

Excellent Women Study Guide

Excellent Women by Barbara Pym

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Contents

Excellent Women Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1-6.....	4
Chapters 7-12.....	8
Chapters 13-18.....	11
Chapters 19-23.....	14
Chapters 24-27.....	17
Characters.....	20
Objects/Places.....	23
Social Sensitivity.....	25
Techniques.....	26
Themes.....	27
Style.....	29
Quotes.....	32
Topics for Discussion.....	34
Literary Precedents.....	35
Related Titles.....	36
Copyright Information.....	40



Plot Summary

"Excellent Women" by Barbara Pym is the story of Mildred Lathbury, an unmarried woman just over the age of 30. Mildred is an average woman with mousy brown hair who puts little thought into her appearance or outward image. Mildred lives in a flat in London and has a career as a social worker at the Society for Aged Gentlewomen. Mildred's needs are few so she only works in the mornings at the Society and spends her afternoons doing work for St. Mary's Church as well as helping the pastor, Julian Malory, and his sister, Winifred, with various tasks.

As the daughter of a clergyman, Mildred is well-versed in the needs and traditions of the church. Having grown up in a vicarage, Mildred knows the importance of service. Unfortunately, that characteristic often takes over and Mildred spends a lot of time doing work for other people instead of focusing on her life and relationships. While service is an admirable thing, Mildred often takes it to extremes and many people may see her as being one who interferes in other people's business. Mildred begins to realize this when people begin to request help from Mildred in areas with which she is not comfortable. At one point Mildred tells a friend that she is tired of taking on other people's burdens.

The story also revolves around the concept of excellent women, those who are sensible and capable enough to live life on their own terms. In a society that values marriage, and often looks down on the unmarried as being unworthy, Mildred often finds it hard to maintain any sense of self-esteem or worth.

Julian and Winifred Malory play a large part in the story. The brother and sister are Mildred's closest friends in London, and they spend a large amount of time together. The relationship falters when the Malorys take in a tenant, a widow who captures Julian's heart. This relationship causes jealousy in Mildred, who must confess to herself that she has feelings for the pastor.

Helena and Rocky Napier also play integral roles in the story. Mildred first meets Helena, when the woman moves into the flat across the hall. Helena is a vivacious woman, who is devoted to her career in anthropology. The idea of a career woman who has no desire to take part in the activities of her husband or to care for her home is shocking to Mildred. Shortly after the women meet, Rocky Napier returns home from military service in Italy. Unlike Mildred's first impressions of Helena, Mildred finds Rocky fascinating, charming, and attractive. Rocky and Mildred become friends.

It is clear that Rocky and Helena are not compatible as man and wife and after a heated argument, Helena leaves. Mildred gives in to the wishes of Rocky and then Helena and helps the couple reconcile.

In seeing the turbulent nature of the Napiers' marriage Mildred begins to believe that perhaps the others were right in saying that a woman does not need to marry in order to have a full life.



Chapters 1-6

Chapters 1-6 Summary

"Excellent Women" by Barbara Pym begins with the main character, Mildred Lathbury, watching as a new neighbor moves into the flat below her own. Mildred lives in a three story apartment building in a less than posh London neighborhood. On the bottom floor is a number of offices, on the second floor is the newly occupied flat, and the top floor belongs to Mildred. Mildred had moved into the flat with a schoolmate, Dora, after her parents died. Mildred was raised in a vicarage in the country, the only daughter of a clergyman and his wife. Mildred's parents died and Mildred decided to take a flat in London with Dora and go to work at the Society for Aged Gentlewomen. Since then, Dora moved out to the country to teach at a Catholic girls' school.

All in all, Mildred is a mousy woman who cares much more about others than her appearance or herself. Being raised in a vicarage has instilled very strong and deep Christian behaviors in Mildred, who lives by an extremely strict moral code. Many of Mildred's behaviors often seem archaic and overly proper.

Mildred and the new neighbor, Mrs. Helena Napier, meet in the basement by the dustbins. This chance encounter embarrasses Mildred as it does not seem at all proper to have a first meeting while carrying garbage. Mrs. Napier is a light-haired woman, who dresses in bright corduroy trousers and a cheerful jersey. In comparison, Mildred refers to herself as mousy and plain in shapeless clothes. Mildred is quick to point out to the reader that she is nothing like Jane Eyre, although she does choose to tell her story in the first person. Mrs. Napier tells Mildred that her husband is in the Army and will be joining her soon.

Mrs. Napier tells Mildred about her work as an anthropologist. Mildred has no idea what an anthropologist does, but it still sounds fascinating all the same. The part that especially fascinates Mildred is when Mrs. Napier says that her husband is living in Italy, and she has recently returned from Africa. Although Mildred is captivated by Mrs. Napier, she bears a sense of disdain over the woman's lack of domestication. Mildred sternly reminds herself that this attitude is not one of Christian charity. Mildred was born and raised in the country, the daughter of a minister and his wife. After her parents died within two years of each other, Mildred connected with an old school friend with whom she eventually shared an apartment. Because Mildred is over 30, and unmarried, there is a stigma of becoming a spinster, a role which Mildred does not dislike.

St. Mary's Church is the place of worship for Mildred and as an unmarried woman she becomes good friends with the pastor and his older sister. Mildred has dinner at the vicarage on a regular basis. The food is not very good but neither the pastor, nor his sister seems to notice because there are much more interesting things to think and talk about. Julian Malory, a man of about 40 years old, is the pastor. Both Julian and his sister are tall, angular and thin. Winifred is especially eager and high strung with a



sense of awkwardness about her. The woman has good intentions, but has little skill in a domestic role, and her hard work tends to suffer from lack of skill, but not from enthusiasm. Mildred finds it odd that more people do not dote on Julian, especially since he is an unmarried pastor. There is a look about him that can be somewhat forbidding and Mildred surmises that perhaps this is the reason no one has ever knitted a sweater or scarf for him.

Over dinner, Mildred tells the Malorys about Mrs. Napier, and in return, the Malorys tell her of an unexpected donation from an anonymous source. There is much excitement from the Malorys and the discussion is lengthy.

The Malorys decide that their house is too large for just the two of them and it does not seem fair that there are many people who need a place to live. The brother and sister have decided to rent the rooms on the second floor and ask Mildred if she is interested. Mildred says that while it would be lovely, she opts to stay in her current apartment. Winifred agrees, saying that it would probably be improper for an unmarried woman to share at the house with an unmarried vicar and his sister.

On the way home from the Malorys, Mildred hears voices from the Napier's apartment. Knowing that Mr. Napier has not yet come home from Italy, Mildred wonders who the male voice longs to and why he would be at the Napier's apartment in the absence of Mr. Napier.

Helena visits Mildred and tells her that Mr. Napier is coming home from Italy. Helena is not terribly keen on her husband returning from the military particularly because the couple has nothing in common. Mr. Napier does not care about anthropology, which upsets Helena. Helena confesses that she and Rocky felt an instant passionate connection when they met and never stopped to learn much about each other before they married.

Mildred finds out the identity of the male voice she had heard in the Napier apartment. It belongs to Everard Bone, an anthropologist and colleague to Helena. Bone and Helena were both on the trip to Africa and have decided to write a professional paper on the experience. Both are members of the Learned Society, a fact that deeply impresses Mildred.

A telegram arrives at the apartment announcing Mr. Napier's arrival. Since Helena is not home, the delivery man takes the telegram to Mildred's flat. Mildred knows that Helena is not home and feels that it is important to find a way to get in touch with her. Mildred remembers Everard Bone and thinks that perhaps he and Helena are working on the paper. Mildred calls Bone's home and speaks to his mother. Mrs. Bone says that Everard is at a meeting at the pre-historic society and Mildred assumes that Helena is probably with him.

Rockingham Napier arrives home and Mildred is the one to greet him at the door. Rockingham is a tall, handsome man who carries himself with the distinct air of a military man. Mildred instantly finds Rockingham handsome and charming.



The Napiers' doors are open and the pair enters the flat. Rockingham seems to be thrilled to be at home amongst his things and tells Mildred he is not surprised that Helena is not there to greet him. Rockingham confesses that Helena is not at all domestic and he would never expect to come home to a meal. Mildred finds Rockingham increasingly attractive and worldly.

Mildred goes to the Malorys' house to help Winifred with the church jumble sale. Winifred tells Mildred that they found a tenant to rent the upper rooms of the house. The woman, Mrs. Gray, is the widow of a clergyman. Although Mrs. Gray is technically a single woman, it is considered proper for her to live with the Malorys, because her husband was also in the clergy.

On Ash Wednesday, Mildred attends mass at a church near her office at the Censorship. Mildred is surprised to see Everard Bone at mass. If Bone recognizes Mildred, he does not let on. Mildred tries to decide if she should mention Bone's presence at mass to the Napiers. Later that evening, Mildred hears the Napiers bickering as she goes upstairs to her flat.

Rocky invites Mildred to come downstairs for a visit. After considering the oddity of seeing Everard, Mildred decides to mention seeing Bone at the mass at St. Ermin's Church. Helena is somewhat defensive, asking if Mildred thinks all anthropologists were atheists. Mildred says that she never thought about the religious affiliation of anthropologists at all but suspects that some may choose to worship the religious traditions of the ancients. This comment seems to appease Helena slightly. Helena says that Bone became a devout convert while working on one of the jobs before he went to Africa.

Chapters 1-6 Analysis

Mildred Lathbury is a reserved country girl who has moved to a less than desirable part of London. As the daughter of a clergyman, Mildred has very strong ideas about what is proper for a woman and particularly, what is appropriate for an unmarried woman just over the age of 30. Although Mildred was eager to move to London there are still parts of her that belong in the country and she often seems uneasy with the more liberal attitudes of the people she meets. Mildred is devoted to Christian charity and is always willing to help a person in need.

As a devout Christian, Mildred finds St. Mary's Church a place of worship which suits her needs. Additionally, Mildred makes friends with the pastor, Julian Malory, and his older sister, Winifred. The Malorys are both in their 40s and unmarried. Oddly enough, the marital status of Winifred Malory does not seem to be a topic of conversation although many people in the congregation and the town find it strange that Julian Malory is not married and his sexuality often comes into question. Mildred is not one to think along such lines and ignores the comments. The only time Mildred considers any romantic relationship in regards to Julian is when it is determined that Mildred living in the same house with the Malorys would be considered improper.



There is much about Mildred that could be considered proper. The woman definitely has opinions about what is and is not appropriate, almost leaning toward prudish.

Mildred's first meeting with Helena Napier is somewhat embarrassing as it takes place next to the dustbins in the basement. Mildred feels it is in bad taste to meet a new neighbor while carrying waste baskets. Although Mildred is fascinated by Helena's career, dress and personality, there is something about the woman that Mildred does not like. One of the initial reasons for Mildred's disdain of Helena Napier is the fact that the woman is delighted by her own domestic ineptitude. Mildred cannot fathom a woman who is disinterested in taking care of her husband and home.

The presence of Everard Bone in the Napiers' flat also bothers Mildred. Mildred cannot imagine why another man should be present while Mr. Napier is still in Italy. When Mr. Napier arrives home, Helena is not present to greet him. This is one more thing that strikes Mildred as odd and inconsiderate.

Mildred immediately likes Mr. Napier. Rockingham Napier is attractive and friendly, seemingly the opposite of Helena. Mildred does not like Everett Bone as he seems as equally patronizing and rude as Helena.



Chapters 7-12

Chapters 7-12 Summary

Mildred goes to the Malory house to help Winifred with the church jumble sale. Winifred is excited to tell Mildred that they found a tenant, a widow by the name of Mrs. Allegra Gray. Mrs. Gray is the widow of a clergyman, the one reason it is appropriate for an unmarried woman to be living in the Malory house along with the unmarried vicar.

Mildred notices immediately that Julian is paying a lot of attention to Mrs. Gray. Remarkably, Mildred discovers that she is jealous, yet when other people comment she is quick to defend Julian by saying he is just being kind to the new parishioner.

Spring arrives and Mildred has her annual lunch date with William Caldicote, Dora's brother. At one time Dora had hoped that Mildred and William would develop a romance. Over the years the relationship turned into more of a friendship. There are many things about William that Mildred likes but there are times when she finds him fussy and pretentious.

Over lunch, William and Mildred talk about Mildred's work with the aged gentlewomen, the arrival of the Napiers, Mrs. Gray, and news from Dora. William immediately assumes that Mildred is upset about the amount of attention and Julian is paying to Mrs. Gray. Williams says that Mildred is an excellent woman, one who should not marry. Excellent women should stay unmarried and enjoy life. After lunch, William takes Mildred to his office at the Ministry for a tour.

On the street Mildred runs into Rocky Napier and they go to afternoon tea. As usual, Mildred finds Rocky charming and cannot understand his relationship with the unconventional Helena.

On Wednesdays when Mildred is at work, she and a coworker often go to St. Ermin's church for services. During the mass Mildred sees Everard Bone. This time, Mildred and Everard speak to one another. The exchange is relatively pleasant.

Mildred has a desire to visit Winifred to catch up on news. Ever since Mrs. Gray moved in, the friends have not seen much of each other. When Mildred arrives, Winifred is in Mrs. Gray's room helping her move in and arrange her things. Mildred agrees to help with the curtains. Julian arrives in time for tea and Mildred sees his affection for Mrs. Gray. Once again, Mildred feels a combination of jealousy and protection and makes an escape.

Helena, Everard, Rocky and Mildred go to the Learned Society to hear the speech on the trip to Africa. Rocky and Mildred sit together in the gallery and watch as interesting people mill around the room while Helena and Everard make their presentation. Mildred is completely lost by the topic and spends her time observing the crowd, including the president's sleeping wife. After the presentation, the group goes out to dinner. Everard



and Helena make no effort to make Mildred feel at home and throughout the meal Mildred feels inferior. When Everard mentions that he is going away for awhile, Helena is visibly upset. Yet later, Helena and Rocky discuss the suitability of Everard as Mildred's husband.

Dora comes to visit over the Easter holiday. When the pair goes shopping Dora makes comments about how Mildred's looks have changed. There is a conversation about giving up on marriage over the age of 30. Dora and Mildred ride atop a double-decker bus to Piccadilly. They see Julian and Allegra Gray, holding hands in public. Dora finds this demonstration somewhat odd and Mildred becomes extremely upset. For the rest of the day Dora and Mildred seem to be at odds.

Rocky comes by Mildred's apartment and invites Dora and Mildred to go for drinks. Dora has a grand time flirting with Rocky while Mildred feels somewhat uncomfortable, particularly since she is not used to drinking alcohol. Both Dora and Rocky tease Mildred about Julian and Everard. Mildred tries to convince them that she is not interested in either, but the protestations go unheard.

Dora and Mildred go to their school reunion where they meet up with old friends and acquaintances. On the way home, Dora and Mildred meet a Wren officer who was stationed in Italy at the same time as Rocky. The woman tells Dora and Mildred about Rocky's numerous affairs, and refers to him as a shallow person. Mildred is shocked by the confession and wonders if Helena knows.

Chapters 7-12 Analysis

Mildred has spent a great deal of her life in service, and never gave much thought to her own romantic relationships. If Mildred had any strong feelings for Julian, it was not apparent to her until Mrs. Gray arrived. Mildred finds herself becoming more and more jealous and protective yet will not admit even to herself that she has strong feelings for the vicar. Mildred is also jealous that Mrs. Gray is the center of attention and has commandeered Winifred's time and affection.

The luncheon with William Caldicote only reinforces Mildred's realization that the two will never be more than friends. William takes great pride in being pretentious and superior. Mildred is surprised when William tells her that she should not marry, and that marriage should be left to those who are less capable and sensible. Williams sees Mildred as an excellent woman, one who is responsible and able to take care of herself, therefore she is not in need of a husband. While Mildred is somewhat flattered by the comment she is also disappointed as William apparently does not see her as the marrying kind.

Mildred continues to see herself as one of the rejected ones, particularly when it comes to Julian. There are also a great number of instances where Mildred feels inferior, particularly in the presence of Helena and Everard. The experience at the Learned



Society, thoroughly intimidates Mildred, and she wishes she was more intelligent and devoted to a fascinating career.

Mildred is glad to see Dora yet the visit reaffirms Mildred's love of living alone. Although Dora is a close friend, she has many habits which irritate Mildred. Among which are Dora's untidiness and negativity regarding Mildred's looks and marriage.

The trip to the school reunion is a pleasant one for Mildred. On the way home, she surprised to meet the Wren officer that was stationed with Rocky. Mildred realizes that she is not the only woman other than Helena that finds Rocky attractive and charming. Mildred wonders if it is common for officers stationed in other countries to have extramarital affairs and if Helena knows about Rocky's indiscretions. The Wren officer says that many soldiers have these kinds of affairs, while others seem completely devoted to their wives and families. Mildred is disheartened to realize that Rocky is a shallow human being.



Chapters 13-18

Chapters 13-18 Summary

Every time Mildred finds herself attracted to Rocky she reminds herself of the Italian girlfriends, hoping that the image will keep her from falling in love.

The parishioners get together to decorate the sanctuary for Whit Sunday. There are traditional roles for each person and the longer one is involved with the church, the more important the role becomes. It is apparent that Allegra has ingratiated herself to Winifred even more as she dares to suggest that the arrangement of the flowers on the altar could be changed to be more attractive. Winifred argues that this is the way it has always been done, and the group is shocked that anyone should try to interfere with the job that has always belonged to Winifred. Winifred's centerpiece is always groups of lilies donated by the congregation's most illustrious member. Allegra takes over, and the new centerpiece become peonies and delphiniums.

Allegra approaches Mildred and asks her to go to lunch. Mildred is taken aback by the offer, curious as to why the woman would want to have lunch with her. Mildred tries to put her own feelings aside and realizes that she should probably get to know Allegra if the woman is going to be an integral member of the church.

During lunch, Allegra tells Mildred that Julian has proposed. Mildred congratulates Allegra. Allegra says that she and Julian were worried that Mildred would be upset so it was appropriate that Mildred was one of the first people to know. Mildred convinces Allegra that she is not in love with Julian and is happy for the couple. During the conversation Allegra surmises what will happen to Winifred when they marry as it would not be appropriate for Winifred to stay in the house with her and Julian. Allegra suggests that Winifred move in with Mildred since they are such good friends. Mildred is so shocked that she is speechless. The idea is so completely inappropriate and absurd that Mildred laughs and refuses.

Mildred runs into Julian and congratulates him on his engagement to Allegra. For the first time in their relationship, Julian seems somewhat uneasy with Mildred and explains that he was concerned about hurting her feelings. Julian says that Winifred had always hoped that Mildred would become his wife. Once again, Mildred says that she is not in love with Julian and is very happy for the couple.

More than ever, Mildred considers herself to be one of the rejected ones. Apparently no one considers her to be the marrying kind.

Rocky comes to Mildred's apartment to visit. Rocky tells Mildred about Italy and makes the offhand comment that perhaps he never should have married Helena.

Mildred runs into Everard on the street as she is coming out of her office. Everard says he was waiting for her and wants to go for drinks. Mildred is horrified and says she is



not appropriately dressed to be in the company of a man but Everard disagrees. Over drinks Everard says that Helena is in love with him, but that the feelings are not returned. Even if Everard did love Helena, he does not believe in divorce and therefore could never marry her.

Everard invites Mildred to have dinner at his mother's house. Before they go Everard warns Mildred that his mother is eccentric. Mildred says that as a clergyman's daughter, she is used to dealing with all kinds of people, and besides, everyone's mother is eccentric in some way. Mrs. Bone is fascinated by birds and worms among other things and chats easily with Mildred. During the conversation Mildred discovers that Mrs. Bone is not a Christian and seems to simply tolerate Everard's conversion. On the way home Everard tells Mildred he admires the way she handled the dinner and his mother.

As Mildred passes by the Napiers' door on her way home she smells burnt potatoes. There is no answer at the door so Mildred goes in and finds a saucepan on the stove with the water boiled out of it and potatoes hopelessly scorched. Rocky says he completely forgot about the potatoes and he is upset because Helena has left him. Rocky knows that Helena is in love with Everard and assumes that she has gone to his flat. Mildred calls Everard to find that Helena is not there. In fact, Everard is going to be leaving town for a while. Mildred relays the news to Rocky and sets about taking care of him in his hour of need.

During the evening Julian appears and seems uneasy, particularly when he finds Rocky in Mildred's apartment. Rocky tells the story about Helena leaving him. Julian slips into the role of a pastor and consoles Rocky. Mildred feels increasingly uncomfortable and escapes to clean up the mess in the Napiers' apartment. While Mildred is cleaning, Helena calls and asks Mildred to pack a suitcase. She has gone to stay with Miss Clovis from the Learned Society. Mildred continues her work and Rocky and Julian go to a local pub to talk.

When Mildred delivers the suitcase to Miss Clovis, the woman says that Rocky is a brute and that it is a good thing Helena has left him. There seems to be no hope of a reconciliation.

Mildred goes to visit Winifred and the two commiserate about their individual situations. Mildred is upset about Rocky and Helena and Winifred is becoming disenchanted with Allegra.

Unable to stand being in the London flat, Rocky goes to the Napiers' cottage in the country. Rocky leaves Mildred in charge of the apartment and the removal of the furniture. Mildred gladly takes on the task.

Mrs. Morris comes to Mildred's apartment and talks about the Napiers' breakup. Mrs. Morris feels that Helena is not a good wife and that men should never be expected to keep house. Mrs. Morris goes on to talk about how it is unnatural for a woman to live alone. The conversation only reinforces Mildred's current belief that excellent women are always left behind. Mildred becomes increasingly sad and upset.



Chapters 13-18 Analysis

Mildred is shocked by Allegra's boldness, particularly when it comes to the decorating of the church. Winifred has always served in the role of the pastor's wife and handles the appropriate jobs. Apparently, Allegra is trying to assume the same role and is edging Winifred out. Although Winifred is obviously upset, Allegra gets her way. The parishioners discuss the event and realize that Allegra must be involved with Julian to a greater degree than they had expected.

Mildred is surprised by Allegra's invitation and the news of the proposal. Mildred works hard to convince Allegra and herself that she is not in love with Julian and is happy for the couple. Mildred is completely astonished when Allegra says that Winifred will need to move out of the vicar's house after the wedding. It is obviously not something that anyone but Allegra has considered. When Allegra suggests that Winifred move into Mildred's apartment, Mildred does not know what to say. Although Winifred is a good friend, Mildred likes living alone, even though many people think it is an unacceptable arrangement.

Mildred is somewhat confused by Everard's actions. When Mildred meets Everard on the street she says that he could have called rather than waiting outside the office. Mildred is somewhat surprised by Everard's confession regarding Helena, especially when he says that he does not love her. It seems that since the paper has been finished Everard is going to take pains to avoid Helena.

It is easy for Mildred to slip into the caretaker position when she finds Rocky upset. Mildred begins to understand that her empathy often overtakes her personality to the point of being considered as interference. Rocky is grateful for Mildred's help and relies heavily on her while he attempts to deal with the fact that Helena is gone.



Chapters 19-23

Chapters 19-23 Summary

Mildred takes great pains to handle the belongings in the Napiers' apartment as Rocky had asked. Rocky's large desk has been infested with worms and Mildred ponders calling Mrs. Bone to find out what one can do with infested furniture.

Miss Clovis invites Mildred to tea and the pair has a long conversation with Helena about her relationship with Rocky. Helena has decided to collect her things from the apartment. Mildred tells Helena about the movers and the items that Rocky had requested to be taken to the cottage. Helena is annoyed as some of those things belong to them as a couple and she wants them back. Helena asks Mildred to write a letter to Rocky asking for the return of some of the furniture. Helena confesses that Everard is out of the picture, although she does love him. Helena also asks Mildred if she cares about Rocky in a romantic sense.

Mildred writes to Rocky at the cottage. Rocky returns the letter and invites Mildred to come to the cottage for a weekend. Mildred says she would love to accept yet Rocky does not indicate a particular date and Mildred feels it is not proper for her to initiate the visit.

Helena goes to live with her mother in Devonshire. Julian, Winifred and Allegra go on holiday together. Mildred feels somewhat lonely and abandoned.

Everard waits for Mildred on the street once again and takes her to lunch. During the lunch Everard asks about Helena and if there are any plans for reconciliation or divorce. The topic of marriage comes up, and Everard is also of the opinion that excellent women are not for marrying. William stops by the table and seems to be jealous about Mildred's lunch with Everard.

Mildred and Dora go on their annual September holiday. This year, they have chosen to go to Devonshire to visit a famous abbey. Mildred loves the abbey and the religious connotations, while Dora feels the entire scene is over-commercialized. The pair goes into the village to have lunch and run into Helena. The three go to tea together, and Helena asks Mildred to write to Rocky right away because she wants him back.

Winifred comes to Mildred's apartment one evening, completely overwrought. It is pouring down rain and Winifred is in her slippers and not wearing a coat. Mildred invites her up to the apartment and learns that Winifred's relationship with Allegra has completely disintegrated. Winifred says she cannot spend another minute in the house with Allegra. When Julian was out with the boys' club, Allegra turned on Winifred and the two argued bitterly. Allegra said many terrible things to which Winifred was too shocked to reply. Winifred says as she wants to live with Mildred. Mildred stumbles, not sure how to convince her friend that everything will work out.



Julian arrives at Mildred's apartment equally upset. Julian tells Mildred and Winifred that the engagement is off. Although Julian had been previously oblivious to Allegra's ways, a huge argument broke out regarding Winifred and Allegra's expectations. Julian says Allegra has left the vicarage. Mildred does her best to comfort her friends.

Mrs. Morris arrives at Mildred's apartment and already knows the news about the breakup. Mrs. Jubbs, the Malorys' cleaner, heard the entire argument. Apparently, Allegra said many horrible things to Winifred and the opinion is that everyone is glad Allegra is gone. Everyone is now wondering if Mildred will marry Julian after an appropriate period of time.

It has been determined that Sister Blatt will move into Allegra's old room.

Mildred feels terrible and decides to go to bed early. Everard calls and invites Mildred to dinner but she declines. Later Mildred feels guilty as if no one would be there to cook for Everard. Mildred wonders who else Everard called and if she was the first person he thought of regarding dinner. Mildred wants to be the first although she is unsure why.

Mildred becomes restless, and can no longer bear the thought of staying home alone so she goes to the vicarage.

Chapters 19-23 Analysis

Mildred becomes more and more involved in the Napiers' breakup and is put in the position of acting as a go between and mediator. Although Mildred's aptitude for empathy and service serves her well, she is beginning to think that people are taking advantage of her and she finds herself in situations that make her uncomfortable. Regardless, Mildred takes care of the Napiers' belongings and finds herself in the middle of a reconciliation attempt although she is not entirely sure she wants Rocky and Helena to get back together.

Mildred feels even more isolated now at the Napiers are gone. Allegra seems to have taken over the vicarage and all the attention of Julian and Winifred. When the trio goes away together on holiday Mildred feels completely lost.

Mildred is somewhat baffled by Everard's attention. At first Mildred thought Everard simply saw her as a shoulder to cry on and someone to assist in creating a barrier between him and Helena. Although Everard says he is not in love with Helena, there is obviously some sense of affection and curiosity involved. Mildred is somewhat confused and is not sure what to think.

The breakup between Julian and Allegra is shocking and Mildred is not sure what to do to help. Winifred is all but inconsolable. Apparently, Allegra had been manipulating Julian, in order to get her own way. Mildred believes that once a woman has been married, she knows what to do and can easily find a new husband.

When Julian arrives and tells Mildred and Winifred about the breakup, Mildred finds herself torn between empathy and relief. Relationships are out of Mildred's realm of expertise, yet she knows how to care for the friends and does her best.



Chapters 24-27

Chapters 24-27 Summary

Rocky visits Mildred at the apartment and says that he and Helena are back together. Mildred congratulates Rocky and says that she will be glad to have them back in the flat because she missed them terribly. Rocky says that he and Helena will be moving out of the flat and going to live at the cottage in the country. Neither of the couple ever felt comfortable in London, and perhaps that was part of the problem. All of the other issues involving work and Helena's lack of domestication seem to have fallen by the wayside.

Mildred tells Rocky about Julian's breakup and once again, Rocky says it would be appropriate for Mildred to be the one to marry the vicar after an appropriate interval of time. For once, Mildred only gives a small argument. Perhaps the marriage would be fitting for her after all.

The church holds a bazaar and everyone chooses their places at booths and stations. The bazaar is one of the main fundraisers for the church throughout the year. People must pay a small amount to get in but the bargains are well worth the price. Mildred explains to one of the other parishioners that the people who come to the bazaar are not always nice and many come from the immediate area, which is not the nicest part of the city.

There is much talk about Julian and the breakup. It seems that many people are happy Julian will not be marrying Allegra. Mildred thought that everyone liked Allegra but as it often happens after a breakup, several people come forward and voice the opposite. The topic of Mildred becoming involved with Julian comes up once again. Mildred hears this opinion so often that she barely protests. Mildred begins to question her feelings for Julian and thinks perhaps marrying the vicar would be a nice thing, especially since she is well versed in being closely related to a member of the clergy and knows exactly what would be expected of her. Additionally, Julian and Winifred have been dear friends and that would make the transition all the easier.

At the bazaar, everyone fusses over Julian and tries to make sure that he is content as possible. Julian accepts the kindnesses but obviously just wants things to return to the way they were before Allegra appeared.

Helena and Rocky invite Mildred to the flat to say goodbye and to thank her for all she has done, from taking care of Rocky to handling the furniture and prompting the reconciliation. Mildred reminds Rocky that he had promised to make a donation to the church as thanks for Julian's kindness. Rocky gives Mildred money for incense and decides against creating a stained glass window, thinking that it would be too gaudy. In honor of the Napiers' stay at the flat Rocky etches one of the windows with a quote from Dante. Helena says that no one will understand the quote, since it is written in the



original Italian and Mildred says many soldiers are returning to London from serving in Italy, and surely there will be someone who understands the language.

Mildred continues to be fascinated with the Learned Society and makes a point of walking by the building one afternoon. Mildred sees Everard with Miss Clovis and remembers how he said Miss Clovis was an esteemed and respectable woman. Mildred jumps to conclusions and thinks that Everard is interested in Miss Clovis as a suitable wife, considering she would be able to help him with his anthropology and archeology work. Mildred tries to convince herself that any gentleman would take a woman's arm when crossing the street and that Everard's gesture meant no more than that. Yet she cannot shake the image of Everard with Miss Clovis.

Mildred pretends not to see the pair and continues walking. Everard catches up and takes Mildred to lunch. Mildred asks if Miss Clovis will be joining them and Everard is surprised and says that she has other plans.

Mildred runs into Miss Statham, who discusses Allegra and her new station out in the country. Allegra has moved into another parish where there are more single men although Allegra insists she is through with being married to a member of the clergy. Miss Statham, as a longtime member of the church, is glad that things will return to normal.

Mildred runs into William and the two exchange polite conversation. William asks about Everard and assumes that Mildred is involved with him.

New tenants arrive at the flat and Mildred is somewhat discouraged to learn that they are two female teachers. While they seem nice enough, Mildred was hoping for another couple or single men. The women are both fluent in Italian and critique Rocky's quote from Dante.

Mildred visits the vicarage and things seem to have returned to normal since Allegra has gone. Julian tells Mildred that he learned the identity of the church's anonymous donor and reveals that it was Allegra. Apparently, the donation was a way to get Julian's attention and was cleverly crafted to appear as a simple gesture of charity. Mildred cannot help but wonder if making such a donation would ingratiate her to Julian. Does a simple donation ensure that an unmarried vicar will marry the donor? As ridiculous as it seems, Mildred wishes she would have thought of it first.

There is much conversation among the congregants about Julian's future and if he should ever marry. Many people think Mildred should become his wife since they are friends and completely compatible. Others believe that Julian should never marry and instead, continue to run the vicarage with Winifred at his side. The engagement did dispel some of the rumors about Julian's sexuality, a topic that completely offended Mildred.

Everard calls Mildred and invites her to dinner at his flat. Mildred is prepared to cook for Everard, thinking that men routinely do not cook for themselves. All the way to the flat Mildred wonders who else will be present at the dinner. Mildred expects to see Miss



Clovis, as she is now convinced Everard is interested in the woman. When Mildred arrives at the flat, Everard is alone. She expects that they will wait for Miss Clovis, who must be running late. When Mildred asks if Miss Clovis will be joining them Everard is surprised and attempts to convince Mildred that while Miss Clovis is an esteemed and respectable woman there is no relationship and he is not interested in her in that way. Mildred is still unsure as Miss Clovis would be the perfect person to help Everard with his work. Reading proofs and creating indices for a book is the perfect position for a wife.

Everard talks about the book and asks Mildred if she would be interested in reading the proofs and creating the indices. Mildred is thrilled, yet unsure that she will be appropriate to do the job since she knows nothing about anthropology. Mildred explains that the topic is completely foreign to her. Everard insists that she is capable and he can teach her how to the work. Although it is a great deal to ask, Mildred readily agrees.

Although the relationships with Julian and Everard are unclear, Mildred realizes that her life has become full and worthwhile. Mildred is happy that she will be a part of Everard's work and will spend much of her free time caring for and protecting Julian. Perhaps being an excellent woman is not the worst thing in the world after all.

Chapters 24-27 Analysis

Mildred is glad for Rocky and Helena, although there is a sense of regret. The reconciliation shows Mildred that she is not the right woman for someone of Rocky's caliber and although Helena does not seem well suited to him either, the couple obviously loves each other enough to overlook the differences.

Mildred is surprised that Allegra would show her face in London ever again, even if for a short time. Miss Stratham seems incensed at Allegra's behavior and is sure that the woman is out seeking another husband. After all, once a woman learns how to catch a man, it is not a difficult process to repeat.

Mildred's reaction to Everard and Miss Clovis is somewhat surprising. At first, Mildred did not like Everard at all, yet over time she began to respect him and his work. It all seemed so important and Mildred wanted to become more learned in that area.

Everard is unclear about his intentions toward Mildred at first but asking her to read proofs and create indices is a big step toward establishing a lasting relationship.



Characters

Mildred Lathbury

Mildred Lathbury is an unmarried woman just over the age of 30. She is of medium height and build with mousy brown hair and an average appearance. Mildred's clothes tend to be very conservative and over-sized.

Mildred was raised in a country vicarage. Mr. Lathbury, Mildred's father, was a clergyman. Mildred is the only child. As the daughter of a pastor, Mildred was expected to serve the church and the members of the parish. Others' needs came before the Lathburys' own, a characteristic that has been ingrained in Mildred since the day she was born.

Mildred's mother died several years before, and Mr. Lathbury followed two years later. Mildred took care of her father while he was ill. After Mr. Lathbury died, Mildred decided to move to London to experience all the city has to offer. Although Mildred has moved to the city, Mildred still possesses many mannerisms and behaviors reminiscent of country life.

Mildred has little confidence and seems to place all of her worth on what she is able to provide to others. Mildred's actions, no matter how well intended, often come off as interference. As a result, Mildred is often put upon to handle situations which are out of her comfort zone. In the end, Mildred begins to carve out her own niche in the world and finally realizes that excellent women can have it all.

Helena Napier

Helena Napier is Mildred's upstairs neighbor and the wife of Rockingham Napier, a soldier stationed in Italy. Mildred's first impression of Helena Napier is of a woman who is colorful and vivacious. Mildred's first meeting with Helena is in the basement of the apartment building where they reside. Mildred is horrified at this meeting since it is not proper to meet someone for the first time while carrying a wastebasket. Helena does not seem to notice the impropriety.

Helena Napier is a strong woman, devoted to her career in anthropology. Helena is the first to admit that she has virtually no domestic skills and seems to take delight in the fact. Mildred is immediately taken aback by this confession from the stranger. In Mildred's world it is part of a woman's duty to be domesticated and to serve her husband and home. Mildred has never met anyone like Helena Napier before, and is not sure that she likes the woman very much.

Helena is much more devoted to her career than to Rocky. This becomes apparent when Helena receives a telegram saying that Rocky is coming home from Italy. Helena is not at all pleased that Rocky will be coming home soon. In fact, Helena tells Mildred



that she wishes Rocky would not come home and regrets that they ever got married. This confession shows that Helena is an impetuous woman, who does not give nearly as much thought to her personal life as she does to her career.

It is obvious to everyone, even to Rocky, that Helena is in love with Everard Bone. Although Everard has no romantic interest, Helena seems completely open about a working relationship that has turned romantic. Once again, the situation is shocking to Mildred.

Winifred Malory

Winifred Mallory is older sister of Julian, pastor of St. Mary's Church in London. As both Winifred and Julian are unmarried, Winifred takes it upon herself to perform all the duties of the vicar's wife. Winifred's entire life revolves around Julian and the church.

Rockingham Napier

Helena Napier's husband and Mildred's downstairs neighbor.

Julian Malory

Pastor at St. Mary's Church

Everard Bone

Anthropologist and colleague to Helena Napier

Mr. Mallet

St. Mary's churchwarden

Miss Clovis

Member of the Learned Society

Mrs. Morris

Mildred's cleaner



Allegra Gray

Tenant of the Malorys who becomes Julian's fiancée.

Dora Caldicote

Mildred's best friend and former roommate.

Mrs. Bonner

Mildred's co-worker and fellow church-goer.

Sister Blatt

Member of Julian's congregation

Miss Stratham

Member of Julian's congregation

William Caldicote

Dora's brother and Mildred's friend.



Objects/Places

Mildred Lathsbury's Flat

Mildred Lathbury lives in a rented flat on the second story of a brick apartment building in London. There is a second flat located on the same floor and business offices located on the first. Although Mildred only works morning hours at the Censorship, the rest of her days are busy with church work so that the noise from the business offices hardly ever reaches her ears. The location of the building is in a less than superior part of the city, however Mildred is satisfied with the rental payments.

The apartment is on the small side but suitable for Mildred, who lives alone. The only real complaints Mildred has about the flat are that the tenants must share a bathroom as well as dustbins and the basement. The bathroom is the most annoying to Mildred, who ends up doing a great deal of the work in order to keep it neat and tidy.

The interior of the flat is also tidy, particularly since Dora moved out. The décor is modest. Mildred transported most of the furniture from the vicarage in the country. The rest of the items were purchased here and there, including some of the church jumble sales and bazaars.

London

"Excellent Women" takes place in London in the 1950s. As the capital of England, London has a variety of opportunities to offer to a woman like Mildred Lathbury. Mildred came to London to escape the sameness of the country life which she had been living since the day she was born. To Mildred, London was a foreign and exciting place, full of adventure and opportunity. London was, however, a bit scary to Mildred since she had little or no experience living in the city.

In order to establish herself in London Mildred made arrangements with an old school friend, Dora Caldicote. Together, the women rented a flat in a two story brick apartment building. There is another flat located on the second floor and a business office located on the first.

Although Mildred declares that the apartment is not in the best part of London, the women seem to feel safe and protected by watchful neighbors and members of Mildred's church.

Unlike many London residents, Mildred doesn't flee the city in the summertime although she may take jaunts on occasion. Everything Mildred wants seems to be located in the city, from her work at the Society of Aged Gentlewoman, to the church, and her friends.

Even after Dora moves to the country to accept a teaching position, Mildred is content to live alone in the city.



The Napiers' flat

Second floor flat belonging to Helena and Rockingham Napier, Mildred's downstairs neighbors.

St. Mary's Church

Mildred's church of choice; parish supervised by Julian Malory.

Malory House

Home to Mildred's pastor, Julian Malory, and his older sister Winifred.

St. Ermin's Church

Church close to Mildred's work.

Devonshire

Location of Mildred and Dora's vacation and home to Helena's mother.

Napier country cottage

Where Rocky goes after the breakup and the place where the Napiers eventually live.

The Learned Society

Organization that Helena and Everard belong to and the site of their talk on Africa.

Society for Aged Gentlewomen

Mildred's workplace.

Social Sensitivity

The phrase "excellent woman," mentioned numerous times by several characters, refers to a type of lady common to all times in England, America, and elsewhere. As represented by the narrator Mildred Lathbury, she is a cultured, comfortably off spinster, living a quiet life alone, devoted to the church and to such everyday social occasions as having tea with friends, or attending "jumble" (rummage) sales. Everyone calls them "excellent women" which, to the narrator, is a synonym for virtuous dullness. Such women are usually not considered dynamic enough to be central characters in fiction, and Pym's fondness for them is one reason her books went out of style for so long.



Techniques

The novel is narrated by Mildred.

The author succeeds at the difficult task of making her constantly interesting to the reader, in spite of Mildred's rather dull life.

Gentle satire is a characteristic of many Pym books. She finds humor in people's devotion to rituals and customs, church functions, the role of tradition in running a "jumble sale" or a reception. An especially amusing passage in *Excellent Women* concerns the behavior of those attending a scholarly meeting at which Everard Bone delivers a paper. The pomp and pretense of the audience and their questions and discussion are affectionately presented.



Themes

Marriage

Marriage is a prevalent theme throughout "Excellent Women." In London in the 1950s, being unmarried over the age of thirty dubbed a woman as a spinster with little to no hope of ever catching a husband. There is much said about unmarried women, from Mrs. Morris' opinion that it is unnatural for a woman to live alone to Everard Bone and William Caldicote's observations that excellent women such as Mildred should never marry. Marriage is for women who are less sensible and not as capable as Mildred. While Mildred is somewhat flattered to think that she is an excellent woman, there is also a sense of disappointment since it seems that men do not see her as "the marrying kind."

The approach to courtship throughout the book is rather archaic given the time period. The author has been compared to a modern Jane Austen and the tone of the work clearly shows a strong comparison. The romances in Excellent Women involve little more than intention, as it was in the day when people simply decided to marry without exploring the finer points of the relationship. This can clearly be seen in Mildred's relationships with Julian Malory and Everard Bone.

In the end, Mildred has a renewed sense of hope in regards to relationships although they might not necessarily lead to marriage.

Clergy

Much of "Excellent Women" deals with the clergy and their positions as a part of society. As a general rule, members of the clergy are devoted to their churches, parishes and members of the congregation. The responsibilities of being a pastor come first and foremost before all others. This is especially true with Julian Malory, who is unmarried. Mildred and other people in the church find it strange for Julian to be involved with Allegra Gray and resent that the pastor's time is being devoted to something other than the church and the traditional roles of the congregation. Even those who support Julian in his relationship, at least at the start, are somewhat upset by his new behaviors.

Those closely related to the church have an unerring sense of propriety and tradition. There are to be no variances in what is considered to be appropriate behavior. Service must always come first before self and the clergy are especially bound to this rule and are to remain available at all times.

As the daughter of a clergyman, Mildred has grown up with the lifestyle and attitudes of an integral member of the church. This may serve Mildred well in some areas yet it may also prevent her from experiencing life.



Since Mildred was raised in a vicarage, it would make good sense for her to marry Julian; she already knows the ways of a pastor's house and the duties that would be expected of his wife.

Appropriate behavior

A great deal of "Excellent Women" deals with the topic of appropriate behavior. Since the time period of the book better relates to the 19th century rather than the 1950s, the code of conduct is strict. This is especially true for Mildred and the other unmarried women of the church.

There are many instances in which Mildred is shocked or chagrined by another's lack of appropriate behavior. The first relates to the fact that Helena Napier does not believe in performing any sort of domestic chores. This is shocking to Mildred since she was raised to believe that a woman's duty is to her husband and the home.

It is clearly pointed out that it would be inappropriate for Mildred to become the Malorys' tenant because she is an unmarried woman and although Winifred lives in the house, Julian is an unmarried man. The only reason Allegra Gray's presence is appropriate is because she is the widow of a fellow clergyman.

Finally, one of Mildred's strict rules of appropriate behavior is to make sure that she is always dressed appropriately in the company of a man. When Mildred meets Everard on the street and is not wearing stockings or a hat, she is embarrassed and tries to avoid meeting the man's gaze.

Significant Topics

The narrator, Mildred, is confided in and trusted by several characters who lead less orderly, more complicated lives than hers. She becomes involved with an engaged couple (her minister and his fiancée), and a quarreling married couple (her downstairs neighbors). Some of these, notably the vivacious but spiteful neighbor Mrs. Helena Napier, seem condescending and patronizing towards Mildred, even as they seek her help. Mildred grows increasingly discontented with her own life which seems so unexciting and boringly stable. Helena pities Mildred for not leading "a full life."

The novel raises the questions of what constitutes a full life and, whether a woman like Mildred must have a man in order to live fully.

To some extent, the answer to the latter question seems to be yes. At the novel's quietly upbeat ending Mildred has possible involvements with two reasonably suitable men, and "it seemed as if I might be going to have what Helena called 'a full life' after all."



Style

Point of View

The point of view in "Excellent Women" is in the first person, through the eyes of the main character, Mildred Lathbury. Mildred has a unique point of view regarding the workings of relationships in the church and between members of polite society. Conversely, Mildred has an extremely limited scope in regards to romantic relationships so that it may not be clear to her what kind of behavior takes place in such a relationship or in a marriage.

Mildred's point of view may be limited in some ways yet the other characters fill in where Mildred's voice is lacking clarity.

The first person point of view works well in the book except for those instances when Mildred's naivete colors the story. Although the innocence lends charm to the story, the reader may be better served through a third person omniscient point of view in order to develop a more complete picture. This is especially true when it comes to Mildred's opinions on Julian Malory, whom she adores, and Everard Bone, who remains an enigma throughout the story. Another example may be that Mildred's opinions do not always effectively describe certain characters in the story such as Miss Statham and Sister Blatt.

Overall, the use of first person works well in that it gives the reader a solid sense of Mildred's character. The point of view does not necessarily match the time period in which the story is set however, and that inconsistency is never thoroughly explained.

Setting

The first setting used in "Excellent Women" revolves mainly around the apartment building in which Mildred lives along with her neighbors, Helena and Rocky Napier. The building is located in a less than desirable neighborhood in London, yet offers security to its tenants. The flats where Mildred and the Napiers live are medium sized and pleasant. The shared bathroom is an annoyance for the tenants and at times becomes a point of contention when it comes to cleaning and the replacement of toilet paper.

Although the building is located in London, the tenants seem to feel secure in their surroundings.

The second main setting is the Malorys' house. The house is actually a parish house inhabited by brother and sister, Julian and Winifred Malory. Since both are unmarried, it is a beneficial arrangement for the siblings to share a home.

The Malorys' house is large and comfortable. In fact, the siblings come to believe that they are selfish for inhabiting such a large house when there are people in need of a



place to live. That decision leads to the introduction of Allegra Gray, the woman who becomes the Malorys' tenant and Julian's fiancée.

Little is said about the Society of Aged Gentlewomen, Mildred's workplace, or St. Mary's Church.

Language and Meaning

The language in "Excellent Women" is supposedly based on the average Londoner in the 1950s. However, the usage is reminiscent of novels from the 19th century, which brings about comparisons to Jane Austen's characters and story lines.

The language is proper with most of the grammar being used correctly. There are times when the language is stiff and overly formal, giving the impression that even the friendliest of characters are no more than passing acquaintances. There is little familiarity throughout the dialogue.

The first person point of view puts Mildred's language in the forefront, save for the dialogue amongst the other characters. The author does a good job in representing Mildred through cleverly chosen words designed to depict the character's upbringing and often rigid set of beliefs and behaviors.

The most contradictory and confusing aspect of the language is the time period in which the book is set. One would expect a different type of language, more informal and perhaps peppered with slang, from characters set in the 1950s, regardless of their social standing or occupation.

There is a great deal of wit and cleverness throughout the text, including descriptions of the people and their habits. This can clearly be seen in Mildred's description of Dora and her penchant for being an untidy roommate.

Structure

"Excellent Women" by Barbara Pym is a work of fiction that consists of 256 pages broken down into 27 chapters.

The shortest chapter in the book is 5 pages in length; the longest chapter is 13 pages in length. There is an average of 9 pages per chapter.

The structure of the book maintains a consistent story line. Occasionally, a chapter will contain a large number of short scenes that require the reader to shift from setting to setting or between various situations and characters.

Some of the scenarios could easily be expanded, while some, such as the lengthy description of the church bazaar could be shortened. The description of the activities at the church bazaar serves an important purpose to show the reader how the members of

the church interact, their roles as well as their disagreements and individual ideas. However, devoting an entire chapter to the bazaar seems extraneous and does very little to move the story forward.

Overall, "Excellent Women" is well structured in that the reader can easily follow along with the main thread of the story. While there are references to past events, they are kept to a minimum and are clearly defined so that the reader will not confuse those events with the present. The short chapters also help the structure, allowing the reader to keep characters and events in proper perspective.



Quotes

"I sometimes thought how strange it was that I should have managed to make a way for myself in London so very much like the life I had lived in a country rectory when my parents were alive," p. 11.

"No answer seemed to be needed or expected to this question, and we laughed together, a couple of women against the whole race of men," p. 23.

"You should see my bedside table, such a clutter of objects, cigarettes, cosmetics, aspirins, glasses of water, the Golden Bough, a detective story, and any object that happens to take my fancy," p. 27.

"I hesitated at the top of the stairs, feeling nervous and stupid, for this was a situation I had not experienced before, and my training did not seem to be quite equal to it," p. 30.

"I lay awake feeling thirsty and obscurely worried about something," p. 38.

"I could see very well what she meant, for an unmarried woman with no ties could very well become unwanted," p. 39.

"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," p. 69.

"I accepted the compliment as gracefully as I could, but I was sufficiently unused to having anybody make any comment on my appearance to find it embarrassing to have attention drawn to be in any way," p. 86.

"My heart sank as I recognized familiar landmarks. I could almost imagine myself a schoolgirl again, arriving at the station on a wet September evening for the autumn term and smelling the antiseptic smell of the newly scrubbed cloak rooms," p. 110.

"I went back to my flat, puzzling a little about this friendly overture. I was sure that she did not really like me, or at best thought of me as a dim sort of person, whom one neither liked nor disliked, and I did not feel that I really cared for her very much either," p. 121.



"Inside it was a sobering sight indeed, and one to put us all in the mind of futility of material things and our own mortality," p. 131.

"I'm not used to going into public houses, so I entered rather timidly, expecting a noisy, smoky atmosphere and a great gust of laughter," p. 140.

"I noticed a group of priests looking down on us from the upper deck, and I felt that somehow the Pope and his Dogmas had triumphed after all," p. 202.

"The truth was, I thought, looking once more at the letter on my desk, which would not now be finished tonight, that I was exhausted with bearing other people's burdens, or burthens as the nobler language of our great hymn writers put it," p. 207-28.

"My normal appearance is very ordinary and my clothes rather uninteresting, but the new dress I had bought showed an attempt, perhaps misguided, to make myself look different," p. 248.

Topics for Discussion

Why does Mildred take an instant dislike to Helena Napier?

How might the Mildred's relationships with the Napiers and Malorys been different if Dora had not moved to the country?

Do you think the characterization of an unmarried woman was apt during the time of the novel? In present times? Discuss.

What might have happened to Winifred if Julian and Allegra married?

Who do you think Mildred will marry, if anyone at all? Explain.

Discuss your own idea of an excellent woman in history.

Do you think that Mildred accepted the job with Everard out of interest in education or because she wanted to please him? Explain.

What do you think will happen to Allegra?

Literary Precedents

In addition to the many easily drawn parallels to Jane Austen, one may compare Barbara Pym to any number of twentieth century British women writers who have dealt to some extent in humor. Some of these writers include Angela Thirkell, whose series of satires written in the 1930s/1940s were reissued in the early 1980s; Ivy Compton-Burnett; Iris Murdoch; Muriel Spark; and Margaret Drabble.

Pym herself expressed great admiration for Drabble's craft. Pym's skill at depicting quirky eccentric behavior may remind some of the currently popular American writer Anne Tyler; Tyler has reviewed Pym enthusiastically.

Related Titles

A Glass of Blessings Pym is best known for studies of unmarried women and their position in society, but she has also done several portrayals of married women who are slightly bored, who feel the romance and excitement have gone from their marriages, and who would like some adventure. These women, such as Wilmet Forsyth of *A Glass of Blessings* (1958), do not work or have careers. So Wilmet turns her energies toward searching for a possible affair.

She considers three men — a priest; a friend's husband; and, most seriously, a family friend and language instructor. She has a number of dinners with the latter, takes his class to be around him more, and tries to create a romance; but he turns out to be a contented homosexual and she settles for friendship with him and his "friend."

The heroine's easy nonjudgmental acceptance of a homosexual relationship is noteworthy in a book written in the 1950s.

Wilmet reaffirms the values of 1950s, however, when she comes to appreciate her marriage and her life as they are; her husband becomes more interesting to her, especially when the possibility is raised that he might be about to stray. As in several Pym novels, these affairs remain only "possibilities."

The novel appears to be an affirmation of quiet marriages and the rather uneventful daily life of women like Wilmet. Two very different women — her oft-married and outgoing mother-in-law, Sybil, and her quiet, mousy friend, Mary Beamish — teach Wilmet to appreciate her life by the examples they set. Wilmet concludes that, "there was no reason why my life should not be a glass of blessings too. Perhaps it always had been without my realizing it."

Wilmet resembles Mildred of *Excellent Women* in many ways; she is sensitive, intuitive, easily discouraged, and never quite satisfied. Both novels are first-person narrations, which heightens the resemblance. In some ways these lead characters are aware of being less interesting than some of the more colorful characters around them.

In this case, Wilmet seems a little stuffy compared to her iconoclastic, outspoken mother-in-law. But she endears herself to the reader, especially in her tolerant, flexible amusement at most of the behavior around her.

One of Pym's more interesting male characters is the moody, enigmatic, somewhat disreputable language teacher, Piers Longridge — a mystery which Wilmet finally solves when her discovery of his male roommate ends her fantasy of an affair.

Many of Pym's novels involve sensitive characters who are easily upset or worried about what seem trivial matters. Thus the author constantly gets humorous effects by the magnification of small incidents. For instance, in *A Glass of Blessings*, a servant's theft of a Faberge egg becomes a major, recurrent, amusing discussion point.



The reader finishes *A Glass of Blessings* with a particularly warm feeling because the author ends it in a round of marriages, engagements, and reconciliation. This celebratory conclusion recalls the festive endings of many Shakespeare romantic comedies and Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* (1785).

The Sweet Dove Died Like Excellent Women, The Sweet Dove Died (1978) concerns a middle-aged prosperous woman living alone; but Leonora Eyre does not consider herself to be especially virtuous nor excellent.

She is aware of being unreligious, beautiful, vain, selfish. While courted by a middle-aged antique dealer, Humphrey Boyce, she becomes attracted to, and eventually obsessed with, his handsome, indecisive nephew, James. This triangle offers plenty of opportunities for a witty study of the generation gap as Leonora tries to center James's life around herself, even to the extent of having his possessions moved into a neighboring apartment while he is away, so she can keep him close.

James becomes briefly involved with a determined young woman, Phoebe, whom Leonora vanquishes easily. Then James, tempted by homosexuality, takes up with an American professor, Ned, whose competition is too much for Leonora. The attractive but indecisive James is caught up in a confusion of sexual choices and options with a freedom unknown in Leonora's or his uncle Humphrey's generation.

One of Pym's usual themes, women looking for love, recurs in *The Sweet Dove Died*, although her vision is somewhat darker here than in her 1950s novels. Leonora is unlikable and manipulative, but eventually moves the reader as she surrenders to a terrible loneliness and depression upon the apparent loss of James. She becomes aware of emptiness, not only in her life but in herself, realizing she is a materialistic woman who likes comfort and position more than people. Leonora has always felt smugly superior to other women similar to herself, some of whom are dependent upon young men or on cats for companionship; but she turns out to be vulnerable and, in the book's emotional climax, confides in one of these very women. Unable to love, she is vouchsafed some hope for appropriate companionship in the final pages, even if it means settling for Humphrey.

Pym's books sometimes resemble Jane Austen filtered through Henry James. The Jamesian influence, particularly evident in *The Sweet Dove Died*, results in many scenes where characters leave their most important motives unspoken; characters have a silent unspoken understanding or conspiracy; or characters communicate and understand without speaking. A particular Jamesian "confrontation" scene is a late one between Leonora and Ned, after she has lost James to Ned, but Ned is tired of James and wishes to "return" him to Leonora. In this very literary scene, the two characters actually discuss Henry James and relate their situation to him, emphasizing that Pym is aware of this strain in her work.

Thematically, all Pym's books are related, with themes reinforcing one another, and characters sometimes turning up in several books. The author illustrates a literary ideal



of "consistency with variety" — the same themes and types, variously presented. Four of the novels contain self-aware references to Jane Austen.

Some Tame Gazelle *Some Tame Gazelle* (1950) was Pym's first published novel, mostly written in her youth during the 1930s. Its humorous portrayal of two sisters living together foreshadows how the author lived most of her life with her own sister. While predicting her own future in fiction, she also included humorous portraits of her college friends. On this occasion the *New York Times* pronounced Pym "funnier" than Jane Austen.

Less Than Angels *Less Than Angels* (1955) is a sparkling satire of anthropology scholars (who figure in several other novels). It asserts that intellectuals spend their time in "petty disputes," "squabbling about trivialities," and describes a seminar as a "barbarous ceremony, possibly a throwback to the days when Christians were thrown to the lions," in which "somebody prepared and read a paper . . . after which everybody took great pleasure in tearing it and its authors to pieces." Must reading for academicians, this novel is the only one by Pym in which the main couple live together unmarried, until the man's unexpected death. *Less Than Angels* contains an extended quotation from Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, and some of its characters are comparable to those in Austen's work.

No Fond Return of Love *No Fond Return of Love* (1962) contains yet another pairing of two somewhat lonely women, uneasy friends and part time rivals for a particularly vain, unworthy married man. As usual their competitive scheming and mild trickery are sweetly comic. The author frequently employs her favorite point of view technique — entering two or three characters' minds in successive paragraphs at the same moment. There is a sudden appearance by four characters from *A Glass of Blessings*, touring a country home. In an authorial in-joke, somebody comments of them: "What odd people they were! Like characters in a novel." Pym's novel *Some Tame Gazelle* also turns up on a character's bookshelf here, and there is a concluding allusion to Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814).

Quartet in Autumn *Quartet in Autumn* (1977) addresses the problems of old age. The four main characters, two men and two women, have worked at an office together for many years. Their lives are disrupted when the two women retire and, soon after, one dies, apparently of anorexia. All four characters have trouble adapting to change of any kind — change in office procedure, in schedules, in eating habits, as well as the moral and social change they constantly observe in the world.

An Unsuitable Attachment *An Unsuitable Attachment* (written 1962, published 1982) halted Barbara Pym's career when it was turned down by several publishers. Now it is held in nearly as high esteem as the others, although a few critics continue to argue that is, marginally, her weakest novel. The "Unsuitable Attachment" of the title refers to a woman's liking for a younger man — a similar situation to that in *The Sweet Dove Died*, but this time, she gets the man. The two autobiographical sisters from *Some Tame Gazelle*, Belinda and Harriet Bede, appear unexpectedly in Rome where most of the cast is visiting.



Jane and Prudence Jane and Prudence (1981) contains several references and parallels to Jane Austen, in this case her character Emma. It features another pair of women, the young and glamorous Prudence and the older Jane, comfortably married and sometimes afraid that life has settled into a dull routine. Jane lives vicariously through her romantic friend Prudence. As often in Pym novels, the men in these women's lives are rather dreamy, complacent, or impractical creatures who need to be spoiled and pampered by indulgent women.

Although one man is a bit of a rogue, as usual everyone is finally likable, and Prudence ends up "overwhelmed by the richness of her life."

A Few Green Leaves A Few Green Leaves (1980), the last novel Pym wrote, deals with her favorite kind of people — subtle, intelligent, well-read, and possessing finetuned sensibilities. Its heroine, Emma (twice compared to Jane Austen's Emma), is middle-aged, cultured, scholarly, and presented with several romantic choices. Esther Clovis, a minor character in *Excellent Women* and *Less Than Angels*, dies in this novel, in which the novelist outdoes herself at her talent for droll nomenclature; the cast includes Miss Grundy, Mrs. Bland, Miss Lickerish, Magdalen Raven, Isabel Mound, and Heather Blenkinsop — excellent women, all.

Crampton Hodnet Left unfinished in the late 1930s and "assembled" by the editor of Pym's autobiography, *Crampton Hodnet* (1985) was hailed as the author's most laughably funny novel, although the plot may have been her most trivial. It concerns two ill-matched, uncompleted romances in a gossipy village and, although she appeared last, the first of Pym's timid, wistful, but humorously self-aware spinster heroines.

Pym left *An Academic Affair* unfinished in the late 1940s and it was enthusiastically received upon publication in 1986. The heroine, a bored discontented housewife with empty days, somewhat resembles Wilmet in *A Glass of Blessings*. Instead of seeking an affair, she tries to become involved in her teacher husband's research and campus political infighting. But she finds he is having an affair; he is one of Pym's few major characters who actually strays. The author permits another reconciliatory ending, however.

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