

Class and the Novels of Barbara Pym

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I don't intend to speak at great length. I hope that this talk will give rise to lively discussion and plenty of questions, and I want to leave time for that.

That day the four of them went to the library, though at different times. The library assistant, if he had noticed them at all, would have seen them as people who belonged together in some way. They each in turn noticed him; with his shoulder-length golden hair. Their disparaging comments on its length, its luxuriance, its general unsuitability – given the job and the circumstances – were no doubt reflections on the shortcomings of their own hair. Edwin wore his, which was thin, greying and bald on top, in a sort of bob – ‘even older gentlemen are wearing it longer now’, his barber had told him – and the style was an easy one which Edwin considered not unbecoming to a man in his early sixties. Norman, on the other hand, had always had ‘difficult’ hair, coarse, bristly and now iron-grey, which in his younger days had refused to lie down flat at the crown and round the parting. Now he did not have to part it and had adopted a medieval or pudding-basin style, rather like the American crew-cut of the forties and fifties. The two women – Letty and Marcia – had hair as different from each other as it was possible to imagine in the nineteen seventies, when most women in their sixties had a regular appointment at the hairdresser for the arrangement of their short white, grey or dyed red curls. Letty had faded light brown hair, worn rather too long, and in quality as soft and wispy as Edwin's was... Marcia's short, stiff lifeless hair was uncompromisingly dyed a harsh dark brown from a bottle in the bathroom cupboard, which she had used ever since she had noticed the first white hairs some thirty years earlier.

This passage, which so ingeniously introduces the four principal characters in *Quartet in Autumn*, and, indeed, with them the library assistant, representative of the new age, through the medium of their hair, telling us in a page and a half almost all we need to know about their characters, also reveals Barbara Pym's acute sensitivity to the nuances of class. Her choice of names as well as her choice of hair types and styles deftly places each character in their class context. The two owners of soft, wispy hair worn rather long are given names to match. “Edwin” could only be an upper middle (or even, upper) class name, and to a person of the same class would further signify that he or his family originated from Northumberland or County Durham in the North East of England – the names of the Northumbrian saints Cuthbert, Edwin and Aidan are little heard outside that region, though there they are still bestowed on children to this day. I myself know both an Edwin and an Aidan – and they are both in their thirties. “Letty”, short for either “Lettice” or “Letitia”, could scarcely be more upper class. The bristle-haired lower or possibly middle middle class pair are also given appropriate names. “Norman” is a distinctly down-market name; one chosen by John Betjeman for his often-quoted (especially among the upper middle class) poem which incorporates every conceivable verbal solecism, and begins: “Phone for the fish-knives, Norman, As cook is a little unnerved”. “Marcia”, on the other hand, is more ambiguous. It is really rather a grand name to be given to the Marcia of the novel. Perhaps Pym, with her subtle sense of the appropriate, did not wish to hammer home the contrast between the two pairs by giving Marcia a too obviously lower middle class name.

The passages concerning Aunt Hermione in *No Fond Return of Love* are also packed with the consciousness of class differences. When Dulcie begins to look at old copies of *The Field* in her Aunt's drawing-room she is baffled by a query from a correspondent in Montevideo who wanted to know how he could stop a mat in his lounge from curling up at the edges. Dulcie found herself quite unable to picture either the (quotes on) ‘lounge’ or the mat in such an exotic setting. The word ‘lounge’ is placed in quotation marks

to show that it is an unacceptable usage. Upper-middle class people do not have lounges – they have ‘drawing-rooms’, just as they do not have ‘mirrors’ but instead ‘looking-glasses’. Barbara Pym never puts a foot wrong in the jungle that is the distinction between ‘U’ and ‘Non-U’ usage, just as she is aware of and exploits all the subtleties of language in a stratified society. A female person of the middle and upper classes is a ‘lady’; a female person of the lower orders is a ‘woman’, and Pym’s characters observe this convention; thus putting themselves in context. When Jane in *Jane and Prudence* turns from looking out of the window of the new vicarage which she and Nicholas are to inhabit, disappointed that no-one has been to visit them, Nicholas exclaims in a rather agitated voice:

‘But there *is* somebody coming. A lady, or perhaps a woman, in a straw hat with a bird on it, and she is carrying a bloodstained bundle.’ Jane hurried to the window. ‘Why, that’s Mrs Glaze. It must be! She is to do for us. I quite forgot.’ Jane greets Mrs Glaze in her usual effusive manner. ‘Good evening, Mrs Glaze. How kind of you to come to us on our first evening here!’ ‘Well, madam, it was arranged, Mrs Pritchard said you would want me to.’ ‘Ah, yes; she and Mr Pritchard were so kind....’ ‘*Canon* Pritchard,’ Mrs Glaze corrected her gently, entering the house. ‘Yes, of course; he is that now. *Canon* Pritchard, called to a higher sphere.’ Jane stood uncertainly in the hall, wondering if perhaps such words were found only on tombstones or in parish magazine obituary notices, and were hardly suitable to be used about their predecessor, who was still very much alive.’

But to return to Aunt Hermione. When Dulcie tells her Uncle and Aunt that her friend Viola Dace is going to marry Bill Sedge they are astonished. “But how can that be? Do they know each other?” says Uncle Bertram, somewhat illogically, as Aunt Hermione is swift to point out: but his meaning is clear; how could they have ever met? How could his niece’s friend have met the cook’s brother? Earlier in the chapter Pym has pointed up the social difference by having Mrs (the honorary title of cooks in private service everywhere) Sedge and her brother return Dulcie’s Christmas greetings with, “And the same to you, Miss Dulcie”; the proper title for a member of the younger generation of their employer’s family. This may seem far-fetched to 21st century ears but it was not so at the period of Pym’s novels. My own mother, who would have been 100 this year, exclaimed in anguish when my son looked like making an unsuitable attachment: “But darling, you would never have met such a person” – and she was right too; the world operated within well-defined and defended circles, and young people were closely monitored.

Class is one of the principal motors of Pym’s fiction and certainly one of the principal sources of her humour. To cite *No Fond Return of Love* once again, the main plot is at least partly built upon Dulcie’s determination to seek out the truth about Aylwin and Neville’s background, in a way that Pym herself would have enjoyed vastly. To find out that their father was the black-sheep of a gentry family (just like Pym’s own grandfather) who had contracted a misalliance with the daughter of an hotel-keeper in the town is an unexpected and glamorous discovery. The names ‘Aylwin’ and ‘Neville’ sound aristocratic, but then we are put off the scent by being told that the former was derived from the title of Theodore Watts-Dunton’s novel, a copy of which had long resided in the maternal hotel. The sub-plot of the novel is, of course, represented by the misalliance between Viola Dace and Bill Sedge.

The past is another country; and here in the United States England is also another country. There are therefore two barriers to comprehension, from which I, an elderly Englishman, shall attempt, however ineffectually, to tear a brick or two. At the time that Pym was writing class was important to almost everyone. People were conscious of their position, and often none too subtle about expressing it. It was a stratified and largely deferential society. Distinction was made between the lower-middle (shopkeepers, clerks), middle-middle (local bank managers, lawyers, real estate agents and other professionals) and upper-middle class (similar positions to the middle-middle class, but in London or major cities and destined for the top of whatever organisation they graced). The upper-middle class for the most part went to the same schools and colleges as the upper class, and were at ease with them. The difference derived from the upper class owning or having once owned a country estate or estates. The end (or at least the beginning of the end) of this rigid society came in about 1970; later than most people would suppose. Barbara Pym, writing as she did between 1935 and 1979, was ideally placed to observe and record that society and its demise.

The attitudes of the upper-middle class (which is what so many of Pym's characters, with their private incomes and secure lives, so clearly belong to) tended to be inflexible and freely expressed. Social sensitivity, let alone political correctness, lay a long way ahead. Their prejudices were unthinking and often therefore curiously without malice. "He's not a bad chap, for a Jew-boy" would be said with warmth rather than scorn. Apart from Jewish people, the other three unacceptables were Blacks, Gays and Roman Catholics. The attitude to people of colour was more paternalistic and colonial than domestic, since there were virtually no black people in Britain. Indeed, during World War II British people were intrigued by, and welcoming of, black American soldiers – and were shocked by segregation in the US Army. Prejudice against Roman Catholics was as strong if not stronger than that against the other groups. They were seen as not quite English; indeed the majority of English Catholics were either from Ireland or from Continental Europe, and their practices were mysterious and felt to be somehow sinister. My father declared that he would rather that I married a black girl than a Roman Catholic. I ought to have defied him by seeking out an African Catholic girl, perhaps an Ibo, and thus covered both bases.

Prejudice on the ground of religion was not confined to Roman Catholics. The passage from *Jane and Prudence* where Fabian Driver walks down the village High Street from the pub to his house sums it up beautifully:

He walked slowly down the main street, past the collection of old and new buildings that lined it. The Parish Church and the vicarage were at the other end of the village. Here he came to the large Methodist Chapel, but of course one couldn't go there; none of the people one knew went to chapel, unless out of a kind of amused curiosity. Even if truth were to be found there. A little further on, though, as was fitting, on the opposite side of the road, was the little tin hut which served as a place of worship for the Roman Catholics. Fabian knew Father Kinsella, a good-looking Irishman, who often came into the bar of the Golden Lion for a drink. He had even thought of going to his church once or twice, but somehow it had never come to anything. The makeshift character of the building, the certain discomfort that he would find within, the plaster images in execrable taste, the simplicity of Father Kinsella's sermons intended only for a congregation of Irish labourers and servant-girls – all these kept him away. The glamour of Rome was obviously not there.

There remained only the Church of England, and here there was at least a choice between the Parish Church and Father Lomax's church – in the next village, but still within reasonable distance. It was natural to Fabian's temperament to prefer a High Church service, incense and good music, vestments and processions, but Father Lomax discouraged idle sightseers and expected his congregation to accept the less comfortable parts of the Faith – going to Confession, and getting up to sing Mass at half-past six on a winter morning. So there was really nothing for it but to go to the Parish Church, where, even if the service was less exotic, the yoke was easier."

Non-conformity was clearly out. (I always find it rather sad that the grand old Quaker families who did so much to build British industry and philanthropy have almost all become Church of England – but then I suppose something similar happens over here when families as they become richer and grander become Episcopalian). Roman Catholics were out unless they were part of the small inbred group of Old Catholic Families, recusants who had never embraced the Reformation despite all that fines and civil disabilities could do to persuade them. And, pace Barbara Pym, who when she went to live in Pimlico, became intrigued by Anglo-Catholicism with its smells and bells, "spikey" Anglicanism was out too. I do not recall ever having set foot in an Anglo-Catholic church until I went up to Cambridge and took to frequenting Little St Mary's, where the incense was so thick that one could scarcely see across the nave. I have heard people of my parents' generation say that the smell of incense made them feel physically unwell. As Belinda in *Some Tame Gazelle* remarks anxiously about Father Plowman: "But Harriet, he is rather high. He wears a biretta and has incense in the church. It's all so – well – Romish." Broad-minded as she was, Belinda was unable to keep a note of horror out of her voice.' The reaction of Dulcie Mainwaring when she stepped into the porch of St Ivel's Church sums up the general attitude: "Another notice-board gave the services for the

week typed on a printed form with little crosses at the corners. ‘Confessions – Saturday 6.45’, she read with a shudder. So it was High Church and Aylwin Forbes’s brother might very well be unmarried.”

In London at least Anglo-Catholic churches tended to be in working-class districts: Pimlico, Pentonville, or Holborn, for example. There they brought colour and drama into the lives of the toiling masses. I sometimes feel that Barbara Pym’s High Church leanings mean that she gives that branch of the Church of England rather more prominence in her novels than it really would have had in middle-class lives at the time. Most people would have regarded taking Communion every Sunday with horror; once a month would have been quite enough, or preferably three times a year. Mattins and a good sermon were what most church-goers required.

Reflecting on Pym’s churchmen and churchgoers reminds us that many of them are financially secure – even well-off. Archdeacon Hoccleve in *Some Tame Gazelle* clearly wants for nothing. He has a vicarage where several guests may stay in comfort at one time, a gardener to tend the spacious grounds (a gardener who cannot bear him because he wants hahas and yew trees and other such upper class adornments), and indoor servants too. His wife’s foreign travel – at a time when it was relatively much more expensive than it is today – appears not to be limited by financial considerations. The Archdeacon may not have felt well off – who among us ever does – and he may have wished Lady Clara Boulding would attend his church rather than that of Father Plowman where she was wont to put five or ten pounds into the collection bag on Easter Sunday, the day when the collection traditionally is for the benefit of the incumbent, but he was immensely much better off than his equivalent would be today. For one thing, the spacious rectories and vicarages have mostly been sold off by the Church, to be replaced by mean and cramped little boxes. For another thing, the Church of England’s revenues in those days were not pooled so that the clergy might be paid a uniform stipend. Each parish supported its own incumbent, and some livings were extremely well-endowed with glebe land and other investments. Others were not, and one wonders whether Father Plowman, as he sat wondering whether there would be refreshments at the Archdeacon’s garden-party, had one of these less than fat livings. With wealth and a dignified habitation came status, and a well-endowed parson was the equal of the gentry – indeed, often came from a gentry family. The system of advowsons, whereby the Lord of the Manor often had the gift of the Living to bestow where he saw fit, meant that he could look after worthy but less well-to-do relations. Sometimes, indeed, the owner of a living bestowed it on himself. George Nathaniel Curzon, afterwards First (and last) Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, who as an Oxford undergraduate was described in rhyme as a most superior person, whose hair was long and dark and sleek, and who dined at Blenheim twice a week, claimed that he was middle class (he pronounced it thus, somewhat unusually for the time) because his father was a parson. Lord Scarsdale, the father in question, being in Holy Orders, had appointed himself to his own Living, the parish church being, conveniently enough, immediately behind his stately Adam pile, Kedleston Hall.

Rich parsons or not, the purchasing power of the middle classes was relatively much, much greater than it is today, while the wages of the working class were much, much less. My Great Uncle Eric, who died in his nineties some twenty years ago, was the youngest son in a large family, and always thought of himself as being rather poor. I was lucky enough to inherit his chattels, and so acquired, along with his library, his dinner-jacket (or tuxedo) made by one of the best tailors in Savile Row, his shooting-suit (ditto), his binoculars, made by Negretti and Zambra, the best that money could buy, and so on. To buy nowadays what Uncle Eric bought one would have to be a millionaire at least. The very rich have become very richer, and the working class are for the most part infinitely better off. This is as it should be. For instance, one can no longer tell a woman’s class simply by looking at her clothes. A much better off working class does, however, mean higher wages and more expensive goods, and therefore a middle class whose money does not go so far.

When my father retired from the army in 1950 on a Lieutenant Colonel’s pension (although to be accurate he did subsequently get a retired officer’s job with the Territorial Army, our equivalent of the National Guard) he took with him to the house in the country that he had inherited from an Aunt a retinue of seven servants indoors and out. This did not last long, and at the end of their lives my parents had a cook

as ancient as themselves and a part-time gardener, both of whom had worked for them for thirty years. The middle class characters in Pym's novels are therefore enjoying the last years when servants were affordable and available. Despite Dulcie Mainwaring's incredulous response to Viola Dace's observation that the noise coming from the basement of Aylwin Forbes's house must be the servants listening to a television programme, "Servants? Do people have servants nowadays – I mean, ordinary people like Aylwin Forbes?" most of the characters in the novels do keep a servant.

We learn in *Some Tame Gazelle* that "although the Misses Bede had a maid they were both quite domesticated and helped her in various small ways, clearing away the breakfast things, dusting their own bedrooms and doing a little cooking when they felt like it." Aunt Hermione in *No Fond Return of Love* has, as we have seen, a cook in the redoubtable shape of Mrs Sedge (cooks were traditionally extremely fierce and territorial animals), just as Julian and Winifred Malory in *Excellent Women* have Mrs Jubb, she who might have been quite a good cook with any encouragement but who had lost heart long ago. Even Mildred Lathbury, the daughter of a country clergyman, had an income of her own and retained the services of Mrs Morris, her 'woman' (in quotes), who came twice a week. Mrs Morris addresses her employer respectfully as 'Miss' ('Kettle's boiling, miss') as would have been expected. This does not, however, prevent her from expressing her feelings with some familiarity, and the passage where she does so demonstrates how brilliantly Pym catches regional accents (in this case, Welsh – she's as good as Dylan Thomas – perhaps it was growing up in Oswestry right on the Welsh border) and working class turns of speech. Mrs Morris is expressing her misgivings should Mildred go to live at the Vicarage and Winifred Malory be away.

'Yes, indeed, Miss Lathbury. It wouldn't be right at all for you to live at the vicarage.'

'You think it wouldn't be quite respectable?'

'Respectable? That isn't for me to say, Miss Lathbury. But it isn't natural for a man not to be married.'

'Clergymen don't always want to, or they think it better they shouldn't.'

'Strong passions, isn't it [a very Welsh turn of phrase]. Eating meat you know, it says that in the Bible. Not that we get much of it now. If he was a real Father like Father Bogart [of the local Roman Catholic church] you could understand it.'

'Has something upset you? Something about Father Malory?'

'Oh, Miss. It's that old black thing he wears on his head in church.'

'You mean his biretta?'

'I don't know what he calls it. Like a little hat, it is.'

'But you've been going to St Mary's for years. You must have got used to it by now.'

'Well, it was my sister Gladys and her husband, been staying with us they have. I took them to church Sunday evening and they didn't like it at all, nor the incense, said it was Roman Catholic or something and we'd all be kissing the Pope's toe before you could say knife. Of course, Evan and I have always been to St Mary's because it's near, but it isn't like the church I went to as a girl, where Mr Lewis was vicar. He didn't have incense or wear that old black hat.'

'No, I don't suppose he did.'

'I was always church. Never been in the chapel, though I did once go to the Ebenezer social, but I don't want to have anything to do with some old Pope. Kissing his toe, indeed!'

'There's a statue in St Peter's Church in Rome, and people do kiss the toe. But that's only Roman Catholics. Don't you remember Father Malory explaining about the Pope in his Sunday morning sermons last year?'

'Oh, Sunday morning, was it? That's all very fine, standing up and talking about the Pope. A lot of us could do that. But who's going to cook the Sunday dinner? Let's have a fag, any road. I'll just tell Gladys what you said, Miss Lathbury, about it being some old statue.'

Barbara Pym also follows an ancient tradition, stretching back to Moliere and beyond, whereby servants are the people with resolution and initiative, and continually have to make up for the shortcomings of their somewhat feeble and ineffectual employers. Mrs Glaze comes to the rescue of Jane Cleveland:

‘Well, if you will excuse me, madame.’ Mrs Glaze made as if to pass.

‘Oh, certainly!’ Jane stood aside, for she had hardly yet grasped where the kitchen was and in any case it was a part of the house in which she took little interest. ‘I don’t know what we are going to have for supper.’

‘Don’t you worry about that,’ said Mrs Glaze, raising her bloodstained bundle and thrusting it towards Jane. ‘I’ve got some liver for you.’

‘How wonderful! How did you manage that?’

‘Well, madam, my nephew happens to be a butcher, and one of the sidesmen at the Parish Church too. I warned him when you would be coming and naturally he wanted to see that you had a good supper. He loves his work, madam.... Of course, he can’t take the same pride in it that he used to, not every day, that is. Meat has never been at such a low ebb as it is now, what with everything having to go through the Government; it’s no wonder the butchers can’t go on grinding out the ration, is it madam?’

‘No, indeed, one does wonder how they grind it out,’ said Jane fervently. ‘My husband is so fond of liver. But what about vegetables?’

‘Why, in the garden, madam,’ said Mrs Glaze in a surprised tone.

‘Of course a “well-stocked garden”. We didn’t have much of a garden in London,’ said Jane apologetically.... ‘This is my daughter Flora’, said Jane. ‘She’s been putting away the china.’

‘Well now, isn’t that kind,’ said Mrs Glaze; ‘that’s saved me a lot of work. And I see she’s even got the vegetables; I can start getting supper right away. Then you will be ready for Father Lomax when he comes for coffee.’ It was almost soothing that she should know so much about one’s life, Jane thought.”

Barbara Pym’s world is a vanished world, but human nature never changes, and through her genius we know and care about the characters, both great and small, who populate her novels. Human attitudes, assumptions, priorities and prejudices, however, do change, and they can puzzle us and bring us up short. We may even ask ourselves whether Pym has got it right; did people really think, speak and act in the ways that she describes. Did her world ever really exist? I hope that this little talk has demonstrated that it certainly did, and that Barbara Pym, with her sympathy for human motivation and her ear for dialogue, has given us an outstandingly accurate portrayal of the particular world that she knew and understood so well, and which gave her, and through her, us, so much entertainment.