. Instead, she draws attention to everyday silliness and minor inequities, and she leaves it to the reader to draw inferences.

Part of Pym's subtlety is due to her careful manipulation of point-of-view. Pym usually, but not always, filters her wry observations through her sensible female characters such as Mildred or Jane. These characters usually think their comments without saying them, or utter them only to a safe audience, as Jessie does.
with Jane. The result is that the satire is distanced from the
author and is somewhat diffused. Mildred's story, for example,
could not be told in any other way except first person, because
Mildred never voices her sometimes caustic wit, and even tries to
suppress her uncharitable thoughts. So self-effacing is she, and so
well does she hide her sharpness from others, that even at the end
of the novel she appears to be almost what she was at the opening
scene: a drab, passive spinster. She may notice inequitable
relations between men and women, but has no intention of really
changing her own meek, helpful behavior, and has not rebelled
against convention in the underhanded way that Jessie has. The
first person presentation in Excellent Women, combined with Mildred’s
own traditional behavior, help to diffuse the novel’s satire of
romantic convention.

Jane and Prudence, although presented in third person, does jump
from one character’s consciousness to another’s. Jessie’s scornful
detachment and disgust with fawning adulation contrast nicely with
the self-indulgent maunderings of Fabian, or the pomposity of Miss
Doggett. Such multiple points-of-view help to focus attention on the
everyday inconsistencies of life and expose the foibles of romantic
conventions.

A similar technique--multiple consciousnesses--is used in A Sweet
Dove Died, but with even greater detachment. This novel, in
contrast to Jane and Prudence, employs no direct authorial comment
whatsoever. Rather than relying on the interpretations offered by an authorial voice, the reader must sort through the imperfect and biased impressions offered by the characters. Thus Leonora's self-absorption is made all the more chilling when the reader grasps Leonora's inability to acknowledge other characters' humanity. The brittle, detached tone of the novel contradicts the commonly held expectations about romantic fiction.

Rare as such incidents are, occasionally Pym's authorial voice does intrude. Some of Pym's best sarcasm is doled out to her comic egotistical characters, and she may present it directly, without benefit of an intermediary. Fabian, we are told, would not dream of entering the Methodist Chapel: "none of the people one knew went to chapel, unless out of an amused curiosity. Even if truth were to be found there" (Jane and Prudence 54). The latter sentence does not arise from Fabian's unobservant consciousness, but appears to be a direct authorial comment.

Because most wry observations are kept private, however, no one in the books is confronted directly with his or her childish or self-defeating behavior. Rocky and Helena do not grow up, presumably, nor does James in A Sweet Dove Died learn to be less passive. (Fabian does stumble into marriage to Jessie, however, which is perhaps only due him).

Pym's novels, then, really do not indicate that anything will change between men and women, but that is not to say her work
is pessimistic or bitter. They chronicle the value of love as well as the stubbornness of human expectations, and leave room for quiet hope and the pleasure of the ordinary.
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PRIMARY BIBLIOGRAPHY


SECONDARY BIBLIOGRAPHY


