

# *Less Than Angels, or An Unsuitable Detachment*

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In Barbara Pym's *Less Than Angels*, the young French anthropologist Jean-Pierre le Rossignol spends his time observing various aspects of English culture. After attending a Whitsunday church service, he visits the Swans to experience a typical English Sunday dinner. In response to Rhoda's comment that living in a detached house "is an advantage," he replies, "detachment is a good thing. But one can be *too* detached, perhaps?" This exchange lays bare a key question explored in this novel: Is complete detachment desirable, or even achievable? We see a variety of characters who through their actions and words maintain that their goal is to remain detached, as they consider it a necessity. I argue that in this novel, while Pym acknowledges the usefulness of detachment—especially for anthropologists and writers—she examines the real benefits of human attachments. Such attachments can be both personally fulfilling as well as professionally important. She also shows how complete or near-complete detachment leads to isolation and a real or figurative death.

Now I'm a bit of a word geek, so I looked up the words **detach** and **detachment**. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word detach comes from the Latin prefix *dis* meaning away and apart, and the Roman *tacca*, which means nail, tack, fixed point, or spot.<sup>1</sup> The dictionary had several meanings, but the most useful one states: "to disengage, and separate oneself; to become disconnected."<sup>2</sup> The word detachment is defined as "standing apart or aloof from objects or circumstances; a state of separation or withdrawal from connexion or association with surrounding things."<sup>3</sup> These various definitions play a large part in how the characters in this novel view the concept.

According to my count, some form of the word detachment is used twenty times. In addition to Rhoda and Jean-Pierre, the word is most associated with Deidre (two times) Catherine (five times) and Tom (also five times). Additionally, the words detached or detachment are also used with minor characters: Prof. Mainwaring uses it once in reference to Vanessa Eaves, and Pym uses it twice to describe Mark Penfold. We also see many signifiers of detachment as characters are portrayed physically and perhaps emotionally separated behind masks, hedges, walls, or windows.

Two characters who view detachment as a good or necessary ideal, whether it be for personal or professional reasons, are Vanessa Eaves and Deirdre Swan. As students of anthropology, they would be expected to cultivate the necessary detachment required to do field work. As the critic Jane Nardin explains, anthropologists are "detached observers of the social world around them...[observing] customs as closely as possible while trying to keep their intellectual distance."<sup>4</sup> Yet these two particular characters have trouble achieving this ideal, and actually appear to seek out attachments, despite their professional ambitions. Vanessa Eaves, a minor character, is sufficiently advanced in her studies to be applying for a grant to go out in the field. Yet, her commitment to her studies appears to be rather suspect as we first see her hung-over and unprepared for the seminar paper that she is about to present. Pym's description of her in this first scene is telling: "dark and languorous...[and] generally in the throes of some desperate love affair." She appears more interested in maintaining or creating attachments, rather than remaining an aloof observer. She is either coupled with a significant other, dancing with her Ethiopian boyfriend at Tom and Catherine's party, or fantasizing about getting together with Felix Mainwaring. Indeed, when she goes to his country estate along with the other grant applicants, her actions are rather obvious; she allows Mainwaring to choose her drinks, turns towards him "so that her long jade ear-rings [swing] in a rather provocative way," and

wonders why he hasn't married and whether or not she could make him happy. Her attentions are apparent, that the professor remarks to her: "you...are an impressionable young lady, who will look for the romance of life. Perhaps you would find it difficult to take the detached view necessary for successful fieldwork." Clearly her inability to detach has hurt her chances to advance in her field. Yet it is also during this weekend where we hear about how attachments can be a professional advantage. After all, Father Gemini is able to "steal" the Foresight grant by forming some sort of connection to Minnie Foresight and advancing his professional endeavors, so perhaps all is not lost for Vanessa.

Deidre Swan is the better example of someone believes that she wants to be detached, but is actually intent on permanently attaching herself to both her upbringing and to someone else. Deidre can be considered a typical 19-year old seeking to free herself from the fixed point of her traditional background and all the trappings that go with it—a stable comfortable home with a drawing room boringly decorated with "beige walls and flowered chintz," homemade dinners in the dining room, Sunday afternoon teas in the garden, a caring mother, a nosy aunt, a solid brother, and a suitable, if dull, gentleman caller. She longs to break free from the family attachments that she considers to be a "nuisance" and the dull life of suburbia that comes with the detached house and close neighbors who have known her since she was a child. Deidre dreams of disengaging from these familiar connections: "She would have liked to live in the heart of London or deep in the country. There could be no dignity or beauty or even interesting squalor in a place that was no more and no less than a nine-penny bus ride from Piccadilly Circus." Deidre yearns to be more like the bohemian and detached Catherine.

Her attempts to separate herself from this life are many and obvious. She rejects anything that is conventional, including a nicely dressed salad on a warm night. As she tells her mother, she wants "something *different*...rice, all oily and saffron yellow, with aubergines and red peppers and lots of garlic," the kind of exotic food only to be found in the ethnic grocery stores of Soho. The description of such a meal is so foreign to her family that her mother says "it's no good wishing for that sort of thing *here*" safe in suburbia. (And, just as an aside: Deidre's description is echoed later by Catherine when, after staying with the Swans for two weeks, she goes home and "cook[s] herself an oily dish full of garlic, of the kind she had not eaten for a fortnight.") Deidre prefers the modern problem plays, over the popular musicals her brother takes his fiancée Phyllis to, rejecting them as not "[her] kind of thing." And while her mother and Aunt have "traditional ideas about women being wives and mothers"<sup>5</sup>, Deidre openly scorns these ideas. When she finds Rhoda washing the vicar's albs, Deidre tells her aunt, "Well, I certainly wouldn't do that for a man..." She even, if only for a brief moment, bucks convention when she assumes the daring role of the other woman in her relationship with Tom. Perhaps the clearest indication of her desires to detach is her field of study. Jane Nardin argues that in choosing anthropology Deidre is "flee[ing] ...the confined world of her mother and aunt."<sup>6</sup> I would also contend that a young woman attempting to enter this traditionally male field is another indication of her desire to break free from her conventional upbringing.

Yet Deidre struggles with the type of detachment she is seeking, and Pym makes that clear early in the novel when, after the party at Felix's Folly, Deidre is on the bus ride home, trying to examine the scene "in a detached way" much like an anthropologist would. Yet Pym writes that Deidre is unable to do so as she is "not yet detached enough." Indeed, it becomes questionable as the novel progresses whether Deidre will ever achieve a level of detachment.

When we first see Deidre, it is at the party in the library where she finds herself uncomfortably alone in a room full of strangers. Instead of observing the rituals playing out before her, she craves company, "praying that one of the young men might take pity on her" and come speak with her. When Jean Pierre does come over to her,

she attempts to assume the role of a dispassionate observer and says about the gathering: "I suppose it is interesting if you can be detached about it." By describing Deirdre uttering this sentiment "rather desperately," and using the word "if," Pym is making it clear that Deirdre struggles to be comfortable standing apart or aloof from those around her.

In this same conversation Jean Pierre brings up visiting the "exquisite" Methodist Chapel, and the "fashionable" Mayfair church as if they were specimens for study or just tourist attractions rather than places of worship. Deirdre is clearly uneasy with Jean Pierre's detached manner: "Churchgoing was a serious matter in her family, one either went to church or one didn't; there was none of this light-hearted experimenting that Jean Pierre seemed to indulge in." This is an interesting sentiment for someone who later declares, in the comfort of her home, that she is not sure that she believes any more anyway. But away from her home, she clings to her conventional upbringing.

Her relationship with Tom is the clearest example of Deirdre's unwillingness to detach from the conventions that she claims to dismiss. Ellen M. Tsagaris claims that "Deirdre is not that interested in the academic life; she is really at school looking for a husband"<sup>7</sup>. When her actions are examined, it is understandable why some would argue this and why Mark claims that Deirdre threw herself at Tom. Deirdre and Tom's first meeting is almost the stereotype of the lovesick teenager looking for a boyfriend. As they are sitting in the pub together, Deirdre, "felt such a rush of happiness that she could have listened for ever to his voice going gently on about the complications of lineage segmentation" while gazing at him with an "uncomprehending starry-eyed look." She hopes that he will give her his picture, asks him about his mother, and frets about his off-hand "See you again, sometime." While she is out with Bernard that evening, she dreams about what it would be like to go out with Tom. She is so besotted with Tom, and so conventional in her thinking that the fact that Catherine and Tom are lovers is a complete surprise to her, and she of course assumes that they will marry. She is able to adjust her thinking, especially upon hearing that they are not planning to marry, and is even, as I've said earlier, willing to play the other woman briefly. Yet even in in this scenario, she cannot assume the necessary level of emotional detachment and appears genuinely sorry for Catherine and wishes to remain friends with her. That she is reflecting her conventional upbringing is evidenced by her mother saying later in the novel that she hoped Catherine wasn't unhappy about Tom and Deirdre. And while Deirdre derides her aunt for doing the vicar's laundry, she too has assumed the traditional female role as helpmate by taking on some typing for Tom, even if she considers that to be in a "higher category" than washing. Her actual courtship with Tom follows the traditional customs that her upbringing has prepared her for: she brings him home for family dinner, gets jealous "like an outraged Edwardian dowager" when he flirts with Phyllis, takes romantic walks in the parks and strolls by the river, and chastely holds hands in restaurants and libraries.

When Deirdre visits Tom in his room, it is clear that she can only respond to this new situation through the lens of her upbringing. She struggles to drink "cold sour red wine," and tells herself that she must "learn to enjoy...the kind of things these people seem to enjoy, beer and funny kinds of wine." Viewing her boyfriend and fellow students as "these people" is significant. Despite her efforts, she still sees herself as connected to everything from which she wants to detach. Indeed, while she thinks scornfully of the sweet dark sherries and fruited gin drinks that "'nice' suburban men regarded as being suitable for women" she does indeed prefer them. Most telling, of course is Deirdre's discomfort in being alone with Tom in his bedroom: "Deirdre had been walking about the room, for there seemed to be nowhere to sit down except the bed which, after a quick nervous glance, she had rejected for some reason not quite clear to her." Nardin argues that in this scene, Deirdre is "unconsciously follow[ing] the customs of her suburban background."<sup>8</sup> While she wishes to break free and emulate the bohemian Catherine, she is only willing to go so far. Walks by the river, kisses under the elderberry trees, and even telling Tom that she loves

him, despite being raised that “women aren’t supposed to say that to men, are they?”, Deirdre goes as far as she can, unable to detach completely from the expectations with which she has been raised. She has been taught to expect marriage, and despite her protestations to the contrary, that is what she wants:

Enlightened though she was, Deirdre couldn’t help glancing a little enviously sometimes at Phyllis’s conventional engagement ring—a medium-sized sapphire with a diamond on each side—and wishing that Tom might suggest that they became engaged before he went back to Africa. Then, when he came back again, they could get married. It seemed so simple, really, but she would never admit this to her aunt.

It *is* simple according to the world in she was brought up, a world she can’t or won’t leave. But for a conventional woman who falls in love with an unconventional and more completely detached man, it is not that simple. On some level, Deirdre recognizes this. In the scene where she is walking home with Tom, on their way to a family dinner, Tom tells Deirdre that “you’ve all the time in the world to get what you want and I hope you will get it.” Deirdre becomes sad as she notes that his words, said “with their air of chilly detachment,” tell her that “he could have no part in giving her what she wanted.” Immediately after these words, Pym writes of Deirdre’s relief upon entering her family circle, where she can feel safe, secure, and attached.

When Tom leaves for Africa, Deirdre tries to maintain the relationship, but it becomes apparent that the attachment is as thin and fragile as the blue air letter that she reads and rereads. In the scene where Deirdre is writing to Tom, Pym characterizes the real state of their relationship as infatuation, not love, or even friendship, and therefore implies its unsuitability. In this scene, Deirdre literally has nothing to say to Tom that she hasn’t already said—“she loved him, she missed him, [and] she...felt like Scheherazade.” She doesn’t have the nearness and the convention that she requires and struggles to find things to say and write to him. Perhaps the clearest example of Deirdre’s unwillingness or inability to be detached is made clear by the death of Tom and her immediate attachment to Digby. Much like her initial meeting with Tom, Deirdre seems to have fallen in love rather quickly after Digby breaks the news. Her aunt muses upon this turn of events: “Tom or Digby, what did it really matter to her, as an aunt?” For Deirdre, however, it does matter. Her attachment to Digby—patient, conventional Digby—whose suitability was perhaps foretold by Professor Mainwaring’s comment: “a worthy young man...very conscientious and will probably make an excellent husband and father” is a more suitable attachment for Deirdre. In attaching herself to Digby, Deirdre, will assume the conventional role that not only her upbringing has molded her for, but also the one she truly desires.

Two characters quite different from Vanessa or Deirdre are Alaric Lydgate and Catherine Oliphant. While Vanessa and Deirdre may play at being detached, both Alaric and Catherine are more truly detached, in both their personal and professional lives, but each clearly seek more meaningful and perhaps more permanent attachments.

At the beginning of the novel, Alaric Lydgate keeps himself isolated and detached from others by both real and figurative barriers. He lives out in the suburbs but hides from his neighbors behind masks, hedges, and a prickly personality. In the scene where he is writing a particularly harsh book review, Pym introduces him with a blunt assessment:

Alaric Lydgate regarded himself as a failure. He had been invalided out of the Colonial Service, where he had not been awarded the promotion he felt he had earned. He had achieved nothing in the fields of anthropology or linguistics, and the trunks of notes up in his attic, which he had never even sorted out, were a constant reproach to him.

Tsagaris writes that “Lydgate has been taught to believe that, as a British male, he must make some significant

achievement in his life,”<sup>9</sup> but has failed. I argue that these failures—most clearly symbolized by his unwritten field notes—have led to his unfulfilling separation from people and circumstances surrounding him. When we first see Alaric, he is concealed by an African mask “withdrawing himself from the world, feeling in the stuffy darkness of the mask that he was back again in his native-built house, listening to the rain falling outside.” He wishes he could make wearing masks permanent, as this physical barrier would further detach him from the most basic human interaction and he wouldn’t have to “assume any expression—the strained look of interest, the simulated delight or surprise, the anxious concern one didn’t really feel.” Even without the mask, he is isolated and separated from those around him, believing himself to be “disliked by most of his acquaintances because he found himself unable to make small talk or even to bring out the pleasant harmless little insincerities which help everyday life to run smoothly.” While he is moderately well-known in his profession as a book reviewer, this too separates him, as his scathing reviews of anthropological books certainly cannot endear him to others in the field. When Catherine first sees him, while she considers him handsome, she also likens him to the stone statues on Easter Island—and indeed Alaric is as static and lifeless as the statues, unable to progress professionally or personally. He is, however, the cause of much curiosity, especially with Rhoda, but his actions have prevented any real opportunity to get to know him. Rhoda is content to watch him through the bedroom window as more of a curiosity than a member of the community. Rhoda’s description of him to Catherine, is a mixture of wonder and pity: “He walks in the garden at night, wearing an African mask. . . and nobody ever comes to see him, as far as I know, apart from his sister, that is. He seems to be a lonely kind of person.”

Rhoda’s comment may be nearer the mark than she knows. Despite his prickly exterior, it becomes clear that Alaric is lonely and finds his detachment painful as evidenced by his stuttering attempts to come out from behind the mask, and if not actively seeking to make some connections, at least responding positively to others’ overtures. The first tentative steps occur when he figuratively reaches over the hedge to talk with the Swans and their guests during Sunday tea. That evening, instead of writing, he thinks about the women in the “pretty, light dresses” and wonders why he didn’t ask them round for a drink. He even decides that the mask would be too hot to wear, perhaps acknowledging the discomfort of being so detached. Instead, he turns to his wine list and meditates upon suitable wine pairings. While he can find no wine that would have gone with “his own ungracious tea,” he does find a Riesling that would have paired nicely with the “the girls in the garden, the voices and the laughter floating over the hedge.” While the hedge remains, it seems to have been breached, at least in his thoughts. Later, the breach widens when Alaric is invited by Rhoda to a dinner party and is “quite pleased to come.” And it is at this dinner party that he asks after Catherine, another indication that he is beginning to come out from behind his mask.

There is no hedge, no mask, and even less tentativeness when he runs in to Catherine at the tea room in the department store. He is pleased to see her, and this time he makes the overture and invites her to join him. The conversation between the two begins to establish a connection of sorts: They are two writers discussing writing, and he is clearly pleased with Catherine’s concern for accuracy, something he values highly. When they get ready to part, Alaric seeks to continue their connection by asking if he will see her again. Alaric discovers another connection—they both like to read wine lists. Perhaps with such a connection in mind, when he goes to the wine shop later he finds a suitable wine to share with Catherine and others during the Guy Fawkes celebration.

Leading up to the Guy Fawkes scene, Alaric and Catherine are out at a pub discussing his unsorted, unpublished field notes, when Catherine shocks him by asking why he even has to write up his notes. Pym describes his reaction:

Her suggestion was so outrageous that he could think of absolutely nothing to say. Ever since he

could remember, almost, he had been going to 'write up his material. He felt as if the ground were slipping away from under his feet and it was quite an effort to stand up and walk to the bar for more drinks.

Not only is he speechless, but his world seems to literally shift as he comes to realize that he has the ability to dismantle perhaps the greatest barrier—in this case his notes—that has kept him from forming more significant attachments. When he returns from getting the drinks, Pym describes Alaric's change in demeanor. While at first he looks "terribly Easter Island...suddenly the sun broke through on the grim surface of the carved rock and he smiled." With the connection he has made with Catherine, the lifeless stone statue is no longer.

On the evening of Guy Fawkes, a night of community celebration, Alaric does not stay hidden, but takes part to great effect. With his bonfire, Alaric burn his notes and with them, the last barrier that has kept him apart and separate from people and circumstances. The burning notes enlighten Alaric to new possibilities beyond his self-imposed detachment. When his sister asks what he will do next, his response is significant: "I don't really know. I shall be free to do whatever I want to...I could even write a novel." Here he is clearly establishing a link with Catherine that goes beyond attention to details and wine lists. One critic argues that in his assertion, he is "declar[ing] his allegiance to Catherine's values"<sup>10</sup>—one value which I contend is becoming less detached. That Alaric goes so far as to invite his housekeeper to join them in drinking wine illustrates just how far he has come.<sup>11</sup> In the final scene of the novel, we see Alaric's masks and other Africana laid out on the lawn, perhaps as Mabel suggests for a good airing. No longer are the masks a barrier used to detach from those around him, now they are simply artifacts to admired and wondered at. By the end of the book, Alaric is no longer detached and isolated, but forming a new attachment with the like-minded Catherine, to whom I would like to turn next.

As a writer, dispassionate observation is crucial for Catherine's profession, so it is not surprising that Catherine is described as being detached. One critic argues that Catherine "is a more successful observer of the world around her" than other characters and is "more detached in her observation of social patterns than the most detached of practicing anthropologists."<sup>12</sup> Her detachment serves her well in her writing as we see in the scene where she is having lunch with an editor to pitch some stories. The editor believes that Catherine would be a good fit for his magazine: "her conversation was brittle and quite witty, and he judged that her approach would be detached and unsentimental which was the tone he aimed at in his magazine." Even when her detachment reveals painful scenes, as when she sees Tom and Deirdre holding hands in the Greek restaurant, it serves her well professionally. She was able to turn that observation into a successful short story titled "Sunday Evening" as we learn in the later novel, *A Glass of Blessings*.

Catherine's detachment, however spills over into her personal life, in which, as the story unfolds, she is neither happy nor productive. When we first see her, she is literally detached from the people around her. She sits at a table, separated from the crowds by a window, observing, but not part of the "rush-hour crowds beginning to move." While she is trying to find inspiration for a story, the scene is emblematic of the type of detachment she wants to overcome, being stuck and separate and having no connection with others.

Of course, it can be argued that Catherine is actually already attached, as she is in a relationship with Tom. Yet by looking more carefully at Catherine's thought and Pym's descriptions can see that Tom and Catherine's emotional connection is rather tenuous at best. The story of how they initially got together suggests their coupling was more happenstance than a true connection. They met on a boat, and convenience and routine, rather than real feeling seems to have kept them together. Pym describes their emotional connection early in the novel: "They had become fond of each other, or perhaps used to each other..."—the word "or" gives a sadder interpretation of their

feelings, but neither is a ringing endorsement of domestic bliss or deep connection. The relationship is sterile and literally lifeless, as Catherine realizes that she would have liked to have had a child, but that does not appear to have been an option with Tom. Catherine seems aware that her relationship is not fulfilling. In an early scene, just before Tom's welcome-home party Catherine ruminates on the relationship, "We're just like an old married couple, Catherine thought, a little depressed, for she meant it in the worst sense, where dullness rather than cosiness seemed to be the keynote of the relationship." Later in the book she notes that having been apart for nearly two years, they "[have grown] more like themselves, so that now they now seemed almost more like strangers than when they had first met." When we see them interact and hear their interior monologues, it is not surprising that they decide to part.

The break-up scene is interesting in that Tom says "I didn't mean to start all this, and I don't think I did. It seems to be all your idea." Catherine tellingly replies, "But it's a good idea." Catherine is the prime instigator of the break-up. She has recognized, perhaps well before this moment, that their time together has run its course, and rather than remain in a dead relationship, parting from Tom could lead to a more fulfilling attachment.

After Tom and Catherine break up, Catherine becomes more keenly aware of how detached she has become, and recognizes the serious void that it leaves her with. "But surely there was, or ought to be, some cosy woman friend, some old school contemporary to whom she could run? ... Catherine thought regretfully of all the people she had meant to keep in touch with, and rather shamefacedly of others whom she had rejected as being dull." At this point there is no one she can connect with to talk about the upheaval that has just taken place in her life.

Catherine doesn't just want more friends, or just another companion like Tom, she longs for permanent, meaningful attachments. She wishes she had a family—remember she is an orphan, and at one point, when thinking about if she and Tom had married, she thinks somewhat longingly of what she would have gained: she "would [have] acquire[d] a mother, as well as a brother and sister." This desire for a family is clear in her comments to Deirdre at her party: "'How lucky you are to have relations! I haven't any now,' said Catherine sadly." She reminds Deirdre that having a family means that one is cared for and fussed over, something Catherine sees as desirable. When she visits the Swans, Catherine once again envies Deirdre the warm family circle. Indeed when she learns of Tom's death, she flees to the Swans in suburbia, what Anne Wyatt-Brown calls a "place of family love."<sup>13</sup> Walking into the drawing room with its conventional chintz-covered furniture, and seeing Mabel and Rhoda, Catherine immediately experiences "a feeling of safety and comfort." At such a time, she seeks and finds a connection with the closest thing she has to a family, and is so delighted to be welcomed by them that she stays for two weeks.

It is at the Swans in suburbia where Catherine first meets Alaric, and notes his attractiveness, and just as she initiated the break up with Tom, she initiates a connection with Alaric. Indeed when she runs into him in the tea room, Pym makes clear that Catherine has already made a connection with him, at least in her imagination. Pym writes the Catherine "had thought of him [Alaric] several times since their first meeting..." so much so, that he had inspired her to write about a big game hunter just back from Africa. In their initial interactions, it is Catherine who more aggressively seeks the attachment. She approaches him in the tea room with "every intention of joining him"; later, she takes "the bold step" to invite him out to supper, and then out for a drink, and, tellingly, it she who encourages Alaric to burn his notes, which allows for a more genuine connection to form between them. As the book opens with Catherine alone, looking through a window, it bookends with a scene where she is now on the other side of the window, having joined in with, if not a throng of humanity, at least with one other soul with whom she has the possibility of a more lasting attachment.

Thus far I have considered those characters who, admittedly or not, seek personal attachments despite their professional requirements or words to the contrary. Yet in this novel Pym also examines those characters who are not only detached, but are content to remain so. A close examination uncovers that such detachment is not only negative but dangerous. A minor character who appears rather unlikable because of his detachment is Mark Penfold. At first glance, Mark is harmless, and friends with the reliable Digby, which suggests he is capable of attachment, but his actions and words prove otherwise. Again, it is Professor Mainwaring who gives some insight into his character. Mark does not come off all the well in the professor's estimation: "a promising young man who will go far. I see you in a wealthy setting, a connoisseur of fine living, perhaps not as an anthropologist at all." There is a suggestion in the Professor's words that Mark is rather selfish. While enjoying the finer things in life is not in and of itself damning—Felix is also a connoisseur of gracious living—it is the giving up of Anthropology for the high life that suggests a selfish detachment. There are other hints as well. Catherine, an astute observer finds Mark "rather spiteful in his conversation." Pym offers several hints of Mark's selfish character. She describes him as being **satisfied** that the Mallow estate is falling into decay, he **brightens** at the idea that Deirdre may break up Catherine and Tom, and his eyes "[**sparkle**] with malice" when he talks of Tom's lack of brilliance in the anthropology [emphasis added]. Mark is rather cold, even in his friendships and sees people as being useful to him. Early in the novel, after the library party, when Mark and Digby decide to visit Catherine, it is Mark who suggests they do so to get a free meal: "And she may be cooking something...It's so depressing cooking for one person or so one hears. Let's go and make it worth her while to prepare a good meal." Another time when there is no food in the apartment he and Digby share, his solution is to call Catherine, as "she may be able to help us. Perhaps she'll invite us round for a glass of beer." Of course, we do see that Mark does attach himself to a woman he met at Beddoes' dance, and while we don't see their courtship, we can judge Mark's level of attachment by some of his remarks. It appears that the young debutante was the more interested party, as she was the one who "who had seemed anxious that they should meet again." When Tom asks if the lady in question is rich, Mark assures him that she is: "I found that out straight-away" and then in the same breath, proceeds to mock the woman's conversation. The implication is that her money is what makes her attractive. When it becomes clear that he will marry her, there is no mention of true attachment, but rather that he is being offered a better paying job in his father-in-law's firm. Later, in the scene where Tom is leaving for Africa, twice Pym uses the word detached to describe Mark, first when he comments to Digby "in a detached tone" that the plane might crash and then again, "in his detached way," Mark notes the manner in which Tom kisses both Catherine and Deirdre good bye. His coldness is most apparent when he learns of Tom's death. While Digby thinks immediately of Deirdre, the more detached Mark thinks of the "unexpended balance" of Tom's field grant and who was likely to get it." In going to Catherine's flat, ostensibly to console her, his impatience with her grief causes Catherine to cry and run out of her apartment. Mark is so aloof from the situation, that he actually blames Tom for getting killed. "All this, as he put it to himself, was a bit much. By going to such extremes, Tom had gone too far." With these final thoughts, Pym leaves Mark alone, banishing him to his life "of ease and luxury," but with no real attachment to anyone other than himself.

Of course the most obviously detached person in the novel is Tom Mallow. Like Catherine, Tom's professional ambitions are enhanced by his ability to remain disconnected from his surroundings and circumstances. He has advanced to the point where he was awarded a grant to go out in the field for nearly two years. Over the course of the novel, he finishes his PhD thesis, and gets yet another grant to return to Africa. Tom seems well on his way to progressing far in his chosen field of study. Yet, again like Catherine, his professional detachment has seeped over into his personal life much to his detriment. In the scene where Tom and Deirdre are holding hands in the library and are interrupted by Professor Mainwaring and Minnie Foresight, Mrs. Foresight comments that Tom must

have seen some unsettling things when in Africa. He replies, “Well, I suppose they might be thought dreadful by the non-specialist...but we have to be detached, you know.” This comment encapsulates Tom’s demeanor and behavior—the idea that detachment is required in all aspects of life, not just anthropology.

The examples of Tom’s detachment are legion. At various times throughout the novel, Pym describes him as having “broken away from his upbringing,” and as being “detrribalized,” “excluded from his family,” and “completely...alienated.” Not only has he detached from his family, upbringing, and responsibilities to pursue a career in anthropology, he detached from his first girlfriend, Elaine and the expectations that they would marry. Over the course of the action, he detaches from Catherine, from Deirdre, and from England. While there are half-hearted attempts to reattach, they are too feeble and ultimately ineffective.

Now of course Tom and Catherine are in a relationship and living together, so it would appear that he has the ability to attach himself to others. Yet, as I’ve said earlier, their connections seems based on convenience and habit. For Tom, the benefit is obvious—Catherine basically supports him, and Tsagaris argues that he sees Catherine “more as a cook and typist than as a lover.”<sup>14</sup> When we look at their personal interactions, Tom does not appear very caring. The night of the Tom’s Welcome Home party—which was Catherine’s idea—Tom remains in a separate room, aloof and attempting to write, while Catherine does most of the preparations. He seems irritated with her, and his thoughts about her in this first scene are anything but flattering: he “was forced to listen to her babbling” as she reads from a wine list; and is “exasperated, for Catherine was sometimes very trying and, for an intelligent woman, remarkably frivolous at times.” Even when they physically touch, it is all rather chaste, just him putting his cheek against hers.

While living with Catherine, he begins a relationship with Deirdre almost by accident. He first invites her out for a drink because he didn’t want to be alone and didn’t want to wait for the seminar to finish. His behavior at the pub is rather telling. During their conversation “he [does] not lay himself out to be particularly interesting to Deirdre or to ask her anything about herself.” When he sees her again, his first impulse is to ask her if she could do any of his typing because Catherine is too busy. As with his relationship with Catherine, he seems to have simply allowed another person to attach or attempt to attach herself to him. Yet after he breaks it off with Catherine, he never really seems attached to Deirdre. He is, as he was with Catherine, very critical of Deirdre. He is either comparing her to Catherine, or wishing himself somewhere else. In the scene where Deirdre visits him, Tom seems to see her as just a complication. His thoughts about going to Deirdre’s home for dinner are rather stark in their detachment: “it was better when women were without kinship ties, like Catherine, he thought dispassionately, and then they could be rejected at will and without the likelihood of any awkward repercussions.” While Tom might enjoy a few pleasurable moments kissing Deirdre, in this scene he also “push[es] her away...rather abruptly.” Later, after dinner when they are down by the river Tom examines the scene as an anthropologist rather than as a lover: “This is the place where the young men and women walk at night and are allowed a certain amount of licence thought Tom in his detached anthropologist’s way.” And while they do kiss, Tom’s thoughts drift to Catherine and Elaine and how the smell of the flowers remind him of his childhood. He certainly does not appear invested in the matters at hand.

There are times where Tom himself seems troubled by his own detachment and there are two important scenes where we see him trying to reattach himself to all that he has left. The first example is the night he finishes his thesis. His first thought is to call Catherine, reaching back to their connection, but Catherine refuses his offer to come over for a drink. With no one else to call, Tom “almost wished now that he had accepted his aunt’s invitation” to the dance for his cousin. So he heads out and ends up outside of where the dance is taking place. He seems to

think seriously about crashing the party, but is stopped by a police officer who takes him for a “harmless lunatic,” based on his appearance and the late hour. Tom realizes that he is completely unrecognizable as someone who would belong to the world of debutant’s balls: “he looked down at his shoes, his old suede creepers with rubber soles; he couldn’t dance in those. And probably his old grey flannels and leather-patched tweed jacket would look out of place too.” Tom is also literally too late to return to his past, and is told by the policeman that he doesn’t belong there. The other more provocative scene is when he returns home to Shropshire before leaving for Africa. He is so far removed from his former life that he has forgotten some basics: the train has no restaurant car, and what day the flower show is held. As he passes through the village, he can’t see it except through the detached lens of the anthropologist. The preparations for the flower show remind him of the festivals that he attended back in Africa. Upon seeing his mother, Tom mentally compares her to “some African woman petty trader.” In the house, he finds things as he had left them, from the unmended sofa, to his dress clothes in his closet. As familiar as they once were, they now appear to him “as if he were observing some aspect of a culture as alien to him as any he had seen in Africa.” During the course of the evening, he continues to visit his past, literally and figuratively going down memory lane with his former girlfriend and “mourning the young man of those days, who went for long country walks and quoted poetry.” While he does end up kissing Elaine, Pym switches the point of view to how Elaine is affected “she had not quite achieved the friendly indifference she aimed at, and Tom’s sudden reappearance would disturb her for some time to come.” Tom’s only mental comment on the moment is that he is disappointed that Elaine is so calm about his kiss. Tom’s detachment and concerns for only himself leave him blind to the havoc he is wreaking upon Elaine’s peace of mind.

Realizing he can no longer reattach, Tom returns, unhappy, to London and has drinks with Catherine. Here again Tom is disappointed when he realizes what ever attachment they may have had is nearly nonexistent. Catherine has no sympathy for him and his tale of woe, and irritates him by asking if he will marry Deirdre. Catherine’s parting remarks sums up Tom’s state: “How soothing it will be to get away from all this complexity of personal relationships to the simplicity of a primitive tribe, whose only complications are in their kinship structure and rules of land tenure, which you can observe with an anthropologist’s calm detachment.” Tom is being told what on some level he knows; he has to make permanent his separation from his entire world and retreat to a world where his detachment will best serve him.

Tom’s return to Africa signals the extent and ultimately the permanence of his detachment. While there, he garbs himself in African clothes, similar to Alaric wearing a mask. But even when Alaric was masked, everyone knew who he was. Tom’s separation is more complete and he becomes unrecognizable to the British soldiers as he was to the policeman outside of his Aunt’s house. Indeed, Tom’s detachment gets him killed.<sup>15</sup> There will be no return for Tom, as even his body will be buried in Africa. All that will remain of his brilliance are trunks of notes, quite like those of Alaric’s. While they may never be burned, they seemed destined to be buried, in the in storage at Harrods, or perhaps kept in chests in the attic of Felix’s Folly. Tom’s only memorial will be a “quite simple” tablet hanging on a church wall in Shropshire where his family remains. Miss Clovis foresees yet another death of Tom—she recalls an African tribe that believes that one will die again when he or she is no longer remembered. While Elaine and his family may remember him, he seems to have begun the process of dying a second time by being forgotten by Catherine and Deirdre—or at least replaced by more suitable attachments.

At the party at the library early in the novel, when Jean Pierre and Deirdre are talking, he says to Deirdre that “one must be detached about so many things! Otherwise how could a Frenchman endure the English Sunday?” While he may be joking, I read this comment more as a lament at just how hard it is to remain detached from

surrounding people, expectations, and circumstances. The requirements of detachment can be onerous, and for some downright impossible. Pym illustrates that for those characters who seek more significant attachments, there is the potential for growth. We know that for Deirdre and Digby, their future involves marriage and possibly children. And while Catherine's and Alaric's union might not be guaranteed, ending with them in the garden, with Alaric giving Catherine some rhubarb certainly suggests a potential for growth. For those others who insist on remaining detached in their personal lives Pym dooms them to the dreadful sounding Leadenhall Street or being shot and their lifeless notes boxed up in chests and forgotten by those who would have been only too happy to have helped them overcome their unsuitable detachment.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 1982, "detach."

<sup>2</sup> *OED*, "detach."

<sup>3</sup> *OED*, "detachment."

<sup>4</sup> Jane Nardin, *Barbara Pym* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), 93.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen M. Tsagaris, *The Subversion of Romance in the Novels of Barbara Pym* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1998), 87.

<sup>6</sup> Nardin, 98.

<sup>7</sup> Tsagaris, 87.

<sup>8</sup> Nardin, 96.

<sup>9</sup> Tsagaris, 96.

<sup>10</sup> Nardin, 101.

<sup>11</sup> Jane Nardin writes that his inviting the housekeeper to join them for a drink as another indicator of Alaric's breaking away from social conventions and expectations (100).

<sup>12</sup> Nardin, 93.

<sup>13</sup> Anne Wyatt Brown, *Barbara Pym: A Critical Biography* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 98.

<sup>14</sup> Tsagaris, 87.

<sup>15</sup> Tsagaris points out that Tom "significantly changes roles by donning some sort of African garb" and that as a result, "his costume gets him killed" 96.