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LOVE, MARRIAGE, AND IRONY IN BARBARA PYM'S NOVELS

DISSERTATION

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In my study on Barbara Pym's novels, the focus is first on the two basic ironies in love-marriage relations: irony of dilemma in which marriage is seen as the end of romantic love; and irony of situation in which excellent but plain-looking women are deprived of the chance to express their basic need for love. Chapter I of this study introduces the major themes and ironies in Pym's novels and the nature and functions of her irony. The following six chapters examine the two major ironies in six of Pym's twelve novels: *Some Tame Gazelle*, *Excellent Women*, *Jane and Prudence*, *Less Than Angels*, *A Glass of Blessings*, and *A Few Green Leaves*. While discussing the uniqueness of each of Pym's heroines, I also explore how Pym underwent changes in her views of love and marriage and how she attempted to keep a balance between her romanticism and her sense of irony. Pym's other six novels are discussed in Chapter VIII, the concluding chapter.

In her earlier novels, such as *Some Tame Gazelle*, *Excellent Women*, and *Jane and Prudence*, Pym gradually increases the ironic tension in love-marriage relations, with the tension reaching its height in *Jane and Prudence*. *Less Than Angels* uniquely shows the ironic dilemmas both men

and women face in male-oriented society and the effects of the emergent feminist movement on both men and women. In *A Glass of Blessings* and *A Few Green Leaves*, the degrees of irony in love-marriage relations decrease with the author's attempt to solve the problems.

Through the effective use of irony, Pym succeeded in creating an original voice. At the same time, her ironic spirit did not make her lose compassion and love for people, hope for the future, and faith in God. Behind the mask of a wry ironist is hidden a romantic who believes in life's infinite possibility and who dreams of the ideal relationship between men and women.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Page numbers are noted in parentheses within the text. I quote from Dutton editions of Pym's works throughout.

Abbreviations for the works:

STG	<i>Some Tame Gazelle</i>
EW	<i>Excellent Women</i>
JP	<i>Jane and Prudence</i>
LTA	<i>Less Than Angels</i>
GB	<i>A Glass of Blessings</i>
NFRL	<i>No Fond Return of Love</i>
QA	<i>Quartet in Autumn</i>
SDD	<i>The Sweet Dove Died</i>
FGL	<i>A Few Green Leaves</i>
UA	<i>An Unsuitable Attachment</i>
CH	<i>Crampton Hodnet</i>
AQ	<i>An Academic Question</i>
CS	<i>Civil to Strangers and Other Writings</i>
VPE	<i>A Very Private Eye: An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters</i>

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: LOVE, MARRIAGE, AND IRONY

Love and marriage are major subjects in Barbara Pym's novels. While the protagonists in the traditional romantic novels are attractive young men and women, the main characters in Pym's novels are mostly plain-looking spinsters who are no longer young and have no specific careers. As Letty Crowe in *Quartet in Autumn*, who has never been married and is now in her sixties, thinks, "the position of an unmarried, unattached, ageing woman is of no interest whatever to the writer of modern fiction" (QA 3). Few novelists before Pym have thought of casting ordinary-looking, unattached old maids with no splendid careers as fictional heroines, because the lives of spinsters have been considered to be too dull, boring, and empty to attract the interests of readers.

More uncommon than Pym's choice of plain-looking spinsters as heroines are her ways of portraying them in love-marriage relations. The pre-modern way of treating the love-marriage question is to have a man and a woman meet and fall in love; there are obstacles to prevent their attachment and marriage; their true love prevails despite all the difficulties; finally, all the problems are solved, and a marriage of true minds takes place at the end of the

novel. Readers are expected to assume that the couple, after the wedding ceremony, will live happily ever after. Jane Austen's novels are typical in following this pattern of love and marriage. In Austen's novels, love is completed through marriage. In Pym's novels, however, marriage weakens love and ends dreams of romantic love. The idea of marriage as the end of romantic love instead of its ultimate, happy fruition is a major irony in love-marriage relations shown in Pym's novels. If irony can be defined as "recognition of a reality different from the masking appearance" (Holman 236), Pym's women characters recognize the discrepancy between their expectations of their marriages and the realities of their married lives.

Although the married women characters in Pym's novels become disappointed with their married lives and their husbands, most of them do not have any particular complaint about their spouses; and they have no intention of changing their married status. As Jane Nardin writes, "Because of the irrational nature of desire and the imperfection of all human creatures, some disappointment, and often great disappointment, accompanies the fruition of a love affair" (65). Since Pym presents married women's disappointments as unavoidable, natural by-products of their status, the irony these women face can be categorized as "irony of dilemma," which takes "the form of logical contradictions, paradox, dilemmas, or . . . 'impossible situations'" (Muecke, *The*

Compass of Irony 113). Irony of dilemma is a major literary device through which Pym shows the ambivalent attitude of her heroines toward love and marriage in her novels. On the one hand, Pym's women wish to fulfill their dreams of romantic love through matrimony; on the other hand, however, they see the grim reality that their marriages can bring: the end of their dreams and freedom.

Another major irony seen in relation to love and marriage in Pym's novels lies in her cast of the two different types of women characters for the married and the unmarried. When one compares Pym's female characters, he or she notices that the single women have better qualifications to be good wives than the married have. The best example may be Mildred in *Excellent Women*, who has all the qualities to make a good, devoted wife: she is virtuous, modest, sympathetic, sensible, neat, and considerate; and she is ready to help people in need. In contrast to Mildred, Helena is an unfaithful, selfish, insensitive, messy, and inconsiderate wife. Nevertheless, it is not Mildred but Helena who has been married to Rocky, whom Mildred loves. Despite all his complaints about and quarrels with his wife, Helena, and despite all the good works that Mildred has done for him, Rocky still wants Helena rather than Mildred because Helena is pretty and exciting. For Rocky, who likes glamour and excitement, a good woman like Mildred is too dull and boring to love, no matter how virtuous and

considerate she may be. Mildred thinks of herself as one of the "excellent" women who "are for being unmarried" (EW 190); for what men want from women is not beauty of the mind but physical beauty, and Mildred's self-effacing goodness makes her become only an easy target of selfish and exploitative men and women. The problem which Pym's excellent women face forms another major irony, which may be categorized as irony of situation. The irony lies in the situation in which a good-natured but plain-looking woman, who has an irrepressible need for love, is deprived of a proper love-object while an insensitive but good-looking woman easily attracts men's attention.

How to fulfill the need for love is, then, the problem Pymian unattached excellent women face. They want someone or something to love even if their love-objects are not lovers or husbands. In *Some Tame Gazelle*, for instance, physically weak, young, single curates are Harriet's love-objects, for whom she cooks dinners, bakes cakes, makes jam, and knits socks. Winifred in *Excellent Women* and Daphane in *A Few Green Leaves* fulfill their needs for love through looking after their helpless clergymen brothers. Sometimes, animals such as dogs and cats become "something to love" (STG 17) to some of Pym's single women like Mrs. Beltane in *No Fond Return of Love*, Daisy in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, and Liz in *The Sweet Dove Died*. Belinda's favorite quotation, "Some tame gazelle, or some gentle dove:/"

Something to love, oh, something to love" (STG 17), pinpoints the single women's way of fulfilling their needs for love despite their lack of normal love-relationships. For Belinda, "it was obviously natural that one should lavish it [one's affection] on somebody" (STG 17). She loves Henry, the Archdeacon, who is married to another woman. Belinda has been in "the habit of loving" (STG 17) him for over thirty years, and she has no hope of her love ever being returned.

Unrequited love is common to Pym's unmarried women characters. Belinda's long-term, faithful love for Henry in *Some Tame Gazelle*; Prudence's short-term, secret passion for Dr. Grampian in *Jane and Prudence*; and Dulcie's persistent research into Aylwin's life in *No Fond Return of Love* are a few examples of the one-way loves through which many of Pymian female characters fulfill their basic needs for love. Through her direct experiences with men, Pym herself knew the nature of unrequited love--both its pain and its need. In her diary, Pym repeatedly expressed the suffering and frustration caused by her unrequited love for men, such as Henry Harvey, Gordon Glover, and Richard Roberts. Through her one-way love for Henry Harvey, Pym began to experience the pain of rejection in her early twenties, when she, at least, had room to enjoy her "pose of romantically unrequited love" (VPE 27). In her thirties, however, one quotation from her diary shows what agony and misery Pym had

gone through because of her hopeless love for Gordon:

7 April, 1943. Whereas now I have no reason to hope--I don't even know if Gordon ever thinks of me and nobody can assure me on that point. So I went round in miserable circles--to know what one wants and see no prospects of getting it--what pain, sometimes I feel I must talk about it, and let go for a minute (yes, there were some tears privately)--then I can start again being dreary splendid. (VPE 121)

Pym's habit of loving someone who does not return her love continued when she, in her fifties, was involved with a man who was much younger than she. Pym wrote of this relationship:

24 May, 1965. Fortunately all the fury and bitterness I sometimes feel has stayed hidden inside me and R. doesn't--perhaps never will--know!

25 May, 1965. All miserable again and determined to "end it all" between us--but how? And why?

29 May, 1965. A letter from R. inviting us to dinner on my birthday. I phoned him and we talked. I must learn not to take "things" so much to heart and try to understand--don't stop loving (can't), just be there if and when needed. (VPE

235)

The last entry of the quotation clearly shows how some women cannot help loving someone because love is an essential and irresistible need, no matter what pain it may bring to their lives.

Pym's personal, bitter experiences with men may be one of the reasons that led her to take a special "interest in people who are failures or deprived or in some way unsuccessful" (Kaufman 50), as she said in one of the BBC programs. Pym identifies herself with those who have suffered from a sense of failure and have not achieved anything worth mentioning. Naturally Pym is, in her novels, sympathetic to such "unachieving characters" (Nardin 12) as Belinda in *Some Tame Gazelle*, Prudence in *Jane and Prudence*, and Letty in *Quartet in Autumn*.

Not only does Pym show sympathy for these characters' sense of failure, but she suggests a certain validity for their unachieving state. For example, Letty in *Quartet in Autumn*, an unmarried woman in her sixties, has never had anything much, and she wonders: "might not the experience of 'not having' be regarded as something with its own validity?" (QA 25). When Pym didn't accept Henry Harvey's invitation to tea because she was afraid of being disappointed, she wrote in her diary: "because I didn't go to tea--I am thinking of the happy time we might have had--and am loving him more than I probably should do if I had

actually gone" (VPE 39). The single women whose loves have not been returned can have justification for their "not having" state. They can fully enjoy the world of imagination not in spite of, but because of, their dreams of love not being realized. As Nardin remarks, they have "the chance to avoid painful collisions between imagination and reality and so to keep the imagination alive" (19). One statement that Pym made in her thirties also implies that the dream of ideal love can only be kept alive through its being unachieved: "I shall be able to keep my illusions [of ideal love] as it doesn't look as if I shall ever get married" (PVE 180).

In addition to a life of imagination, a life of observation is another source which occupies Pym's single women. Dulcie in *No Fond Return of Love*, for instance, enjoys observing the lives of others to compensate for "the dreariness of everyday life" (NFRL 18) and "to amuse herself" (NFRL 11). While observing and investigating Aylwin's personal life, Dulcie feels that she has fallen in love with him. It is, in a sense, her way of fulfilling her need for love; for, as she admits it, love is "a powerful incentive to this kind of research" (NFRL 44). One advantage which the life of observation provides for the observer is, according to Dulcie, that "it seemed . . . so much safer and more comfortable to live in the lives of other people--to observe their joys and sorrows with

detachment as if one were watching a film or a play" (NFRL 108).

The unattached women in Pym's novels endeavor to be happy with the substitutes--their unconditional and unrequited love and their lives of imagination and observation. Pym's single women are cautious about being involved in any serious relationship with men, and they attempt to be happy as detached spectators of the lives of others. The reason is not that the vicarious experiences bring them a genuine, satisfactory happiness but that they have not been given what they really wanted--the real men who will appreciate and return their love. These women are vulnerable; and through their contacts with men, they know how insensitive men can be. They prefer observing other people's lives to being seriously involved with men and taking a chance on being rejected by them. This is the reason that Dulcie does not accept Maurice's offer to renew their relationship; she is afraid of being rejected again, and "the second loss might well be more painful than the first" (NFRL 128). By being preoccupied with the research into Aylwin's life without letting him know that she loves him, Dulcie can safely lavish her affection on him with no fear of rejection. Nevertheless, the substitutes never fully satisfy these women. One quotation from Pym's diary written in her forties clearly shows the author's dissatisfaction with the absence of love in her life:

28 October, 1955. Perhaps to be loved is the most cosy thing in life and yet many people, women I suppose I mean, know only the uncertainties of loving, which is only sometimes cosy when one accepts one's situation (rarely perhaps). (VPE 192)

In Pym's fictional world, her excellent women do not have much choice in love and marriage. Women in the feminist novels, such as Tony Morrison's *Sula* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, choose women's freedom and independence at the risk of losing their men. In Pym's novels, however, women cannot make a choice between their own freedom and men's love because the latter has not been given to them in most cases. Choice without options can hardly be called a choice.

Although all of Pym's novels were written in the mid- and late-twentieth century when the feminist movement was one of the main concerns for contemporary women novelists, most of Pym's spinster heroines wish to fulfill their private needs for love rather than to pursue their careers and keep equal position, freedom, and independence in society. One statement that Pym made at the age of twenty shows her view of women's role in male-female relationships: "the girls were too intellectual and didn't have the compensation of being the opposite sex" (VPE 20). Her position that women should keep feminine qualities which

distinguish them from men didn't change in her forties when she expressed her negative view of the modern women in the '50s: "On TV I thought that women have never been more terrifying than they are now--the curled head ('Italian style'), the paint and the jewellery, the exposed bosom--no wonder men turn to other men sometimes" (VPE 197). Pym's major female characters are a direct product created from the author's predominant "feminine" sensibility--the sensibility which makes a woman desire to have someone to love for her ultimate happiness.

Women's need for love is one of the major themes which is extensively and seriously treated throughout Pym's novels. Since single women have no specific men upon whom they can pour their emotions, they feel a stronger need for love than the married women do. In her diaries, Pym, who never married, wrote about her own longing for love over and over. At the age of nineteen, Pym described her love for Henry Harvey, her first unrequited love: "the happiness one got out of love was worth any unhappiness it might (and generally does) bring" (VPE 17). Six years later, Pym wrote in a friendly letter to Elsie, who married Henry Harvey in 1937:

30 September, 1938. I do not grudge happiness to other people, although it is something I want for myself. It is known that every woman wants the love of a husband, but it is

also known that some women have to be content with other kinds of love. . . . I was meaning the love of a dear sister. . . . (VPE 84)

Pym's disappointment with the "doomed" love affair with Gordon Glover and her never-ending wish for love are well expressed in a diary written at her age of thirty:

22 April, 1943. If G. isn't the best and the real thing, well, I will get it with somebody else. But it's got to be pretty good, to be better than "Sweeney Todd" . . . No words will describe this wonderful nebulous lover that may one day materialise. (VPE 126)

Women's longing for love seen in Pym's novels does not just come from "a self-serving, male-created myth that a woman fulfills herself only through love" (Brothers, "Women Victimized by Fiction" 63). The desire to love and to be loved is a natural, irrepressible life-force, and a fulfilling love is essential to make Pym's single women feel whole. What bothers these women the most is their awareness of "the incomplete quality of their emotional lives" (Kaufman 62), not just the pressure of people in society looking upon marriage as women's goal. Mildred regretfully realizes that she has "so far missed not only the experience of marriage, but the perhaps even greater and more ennobling one of having loved and lost" (EW 44). It is true that Pym's novels show that the lives of the unmarried women are

not so empty as they appear to other people. Nevertheless, Mildred feels that her life is not complete without the experience of love and marriage even if she realizes that she may be disappointed with the reality of marriage. Like Alfred Tennyson, Pym and her major women characters believe that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all (STG 213). In Pym's novels, even widows are presented as being better off than spinsters; for the former, at least, have loved and married, whereas the latter have not been given the chance to experience love followed by marriage. A sense of being neglected and useless prevails in the single women's lonely lives because they have never been the first or the most important in anybody's life. As long as women stay single with no men attached to them, their emotional worlds are continually disturbed either by their own sense of emptiness and loneliness or by occasional encounters with flirtatious men or the sudden reappearance of their ex-boy-friends.

It is obvious that Pym depicts the gloomy, sad, and painful aspects of love and marriage: the loneliness and emptiness of the single women; their unfulfilled needs for love; their sense of rejection and failure; the absence of chance and choice in the lives of the single women; their vain attempts to be happy with substituted forms of love; the disillusionment and frustration of married women; and the selfishness, insensitivity, and egotism of men. Nobody

is perfectly happy; both the married and the single women are dissatisfied with "the impossible situations" (Mueck, *The Compass of Irony* 113).

Although Pym's novels have the "potentially tragic" (Halperin 100) themes, they are not tragic, nor are her characters tragic. The uniqueness of the author lies in what she does with her tragic vision of human experiences. No matter how serious and depressing the subjects and themes of her novels may be, Pym never fails to see and portray their funny, amusing side. The tone of her novels is humorous and comic instead of being bitter and cynical. As Horace Walpole wrote, if "the world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those who feel" (Bartlett 246), Pym shows capacity for both feeling and reasoning at the same time. As a romantic who is actively involved in life and bitterly disappointed with what her life has given to her, Pym feels that life is a sad, tragic story of unfulfilled dreams and frustrated hopes; however, as a detached observer of people and their lives, including her own, she thinks that life is a comedy full of funny incidents, farcical moments, and delightful, amusing situations. In her journal, Pym has repeatedly expressed her awareness of both painful and amusing sides of life:

12 December, 1966. As for news of Richard, I fear it is all over now (it makes me sad to write this)--he did get in touch once but I think it was

only because he and Maurice wanted to get rid of some jumble (which we were of course delighted to have, but still . . . ?). Life has its farcical moments and perhaps my sense of humour is greater than his. (VPE 240)

Pym's comment on the nature of her own novels also shows these two contrasting elements in them--the comic and the serious: "I like to think that what I write gives pleasure and makes my readers smile, even laugh. But my novels are by no means only comedies as I try to reflect life as I see it" (Strauss-Noll 73).

Pym's portrayals of life in her fictional world are always based on both a sense of tragedy and a sense of comedy, and irony has been the most effective literary device to unify her tragic and comic vision of life. In a sense, irony in Pym's novels functions as an artistic fusion of these two opposite elements. For instance, the scene in *Crampton Hodnet*, in which Mr. Latimer proposes to Miss Morrow, is a typical example which shows how Pym combines a serious matter with a comic element. In this scene, Mr. Latimer, a young curate, proposes to Miss Morrow, a companion of an old bossy lady, Miss Doggett, not because he loves her but because he wants to escape from the suffocating atmosphere of Miss doggett's house where he stays:

"Oh, Miss Morrow--Janie" he burst out

suddenly.

"My name isn't Janie."

"Well, it's something beginning with J," he said impatiently. It was annoying to be held up by such a triviality. What did it matter what her name was at this moment?

"It's Jessie, if you want to know, or Jessica, really," she said, without looking up from her knitting.

"Oh, Jessica," continued Mr. Latimer, feeling a little flat by now, "couldn't we escape out of all this together?" (CH 92)

One can see how Miss Morrow is regarded by Mr. Latimer, who does not even remember her first name: she is viewed as an obscure and negligible woman who does not have a definite personality. She is like an inanimate, "comfortable chair by the fire, where he can sit with his slippers on and a pipe in his mouth" (CH 31). Miss Morrow refuses Mr. Latimer's proposal because

Even Miss Morrow's standards were higher than that, so high, indeed, that she feared she would never marry now. For she wanted love, or whatever it was that made Simon and Anthea walk along the street not noticing other people simply because they had each other's eyes to look into. And of course she knew perfectly well that she would

never get anything like that . . . respect and esteem were cold, lifeless things--dry bones picked clean of flesh. There was . . . nothing warm and romantic about respect and esteem. (CH 94)

The message is obviously tragic: it underlines the frustration and sadness of a plain-looking spinster who is no longer young but hopelessly searching for romantic love. Nevertheless, the scene is portrayed in such a funny way that one cannot help laughing over it in spite of one's sympathy for Miss Morrow's painful humiliation. Later, almost at the end of the novel when Mr. Latimer announces his engagement to a girl of nineteen whom he met in France, Mrs. Wardell, a neighborhood woman, makes a comment on her earlier suspicion about the relationship between Mr. Latimer and Miss Morrow:

"Do you know" said Mrs. Wardell, suddenly gripping Mr. Latimer's arm, "I actually thought there was something between you and Miss Morrow!"

Miss Morrow joined as heartily as anyone in the laughter which followed this amazing admission. Everyone seemed to think it was very funny, although Mr. Latimer's laughter sounded a little forced. (CH 207)

The fact that everyone in the scene thinks that Mrs. Wardell's suspicion is ridiculous and funny shows the

impression which Miss Morrow gives to the people in the community: an unimportant, dreary old maid to whom no man pays any attention. The community's unspoken but unanimous denial of her feminine qualities inflicts emotional pain on Miss Morrow, but she manages to hide the pain under her hearty laughter. By using one of the techniques of dramatic irony--"*double entendre*" (Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* 105) --Pym skillfully presents the incongruity between what Miss Morrow appears to the people in the community and what Miss Morrow really is. By so doing, Pym successfully achieves her purpose of creating the comic effect while treating the painful subject. The reader can laugh with the people who laugh over Mrs. Wardell's unexpected, apparently silly statement, but the reader's laughter comes from his or her knowledge of the community's "confident unawareness" (Muecke, *Irony* 25) of the truth in her comment. At the same time, the reader can sympathize with the humiliation and frustration which Miss Morrow must feel but has concealed from the people in the scene. As David Worcester defines irony, "Laughters and tears are reconciled" (139) in Pym's irony. Since irony in Pym's novels is always accompanied with both comedy and pathos, and it functions as a bond connecting tragedy and comedy, the nature of her irony can be properly explained by Alan Reynolds Thompson's definition of irony:

the ironic contrast must, to be ironic, affect us

as both painful and comic:

In irony, emotions clash . . . it is both emotional and intellectual . . . To perceive it one must be detached and cool; to feel it one must be pained for a person or ideal gone amiss.

Laughter rises but is withered on the lips.

Someone or something we cherish is cruelly made game of; we see the joke but are hurt by it. (15)

Critics agree that Pym is essentially a comic writer (Halperin 100; Rowse 64; Smith 63), who deals with serious, grave, and sad themes underneath the comedy (Halperin 100; Long 24 & 219; Rowse 70) and that her comedy is "always informed by irony" (Long 219). In fact, irony is essential in Pym's fictional world. While pointing out accurate observation, detachment, and sympathy as common qualities shared by both novelists and anthropologists (Burkhart 69), Pym mentions other important elements necessary for novelists: "It only needed a little more imagination, plus the leavening of irony and humor, to turn their [anthropologists'] accounts into novels" (Burkhart 69). Pym's twelve novels (seven of them were published in her lifetime and five, posthumously) all prove that Pym practiced what she preached. Her novels are fine examples of the effective uses of the various ironic methods adopted by a talented ironist who sees people and their worlds with both detachment and sympathy. As Hazel Holt, Pym's lifelong

friend and literary executor, states, Pym's ability "to draw comfort from small pleasures and ironies . . . is . . . the greatest gift she has bequeathed to all who read her" (VPE 292).

Among Pym critics, some, such as Jane Nardin, Barbara Brothers, Doreen Alvarez Saar, Janice Rossen, and Barbara Bowman, discuss Pym's ironic treatment and her ambivalent views of love and marriage. By pointing out the common aspects in Pymian heroines' personalities and their perspectives on life, love, and marriage, these critics examine Pym's ironic views in love-marriage relations and man-woman relationships. Nevertheless, in their generalizations of the ironic attitudes of Pym's heroines toward love and marriage, the critics pay little attention to the uniqueness of each heroine's character and the different degrees of irony in the love-marriage question. Despite their common elements--being sensible and quiet in personality and ordinary in appearance--each of Pym's "excellent" women has a definite individuality, and her relationships and responses to the male characters are different from those of other heroines. What is also missing in the study of Pym is her irrepressible romanticism hidden under her disguised ironic detachment. Pym's novels are, in a sense, a reflection of her conflicts between her innate romantic longings and her self-trained irony as a defensive weapon; and underneath her ironic attitudes toward

her subjects including herself always lie her ineradicable romantic aspirations.

In my study on love, marriage, and irony in Pym's novels, I have first focused on Pym's two basic ironies: irony of dilemma in which marriage is seen as the end of romantic love; and irony of situation in which excellent women with ordinary looks are deprived of the chance to express their basic needs for love. Then, I have examined the different degrees and intensities of these two ironies dramatized in Pym's major novels. While dealing with the different degrees of irony, I have discussed the uniqueness each of Pym's heroines has in her personality, circumstance, ideas, and behavior. By analyzing Pym's heroines and her fictive world, I have also explored how she underwent changes in her views of love and marriage as time passed and how she attempted to keep a balance between her irresistible romanticism and her self-imposed sense of comedy and irony. I have also discussed the way in which Pym used dramatic irony as an effective technique for her central themes in some of her novels.

Out of Pym's twelve novels, I have focused on six, *Some Tame Gazelle* (1950), *Excellent Women* (1952), *Jane and Prudence* (1953), *Less Than Angels* (1955), *A Glass of Blessings* (1958), and *A few Green Leaves* (1980). In choosing these novels, I have considered two aspects: one is their relevancy to my main subjects; and the other is the

artistic qualities of each novel as a coherent whole. Each of the following six chapters deals with each of the six selected novels chronologically.

In the concluding chapter (Ch. VIII), I have discussed Pym's other six novels, *Crampton Hodnet*, *No Fond Return of Love*, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, *The Sweet Dove Died*, *An Academic Question*, and *Quartet in Autumn*, along with their strengths or weaknesses.

CHAPTER II

SOME TAME GAZELLE

Barbara Pym's first novel, *Some Tame Gazelle*, was written in 1934 and 1935 when she was in her early twenties. It was not published until 1950 after several revisions. In her diary of 1934, Pym wrote about the birth of *Some Tame Gazelle*:

1 September, 1934. Sometime in July I began writing a story about Hilary [Pym's sister] and me as spinsters of fiftish. Henry, Jock and all of us appeared in it. I sent it to them and they liked it very much. So I am going on with it and one day it may become a book. It is of course "for Henry," and in it I seem able to say what I cannot in the course of events. Barbara keeps looking back to her youth, and so I have an excuse for revealing some of my present feelings about Henry. (VPE 44)

Belinda Bede, the protagonist in the novel, is a persona for Barbara Pym; and Henry Hoccleve, the Archdeacon, is a comic version of Henry Harvey, whom she passionately loved at the time she wrote the story. The novel is, in a sense, a product of Pym's unrequited love for Henry Harvey, who married a Finnish girl, Elsie Godenhjelm, in 1937.

What is surprising is that, despite her passionate love for Henry and her hopeless desire to marry him, young Barbara Pym, from the beginning of her career as a writer, was already detached enough to be aware of the paradoxical nature of love-marriage relations and to dramatize this awareness, which forms a major thematic frame throughout all her novels. In *Some Tame Gazelle*, by comparing and contrasting the single people, such as Belinda, Harriet, Ricardo, Mr. Mold, and Nicholas with the married couples, such as Henry and Agatha, Mr. Donne and Olivia, and Bishop Grote and Connie, Pym presents her ironic view of love and marriage.

First of all, Belinda's unfulfilled but undying love for Henry is repeatedly contrasted with Agatha's apparent lack of romantic love for him. For instance, Agatha has "a very difficult time with him" (11) because of his self-centered, insensitive, and pompous character. Belinda notices that Henry does not appear to be eager to go away for a holiday with his wife and Agatha looks much better after her holiday--a month's separation from her husband. Besides, Agatha seems to prefer the company of the bishop she met in Karsbad to that of her husband. The letter which Agatha sent to her husband during her holiday "contained nothing private. It seemed to be a long list of things he must not forget to do. It was admirably practical, but unromantic" (147). It is obvious that Belinda sees the end

of romantic love in the married lives of Henry and Agatha.

Marriages of the two other couples also seem to lack romantic passion. The relationship between Mr. Donne, a young curate, and Olivia, a young scholar, is similar to that of Henry and Agatha. Both women are capable and practical; and their skillful courting tactics lead their men to marry them. One conversation between Belinda and Agatha suggests that both men were proposed to by their women. In the courtship of these couples, one cannot find the feminine romantic dream of strong, masculine men passionately asking for women's hands. As for the relationship between Bishop Grote and Connie, Bishop Grote does make a marriage proposal to Connie, but he says he wants a wife only for a "helpmeet" (224). Whether they love each other hardly matters to him; his decision to marry her is based on only his need for someone to help him in the mission field in Africa. By dramatizing the prosaic lives of these three couples whose marriages lack excitement and romance, Pym presents her ironic awareness of love-marriage relations: marriage can weaken love and end romantic passion instead of fulfilling the dream of perfect love. As Jane Nardin writes, "Paradoxically, then, it is by *not* marrying that one keeps passion alive in *Some Tame Gazelle*" (68).

The question is, then, whether Belinda, as Nardin also believes, is more contented than the married women because of her romantic love being kept alive. In the novel there

are many occasions when Belinda envies Agatha her status as Henry's wife. Even though she is aware of the disadvantages which the married status brings to the couple, Belinda is objective enough to admit the benefits which Agatha enjoys in her married life; and she is sensitive enough to feel what is missing in her single life. For example, while Belinda is talking to Agatha at the vicarage, Henry comes in and kisses his wife, and the scene distresses Belinda. Why does the "outward signs of affection" (65) between husband and wife surprise and distress Belinda? The reason is that their outward expression of love makes her acknowledge the possibility that Henry and Agatha may be, after all, a happily married couple with genuine devotion to each other. At the same time, the scene reminds Belinda of the elements lacking in her life: a comfortable home, loving husband, and emotional security. Belinda cannot help feeling a sense of loss while she is watching Agatha mending her husband's socks. This "cosy domestic scene" makes "a deep impression" (70) on Belinda, and she reminds herself of the fact that Henry and Agatha are "devoted to each other" and Agatha is "an admirable wife" (70). Belinda is compelled to admit that there is nothing wrong with their marriage except some differences between and complaints about each other, which are not unusual to most of the married couples.

Belinda does not consciously wish Henry and Agatha to have any serious problem in their marriage. Rather, her

trouble comes from the absence of the proper man on whom she can legitimately pour her unexpressed emotions. Although she has loved Henry for many years, Belinda cannot allow herself to accept his casual invitation to tea while Agatha is away; for Henry has been legally married to Agatha, and Belinda is a gentlewoman, who respects decorum and social codes. Even "an ordinary task like making a pullover for somebody we love or used to love seems too dangerous to be undertaken" (83) because Belinda is afraid that "Agatha might hear of it" (83) or she "might pick at it critically and detect a mistake" (83). With the wool which she bought to knit Henry a pullover, Belinda finally makes a jumper for herself. Belinda feels that she cannot even tell Henry's maid to clean the dusty mantelpiece in his study during Agatha's absence:

There was nothing vague or nebulous about an Archdeacon's wife, even when she wasn't there. I loved you more than Agatha did, thought Belinda, but all I can do now is to keep silent. I can't even speak to Florrie about the dusty mantelpiece, because it's nothing to do with me. It never was and it never will be. (150)

Belinda's apparent tranquility is frequently disturbed by external factors, such as Henry's callous question or request and his sudden visit to her house. For instance, while Henry is reading to Belinda *The Faerie Queene* and *The*

Prelude, which he used to read in their college years, he asks:

"Do you know," he said suddenly, with the air of one who has an important discovery, "this reminds me of the old days. I used to read aloud to you then. Does it remind you?"

Belinda was speechless, as she considered this proof of man's oddness. Whatever did he imagine that it reminded her of? (150)

While Belinda has constantly lived with the memories of the old days, always relating the present to the past, Henry has almost forgotten his close attachment to her in the past.

Henry's question clearly shows his indifference to Belinda's long-cherished affection for him. When Henry asks her to go to the station with him to meet his wife, Belinda thinks:

"On this day she was classed with Agatha's nearest and dearest in a way which seemed to her rather ironical. Who but a man could be so lacking in fine feelings as to think of such a thing? . . . But of course she said she would go"

(160). Henry's obvious insensitivity is contrasted with Belinda's hidden emotional hurt. Belinda vainly wishes, "If only one could clear out one's mind and heart as ruthlessly as one did one's wardrobe" (220). When Belinda mended Henry's sock on his sudden visit to her and her sister in their house, this seemingly trivial incident is, to her, such "an upsetting and unnerving experience" (79) that she

almost wishes to have no feelings at all. Belinda tells her sister: "I wonder what it would be like to be turned into a pillar of salt? . . . I should imagine it would be very restful . . . to have no feeling or emotions" (79-80).

Despite her claim that she is a contented spinster with no sadness in her mind, Belinda cannot but feel that her outward calm and contentment are easily disturbed by any statement or event related to Henry.

Not only does Belinda often feel frustrated because she has no proper, normal outlet for her need for love, but she also feels a sense of being negligible and insignificant. Contrasted with Agatha, who has an important position in the community as the Archdeacon's wife, Belinda feels "dowdy and insignificant, one of the many thousand respectable middle-aged spinsters" (176). Belinda comforts Ricardo by saying, "it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all . . . so many of us have loved and lost" (213). Nevertheless, she does not want to be "one of many, and she did not like this picture of herself, only one of a great crowd of dreary women" (213-14). Throughout her life, Belinda has been a marginal figure or at most "second best" (46), for she has never been cherished and loved as the most important woman in any man's life.

Loneliness also troubles Belinda's single life. When she hears from Harriet that Mr. Mold came to ask Harriet to marry him, the idea of losing her sister upsets Belinda too

much to ask what Harriet answered. Belinda sadly broods: "She might have known that something dreadful like this would happen" (141). Harriet's marriage would mean that Belinda has to live alone or find a companion to live with her; therefore, any possibility that may lead her sister to marriage is, to Belinda, a "menace" (149) which threatens Belinda's comfortable life with her sister. When Harriet tells her that she didn't accept his offer, the "look of relief that brightened Belinda's face was pathetic in its intensity . . . Belinda was so overcome with joy and relief at Harriet's news that she kissed her impulsively" (142). Since female companionship can be ended when the other single woman gets married, unmarried women like Belinda tend to worry about total loneliness.

While she perceives what disappointment and disillusionment marriage may bring to one's life, Belinda is fully aware of the drawbacks in her single status, such as loneliness, lack of secure companionship, the unfulfilled need to love and to be loved, emotional insecurity, and sense of being neglected and useless. Because of the disadvantages in both the married and the single status, Pym's view of love-marriage relations is ironical in *Some Tame Gazelle*; and the irony may be categorized as "Irony of Dilemma" (Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* 113), in which the discrepancies between expectation and reality in love-marriage relations are viewed as unavoidable.

Belinda understands the basic contradictory nature of human experience in which the realization of high expectation often inevitably brings disappointment. She thinks of Agatha's emotional change toward her husband: "after so many years of being married to a charming but difficult man like the Archdeacon, perhaps it was rather too much to expect that Agatha should dwell on the desolation of life without him" (147). Agatha has to put up with Henry's bad temper at such times as he gets mad at her "negligence in letting the moths get into his grey suit" (37). Unlike Agatha, since Belinda does not have to deal with him on the daily basis, she has been able to maintain her romantic love for him for thirty years despite the fact that he has "very few of the obvious virtues that one somehow expected of one's parish priest" (8). Belinda admits that her undiminishing love for Henry may be caused by the fact that her love has never been fulfilled: "I love him even more than Agatha does, but my feeling may be stronger for not having married him" (161). If one is married, the dreams of romantic love end; however, if one remains single, love, romantic though it may be, is incomplete. This is the dilemma that Belinda sees in love-marriage relations.

Although the author and the protagonist of *Some Tame Gazelle* clearly perceive fundamental contradictions in the interaction between love and marriage, Belinda is not an ironist, if the ironist can be defined as

a passive person who looks on as the world goes by. . . . Futility and vanity are his final terms for human effort . . . the final consequence of its disillusioning vision is the despair of an Ibsen or a Swift. (Thompson 255)

Unlike such ironists as defined in the statement above, Belinda does not feel trapped or puzzled by the ironic situation. She is intellectually detached enough to see drawbacks in both the married and the single status, but her natural desire prefers the married status.

In one of her short stories, entitled "Civil to Strangers," which was written in 1936 and posthumously published in 1987, Pym shows the relationship between Adam and Cassandra as a married couple. Adam in this story is very much like Henry in *Some Tame Gazelle*: both are egotistic, complacent, pompous, affected, but handsome, charming men. Cassandra is similar to Belinda in the sense that she is considerate, patient, and faithfully devoted to her man. The difference is that Cassandra is married to Adam, whereas Belinda is not married to Henry. In this short story, Cassandra is portrayed as a happy wife, who only cares for her husband's comforts and happiness with strong affection, although she knows that he is often like a difficult, capricious, immature child.

One critic believes that Pym was disappointed by men because "her expectations were too high, one couldn't come

up to her standards" (Rowse 69). But my reading of Pym's diary leads me to disagree. For instance, at times when Henry Harvey treated her badly, Pym wrote about him:

9 March, 1934. He [Jockie, a friend of both Henry and Pym] told me a few things about Lorenzo [the pseudonym Pym uses for Henry in her diary] . . . what a horribly difficult person he is. Lorenzo himself was frightful at supper . . . He did not speak to me at all except to be rude . . . I . . . was too tired to think much about the way Lorenzo had behaved to me and my miserable future prospects. The worst of it is that the more I know him the more I seem to love him, in spite of all his faults. (VPE 37)

Pym was a woman passionately, if not blindly, in love, who could see all the shortcomings of her man but still love him in spite of them. A letter written by Pym's literary executor, Hazel Holt also supports my point: "Barbara Pym saw all the faults and weaknesses [of men] very clearly, but with the eye of love . . . she always [had] great affection, even for those who had hurt her" (Halperin 99). One can see the same attitude in Belinda's way of loving Henry in *Some Tame Gazelle*:

the Archdeacon was very difficult to get up in the mornings, and of course one knew that he always made his curates do the early services which was

really very slack, because it wasn't as if he were very old or weak in his health. And yet he had such charm, even now (11)

So I would agree with one of her fans, who wrote to Pym:

I do hope you will marry, because you would make such an understanding wife; you would expect your husband to be more or less helpless, though loveable, and you would not be disappointed. . . . On the other hand, perhaps if you were married you would have no time for writing, so I do not really know what to wish. (Strauss-Noll 72)

Belinda in *Some Tame Gazelle* is like her creator, who would have enjoyed her married life if she had had a chance, no matter how selfish, vain, and peevish her man might have been. Belinda is not a confirmed spinster who has willingly chosen to be single. She has had no proper choice to make throughout her life: "Belinda, having loved the Archdeacon when she was twenty and not having found anyone to replace him since, had naturally got into the habit of loving him" (17). Henry, who married Agatha when Belinda was twenty-five, does not seem to care whether Belinda still loves him or not. It is true that Belinda is proposed to by Theodore Grote, the bishop of Mbawawa; however, since Belinda dislikes him at once, his proposal can hardly be called a choice to her.

Although Belinda often experiences sadness, pain,

loneliness, and frustration because her basic need for love is unfulfilled, she is not any more a tragic character than she is an ironist. For life is, to Belinda, not a struggle for what she cannot have but a quiet and stoical acceptance of what she is and has, even though she has not willingly chosen the state. With no bitterness, Belinda accepts that her love for Henry has never been returned. The pain and sadness that she felt have gradually turned into a kind of sweet sadness, which has become almost an inseparable part of herself. Belinda thinks: "her love was like a warm, comfortable garment, bedsocks, perhaps, or even woollen combinations; certainly something without glamour or romance" (158).

Not only does Belinda accept her unmarried state with no complaint, but she transforms her "not having" (QA 25) state into something valid for its own sake. Belinda suggests a certain validity for her single status by discovering some advantages inherent in it:

there was a certain pleasure in not doing something; it was impossible that one's high expectations should be disappointed by the reality. To Belinda's imaginative but contented mind this seemed a happy state, with no emptiness or bitterness about it. She was fortunate in needing very little to make her happy. (89)

As is often the case, the world of imagination is better

than the world of reality. Belinda understands the inevitable discrepancy between dream and reality, and her attitude toward the disparity is not that of a pessimist or an ironist, but that of an optimist. The pessimist sees the negative side of human experience and mourns over it. The ironist sees the contradictory nature in human life and does nothing about it. Despite her recognition of ironic ambivalence in the relationship between love and marriage, Belinda attempts to see the positive, bright side of her own status. It is true that the attempt mainly comes from her conscious or unconscious desire to justify her situation. Nevertheless, even if it is only a justification, it has some truth in it; and her tendency to justify her life is the very act of an optimist. Belinda tries to make the most of the advantages in her unmarried status. While she imagines that "Henry *might* prefer her to Agatha" (158), Belinda thinks, "It was one of the advantages of being the one he hadn't married that one could be in a position to imagine such things" (158).

Since Belinda has accepted her own world--melancholy and lonely as it may be--with no anger or complaint, she has been able to appreciate and cherish seemingly trivial events in life. When Henry gives Belinda a casual compliment by saying, "You have put up with my ill-humour for ten minutes . . . which is more than anyone else could have done" (28), "Belinda flushed with embarrassment and secret pleasure"

(28). When Miss Prior, a sewing woman, comparing Belinda with Agatha, praises Belinda for keeping a good table, "Belinda's eyes filled with tears and she experienced one of those sudden moments of joy that sometimes come to us in the middle of an ordinary day" (52). Listening to Henry reading poems to her and exchanging some impersonal conversations over a simple dinner with him and Nicholas are just enough for Belinda to feel happy: "Just one evening like that every thirty years or so. It might not seem much to other people, but it was really all one needed to be happy" (158). The protagonist portrayed in these scenes above is definitely a stoical optimist who is determined to be contented with her present life, no matter how stingy life may have been in granting some moments of happiness.

Pym's optimism is always accompanied by strong faith in God, infinite hope for the future, and deep love for people and life. Belinda's final or rather fundamental ground is that of a believer who accepts the will of God, although she does not know it. Instead of vainly struggling to understand His will, she firmly believes that "God moves in a mysterious way" (19, 225), which is "her favourite hymn" (225). Belinda's firm belief in God helps her accept all her difficult times with patience and endurance, overcome them, and affirm life with hope. Belinda realizes "how well her own heart, broken at twenty-five, had mended with the passing of the years . . . there was always hope springing

eternal in the human breast, which kept one alive" (130). Belinda asks herself "What would she herself have done without hope?" (214) If she were asked what she hoped for, Belinda "could not have said exactly what it was" (214). Belinda, as a fiftish spinster, has little hope for the ultimate fulfillment of her need for love. Nevertheless, to keep hope alive is an essential condition for her to live in this mysterious life.

Finally, the most distinctive element in Belinda's character is her great capacity for love. Although there is no hope of Belinda's love for Henry ever being returned, she has continued to love him; for, to Belinda, "it was obviously natural that one should lavish it [one's affection] on somebody" (17). The need for love is only too natural and intrinsic for Belinda to repress, no matter how painful the way to fulfill her need--unrequited and unexpressed love--may be. At the end of the novel, when Mr. Donne marries Olivia, Belinda once again affirms her own life as it is and repeats the same lines that she quoted at the beginning scene of the novel: "Some tame gazelle or some gentle dove or even a poodle dog--something to love, that was the point" (251).

Belinda's capacity for love is not limited to Henry; for her passion for him is only a part of her natural affection for people around her. Belinda is, by nature, a sympathetic, considerate person who makes a deliberate

effort to assure that Miss Prior, the sewing woman, will be provided a decent meal so that she should not feel that her "whole life is just a putting up with second best all the time" (46). Although she did not like the idea of Mr. Donne, her sister's young curate, getting married to Olivia, once Belinda sees and talks with her, she immediately feels "a glow of warm friendliness toward her" (236).

Even with Agatha, who, in a way, took Henry away from her, Belinda has made friends, although Agatha is often too quick to point out Belinda's mistakes or weaknesses and makes Belinda feel inferior. For instance, when Agatha disapproves the way Belinda wrapped Lady Clara's marrows and wraps them again in her own way, Belinda "felt that she wanted to tell somebody about the marrows and perhaps laugh over them. Harriet's healthy indignation would do her as much good as a cup of tea" (36). Once again, Belinda is an optimist. She has every reason to be hurt or angry but chooses to laugh over Agatha's petty sense of rivalry.

Later, almost at the end of the novel, Belinda, by chance, discovers a pathetic side of Agatha when the bishop tells her that Agatha knitted him some socks, which are "not quite long enough in the foot" (226). Belinda feels that she could almost love Agatha as a sister now. The pullover that she might have made for the Archdeacon would surely have been wrong somewhere, but as it had never been started, it lacked the

pathos of the socks not quite long enough in the foot. (226)

On the one hand, Belinda feels gratified with the idea of Agatha being pathetic. On the other hand, however, imagining Agatha as a pathetic person troubles Belinda. At the last scene of the novel while Belinda happens to stand by Agatha and tells her that she is not used to drinking champagne, Agatha, as is often the case, laughs at her remark. Instead of being crushed by Agatha's scornful "social laugh" (248), Belinda feels glad to see Agatha as "her old self again" (248)--the Agatha, who is "poised and well-dressed, used to drinking champagne, the daughter of a bishop and the wife of an Archdeacon" (248). For the picture of Agatha as pitiful has worried and disturbed Belinda. Comparing herself with Agatha, Belinda contemplates:

It was Belinda Bede who was the pathetic one and it was so much easier to bear the burden of one's own pathos than that of somebody else. Indeed, perhaps the very recognition of it in oneself meant that it didn't really exist. Belinda took a rather large sip of champagne and looked round the hall with renewed courage. (248)

Belinda's response in the passage above suggests both the intensity of the pain she has gone through and the depth of the compassion she has for other people. The pathos Belinda

has felt from her own life is too deep for her to see others from the same perspective. Belinda is too compassionate to be angry with people even if they are arrogant, petty, peevish, or complacent.

Belinda's attitude toward life and people is like that of Anatol France, who says:

Irony and Pity are two good counselors; the one, by smiling, renders life lovable; the other, that weeps, renders it sacred. The irony which I invoke is not cruel. It mocks neither love nor beauty. It is gentle and kindly. Its laughter calms anger, and it teaches us to make fun of scoundrels and fools, whom we might otherwise have the weakness to hate. (Chevalier 3)

Belinda's world is actually more gentle and kindly than Anatol France's; for in her world, there are no scoundrels or fools she makes fun of. Belinda sees people around her with deep sympathy and generosity, respects the differences of other people, and genuinely hopes for the best for them. Vulnerable as she may be, and painful as the emotional hurt may be, Belinda is actually a strong character whose indomitable optimism has led her to affirm her life and others' lives. Her affection for people may be her weakness because it often puts her in a vulnerable position; at the same time, however, it is her strength, because the capacity for love, along with her faith and hope, has saved her from

being a despairing pessimist or a cynical ironist.

Since Belinda, as a narrator, is often inconsistent, some critics tend to see her character as being either too positive or too negative. For example, Nardin thinks that Belinda is more contented than Agatha (65) just because Belinda says that she is a contented spinster. Nardin fails to understand Belinda's stronger need to love and to be loved, her lack of choice, and her hard-earned stoicism. One should remember the fact that Belinda's single status is not of her own choosing, but her contentment is a stoical justification of her present state. On the other hand, when Robert E. Long says that "rather than bringing a sense of harmonious integration and order to life," the ending of *Some Tame Gazelle* "reveals what a fundamentally lonely place the world is" (38), Long has failed to see that Belinda's optimistic affirmation of life brings the novel order and harmony at the end. One should see and evaluate Belinda as a real person; she is not a defender of one principle or another, but an ordinary human being who has many unavoidable conflicts and contradictory desires. The fact that Belinda is sometimes sad and melancholy does not mean she is a pessimistic, tragic character, just as the fact that she says that she is contented does not mean she prefers her present status to any other. What is important in examining her view of love, marriage, and life is her fundamental attitude toward her situation and those of

others. Then, one can realize that Belinda is a firm optimist who is determined to overcome the various difficulties in life and to see its bright side. Sometimes, she fails, but to fail is only natural because she too is a human. Her more essential nature is that she will continue to endeavor to keep alive hope for the future, faith in God --mysterious as He may be to her--and love for people. What makes *Some Tame Gazelle* a comedy is not just the author's "sense of the ridiculous" (Smith 63), not just "a continual ripple of amusement" (Rowse 70), not just her "irrepressible sense of fun" (Rowse 66), but her marvelously unique creation of the main character who, in spite of her sharp awareness of the dark side of life and its ironic discrepancies, still affirms life with unshakable optimism and loves people with deep compassion. As Charles Burkhardt says of Pym,

She is an unfashionably, even uniquely affirmative writer. She is brave enough to say yes. This may be the ultimate satisfaction of her comedies, that, despite what she knows about our vanity, idleness and egotism, they are documents of faith and acceptance. (116)

In addition to Belinda's optimistic and affirmative attitude toward life and people, there is another element which clearly shows the author's determination to write a comic novel; that is, the ironic situation which Belinda and

Agatha face in their relations to Bishop Grote. The situation is that whereas Belinda, who loves Henry, has no interest in the bishop, "Agatha . . . seemed to prefer his company to that of her husband" (198). At the same time, the bishop does not care for Agatha; instead, he prefers Belinda to anyone else. Harriet says to Belinda, "I wonder if Agatha does prefer the Bishop to Henry . . . How ironical life is; he sent you those flowers and you weren't at all pleased" (218). After Belinda has refused the bishop's proposal of marriage, she thinks: "It was not until they were in the hall that she realized that she had been offered and refused something that Agatha wanted, or that she may have wanted" (225-26). Although Agatha's love for the bishop is only the conjecture of the two sisters, Pym leads the reader to enjoy Belinda's moment of triumph over Agatha. This ironic situation helps Belinda overcome a sense of failure and inferiority and prevents the reader from seeing her as a totally pathetic loser. In Pym's fictional world, there exists no absolute winner or loser; if Agatha is a winner because she married the man Belinda loves, so is Belinda because she is proposed to by the man that Agatha supposedly loves. This kind of situational irony shows Pym's deliberate intention to make the novel into a comedy.

When one examines and compares Belinda's single life and Agatha's married life, the novel seems to support marriage as the better state. However, the other single

characters in the novel also play an important role in creating ironic tension in the concepts of love and marriage. Belinda's sentimental, melancholy, pathetic mood caused by her being single is constantly contrasted with the comfortable living, freedom, and peaceful contentment enjoyed by the other single characters, such as Harriet, Ricardo, Mr. Mold, and Nicholas.

First of all, Harriet is a genuinely contented spinster. She keeps a platonic friendship with her faithful admirer, Ricardo Bianco, who has "the habit of asking her to marry him" (23), only to be rejected. Harriet is content with her single life, lavishing her motherly affection on helpless young curates in her parish. Harriet enjoys harmless flirting with Mr. Mold, a deputy librarian visiting from London. However, when he proposes to her, she is ready to refuse his proposal; for as Harriet rhetorically asks herself, "who would change a comfortable life of spinsterhood in a country parish, which always had its pale curate to be cherished, for the unknown, trial of matrimony?" (136). In Pym's novels, Harriet is actually the only contented, confirmed spinster who has chosen to be single, although she has had good opportunities to marry. She prefers freedom, independence, and her own way of comfortable living to the uncertainty of marriage. Unlike Belinda, Harriet fully enjoys her single status without regret or loss of her feminine attraction.

As for Ricardo, he appears to be in the same situation that Belinda faces; for he suffers from unfulfilled love and cherishes a hopeless desire to marry. Nevertheless, Ricardo's love for Harriet is not completely unreturned as is Belinda's for Henry because Harriet always pays a special attention to him as her close friend. Moreover, unlike Belinda's, his wish to marry is not absolutely hopeless because Harriet is not attached to anybody. As long as Harriet stays single, Ricardo has hope. Besides, his annual proposal and Harriet's refusal repeated for many years have turned into a kind of ritual in which the acting for its own sake has become more important than its purpose or meaning. Ricardo knows that he is expected to propose, and Harriet knows that she is expected to refuse. They play their roles and enjoy the ritual.

Mr. Mold, a deputy librarian, proposes to Harriet and is rejected. Unlike Belinda, who suffers from a sense of rejection, Mr. Mold has no such feeling at all. Instead, after his offer is refused, he immediately feels relieved and thinks that marriage is "a tiresome business" (139) and that he is "lucky not to have been caught" (139).

Finally, Nicholas Parnell, a friend of both Belinda and Henry, is another single man who has "the opinion that it must be very tiresome to be married" (144), and he considers himself fortunate in not having married because he does not think that "poor Henry was quite as free as he had been"

(144). Nicholas believes that "Love is only one of many passions and it has no great influence on the sum of life" (144) and that "the emotions of the heart are very transitory" (145). Harriet, Ricardo, Mr. Mold, and Nicholas are all happy with their present status; and their contentment with their single status works as a counterpoint for Belinda's sense of loss and loneliness.

The married couples are also contented. To Belinda, these couples may appear to lead unromantic, dull lives. However, the reader is not given the chance to see through their minds, since they are observed and interpreted mainly through Belinda's eyes, which may be colored by her own subjective points of view. Even if Belinda's observation is objective, these people do not realize what they are missing. Although Agatha sometimes suffers from Henry's bad temper, she fully enjoys her position as the Archdeacon's wife and is proud of what she has achieved through her marriage. The fact that Agatha encouraged Olivia, her niece, to marry the young curate, Mr. Donne, indirectly shows that she is basically a contented wife, the position which her niece, she believes, will enjoy. Olivia's goal is also to attain the same position that Agatha has. Like Agatha, Olivia would like to use her scholarly background in helping her husband write sermons and use her skill and intelligence for his promotion. Practical and independent as they may be, both women have aimed at marriage, and they

are happy with their success.

As for the marriage of Bishop Grote and Connie, the complacent man is perfectly satisfied with his choice because all he wants from his marriage is a helper who meets his practical needs. So is Connie a happy bride, for she has been regarded as a "dreary" (15) and insignificant old maid: "The village people thought poor Miss Aspinall was not quite right in the head and considered it very clever of her to be able to play [the harp] at all" (43). Even Belinda, considerate as she is, thinks, "poor Connie was really rather uninteresting and it was hard to think of anything nice to say about her" (16). To marry anyone at all would be more than "poor Connie" would have expected in her life; then, to be proposed to by Theodore Grote and to become a bishop's wife must be the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to her. The contentment of the married couples with their marital status works as a counterpoint for Belinda's assumption of their dull, unromantic lives.

The novel is heavily charged with ironic tension between the single group and the married in love-marriage relations, and this ironic contradiction is not resolved because the discrepancy between expectation and reality is shown as an unresolvable dilemma. Nevertheless, both the protagonist and the other characters in the novel accept their own status with contentment and, as for Belinda, with stoicism as well. Despite the author's and the heroine's

awareness of the paradoxical nature of love-marriage relations, *Some Tame Gazelle* is a work of a comedy because it is a story of acceptance and affirmation of what we have and what we are.

CHAPTER III

EXCELLENT WOMEN

Out of Barbara Pym's twelve novels, *Excellent Women* (1952) is one of two novels written in the first-person point of view. This second novel is a story about the narrator, Mildred Lathbury, "an unmarried woman just over thirty, who lives alone and has no apparent ties" (5). Mildred is a typical Pymian "excellent" woman, who is considerate, compassionate, modest, and sensible. She is always ready to help others and sometimes exhausts herself with "bearing other people's burdens" (207). She is a good housekeeper, a willing server for her church, and a part-time worker at a charity organization which helps "impoverished gentlewomen" (12).

Considering all of her good qualities, one tends to expect that Mildred should be loved by the opposite sex and should deserve a caring husband. The reversal of this expectation forms a major irony in love-marriage relations in *Excellent Women*. While Mildred, a loving, sympathetic woman, is unmarried, Helena, an inconsiderate, insensitive flirt, is married to Rocky, whom Mildred secretly loves. Mrs. Gray, who is a cold-blooded, selfish, exploitative, scheming widow, is engaged to Julian Malory, the vicar in Mildred's parish, who, the parish people think, ought to

marry Mildred if he does not want to remain celibate.

Mildred is aware of this ironic situation: "It was not the excellent women who get married but people like Allegra Gray, who was no good at sewing, and Helena Napier, who left all the washing up" (170).

Mildred realizes the reason that Helena and Mrs. Gray succeed in attracting men while she fails to do so. Men are, by nature, liable to be attracted to good-looking women. On the day that Helena moves into Mildred's duplex, Mildred immediately notices the obvious difference in their outward appearances: "She was fair-haired and pretty, gaily dressed in corduroy trousers and a bright jersey, while, I, mousy and rather plain anyway, drew attention to these qualities with my shapeless overall and old fawn shirt" (7). Mildred's description of Mrs. Gray also shows why the latter easily draws men's attention: "Mrs. Gray was . . . good-looking and nicely dressed, rather too nicely dressed for a clergyman's widow" (57). Mrs. Gray knows that men often tend to be gullible when dealing with pretty women, and she makes the most of this male weakness. She is the kind of woman who wants men to serve her, and men like Julian and Father Greatorrex are actually too eager to help her.

Since her main goal is to catch a man and to get married, Mrs. Gray, from the beginning of her relationship with Julian, skillfully contrives deceptive schemes step by step. First, she sends quite a large anonymous donation to

Julian's church, but later she tells him that she was the donor; so he is led to believe that she is poor, but generous and devout. Then, she moves into his vicarage to attract Julian, and she succeeds. After her engagement to him, Mrs. Gray tries to make his sister, Winifred, move out of the house without discussing the matter with him.

Finally, having discovered Mrs. Gray's selfish, cruel, wild character hidden under her pretty face, Julian admits to Mildred the mistake he has made: "I obviously had no idea of her true character. You see, I thought her such a fine person" (211). While listening to Julian, Mildred thinks:

She was certainly very pretty, I thought, but I did not say it. I could not add to the burden of his humiliation by pointing out that he may have been taken in, like so many men before him, by a pretty face. (211)

By dramatizing the difference between what Mrs. Gray appears to be and what she really is, and by contrasting the ugly nature in the good-looking woman with the beauty of character in the plain-looking, the novel shows irony of situation in which a modest, sensible woman like Mildred has no chance for love and marriage as long as men are blinded by women's physical beauty. Julian, a credulous clergyman, fails to see the good qualities of character beneath the ordinary-looking appearances; and Rocky, a flirtatious naval officer, does not want good-natured, plain-looking women

because they fail to provide excitement and glamour.

After she has been acquainted with the selfish and irresponsible women like Helena and Mrs. Gray and after she has observed that men choose such women, Mildred makes an ironic but meaningful statement: "They [excellent women] are for being unmarried . . . and by that I mean a positive rather than negative state" (191). The statement shows Mildred's sharp awareness of the ironic situation in which excellent women suffer from lack of chance to attract proper men because men are unable to see or appreciate the fine personalities of these women beneath their plain looks and modest characters. At the same time, her explanation that being unmarried is a positive state implies that she has enough self-respect to acknowledge the excellent qualities in her own character. If one has to be a scheming deceiver like Mrs. Gray in order to catch a man, Mildred prefers to remain unmarried rather than sell out the values she cherishes.

Although Mildred has enough self-esteem to recognize the good qualities in herself, she has difficulty in maintaining emotional stability. Her seemingly quiet emotional world begins to be disturbed as soon as the Napiers move into her house. The moment she meets Rocky, Helena's husband, Mildred is attracted to him because of his handsome looks, charming manner, and sociable personality. When she is alone at night, Mildred tries to calm down her

mind which is disquieted by him. She remembers what Helena told about him when he was serving as a naval officer in Italy: "Rockingham hasn't had to do anything much but be charming to a lot of dreary Wren officers in ill-fitting white uniforms" (9). Mildred suspects that "he must be rather a shallow sort of person" (38), who thinks of her only as one of many awkward Wren officers who used to fall in love with him. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Rocky's appearance in her uneventful, quiet life has disturbed her peace of mind against her will, for she forgets to say her regular night-time prayers on the first day she met him. After she has enjoyed tea with him alone in a cafe on the way home, Mildred once again feels "the power of his charm" (44) with "a disturbed feeling which was most unlike me" (75). Mildred knows that she has no hope to have her love requited; for he is a married man. Besides, he has no interest in her as a woman. So she tries to play a role of a detached spectator to restore her tranquility: "I must not allow myself to have feelings, but must only observe the effects of other people's" (76). It is not surprising that she should fail in her attempt not to have feelings, because it is only natural to have feelings. Mildred later says, "Perhaps it's better to be unhappy than not to feel anything at all" (115); and finally she admits to Everard that she too has "the normal feelings" (190).

The question lies in what to do with the natural

feelings, the unfulfilled longings for love that have been kept inside her. Mildred replies to Everard, "nothing can be done about them" (190). Unlike Helena, who has no hesitation about showing her crush on Everard, and unlike Mrs. Gray, who is ready to trap a man into marriage, Mildred does nothing about her love for Rocky except to cherish it secretly. When Everard says to her that Helena has said she loves him, Mildred is shocked: "Oh, no! Not without encouragement! Do women declare themselves like that?" (145). Mildred is like Belinda in *Some Tame Gazelle*, who is stunned to hear of the implication that both Agatha and Olivia may have proposed to their men instead of being proposed to. The role that Pymian excellent women can play in courtship is passive and limited. They cannot imagine either overtly or covertly encouraging men to approach them, nor can they reveal their loves.

More often than not Mildred attempts to repress her emotions too much to allow herself and the reader to know her genuine feelings for her male friends. For instance, Mildred's relationships with both Julian and William show how, from the beginning of her acquaintance with them, she totally blocks her mind from considering any possibility of love or marriage. Mildred does not express how she feels about the possibility of marrying Julian. Without knowing Julian's definite views on the celibacy of the clergy in the High Church, she assumes that "he does not believe in

marriage for the clergy" (69-70). Nevertheless, when he is engaged to Mrs. Gray, Mildred realizes that people in the parish regard her as "the chief of the rejected ones" (171). No matter how strongly she denies that she has ever loved or thought of marrying him, nobody believes her. Informing Mildred of her engagement news, Mrs. Gray implies that Mildred herself must have wanted to marry him and says that Julian also thinks the same way. Mildred thinks: "How stupid I had been not to see it like that for it had not occurred to me that anyone might think I was in love with Julian" (127).

While she is brooding over what other people may have thought of her relationship to Julian, Mildred gradually remembers what she imagined when she began to get to know him:

Of course, I thought, trying to be completely honest with myself, there had been a time when I first met him when I had wondered whether there might ever be anything between us, but I had so soon realized that it was impossible that I had never given it another thought. (127)

Mildred acknowledges that she thought about some possibility of loving and marrying him, but she does not tell the reader why she realized that "it was impossible." The reason is not that she believes that Julian wants to remain celibate but that he has never shown any interest in her as a woman.

Mildred is afraid of facing the grim truth that he does not want to marry her even if he would like to marry some day. Belinda's statement in *Some Tame Gazelle* clearly illustrates Mildred's defense mechanism in man-woman relationships. When Harriet says, "If only you could have thought of proposing, Belinda" (STG 217), Belinda answers: "I think how dreadful it would be to be rejected. I sometimes wonder how men can bear it . . . I think it's much better not to have asked, not to know definitely that one wasn't wanted" (STG 218). Like Belinda, Mildred does not want to know that she might not have been wanted. Imagining the possible rejection from the other sex is too painful and humiliating for her to bear, especially when she does not have the confidence of Helena and Mrs. Gray. Twice, once to Julian, and another time to Rocky, Mildred says that she never expected that he [Julian] would marry her. This statement implies that Mildred already suspected that Julian would not marry her even though he would like to marry in the future. When Rocky asks, "But you may have hoped [that he would marry you]?" (135), she does not or perhaps cannot answer him. To Mildred, who cannot think of playing any active part in the game of courtship, analyzing how she feels about Julian is not only useless but painful when she imagines that he may not want to marry her. Therefore, she stopped thinking of any possibility of loving or marrying him at an early stage of their friendship--before she even

knew what she really wanted from him.

After having heard about Julian's broken engagement, Rocky encourages Mildred by saying, "now he can marry you" (224). Then, Mildred finally faces the humiliating truth of the matter and frankly pinpoints where she stands in her relation to Julian. Mildred says to Rocky, "If he had wanted to marry me he could have asked me before he met Mrs. Gray" (224). When Rocky tells her that the second chance has its own romantic nature, Mildred says, "It could be romantic if you had been the person to do the rejecting, but one doesn't like to be the person rejected" (224). Mildred admits that Julian did not want to marry her; but still she does not clearly tell the reader and her friends whether she has ever wanted to marry Julian, for she is not certain of her feeling about him, nor does she want to know it.

Almost at the end of the novel, Mildred hears from Julian that he was deceived by Mrs. Gray, partially because of her anonymous large donation to the church. Then, Mildred imagines, "At this moment an unworthy thought occurred to me. Supposing I had given an anonymous donation of, say, twenty pounds, would Julian have got engaged to me?" (245). Her speculation implies that she would not have turned down his offer of engagement if it had been offered. Actually, nowhere in the novel does Mildred mention that she would not marry Julian if he proposed. Therefore, although it is true that she is not in love with him and that she

never expected that he would marry her, her negative reactions stem from her fear of rejection that causes her repression of natural feelings for the opposite sex.

Mildred's relationship to William also shows why she has not developed any romantic feelings for him. Mildred regards their relationship as "a comfortable dull thing" (66); and she explains the nature of their friendship:

I do not remember when it was that I first began to realize that William was not the kind of man to marry, and that I myself did not mind in the very least. It now seemed so natural that if we were in a taxi together he should express the emotion that it was a relief to sit down rather than it was pleasant to be alone with me. (66)

When one carefully analyzes the way Mildred tells of the development--or lack of development--of their relationship, one can notice that it is not Mildred but William who first lost interest. If Mildred had not been interested in William at all from the beginning of their relationship, she would have said that he was not the kind of man she would like to marry. Instead, she says, "William was not the kind of man to marry." It is true that she says that she did not mind it. However, the very use of the least intensive expression--not mind--in the degree of liking implies that Mildred accepted the situation not because she originally and voluntarily desired it but because it was the only

option that had been given to her. No woman would cherish the hope to love or to marry a man like William, who bluntly says to her: "you mustn't marry . . . Life is disturbing enough as it is without these alarming suggestions. I always think of you as being so very balanced and sensible, such an excellent woman. . . . We . . . are the observers of life" (69-70). How can Mildred even dream of any romantic attachment to William, who is preoccupied with "his health and his food and his spiteful old-maidish delight in gossip" (66) and regards most women as "monsters" and "fiends" (69)? He prefers the company of pigeons to that of women and scarcely remembers how Mildred usually looks. From the early stage of their friendship, Mildred clearly saw that nothing would come of their relationship regardless of her wish. Therefore, Mildred's undeveloped feelings for William originate from her early awareness of his lack of interest in her as a woman.

The development of Mildred's relationship to Everard Bone shows how easily her feelings for the other sex can be changed by the attitude of men toward her. The first time Mildred is introduced to Everard, she finds him "difficult to talk to" (37) because he is, unlike Rocky, uncooperative when she tries to draw him into the conversation. Mildred sees Everard as a sharp intellectual with forbidding manners and "no warmth or charm about his personality" (92). At the same time, she notices that he is "rather good-looking" (37)

with a tall outstanding figure. Mildred believes that she is "indistinguishable from many another woman in a neutral winter coat and plain hat" (50). When Everard fails to recognize her at a church service, Mildred accepts this fact with no bitterness because she assumes that "there's really nothing outstanding" (55) about her. Because of his intellectual capacity and handsome appearance, Mildred feels inferior to him. Therefore, at the beginning of her acquaintance with him, Mildred does not imagine any possibility of loving or marrying him.

As she gets to know him better, Mildred is gradually attracted to him. However, as in the case with Julian and William, Mildred does not directly express to the reader how she feels about him or what she really expects from him. Instead, whenever she tells about the impression that Everard has made on her, Mildred uses the third-person pronoun or impersonal noun rather than the first-person pronoun. For example, Mildred describes her feelings for Everard: "I felt that I could almost understand the attraction he might have for the kind of person who is drawn to the difficult, the unusual, even the unpleasant" (50). Later, while she is listening to Everard's presentation at the Learned Society, she imagines: "I realized that one might love him secretly with no hope of encouragement, which can be very enjoyable for the young or inexperienced" (92). The reason that Mildred uses the third-person pronoun in

describing her own feelings for him lies in her reluctance to confront her own suppressed desire. Instead of admitting that she is interested in Everard, Mildred says to herself and the reader: "For Helena's sake, if not for my own, I ought perhaps to make some friendly overture if he were there next week. I could make it a Lent resolution to try to like him" (56). Mildred is afraid of facing what she might unconsciously hope for. It is not because she is a deliberately unreliable or self-deceived narrator, but because her fear of rejection is so enormous that Mildred does not even want to think of the groundless hope that may be found in her heart if she examines it.

When Helena sees Everard and Mildred talking to each other, she says, "You and Everard seemed to be having an interesting conversation . . . Was he declaring himself or something?" (99). Mildred tells the reader: "Her tone was rather light and cruel as if it were the most impossible thing in the world" (99). This statement of Mildred's shows how well she knows herself and what others think of her. At the same time, it implies how vulnerable Mildred can be to other people's insensitive, careless comments about her. As Michael Cotsell writes about Mildred,

she is so much her own woman and yet so vulnerable that Mildred is sensed to have a capacity for pain. . . . A determined self-knowledge that is also a repression leaves one open to subsequent

humiliating self-knowledge and to the easy
condescension and pity of others. (51)

Helena's cruel, condescending joke hurts Mildred, especially because Mildred believes that Helena's implied message--the impossibility of Everard being in love with Mildred--is true. When the idea of the possibility of their being together is suggested for the first time by Rocky, Mildred's emotional world is disturbed so much that she regrets that she has been involved in the complicated lives of Rocky, Helena, and Everard. She decides that "Love was rather a terrible thing" (100).

It is natural that love should be a terrible emotion to Mildred when she suspects that her love for a man--either Rocky or Everard--would never be returned. Regardless of her wish to avoid any more emotional entanglement, Mildred is getting more involved in these people's problems caused by Helena's impulsive, momentary crush on Everard. Everard, who does not love Helena, turns to Mildred to ask for help to discourage Helena's bold approach to him. After a few meetings with Everard because of Helena, Mildred gradually understands him better and gets to know the kind of woman he wants to marry. When Mildred asks him whether he would have married Helena if she had not been married, Everard answers:

"Certainly not. . . . She is not at all the
kind of person I should choose for my wife."

"What would she be like, that Not Impossible

She?" I asked.

"Oh, a sensible sort of person," he said
vaguely. (189)

The reader must remember that Everard, several lines before this conversation, said to Mildred, "you're a sensible person" (189). It would be surprising if Mildred couldn't connect his description of herself as a sensible person with his reply to her question about the kind of woman he wants to marry. Nevertheless, as soon as Everard tells her that he wants to marry "a sensible sort of person," Mildred subtly changes the direction of their conversation by saying: "Somebody who would help you in your work? . . . Somebody with a knowledge of anthropology who could correct proofs and make an index, rather like Miss Clovis, perhaps?" (189). Why does Mildred mention Miss Clovis when she could easily name herself, since she is much younger and more suitable than the old secretary of the Society of Anthropologists? The reason is that although she is getting to realize that he is looking for a sensible woman like her, Mildred does not have the bold confidence which made Helena declare herself. Since she does not exactly know what he thinks of her, Mildred would like to avoid direct confrontation with the real issue--love and marriage--until she is sure of what he really wants from her.

When Everard calls to ask her to have dinner with him in his flat--actually asking her to cook his meal, Mildred,

already "exhausted with bearing other people's burdens" (207), refuses his invitation. However, as soon as she has hung up the phone, she feels uneasy and sorry for him. Mildred tries to ease her guilty conscience by reminding herself that Everard is not so helpless as she imagines him and that he can easily ask somebody else to dinner. However, the moment she is reminded of the possibility that she may not even have been the first person he called, Mildred finds this thought disturbing. Mildred broods: "It seemed as if it was necessary for me to know that I had been the first choice, but I did not see what I could do about it" (220). Although she tells the reader that she cannot understand the reason for her emotional disturbance, Mildred's subconscious mind knows why. To have a modest opinion of oneself is one thing, and to wish to be first in a man's life is another. Throughout a few meetings and conversations with Everard, Mildred has been, in a sense, so encouraged by him as to unconsciously imagine the originally impossible wish that he would marry her. Since the wish still appears out of the question to her, she blocks out of her mind why she is disquieted by the thought that she may not have been his first choice.

Although Mildred has not accepted Everard's invitation to dinner, his phone-call becomes a strong incentive for her to have hope, no matter how faint the hope may be. Besides, the reconciliation and reunion of Rocky and Helena lead

Mildred to think more of herself and her own future. Mildred takes a positive action in looking for a chance to meet Everard instead of passively waiting for the chance to come incidentally. First, she thinks of joining the Society of Archaeologists to which he belongs. Then she remembers that she is "supposed to keep Everard up-to-date with news about the Napiers" (239), and she finds that the new information about Rocky and Helena may be more practical for an excuse to approach Everard than joining the academic society. At this later stage of the relationship, Mildred admits to herself that Helena is only an excuse to see Everard, which she did not want to acknowledge in their early relationship.

A few days later, Mildred walks near the premises of the Learned Society hoping that she may be able to see Everard. The walks remind her of Bernard Hatherley, a bank clerk, whom she at nineteen imagined herself to be in love with. Mildred says,

I was doing what I had so often done in the days of Bernard Hatherley. The walk along Victoria Parade in the gathering twilight, the approach to "Loch Lemond," the quick glance up at the lace-curtained window, the hope or fear that a hand might draw the curtain aside or a shadow form be seen hovering behind it . . . is there no end to the humiliations we subject ourselves to? (239)

Here, at least, Mildred boldly faces her hidden desire and admits it to herself; for Everard has, if not directly, encouraged her to have hope of their future attachment. But she still does not know whether he has a genuine interest in her as a future wife. When she finally sees Everard coming out of the building with Esther Clovis and taking her arm to help her cross the road, Mildred immediately assumes that they may be in love and that her hope of any close attachment with him has been groundless. When Everard explains that he has no interest in Esther and again invites her to go to dinner with him at his flat, Mildred willingly accepts his invitation, promising that "I would cook the meat and I felt better for having done so, for it seemed like a kind of atonement, a burden in a way and yet perhaps because of being a burden, a pleasure" (241). This statement pinpoints the very nature of Mildred: she is a kind of woman whose need to be needed is stronger than any other need. To help others may be a burden to many people, but to Mildred, it is a willing burden and so a pleasure which provides meaning to her life.

What Mildred is not still sure of is whether she is his first choice. Since she is by nature modest and lacks confidence, she is not certain whether she is the only person to be invited to dinner that evening. Mildred's presumption that Esther Clovis may have been also invited comes from her defense mechanism with which she can lessen

the emotional pain if her expectation and hope turn out to be her own pure imagination.

When Everard asks Mildred at the dinner table with no Miss Clovis around to correct proofs and to make an index for his book, she finally finds out that she is the person from whom Everard wants to get help. Accepting his request to help him and being relieved of the fear of rejection that she may not be wanted, Mildred already pictures her future life as Everard's wife:

before long I should be certain to find myself at his sink peeling potatoes and washing up; that would be a nice change when both proofreading and indexing began to pall. Was any man worth this burden? Probably not, but one shouldered it bravely and cheerfully and in the end it might turn out to be not so heavy after all. (255)

Because of the exploitative nature of men and the discrepancy between expectation and reality in love-marriage relations shown in the novel, some critics, such as Jane Nardin, Mary Strauss-Noll, and Doreen Alvarez Saar, emphasize Mildred's ambivalent attitude toward love and marriage. It is true that Mildred has gone through disenchantment in her view of love and marriage since the Napier couple moved into her house. The irony presented in the relationship between Rocky and Helena is the same type of irony portrayed in the Henry-Agatha relationship in *Some*

Tame Gazelle: the irony of dilemma in which marriage is viewed as the end of romantic love. Helena says to Mildred:

"when you're first in love, everything about the other person seems delightful, especially if it shows the difference between you. Rocky's very tidy and I'm not. . . . Rocky used to think that so sweet, but after a while it maddened him, it was just a mess." (26-7)

When Mildred, who has "all the romantic ideals of the unmarried" (27), protests that such a detail "ought not to affect the deeper relationship" (26), Helena disregards her protest as an ignorant naïveté of the inexperienced by saying, "Of course you've never been married" (27), and she puts Mildred "in [her] place among the row of excellent women" (27).

Mildred's ideal vision of marriage begins to be shattered as she observes the unstable, disturbing lives of the Napier couple. Rocky's flirtations with the Wren officers in the navy seem, to Helena, almost a matter of course, and she does not even feel jealous. Complaining about Rocky's total lack of interest in her career as an anthropologist, Helena tells Mildred that she feels a special link with Everard, her colleague in the same academic field. On the other hand, Rocky is unhappy with Helena's complete neglect of the housework such as cooking, washing, and cleaning. Rocky criticizes Helena when she

carelessly puts a hot saucepan down on the polished walnut table, leaving an unsightly mark on it. His anger at her lack of consideration in the housework finally makes her run away from him, and both consider the possibility of divorce during their temporary separation.

It is obvious that Mildred, a spectator and confidante of the couple, has been disillusioned through her involvement in their disquieting lives. At the beginning of the novel, before she is well acquainted with the couple, Mildred's untried, preconceived view of married couples is superficial but positive. After she has heard Helena talking about her marital problems, Mildred thinks: "people like the Napiers had not so far come within my range of experience. . . . Such married couples as I knew appeared to be quite contented" (28). Almost at the end of the novel, after having seen all the quarrels and conflicts that Rocky and Helena have gone through, Mildred's attitude toward love-marriage relations changes from that of a naïve romantic to that of a disillusioned skeptic. Although Rocky and Helena have been reconciled, Mildred doubts whether there will be any improvement in understanding between Rocky and Helena. Mildred ponders over their reunion: "It is said that people are refined and ennobled by suffering . . . but would Helena have learned to be neater in the kitchen, or Rocky to share her interest in matrilineal kin-group?" (238). Mildred suspects that they will most likely face the

same problems that they used to have. Through her daily contacts with the couple, Mildred has learned that marriage may not lead to the ultimate fulfillment of one's romantic dream of love. As Nardin says, "It is *Excellent Women's* central irony that marriage will not bring Mildred the sort of love or 'fulfillment' any spinsters envy" (38).

Concerning her own possible marriage, Mildred also suspects that it may not always be "an unmixed blessing" (125), as Mrs. Gray says to her. Mildred knows that Everard will never come up to her expectation that romantic love should be the essential element in marriage. Nor does she believe that Everard is worth her burden, because she is not sure whether any man will ever return enough for all the work she would do for him in the name of love. Regarding the function of Pym's irony as "a weapon used to reveal how society has made woman's lot a difficult one" (Saar 74), Saar points out how Pym's women are victimized by men: "Pym shows her readers all the mundane ways in which women suffer the small lashes of inequality, and how these small inequalities are worn down by their society" (74).

In interpreting women as total victims exploited by the opposite sex, however, Saar ignores the fundamental reason that Mildred would accept Everard's proposal despite her clear knowledge of the disappointing reality of love and marriage. First of all, one should remember that the very quality that has made Mildred an excellent woman is her

innate desire to be needed and work for others. While Rocky is talking and drinking wine with Julian after Helena left him, Mildred cleans the greasy dishes in the couple's messy kitchen and feels

resentful and bitter towards Helena and Rocky and even towards Julian, though I had to admit that nobody had compelled me to wash these dishes or to tidy this kitchen. It was the fussy spinster in me, the Martha, who could not comfortably sit and make conversation when she knew that yesterday's unwashed dishes were still in the sink. (161)

Mildred knows that she does not have to work in the Napiers' kitchen if she does not want to; it is her irrepressible desire to serve that forces her to work for others. In contrast to Helena and Mrs. Gray, who want to be served and loved, to Mildred, fulfilling her need to serve and love is more important than to fulfill her need to be loved and served.

Mildred refuses to accept the feminists' total commitment to women's freedom, independence, and equal position in society. Unlike Esther Clovis, who puts her career first in her life and fully enjoys her single status, Mildred feels pity for Helena when Esther encourages her to divorce Rocky by saying, "You will do better work without your husband . . . You will now devote your whole life to the study of matrilineal kin-group" (178).

The author's own comment on *Excellent Women* also shows that the novel is not just an attack upon male-dominant society in which women are its victims. Pym writes in a letter to a friend:

Richard has been reading some of my books--I gave him *Excellent Women* and *A Glass of Blessings* . . . E. W. he found terribly sad, but witty--why is it that *men* find my books so sad? Women don't particularly. Perhaps they (men) have a slight guilt feeling that this is what they do to us, and yet really it isn't as bad as all that. (VPE 223)

Pym admits that men like women to serve their (men's) needs. At the same time, however, she also points out that women do not find the situation as bad as men think it is. Pym understands that to some women, the need to love and serve is too strong to repress. Since Mildred is one of these women who are too glad to be needed, there is nothing sad about Mildred working for Everard. In the last scene of the novel, what worries Mildred is not whether Everard loves her but whether she will be of any use to him when he needs her. She feels inferior to Esther because she does not know how to correct proofs or make an index, which can be a great help to Everard. When she finds that Everard would like her to correct proofs and to make an index for his book and that the work is not so difficult as she thought, Mildred is finally relieved of the fear of rejection. If the need to

love and to be needed is the irresistible innate nature to an excellent woman like Mildred, to have found a man who sincerely wants the sensible, excellent woman to be his wife is certainly a blessing even though it may be "a mixed blessing" (Strauss-Noll 78).

It may be true that "Love is only one of many passions and it has no great influence on the sum of life" (STG 144), as one of the characters in *Some Tame Gazelle* believes. Marriage to Everard will not bring much change to Mildred's life, which has already been a life of service and sacrifice for others. It will only add one more person to the list of people for whom she has been working. However, when one compares Mildred with Belinda, one can see the difference Mildred's marriage will bring to her emotional life. Belinda will always go through emotional ups and downs because she does not have a legitimately proper man for whom she can express her feelings. Unlike Belinda, Mildred will not have to wander with her unfulfilled longing for love or with fear of rejection any more. Early in the novel, Mildred broods over her present situation and her future death: "unmarried women with no ties could very well become unwanted . . . who was there really to grieve for me when I was gone? . . . I was not really first in anybody's life. I could so very easily be replaced" (39). Mildred will no longer have to suffer from a sense of being unwanted or insignificant when she marries Everard. The marriage will

enable Mildred to show her care and affection for Everard with no reservation and finally to settle down to an emotionally secure life. If Everard will gain through marriage to Mildred, so will Mildred from her marriage to him, because her emotional gain may be as great as his practical benefits.

The novel ends with Mildred's strong reaffirmation of her life up to the present--a life of duty and service for others--on the one hand and her optimism and hope of her future life--a life of love for one specific man--on the other. Because the novel suggests that Mildred will enjoy "a full life" (256) through fulfilling her emotional need, *Excellent Women* offers a brighter ending than *Some Tame Gazelle*, in which the reader is given the impression that Belinda's sense of incompleteness will continue because her need for love remains unfulfilled.

The ironic situation which Mildred and Helena face in their relations to Everard also shows that the comedy in *Excellent Women* is more positive than that in *Some Tame Gazelle*, in which a similar situation involves Belinda and Agatha in their relations to Bishop Grote. In *Excellent Women*, Mildred secretly loves Helena's husband, but Rocky, despite his awareness of Helena's crush on Everard, prefers her to Mildred. On the other hand, Helena publicly declares her love for Everard. However, Everard does not care for Helena and runs away from her bold approach to him. At the

same time, it turns out that Everard likes Mildred and wants to marry her. What makes *Excellent Women* a brighter comedy than *Some Tame Gazelle* lies in each heroine's different response to the man who likes her. While Belinda refuses Bishop Grote's proposal because she does not like him at all, the ending of *Excellent Women* suggests that Mildred, who likes Everard, will accept his proposal if and when it comes. The reader of *Jane and Prudence*, *Less Than Angels*, or *An Unsuitable Attachment* finds that Mildred is actually married to Everard, and her marriage makes Mildred's sense of triumph over Helena greater than Belinda's over Agatha.

The final reconciliation and reunion of Rocky and Helena also reflects the author's definite intention to write a comedy rather than a purely ironic work. At the end of the novel, Helena, who seemed to act like quite a radical, liberated modern woman, turns out to be a rather conventional, old-fashioned wife, who runs away to her mother's house, not to Everard's. As soon as she realizes that Everard is not interested in her and tries to avoid her, she decides to forget all about him with little sense of rejection or humiliation; and she immediately looks for reconciliation with her husband without shame or guilt. There is nothing sad or shameful about her failure to marry Everard or her returning to her husband. Rocky's response to this apparently disastrous incident features the same light comic tone as Helena's. He says to Mildred,

"I imagine he [Everard] will be both relieved and disappointed when he knows that Helena and I have come together again," said Rocky complacently . . . "Poor Helena, it was one of those sudden irrational passions women get for people. She is completely disillusioned now. When he should have been near at hand to cherish her she found he had fled to a meeting of the Prehistoric Society in Derbyshire!" (225)

Few husbands in real life would talk about the return of their run-away wives in such a frivolous, almost pleasant way as Rocky does. In *Excellent Women*, both Rocky and Helena play important roles for the author to create the comic effect, dealing with the serious theme, the disillusionment about love and marriage.

The way the relationship between Julian and Mrs. Gray is ended also shows that the author's final position is that of a comic writer, although irony is used for the effective portrayal of a major theme; that is, men's failure to distinguish beauty in the character from physical beauty. In the end, Julian realizes that he has been deceived by Mrs. Gray and recognizes Mildred's virtues by saying, "perhaps I looked too far and there might have been somebody nearer at hand" (211). He acquires a better understanding of reality through his mistake. Unlike in tragedy, however, in *Excellent Women*, his flaw and his awareness of it do not

bring him any serious suffering or loss. There is no punishment for his mistake except his light sense of humiliation, which he soon overcomes. Even Mrs. Gray, who should deserve some punishment, gets away with her wicked behavior and suffers no shame or regret. Actually, at the end of the novel, she is better off in her own way. Miss Statham, a parish woman, who recently met Mrs. Gray, says to Mildred:

"it seems that she's found a flat already, in the best part of Kensington, a much higher-class than this . . . the one she's decided to go to has a vicar and two assistant priests and they're none of them married. She told me that. They all live together in a clergy house. . . . I'd almost feel like warning them to look out." (249-50)

Just as Pym turns Helena into a childish, conventional wife, she adds a comic element to Mrs. Gray's situation; therefore, Mrs. Gray does not appear wicked and evil, but she almost becomes a joke to the parish people and the reader.

Compared with *Some Tame Gazelle*, the degree of irony in *Excellent Women* is more intense. For whereas we do not really know whether Henry and Agatha have any serious conflicts in their marriage, we see the serious problems in the Napier couple's marriage. At the same time, the pain and humiliation Mildred as a spinster has to go through are

worse than Belinda's, because while Belinda does not suffer from the judgmental criticism of the people in society, Mildred becomes not only a victim of her own emotional turmoil but of the community, who give her advice about how to live. Since the disadvantages in both the married and the unmarried states are more acutely portrayed in *Excellent Women* than in *Some Tame Gazelle*, the ironic dilemmas are deeper in the second novel than they are in the first.

Despite its intensive ironic tensions rampant throughout the novel, *Excellent Women*, unlike *Some Tame Gazelle*, finally corrects the irony of situation by the exposure of Mrs. Gray's evil schemes to Julian, his recognition of Mildred's good qualities, and the chance granted for Mildred to fulfill her need for love through the socially and legally accepted form. The heroine's ironic dilemmas are also corrected through her self-awareness that her need to love and serve is stronger than her wish to keep alive her dream of romantic love. Compared with the total loneliness and the lack of the normal outlet for her basic need for love, the possibility or the inevitability of disappointment with marriage is tolerable to her. No matter how dull and unromantic her man may be, marriage is still an enviable state to the single woman like Mildred.

CHAPTER IV

JANE AND PRUDENCE

Barbara Pym's third novel, *Jane and Prudence* (1953), dramatizes women's ironic dilemma in the love-marriage questions to the utmost intensity. By portraying Jane as a disillusioned wife of a clergyman and Prudence as a romantic spinster endlessly involved in unsatisfactory love affairs, Pym again presents irony of dilemma in which marriage becomes the end of dreams and romantic love on the one hand, and in which love unaccompanied by marriage is incomplete on the other. Prudence Bates is twenty-nine, "an age that is often rather desperate for a woman who has not yet married" (7). And Jane Cleveland is forty-one, "an age that may bring with it compensations unsuspected by the anxious woman of twenty-nine" (7). In spite of their age difference, however, they have become close friends since Jane worked as English tutor at her old college for two years and Prudence was her pupil. While comparing and contrasting their appearances, experiences, and views of life, love, and marriage, the novel shows the various problems faced by each woman.

First, Jane's dreams about being a picture-perfect clerical wife that she has read of in the Victorian novels have been shattered by the actuality of her married life.

Although she tries to be a dedicated, efficient clergyman's wife busy helping her husband and people in his parish, Jane turns out to be "no good at parish work" (102). Her total indifference to domestic arrangements and her tactless outspokenness in the meetings of the Parochial Church Council make some council members question her qualifications as their vicar's wife. Although she is "quite nice-looking" (9), Jane's lack of concerns for her appearance is not only irritating to her daughter and friends, but it is offensive to some of her neighbors. Besides, because of her wild imagination and unconventional, carefree temperament, some people in the parish regard her as eccentric and strange. Jane admits to her husband her failure as a clergyman's wife: "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 Barse*" (212).

When marriage has led her to disillusionment and loss of dreams, Jane tries to overcome her sense of failure by continuing "her studies of obscure seventeenth-century poets" (83), the research which was stopped when she married Nicholas about fifteen years ago. Hoping that "Creative work" (131) can compensate for her disappointment in her marriage, she begins to look for her old notebooks. But when she opens the notebook "with pleasurable anticipation" (131), she finds that "the ink had faded to a dull brownish

colour" (131). Jane thinks,

It would be better if she started quite fresh and began reading the poems all over again. Then she remembered that her copy of the *Poems on Several Occasions* was upstairs and it seemed too much of an effort to go up and get it. . . . She sat for a long time among the faded ink of her notebooks, brooding, until Nicholas came in with their Ovaltine on a tray and it was time to go to bed.

(131)

This scene is typical of Pym's frequent uses of anticlimax to show the ironic discrepancy between anticipation and actuality. The effect of the ironic reversal is comic, because what frustrates Jane's attempt to fulfill her expectation is not a great obstacle but a trivial reason: she is too lazy to go upstairs to get her book. Her ambitious attempt at the creative work ends with the drinking of Ovaltine brought by her husband. Nevertheless, her sense of failure and frustration is real and serious; the more fundamental reason behind her laziness is that Jane had already lost a genuine interest in the research when she married, and she has no intention of starting it again. It is only her present discontented life as a wife unsuitable for a clergyman that has made her feel nostalgia for the past, her early days when she hoped to write another book about the seventeenth-century poets after the publication of

her first book. It is natural that the fifteen years of routine, domestic life without any intellectually stimulating activities have caused Jane to lose a strong motivation for creative work. Marriage again has worked against her desire to feel a sense of self-fulfillment.

Emotional change in Jane's relationship to her husband also makes her wonder what may have been lost in her married life. After fifteen years of marriage, Jane thinks of Nicholas: "The passion of these early days . . . 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). Marriage brings the end of passion and romantic love.

The disadvantages Jane finds in her married life are evenly paralleled by those in Prudence's single life. Whereas marriage has brought loss of passion to the lives of Jane and Nicholas, the absence of a steady, suitable man in Prudence's life prevents her from expressing passion. Prudence loves Dr. Arthur Grampian, head of a cultural organization, whom she helps as assistant. However, she cannot express her love because Dr. Grampian is a married man, and he does not show any interest in her. Prudence's secretive, unrequited love for him, passionate though it may be, causes only misery and pain, "like a rheumatic twinge in the knee when one neared the end of a long flight of stairs" (37). She admits to Jane that there is only "the complete

lack of rapport" (15) in her relationship to Dr. Grampian.

Unlike Belinda in *Some Tame Gazelle* and Mildred in *Excellent Women*, who look plain and dowdy, Prudence is attractive and always well-dressed--often over-dressed. And she has been continually involved in love affairs since her early undergraduate days. However, despite the fact that she has had numerous admirers and lovers, nothing has come of it. Now that Prudence is twenty-nine, "the supply of suitable men isn't inexhaustible when one reaches her age--not like it is at Oxford" (191), as Jane's daughter, Flora, tells her boy friend, Paul. Prudence is also conscious of her present difficulty in meeting proper men, and she envies the youth of Flora and Paul.

A sense of loneliness and emptiness often falls upon her single life. Prudence often misses what marriage can provide--a cosy, sweet home with husband and children. While she is looking at a man in the train, Prudence notices that "he had some cakes in a white cardboard box--taking them for the children, she supposed; she could hardly bear it . . . she left the carriage, her eyes full of tears" (78). Pym's own description about Prudence supports the idea that what the heroine wants is not just romantic love but marriage as well. Pym writes in a notebook entry about Prudence: "Fabian finds underneath Prue's [sic] promising veneer a sensitive vulnerable creature wanting love, marriage, perhaps even children--the things women did want"

(Rossen, "Love in the Great Libraries: Oxford in the Work of Barbara Pym" 291). An absence of normal outlet for the desire to love, loneliness, and lack of emotional security are the shortcomings in Prudence's single life.

When Prudence's involvement with Fabian has led to nothing but another unsatisfactory love affair, her unmarried woman friend, Eleanor Hitchens, says to her:

"You ought to get married," said Eleanor sensibly. "That would settle you." . . . "Look at my awful stockings" Eleanor went on, but she spoke comfortably and without regret . . . Prue could have this kind of life if she wanted it; one couldn't go on having romantic love affairs indefinitely. One had to settle down sooner or later into the comfortable spinster or the contented or bored wife. (200)

The fact is that Prudence is not a comfortable spinster nor is Jane a contented wife. As Robert E. Long writes, "Jane is married and disillusioned, and Prudence is unmarried and balked" (76). Unlike Agatha's husband in *Some Tame Gazelle* and Helena's in *Excellent Women*, who have some flaws in their personalities, Jane's husband has no serious personal shortcomings except that he is not passionate any more as he used to be. Therefore, Jane's disillusionment can be interpreted as an inescapable outcome which often follows the realization of one's dream. At the same time, in

contrast to Pym's other heroines who do not have much choice in love and marriage because of their ordinary looks, Prudence easily attracts men. Nonetheless, none of her romantic love affairs leads to a happy fruition, and the failure in her relationships to men only makes her have the more tantalizing longing for love. Since the discontentment of both Jane and Prudence is depicted as an unavoidable by-product inherent in their different marital status, and nothing can be done to correct their impossible situations, the ironic tension arising from their dilemmas is the most acute among all of Pym's novels.

Jane and Prudence are alike in the sense that both are romantics who still have their own unique worlds of imagination. Nevertheless, the way each character responds to her own situation is different. While Prudence, despite her trials and errors, does not grow to be a perceptive person, Jane grows to be a mature observer of life and people through the disillusionment of her marriage. The reason for this difference comes from the fact that Jane has a sense of detachment and compassion, while Prudence has neither.

Jane, through her married life, has come to understand the disappointing reality of the nature of love-marriage relations, and she is detached enough to see men's plainness as it is. In the early part of the novel when Prudence introduces Dr. Grampian to her, Jane is disappointed by his

insignificant, ordinary looks. In fact, Jane thinks that most men are plain and dull, not like handsome, brave, passionate lovers that she has read about in romantic novels. She has no fanciful illusion about men; her opinion of men is rather low.

At the same time, however, Jane understands that Prudence's love has nothing to do with Dr. Grampian's looks or his personality; for it originates from the infinite capacity for love inherent in women. Jane thinks, "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" (75). Jane recognizes women's power of love and imagination which transforms ordinary, undistinctive men into extraordinary, remarkable beings. While emphasizing the ironic dilemmas that Jane and Prudence confront, Long says, "Between the two [women], the romantic imagination has nowhere to go" (76). Long fails to notice that Jane actually affirms women's capacity for romantic imagination. It is Jane's capacity for imagination that enables her to accept and to love the "mild, kindly looks and spectacles" (48) of her husband, who seems to have lost all the passion of their early days. It is her ability to imagine more than what she sees that helps remind her of her husband's need for her love, when she sees the childish soap animals that he bought. At the end of the novel when Prudence again

introduces to Jane another ordinary man, Geoffrey Manifold, Jane thinks:

What object could Fate possibly have in enviously debarring love between Prudence and such an ordinary and colourless young man as this appeared to be? But of course, she remembered, that was why women were so wonderful; it was their love and imagination that transformed these unremarkable beings. For most men, when one came to think of it, were undistinguished to look at, if not positively ugly. (217)

Jane has a rare combination of detachment and sympathy, and she is capable of both judging and loving at the same time. With her sense of distance, Jane is able to perceive the shortcomings in men; at the same time, however, her capacity for compassion enables her to accept human limitations and to love people as they are. When Prudence complains about Fabian's ignorance of poetry, Jane says, "one has to accept that, together with their other limitations" (165). When her husband feels a sense of failure in his work as parish vicar after Mr. Oliver, a member of his church council, has joined another church, Jane says to him: "We can only go blundering alone in that state of life unto which it shall please God to call us" (212). It is her capacity for undying love that makes Jane continually attempt to be a useful, efficient wife despite

her frequent failures.

Jane's willing acceptance of the imperfect states of human life and her natural capacity for love help her get over disenchantment brought by marriage and enable her to love her husband as he is. Jane tells herself: "Wasn't that what so many marriages were--finding a person boring and irritating and yet loving him? Who could imagine a man who was never boring or irritating?" (192-93). Jane thinks that women love men in spite of their faults, not just because of their merits. Pym's own statement about what she might have said to a question in a BBC interview shows that the author shares Jane's view of men. Pym writes to Philip Larkin about the interview:

I enjoyed it all very much, my only fear being that I may have said rather foolish things or not said anything I meant to say . . . I did at least save myself once when a question about my treatment of men characters suggested that I had a low opinion of the sex. My instinctive reply sprang to my lips "Oh, but I love men," but luckily I realised how ridiculous it would sound, so said something feeble, but can't remember what.

(VPE 303)

It is true that Jane is disillusioned about love, marriage, and men after her marriage, and her detached opinion about men is low. She has come to recognize the discrepancy

between what she has read about love in the fiction and what she has learned about it in real life. However, in the end, her disenchantment and discontentment have been overcome through her deep compassion and genuine love for people.

Unlike Jane, Prudence has no sense of detachment, nor does she have a genuine compassion. Prudence is too involved in her own world of fantasy to understand men or her feelings for them. She becomes a mere victim of fantasy because she lacks ironic detachment--the objectivity which can lead one to self-awareness and understanding of others.

Prudence does not know what she is or what she wants. She thinks that she is a passionate woman who is constantly in love with one man or another. However, the one she actually loves is not a man but a romantic atmosphere accompanied by "wine, good food, flowers, soft lights, holding hands, sparkling eyes, kisses" (111). The way Prudence is described during her dinner with Fabian in the restaurant explains the nature of her love for men:

Prudence chose what she would have, perhaps more carefully than a woman truly in love would have done . . . She could not pretend that she admired Fabian . . . But when the wine came, golden and delicious, her heart warmed towards him and by the time they were drinking black coffee and brandy she felt that perhaps she really did admire Fabian. (102-103)

As Janice Rossen writes, "The aesthetic arrangement of the evening does more than enhance an affair of the heart; it replaces passion altogether" ("Love in the Great libraries" 291).

Prudence appears to know much about love when one hears the way she describes it to Jane. For instance, she calls her relationship to Dr. Grampian a "negative relationship" (14) and her love for Geoffrey Manifold an "attraction of the opposites" that is already "doomed" (216). Despite her eloquent, literary phrases about love, however, Prudence's knowledge about men and love is purely theoretical, based upon her fanciful imagination nourished by her reading of romantic novels. Since Prudence is preoccupied with playing her role as a passionate, romantic lover, her endless, unsatisfactory love affairs fail to teach her to see the reality of man-woman relationships.

Prudence's relationships with men in the novel show how little she knows about them as individuals. For instance, as the narrator says, Prudence's love for Dr. Grampian "had suddenly flared up" (37), because "there had been at that time a temporary emptiness in her heart" (37). It is her need for love that has prompted Prudence to keep the unrequited, secretive love for him, as he happens to be with her when her longing for love has momentarily overwhelmed her. Therefore, her love for him has nothing to do with his personality or how he feels about her. Prudence does not

need to know him to love him; for her imagination can provide enough material with which she can build up her castle of love.

Like her love for Dr. Grampian, Prudence's love for Fabian Driver is also a product of her imagination. Prudence does not know Fabian's character, nor does she attempt to understand him; for she is preoccupied with pursuing her ideal of love. According to Prudence, the conversation between the lovers should always be "sparkling" (102) and full of literary quotations. When Jane asks about her first date with Fabian, Prudence answers:

"We talked about Italy and Coventry Patmore and Donne and various other things."

"Coventry Patmore and Donne! He has never talked like that to me--you *must* have got on well."

"I thought him rather pleasant," said Prudence in an offhand way. Really, now she came to think of it, she thought, it was she who had brought Coventry Patmore and Donne into the conversation.
(95-6)

Jane is right when she thinks that Fabian is not the sort of a literary person who would enjoy talking about a subject like Donne. Later when Jane is angry with him because he has decided to marry Jessie Morrow instead of Prudence, Fabian explains to Jane why he prefers Jessie's company to

Prudence's by expressing how he felt about her letters written to him: "Her letters, wonderful letters in a way, but so difficult to answer" (189). Prudence's unconscious obsession with formulating her love-life according to her romantic concept of love blinds her to the reality of Fabian's character. As a result, Prudence fails to notice that, despite his handsome looks and countless love affairs, Fabian is a simple, ordinary, boring, childlike man; and to him, his own physical and emotional comfort is more important than romantic love for women. Fabian is so comfortable and contented with his way of living that he is threatened by Prudence when she wants to change everything including the curtains and wallpaper in his house.

Prudence's ignorance of what Fabian wants from a woman is a main reason that she is defeated by Jessie, who is perceptive enough to understand what kind of woman Fabian wants. After Jane discovers Fabian is going to marry Jessie, she thinks:

Prudence's pride would be seriously wounded when she realized that it was plain, mousy Jessie Morrow who had taken Fabian away from her.

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? Jessie, who, for all her dim appearance, was very shrewd, had no doubt realised this. (193)

Fabian is a complacent narcissist who likes to be loved and admired by his woman rather than to love and to admire her. Prudence is unaware of this fact, whereas Jessie knows Fabian's self-centered nature and makes the most of her knowledge.

Fabian and Prudence are alike in the sense that both are narcissists in love with their own images; therefore, neither lover has the heart for his or her partner. Jane implies that the narcissistic nature common to both Fabian and Prudence may have been an obstacle to any development of their relationship: "A beautiful wife would have been too much for Fabian, for one handsome person is enough in a marriage" (193). Fabian's putting his own photograph on his wife's tomb instead of a tombstone reflects his narcissistic ego. Fabian is in love with his image of a handsome-looking man loved and adored by women. While sitting in a cafe with Jessie, who insists that he should tell Prudence about his decision to end his relationship to her, Fabian realizes, the distinguished-looking man sitting at that distant table was himself reflected in a mirror at the far end of the room. No wonder one had had to hurt people, he thought, resting his forehead on his hand. (176)

Prudence's narcissism is somewhat different from Fabian's in the sense that she is in love with her image of the one who loves more than that of the one who is loved.

That is why Prudence lets her love for Dr. Grampian rush in her heart without any encouragement from him and keeps all "the rapture and misery and boredom" (35) caused from her unrequited love for him. Because of her narcissistic love, she is able to enjoy going out with Fabian without any attempt to understand him. To Prudence, Fabian is "no more than just another 'amusing' object" (199), which will "fit into the general scheme of furnishing" (199) in her cosy apartment, and an object is all she needs in order to create her own image as a woman in love. Since what she really loves is the idea of her being in love, as soon as her relationship to Fabian is over, she gladly starts another love affair with Geoffrey Manifold, while predicting another failure in the future.

One can also understand why Prudence, at the end of the novel, rejects Dr. Grampian's invitation to dinner, which she would have readily accepted earlier. What attracted her to him in the beginning is the unavailability of his love. Since what she is concerned about most is to keep eternal her image of a woman romantically in love, it is only natural that she prefer the love that is unachievable or the love affair that is already "doomed" to the love that will lead to marriage, in which she sees "closed possibilities" (Nardin 19). Comparing her life with Jane's, Prudence thinks that her own life

seemed rich and full of promise. She had her

work, her independence, her life in London and her love for Arthur Grampian. But tomorrow, if she wanted to, she could give it all up and fall in love with somebody else. Lines of eligible and delightful men seemed to stretch before her, and with this pleasant prospect in mind she fell into a light sleep. (83)

Prudence is a pure romantic who continually recreates the beautiful, sparkling moments that she has read in romantic novels. Therefore, the novels' unhappy endings rather than happy endings are not only "inevitable" (47, 156) but "satisfying" (47) to her. To Prudence, love already doomed or vainly desired is better than love finally fulfilled; for, the former can lead to another beginning of a new love, whereas the latter to the end of romantic love. Because of her love for this infinite possibility, Dr. Grampian's invitation to dinner--although she refuses--makes her "suddenly overwhelmed by the richness of her life" (222), and she makes an optimistic closing statement in the novel: "We have many more evenings before us if we want them" (222).

Despite her self-sufficiency and narcissism, however, Prudence is vulnerable; and her vulnerability comes from her lack of self-awareness. Prudence is not aware of the real reason for her unsatisfactory love affairs. She thinks that she passionately loves a man each time, and she wishes to

marry him. Then she suffers from the failure to achieve her wish. When she is informed that Fabian is going to marry Jessie, "the blow" is "shattering" (193) to her; for she has been so confident of his desire to marry her that she already imagined herself as a picture-perfect wife and hostess in his house. Prudence's strong self-confidence and her narcissism block her from realizing where she stands in her relationship to Fabian. When Fabian complains to Jane that Prudence "even chose a new wallpaper for Constance's old room" (189), Jane thinks, "Poor darling Prue . . . how sure she must have been" (189). In *Excellent Women*, Mildred's lack of self-confidence causes her fear of possible rejection and reluctance to become actively involved in her relationships to the male characters. At the same time, however, the very lack of confidence and action gives her the opportunity to develop the power to observe the lives of others with penetrating detachment. As a result, the reader feels that Mildred's self-knowledge and her observations of her male friends are based upon sober reality, not gilded with fantasy or illusion. In contrast to Mildred, Prudence cannot imagine that she may not be wanted by Fabian; for her self-assurance prevents her from thinking of the possible rejection. When Fabian chooses Jessie over her, Prudence feels hurt in her confusion; for she does not know why she has failed in her relationship to him, and she is not even aware of the fact that she did not

really love him. In fact, Fabian's unexpected rejection upsets her so much that she bursts into tears in front of Geoffrey, a colleague in the office where she works. Since she does not realize that she didn't actually want to marry Fabian, the pain caused by his rejection is real to her. From the early part of the novel, Pym points out Prudence's habit of imagining herself to be what she is not:

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 playing a noble part. (42)

It is clear that Prudence is depicted as a character of contradiction between what she wants to be and what she really is. Since she does not understand her contradictory nature, she is vulnerable; and because of her vulnerability, Prudence appeals to the reader's sympathy despite her self-confidence and narcissism.

In contrast to Prudence, Jessie understands both her own need and those of men; and she makes the most of men's needs in order to fulfill her own. Jessie tells Jane about Fabian's response to his wife's death: "her husband was more interested in other women than he was in her. I believe that does sometimes happen. Her death came as a great shock to him--he had almost forgotten her existence" (28). While Jessie gives this information, Jane notices her "cool,

detached tone" (28). Jessie knows Fabian's character better than Fabian himself. Her observation of Fabian's reaction to his wife's sudden death sounds comical, but the statement pinpoints the penetrating truth of his personality.

In many ways, Jessie is the opposite of Prudence. First, physically, Prudence is charming and attractive, whereas Jessie is "plain" and "mousy" (193). Nevertheless, it is not the distinguished-looking Prudence but the ordinary-looking Jessie who has an extraordinary sense of detachment and power of observation. Through this ironic contrast, Pym shows that a plain-looking person, especially a woman, is not necessarily a boring, obscure character whose private world is empty, dull, and dry. In contrast to her dim appearance, Jessie has a definite character of her own. She understands both herself and other people around her. She knows that she is viewed by others as a dreary old maid who has no definite personality, and she plays the expected role of a passive, timid, uninteresting spinster. However, privately, she takes a positive step to catch Fabian, the man she knows well, loves, and wants to marry.

Jessie in this novel is quite different from Jessie in *Crampton Hodnet*, which was written earlier than *Jane and Prudence* but published after Pym's death. In the character's appearance, living condition, and personality, there is no difference in both novels: she is a poor, negligible, plain-looking spinster in her thirties living as

a companion to a bossy old lady, Miss Doggett; at the same time, she has a keen sense of detachment and a capacity for sharp observation. What is different in the two novels is that Jessie in the earlier novel is a romantic dreamer who rejects Mr. Latimer's impromptu proposal because she knows that he does not love her. But in *Jane and Prudence*, she turns out to be a realistic, manipulative schemer who is ready to do anything to trap a man into marriage. In this later novel, Jessie does not care whether Fabian loves her because she does not have dreams that the Jessie of *Crampton Honet* hopelessly cherishes. What is important to the later Jessie is to get a man she loves, to maneuver him into matrimony, and to settle down as a contented wife in a comfortable home. When she feels threatened by Prudence's appearance in Fabian's life, Jessie immediately takes action. The narrator explains Jessie's character: "She had always loved him . . . she was not the person to cherish a hopeless romantic love for a man . . . and now that Prudence Bates had come into his life Jessie felt that she must act quickly" (139).

The way Jessie approaches Fabian is entirely different from the way Prudence does. While Prudence is busy talking to Fabian about the metaphysical poet like Donne, whom he has no interest in and understanding of, Jessie, with her face carefully made up, visits him in his house alone at night in a blue velvet dress, which belonged to his late

wife and which Jessie altered to fit herself. By making an unusual effort for a change of her outward appearance on her first formal visit to Fabian, Jessie succeeds in making a striking effect on him, because he was used to seeing her as a dowdy woman, "badly dressed, usually in tweeds that had never been good" (111). Jessie knows that what Fabian wants from a woman is not an intellectually stimulating conversation full of literary quotations but a company who can please and flatter his masculine ego. Naturally, Fabian feels comfortable with Jessie, who tells him not to "bother" (142) about Oscar Wilde, whom he is trying to quote the way Prudence did. It is not surprising that Jessie's visiting scene end with Fabian kissing her, which is what she expected.

Jessie's ruthlessness is clearly shown to the reader, if not to the other characters in the novel, in her treatment of Prudence when Prudence visits Fabian's house a second time to attend his tea party. Jessie, who is determined "to get rid of Prudence" (167), almost welcomes her visit, since it will give Fabian a chance to tell her about his new attachment. In the tea party, being jealous of Prudence's beauty and elegance in a lilac cotton dress, Jessie, with a disguised clumsiness, deliberately knocks against the table on which Prudence put her cup of tea so that the cup upsets all over the skirt of her dress, making her feel "foolish and irritated at being the center of so

much fuss" (173). With her perceptiveness, detachment, and skill of manipulation, "plain, mousy" (193) Jessie defeats charming, elegant Prudence and wins Fabian. Furthermore, Jessie forces Fabian to buy her a small token of love, and the little brooch that she selects has *Mizpah* on it, the meaning of which is "The Lord watch between me and thee when we are absent one from another" (178). Fabian realizes that Jessie is too smart to allow him to have affairs with other women as he used to do when he was married to Constance.

Jessie is one of a few female characters through whom Pym directly rather than subvertly reveals her view of women as the stronger sex. In most of her novels, Pym casts quiet, passive, mild, humble characters as her heroines, such as Belinda, Mildred, Dulcie, and Emma. One tends to see them as weak women exploited and victimized by their men and to miss their sustaining inner strength. It is true that Pym frequently portrays men's exploitations of women, and many fictional incidents focus on men's vanity, pomposity, selfishness, and self-importance. As a result, some critics such as Barbara Brothers, Robert E. Long, and Doreen Alvarez Saar regard Pym's women characters as "psychic victims" (Brothers 74), who "depend wholly upon men for their self-identity" (Long 215) in the society of "male chauvinism" (Long 215), and they focus on Pym's "women's continual frustration with their lot" (Saar 74).

However, if we consider the three characters involved

in the love-triangle in *Jane and Prudence*, who can we say is a victim and who a victimizer? Although Prudence is hurt by Fabian's decision to marry Jessie, she cannot be called Fabian's victim. For she is a self-deceived narcissist, who may be called at most a victim of her own fantasy. Moreover, since Fabian feels trapped by Jessie, it is hard to see him as a victimizer. The relationship between Fabian and Jessie focuses on men's victimization of women less than women's perceptive understanding of men's nature, their quietly enduring power, and their skillful maneuver of men's action and decision by appealing to male egotism. It is not Fabian but Jessie who controls the direction of their relationship. Fabian is too helpless to change the situation even though he feels "as if a net had closed round him" and sees his forthcoming marriage to Jessie as "a frightening prospect" (199). Jessie says to Fabian, who pretends to feel pain for the loss of his wife: "Women are very powerful--perhaps they are always triumphant in the end" (110). Jane also mentions the change in the modern women's position by telling Prudence,

"Women are not in the same position as they were in Victorian times. They can do nearly everything that men can now. And they are getting so much bigger and taller and men are getting smaller, haven't you noticed?" (161)

The headless body of a stone dwarf which Fabian finds in the

vicarage almost at the end of the novel is a symbol of men's decreased power and shrunken status. One critic writes, "Barbara Pym sees a woman's place from a very strange perspective: to her, this is really a woman's world, and men are the weaker sex. . . . Women, like cats . . . are self-contained and manage competently and even satisfactorily by themselves" (Kapp 238-39).

It is true that Pym sees women as the stronger sex, as Isa Kapp says. However, unlike what Kapp believes, most of Pym's women are not "self-contained." For the strength Pym portrays in her major female characters is different from the power that the modern feminists want to discover and develop. Feminists find women's strength in their emotional and financial independence, success in their careers, and commitment to social changes for equal treatment and freedom from male dominance. The strength in Pym's women characters, however, lies in their long-lasting love and quiet perseverance. While Jessie's transformation from a passive romantic in *Crampton Hodnet* to an action-oriented schemer in *Jane and Prudence* challenges the conventional concept of female passivity and weakness, it also implies how some women are forced to conform to the male principles in order to fulfill their innate needs for love. The changed Jessie in *Jane and Prudence* makes the reader feel uncomfortable with and ambiguous about her power, because, despite her inner strength, she is not self-sufficient. Her

lack of financial and professional independence makes a modern woman wonder what the female strength is for and what her love means when a woman has no other choice but maneuver a man who does not love her into marriage in order to fulfill her need for love and to promote her social and economic status. Although Jessie overthrows the traditional idea of female passivity, Pym's genuinely strong, independent, and self-sufficient heroine from the modern woman's perspective is not seen until the next novel, *Less Than Angels*.

CHAPTER V

LESS THAN ANGELS

Barbara Pym's fourth novel, *Less Than Angels* (1955), holds a unique position among all of Pym's novels which deal with the ironic depictions of male-female relationships. In her earlier novels, such as *Some Tame Gazelle*, *Excellent Women*, and *Jane and Prudence*, Pym gradually increases the ironic tension in love-marriage relations, with the tension reaching its height in *Jane and Prudence*. Her later novels, such as *A Glass of Blessings*, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, *An Academic Question*, and *A Few Green Leaves*, also treat married women's disappointment and single women's awareness of the ironic discrepancy between dream and reality in love and marriage, although the degrees of irony lessen in these novels. In *Less Than Angels*, however, Pym shows the ironic dilemmas both men and women face in male-oriented society and the effects of the emergent feminist movement on both men and women.

Although all of Pym's novels were written in the mid- and late-twentieth century when the creation of the new woman has been one of the main concerns for contemporary women novelists, most of Pym's female characters define their successes and achievements according to their usefulness to men. Belinda in *Some Tame Gazelle*, Mildred in

Excellent Women, Jessie in *Crampton Hodnet*, and even Jane in *Jane and Prudence* voluntarily and involuntarily subordinate their needs to the needs of men and consciously or unconsciously accept women's roles assigned by male-dominant society. Even though they may subtly subvert the patriarchal culture through their keen sense of irony, their "subversive irony" (Bowman 90) is only "shared by narrator, heroine and reader" (Bowman 90) without making any impact on the complacent male characters. Although Jessie in *Jane and Prudence* is, contrary to what she appears to be, actually assertive and strong, she conforms to the old social order by trapping a man into matrimony because she believes that marriage is the only way to fulfill her need for love and to improve her financial and social status. Like Mildred and Jane, she too is ready to give priority to her man's needs for comfort and well-being.

In *Less Than Angels*, however, Pym, for the first time, creates a female character whose sense of fulfillment has nothing to do with how much she serves her man's needs. Catherine Oliphant, the heroine of the novel, has a definite career of her own, which provides enough income for her to be financially independent, modest though it may be. Pym's other major female characters lack intellectually and emotionally satisfying careers and earned incomes, the modern woman's basic weapons in her battle for liberation. Even Prudence in *Jane and Prudence*, who has a career of her

own, suffers from a sense of inferiority because she is only "a sort of personal assistant to Dr. Grampian" (JP 10), and she looks after only "the humdrum side of his work" (JP 10). In contrast to Prudence, Catherine is intellectually assertive enough to consider her work as a writer to be as important as her boy friend's study of anthropology, and her confidence in her profession leads her to think that her stories may make the more significant contribution to human society than his scientific writing.

Not only is Catherine professionally and financially self-reliant, but she, in her early thirties, is quite comfortable with her plain, rather untidy appearance. Catherine's strong confidence in what she is helps her accept how she appears with no sense of inferiority, the inferiority which Belinda, Mildred, and Jessie all share because of their ordinary looks. Catherine's relationship with her boy friend has had no effect on her self-image, nor has his returning to her from his field work in Africa weakened her independent spirit. Unlike Jessie in *Jane and Prudence*, who hides her assertiveness, strength, and definite personality under her self-effacing appearance, Catherine is not hesitant to show to others including her boy friend what she really is. Catherine's unique personal qualities produce various kinds of irony different from the ironies dramatized in Pym's other novels in terms of male-female relationships.

One of the major ironies presented in the relationships between men and women in *Less Than Angels* is the discrepancy between the conventional sex roles stereotyped by traditional culture and the real nature and desires of both men and women. From the early part of the novel, Catherine is aware of the ironic disparity between the type of man that she has imagined as her future husband and the boy friend that she has at the present:

Catherine had always imagined that her husband would be a strong character who would rule her life, but Tom, at twenty-nine, was two years younger than she was and it was always she who made the decisions and even mended the fuses.

(27)

Catherine challenges both the traditional male and female characters by expressing to them her views of sex-linked issues. She says to Deirdre, who feels reverence for Tom's work and sympathy for his struggle to finish the thesis: "Men seem to have so little will-power and concentration at times" (88). Catherine criticizes Tom's "moaning" (88) about his thesis writing, because she thinks that he ought to be strong enough to be responsible for his own choice. She bluntly says to Tom that the loneliness of men is much worse than that of women because loneliness makes women strong, but it makes men pathetic (90).

Catherine's directness in pointing out male weaknesses

causes some of the male characters to change their views of women. Although Belinda in *Some Tame Gazelle* and Mildred in *Excellent Women* also perceive their men's shortcomings, the male characters fail to detect the heroines' "subversive irony" (Bowman 90) because the women keep their perspectives to themselves while silently enjoying the "private irony" (Bowman 82) and "the rightness" (Bowman 86) of their judgments. As a result, no change in the concept of male superiority over female occurs in the realm of the male characters' consciousness in Pym's earlier novels. Male characters in *Less Than Angels*, however, are aware of the strength of the female characters and their changing social functions in contemporary society. Tom acknowledges Catherine's strength and says to her, "You're so much braver than I am" (128). Tom's friend Mark tells Deirdre about the nature of the relationship between Tom and Catherine: "It would be a reciprocal relationship--the woman giving the food and shelter and doing some typing for him and the man giving the priceless gift of himself" (76). Tom's dependence on Catherine overturns a traditional sex role, the role in which a man earns a living for himself and his woman. When Digby expresses to Mark his worry about Deirdre because he has not seen her home, Mark laughs at him and says, "You really must cure yourself of these old-fashioned ideas" (77). Digby responds, "Yes, of course, one's apt to forget that women consider themselves our equals now. But

just occasionally one remembers that men were once the stronger sex" (77).

The male characters' awareness of female strength leads to another major irony, which may be summed up in the statement that Catherine makes to Tom when he explains to her his need to feel needed:

"That's what seems wrong with so many relationships now, the women feeling that *they* are the stronger ones and that men couldn't get on without them. In the olden days . . . it was quite different--or so we always imagine. Or were women more diplomatic then?" (113-14)

In fact, Catherine is talking about herself and her relationship to Tom. She realizes that her assertiveness and strength are driving Tom away from her to Deirdre, who is "still young enough to be moulded" (76) by her man. Tom, who saw Catherine "busy finishing a story and seeming to have no time for him" (51), finds what he is looking for in Deirdre. Tom prefers Deirdre, who respects his work and loves him uncritically, to Catherine, who, he thinks, "being older, had already been too much of a personality in her own right, always wanting to make him conform to her idea of what he ought to be" (152). Tom reacts against Catherine's intelligence, independence, and self-confidence, the qualities which have been regarded as male monopoly.

Catherine admits that while she has achieved freedom

and independence, she has failed to have an emotionally fulfilling relationship with Tom. Her living with Tom is, Catherine thinks, like a life of "an old married couple . . . a little depressed . . . in the worst sense, where dullness rather than cosiness seemed to be the keynote of the relationship" (69). Catherine and Tom do not have many interests in common; and both mock each other's work, arguing over trivial matters. Catherine says to Deirdre, who tries to understand Tom, "I don't think we can ever hope to know all that goes on in a man's life or even to follow him with our loving thoughts" (172). It is obvious that Catherine's attachment to Tom lacks mutual understanding and communication which are foundations of genuine companionship and love.

Despite the lack of emotional closeness between Tom and Catherine, however, she prefers his company to living alone. When Tom says to her on the day he leaves her place because of his new attachment to Deirdre, "you said I'd never really understood you" (128), Catherine responds, "Oh, that doesn't really matter--people make a lot too much of it. Who understands anybody, if it comes to that?" (123). Catherine is not a perfectionist like Leonora Eyre in *The Sweet Dove Died*, who chooses isolation over human contact because of the imperfectness in human relationships. The desire to connect is the more basic need to Catherine than the desire to be perfect. She prefers "the bathroom all untidy and

pages of typescript lying on the floor in the sitting-room" (69) to tidy rooms. Catherine knows that if Tom leaves her, "she would be free" (111); but, at the same time, she acknowledges that she would miss the comfortable familiarity that she has felt in having Tom around her. Therefore, Tom's leaving hurts her more than he thinks it will and, more than she has expected.

Catherine's dilemma is that of a modern independent woman who is caught in the middle between her desire for self-improvement and her desire for love. In order to feel whole, the needs for self-enhancement and love are equally important for both men and women. Nevertheless, while men do not have any major problem in fulfilling these needs, women often face problems when they attempt to pursue both. The reason is not that these desires are self-contradictory but that most men and women accustomed to the patriarchal culture resist any change that may overturn its traditional structure. It seems not only ironic but almost inevitable that women's positive pursuits of their self-directed goals often cause negative relationships with men, because many men feel too threatened by female strength to love them.

Catherine is not the only one that suffers from the stereotyping of sex roles. Apparently, Tom is a victimizer, who inflicts emotional pain on the women he is involved with; however, he also has a dilemma of his own. On the one hand, Deirdre's blind, uncomplicated devotion to him, her

reverence for his work, and her total dependence on him for her happiness make him "feel that she needs me and a man likes to feel that sometimes" (113), as he explains to Catherine. On the other hand, however, he often feels annoyed and tired by the young girl's timid shyness, obvious insecurity, and absence of intellectual communication. In contrast to Deirdre, Catherine is capable of providing Tom with the emotional security and comfort as well as food and shelter. Therefore, when Tom is in tears at the time he leaves Catherine and her flat, his feeling of sadness and depression is real despite the fact that the decision is his own. Caught in the two conflicting desires, Tom actually wants both Deirdre and Catherine. He sums up his feelings for the two women:

he thought how different her [Catherine's] merry sardonic grey eyes were from Deirdre's intense brown ones with their spaniel-like look of devotion. The trouble was that he liked--perhaps even loved--both of them. (114)

Instead of attempting to resolve his conflict by changing his conventional notion of sex roles, Tom begins to "form a sentence about polygamy and how primitive societies were really rather better arranged than our own civilization" (114); and unable to find a "civilized" solution, Tom, after having finished his thesis, escapes to his hometown, where his family and his first girl friend,

Elaine, live. In Tom's memory, Elaine is still a young girl of eighteen. That is the reason that the "sweet," "uncomplicated," and "honest" (152) Deirdre reminds him of Elaine. However, once he starts to talk with Elaine during his visit to the town, he marvels at her "sharpness" (183), which he had not seen earlier; and he is disappointed with her seemingly undisturbed "calmness" (185) with which she accepts his good-night kiss. Tom realizes that Elaine at the age of twenty-nine is no longer a naïve, dependent young girl, the image he has carved in his memory. Tom fails to detect her emotional disturbance under the disguise of "the friendly indifference" (185), and he does not know "how she had trained herself not to think of him and to go on her country activities" (185). Therefore, Elaine's apparent serenity and self-sufficiency hurt Tom's self-important male ego.

Confused and lost, Tom returns to London and seeks out Catherine for sympathy and consolation. To his surprise, however, Catherine is no longer sympathetic to his confusion and sense of bewilderment. In the end, Tom is totally alienated from the real world and its people; and he decides to return to Africa. Catherine satirically responds to his decision to leave England:

"How soothing it will be to get away from all this complexity of personal relationships to the simplicity of a primitive tribe, whose only

complications are in their kinship structure and rules of land tenure, which you can observe with the anthropologist's calm detachment." (186)

In his study of anthropology, which demands that the investigator show "no expression of disgust, astonishment or amusement" (124), Tom has successfully developed a sense of detachment; at the same time, however, the very sense of detachment has caused him a complete loss of human feeling and human bond. Tom is a failure in the struggle to find or to create some meaning in life--either in his studies or in his relationships with his family and his women. The reason for this failure is not that anthropology has no meaning in human life but that Tom has not tried to connect his academic study of men to the people in the real world. In writing his thesis, Tom expresses to Catherine his doubt of the contribution of his study to human society. Actually, as Catherine jokingly compares the completion of Tom's thesis to the death of a "dreadful elderly relative" (105), Tom begins to become aware of his spiritual death when his thesis is finished. Returning to his place of birth is his last effort to find some meaning in his life, but it only makes him realize what he has lost:

Tom found himself mourning the young man of those days, who went for long country walks and quoted poetry. Now he went into Regent's Park and talked about his thesis. He wondered if the change was

for the better. (185)

Tom has grown to be a man of pure reason who has lost the heart full of spontaneous, natural passion which used to prompt him to quote poems to his girl friend. Catherine's quotations from *Paradise Lost* and *Dover Beach* in describing Tom's situation are not so irrelevant as he thinks they are; for they allude to his loss of the innocent youth and his present failure to reconstruct a new world of truth, joy, peace, compassion, faith, and love, which the speaker of *Dover Beach* vainly struggles to find. Tom's sudden departure for Africa for no specific reason reflects his desire to escape from all human contact, and, thereby, from life itself. And the way he dies in Africa only culminates a life of meaninglessness. Tom is "accidentally shot in a political riot, in which he had become involved more out of curiosity than passionate conviction" (231). It is obvious that he belonged to neither society, the British nor the African; he has been only an uncommitted onlooker with "chilly detachment" (143) in Africa as much as he had been in England.

Tom is Pym's first male character whose personal struggles and self-doubts are uncovered and seriously dramatized in the novel. In her earlier novels, such as *Some Tame Gazelle*, *Excellent Women*, and *Jane and Prudence*, men like Henry, Rocky, Everard, and Fabian are all complacent, egotistical, vain, and pompous narcissists.

Since men in these earlier novels are stock characters whose main function is to produce the comic effect by the use of irony and satire, the characters are not fully developed. The realm of consciousness, in which the inner personal struggles take place, is totally missing in Pym's characterizations of these men, while the inner conflicts of the women characters are intensively dramatized. In *Less Than Angels*, however, men are no longer the "Other" (Simone de Beauvoir xvi; Schumacher 32), whom the author sees as enigmas. As Diana Benet says, "with *Less Than Angels*, Pym begins to extend her vision to include men as full citizens of the emotional life" (63). Tom's restlessness, unsuccessful quest for meaning in his study and life, and his sense of alienation reflect Pym's first serious attempt to portray men as emotional entities not much different from women.

Pym's characterization of Alaric Lydgate and his relationship with Catherine also reveal the change in Pym's treatment of male characters. By depicting Alaric's sense of failure, vulnerability, and loneliness, Pym suggests that not only women but men may also be victims in sex-role socialization. Alaric thinks of himself as "a failure" (57), for he has achieved nothing that the male-dominant culture regards as a success. He was not awarded the expected promotion for his work as an administrator in the Colonial Service; he was "invalided" (57) out of the work;

he has made no significant achievement in the field of anthropology; and he neglects the trunks of notes about what he had observed in Africa for eleven years. The notes have become "a constant reproach" (58) to him, and he feels a heavy burden of writing up the material. He thinks that he has failed in human relationship as well, believing that "he was disliked by most of his acquaintances" (58) because of his awkward shyness. His extreme sense of insecurity makes him run away from human society. Alaric's frequent habit of wearing an African mask in the middle of the night reveals his fear and defenselessness that he feels in everyday life.

Catherine is perceptive enough to see how Alaric is victimized by the false ideologies of masculine strength. While the other characters in the novel regard him as eccentric and enigmatic, Catherine, who has a sympathetic interest in him, notices his loneliness and vulnerability. While Catherine is wandering through a large store some days after Tom left her for Deirdre, she happens to see Alaric drinking coffee alone; and she does not hesitate to go and talk to him, because "Shyness was not one of her faults and she had every intention of joining him" (155). The self-effacing and insecure Mildred in *Excellent Women* is afraid that the attractive Everard may see and recognize her in a church service. She refuses Everard's first dinner invitation because of fear of being exploited and later accepts his second invitation with a great deal of

apprehension caused by fear of rejection and disappointment. In contrast to Mildred, the self-confident and action-oriented Catherine is, with no fear of rejection, ready to approach Alaric, "whose oddness and apparent loneliness interested and attracted her" (155) after their first meeting. After their second meeting in the coffee shop, Catherine invites him to a dinner in her flat, which no women in Pym's earlier novels had done. Catherine is comfortable with what she is and what she does, and she is not worried about what other people might think of her behavior. Her attitude toward Alaric is based on her own perceptions and judgments, not on socially acceptable codes of gender. In Catherine's self-defined, positive quest for the emotional closeness to a man, along with her pursuit of "self-actualizing" goals (Register 20) lies her true modernity as a contemporary, independent woman.

The bold move Catherine makes to get better acquainted with Alaric overturns the traditional male and female roles. Through the relationship between Catherine and Alaric, Pym challenges the culture's biases and assumptions of male strength and female passivity. The narrator comments on the nature of the relationship between Catherine and Alaric: "Like so many men, he needed a woman stronger than himself, for behind the harsh cragginess of the Easter Island façade cowered the small boy, uncertain of himself" (242). Catherine helps free Alaric of the burden of writing up the

material stored in the trunk. At first, when she suggests the idea of giving up his long-conceived plan to write a book, her "suggestion was . . . outrageous" (224) to him. In the end, however, Alaric decides to follow her suggestion; and he and Catherine make a bonfire by burning all the notes on a Guy Fawkes night. No longer being overwhelmed by the oppressive power of the male-dominant culture, Alaric finally feels "free to do whatever I want to. . . . I could even write a novel" (229). In contrast to Tom, who fails to feel his need for human contact, Alaric recognizes his desperate need for human communication and emotional support; and he welcomes Catherine when she has attempted to connect.

It is true that the failure of the relationship between Tom and Catherine is mainly due to Tom's personal shortcomings, such as his sexually biased ideas, self-centeredness, inability to feel, and lack of commitment to any human relationship. Nevertheless, Catherine is also aware that what drove Tom away from her is not just gender-related issues but her limitations as a person as well. Catherine admits her share of faults in the failure in her relationship with Tom: her frivolous jokes when Tom wanted a serious listener; her sarcastic remarks when he needed sympathetic support; her criticism when he expected generous understanding. Catherine's self-examination helps her express to Alaric more sympathy than she did to Tom, because

through her observation of Tom's reactions to her, she has learned that men may not understand that "one can love and criticize at the same time" (88). When Alaric is still preoccupied with the idea of writing up his material and says that he does not want to show his notes to anybody, including Tom, until he uses them for his own book, Catherine is too tactful to tell him that Tom thought the notes useless. She says,

"Yes, I can appreciate that," she said. "But . . ." she looked up at him, her eyes rather wide and soft-looking with hardly a trace of their usual sardonic merriment, "do you have to write up the material? I mean," she went on, "wouldn't it be rather a bother to have to do it?" (224)

Compared with her openly sarcastic and critical attitudes to Tom, in her new relationship with Alaric, Catherine shows more warmth, generosity, and sympathy. In Pym's fictional world, the relationship between Catherine and Alaric is a rare instance of a heterosexual attachment based on mutual love and understanding. And Catherine is not only Pym's first independent modern woman, but she is actually the most self-reliant and action-oriented woman the author had ever created. Considering the fact that Pym had never been a public or active supporter of the women's movement, Catherine may be the furthest the author could go in her creation of the new woman.

The novel ends with a possibility of marriage between Catherine and Alaric. The tentatively optimistic ending of the novel suggests that the modern women's ironic dilemma between the desire for independence and the need for love may be resolved by the male's willingness to change his deep-rooted concept of male domination and female subordination. At the same time, the ending also implies that if a man is honest enough to admit his emotional needs, he may find a solution for his conflict between his culturally acquired desire to display masculine strength to his woman and his innate need to be comforted and guided by her. If society can see that men as well as women may also be victims in the sex-role differentiation, perhaps both men and women can liberate themselves from the bondage of the oppressive social codes of gender. Acknowledging their basic needs and having courage to take a bold step in their personal lives, both Catherine and Alaric have succeeded in transcending the traditional sex roles.

Less Than Angels is Pym's most profound and mature work. The frequent in-depth, philosophical comments about the nature of life made in the novel reflect how well Pym knows the nature of the ordinary people's lives, which are her main subjects. For instance, the narrator of the novel describes life:

It's comic and sad and indefinite--dull,
sometimes, but seldom really tragic or deliriously

happy, except when one's very young. (89)

Life had been going on for Catherine too, as she knew that it would. She thought of it as an old friend, or perhaps a tiresome elderly relative, pushing, knocking, clinging, but never leaving her alone, having the power to grant her moments of happiness but being very stingy with them just now. (154)

Both passages tell the reader how fully the author understands the pain, disappointment, and sadness that may happen to ordinary people. Their suffering may be as intense as that of extraordinary people. Nevertheless, by deliberately attempting to keep a distance from the pain and misery life often brings to us, Pym firmly refuses to see life as a tragedy.

It seems that, at the time she was writing *Less Than Angels*, Pym was fairly confident in and comfortable with adopting a detached attitude and a comic spirit, which had always been the distinctive elements in her fiction from the beginning of her writing career. In *Less Than Angels*, Pym has succeeded in achieving an emotional maturity balanced between detachment and compassion, both of which are fully represented in the heroine's character. It is Catherine's mature personality well balanced between intellect and sentiment that makes a difference between her detachment and Tom's. Tom develops a chilly detachment to discard normal

human feelings and thereby to be completely detached from human life. Both Catherine's and Pym's detachment is for the self-protection against unbearable emotional pains. Because of her self-imposed detachment and comic spirit, Pym in *Less Than Angels* succeeds in expressing her profound ideas of life without sounding sentimental or pretentious. At the same time, her interpretation of life as "an old friend" that has "the power to grant . . . happiness" (154) shows what courage and strength she must have in order to keep hope and optimism alive when life seems to have nothing to offer.

It may not be a coincidence that when Pym reached her height as a professional writer, she was able to create a mature and self-sufficient female character who is braver and stronger than any other character in her novels. It is rather disturbing for the reader who likes Catherine best among all of Pym's heroines to run across a change in the author's later opinion of Catherine: "Catherine used to be quite a favourite heroine of mine but she now seems less real to me than Wilmet and Prudence (my own favourite)" (VPE 223). Considering the fact that the passage was written during the period when she was not able to publish any of her novels, it is possible that Pym's loss of confidence as a writer may have affected her view of the female character she had created as the ideal modern woman. It seems understandable that to the author, who suffered from a

severe sense of failure and rejection, Catherine's strength and self-confidence may have appeared rather unreal. Nonetheless, as is often the case, the author is not always the best judge of her or his own work. *Less Than Angels* is, in my view, the best of all her novels, for the novel successfully portrays the grim sides of life without trying to appeal to the reader's sentimentalism; it reflects the author's mature, profound thoughts on life without pretension; it shows a change in her concept of men--her ability to see men's world from the human point of view rather than the victimized female perspective; and, most of all, the novel depicts an independent modern woman who copes with various difficulties with courage, inner strength, humor, love, and compassion. To a modern female reader struggling to define her identity, Catherine may appeal as Pym's most "authentic" (Holly 43) female character.

CHAPTER VI

A GLASS OF BLESSINGS

In her fifth novel, *A Glass of Blessings* (1958), Barbara Pym again returns to one of her favorite subjects: the ironic discrepancy between a woman's expectations of what marriage should be like and what marriage really is. In her first two novels, *Some Tame Gazelle* and *Excellent Women*, Pym focuses on the single women's problems, while the third novel, *Jane and Prudence*, juxtaposes the conflicts of both the married and the single woman. In *A Glass of Blessings*, Pym's focus is on a discontented married woman. Wilmet Forsyth, the heroine and first-person narrator of the novel, is a disillusioned wife of thirty-three, whose dream of romantic love is ended with her marriage to a civil servant at the Ministry.

The relationship between Wilmet and her husband, Rodney, is similar to that of Jane and Nicholas in *Jane and Prudence* in the sense that like Jane, Wilmet is dissatisfied with her married life not because her husband has any serious flaws in his character but because the routine, settled life of marriage over ten years has brought boredom. Both Wilmet and Rodney lack interest in the other's private inner life, and they have lost romantic love that they had at the beginning of their attachment. Although she is

beautiful and elegant, and she always takes trouble with her clothes (9), Wilmet finds that her husband no longer pays a special attention to her appearance or compliments her outfits. She also notices that Rodney, approaching middle age, is getting "slightly balder and fatter" (33) than he had been in Italy where she met him during the war. To Wilmet, who still has some vague longings for romantic love, Rodney is too "dry" and "businesslike" (13). When her husband is talking to her about the present that he has arranged for her thirty-third birthday, she feels no excitement, because she knows that it is "the transfer of a substantial sum of money to my account, nothing really spontaneous or romantic about it" (13).

The relationship between Wilmet's best friend, Rowena, and her husband, Harry, also lacks romantic love and passion. Although Harry is a "strong" and financially dependable "breadwinner" (37) for his family, he is a "non-intellectual" (37), boring husband, who, Wilmet suspects, "might not have any interesting conversation for his wife at the end of the day, might indeed quite easily drop off to sleep after dinner" (37). In addition, Harry shows more interest in Wilmet than he does in his wife. He is often either secretly or "obviously flirtatious" (89) to Wilmet, although Wilmet regards it as an irritating but harmless joke, and nothing serious happens in their relationship. Rowena is always busy with her housework and three children

so that she does not even have time to ask herself whether she is contented.

Once in a while, however, when she is away from her husband and children, doing shopping for herself, not for her family, Rowena feels free. She says to Wilmet: "I do feel wonderfully free at this moment . . . I almost feel as if I had cast off Harry and the children for good" (150). At the same time, Rowena's momentary sense of freedom reminds her of what she has lost and will no longer have in her married life. She tells Wilmet:

"sometimes . . . I envy really *wicked* women, or even despised spinsters--they at least can have their dreams . . . if we do [have dreams], we know that there's absolutely no hope of their coming true. Whereas the despised spinster still has the chance of meeting somebody . . . At least she's *free!*" (149)

Rowena sees her marriage as the end of her dream and freedom because as a respectable middle-class wife, she feels that there is nothing she can do to change her dull, monotonous life.

Both Wilmet and Rowena view their marriages as "closed possibilities" (Nardin 19), and Pym portrays their situation as irony of dilemma, in which the ironic discrepancy between their expectations of marriage and its actuality is unavoidable. However, the attitudes of Wilmet and Rowena

toward their disillusionments are different. Rowena accepts her marriage with a cheerful resignation so that she has no serious problem in coping with the disappointing reality of her married life. In fact, she enjoys what her marriage has provided for her--a dependable husband, financial security, and the three children, who make her feel needed. Unlike Rowena, Wilmet still cherishes the dream of romantic attachment and cannot overcome her sense of loss. When Rowena talks to Wilmet about the impossibility of their pursuits of freedom and dreams, Wilmet secretly revolts against Rowena's comfortable fatalism: "I suddenly felt that I wanted to break out of the mould of respectability into which Rowena had cast me and say, 'Speak for yourself!'" (149).

One of the reasons that Wilmet fails to accept her present life lies in her external circumstances, which provide no work for her to feel needed. Wilmet and Rodney live with Sybil, Rodney's mother, in Sybil's house; and the healthy, energetic, and considerate woman of sixty-nine gladly takes good care of housework, her son, and her daughter-in-law. With no child and no housework, Wilmet is deprived of the opportunity to forget in her "busyness" (17) what might have been missing in her life. Moreover, Wilmet does not even have to try to be a useful helpmeet for her husband the way Jane in *Jane and Prudence* vainly struggles to become as a clergyman's wife. Wilmet's husband, a civil

servant, has his own secretary and typist at the Ministry. Since Wilmet has a husband who provides a financially comfortable living, she, unlike Catherine in *Less Than Angels*, does not have to work, nor does she have any interest in a career of her own. To Wilmet, the image of career women is not that of self-reliant, courageous women who seek freedom and equality but that of women who "try to combine marriage with a career" (11), "the ones who carry baskets as well as briefcases and look both formidable and worried, as if they hoped to slip into the butcher's before going to their desks" (11). Wilmet's view of career women is dismally negative; to her, they are objects of pity rather than of admiration or envy.

At the beginning of the novel, Wilmet appears to have nothing to look forward to in her daily life. Compared with Wilmet, even Belinda and Mildred seem to lead emotionally enriching lives. For Belinda has a man to yearn for, unrequited as the love may be, and that can be enough reason for her to look forward to another day; Mildred has men who ask for her emotional support and practical help, and that, at least, makes her feel needed. Therefore, although all of Pym's major female characters feel the "general uselessness of women" (LTA 105), Wilmet's feeling of uselessness and emotional barrenness is the most intense despite the fact that she, among all of Pym's heroines, appears to have the most--beauty, intelligence, a reliable husband, a caring

mother-in-law, a cosy, sweet home, and a close friend.

Wilmet's task is, then, how to cope with this overwhelming sense of uselessness in her comfortable life. In her struggles to feel useful arise various ironic discrepancies between what she sees in life and people and what they really are. In terms of situation, Wilmet as a disillusioned and discontented wife is similar to Jane; but in terms of appearance and personality, Wilmet is actually more like Prudence. Wilmet, like Prudence, is beautiful and elegantly dressed; she is aware of her beauty and confident of her power to attract the opposite sex; she is intelligent, sensitive, and imaginative; and she firmly believes in her capacity to love and understand other people. At the same time, Wilmet's self-confidence and narcissism, like Prudence's, prevent her from developing a keen sense of perception, detachment, and self-knowledge. While Mildred in *Excellent Women* becomes a fairly reliable first-person narrator of the story, Wilmet in *A Glass of Blessings* turns out to be an unreliable storyteller.

In *A Glass of Blessings*, Pym skillfully utilizes the limited, unreliable first-person point of view for the maximum effect of dramatic irony, in which the main character knows less than the reader does. Dramatic irony, which pervades the novel, is a superb technique for fictionalizing one of the universal themes in literature: the education of the protagonist through pain and self-

knowledge. The character must suffer first in order to understand the world, its people, and eventually himself or herself better. While Pym's other heroines--Belinda, Mildred, Jessie, and Catherine--go through little changes in their views of themselves and other people because of their penetrating self-awareness, Wilmet, like Jane Austen's Emma, is an arrogant, narcissistic heroine full of snobbish elitism and is to suffer and to be humiliated before she reaches the "know-thyself" stage and experiences spiritual awakening and rebirth.

Wilmet's education begins when she, in her attempt to be useful, becomes romantically attracted to another man, Piers Longridge, Rowena's brother. In the beginning of the novel, when Wilmet happens to see Piers in the church and recognizes him, she remembers that his sister usually speaks of him as "poor Piers" (6); for "At thirty-five he had had too many jobs and his early brilliance seemed to have come to nothing. It was also held against him that he had not yet married" (6). The drifting restlessness which Wilmet sees in Piers attracts her, and she thinks, "it might be that my friendship could be beneficial to him" (47) because she believes him to be "frustrated and unloved" (131). Piers also encourages Wilmet to think that he is attracted to her and he needs her emotional support in order to overcome his moody depression. Through his frequent compliments on her appearance and his seeming appreciation

of her company, Piers makes Wilmet feel "admired and cherished" (47), the feelings that she "used to have after parties in Italy" (47). While having lunch with Piers and listening to his complaints about his work, Wilmet thinks, "Perhaps I had helped to make him a little happier by my company and that might be something" (73).

After having lunch with him a second time and noticing that he seems much better than before in his attitude toward his work and life in general, Wilmet believes that he is "turning over a new leaf" (162) and assumes that she is the main reason for his change. Feeling happy and satisfied with her achievement, Wilmet compares Piers with Rodney:

I felt that Piers really needed me as few people did. Certainly not Rodney, I told myself, justifying my foolish indulgence. Piers needed love and understanding, perhaps already he was happier because of knowing me. When I had reached this conclusion I felt contented and peaceful, and leaned back in my seat, smiling to myself. (163)

To Wilmet, who suffers from an extreme sense of uselessness, the feeling that she has done "something to make Piers happy . . . compensated for everything" (175) that is missing in her life, such as a romantic husband, children, a splendid career, or a sweet memory of passionate love.

The turning point in Wilmet's relationship to Piers comes at her third meeting with him when she is invited to

have a walk and tea with him. Exuberantly happy at the prospect of a romantic afternoon walk with him, Wilmet goes out to meet him in the park. When Wilmet persists in seeing his place, Piers takes her to tea in his flat, which he shares with another man, whom Wilmet has assumed to be his colleague. However, during her visit to his flat, she finds out that his housemate is not his colleague but his lover. In addition, she realizes that all the changes in Piers that she has thought she has brought to him have been actually due to his domesticated young male lover, Keith, who has taken good care of Piers, including cooking, making tea, cleaning, and shopping for him. On her way home from their flat, Wilmet thinks:

I felt battered and somehow rather foolish, very different from the carefree girl who had set out across the park to meet Piers. But I was not a girl. I was a married woman, and if I felt wretched it was no more than I deserved for having let my thoughts stray to another man. And the ironical thing was that it was Keith, that rather absurd little figure, who had brought about the change I thought I had noticed in Piers and which I had attributed to my own charms and loving care!

(200)

Wilmet's discovery of Piers's homosexual attachment to Keith is the first major event in the novel that brings her

humiliation and shatters her self-confidence. She has to admit that Piers has had no romantic interest in her and does not need her love and understanding for his happiness. Moreover, Piers attacks her narrow-minded, snobbish middle-class upbringing and morality when she cannot hide her feeling of "horror" (199) after she hears from Piers that Keith works in a coffee bar in the evening and sometimes gets modelling jobs for a living. Piers reminds her,

"there are others in the world--in fact quite a few million people outside the narrow select little circle that makes up Wilmet's world . . . After all I didn't really mean to imply that you're to blame for what you are. Some people are less capable of loving their fellow human beings than others" (199)

Piers's blunt criticism makes Wilmet realize: "Perhaps I had never really known him, or--what was worse--myself. That anyone could doubt my capacity to love!" (199). Wilmet's self-doubt leads her to self-knowledge and brings a change in her view of herself. The change is noticed by one of her friends, who says to her: "You're always belittling yourself lately . . . you seem different . . . As if . . . you'd been disappointed in some way about something, perhaps lost confidence in yourself a bit" (205). Wilmet responds: "sometimes you discover that you aren't as nice as you thought you were--that you're rather a horrid person, that's

humiliating somehow" (205-206). Although Wilmet's search for a meaningful life through romantic love is a total failure, the very failure helps her attain a better understanding of other people and awakens her to her own shortcomings.

Wilmet's understanding--or lack of understanding--of her mother-in-law also shows her limitations in her perspectives of life and people. Sybil is both perceptive and sympathetic; and she understands Wilmet's problems better than anybody else in the novel. She knows that Wilmet is discontented with her unromantic, boring husband and suffers from a sense of uselessness; and she makes a serious effort to help Wilmet search for a meaning in her seemingly meaningless life. In contrast to Pym's other old women characters, such as Miss Liversidge in *Some Tame Gazelle*, Miss Doggett in *Crampton Hodnet* and *Jane and Prudence*, and Mrs. Pope in *Quartet in Autumn*, who are quick to criticize the behavior of others and ready to impose their dogmatic value systems on young people, Sybil does not try to interfere in her daughter-in-law's private life in the name of love or experience. On the contrary, even when she is eager to help Wilmet, Sybil is careful enough to protect the young woman's self-esteem. With a disguised casualness, Sybil suggests to Wilmet some intellectual and social activities or charitable works which she might like to do, such as taking the Portuguese classes that Piers

teaches, inviting Piers to dinner, or working in the charity organization in the parish. However, when Wilmet, who feels guilty about her idle days, defensively asks her, "You mean that I should have some work to do?" (17), Sybil simply says to her, "Not at all, dear . . . Everybody should do as they like. You seem to fill your days quite happily" (17). Sybil, a considerate and compassionate mother-in-law, sincerely wishes Wilmet to find some constructive outlet for her frustration; at the same time, however, she is sensitive enough not to hurt Wilmet's sense of dignity and not to expose her vulnerable ego.

The naïve and arrogant Wilmet is unaware of how perceptively Sybil sees through her dissatisfaction, restlessness, hidden longings for romantic love, and all her daydreams; nor is she aware of how anxiously Sybil wants her to be happy and how thoughtfully she hides her genuine concern for Wilmet under her nonchalant attitude. Wilmet's total blindness to Sybil's capacity for perceptiveness and empathy is well reflected when she confidently believes that Sybil could not know how she feels toward Piers.

It is true that Sybil's feigned ignorance and indifference make a false impression on Wilmet. Sybil pretends not to be aware of what is going on in Wilmet's emotional world by playing a role of a solely practical and rational elderly woman, who no longer thinks about how one's heart feels for the opposite sex. For example, when Wilmet

tells Sybil that Piers has asked her to have lunch with him on one day after their first Portuguese class, Sybil "briskly" (67) says to her: "That should be good for your Portuguese conversation" (67). She adds, "it will keep him out of the wine lodge, having lunch with you . . . and that should be a satisfaction to you both" (67). Instead of making any objection to her daughter-in-law's meeting with another man, Sybil agreeably expresses her approval of Wilmet's apparently improper behavior. When Wilmet comes home from her lunch with Piers, Sybil greets her by reciting some Portuguese verb forms and saying to her, "I suppose you will have learnt more than that this afternoon" (75). Then, Wilmet assumes that Sybil could not know her "confusion of pleasure, sadness, uneasiness and expectation that the day seemed to have left behind" (75). On the day when she is about to leave for her third meeting with Piers, Wilmet again regards Sybil as an unsophisticated, gullible old woman impervious to human feelings. Sybil says to Wilmet, who is going out to meet Piers: "you look very nice and I hope you will enjoy yourself. Give Piers my kindest regards and tell him that I have composed six sentences showing--I hope correctly--the use of the personal infinitive" (188). Wilmet secretly thinks:

If it had seemed odd, and it had a little, for Sybil to send me off to Piers with her blessing, I was now reminded that to her he was after all our

Portuguese teacher and the brother of my best friend. She could not know the delicious walking-on-air feeling that pervaded me as I hurried across the park. (188)

In the end, however, Wilmet finds out that Sybil all along has known all about her emotional disturbance, high expectations, exuberant happiness, and final heartbreaking disillusionment throughout her relationship with Piers. When Wilmet informs Sybil of what she discovered during her tea with Piers in his flat--his homosexual attachment to Keith--Sybil's response is: "it doesn't seem to have been a very exciting afternoon . . . I suppose I was hoping some little bit of scandal--very wicked of me, I know, and wickedness is particularly distressing in *old* people don't you think?" (202). One cannot but notice the maturity and wisdom Sybil has shown in dealing with the difficult situation which could have led her son's wife to have an affair with another man. Even though Sybil knew that Wilmet was getting attracted to Piers, and she thought that Piers was also interested in Wilmet, she decided not to meddle in Wilmet's private life, no matter how much she was concerned about the situation in which Wilmet was apparently involved. At the same time, Sybil is ready to comfort her when Wilmet's high expectation has turned into a humiliating disappointment. The fact that Sybil mentions the words "scandal" and "wicked" only after Wilmet's disillusionment

with Piers shows that Sybil's genuine intention behind such an apparent self-criticizing statement is to help Wilmet overcome her loss of romantic dream by indirectly reminding her of what might have happened if the dream were realized.

Not only does Wilmet fail to see Sybil's acute perceptiveness, but she also fails to notice the emotional closeness between Sybil and Professor Arnold Root. To Wilmet, Professor Root is simply a friend of Sybil's, "who shared Sybil's lack of religious faith as well as her interest in archaeology" (62). Wilmet, who regards romantic love as a monopoly of the young, cannot imagine that the two old people in their late sixties can still feel any deep romantic attachment to each other. When Sybil, knitting a pullover for Professor Root, mentions that she bought the wool in green because "there is green in Arnold's eyes" (138), her rather delicate statement surprises Wilmet, because she considers Sybil an "unfeminine" (104), careless person who lacks "any natural artistic sense" (133). Wilmet's surprise turns into annoyance when she sees a large bouquet of beautiful roses sent to Sybil, the flowers which Wilmet at her first glance assumed to be hers. Wilmet, disappointed and irritated, asks herself: "Why should anyone send flowers to Sybil? . . . It wasn't her birthday and she was hardly the kind of person who invited these spontaneous tributes of admiration" (155). Later when Sybil comes home, Wilmet learns from her that it is Professor Root who sent

the flowers. Preoccupied with her own thoughts about Piers and having no sense of empathy for Sybil, Wilmet is unable to see the growing attachment between Sybil and Professor Root.

Sybil's news of her engagement to Professor Root becomes a second blow to Wilmet after her discovery of Piers's personal life. In fact, this second discovery of Sybil's forthcoming marriage upsets Wilmet more than the first revealing incident about Piers. Wilmet thinks:

I can hardly describe how I felt on hearing this news. My first feeling was that I must have heard wrongly, my second that it was some outrageous joke. Sybil to be Professor Root's wife! But she was Rodney's mother and my mother-in-law--how could she ever be anything else? (221)

Sybil knows how Wilmet feels about her marriage: "Wilmet is overcome . . . Perhaps she is astonished and a little shocked to hear that two old people have decided to marry" (221). As if the news of her marriage were not enough to shock Wilmet and Rodney, Sybil makes another alarming announcement to them. When Rodney asks where Sybil and Professor Root are going to live, Sybil answers:

"I shall go on living here, of course . . . in my own house. Arnold has been living at his club lately, as you know, and could not take a wife there. He will come here to me . . . I shall be

turning you out. You and Wilmet will buy a house of your own. I think Wilmet will enjoy that."

(222-23)

Both Rodney and Wilmet are "dismayed" (223) and depressed at the prospect of living by themselves without Sybil, who has been, in a sense, a pillar of the house and their lives. At this second revelation, Wilmet learns that the need for emotional closeness is not a privilege of young people, but it is a universal desire of all ages. Wilmet finally agrees with one of her friends, Mary Beamish, who says to her, "it's nice for older people to marry, to be able to comfort each other in their old age. I think people do need help and comfort from others" (227).

With her growing self-knowledge and ability to understand other people, Wilmet begins to show more sympathy and openness to her neighbor and friend, Mary Beamish. Mary is an old maid of about her own age, and Wilmet has secretly had a condescending attitude toward her. At the beginning of the novel, Wilmet regards Mary as a person who is "small and rather dowdily dressed, presumably because she had neither the wish nor ability to make the most of herself" (19). In outward appearance, Mary is an opposite of Wilmet; and Wilmet believes that Mary's private life must be dull and boring. When Mary asks for her help in choosing a dress, "a sort of wool dress suitable for parish evening occasions" (79), Wilmet immediately imagines, "Poor Mary,

was that really all the social life she had? I supposed that must be" (79). Wilmet's habit of judging people according to how they look and what they wear is well reflected when she is on the way to the park to meet Piers for the third time. Feeling at her best in a charming dress, she sees "a drab-looking woman in a tweed skirt and crumpled pink blouse" (189) passing by her. Wilmet is "suddenly embarrassed and was reminded of poor Miss Limpsett in Piers's office. What could her life have held? What future was there for her and the woman in the crumpled pink blouse?" (189).

Wilmet's sense of superiority to Mary is not an entirely unmixed feeling, for Wilmet must admit that Mary's eager, sincere dedication to good works for the church and the parish makes her admirable. Wilmet's introduction of Mary to the reader is: "Mary Beamish was the kind of person who always made me feel particularly useless--she was so very immersed in good works, so *splendid*, everyone said" (19). Just as the outward appearances of Wilmet and Mary are distinctively contrasting, so are their daily activities. While Wilmet, living with her caring mother-in-law, does not know what to do with her "long idle days" (17), Mary is always busy working for the parish people and taking care of "her selfish old mother" (19), who demands a lot of time and care from her. Wilmet also finds out that Mary, despite her mother's wealth, usually buys her clothes

when they are on sale and donates the money she saves to charitable organizations. Wilmet, on the other hand, buys "as many clothes as I wanted in all the most becoming styles and colours, gave a little money to the church and none at all to charitable organizations" (79). Wilmet admits, "I was unable to decide what it was that I found so irritating about her goodness; it could not be only that she was such a contrast to myself and made me feel guilty and useless" (84).

Unwilling and unable to break out of her complacent, middle-class world of security, Wilmet subconsciously takes an antagonistic attitude toward Mary's goodness and begins to "examine the paradox of good and wicked people: why the wicked were often nicer" (84). Wilmet tries to justify her idle life by showing the ironic contrast between the humanness of the "bad" people and the coldness of the "good." Wilmet associates Mary with "the unpleasant character of the wise virgins in the parable" (84-5), who refused to share the kingdom of heaven with others. Wilmet presumes that Mary, like the wise virgins, has no understanding of human feelings or passions. Therefore, it seems natural that Wilmet feels upset when Mary shows her interest in a young assistant priest and her sentiment about summer being over, and then suddenly quotes some lines from Wilmet's favorite poem, Walter de la Mare's "Autumn" (Fergus 114). Wilmet says to the reader:

I could not bear to be invited to a womanly sharing of confidences. I looked at her dispassionately and saw almost with dislike her shining eager face, her friendship offered to me. What was I doing sitting here with somebody who was so very much not my kind of person? . . . I could not bear to think that she might have read my own favourite poems, and my one idea now was to escape from her as quickly as I could. (83-4)

By deliberately lying to Mary by saying that she prefers reading novels to poems, and thereby denying anything in common with Mary, Wilmet furtively but cruelly rejects Mary's offer of friendship. Wilmet's snobbish elitism reaches the utmost degree in this scene, and she does not see the irony of situation in which she, who has excluded Mary from her select world, has just acted like the wise virgins, whom she does not like because of "their unwillingness to share" (Fergus 113).

The sudden death of Mary's mother and her temporary residence in the convent bring Wilmet closer to her. During her visit to Mary in the convent, Wilmet feels a little more sympathy for her than before. When Mary tells her that the young priest, Marius Ransome, has written several letters to her, asking for her advice about a matter of his possible conversion from an Anglican to a Roman Catholic, Wilmet responds with empathy:

"I think men do need women in that way, for our advice and strength which is sometimes greater than theirs." I was thinking that Mary was a little bit human after all, and what a strange coincidence it was that we should both at this moment be in rather similar positions. In some curious way Piers needed me, and Marius needed her. Perhaps it made a little bond of happiness between us, for everybody wants to be needed, women especially. (165)

Since she had already noticed a change in Piers at her second lunch with him on the same day that she visits Mary in the convent, Wilmet no longer has a sense of uselessness which had made her feel inferior and self-defensive to Mary. In addition, Mary, who has always appeared to be strong and self-sufficient, is asking for Wilmet's emotional support. Being indulged in her own capacity for love, goodness, and usefulness, Wilmet, at this time, no longer feels uncomfortable in finding out the humanness of Mary; instead, she feels a common bond between them in their desires to be needed.

One can enjoy the ironic contrast which Pym deliberately makes between the different attitudes that Wilmet and Mary have toward their men. Wilmet's arrogant assurance of her power to change Piers, who does not actually need her, is effectively contrasted with Mary's

discreet and modest attitude toward Marius Ransome, who really seeks her support and advice. The author's real target is Wilmet, who thinks of herself as a romantic saver of a restless man, when Mary says to Wilmet in a self-criticizing tone:

"He seemed to think that I could help him to resolve [his religious doubts]. It may sound an odd thing to say, but I feel he *needs* me in some way--my advice, of course--though that sounds very conceited I know, and obviously nothing I could say would make any difference." (165)

Although Wilmet has some friendly feelings toward Mary at this stage, she still fails to understand the real issue in the relationship between Mary and Marius. It is true that Wilmet momentarily ponders the possibility of their marriage; however, she immediately dismisses it as "a wild idea" (165). Wilmet thinks: "even if he stayed where he was and decided to marry, he would choose somebody younger and more attractive than Mary" (166). Instead of probing into "Mary's feelings for Marius" (214), Wilmet sees their relationship as "a hopeless and hackneyed situation--dowdy parish worker in love with handsome celibate priest--and I hoped she would not brood too much over it" (214). Therefore, when Mary later says to her, "Marius has asked me to marry him--that's what I've really been wanting to tell you" (228), Wilmet's first reaction is "the perhaps

typically feminine one of astonishment that such a good looking man as Marius Ransome should want to marry anyone so dim and mousy as Mary Beamish" (228). This third unexpected revelation of Mary's engagement to Marius adds more humiliation to her already shattered self-image. Once again Wilmet has to face her failure to understand another human being because of her superficial and conceited ideas about others. Wilmet finally changes her preconceived view of Mary and Marius, and she begins to see their relationship in a different perspective: "Mary was obviously just the person he needed to steady him, and the novelty and responsibility of marriage would surely take his mind off Rome" (228). On the night she heard the news of Mary's upcoming marriage, Wilmet feels disturbed and confused by all the startling, unexpected discoveries about Piers, Sybil, and Mary; and she is completely overwhelmed by her total ignorance of all these happenings. Wilmet broods over the events:

It seemed as if life had been going on around me without my knowing it, in the disconcerting way that it sometimes does . . . Sybil and Professor Root, Piers and Keith, Marius and Mary--the names *did* sound odd together--all doing things without, as it were, consulting me. (230)

At this stage, Wilmet seems to think that nothing more is left to upset her. But, one more stunning piece of information, which comes from Rodney, gives a final blow to

Wilmet's ego. Looking for a new house brings Wilmet and Rodney closer than before, and their holiday in the West Country provides more private time for them. It is during this trip that Rodney confesses to Wilmet that he took out Prudence Bates to dinner twice--once on the evening "when you heard about Bason stealing the Fabergé egg, another time later on when Mary Beamish came to stay" (249). Although Rodney can only relate the two evenings to the comparatively minor incidents, Wilmet knows that these two specific days left more significant meanings in her memory. She remembers the evening Rodney took out Prudence to dinner for the first time is the day when she had her second lunch with Piers, after which she imagined that Piers's change was because of her charms and love; and Rodney's second dinner with Prudence happened on the day when Wilmet met Piers at the third time and discovered Piers's homosexuality. In listening to Rodney's confession, Wilmet thinks: "At the time when I had been occupied with foolish thoughts of Piers, my husband had been taking the attractive friend of a woman civil servant out to dinner" (249). Wilmet, because of her guilty conscience, also tells Rodney about the lunch she had with Piers and Harry; however, Rodney does not regard it as anything serious. In fact, he is too preoccupied with his own sense of guilt to pay attention to Wilmet's. Rodney implies that he is more guilty than she is because having dinner is more secretive than having lunch,

and he adds that he went to Prudence's place although nothing disgraceful happened.

The revelation of Rodney's meeting with Prudence is a final pivotal point which completes Wilmet's tough, long journey of her education. Wilmet has always considered Rodney a dull, "dry," and "businesslike" (13) man who would never understand or feel the need for romantic attachment; but it turned out that he was seeking romance from another woman. Moreover, Wilmet has seen herself as a warm, caring woman, whose husband has failed to provide her with emotional closeness. When Rodney describes Prudence to Wilmet: "The funny thing is she reminded me of you. Sitting there on that Regency sofa thing, rather cool and distant" (250), Wilmet learns how different his image of her is from her own. After laughing with Rodney over Prudence's uncomfortable Regency furniture, Wilmet thinks:

perhaps it wasn't so funny after all. I had always regarded Rodney as the kind of man who would never look at another woman. The fact that he could--and he had indeed done so--ought to teach me something about myself (250)

Wilmet's painful journey into self-examination and self-knowledge is finally over. Wilmet's response to other people and her attitude toward her own life shown at the end of the novel are totally different from those at the beginning of the novel. At Marius Ransome's induction

scene, which is the last scene of the novel, Mary, recently married and happy, says to Wilmet,

"Oh Wilmet, life is perfect now! I've everything that I could possibly want. I keep thinking that it's like a glass of blessings-- life, I mean," she smiled.

"That comes from a poem by George Herbert, doesn't it?" I said.

"When God at first made man,

Having a glass of blessings standing by . . . "

(253)

The reader remembers Wilmet's cool dismissing of poetry earlier. Wilmet's response to Mary's literary allusion to George Herbert's "Pulley" shows Wilmet's changing attitude toward other people. Wilmet can now accept Mary's friendship and share her private feelings with her.

When she learns to accept other people as her equals and to make emotional contact with them, Wilmet begins to affirm her own life as it is without being either overconfident or self-demeaning. Imagining what may happen if Marius, in reconstructing his church, spends all the money that Mary's mother left for her, Wilmet thinks:

But Mary would be happy whether they had money or not. I turned over in my mind her description of life as being a glass of blessings, and that naturally led me to think about myself. I had as

much as Mary had--there was no reason why my own life should not be a glass of blessings too. Perhaps it always had been without my realizing it. (256)

This is the final moment of Wilmet's self-revelation and the beginning of her spiritual rebirth. As one critic notes, "the couplet from John Heywood's *Proverbes* is integral to the portrait of Wilmet in *A Glass of Blessings*" (Snow 132). The couplet is:

If you will not when you may
When you will you shall have nay. (GB 96, 136,
202)

In the novel, this couplet is brought up as an inscription on the little box which Harry anonymously sent to Wilmet and which she thought Piers sent. The earlier Wilmet, who is indulging in her daydreaming, interprets it as Piers's suggestive invitation to an affair with him (96). Later when she finds out that the box was sent by Harry, she thinks that the flirtatious Harry is inviting her "to have an affair with him" (138). However, the later Wilmet, going through a period of self-doubts, begins to suspect that the couplet may have "a grain of truth" in the light of her "new character" (202). Wilmet is right in her suspicion; for the couplet metaphorically pinpoints Wilmet's unawareness of the blessings that have already been given to her and her near-loss of these blessings--her not-so-unromantic husband, her

secure, comfortable daily life, her caring mother-in-law, and her understanding friends.

Wilmet's irony of dilemma is completely resolved through her painful but eye-opening experiences, and her acceptance and affirmation of her married state is more positive than Jane's in *Jane and Prudence*. Since Jane has no serious flaws in her character, she does not undergo any drastic change. As a result, the intensity of her final acceptance of her life is not as strong as Wilmet's. In *A Glass of Blessings*, Wilmet starts as a horrible, selfish character; therefore, the degree of her reform is intense, and so is that of her affirmation of her married life.

In the radical change in Wilmet's perspectives lies the main difference between Prudence in *Jane and Prudence* and Wilmet in *A Glass of Blessings*, although they are much alike in personality in the beginning of each novel. Prudence never goes through self-examination; as a result, she fails to attain self-knowledge. Her story in *Jane and Prudence* ends where it started: Prudence dashing into another "doomed" love affair with Geoffrey Manigold. In fact, the reader of *A Glass of Blessings* hears from Rodney of Prudence having broken off her engagement to a Member of Parliament. The reader of *Jane and Prudence* must remember that Jane, at the end of the novel, thinks of Edward Lyall, an MP, as a possible suitor for Prudence. One can now imagine that Prudence must have added Geoffrey, Edward, even Rodney to

the "shrine of her past love" (JP 215).

While the pattern of Prudence's experiences is circular, Wilmet's is progressive. Wilmet learns to understand other people through a series of failures. Pain and humiliation have taught her about her own limitations. In fact, other characters are, in a sense, necessary means through which Pym successfully dramatizes Wilmet's gradual discovery of Socratic self-awareness. That may be a main reason that Pym leaves many of the minor characters and events in the novel not fully explained. For instance, we do not know why Piers, in the early part of his relationship to Wilmet, deliberately misleads her into thinking that he loves and needs her when he himself later cruelly proves that he does not love or need her at all. Piers's reasons are never made clear to the reader, and the victimized Wilmet does not bother to question him about his deception. Piers's homosexuality is also used mainly for the effective ironic reversal of Wilmet's arrogant assumption of her own feminine charms. After Wilmet discovers his private love life, Piers rather abruptly withdraws himself from her world, and he becomes a marginal character in the latter part of the novel.

Pym does not explain how much Sybil knew about her son's temporary attachment to another woman, although Sybil makes some significant comment after each time Rodney met Prudence. At the first time, she asks Wilmet, who is

waiting for Rodney: "Noddy [a nickname Sybil uses for her son] was out to dinner, wasn't he? . . . Did you know where he was going?" (176). When Rodney is about to open the door, just coming from dinner with Prudence, Wilmet hears Sybil saying: "Isn't that his key in the lock now? . . . The sound a wife is said to love above all others?" (176), a statement which the apparently unfeminine Sybil does not usually make. Sybil's second suggestive comment concerning Rodney is made some time after he had a second dinner with Prudence. While having dinner with Rodney, Wilmet, and Professor Root, Sybil casually describes the nature of Piers's attachment to Keith, which is no longer a secret at that time: "I see now the clue to Piers's lack of success in this world. I believe that he has loved not wisely but too well" (220). Rodney replies: "Mother, that's such a hackneyed quotation, and it really tells one nothing. I suppose we've all of us done that in our time, if you come to think of it" (220). Rodney's sudden reaction to Sybil surprises Wilmet because the naïve and blind Wilmet regards him as a man who "so seldom indulged in these generalizations about love. I saw that he had gone a little pink" (220). It is in this scene that Sybil announces her decisions to marry Professor Root and to turn Rodney and Wilmet out of her house. It is possible that Sybil has perceived a crisis in the marriage of her son and his wife. Perhaps Sybil hoped that making them have their own house

and live without her might bring them closer, and it turns out that Sybil's decision does help Rodney and Wilmet feel closer. Nevertheless, since the reader is not shown what goes on in Sybil's mind, he or she can only guess that Sybil's seemingly "unnatural" (223) action must have been taken after her carefully calculated thought, considering the fact that she has been portrayed as a considerate, perceptive, and wise person.

In the treatment of the young Anglican priest, Marius Ransome, Pym is at her best in using the technique of the first-person, limited point of view to explore the central theme of the novel. Through Wilmet's observations of Marius, limited though they are, the reader can suspect that he is not a good role-model for a clergyman who would willingly sacrifice a materially comfortable life in the name of priesthood. Pym provides enough clues to make the reader suspicious of Marius's real motive behind his decision to marry Mary. The first clue to his weakness for material comfort is given during his talk to Wilmet about a legacy that Mary's mother left before she died. Marius asks Wilmet:

"Did you know that Mrs Beamish had left me a legacy?"

"No, I didn't," I said, rather taken aback.

"Yes--five hundred pounds. An awkward amount really."

"How do you mean, awkward?"

"Well, had it been five *thousand* pounds one might have done some rather spectacular good with it. As it is there is the temptation to do good only to oneself." (146)

Wilmet later finds out that he bought a scooter for himself with the "awkward amount" of money. Later, Wilmet begins to "wonder . . . whether in spite of his being a clergyman he was really good enough for Mary" (242). When Wilmet says to him, "You're very lucky . . . Mary is such a splendid person" (242), Marius agrees with her. Then, he adds:

"Of course it's a bit embarrassing, Mary being rather well off," he said.

"But just think of all the good you'll be able to do with the money," I said quickly.

"Yes, we shall, shan't we?" he said thankfully. "Money need not always be an embarrassment." (242-43)

One cannot miss the ironic implication that Marius is not embarrassed by his future wife's wealth but is actually very much interested in money and the conveniences it can bring to him. One can suspect that his "doubts and uncertainties" (242) might have arisen from the conflict between his spiritual desire for celibacy and the prospect of comfortable living with a rich woman, not the conflict between remaining an Anglican and becoming a Roman Catholic.

When Wilmet tells Piers of Father Thames's fears about Marius Ransome's possible conversion, the sharp Piers responds, "He [Father Thames] needn't worry . . . From what you've told me of Father Ransome he doesn't sound the kind of young man to do anything as definite as that" (161).

With Wilmet, one has a doubt about his love for Mary, but one cannot prove the doubt. Mary is too innocent and too good to imagine any possible ulterior motivation behind Marius's proposal. By sticking to Wilmet's limited point of view, Pym does not show what is really going on in Marius's mind.

It seems that Pym deliberately implies Marius's weakness for money and then refuses to clearly define his character. Pym's intentional portrayal of Marius's ambiguous personality and morality effectively serves the thematical purposes of the novel. Since the major theme of the novel is Wilmet's education, Marius's limitations as a priest and a person function as an element for the ironic reversal in Wilmet's superficial value system, the element which finally makes Wilmet wonder whether he is "really good enough for Mary" (242), which is completely opposite to her earlier opinion of their relationship. Besides, if Marius turns out to be a real villain and if Mary becomes a victim, the situation will only lead Wilmet to confirm the rightness of her snobbery, and it becomes too sad and bitter to be enjoyed by the reader. Pym's ultimate intention of writing

is to produce a comedy of the ordinary people who have some shortcomings but who do not have extremely malignant personalities. Therefore, Marius has to be weak but not wicked; and Mary has to be good and innocent but not gullible. One critic says that "Pym's basic strategy in dealing with theme is to tantalize the reader by refusing to complete the patterning of her details" (Nardin 29). The very technique of adopting an indefinite pattern in *A Glass of Blessings* contributes to the effective focus on the novel's central character and its main theme, which is what *Wilmet* learns about *herself*.

In *A Glass of Blessings*, Pym makes the most of the techniques of dramatic irony and the limited, unreliable first-person point of view in portraying *Wilmet's* delusions and illusions in her relationships with others. At the same time, Pym presents the reader with the significant clues to the realities, which *Wilmet* misses. Pym manipulates what *Wilmet* observes and how she tells the events so that *Wilmet's* observations actually provide the careful reader with accurate information--more accurate than *Wilmet* can make out from her story. For example, *Wilmet* describes to the reader how Rodney tells her that he is going to be late in the evening:

"I shan't be in to dinner this evening,"
Rodney announced rather self-consciously one
morning a few days later.

"Why, darling, are you working late at the Ministry?" I said in a silly teasing way.

"That's the idea," he said, not looking up from *The Times*. (168)

Later, the reader finds out that the day was Rodney's first dinner-date with Prudence. When Rodney comes home on that night, Wilmet sees him standing in the hall, "hesitating, as if he could not decide whether to come up or not . . . he had probably been drinking a little more than he should and did not feel quite equal to facing the steely glances of his wife and his mother" (176). Obviously he must have felt guilty after dining with another woman. The ignorant Wilmet describes to the reader the night that Rodney went out again with Prudence: "Rodney had decided to be out; he was rather nervous of meeting Mary, perhaps fearing that his conversational powers would not be up to the situation" (201). Later at night in bed, Wilmet, half asleep, tells of Rodney's coming home: "I was just conscious of Rodney coming in very much later, but I did not open my eyes or speak to him" (204). Since Pym often drops the suggestive clues into the main context in a very subtle, almost unnoticeable way, many implications can be discovered or confirmed only in a second reading of the novel. In fact, its second reading can give more pleasure to the reader, because one can discover many more significant hints that he or she missed in the first reading.

A Glass of Blessings offers the most satisfying happy ending among all of Pym's novels. As a comic writer, Pym never ended her novels with a tragic tone except in *The Sweet Dove Died*. Nevertheless, most of her novels are ended with an indefinite hope for the future. As a result, more often than not, the heroines like Belinda in *Some Tame Gazelle* and Letty in *Quartet in Autumn* cannot even answer a question about what they hope for. In *A Glass of Blessings*, however, Pym's typical "tentative optimism" (Burkhart 116) turns into a definitely positive affirmation of life as being a blessing; therefore, the degree of Pym's optimism is stronger than in her other novels. Not only is the ending satisfying, but it is believable as well. For what transforms and regenerates Wilmet and finally prompts her to sing the praises of her own life is not her naïve and vulnerable romanticism but her hard-earned stoical optimism which often comes after getting through disillusionment, suffering, frustration, humiliation, and painful self-examination. Wilmet, at the end of the novel, accepts and affirms her life not because she is given what she has desired, but because she learns to be happy with and appreciative of what she has already had.

CHAPTER VII

A FEW GREEN LEAVES

Barbara Pym's last novel, *A Few Green Leaves* (1980), holds a significant position in the body of her work because it is the only novel written since she was "rediscovered" in 1977. In 1963, her seventh novel, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, was rejected by the Cape publishing house, which had previously published all of her novels. After the publication of her sixth novel, *No Fond Return of Love* (1961), Pym had not been able to publish for sixteen years. In January 1977, the *Times Literary Supplement* published a list of the most under-rated writers of the century. Pym was the only living writer chosen by two literary figures, Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil (VPE 291), and there was "no collusion" (VPE 294) between them, as Philip Larkin told Pym later. After that, Pym's literary reputation was revived, and her books were "virtually overnight" (VPE 291) in a great demand.

Because of her restored status as a "published novelist" and her renewed confidence as a writer, Pym could comfortably pick up her favorite materials for her final novel. It is not surprising that she returned to the characters and themes that she had dealt with in her early successful novels written in the 1950s and the early '60s

rather than to those of her later experimental novels, which show atypical subjects and styles. In *A Few Green Leaves* one can easily find the group of typical Pymian characters portrayed in her early fiction: an ordinary-looking but intelligent and perceptive spinster in her thirties seeking an emotionally fulfilling relationship with a man; a self-centered, insensitive, selfish man taking advantage of an excellent woman's emotional need for his practical need; an attractive-looking but careless wife disappointed with her self-important, dull husband; an ineffectual clergyman with a weak, nebulous personality; quite a few unattached old women of uncertain ages who are either bossy busybodies or well-meaning do-gooders; and a talkative and presumptuous cleaning woman ready to give free advice to her employer.

In her final novel, Pym again picked up the issue that had been almost her obsession throughout her work and her life: male-female relationships focusing on a single woman's desire for love and marriage and her awareness of irony in love-marriage relations. Emma Howick, the heroine of the novel, becomes Pym's spokesperson, whose observations and reflections remain the author's "final statement on life" (the dust jacket on the Dutton edition of the novel), including love, marriage, and man-woman relationships.

A Few Green Leaves shows the same two types of irony in love-marriage relations that were dramatized in such early novels as *Some Tame Gazelle*, *Crampton Hodnet*, *Excellent*

Women, Jane and Prudence, A Glass of Blessings, and No Fond Return of Love: the irony of situation in which careless but good-looking women are more likely to become housewives than domestically inclined but plain-looking women; and the irony of dilemma in which marriage is regarded as an unavoidable end of romantic love. Just as Rocky in *Excellent Women* prefers Helena's physical beauty to Mildred's good personality, Graham Pettifer in *A Few Green Leaves* marries Claudia, who is pretty, elegant, and fashionable, after he had a brief affair with Emma, who is "dowdy" (34) and "not particularly attractive" (34). Although Emma, an intelligent and caring woman, shares a common academic interest with him, Graham, after using her for his convenience, returns to his "frivolous" (127) wife, who does not seem to care about his work or his comfort.

The irony of dilemma, seen in the married couples of the early novels, becomes the pattern of the relationship between Graham and Claudia. When Graham visits Emma's cottage after her invitation, she hears that he is temporarily separated from his wife and notices that he appears more concerned about his book-writing than the separation. Emma feels disconcerted to see his wife appear "more interested in what pudding she was going to eat than in Emma's possible relationship with her husband" (152). Claudia expresses to Emma her feeling of regret about her early marriage: "I sometimes think I married too young . . .

It would have been better to have started off on a career and then married" (153). The marriage between Graham and Claudia seems as unsuitable as the one between Rocky and Helena in *Excellent Women*. Nevertheless, like Rocky and Helena, Graham and Claudia return to their routine, dull married lives after some period of separation but with little change in their personalities or perspectives.

Although *A Few Green Leaves* follows the tradition of Pym's early work in its basic frame--characters and themes--what makes her final novel significant is not so much what it has in common with the early novels as its differences from them. In *A Few Green Leaves* one can find a great change in the main female character's behavior and attitude compared with those of the early heroines in dealing with the male characters. Emma Howick is a thirtish woman in the 1970s, who studies anthropology and has come to live in her mother's cottage in a West Oxfordshire village in order to do her field work. When she sees in a TV discussion her ex-boy-friend, Graham Pettifer, whom she has not seen for many years, Emma impulsively sends him a casual invitation letter, assuming he will bring his wife with him. After Graham has responded to her letter and comes to her cottage, Emma begins to be involved with him. She finds out that he has trouble with his wife and is temporarily separated from her. Apparently, Graham seeks Emma's company to escape from his marital problems; for he visits Emma again after their

first reunion and stays the night in her place. Moreover, in order to write a book, he rents a cottage in the village where Emma lives.

Emma's behavior toward Graham shows how much time has changed since Pym began to write her first novel in 1934. Unlike Belinda, Pym's first heroine, who had to refuse Henry's invitation to an afternoon tea while his wife was gone, Emma has no hesitation in allowing Graham to stay the night in her cottage when he visits her a second time. In fact, she seems rather disappointed with Graham, who has made "no move towards her" (87). Emma later half jokingly and half seriously expresses to her mother her disappointment over the uneventfulness of the night he spent in her place: "we slept in separate rooms. He made no attempt at anything else--rather humiliating!" (97). While Graham is writing a book in his cottage, Emma buys groceries for him, brings casseroles to his place, and invites him to her cottage for dinner. Later when Emma visits him in his cottage, Graham makes physical advances, and Emma accepts him without resistance. In *Excellent Women*, Rocky's married status makes Mildred at least try not to fall in love with him and decide not to have hope. When we compare Emma's affair with Graham with one scene in *Excellent Women*, in which Mildred, Julian (a clergyman), and Winifred (his sister) talk about Mildred's growing interest in Rocky, we notice how the behavior of Pym's excellent woman can also

change as time passes. When Julian in *Excellent Women* teasingly says to Mildred that she seems to love Rocky, Mildred denies it by saying, "he's a married man" (EW 43). Then, Julian says:

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

"Now, Julian, we don't want a sermon," said Winifred. "You know Mildred would never do anything wrong or foolish."

I reflected a little sadly that this was only too true and hoped I did not appear too much that kind of person to others. Virtue is an excellent thing and we should all strive after it, but it can sometimes be a little depressing. (EW 43-4)

Pym's early heroines like Belinda, Mildred, and Dulcie respect and observe the proprieties, and that is one of the reasons that they keep their loves for married men secret. Emma, on the other hand, does not behave according to the proper social decorum, nor do the village people, including the parish rector and her mother, raise the issue of the marital status of Graham, who, they suspect, is somewhat involved with her.

Emma's rather unconventional and apparently improper demeanor in her relationship to Graham reflects a major change in sexual behavior in contemporary society. The time

has passed when one argued over one's disapproval of divorce as Mildred and Everard did over the Napier couple's separation in *Excellent Women*. What Emma is concerned about is not so much the fact that Graham is still legally a married man as whether he loves her or not. Since Graham does not appear to care for his wife, the situation offers enough reason for Emma to hope for a fruitful development in their relationship.

In the late twentieth century, physical intimacy has less significance than in the early- and mid-twentieth century, when Fabian, the womanizing widower in *Jane and Prudence*, was forced to marry Jessie after his unexpected affair with her because he as a gentleman--playboy though he may be in reality--had to conform to the old social order. The late twentieth century has seen many old social codes, such as honor, respectability, and virtue, being discarded. Emma as a contemporary woman is aware of the changes in the value system in which physical intercourse may have little meaning to many people living in modern society. Emma describes Graham's move toward her with "the anthropologist's calm detachment" (LTA 186) as if even she, not to mention Graham, were an object of her detached observation:

"Do people pass along this way? Will anybody see us?" He started to kiss and fondle her in a rather abstracted way. Emma found herself

remembering Miss Lickerish and the goings-on in the ruined cottage during the war. "I hope we should have some warning," she said, "see them coming through the trees."

"This is rather pleasant, isn't it?" he said. "I feel I deserve a break from my work," he added, as if being with her could be no more than that.

(148)

The kind of seemingly chilly detachment with which Emma describes her sexual involvement with Graham shown in the scene above is her major weapon with which she, from the beginning of the novel, endeavors to keep a safe distance from life, because life is often full of tumultuous, painful incidents. Moreover, Emma reminds herself of "her role as an anthropologist and observer--the necessity of being on the outside looking in" (20). Emma privately maintains a condescending attitude toward some of the old ladies in the village who are excited to see daffodils in the early spring during their annual walk in the woods. She feels "rather tired of daffodils. Their Wordsworthian exuberance had been overdone" (4). Her detached attitude is seen not just toward other people but to herself as well. Emma suspects that her mother chose her Christian name "with the hope that some of the qualities possessed by the heroine of the novel might be perpetuated" (8); however, she, with an attitude of self-mockery, associates her name with "Thomas Hardy's first

wife--a person with something unsatisfactory about her" (9). The way Emma remembers her past love affair with Graham also shows her deliberate effort to undervalue what might have been once a loving or even passionate relationship:

she realised that this was Graham Pettifer, a man with whom she had once had a brief love affair. To say that he had been her "lover" was altogether too grand a way to describe what their association had been; perhaps even "love affair" was not strictly accurate, for there had not been all that much love about it, no more than proximity and a mild affection. But, anyway, it would have been true enough to say that she had once known Graham Pettifer "quite well" (11)

Despite her role as a detached anthropologist, however, Emma is not like Tom Mallow, an anthropologist in *Less Than Angels*, who refuses to feel and finally loses the capacity for human emotion. Emma is more like Catherine, a novelist in the same novel, who needed to develop a sense of detachment in order to keep a sound balance between her towering romanticism and her heartbreaking disillusionment with life, which never fails to inflict pain and disappointment. In fact, Emma's feelings about Graham are torn between her high expectation of romantic love and her need for self-protection. Her apparently passive acceptance of his physical advances and her detached observation of the

whole situation reflect her two conflicting desires: her natural desire to have a meaningful relationship with him; and her self-imposed demand for total detachment.

Emma's struggle for detachment is closely related to Graham's attitude toward her. For despite their renewed friendship, Graham does not attempt to be emotionally close to Emma. Their first meeting after many years has only made her experience "the curious awkwardness of meeting somebody you had once loved and now no longer thought about" (33). At his second visit, when he stays the night in her place, Graham does not try to be physically close to her. Even after he made love to her, Emma suspects that they are "no more than 'just good friends,'" in spite of their "dalliance on the grass" (151).

Since Emma does not know how to interpret his ambiguous attitude toward her, she too responds to his vagueness in the same ambivalent manner. The narrator repeatedly tells the reader about Emma's confused feelings about Graham. When she receives a letter from him informing of his plan to rent a cottage in the village where she lives, Emma thinks:

it would be more satisfactory if Graham could expand on the bare information contained in his letter--if he could indicate something of his feelings, even. That might help her to clarify her own, for she was not sure whether she wanted him or not. (120)

When she says to her mother, "I don't know how I feel about him" (163), her mother asks her, "How does he feel about you?" (163). Since Emma is not sure of Graham's feelings about her, she deliberately attempts to reserve her feelings about him.

Although Emma's feeling about Graham is not yet clear, she is willing to restore their past attachment, hoping for romance. As far as her emotional need is concerned, Emma belongs to the same line of the Pymian spinsters whose unattached lives cause them tantalizing longing for love and marriage. Like her literary elder sisters, Emma is actually another romantic eager to experience passionate love despite her detached attitude.

Graham finally leaves the village after he has finished his book and returns to the new house in Islington, where his wife now lives. Graham feels that "as far as Emma was concerned he had 'bitten off more than he could chew'" (170). He secretly admits to himself that his "vanity and curiosity" (170) have made him respond to Emma's initial invitation; and the outcome of their meeting has been a total disappointment to him, because it has "not been the kind of amusing romantic encounter he had imagined-- certainly not romantic, hardly even amusing" (170). Nevertheless, he has been flattered by Emma's interest in him and satisfied with "substantial progress with his book" (170). After using Emma for his practical needs--groceries,

casseroles, and company--the complacent, insensitive, and self-centered Graham leaves the village and Emma with no sense of guilt.

As for Emma, her involvement with Graham has been not only an anti-climactic disappointment but a bitter, humiliating experience. Throughout her relationship with him, Emma's position has been extremely difficult; for, on the one hand, she has been encouraged by Graham's seemingly positive approach to her and by her natural desire for love, but on the other hand, she has had to discourage her emotional need with "wry wit" (170) in order to be prepared for future disillusionment and to protect her vulnerable ego from the possible pain of rejection. The tension between her need for love and her need for self-preservation has been such that the stress shows itself as a rash on her hand after Graham left her. After consulting with a physician, Emma in a half truth and a half joke tells the physician's wife about the possible cause of the rash: "some darker secret might be causing it, stress and that sort of thing" (218). Like other Pymian heroines, Emma has enough self-esteem to hide all the subtle emotional turmoil; however, one can suspect that she must have felt a great deal of bitterness, anger, and humiliation underneath her calm detachment and stoical acceptance.

Although Emma feels "bitter" (192) about the failure in her relationship with Graham, she is not a sentimental

romantic like Belinda, Mildred, Prudence, and Dulcie, who are caught in their unrequited loves for their men. Emma has no intention of indulging herself--or being trapped--in one-way love by romanticizing it as Belinda did. Life with unrequited love may be better than life with no love for Belinda, Pym's first romantic heroine in *Some Tame Gazelle*, who has faithfully cherished her love for Henry for over thirty years. Belinda even formulates a theory--or validity--of unrequited love by suggesting that unfulfilled love may be more sustaining than love fulfilled by marriage. But Belinda is a product of Pym's youth when she at least could "enjoy [her] pose of romantically unrequited love" (VPE 23). When she created the fiftish gentlewoman, Belinda, Pym may have been too young to have learned that a woman of fifty could still love a man as intensely as a woman of twenty, not actually like Belinda, whose "passion had mellowed into a comfortable feeling, more like the cosiness of a winter evening by the fire than the uncertain rapture of a spring morning" (STG 17).

Since she had created Belinda, Pym had gone through a great deal of intense pain in "doomed" love affairs, and she often had been miserably crushed by the harsh reality of unrequited love--humiliation and pain of rejection. Pym's relationship with Richard Roberts in her fifties, her last romantic attachment to a man, proved to her how hard it was to reach the state of "calm of mind, all passion spent," no

matter how old one might be. Pym had to realize there was nothing cosy or comfortable in the love of a woman in her middle age when her love was unreturned. In 1967 when she was fifty-four, Pym, who felt a "total failure" (VPE 242) in her relationship to Richard, wrote:

The other day in a fit of boredom I nearly telephoned Richard for a bit of conversation but then I was afraid he might feel awkward and that I might not be able to think of anything to say, so I didn't. So *unflattering* to feel that a person really doesn't ever want to see you again--I don't think it's ever happened to me before *quite* like this! Now, alas, I am too old to change myself but shall just be more cautious in future--not allowing myself to get fond of anybody. (VPE 243)

In *A Few Green Leaves*, one sees a more cautious and self-protective heroine. As one critic points out, Pym's final novel "offers a counterpart to *Some Tame Gazelle* at the beginning of her writing career, as if to show what life had taught her in between" (Rossen, *The World of Barbara Pym* 154). One of the painful lessons Pym was forced to learn "in between" is, as Rossen says, that "women must develop emotional restraint in romantic love" (*The World of Barbara Pym* 69). In fact, Emma in *A Few Green Leaves* is a direct product of this development--Pym's painful life-long attempt to suppress her normal or excessive feelings about her male

friends. It seems that Pym projected her wish for emotional restraint through her creation of a more prudent and more detached heroine in her last novel than any other heroine in the previous novels; for Emma endeavors not to allow herself to fall into the trap of one-way love and to become an easy victim of an exploitative man. To Emma, to be loved is as important as to love, and that is the reason that she reserved her feelings about Graham. Emma had been ready to accept Graham if he were willing to love her, but she was determined not to fall in love with him if she found out that he was not interested in her. Emma's seemingly self-contradictory attitude toward Graham reflects Pym's attempt to create a woman who is more cautious than the author had ever been in handling her own emotional involvement with men.

As soon as Graham leaves her, Emma decides that he is after all not worthy of her, and she is ready to move on to a new relationship. Emma contemplates the situation:

Graham had gone and the summer was over . . . What was she to do now? The only practical thing that occurred to her was to do something that had been on her conscience for some time, to ask Tom to supper. . . . After all, they were two lonely people now, and as such should get together.

(193)

Emma's invitation to Tom Dagnall, which takes place

immediately after Graham leaves, reminds the reader of an incident in *Excellent Women*; that is, Mildred's deliberate attempt to see Everard after Rocky's reconciliation with his wife and his final departure from her duplex flat. However, the nature of the relationship between Emma and Tom is different from that between Mildred and Everard. While the relationship between Mildred and Everard is based upon Everard's practical need for a useful woman and Mildred's emotional need for an appreciative man, the relationship between Emma and Tom gradually, if not passionately, develops, based on mutual understanding, sympathy, respect, and companionship.

Tom Dagnall is a fortish rector in the village, whose wife died more than ten years before. Soon after his wife died, his spinster elder sister, Daphne, came to live in the rectory to help him. Tom's situation is similar to Julian's in *Excellent Women* in the sense that he is single and lives with his sister. Tom also shares with Julian and most of Pym's clergymen some common weaknesses in personality: he is ineffectual and helpless in practical matters in life. People in the village view him as "not . . . a dynamic personality" (124). Tom's lack of efficiency makes Emma even doubt whether he would be "capable of cleaning her top windows, which was what she really needed" (101), and he reminds her of "Poor Tom, 'Tom's a-cold'--*King Lear*" (38) because he is "a widower and lived with his sister" (38) in

the rectory, which is "much too big and cold" (38).

In the early part of the novel, Emma is too preoccupied with Graham to consider Tom an eligible man for her. However, she gradually sees more of his positive qualities as she gets to know him better through their shared social activities in the village. During the history society's summer excursion, Emma begins to speculate on "why he hadn't managed to achieve a more congenial living arrangement or 'life style.' Surely he, an attractive and intelligent man, could have contrived to marry again?" (115). When her friend Ianthe Potts visits her and describes Tom as "good-looking" (123), Emma admits, "He certainly was good-looking, but he was also 'nice,' agreeable, sympathetic" (124). Although she reminds herself of his lack of masculine strength, she is willing to ignore his weakness: "Not, of course, a dynamic personality, but who wanted that?" (124). At this point, Emma considers Tom an eligible man, at first for her friend Ianthe and then, for herself: "could she not be better for him than Ianthe?" (124). However, Tom's seeming lack of jealousy over Graham puts her off the growing interest in Tom. When Emma tells Tom about Graham coming to live in the village to work on his book, Tom responds: "Oh, that will be pleasant for you . . . He will be an asset to our small community" (124). Emma does not know that Graham's coming to the village is an "unwelcome piece of news" (124) to Tom, who wants to be closer to her,

and Tom responded to the news only "in a stiff, clerical sort of way" (125). The disappointed Emma thinks that "Tom and Ianthe might well deserve each other" (125).

Emma's vague feeling about Tom develops into pity at his helplessness when his sister leaves him to live with her friend. Following free advice of a parish busybody, Adam Prince, who is a good-food inspector and former clergyman, Tom, who is a poor cook, puts a note in the parish magazine, asking for "the mercy of the ladies" (144) who are willing to invite him to "a simple family meal" (144). Although Emma decides that she cannot "cope with Tom and Graham" (145) by carrying food to both men, she feels pity for Tom, and she fears that "once you started on those lines there was no knowing what it might lead to" (145), because pity may be "sworn servant unto love" (165), as Samuel Daniel, a minor Elizabethan poet, said. During the group tour of the old manor of de Tankerville family's, Emma and Tom feel a common bond to each other through their casual conversation.

The pivotal point in Emma's relationship with Tom comes at the moment she is beginning to realize that Graham after all has had no romantic interest in her. At the end of summer, around the time Graham is about to finish his book and leave the village, he asks Emma to come in his cottage for a drink after an evening walk. Emma thinks, "Perhaps he has decided to make love to me" (174); however, she finds out that she is "obviously mistaken in her imaginings"

(174), because she hears that Graham has invited his colleagues as well. The disillusioned Emma wonders "whether Graham had deliberately engineered this situation and had invited Robbie and Tamsin in because he didn't want to be alone with her" (174). Feeling "unbearably irritated by the whole situation" (175) and by the complacent attitude of the unimaginative sociologists, Emma decides to leave his place. While she is refusing Graham's offer to accompany her through the woods because it is dark, Tom, who happens to take an evening walk, sees them in front of Graham's cottage and gladly escorts her home. While she is having a drink with Tom in her cottage, Emma at first feels depressed because she originally expected to be with Graham that evening. But in the course of their conversation, both Emma and Tom feel comfortable with each other, and Emma notices that the "tension and irritation, beginning with Graham . . . seemed to go out of the evening" (178).

On the evening of the day when Graham finally leaves the village, Emma invites Tom to dinner. They talk about personal matters, such as Tom's late wife; his inability to marry again because of Daphne's intrusion into his life; "the harmful effect" (196) of Graham's reappearance on Emma; and Tom's impression of Graham being like "a dull dog" (197). Emma feels: "Altogether it was turning into a rather successful evening after the unpromising start to the day" (197). When Emma sees Tom conducting Miss Lickerish's

funeral ceremony in the church, she experiences "a feeling almost of emotion" (231), because she is moved by "the beautiful words of the burial service" (231) that Tom has spoken. During the Christmas season, "Emma, sitting between her mother and Isobel, found herself wishing that she had a man with her" (239), and she finally sees Tom as an eligible man for her.

At the end of the novel, Emma, who "tended to despise her mother's studies of the Victorian novel" (86) and who thought of herself as "the most cynical and sophisticated woman" (239), feels "sympathy with the ideas of the romantic novelist" (239). In fact, from the beginning of the novel, Emma has been often discontented with her role as a detached, unimaginative anthropologist. For instance, during Graham's second visit to her, which has coincided with the annual flower festival day in the village, Emma considers "the festival and its significance in a different, less scientific, light. Flowers in a beautiful setting and a meeting with an old lover suggested a romantic novel rather than a paper for a learned society" (86). At the end of the novel, Emma speculates on the possibility of writing a novel about the village instead of a research paper. Emma thinks: "She could write a novel and even, as she was beginning to realise, embark on a love affair which need not necessarily be an unhappy one" (249-50). So ends the novel, and the ending of the novel shows two changes taking place

in Emma's mind: one is a career change from anthropologist to novelist; another is a change of her heart away from the selfish, narcissistic Graham to the considerate, modest Tom. Both changes offer Emma the infinite possibilities and hope for the future, which are the typical ways in which Pym closes her novels--open-ended and indefinite but affirmative and optimistic.

Although the relationship between Tom and Emma is not the most romantic or passionate, it is the most harmonious and mature Pym ever portrayed in her fictional world. It is a relationship between two mature grown-ups, who are equally intelligent and considerate. It is also the most believable and satisfying man-woman relationship to Pym's readers, because it is the first time the reader ever sees a not-so-unsuitable attachment between the "sensible" man and woman, and Pym realistically and persuasively dramatizes each step of the development of their relationship.

As a heroine, Emma does not surprise the reader much because she has a lot in common with Pym's early heroines. On the other hand, Tom is a unique hero among Pym's male characters; and his uniqueness lies in his attitude toward Pym's last excellent woman. Unlike many Pymian men, who have a weakness for good-looking women, Tom is always aware that "he must look below the surface" (91). Despite Emma's dowdy appearance, Tom sees her "only as a sensible person in her thirties, dark-haired, thin and possibly capable of

talking intelligently about local history, his great interest and passion" (1-2).

When Emma informs him that Graham will come to the village to write a book, Tom politely responds to the news with a welcoming attitude, for "that might be expected of him" (125) as parish rector. However, Tom secretly feels uneasy about the news. Tom is actually Pym's only male character to feel jealous. In Pym's fictive world, in which women always outnumber men, it has been women who have had to compete for a small number of men. Most men in Pym's novels are immature narcissists who are accustomed to being loved by women. But Tom Dagnall in *A Few Green Leaves* does not have that complacency. When he sees Emma and Graham going off together after the hunger lunch, he feels lonely and depressed, although he never reveals to Emma how he feels about her.

At the same time, Tom is generous and sympathetic enough to be Emma's willing company when she turns to him to overcome the pain of rejection and loneliness after Graham has left her. At the end of the novel when he by chance brings up Graham into the conversation with her, Tom, after seeing Emma's hesitating attitude, fears that "he might have said something 'out of turn' or dropped a brick in a way he knew the clergy sometimes did. Was the thought of Graham Pettifer still painful to her?" (249). No other man in Pym's novels is ever as considerate and sensitive as Tom.

Tom is one of a few men in Pym's fiction capable of feeling loneliness. Tom's sense of loss and loneliness is well reflected in his need for marriage, especially because Daphne is, to him,

a poor substitute for his wife Laura . . . He now realised that he ought to have married again after Laura died, but before he could even think what he was going to do, in his bereft and helpless state, Daphne had come running, as it were, determined to do her duty. (22)

Tom wants to have a companion to walk in the woods with, a desire alien to Pym's men--certainly to Graham, who wishes he were not "walking with Emma in the woods on a sultry late September afternoon" (171). Tom Dagnall is actually Pym's only "normal" single man who feels the need to marry mainly because of his natural desire for emotional closeness and companionship, which Pym's earlier excellent single women like Belinda, Mildred, Jessie, and Catherine have vainly struggled to achieve through their unsatisfactory attachments to their abnormally unfeeling men, such as Henry, Everard, Fabian, and Tom Mallow. As if wishing to correct her own mistakes--her often impulsive and infatuous loves for the men who were not worthy, Pym vicariously relives her love-life by giving her last heroine a chance to make up for her error of judgment and her wasted emotions in her attachment to Graham and by offering her a man who is

worthy of the love of a good woman.

The irony of situation is finally resolved through Pym's creation of a sensible man who appreciates an excellent woman's inner beauty beneath her plain-looking appearance. The irony of dilemma may not likely occur in the union of the considerate and mature man and woman, because their relationship is based upon mutual understanding and common need for emotional closeness, not the kind of unsuitable attachment between the reckless man and woman whose momentary and impulsive passions have driven them to marriage and following disenchantment. The ending of the novel shows that Pym, the born romantic, who has disguised herself as the ironist for her self-defense, unveils her true self in her last novel. In describing the future relationship between Emma and Tom at the end of the novel, the narrator's tone is direct and optimistic rather than skeptical and ironic, the tone which Mildred in *Excellent Women* assumed in telling about the nature of her attachment to Everard. It is after all Pym, the romantic, who grants Emma Howick the same blessing that Jane Austen awards Emma Woodhouse at the end of her novel--Mr. Knightley, a single woman's model hero; and Tom Dagnall in *A Few Green Leaves* is the closest twentieth-century version of Mr. Knightley in Pym's fictional world.

Not only is *A Few Green Leaves* significant in tracing the development and change in Pym's attitudes toward love-

marriage relations, but the novel is also important in revealing the author's views of religion, the clergy, and the church. Although many main events and characters in Pym's novels had been closely related to the church, she had been rather evasive about religion. In her final novel, however, Pym raises serious questions about the position of the church in modern British society, in which many traditional values including faith have been lost in the course of the two World Wars and rapid industrialization. In her early novels, the church was a center of the community. Jumble sales, Christmas bazaars, weddings, evening lectures, and various social gatherings took place over endless cups of tea. But, in her later novel, *A Quartet in Autumn* written in the mid '70s, the church is shown only as a marginal place, which is attended by a small number of people, and the clergyman in the novel plays an insignificant role. In her other two later novels, *The Sweet Dove Died* and *An Academic Question*, the church disappears completely. In *A Few Green Leaves*, by reintroducing a clergyman as a major character, Pym attempts to search for the meaning of the church and faith in the modern world. When Miss Olive Lee, an elderly village resident in the novel, says, "we haven't got any kind of centre to the village now" (116), she becomes a spokesperson for the author, who regretfully sees the decline or disappearance of the church as "the central social

institution" (Nardin 54) in the midst of "the advance of modern technology" (234) and in "the rise of the consumer society" (110).

Pym's observations of the decline of the church as a center of the community are well reflected in Tom's sense of inadequacy and his struggle to define his place as a spiritual leader in the village. Tom knows that only a small number of the parishioners attend church regularly, and "very few would be at Evensong" (6). The narrator satirically tells how modern medicine has replaced the function of the church:

Monday was always a busy day at the surgery . . .
"They"--the patients--had not on the whole been to church the previous day, but they atoned for this by a devout attendance at the place where they expected not so much to worship, though this did come into it for a few, as to receive advice and consolation. You might *talk* to the rector, some would admit doubtfully, but he couldn't give you a prescription. There was nothing in churchgoing to equal that triumphant moment when you came out of the surgery clutching the ritual scrap of paper.

(13)

Dr. Gellibrand, the old physician in the village, looks "more like a clergyman than the rector did" (18). Even Tom himself grants the old doctor "his privileged position in

the village as a kind of leader of the community equal to or even above that of his own" (22). When Tom happens to see Dr. Gellibrand in the de Tankerville family mausoleum, the doctor says to him, "funny that we should meet here . . . but after all, you and I are rather in the same line of business, aren't we?" (106). Tom broods over the difference: "whereas the doctor's study was full, the rector's study was empty" (107). Even the rector's sister regards a doctor as "the most important person" (49) in the village. To make Tom's situation worse, Martin Shrubsole, a young doctor in the village, who lives in a cottage too small for his family of six, covets the rectory. Martin and Avice, his wife, invite him to supper one evening and hint that the rectory may be too big for one person:

"Have you ever thought of moving to somewhere smaller?" Avice asked.

"Well, no. It *is* the rectory, after all, and I suppose as rector I'm expected to live in it."

"I believe some clergy are getting smaller houses" Avice went on. . . .

"There are those bungalows going up opposite the church," Martin declared.

"Oh yes--where those old cars were dumped." Was he being sarcastic? Martin wondered--equating himself, as rector of a country parish, with a worn-out and dumped old motor-car? (185-86)

Although Tom feels inadequate and appears weak and ineffectual, his attitudes toward the parishioners show that he is the most modest, considerate, and mature clergyman Pym has ever created in her novels, which have often shown insensitive, self-centered, vain, and pompous clergymen, just like Pym's other male characters. When some of the members of the church council suggest that there should be more strict rules to be enforced by the rector which restrain the excesses of the village mourners in the churchyard, Tom just smiles,

admitting that of course there were certain rules, but who was he to attempt to apply them, to act in what would undoubtedly seem a high-handed and unfeeling manner towards fellow human beings at a time of sadness, still suffering the grief of bereavement? (104)

Tom is a clergyman who believes that what is the most important to people should be what counts the most to the clergy and the church. It is not the rigid doctrines or the neat churchyard decorated with the gravestones of "good taste" (104) but "a common humanity" (104) and compassion for people in grief and in need that matter most to Tom. When Tom invites the old doctor to his evening meeting of the history society to make an informal talk about the history of medicine, starting in the seventeenth century, the doctor talks about only "the 'good old days' of the

nineteen thirties before the introduction of the National Health Service" (243). Tom feels disappointed; however, when he notices that people at the tea party after the lecture all look happy, having a good time, Tom says to Emma's mother: "Not quite all I'd hoped for . . . but I think people enjoyed it and I suppose that's the main thing. Isn't that what life's all about?" (244). When Emma expresses "indignation" (233) because some people attend church only at the time of big events such as "funeral, marriage or christening" (233), Tom, "in his kinder and more tolerant way" (233), points out that it gives "a kind of continuity to village life, like seasons--the cutting and harvesting of the crops, then the new sowing and the springing up again" (233). Instead of criticizing the people who seldom come to church, Tom draws an important meaning--a seasonal cycle and a symbolic cycle of birth, growth, death, and regeneration--from their behavior.

In the latter part of the novel, Tom begins to restore his proper position as a religious leader. The novel shows that there are still certain problems which advanced technology and modern medicine cannot solve. For instance, when an elderly woman patient whose "days were numbered" (209) asks Martin, the young doctor in the village, if he believes in "life after death" (209), he is "stunned into silence, indignant at such a question. Then of course he had realised that he couldn't be expected to answer things

like that--it was the rector's business" (209). By pointing out the limitations of science, which is based upon pure facts, data, proofs, and logical reasoning, Pym reaffirms the human need for religion and spiritualism in the face of the mystery of life and death, uncertainty of the after-life, and fear of the unknown. Tom's feeling of security as a spiritual leader comes with his being in charge of Miss Lickerish's funeral ceremony:

With Miss Lickerish's death, Tom felt that he came into his own . . . it was now obvious that there were some situations that only the clergy could manage properly. The doctors had done their part and it was now over to Tom. (229)

During the Christmas season, Tom is "pleased to see that there was a larger congregation than usual" (238) at the midnight service. At the end of the novel, Tom sees his rectory, which has been empty, crowded with his parishioners, enjoying the evening lecture and tea time. Moreover, he finally finds the location of the deserted medieval village (D.M.V.) with the unexpected visit of the legendary last governess of the de Tankerville family, Miss Vereker. The last scene, in which he and Emma talk about her future, shows the direction that they are going to take in their relationship. At the end of the novel, Tom is granted his rightful place in the village; his search for D.M.V. is achieved; and the possibility of his future

marriage to Emma is strongly suggested.

The loss of faith, which is a phenomenon pervasive in modern men, is intensively dealt with in chapter twenty-five of the novel. A young male florist, Terry Skate, who previously came to Tom to make an offer to do flower decoration in the mausoleum, visits Tom again to tell him that he is "disinclined to carry on the mausoleum work because he had lost his faith" (198). What has caused the young man to doubt his faith is the religious talks on the TV. Terry says to Tom:

"I mean, university professors and that, and one of them was the reverend somebody or other. But he was wearing a green turtle-neck jumper--I ask you!"

The green turtle-neck jumper rather than the clerical collar seemed to have made a deep and lasting impression on Terry, who went on to complain about the "people like that" coming into your lounge through the media, throwing doubt on what you'd been taught to believe. (199)

Tom realizes, "Terry wasn't really all that worried about his doubts. He was accepting them--men speaking on the box had swept away his childhood faith and he was not prepared to be reassured by Tom" (199-200).

Although Tom fails to help the young man regain his faith, the author does not close the chapter on a note of

failure. The next scene of the same chapter is the more important than the first in order to understand Pym's view of religion. It is a significant scene especially because the spiritual aspects of religion have never been seriously discussed in the previous novels despite the author's frequent treatment of the clergy and her lifelong commitment to the church of England.

After Tom watches Terry drive off, he returns to the church, where Miss Lee is "doing what she called 'her' brasses and Miss Grundy attending to the flowers on the altar" (200). While he is looking at Miss Lee laboriously rubbing the brasses, Tom wonders

whether Miss Lee had ever "doubts"; if, when rubbing up the brass head of the eagle lecturn, she had ever wondered whether the whole business wasn't an elaborate fiction and asked herself what she was doing here, Sunday after Sunday and even some weekdays, subscribing to something she wasn't sure about. Could he possibly ask her? (201)

Then, suddenly noticing that the lecturn is not made of brass but of wood, Tom asks whether she wishes to have a brass lecturn as some other churches have, the question that is "nothing to do with faith or lack of it but something much simpler" (201). Miss Lee responds,

"Oh no, rector . . . I love that old wooden bird, and I love polishing it. A brass one may

look more brilliant, but wood can be very rewarding, you know, and I think I can flatter myself that nobody can get a better polish on it than I do."

Tom turned aside, humbled by her words. It was almost an idea for a sermon . . . Of course Miss Lee never had doubts! And if she ever had, she was much too well-bred ever to dream of troubling the rector with such a thing. (201-202)

While reaffirming the faith of Miss Lee--and perhaps his as well--Tom sees another elderly devout parishioner, Miss Grundy, decorating the altar with flowers. Tom compliments Miss Grundy on her talent for flowers, which is her "solitary talent" (202): "Roses in November, that's really something!" (202). Miss Grundy answers: "Oh, there are still roses out in our garden . . . and I think these will do another week, with a few more leaves. A few green leaves can make such a difference" (202). Tom again finds "another crumb for a sermon" (202) in her comment on "a few green leaves." Tom realizes that these devoted elderly ladies are "the backbone of England" (39) and preserve the rituals and tradition of the church and the community in "the present industrial situation" (200).

Pym's choice of the title, *A Few Green Leaves*, pinpoints her two perspectives on the church and religion: on the one hand, Pym notes the decline of the church,

attended only by a small number of worshippers; on the other hand, it is these few people, who, with their indefatigable dedication and unshakable faith, keep mystery, spirituality, and old values alive in the godless modern world. It also defines Pym's perspectives on her own life and on life in general in the final stage of her life and career. Compared with the early novel, *A Glass of Blessings*, in which Pym created a heroine who affirmed her life as "a glass of blessings," the title, "a few green leaves," implies a much more modest attitude toward life, and the novel, *A Few Green Leaves*, does present much darker side of life than the early work.

It is, however, not surprising to find the tone of the final novel much more somber than that of *A Glass of Blessings*. Pym had gone through the most frustrating period in her life: countless rejections from many publishers for sixteen years; the humiliations as an unpublished novelist and overwhelming sense of self-doubt about her writing ability; the broken relationship with Richard Roberts, her final romantic attachment; the health-related retirement from the International African Institution after more than twenty-five years of work as assistant editor of its journal; and her physical illness, surgery, and the awareness of her own impending death. What could be worse?

What is surprising is that despite all the bitter experiences and her worsening physical condition, *A Few*

Green Leaves is still the work of an optimist whose life has been built on hope, love, and faith. At the time she wrote the novel, Pym already suspected that it would be her final work and that she had little time left to finish it because of her life-threatening illness. In February 1979, Pym wrote in her diary: "In the afternoon I finished my novel in its first, very imperfect draft. May I be spared to retype and revise it, loading every rift with ore!" (VPE 323). She finished the novel in October 1979 although she did not live to see its publication. Pym died in January 1980. While the vision and the optimism Pym shows in her final novel are more cautious than those of her early work, they are, nevertheless, founded on the more solid ground of hope and faith. It is the hope which can be traced up from her college days when she wrote in the diary: "I have very little faith in mankind now--although Hope does spring eternal in the human breast, especially in Sandra's [the name she had given herself]!" (VPE 40). The hope of the romantic young woman of her early twenties survived all the pain, humiliation, frustration, anger, and disillusionment which life, the "tiresome elderly relative" (LTA 154), had continually brought to her. As she grew older, Pym showed stronger faith in God, the God that "did still move in a mysterious way, even in this day and age" (FGL 68), as both Belinda Bede of her first novel and Tom Dagnall of her last novel believe. It is this faith which prompted Pym in the

last stage of her life to respond to the question, "if she shared Letty's tentative optimism" (Burkhart 116):

"Certainly. One isn't forgotten. One may seem to be. But not by God" (Interview, *Eastern Times*, May 25, 1978, quoted in Burkhart 116).

Just as "a few green leaves can make such a difference" (202), as Miss Grundy says, *A Few Green Leaves* as Pym's final novel does make a great difference in understanding her fictional world and her personal life as a whole. If she had not lived to enjoy the last three years, the short period of her "rediscovery," and to write a novel of reaffirmation of her life and work, *The Sweet Dove Died* and *Quartet in Autumn*, which had been written at her worst time, would have remained her last words. Although these two novels are artistically superb, they understandably took a much more bitter and depressing tone and mood than her last novel, in which the reader can find the truly Pymian styles that had been shown in her early fiction--the curious mixture of comedy and pathos, irony and sympathy, and poignant satire and warm tolerance. As one critic says, *A Few Green Leaves* "draws her fiction neatly to a close The novel serves in part as an *apologia* for Pym's sense of herself and what her achievement in writing has been" (Rossen, *The World of Barbara Pym* 178).

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

In my study of Barbara Pym's novels, the focus has been on the two basic ironies in love-marriage relations: irony of dilemma in which love is not complete without marriage, but marriage inevitably brings romantic love to an end; and irony of situation in which excellent but plain-looking women who have an irresistible longing for love tend to remain unmarried in spite of--or because of--their self-effacing goodness. One, and sometimes both of these two ironies form basic frames in love-marriage relations in most of Pym's novels.

From her first novel, *Some Tame Gazelle*, Pym builds the basic frame of irony of dilemma by contrasting Belinda's unfulfilled but undiminished love for Henry with Agatha's love for him, which has been weakened by their marriage. However, since the lives of the married couples are observed and interpreted mainly by Belinda, who may not always be an objective spectator, it is possible that Belinda's ironic attitude comes from self-justification of her unmarried status.

The irony of dilemma in love-marriage relations in *Excellent Women* is more intense than that in *Some Tame Gazelle* because the disadvantages in both the married and

the unmarried states are more acutely dramatized in *Excellent Women* than in *Some Tame Gazelle*. Irony of situation, in which a good-natured but ordinary-looking woman has little chance to marry, is intensely dramatized in *Excellent Women* by contrasting Mildred with Helena and Mrs. Gray. But the ironic situation is eventually corrected by the revelation of Mrs. Gray's true nature, Julian's acknowledgment of Mildred's good qualities, and her forthcoming marriage to Everard, on whom Helena has had a crush. Despite the heroine's ambivalent attitude toward her prospective marriage to Everard, *Excellent Women* offers a brighter ending than *Some Tame Gazelle*, because Mildred will be given the chance to express her emotions through the legitimate channel, while Belinda is deprived of the satisfactory outlet for her emotional need.

In *Jane and Prudence*, the degree of irony of dilemma in the love-marriage question is the most intense among all of Pym's novels. Jane and Prudence are the most frustrated of all of Pym's heroines who suffer because of the negative aspects of their marital status. Moreover, since the problems of both women are portrayed as the natural by-products of their present situations--married or unmarried--their ironic dilemmas are not correctable. Jane is a discontented wife, not because she has any specific complaints about her husband, but because in human life, disappointment often follows the actualization of one's

dream. Prudence is caught in the middle between longing for romantic love and desire for emotional security. Since she does not understand that her two desires are contradictory, Prudence continuously goes through emotional ups and downs in her "doomed" love affairs. Both Jane and Prudence are stuck in impossible situations, although Jane manages to overcome her discontentment through the acceptance of human limitations.

The development of Pym's heroine from the self-effacing and timid Belinda in *Some Tame Gazelle* to the self-assertive and self-reliant Catherine in *Less Than Angels* reflects the author's growing confidence in her career as a professional writer. While Jessie in *Jane and Prudence*, despite her inner strength, has to depend upon a man for her living, Catherine has achieved financial independence as a writer. Catherine is unique among Pym's heroines because of her self-fulfilling career and earned income, through which the modern woman can gain social and political power. As a result, her ironic dilemmas are different from those of Pym's other female characters. Catherine's dilemmas come from the discrepancy between the sex roles stereotyped by male-dominating society and the reality of the nature and functions of men and women in contemporary society. In her relationship with Tom Mallow, Catherine goes through the modern woman's conflict between her need for love and her desire for self-assertion. Using their relationship, Pym

shows how love can fail when the male is reluctant to accept the change in the sex-role differentiation. At the same time, through the relationship between Catherine and Alaric, Pym also suggests that a male-female relationship can succeed and ironic dilemmas be solved if both the man and the woman attempt to transcend the stereotyped sex roles. *Less Than Angels* shows a significant change in Pym's portrayal of male characters. By depicting the males from the human point of view rather than from the exploited female perspective, Pym suggests that some men may also be victims in the sex-role socialization and may have the same emotional needs and personal struggles as women.

In *A Glass of Blessings*, Pym returns to her favorite subject and focuses on the married woman's dissatisfaction with her life. By using the technique of dramatic irony, Pym fictionalizes the theory that the heroine's ironic dilemmas can be resolved through her painful but eye-opening self-discovery. While Pym's previous novels emphasize the shortcomings of the male characters and the unsatisfactory circumstances in depicting the dilemmas of the female characters, *A Glass of Blessings* concentrates on its heroine's serious flaws in personality rather than on her ironic situations. Therefore, the ironic tension in love-marriage relations comes to an end when the heroine changes her views of her life and marriage. As a result, the novel offers the most satisfying and believable happy ending among

all of Pym's works.

In her last novel, *A Few Green Leaves*, Pym again presents the irony of situation through Graham's preference for Claudia, who is pretty but selfish, over Emma, who is sensible but plain-looking. However, this irony of situation is finally resolved through the creation of a sensible man who values an excellent woman's inner beauty over her plain appearance. The relationship between Graham and his wife forms irony of dilemma in which marriage is the end of romantic love, just as the marriage between Rocky and Helena does. At the same time, Pym offers a solution for this irony of dilemma through the union of the considerate and mature man and woman. The relationship between Emma Howick and Tom Dagnall is based upon mutual understanding and common need for love rather than on physical attraction, momentary passion, and self-serving narcissistic desire, as is often the case in the male-female relationships in Pym's novels.

In *A Few Green Leaves*, Pym is more straightforward in revealing her heroine's never-dying longing for romantic love and marriage than she in her earlier novels. Emma, the heroine of Pym's last novel, gradually changes from a detached observer and anthropologist to a romantic dreamer thinking about the possibility of marrying Tom Dagnall and writing a romantic novel. In her earlier novels, Pym deliberately attempts to denigrate the romantic idea of

marriage as the ultimate fulfillment of ideal love. Mildred in *Excellent Women*, for instance, is a product of the author's sense of irony. Mildred frequently undervalues her relationships with men, and she is always ready for self-mockery. While Mildred's tone at the end of *Excellent Women* remains ironic in describing the nature of her forthcoming marriage to Everard, the narrator's tone in *A Few Green Leaves* is not ironic but hopeful in telling the reader about the possibility of the marriage between Emma and Tom. It is true that Emma is more cautious and more detached in her relationship with her male friends than Pym's first heroine, Belinda, who endures Henry's indifference to her unconditional and unreturned love for him. Nevertheless, Emma's honest admission of her need for love and her positive attitude toward her future relationship with Tom at the end of the novel reflect Pym's real attitude toward emotional closeness between men and women.

Crampton Hodnet, *No Fond Return of Love*, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, and *An Academic Question* have been excluded from the main chapters of my study; for, although they deal with the major themes relevant to my study, they do not come up to Pym's best standards. I have also excluded two novels, *The Sweet Dove Died* and *Quartet in Autumn*, because their major themes are not quite relevant to the theses of this study, although both novels are of a high quality.

Pym began to write *Crampton Hodnet* in 1939 and finished

its rough draft in 1940. While returning to her first novel, *Some Tame Gazelle*, for several laborious revisions, Pym left the manuscript of *Crampton Hodnet* in its first draft. Based upon some notes and emendations that Pym made about the novel in 1939 and in the 1950s, her literary executor edited and had it posthumously published in 1985. Like Pym's major novels, *Crampton Hodnet* also shows the ironic dilemmas that both married and single women face. The marriage between Margaret and Francis Cleveland, both in their fifties lacks romantic love. Margaret's life is centered on housework and her only child, Anthea; and she does not even question what is missing in her marriage. On the other hand, Francis, a tutor at Oxford University, feels neglected by his wife and his daughter and attempts to find passionate love in his attachment to Barbara Bird, one of his pupils. Through the relationship between Francis and Barbara Bird, Pym shows how the actualization of one's dream often leads to disappointment. Barbara Bird, who cherishes a romantic idea of platonic love, runs away from Francis when he shows a desire for physical intimacy. At the same time, Francis, who has been accustomed to the security and comfort provided by his wife, is also disenchanted with the immature girl of twenty; and instead of being hurt by Barbara Bird, he gladly returns to his wife when the frightened, timid girl leaves him. Through the creation of Jessie as a self-effacing character, Pym dramatizes the

irony of situation in which the good-natured and intelligent woman is totally ignored by men who value women for their physical appearance. As a frustrated romantic idealist, Jessie in *Crampton Hodnet* is a precursor of Jessie in *Jane and Prudence*, who changes to a ruthless and pragmatic manipulator.

The two basic ironies--irony of dilemma and irony of situation--in *Crampton Hodnet* are presented through the technique of dramatic irony for its intensive comic effect. In fact, the novel is the funniest of all of Pym's novels. Nevertheless, comedy in *Crampton Hodnet* lacks the thematic seriousness which makes Pym's comedy meaningful and poignant. Pym's overuse of dramatic irony and comic effect causes damage to the balance between comedy and seriousness, thereby making the novel a farce rather than a more subtle and mature work of art. To produce her best work, revision is a necessary step, especially for Pym, and one can only guess at the strength of the novel if Pym had taken the time to revise it.

No Fond Return Of Love (1961), Pym's sixth novel, shows her strong confirmation of the validity of the ordinary people's lives, which have been ignored totally or treated only as marginal in the world of fiction. Pym again reverses the usual pattern of traditional love-relations in the romantic novels and focuses on the ordinary spinsters' dreams and disappointments in their relationships with men.

Compared with other writers' works, *No Fond Return of Love* is definitely unique; however, compared with Pym's other novels, it is not an original novel in its themes, characters, and patterns. It is true that the narrations and dialogues in the novel are still full of typically Pymian comedy, wit, irony, understatement, and satire which make its reading a pure joy. Nevertheless, the novel lacks something new that fully justifies its creation. The relationship between Dulcie and Aylwin is similar to that between Mildred and Everard in *Excellent Women*; and the relationship between Aylwin and his wife, Marjorie, is similar to that between Rocky and Helena. Moreover, unlike Pym's previous novels, *No Fond Return of Love* lacks artistic unity between theme and structure. Marjorie's impulsive elopement with another man almost at the end of the novel and the unnatural happy ending for the heroine produce a poorly organized plot. At the end of the novel when Aylwin suddenly realizes the value of the sensible woman and decides to propose to her, he is too inconsistent to be believable considering his character development.

Pym's seventh novel, *An Unsuitable Attachment*, was rejected by the publisher in 1963. Since Jonathan Cape had published all of her previous novels with some moderate success, the rejection was an unexpected "bitter blow" (VPE 215) and "horror" (CS 385) to her. She sent the manuscript to several other publishers--sometimes even under a

different name. However, more rejections and humiliations followed her attempts to publish.

Why did the novel suddenly fail to be accepted? This is a question raised again and again by Pym, her close friends and fans, and her critics. It is true that a main reason for the sudden rejection lies in "the effect of the so-called Swinging Sixties" (VPE 213), which made "novels like *An Unsuitable Attachment*, despite their qualities . . . difficult to sell" (VPE 217), as Longmans wrote when returning the manuscript to her. In 1982, when the novel was posthumously published, it was commercially successful. Nevertheless, compared with Pym's other novels, *An Unsuitable Attachment* is below her standards. Unlike her previous novels, it "does lack a central character with whom one can 'identify'" (VPE 246), as Pym herself admitted. The novel also lacks a central theme. According to the title of the novel, the seemingly unsuitable attachment between Ianthe and John is intended to be a major plot. However, these supposedly central characters hardly share with Pym's other protagonists their definite or appealing personalities. Instead, other minor characters, such as Sophia, Penelope, and Rupert, are more intriguing and interesting. The lack of focus in plot and characters damages the effectiveness of the major theme of the novel, if there is one. Pym had never been a romantic novelist, nor did she intend to be one. She even expressed her

dissatisfaction with the lack of "humour and irony" (VPE 280) in romantic novels which she read as one of the judges for the 1974 Romantic Novelists Association award. Moreover, Ianthe is too "stiff" (VPE 222) to become a heroine of a romantic novel. On the other hand, if there is an irony in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, which aspect does Pym focus on for the ironic effect? Does the irony lie in the discrepancy between the ideally suitable man for Ianthe and the man she actually marries? John is not bad enough to make that situation ironic. The attachment between Ianthe and John is not as unsuitable as Pym intended it to be. Consequently, *An Unsuitable Attachment* turns out to be neither an exciting romantic love story nor a humorous comic novel with poignant irony.

The Sweet Dove Died, which was written from 1963 through 1969, portrays the most bitter and grim aspects of male-female relationships in Pym's novels. The novel deals with the relationship of a woman in her late forties with a man in his twenties and is based upon Pym's own attachment to a younger man, Richard Roberts, although the heroine, Leonora Eyre, is an entirely different person from her creator. The novel was written during the worst period in Pym's life--when she was rejected by her publishers and was breaking off with the young man. Besides, Pym deliberately attempted to "leave out boring cosiness and concentrate on the darker sides" (VPE 244), following the contemporary

literary climate. As a result of that, a pessimistic and tragic tone overweighs her usual comic and ironic spirit.

The major theme of *The Sweet Dove Died* is women's need for love, which is the common theme in Pym's fiction. However, what is unusual is that the novel focuses on the choices women tend to make when they cannot find normal love-objects. One choice is that in order for a woman to fulfill her basic need for love, she must endure the humiliation by her exploitative lover. The other choice is that in order to preserve their serenity and dignity, some women force themselves to suppress their natural feelings and to reject the company of men completely. The middle-aged Meg, Leonora's friend, chooses the first by forgiving and accepting Colin, a homosexual young man, who repeatedly leaves her for his lover and returns to her when he needs motherly love. Leonora's neighbor, Liz, who is divorced because her husband "behaved . . . appallingly" (SDD 26), has "a great contempt and dislike for men" (SDD 66). She now loves cats more than she loves people because animals do not betray her. Liz cuts herself off from the world of men, as does heroine at the end of the novel. When James, a bisexual young man, leaves Leonora for his American lover, Nick, she feels hurt and the damage done to her ego is irreparable. When James again seeks her motherly comfort and affection and returns to her when Nick has deserted him, the betrayed Leonora turns down his friendship for the sake

of her self-preservation.

In *The Sweet Dove Died*, Pym does not suggest her typical tentative optimism or indefinite hope at the end of the novel, nor does she offer the "mixed blessing" (Strauss-Noll 78) which Mildred in *Excellent Women*, Jessie in *Jane and Prudence*, and Dulcie in *No fond Return of Love* have in their attachments to their men. Nobody in the novel is happy, and everyone involved in human relationships is hurt. As one critic says, *The Sweet Dove Died* is "Pym's most pessimistic . . . view of the humiliating extremes to which people must sometimes go in order to satisfy their need for 'something to love'" (Nardin 124); and it is actually Pym's only novel that belongs to a pure tragedy in its themes, characters, moods, and ending.

Despite the "stronger theme" (VPE 213) of the novel, no publisher in the '60s was willing to give it a try. Unlike *No Fond Return of Love* and *An Unsuitable Attachment*, which decline in their artistic qualities, *The Sweet Dove Died* is definitely one of Pym's best novels in its in-depth exploration of human relationships and isolation, its convincing and persuasive characterization, its well-structured plot, and its effective use of symbols and images aesthetically tied together with the major themes and characters of the novel. The fact that the novel was "no. 3 in the *Sunday Times* Best Sellers List" (VPE 319) when it was published in 1978 after her "rediscovery," shows how

unreliable the fiction market can be in evaluating either the quality or the commercial value of a writer's work. Although the novel is a superb work of art, I have decided not to include it in the main chapters of my study; for my major subjects are Pym's ironic treatment of love-marriage relationships and her heroines' ambivalent attitudes toward their men, whereas the author's vision in *The Sweet Dove Died* is tragic rather than ironic, and the heroine of the novel lacks a sense of ironic detachment.

After writing a draft of *An Academic Question* in 1970 and 1971, Pym abandoned the novel in order to concentrate on the next novel, *Quartet in Autumn*. Based upon the two drafts which Pym left (one was written in the first-person point of view; the other in the third-person), her literary executor edited *An Academic Question* and had it published in 1986, six years after Pym's death. It is, as Pym wrote, a "novel about a provincial university . . . told by the youngish wife of a lecturer" (VPE 263). Caroline, the heroine and narrator of the novel, is like Wilmet in *A Glass of Blessings*, who feels a sense of uselessness; for, despite her university education, she has no career, and her only child is well taken care of by a live-in baby sitter. The main theme of the novel is the same as that of *A Glass of Blessings*: the married woman's struggle to be useful but in the more modern settings. Nursing homes and social workers replace the church, which disappears as a major social

institution in post-war British society. Bad influences of radio and TV--sex and violence--become a serious issue for discussion in the community. The heroine's sister, who lives with her boy friend, has an abortion because he does not want to get married. While working in an old people's home as a volunteer, the heroine, who wants to be useful to her husband, helps him steal a valuable manuscript from an old, nearly blind scholar and missionary. Because of the new information in the manuscript, her husband gets a promotion in his department. Pym shows the power struggle and the petty competition for publication among the university professors, some of whom are willing to do whatever it takes to have their papers published and to be promoted.

An Academic Question contains Pym's usual mixture of comedy, humor, pathos, irony, and satire, which make her reader always welcome her work. Pym wrote the novel during the rejection period for her own pleasure and for her "immediate circle of friends" (Hazel Holt's introductory note on *An Academic Question*); therefore, the unrevised novel could hardly come up to the high quality of *A Glass of Blessings*. The themes are not fully developed, and the main characters do not have interesting, definite personalities. Caroline in *An Academic Question* is only a pale version of Wilmet in *A Glass of Blessings*.

Quartet in Autumn was written between 1973 and 1976,

again with "no real hope of getting it published" (CS 385). The novel is based upon Pym's own experiences during the later stage of her life. In addition to rejection and failure she felt in her life in general and in her career in particular, Pym had to retire because a temporary stroke caused her inability to read and write correctly. Besides, she was operated on for breast cancer and had to make frequent, regular visits to the hospital. In *Quartet in Autumn*, a story "about four people in their sixties--two men and two women--working in a London office" (CS 385), Pym wanted to

write about the problems and difficulties of this stage in one's life and also to show its comedy and irony--in fact I'd rather put it the other way round: my main concern was with the comedy and irony, the problems and difficulties having been dealt with almost excessively . . . elsewhere.

(CS 385-86)

Nevertheless, the dominating mood and tone of the novel is sad, gloomy, and somber. Aside from *The Sweet Dove Died*, *Quartet in Autumn* is "less light-hearted" (CS 386) than any of Pym's other novels. Letty, who has never been married and retires from her obscure office-clerk position, is Pym's spokesperson and her most "unachieving" character (Nardin 12). Letty frequently suffers from a feeling of inadequacy, uselessness, and "nothingness" (QA 114, 128) because she

feels that she has achieved nothing: no experience of love, no husband, no family, no house, no definite career, and no close friend. More often than not, a sense of failure and loneliness overwhelms Letty, although she lives--or tries to live--"very much in the present, holding neatly and firmly on to life, coping as best as she could with whatever it had to offer, little though that might be" (QA 25).

The novel depicts the lives of four aging ordinary people--their helplessness and loneliness, their attempt or failure to connect, their unique or eccentric private worlds, and their desperate efforts to maintain self-sufficiency and dignity in the threat of physical and mental weakness, illness, and death. Beneath their failures to connect or their denials of their needs to make contact, their subconscious deep longings for human contact emerge gradually, if awkwardly and slowly. Marcia's death makes the other three realize that they are still "very much alive" (QA 191), and the event finally brings them together. Pym suggests that life can still hold "infinite possibilities for change" (QA 218) in the midst of the seemingly hopeless situations. Despite the grim nature of its subjects and its pervasive gloomy mood, the novel, unlike *The Sweet Dove Died*, is a story about survivors rather than losers; it is a story about courage, dignity, hope, and solidarity of ordinary people in the face of alienation, loss, despair, and death. Moreover, *Quartet in*

Autumn, whose central characters are old people, is not just a novel about the aged, but it is essentially a novel about "humanity, in which we all share" (QA 205) and "the ordinary responsibility for one human being towards another" (QA 79).

Quartet in Autumn, Pym's last novel written during the period of rejection, is the first novel published after her rediscovery; and one month after it was published in 1977, the novel was shortlisted for the Booker Prize (VPE 291). With *The Sweet Dove Died*, *Quartet in Autumn* is "a small masterpiece" (*Chicago Tribune Book World*, quoted in the dust jacket on the Dutton edition of the novel) produced in Pym's later career. The central themes are well developed and effectively dramatized through the penetrating--almost naturalistic--descriptions of the world in which each major character lives day by day. The characterization of each main character is so consistent and convincing through his or her thoughts, dialogues, and actions that one does not even doubt the credibility of Marcia's eccentric, suicidal personality and behavior. The quartet structure of the novel, borrowed from musical harmonics, is Pym's highest achievement in the art of fiction as "an organic form" (James 84). The recurrent symbols and images make a smooth and natural transition from a scene about one major character to that about another. Moreover, the use of the poetic language unifies the four different points of view and intensifies the major themes of the novel. Despite its

being a work of high artistic quality, however, I decided not to include the novel in my main chapters since the central themes of *Quartet in Autumn* are aging, death, loneliness, need for human contact, and common responsibility and humanity for other people.

Through the effective use of irony, Pym has succeeded in creating "a distinctive voice" (CS 388), which she wanted to develop in her novels. Her keen sense of irony and comedy has helped her and her readers see the seemingly or genuinely upsetting events from a different perspective--the perspective which enables one to laugh and release the tension in the face of overwhelmingly painful experiences. For Pym, irony has been a defensive weapon against disenchantment and disappointment in life.

What makes Pym's fictional world unique is that while her ironic detachment toward her subjects has prevented her from falling into naïve romanticism, pathetic sentimentalism, self-pity, or pretentious didacticism, it has not made her lose compassion and love for people. Neither has her ironic spirit made her lose hope for the future or faith in God. Behind the mask of a wary and wry ironist is hidden a passionate romantic who believes in life's infinite possibility and who dreams of the ideal relationship between men and women. Pym refuses to give up hope and belief in God, no matter how depressing life appears to her. Because of this stoical optimism persistent

in her fictional world, Pym's novels are admirably sound and "sane" (Burkhart 6) despite her poignant irony and satire about human nature, conditions, and relationships. Although Pym's novels deal with similar circumstances and characters, and their scopes and scales are small and limited, they will continue to attract and appeal to the readers, giving them pleasure and comfort because of her acute sense of irony which never fails to see the discrepancies between human wishes and life's harsh realities; her comic dramatizations of the ironic contradictions and disillusionment in human experiences; her enduring healthy optimism despite her awareness of difficulties and frustrations in life; her strong affirmation of the validity of the ordinary people's lives; and her stoical and courageous effort to hang on to life, no matter how hopeless it may appear.

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