

The Power of Love: Subversive Powerplays in *The Sweet Dove Died*

Ruth Pavans de Ceccatty

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The plot of *The Sweet Dove Died* is largely based on a series of powerplays that grow from implicit to explicit as the story progresses. The first part of this paper discusses the opening scene and possible deeper motivations behind our heroine's actions. In the sections that follow, Leonora Eyre is examined as a literary character — the femme fatale — her place in literature, and her struggles with the other characters. I am always interested in the literary and historical context and so I suggest possible intertextual and social influences on Pym's writing as I go along, before finally wrapping up with a reflection on Pym's final words to us and Leonora's ultimate fate.

I. The importance of being picked up

'The sale room is no place for a woman,' declared Humphrey Boyce, as he and his nephew James sat having lunch with the attractive stranger they had picked up at a Bond street sale room half an hour ago. —Incipit, *The Sweet Dove Died*

Why did Leonora Eyre go to the book auction? I don't mean this as a rhetorical question. Humphrey Boyce declared in the novel's opening line, 'The sale room is no place for a woman'. If the solicitous Humphrey says 'woman', what he means is 'lady'. And the reader takes the point. The 'attractive stranger', an 'exquisite creature' must explain herself, not only to her immediate luncheon companions, Humphrey and James, but also to the reader. The opening premise of Leonora Eyre venturing alone into what is presented as the seedy realm of 'contaminating' book dealers seems so out of character for the delicate-as-lace protagonist, as we get to know her more fully, that it can hardly stand up without justification. To answer why Leonora went to the book auction, we must first pose another question...

Why did Barbara Pym — an author so attuned to romantic poetry that she plucked a line from Keats's 'Dove' to serve as her title — plant the term 'picked up' in the opening line of *The Sweet Dove Died*? It seems so unPym-like, both as a phrase and as a notion, that it quite rankles the careful reader. Every word is a conscious choice, a weighted decision—nowhere more than in the opening of Pym's novels. So why 'picked up'? With a close second reading, it becomes apparent that Pym has carefully constructed a sentence that manages to set up the complex power dynamics of the three main characters while also sowing the first seeds of Leonora's backstory. The term 'picked up' is, in fact, part of an external analepsis. In other words, it refers to a time before the narrative started: to be precise, to the Continental public gardens of Leonora's youth, where pick ups by the upper echelons of European society apparently occurred regularly, if Leonora is to be believed. Pym draws a clear picture of a delicate, middle-aged woman luxuriating in the attentions of two strange men that have literally picked her up as she was swooning, physically assisting her to a more suitable environment to recover from her 'too overwhelming', 'first time' which Pym relates in suggestively orgasmic terms—going from excitement to crying out, swaying and almost collapsing at her 'moment of triumph'.

Is the author suggesting a pathetic, even sordid, backstory for her heroine, as Tennessee Williams does in his dramatic play, *A Streetcar named Desire* (1947)? There is something decidedly 'Blanche DuBois' about Leonora Eyre, as The Kirkus Review also noted in its 1979 review of *The Sweet Dove Died*: '...class and taste are certainly the Blanche-DuBois-esque preoccupations of handsomely mature Leonora Eyre...'. Both fading belles carefully cherry-pick the details of their narratives. Like Blanche, Leonora has always relied to some extent on the kindness of strangers—a theme I will develop further on. Leonora has gone to the auction, or rather been driven, by a sense of rising crisis: the realisation of her loss of beauty, and with it her powers of seduction. The narrative begins with this crisis in *TSDD*, whereas in *Streetcar* it is the climactic ending.

Another literary parallel might be seen with Muriel Spark's haughty school teacher spinster Miss Jean Brodie, who also recounts similar tales of serendipitous romance on the Continent during her

‘prime’, although she is careful to keep this information privy to her special set of girls. The years in both *Brodie* and *TSDD* both correspond roughly to the early-to-increasingly-sinister late 1930s. In any case, this talk of being picked up brings us neatly back to our first question. Because understanding Leonora’s nostalgically recalled backstory also clears up the question of why she went to the book auction — it was a likely place to get picked up.

In her explanation to Humphrey and James, Leonora—either unconscious of her deeper motivations or unwilling to admit them—proffers a ‘silly-me’ response and the conversation moves on. The reader is led astray. Of course, the auction *is* crucial to the plot as it provides a viable means for the meeting of the protagonist and two would-be lovers. But despite Leonora’s protestations, the auction visit is important precisely because it is *not* a novel experience for her. It is a repetition, a reenactment. She is reenacting behaviour from her past — something she has repeatedly done throughout her youth, according to her own accounts. She is soliciting the attention and admiration of men. In fainting in this men’s sphere, she is a damsel in distress; she is appealing for male intervention on her behalf, the kind of chivalry expected of princes. White Russian princes in public gardens, perhaps...

Leonora had had romantic experiences in practically all the famous gardens of Europe, beginning with the Grosser Garten in Dresden where, as a schoolgirl before the war, she had been picked up by a White Russian prince.

High status males are not so readily to be found, nor as forthcoming these days, as they were in the romantic settings of her past, so the venue has sunken somewhat, to a tawdry London sale room. This setting offers Leonora an opportunity to submit to the gaze of men, including old-fashioned Humphrey and naive James, who have come to admire and evaluate objects of beauty. Leonora in effect presents herself as an ‘*objet d’art et de vertu*’. She uses a very public spell of weakness, the most conventional of feminine devices, to attract the male attendees’ attention.

Juxtaposed with Leonora’s highly charged experience is James’s ho-hum reaction to the sale. He finds it ‘boring, the dealers hunched, shabbily dressed and indistinguishable, except for one with a raffish air leaning against a wall’. This introduces the theme of James’s own sexual struggles. He later reflects that Leonora’s ‘near-collapse’ may have saved him from ‘a fate worse than death’. In other words, a homosexual encounter. It suggests that he has elected to play the traditional male role of hero. But has he really chosen her over the rake, or has she led him into thinking he has? James is nothing if not malleable. The first intimation of her power over him comes in their first conversation, when Leonora ‘turns her gaze upon James’. The notion of bewitching is implied. He must sense, almost defensively, that she is not the virtuous ingenue she is playing because he wonders if she isn’t someone’s expensively kept mistress. So the power struggle is already in play, on one level in a literally physical way, as James supports Leonora out, while one another on a psychological level with Leonora having the advantage. She goes home to gloat, ostensibly over her little book, but probably also over her new male catches.

As well as with these direct interactions between characters, powerplays are also related indirectly through objects. To discuss this, I’d like to return for a minute to the theme of the ‘pick-up’, which is also applied to objects. For example, Leonora refers to the sweet, little, Victorian flower book that she ‘picked up’ at the book auction, in a kind of verbal transference. In her mind, she has done the picking up rather than causing/allowing herself to be picked up. In a neat parallel, Blanche DuBois uses the same phrase, ‘picked up’, to discuss the little notebook she is keeping in *Streetcar*, ‘I’m compiling a notebook of quaint little words and phrases I’ve picked up here.’ The double-entendre is not lost on her boorish brother-in-law, Stanley, who retorts flatly ‘you won’t pick up nothing here.’ His grammar is lowly but his meaning is clear: Blanche will not be able to seduce any men in this new location. In contrast, Leonora reminds James that he is ‘lucky’ at picking up things at sales because that is how he and Humphrey met her. Pym regularly uses this technique of blending people and objects, the latter representing the former. Two of the most explicitly symbolic power struggles are when Humphrey retrieves James’s furniture from Phoebe’s cottage while Leonora waits in his car; and when Ned comes to Leonora’s house and holds the dove, a gift from James, while they speak in coded barbs.

None of the characters in the narrative seems to truly want whole-heartedly to go through with the implications of their romantic jousting. To some extent, they are all ambivalent. All but Ned do just

enough posturing to reaffirm their traditional heterosexual roles. This is a nice example of the American philosopher Judith Butler's 'gender performativity' wherein gender is a construct that must constantly be asserted through stereotypical gender-reinforcing behaviours. The gentlemen assisting a weak woman reinforces the power relations of the Romantic tradition. In heroically and 'naturally' assisting Leonora, the two men have acquired her; she is now in some way their responsibility. Pym skilfully begins with this romantic literary convention of the weak heroine and her two chivalrous heroes, luring the reader in, only to turn it on its head. From the heteronormative beginning of two men vying for a woman, the narrative develops into an increasingly complex free-for-all pitting generations, genders and sexual orientations against each other in various configurations. The first is the love triangle between Leonora, Humphrey and James. Leonora will try to use soft power to turn James into an unnatural blend of faux son, faux lover, when in *his* reality he is neither. It is difficult to think of the various pairings as 'love'. Each courtship is rather a roiling power struggle in its own way, filled with subterfuge.

II The love of power

We are not privy to the full facts, the harsh reality, concerning Leonora's romantic experiences — why they came to nought. The text simply relates, 'And yet nothing had come of all these pickings-up; she had remained unmarried, one could almost say untouched'. Leonora professes not to know the answer. Perhaps she is wilfully suppressing unpleasantness, perhaps she truly lacks the insight. I think that it is because Leonora Eyre is in love with Power itself. In a Victorian woman's life, the only time she had any personal power was when she had suitors, before she married. Perhaps our Neo-Victorian Leonora never went beyond the suitor state — indeed relished this state — because it afforded her the greatest degree of power over men. She is in love not with falling in love, but with power itself. It gives her a sense of self in a very visceral way.

Leonora is a spinster by choice, or so she tells us, which puts a more positive spin on her unmarried state than the ambivalent spinsters of Pym's earlier novels like *Excellent Women*. As a protagonist, Leonora is closer to the stereotype of the femme fatale, which the OED defines as 'an attractive and seductive woman, especially one who will ultimately cause distress to a man who becomes involved with her.' Now fading, Leonora is more insistently testing the remaining strength of her powers to attract and control, in other words, to seduce and keep men in her thrall. Unlike Blanche DuBois, Leonora's goal is not marriage, nor the attainment of higher status or riches. But hers *is* a completely self-serving quest. Leonora does not share Humphrey's hopes for a fully sexual and romantic relationship, nor accept Ned's need of a substitute mother. Her expectation for all male comers is one-sided, open-ended devotion to a platonic relationship. Proof of Leonora's cold, calculative cunning is laced throughout the novel. In chapter 2, Leonora reflects,

One of these days she would certainly 'find herself' near Sloane Square [the site of Humphrey's antique store]. But not quite yet. She would wait until exactly the right moment arrived, as surely it would.

The notion of unequal power is introduced even before the novel begins, with its allusive title. The theme is then flushed out in the lines of verse strategically placed just before the novel's incipit. Pym is leading the reader in, step by step.

*I had a dove, and the sweet dove died;
And I have thought it died of grieving;
O, what could grieve for? its feet were tied
With a single thread of my own hand's weaving*

Keats's lines act almost as a moral to a parable, like those in Victorian books of instruction for boys and girls. Or they could equally be the start to a British murder mystery. The victimised pet dies, the victimiser is left to ponder what she has wrought by her own hand, bewildered by loss. The poetic preface acts as a warning to the gentle reader, a clue and an explanation. It introduces the theme, sets the tone, and provides romantic foreshadowing. Above all, the lines are a remonstrance of self-deception. And indeed, if Leonora is in denial as the story opens, she is unable to sustain her alternate reality by the novel's close. Leonora Eyre is the one holding 'the single thread'. An apt metaphor if we

remember the original meaning of spinster — an unmarried woman living at home, spinning thread to maintain herself. James is the sweet dove, a symbol of innocence, peace and purity. He is the object of Leonora's attentions, her prey. Leonora will use her wiles to capture and hold him. She would keep him safely in the room above her as a means of 'decontaminating' him, keeping him away from the infecting influence of the sexualised outside world, as she has done for herself. In her imperiousness, there is also a touch of Miss Havisham, the commanding and controlling old woman in Dickens's *Great Expectations*, who has forsaken men after being jilted long ago.

III Pairings and triangles

Leonora manages many power plays in her stride. For example, Miss Foxe, Leonora's elderly upstairs boarder, moves out after the mildest of confrontations. Phoebe Sharpe, her young female rival for James's attention, requires greater planning and effort but Leonora ultimately comes out on top. Humphrey requires a series of manipulations, rather than true powerplays, to keep him in line physically while maintaining his loyal devotion. Leonora is clear from the start exactly what she wants and doesn't want from him: she seeks people to 'admire her elegance' and that 'asked no more than the pleasure of her company. Men not unlike Humphrey Boyce, indeed.' Humphrey submits to Leonora's force indirectly, as well as directly: James uses this deftly when he wants to justify the day off from work to visit Keats House with Leonora and Ned: 'I did promise Leonora to take her.' Humphrey was silent, confronted by the force of a promise to Leonora.' Leonora believes she has maintained control of Humphrey in chapter XX: 'perhaps she would let him kiss her tonight'. Meanwhile, from the start, he believes he is controlling the development of their relationship. In chapter 1, he wonders, 'Was she fond of the opera or the theatre? Perhaps that kind of an invitation could be his next move'.

Humphrey is increasingly less duped than Leonora believes. Some hundred pages later, he is far from as enraptured as Leonora imagines, as his detached reflection of her appearance illustrates: 'Women of her generation had the idea that black always suited them but often they were mistaken.' Whenever Humphrey's perspective is provided, it is clear that he has a plan, long-term goals, and the perseverance to see them through. He understands the gendered nature of his generation's power plays as fully as Leonora does. It is left to the reader to decide: which character is really the dominant one? Who manipulates whom?

The theme of love as a treacherous powerplay becomes heightened with the supporting characters' awareness of the ensuing, doomed struggle: Liz tries to warn Leonora to back off emotionally, 'before it's too late'. Humphrey's point of view is made clear via his internal monologue: 'How much more sensible it would be for her to admit defeat and give up'. Leonora herself feels 'as if she were already defeated' when she sees James and Ned together in Keats house.

James is seemingly pliant to the point of submissive to all; the little he attains in terms of personal freedom or power is through stealth rather than struggle. He is never taken with Leonora as she would wish. He was only attracted to her 'in the way that a young man may sometimes be with a woman old enough to be his mother.' With Ned's help, James will cut Keats's metaphoric string to Leonora. But the dove flies off, rather than dies. And as this is Leonora's story, she is given a face-saving ending. James proves something of a homing pigeon, and returns to Leonora's gilded cage once Ned has gone.

L'homme fatal, Ned. The one character Leonora cannot compete with is Ned. Leonora meets her match in Ned precisely because he is an *Homme fatal* with his own forceful agenda. Introduced late into the plot, Ned is nonetheless the story's most powerful agent, dominating every scene. For example, it is Ned that calls for a taxi and sends Leonora away when they visit Keats House together, his male gaze used against her with the negative reflection: 'you look exhausted'. Ned regularly insists upon how tired Leonora looks or must feel. Put in his American vernacular, his message can be reduced to 'you're beat.'

When Ned comes to call for James in chapter XVIII, the antagonistic nature of this meeting is only just below the surface conversation. Leonora is immediately on her guard, serving Ned 'not quite a lie' about James being out instead of in bed, where Ned would, of course, like to join him. Pym spells out the struggle from Leonora's perspective: 'this young man wanted to take James away from her and she was not going to let him'. That is Leonora's intention but she is soon outmanoeuvred by Ned. The

representative and literal vie in the scene as the two spar over James linguistically via Keats: ‘Ned picked up from the mantelpiece an alabaster dove, a present James had once given her, and was stroking it’. Symbolically, James has been reduced to an object, a possession, one that ironically represents purity and peace. Ned holds its fate in the palm of his hand. In stroking the dove, he is aping the intimacy that Leonora will never be able to experience with James. Ned has the upper hand intellectually as well, quoting the title line by Keats to Leonora, underscoring its message. Leonora can not (or does not wish to) recall the rest of the poem — *Why would you leave me, sweet bird, why?* — which Ned leaves unsaid, a dart to the heart that will find its way, regardless. Leonora assigns herself the Victorian role of ‘mother’, the tea pourer, and thus reasserts herself as dominant matriarch. But she is destabilised by Ned’s insistence on the poem, which acts as a counter-narrative, marring her prettified vision of her relationship with James. ‘His voice lingering over the words and giving them a curious emphasis’. Pym is thus doing the same for the reader. Ned smiles, enjoying his cruel dominance, the American vs. the Brit, the youth vs. the elder and above all the lover vs. the mother figure. By the time Ned leaves, Leonora is trembling, romantically elevating herself in her mind to the stature of Gothic heroine, who has ‘bravely stood up to the ordeal’. She is mentally reorganising the narrative to see herself as the situation’s controller: ‘it had certainly been a good move to suggest some future meeting.’

Power played out. In chapter XIX the gloves are off, and Leonora comes out swinging: ‘something must be done about Ned’. There is nothing subversive here, the fight for control of James is out in the open. Leonora’s thoughts are unambiguous, with neither pity, nor remorse: it was easy to ‘get rid of’ Miss Foxe and Phoebe. Her internal soliloquy finishes with a bone-chilling thought: ‘such a short time compared with the whole of life’. So that is her plan for James: to keep him as her private pet for the rest of *her* life, at least. Leonora has become *une belle dame sans merci* like the heroine of another poem by Keats with which Pym was surely familiar. The poem warns of the beautiful, merciless woman out to hold men in her thrall. This nasty tone is by design. In a 1967 letter to Philip Larkin, Barbara Pym relates that she had avoided anything ‘cosy’ and was pleased to hear her novel found “almost sinister and unpleasant”.

Pym turns again to Keats’s ‘Dove’ poem in recalling the string in this extended metaphor concerning Leonora’s plans:

An exciting and dangerous prospect opened before her... Perhaps it would be best to reach a compromise whereby Ned could be woven into the fabric of their lives in such a way that he became an unobtrusive thread in the harmonious tapestry of the whole.

Here again is the image of spinster as industrious woman, spinning at home, at once proactive and domestic. The use of ‘exciting and dangerous’ might equally suggest a metaphorical spider, spinning thread-by-thread a delicate trap of a web that masterfully incorporates Ned as well as James. Finally, Leonora is also creating her own spin in the modern sense, creating her own reality and forcing it on others. But her plan goes awry immediately; she cannot compete with the force of Ned’s personality and youth. She is reduced to ‘an ageing, overdressed woman’ in his presence. She can no longer compete — maybe she never could have — in this modern world of open homosexuality. Returning to the thread metaphor, Leonora thinks ‘when it came to weaving people into the fabric of one’s life he had perhaps stolen a march on her’. Leonora must admit Ned’s dominance. She has been outplayed.

IV. Leonora’s place in literature

In her 1996 book *Etats de Femme L'identité féminine dans la fiction occidentale*, which I translate as *States of Womanhood: feminine identity in Western fiction*, the French sociologist Natalie Heinich argues that until roughly the interwar years (1920s-30s), there have been a limited set of female characters in western literature. She sets forth a list that includes spinsters, blue stockings and a sort of autonomous woman that she describes as ‘women who have too much expertise, are too mature; the female vampires that frustrated adolescents both dream of and fear will draw them into their dangerous webs.’¹ In other words what we would call a femme fatale, although she does not. Heinich sees the unattached

¹ p 220: “...des femmes trop expertes et trop mûres, ces vampires femelles dont les adolescents frustrés rêvent et craignent à la fois qu’elles ne les attirent dans leurs dangereux filets.”

woman as at the end of a long literary tradition in fiction. She notes that the traditional states of womanhood have been caused to implode by the uncoupling of the association between economic dependency and sexual availability. Heinich further suggests that this seems ‘to go hand in hand with a crisis in fiction itself’². She cites fiction in movies and later television as playing a part in undoing the relatively stable types of womanhood represented in traditional novels until the interwar years. To me, this seems to explain why Pym’s realistic fiction, dealing with spinsters along the old order, was rejected for publication in the 1960s while Muriel Spark’s new order of literary surrealism treating the same subject, a spinster past her prime, was embraced critically and popularly. Heinich proposes the term ‘unattached woman’ as preferable,

...to respect the ambivalence of a status divided between the undeniable happiness of having no restraints and the almost inadmissible unhappiness that is the lack of attachments, because the traditional woman and the modern woman, the Victorian and the liberated, the tied-down and the unattached, are in opposition like two forms of despair...³

Leonora Eyre seems to be in this bind. She is caught between the pre-war, Victorian vision of woman and the post-war, modern woman. Pym appears to have been hemmed in — not so much by women’s real life condition at the time of writing, in the early 1960s, as this was affording women much greater personal freedom — but by what Heinich has pointed out as a lack of past conventional female types in the literary canon to base her characters upon. With the character of Leonora, Pym broadens these female literary types. She enlarges the vision of the femme fatale — a character featured prominently in many leading films of the 1940s and 50s — to propose a more realistic vision of the female as equally a prisoner to, and victim of, her sex appeal as it wanes, just as Williams does with Blanche DuBois. In terms of direct intertextual influence, Pym may not have attended *A Streetcar Named Desire*, although she certainly could have as the London production opened in 1949, but she could hardly have been unaware of the drama once the movie came out in 1951. It was a sensation, winning three Oscars out of four nominations, including Best Actress for Vivien Leigh’s Blanche. Yvonne Cocking, our Pym historian, very kindly checked Barbara Pym’s diaries for 1949 and 1950 but found no sign that she had seen the play of ‘*Streetcar*’. So no smoking gun evidence. But Yvonne does note that ‘her filmgoing was much more Hollywood orientated’. It may seem a stretch to insist on parallels with an American work for so quintessential a British writer as Pym but there was a great deal of cultural influence between the States and Great Britain due to the ‘special relationship’ created during the WWII.

To conclude with this idea: In literature, it is a common device for the femme fatale to die before she can lose her seductive appeal, as in Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, or alternately to go insane or be incarcerated (Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*). Barbara Pym may begin with this stock figure but she subverts the ending. Leonora is a literary femme fatale that determines her own fate. I see the power struggles in this novel as Pym’s push back, or rather her way forward. In a literary landscape of limited heroines, Pym is creating new avenues for later writers.

V. Femme Fatale vs. Mother

If Leonora is a failing femme fatale, there is another category of woman who also figures heavily throughout the narrative, although always absent and without direct dialogue. This archetype has a strong influence on the younger characters without actually having a name: the generic yet all powerful Mother. It seems to me that the novel’s most subversive power plays are those involving Mother. These are abstract, rather than played out explicitly, but mother is nonetheless often squarely in the middle. In James’s case, her influence is felt through the presence of her photograph in scenes with Phoebe, Leonora and Ned. When Phoebe looks at the photo of James’s mother and says, ‘Poor girl, she never lived

² p.324: “...une crise de l’identité féminine, qui a fait implorer l’ordre traditionnel des états de femme par la déliaison entre dépendance économique et disponibilité sexuelle, semble aller de pair avec une crise de la fiction.”

³ p. 303-304: “Aussi lui préférons-nous celui de “femme non liée”, qui respecte l’ambivalence d’un statut partagé entre ce bonheur indéniable qu’est l’absence d’entraves et ce malheur à peine avouable qu’est le manque d’attaches. Car la femme traditionnelle et la femme moderne, la victorienne et la libérée, la liée et la non liée, s’opposent comme deux formes du désespoir...”

to see you grow up' she is reversing the situation linguistically: the mother is the 'girl' and Phoebe the woman. But there can be no doubt who is closer to his heart: 'I take after my mother' he states. Poor James acts out of the lack of this guiding force. It is because his mother is dead that he succumbs to all sorts of substitute forces.

Living Leonora cannot compete with James's immortal mother in the photograph either. 'How fresh and young she looked' is juxtaposed with Leonora, 'feeling the effects of an exhausting afternoon'. In her solipsism, Leonora is unable to accept the mother's continued dominant place in James's heart. For Leonora, she 'was taken for granted and aroused no more interest than the rather bored reverence accorded to Humphrey's dead wife...'. Leonora may dominate the narrative, but as a magnet, her power to attract is waning; it is in steady decline, whereas the mother is an unchanging ideal. The maternal pull remains an unwavering gravitational force that both Phoebe and Ned submit to willingly: Phoebe returns to East Putney, Ned to the U.S. Both mothers are geographically and socially 'out of bounds' from the snobbish perspective of class-conscious London characters.

Even Leonora is not immune to her mother's influence. In a stark, if narratively awkward, revelation about Leonora's mother and an illicit affair with an Italian lover, Pym seems to suggest that Leonora's behaviour maybe partially attributed to this childhood secret. Only the mothers of minor characters like Phoebe's friend Jennifer and Colin's friend Harold are given a direct scene in the narrative. For the main characters, Mother is out of the bounds of the story, beyond the text, beyond reach. To summarise, the femme fatale is a seemingly powerful woman but hers is a transient force, doomed to ultimate failure. She represents the here and now, falseness and the ephemeral nature of sexual attraction, while the mother figure represents true strength and permanence. I would argue that the love of mother is the only true love in the novel.

VI. Leonora and the kindness of sweet little men: controlling minor characters

Like Blanche DuBois, Leonora Eyre, past her prime, seems to be relying increasingly on the kindness of 'sweet little men'. The word 'sweet' reoccurs regularly throughout *TSDD*. It is not just a refrain from the title. When used by Leonora 'sweet', often paired with 'little', becomes a reductive category, her way of mentally sweeping away the unpleasant by demeaning or dominating it. With this falsely pleasant term she maintains her mental place on a pedestal by lowering other people linguistically. Sweet little people have no individuality. When applied to men, we might go so far as to say she is neutralising or even neutering them. In chapter II, Leonora is confident of her ability to charm a lift home from someone with a car: 'Other people are so kind'. But in an unpleasant reality check, Meg's two male friends — being of another generation, sexual orientation and class — are impervious to her charms and do not oblige. Leonora must get a taxi. Her mind quickly adjusts the situation to fit her romanticised world view: She asserts that she has '*never*' had to give large tips, adding, 'Taxi drivers are usually *sweet* little men.' Pym italicises 'sweet' to emphasise Leonora's glossing over of reality. Later: 'The driver, she now saw, was a colored man, but she was sure he would turn out to be as "sweet" as taxi drivers usually were to her'. What Leonora really means by sweet is pliant, bending to her will.

While writing this text, I happened to be reading *Blessings in Disguise*, a book of recollections by the actor Alec Guinness, and I came across his description of the actress Martita Hunt, who, incidentally, played Miss Havisham in David Lean's film adaptation of *Great Expectations* (1946). In recalling how the actress explained her ability to serve guests delicacies, despite food rationing, Guinness quotes her directly: "I know a little man, dear heart" or "George the taxi-man is very good to me"". We find the same classist sentiments as employed by Leonora, down to the very words. This treatment of 'little people' seems to have been in the zeitgeist of that era. Guinness adds that the actress 'was adored by the people on whom she most depended, dressers, maids, waiters and workmen, whom she sometimes treated abominably'. That was in the 1930s; in Pym's 1960s' depiction, the devotion of the support-service characters seems neither as solid nor as sincere. Leonora fantasises about special treatment à la Scarlett O'Hara 'she could imagine herself as a beauty of the Deep South being handed from her carriage' but again, to me, in her pathos, she evokes Blanche DuBois.

Other kinds of sweet little men that can be charmed into doing her bidding include: the park gate keeper, ('he's a sweet little man...often opened the gate for me') and the foreman at the furniture depository ('Leonora had already classified him as a sweet little man'). Sweet is also the very word

Blanche repeats to her last-chance lover in extolling the room she has redecorated to cover its sordid reality, 'It's sweet, so sweet! It's terribly, terribly sweet!'. Similarly, Leonora uses 'a sweet little house' to represent (or misrepresent?) her own home in an early description to James.

In opposition to this 'sweet little man' category are women. 'Leonora had little use for the 'co-sinness' of women friends' we are told at the start of chapter VII. Their use is rather 'as a foil for herself' as they were generally less attractive and elegant than her. As for female strangers, they lead to immediate power plays of varying intensity, verbal hen fights to establish a pecking order. In chapter XIV, when Leonora encounters Miss Culver on her excursion to Phoebe Sharpe's country cottage. Miss Culver, Phoebe's neighbor, confronts Leonora, who has entered Phoebe's cottage in her absence: '*I am Leonora Eyre.*' "*And I am Rose Culver*" countered the woman'. The stand-off is quickly resolved, however, as Leonora finds the effort unsustainable. She needs tea and Culver provides it. So Culver is quickly reassigned in Leonora's mental categories, from adversary to 'kind'. This adjustment provokes a total transformation on Leonora's part. She becomes docile to the point of near zombie-like in her passivity, allowing herself 'to be led into the next-door cottage, shown where to wash her hands, given an embroidered guest towel...placed in a deck chair...' again, reminiscent of Blanche DuBois being led off at the end of '*Streetcar*.'

Of course, Leonora's mental ploy doesn't always work. She tries to relegate Ned to the 'sweet' category in a talk with James following Ned's visit: 'He is really sweet.' But James, who knows better, rejects Leonora's verbal domination, if only silently. 'Hardly sweet,' is his mental retort. Finally, in the novel's closing — and also mine for this presentation — Leonora re-categorises James himself into the 'sweet' category as a means of self-preservation. She will not open herself up to the possibility of emotional pain again. Her last words to James, 'Goodbye James, it was sweet of you to come' are also her last words to us. She simultaneously thanks us and warns us off. Time to move on, no emotion please. She returns to the cold linguistic solitude of 'one' which is repeated numerous in the novel's final passage.

Yet, when one came to think of it, the only flowers that were really perfect were those, like the peonies that went so well with one's charming room, that possessed the added grace of having been presented to oneself.

The power plays are over. Leonora is obliged to come to terms with relinquishing power. As Pym drily puts it, 'so much for the power of love, or lust'. In the past, this type of situation, an autonomous woman's loss of beauty and thus power, would generally be rendered as a straight-forward downfall, a just comeuppance, but the subtle nuances of Pym's narrative make it difficult to determine a pat ending. At the story's close, it is up to the reader to decide if the heroine has arrived at a newfound state of grace in accepting a reduced vision of herself or is simply in cold denial. I tend toward the latter: even if she chooses a future accompanied by Humphrey physically, mentally — in perfection — Leonora and the novel conclude on the thought that there is only room for 'oneself'. Pym thus allows Leonora to construct an ending acceptable to herself, with *her* spin on reality, *her* cold reasoning. Miss Blanche DuBois ended up in a mental institution, Miss Jean Brodie in a nunnery. At least Miss Leonora Eyre was accorded a muted new reality in her own London home.

*I had a dove, and the sweet dove died
And I have thought it died of grieving;
O what could it grieve for? Its feet were tied
With a silken thread of my own hand's weaving:
Sweet little red feet! why would you die?
Why would you leave me, sweet bird, why?
You liv'd alone on the forest tree,
Why, pretty thing, could you not live with me?
I kiss'd you oft, and gave you white pease;
Why not live sweetly as in the green trees?*

—John Keats, 1819

Ruth Pavans de Ceccatty attended the Pym Society's meeting in London 2016 as part of her research for her Master's thesis, *Barbara Pym's excellent spinsters: when marginal characters take center stage*, subtitled "a study of ambivalence." She holds a Bachelor's degree in English from Hunter College, City University of New York, and was awarded a Master's degree in *Etudes Anglophones* from La Sorbonne in September 2016. She is currently working as an English teacher in the French national education system at a middle school in Burgundy.

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For more Pavans on Pym: my Master's thesis is available online at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311455811 Barbara Pym's Excellent Spinsters A study of ambivalence](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311455811_Barbara_Pym's_Excellent_Spinsters_A_study_of_ambivalence)