

How Goodness and Misfortune Correlate in Barbara Pym's Novels

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I discovered the writings of Barbara Pym not very long ago. I lived in Boston at the time, in Arlington actually, where I worked as a software programmer in an old-school American corporation – Raytheon (which some of you may know). But I wasn't very happy, and I was feeling as we all do at certain points in our lives a kind of restlessness without being able to identify the source of it. I remember being at work one afternoon eating lunch alone at my desk feeling like a general misfit when I stumbled upon an article in *The New Yorker* by Hannah Rosefield about this meeting version 2015. This was my first introduction to Barbara Pym, and it described the general texture of this gathering as “genteel, literary, largely female, located somewhere between academia and the church.” I was intrigued, and I read on. The descriptions of women in the Pym books (“ordinary, a little lonely and socially marginal”) and of men (“self-important, demanding and a little ridiculous”) were both very relatable to me. My encounter with this article was a fortuitous one it seems to me, because around that time, I had also recently read and loved Philip Larkin's masterpiece novel *A Girl in Winter*. In my meanderings on the internet reading about Barbara Pym as my lunch hour stretched on that day, I read about him complimenting her work, saying she was one of the most underrated writers he knew. I was sold. I immediately bought *No Fond Return of Love*, and since then as they say there has been no looking back.

I do not consider it an exaggeration even to say that Pym was a significant factor that influenced my decision to enter academia, wanting to be a linguist. I am convinced that it was because it was the closest thing to an anthropologist that I was qualified to be. What is it about an impersonal observation of the way of the “humans” that is so irresistible to most of us gathered here today? My personal answer is that perhaps when Pym described all these people in her novels she was trying to find a way of articulating her non-comprehension about our species, it was an attempt to explore and understand her inability to completely fit in – an exercise in empathy, an edification in the nature of the object of her study. Speaking for myself, I think I am drawn to Pym because I secretly dislike everybody, and I hope that I can always be spinster at heart, whatever the states of my other entanglements are.

The proposal that I would like to lay out in some detail in my talk today is that in Barbara Pym's stories, the extent of moral goodness in a character is closely correlated with the misfortunes or tragedies that they have happened to have endured in their life. I will try to argue in support of the observation that none of her characters who is perceived as having any “depth” has any perverse, or even so much as obvious, joy in their life. Curiously and quite contrarily to my previous comment, for whatever it's worth, neither are such “morally good”/ “deep” characters actively enduring any serious misfortune right at the moment in which the story is set. Instead, the (always personal) tragedies reside in some distant past. For e.g., Belinda Bede in *Some Tame Gazelle* loving the archdeacon quietly without hope or expectation of love in return reeks of a heart-broken 20-something come to terms with unrequited love as she aged. These characters were separated enough from their misfortune to have gained some perspective – they had had not only an experience of it but an awareness, not only an awareness of it but acceptance.

Before we can consider any evidence to verify whether such a claim might actually be true, i.e., that there is indeed some correlative relationship in Pymian settings between morality and an experience of misfortune, we must first consider what goodness means in her novels, and what exactly counts as misfortune. First, the first question. What DOES goodness mean in Barbara Pym's stories? I think this question

is best answered by considering a couple of her characters who I think we can all agree upon as being “uncontroversially good”. These are Belinda Bede (*Some Tame Gazelle*), Mildred Lathbury (*Excellent Women*), and Letty Crowe (*Quartet in Autumn*). Side note here: I remembered the full names of Belinda and Mildred, but I had to go back and look at what Letty’s last name was in the book while I was preparing this talk. I see it as an interesting decision by the writer – my first thought is that maybe this was to give an effect of her being a somewhat displaced, without an actual identity apart from being a part of the quartet - it may be a whole other interesting study to see – sorry this was a digression. Coming back to the question of goodness then - much has been said and written about these characters. Here is a distilled description on what the core of each of them is to my untrained eyes. Belinda Bede, the older one of the Bede sisters in *Some Tame Gazelle* is most striking in her quiet love for the married Archdeacon. Her character is one of persistence and innocuity. Her non-impulsiveness is very impressive, her consistency in love even more so – possibly these two qualities go hand in hand. Mildred Lathbury, another one of Pym’s “excellent women”, is excellent in that she’s capable and keen-minded, among other things. She does good work for the Distressed Gentlewomen’s society (as a part of which she envisions herself someday). She strongly values her solitude. She helps the local church, and generally keeps herself occupied without putting anyone else out. She still makes cutting observations about the people around her. The third and last character that I will consider is that of Letty in *Quartet in Autumn*. She is one of the four unskilled clerks that are protagonists in this novel, she’s one of the two women in the group and definitely comes across as the more balanced one in comparison to Marcia. Her dignified response to things in her old age, her ability to not become easily flustered and of taking things in her stride are all impressive. She is the only one among the four that seems to have any interest in self- edification – we are informed that she goes to the library and reads for pleasure. It is HER philosophical musings that we are exposed to, while what we see of the other three are their more mundane actions, and thoughts about the remaining three in the quartet. Additionally, back to considering all three together Belinda, Mildred and Letty: what these three heroines have in common, it seems, is a poignant incapacity to be completely fulfilled.

Let’s try to consider these women more systematically, and ask what attributes are common among them to try to arrive at a working definition, if you will, of Pymian goodness. Here are some that stand out to me – perhaps you will point some more out to me later.

1. They do not look upon their personal misfortunes as having been too great. They show a quiet acceptance of their lot and do not wallow in self-pity of any sort or any victim complex.

2. They are not overtly aware of the “depth” of their thoughts – this is to say that they are not overtly conscious of being better than the other people around them, or if they are, at least they do not explicitly let it on. Instead, they are all a little diffident. It is left to the readers to infer what Pym’s attitude towards these characters is and how she wants us as readers to interpret them, and we are able to do so through our insight into their actions and their private thoughts on every day goings-on. The characters themselves certainly do not tell us using words of their own, unlike in stories such as *Jane Eyre* and other Austinian novels – they are not being constantly praised by other “worthy” characters. Austen has the strategy of letting us know who’s good through having that person be positively appraised by other “worthy” characters, Pym does this by making everyone else a little bit inferior.

3. They are not “disinterested” or “have not risen above” the trivialities of life in spite of having this “depth of character”. In her work *The World of Barbara Pym*, Janice Rossen comments that Pym’s characters are often revealed to have rather humbler tastes than their erudite conversation suggests. This betrays Pym’s own similar attitude – “Today I wrote (?) a note telling him what the milk situation was, and it occurred to me, why should not a masterpiece consist of such notes, for after all it is life!” [Rossen, p.12].

Relatedly, I think, Pym's "good" characters or "excellent women" are not cloyingly good. There seems to be in them the tacit understanding that overt displays of virtue are more often than not dishonest to varying degrees.

4. Another virtue that these excellent women seem to share is that of moderation. And they are also not impulsive. Belinda Bede is a prime example of this virtue, which I think she has earned by not having made a move on the love of her life in spite of living so close to him for so many years. While this may seem like not so much a virtue but a duty and we may all like to hold ourselves at least to this standard (and I hope that we do), I do think it is easier said than done within human nature.

5. And last but not least, in some sense, each one is a little bit "wronged" – by life, by time, by other people. But, there exists no sense of entitlement in them – not really a longing for justice. They have made their peace with their fortune.

In a nutshell, we can operationalize goodness in a Pymian novel with the help of adjectives such as these: having acceptance, showing humility, not being above daily trivialities, being a little wronged, being moderate or not given to unchecked impulses.

OK. So now that we have given a somewhat concrete characterization of goodness in Pymian characters, we can move on to doing the same with the concept of "misfortune". What DOES misfortune look like in Pym's stories? Given that her stories are themselves quite moderate (again a side note – this really is one of the many things that I enjoy about her books. There is no melodrama, you know that nothing bad is going to happen to anyone (mostly), just as nothing too annoyingly good is going to happen to anyone) – misfortune often takes the form of simply a lack of fortune. Unreturned love, not being able to find likeminded company, things not having quite worked out in a (one might say, boringly) conventional way, being misunderstood or pushed over by other members of the community, being subject to some general unkindnesses – these seem characteristic of "misfortune" in Pym's novels short of death. Of course, real poverty is unknown – this is a genteel society.

We can ask, again, whether this kind of misfortune really does exist in the lives of the representative heroines that we have been considering so far --- namely, Belinda, Mildred and Letty. I will say yes. They have all three been generally unlucky in love. None of them have what is considered a conventionally full life – they are sometimes objects of pity even though they reject being so. They do not always agree with the words and actions of the more influential or the better-off, or simply – the bolder people around them, but they are expected (both by themselves and by others around them) to put up with them. All in all, in spite of having rich inner lives and deep philosophical musings, they do not feel equal to articulating them and are often, or always, in the danger of being misunderstood. It seems at least that it is true that the women in whom we find "goodness" as defined above are also those who have had their share of misfortunes (also as defined above). There seems to exist a correlation? But why? Does one lead to the other? Could goodness possibly lead to misfortune, or misfortune lead to virtue? Isn't virtue inherent to a person instead of being something that can be learned? We will return to these questions later, and we can be nitpicky about the directions of causality when we do, but it seems clearly to be the case that Pym at least deals exclusively with slightly unfortunate good women and attempts to give them all a sympathetic treatment – I guess we will never know for sure but there is good chance given the autobiographical-ity of her works that this is how she saw herself or would liked to have seen herself. I would once again like to quote Janice Rossen here, who says:

Barbara Pym's novels contend that the weak inherit the earth and perhaps no other aspect of her work accounts so fully for the pleasure they afford the reader. Her comedy sets

the down-trodden and little regarded narrator and his audience in a position of moral superiority to the powerful, authoritarian characters in Pym's fictional world by exposing their weaknesses through the mildness of Pym's excellent women.

Now that we have characterized what goodness and misfortune may mean to Barbara Pym's characters using three prominent works, and observed that there seems to be a correlation between the two notions at least when characterized in the particular way that we have characterized it, we can ask as a test to our theory whether a similar trend bears out in her other works. Specifically, I will focus on the case of *The Sweet Dove Died* – the development of Leonora Eyre's character. Before delving into this, let us consider the character of Leonora Eyre in the context of Pym's other heroines. It seems to me that Pym's ladies can be divided broadly into three "types" of women (I say types at the risk of sounding crass, but for lack of a simpler phrase). The first one is the virtuous type – and this is the category that the women we have so far considered fall into. Belinda, Mildred and Letty are all virtuous, excellent women. We have already said a lot about what the nature of these virtues may be, so I will say no more. The second type on the scale arranged in decreasing order of virtue are the neutral type of women. These outnumber the other two types in Pym's stories – I see Viola and Dulcie of *No Fond Return of Love*, Jane and Prudence, Catherine Oliphant and others falling into this category. They make up the ones most relatable to most of us. They are good in their own ways. They want to be left alone, they prize their solitude, but they are not necessarily virtuous. When they do bad things or think bad thoughts, they justify it to themselves and it is in the nature of these justifications that we find them similar to ourselves. These are not women we aspire to be – we either ARE them or we are not. The third type then, as may have guessed is the "bad" one (note the double quotes – I am not passing a personal moral judgement, I am simply trying to fit this type into the framework for goodness that we defined above). I think of Leonora as being in this category. In this sense, she really is an exception among all of Pym's heroines. Why is she bad? Well, she thinks and utters blatantly bad things – remember Miss Foxe? She is discriminatory – at one point in the story she thinks of something as "the sort of thing black people do".

The question that I am interested in posing here, and then answering is this: along the course of *The Sweet Dove Died*, as the story and the characters in it develop, do we see Leonora's "goodness", characterized as we did above, and the amount of misfortune she experiences grow in the same direction? I will say yes. The more Leonora is thwarted in her love for James, the meeker she becomes and the more readily she seems to accept her lot. Let us consider her from the beginning.

Leonora is introduced to us as a very well-sorted out, good looking character who lives alone in a nice, little house. She likes all Victorian things – she is your typical elegant lady who intimidates people. It is not that she does not have her own thoughts at the beginning of the book, but her thoughts are quite unlike the ones that our excellent women might have. For one, Leonora is not at all diffident. She comes across in fact as having a superiority complex who looks down even on people who she calls her "friends". In the second chapter for instance in *The Sweet Dove Died*, Leonora pities her friend Meg for her officiousness and her "rambling, untidy flat". Crucially, Leonora considers herself better off than Meg because of her own greater material comfort and self-reliance. Contrast this with Belinda in *Some Tame Gazelle* who does not necessarily put much store by material comfort – instead letting a keen mental life and love, of course to take the place of material possessions. Belinda, in addition, seems to be a queen of diffidence. It does not take much convincing to see that these two characters are clearly very different – they value different things, and their self-image with respect to these things also operates differently. This difference between the two characters is underlined by a suggestion that Leonora's friend Liz might look upon her as Belinda looks upon Agatha – indeed in a scene where Liz and Leonora are dining together one evening, and we are informed that - "Liz for her part would be equally bored by Leonora and her reminiscences of her Continental childhood and

later attachments mysteriously hinted at which never seemed to have come to anything”, even as Leonora judges her cats, her dreary clothing, and her reminiscences about her failed marriage.

To continue the discussion of Leonora’s character as she is introduced to us at the beginning of the book, another observation that shows how much importance Leonora paid to external appearances is that she had photos of her grandparents on her bedside table rather than her parents, because they were much more distinguished looking. She also wished for an elegant death – once again an emphasis on “appearing” agreeable. She pities her other friend Liz also for lack of better fortune and better living circumstances, implying that she judges her own circumstances to be fortunate. So, at this point we can start to think that maybe Leonora is not a very good person, definitely not someone to aspire towards. She reaches her zenith of insensitivity in the book, in my opinion, in her behavior towards helpless Miss Foxe, who she always speaks unkindly about and forces to vacate so that her dear James could move in. Note also that at this point, it doesn’t seem to us, the readers, like Leonora has had a lot of misfortune in her life – at least none is revealed to us. It is true that she hasn’t found lasting love – which maybe counts as a happy thing to have happened even in Pym’s cynical worlds. She has always had “kindness from people” as she puts it. Pym lets us know that Leonora “was used to receiving compliments gracefully”, suggesting an abundance of compliments in her life. So far, we have Leonora feeling pretty good about herself, and behaving quite insensitively to the people around her.

The crux of my claim here is that this changes as the book develops. Leonora does grow more sensitive, and this happens as she realizes more and more that she is fallible, not immune to loss. The first time we really glimpse Leonora’s exhaustion is when she feels that James is concealing something from her (with regards to Phoebe). When he is out with Phoebe one evening, she rings him, and he does not answer. Again, she is conscious of her age. But this is fleeting, and the darkness only sets in more lastingly when James returns from his foreign travel with his lover Ned. Ned proves to be a formidable opponent to Leonora, and my claim is that in the midst of thoughts reflecting grave unhappiness is also when we see the presence of charity. We see an instance of this at Keats’ house where she sees a middle-aged woman, I quote – “carrying a shopping bag full of books, on top of which lay the brightly colored packet of a frozen dinner for one. Leonora’s first feeling was her usual one of contempt for anyone who can live in this way, then, perhaps because her growing unhappiness had made her more sensitive, she saw the woman going home to a cozy solitude, her dinner heated up in twenty five minutes with no bother of preparation, books to read while she ate it, and the memory of a visit to Keats’ house to cherish”. Here we find Leonora thinking that there might be something to the trivial internal, definitionally unpretentious pleasures that life had to offer.

Another instance of a charitable thought comes to her at a time when she is at a self-service place, feeling “debased, diminished, crushed and trodden into the ground, indeed brought to a certain point of dilapidation”, when she runs into her cousin Daphne and thinks about her – “At the same time, Daphne was a kind woman and perhaps as one grew older there was something to be said for kindness.” It turns out in the story that James really does choose Ned over Leonora. And then later when Leonora learns that Ned is leaving, stating his mother’s illness as an excuse when he is really just looking for an excuse to get away from James and the other entanglements he has formed during his time here – she feels something akin to a sense of triumph, yes, but no relief. Instead she judges Ned in the way that Belinda judges Agatha. “As she listened to James describing that last quarrel Leonora found herself tempted to laugh. It occurred to her that Ned was in many ways a comic character, but the realization had come too late”. She realizes that she has given up that fight now. We see this when James comes to visit her at the end of the book too, and there is no attempt to win him back – I quote “she was receiving more from him (James) than she ever had before, but unable to respond in the way he obviously expected. She and James had both been hurt, but it hardly seemed to make a bond between them – it was more like a barrier or a wedge driving them apart”. “There

was something humiliating about the idea of wooing James this way, like an animal being enticed back to its cage” – here, we see that the snide remark made by Ned has stuck with Leonora in a profound way. Could this be a sign of acceptance, of moving on with maturity after being rejected by someone you love? I think it is. A final instance I would like to state as a sign of her moral maturity is that she now is to be found judging Meg not for her material circumstances, but for her demeanor. “Leonora, now recovering her composure, was beginning to be conscious of how ridiculous Meg looked, kneeling there on the floor, even as she was voicing such noble and unselfish sentiments as the need to accept people as they are and to love them whatever they did”. – here we see the classic Pymian rejection of cloying goodness.

As Leonora is thwarted in love, is made to feel inferior to Ned, is mocked, as she is “wronged” – all hallmark Pymian misfortunes – we see also the more charitable qualities emerge – primarily that of acceptance and of diffidence. If we can accept that such a correlation indeed does seem to exist, we can then consider meta-questions about the nature of the correlation and its “cause”. Which comes first? The experience of misfortune, or a certain kind of goodness? Certainly, given how we have considered Leonora’s development in TSDD, it seems that misfortune comes first. It seems to really be the case that experience of misfortune, or being thwarted in love, of feeling inferior materially to someone else – all of these can and do bring about in Pym’s stories a kind of mental shift such as increase in sensitivity etc. But then -- why does this happen? In particular, can we try to characterize the mechanism of how this happens? Of course, it could be the case, one may argue that it probably is the case that going through a hard time makes you empathize with others who are going through a hard time as well – this might explain Leonora’s attitude towards the woman in Keats’ house or towards Daphne. But what is this about acceptance coming about as a result of the experience of misfortune? Is it a form of coping mechanism – rather than being something more heroic than the development of an actual virtue. Another question that we can ask is that of why Ned was able to bring about this change in Leonora when Phoebe wasn’t? Is acceptance then a lower form of defense, when actually fighting to win is not possible? This seems to lend support to the hypothesis that acceptance is indeed a form of coping mechanism, rather than a virtue. One thing to consider here, though, is that a person like Belinda Bede may have chosen even with a rival like Phoebe to not fight – so not just a coping mechanism, but an active “virtuous”(?) choice. To go back to our question of whether experience teaches someone (at least in Pym’s world) true insight as a valid consequence, or whether it is just a coping mechanism, maybe the correct answer lies as always somewhere in the middle. It may be a bit of both.

But let’s return to the question of which comes first – goodness or misfortune. OK, so we said that maybe Belinda Bede would not have treated Phoebe cold-bloodedly, as a rival in love. But Leonora, as we know, did. So, in some sense, one might claim that when faced with someone like Ned, it was NOT Leonora’s character at that point, but her circumstances, that prevented her from fighting and winning. But being forced in this case to live through such an experience of defeat was maybe good for her – it gave her insights that she would not have found otherwise. With Belinda though, she would not have chosen to fight even where she might have won. So, in a sense, she can be said to bring upon herself at least in some cases misfortunes like that of being thwarted in love. What I am trying to suggest here is that there is not a one-way causal relation between goodness and misfortune in Pym’s works. There are two characters Belinda and Leonora, each encountering similar experiences - Belinda Bede thwarted in love by Agatha, and Leonora thwarted by Phoebe - but potentially taking away different things. What ultimately is different between Belinda Bede and Leonora Eyre? One – Belinda - has some innate characteristics that make her meek. She has a certain world view because of this, which attracts from the beginning certain types of misfortunes to her – unrequited love being one such misfortune. When these misfortunes inevitably occur, Belinda then must make sense of them in some way that lets her come out of it feeling not terrible about herself and her situation – which further reinforces such a world view as a coping mechanism. In Belinda’s case, goodness

comes first. But for a person like Leonora who starts out at the outset with a very high sense of worth, misfortunes like these come upon her not because of her own doing, but in spite of her best attempts to avoid them, either by extricating herself out of a relationship (as she seems to have done in all the ones before James as far as we know) or trying her best to keep the object of her love close to her (as she did in winning James back away from Phoebe). But she cannot always win against circumstances, as with Ned. So, in her case, where it is the misfortune comes first, goodness must grow as a coping mechanism - perhaps this is the view that she must adapt that best keeps her dignity but still renders her susceptible to the vagaries of life. Both Belinda and Leonora arrive at a midpoint on the scale of this “virtue”, each from either end of it – the former from the completely meek end of it and Leonora from the completely bold end of it. There is thus constant interaction between character and fortune, in Barbara Pym’s novels and perhaps also in life.

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