

# Houses of Mirth: The Role of Architecture, Buildings, and Their Settings in *Crampton Hodnet*

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As an ordained priest in the Episcopal Church, one of the many joys of reading the novels of Barbara Pym, is the way that Pym always manages to put clergy in their place. By making them comic figures, she imposes a humility that is often lost in the living out of their calling. I was reminded of this at the very beginning of this conference when I checked into a charming Airbnb apartment on Beacon Hill. It is in a beautiful house and a neighborhood that could be a setting for one of Pym's novels. As I was being shown around, I remarked on how much the comfort and the beauty of the place resonated with me, to which the owner replied, "Well, I designed it with old ladies in mind."

How appropriate to be reminded once again of the importance of settings in conveying a greater truth, however humbling.

So then, Houses of Mirth.

What a lot of fun Barbara Pym is having in this very early novel. The enjoyment of literary jokes, irony and satire bubble up on every page, making *Crampton Hodnet* a joy to read. It is as much an invitation as it is a literary work, as Pym beckons us to join her in the rarified world of Oxford and in particular the dowdy, well to do, neighborhood of North Oxford. The humor is everywhere and is evident in her use of settings to further the plot and develop themes and characters. Over the course of the novel, Pym is the master architect and builder of a work that delights and moves the reader to deeper reflection on the themes of freedom, love and gender.

From the opening lines, we are planted firmly in the setting of North Oxford.

It was a wet Sunday in North Oxford at the beginning of October. The laurel bushes which bordered the path leading to Leamington Lodge, Banbury Road, were dripping with rain. A few sodden chrysanthemums, dahlias and zinnias drooped in the flower-beds on the lawn. The house had been built in the sixties of the last century, of yellowish brick, with a gabled roof and narrow Gothic windows set in frames of ornamental stonework. A long red and blue stained-glass window looked onto a landing halfway up the pitch-pine staircase, and there were panels of the same glass let into the front door, giving an ecclesiastical effect, so that, except for a glimpse of unlikely lace curtains, the house might have been a theological college.

By immersing the reader in this dark, oppressive, setting Pym invites us to share her perspective as novelist; contrasting the lifeless neighborhood and house with a rich interior personal life of imagination and humor in the central character of Miss Morrow.

Jessie Morrow was a thin, used-up looking woman in her middle thirties...Miss Morrow, in spite of her appearance, was a definite personality, who was able to look upon herself and her surroundings with detachment. This afternoon, however, she was feeling a little depressed. She shivered and pulled her shapeless grey cardigan around her thin body.

At first glance Miss Morrow might be seen as drab and predictable as Leamington Lodge. But instead, that quality belongs to Miss Doggett, the redoubtable owner of the house. Miss Morrow is only a paid companion, inhabiting the house by necessity rather than by desire. As such, she is in a significant way, placed in the setting but is also detached from it. Miss Morrow, like the novelist, will be the touchstone character who will see her life, and the lives of the characters of *Crampton Hodnet*, with imagination and humor. By the end of the novel she will find redemption in the acceptance of her place. Miss Morrow lives in the rich and quirky life of her keen powers of observation and will quietly triumph in the acceptance of her seemingly suffocating existence. She will experience a freedom that is in stark contrast to the gloom of North Oxford and the constricted lives of academia. `

Pym uses architecture and setting to further aspects of the novel in a variety of ways. The predominant architectural style of North Oxford is Victorian Gothic which in the 1930s epitomized all that was old fashioned, unimaginative and ugly. This setting is presented by Pym through the lives and interests of the young, modern undergraduates of Oxford, who flock to Miss Doggett's drawing room for tea.

The big, cold drawing-room, with its Victorian mahogany furniture and air of mustiness which the struggling fire did nothing to dispel, waited to receive the young people.

The overall impression is one of imprisonment both inside and out. There is no escaping the overwhelming gloominess of the architecture and furnishings of North Oxford. Pym uses the setting of Leamington Lodge to pose the question: If there is to be relief from these heavy constraints of both architecture and convention, will it be found in romance, or in the life of the mind, or in the voice of the novelist herself, as humorous observer? Pym also asks a more profound question: Is freedom based in escape from our lives or in perceptive acceptance of who we are?

Pym also uses settings or buildings to affirm a larger cultural meaning in relationship to an individual. For example, at the vicarage garden party, Miss Doggett meets Lady Beddoes and reassures herself concerning Lady Beddoes moral character by musing on the significance of her home in Chester Square, Belgravia.

Could it be that Lady Beddoes hadn't really cared very much for her husband? ... Miss Doggett begin to imagine all sorts of rather dreadful things, but then she suddenly remembered that, after all, Lady Beddoes lived in Chester Square, and she visualised the smooth, unbroken line of the houses, all joined together, so that their inhabitants must be like one huge family, united in respectability, morality and the perfection of the upper classes. This was England, Miss Doggett's England, and it would have been a great shock to her if she had detected any crack in its façade.

Architecture takes on a dynamic role in *Crampton Hodnet*, reflecting not only the moral character of its inhabitant, but an entire class or society itself. Certainly, the old fashioned and heavy-handed Miss Doggett is completely at home in the setting of Leamington Lodge.

The author uses settings to humorous affect with the locations and buildings being the subject of her ironic or satirical observations. The drab lifeless character of North Oxford and its inhabitants is commented on by Miss Morrow:

'Are there no sick people I ought to visit?' asked Mr. Latimer hopefully.

'There are no sick people in North Oxford. They are either dead or alive. It's sometimes difficult to tell the difference, that's all,' explained Miss Morrow.

At other times, the juxtaposition of the setting with a character's behavior is a subject for Pym's wit. One cannot help but smile at Francis Cleveland and Barbara Bird having what passes for a passionate declaration of love in the austere environs of the British Museum, while perusing a manuscript by Milton. And as it happens, they are overheard by Edward Killigrew skulking behind a curtain nearby. It is a scene worthy of a drawing room farce, but Pym is not content to let that be the final word. She revisits the scene when it is revealed later over tea at the Killigrew's home, and Miss Morrow reimagines the setting.

After the declaration, they went to Lyons' Corner House. No doubt they had felt the need of a place like that. The atmosphere of the British Museum was too rarefied; there was too much past history and too many fragments of ancient greatness.

Miss Morrow then muses further on the newly declared couple going to the familiar comfort of Lyons' for tea.

One wanted rather the coziness and liveliness of a crowd of people eating and drinking – the gleam of the Britannia-metal teapots and hot water jugs, the smell of hot buttered toast and cigarette smoke. And perhaps an orchestra, dressed in Hungarian gipsy costumes, with white satin blouses and broad colored cummerbunds. Miss Morrow knew the Corner Houses and found herself wondering what the decoration of that particular room had been. She remembered one with high, noble walls and ceiling and vaguely baroque carvings, a general atmosphere of white and gold, almost more suitable for sacred love than profane, perhaps hardly more sympathetic than the British Museum itself.

In another instance, Pym uses a setting to humorously mock the cliched school girl emotions of Anthea and her crush on the handsome undergraduate, Simon Beddoes. As Anthea goes to bed she enacts a scene that could be taken straight from any pulp romantic novel.

She gulped two glasses of water, then went to the window and leaned out. "Is he thinking about me?" she whispered into the night, solemnly blowing kisses in which she imagined was the direction of Randolph College, but which was actually, and most unsuitably, the nearest way to a seminary for Roman Catholic priests.

Pym gently and with great humor uses setting to show the pitfalls of living an emotional life based on stock gestures versus real depth.

While considering setting and having one character surreptitiously observed by another character, it is worth noting that Pym often uses an unseen observer to further the plot of the novel. This device means no one and no action goes unobserved. The importance of watching and recording what people say, and how they behave, is of paramount importance and ultimately redemptive, for a character like Miss Morrow.

The location for such observations is often humorous. Francis and Barbara are caught while romantically walking in the Botanical Gardens on a beautiful spring day and ridiculously decide to hide in some bushes hoping they will be unobserved by the approaching characters Michael and Gabriel, aesthetic and gay archangels that they are.

‘Michael and Gabriel,’ said Barbara quickly. ‘We don’t want them to see us.’

‘Let’s hide in these bushes,’ said Francis impulsively.

The footsteps came nearer and voices grew louder.

‘...the decor was *tolerable*, but the choreography was simply *frightful*. Talk about Diaghileff turning in his grave!’

‘I always imagined it something like *this*,’ said Gabriel, leaping up into the air.

‘Yes, *exactly*,’ agreed Michael.

They began to dance very prettily in the path.

‘They haven’t seen us,’ whispered Francis, crouching uncomfortably.

But as they moved off, Michael said in a whisper, ‘My dear, did you *see*?’

The actual furnishings of specific settings add depth to the narrative of the novel. For example, the untidiness of the Cleveland household reflects the chaotic nature of their life together. All of the Clevelands in some way seem clueless and unable to cope with the deeper realities of their emotions. Slipcovered sofas in faded chintz, the jumble of the Sunday papers and inadequate provisions for tea all point to the inadequacies of Clevelands to be deeply introspective.

But other characters understand the importance of setting, and actually arrange their furnishings to further their desires. The highly ambitious and ultimately callow Simon who has aspirations to be a future Prime Minister as well as having a dalliance with Anthea (and as readers we all know that the former is much more important than the latter) is careful how he arranges his rooms at St Giles College. Pym brilliantly describes the setting of Simon’s room, but also underscores his political aspirations with the reference to the newspaper’s headline.

The room was dark except for the glow of the fire, for Simon understood the value of a romantic atmosphere.... In the half-darkness Anthea could see the *Sunday Times* spread out on the floor. A flame leapt up in the fire and illuminated the headlines. Something about the Foreign Policy of His Majesty’s Government. (p. 38)

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But of course it’s Leamington Lodge that is the focus of furnishings and how they reflect their owners. The cluttered drawing room of Miss Doggett with its perfusion of dry looking etchings of Bavarian lakes, meaningless bric-a-brac and large furniture emphasizes the propensity of Miss Doggett to express herself in a multiplicity of hackneyed Victorian clichés, and trite moral pronouncements delivered in an overbearing and bullying manner.

There is also of course a churchy quality to Leamington Lodge which reflects a modern interpretation of the previous century's churchmanship. By the 1930's the Anglican church of the nineteenth century was seen as largely arid and punitive. Miss Doggett's Gothic stained glass is likened to the furnishings of a theological college. There will be little comfort offered here, but instead hackneyed churchy judgements.

So it is appropriate when Mr. Latimer, the new curate taking up residence as a boarder at Leamington Lodge, first sees his new digs, it is through the lens of his pious and inauthentic character.

'Well, it seems very comfortable,' said Mr. Latimer, looking around at the reassuringly Victorian room with its good, solid furniture. He glanced approvingly at the hard, uninviting looking sofa. Hardness and uninvitedness were, he felt, just those qualities which the sofa in the study of a bachelor clergyman should possess. No chance of amorous dalliance here. It was too narrow and slippery. He went over to the enormous roll top desk. 'I can see myself writing sermons here,' he said. 'The dark green walls are so restful. The curtains too'—he touched their dull, stuffy folds—'so very soothing.' ...

'The bedroom is through here,' she said, opening a door. 'I believe it has all the usual conveniences. Miss Doggett insisted that the largest washstand in the house should be put here. I don't know why.'

'There is supposed to be some connection between cleanliness and godliness,' said Mr. Latimer, making a curately joke. 'It's certainly a magnificent piece of furniture. I think it's presence is justified simply because of that.'

'Yes,' agreed Miss Morrow. "'A thing of beauty is a joy forever.'" It reminds me of the altar of Randolph College Chapel. So much marble and mahogany.'

Immediately following this interchange Mr. Latimer recalls his own previous dalliance with a young woman. Indeed he and the woman actually go furniture shopping together.

Once, indeed, he had even got himself caught in the tangles of an engagement, so that before he knew what he was doing he found himself strolling with a young woman before the windows of Waring and Gillow, looking at dining-room suites. But fortunately, they have not got beyond looking, although there had been some unpleasantness and nearly a breach of promise case.

Pym reveals Latimer's hypocrisy through his appreciation of Victoriana, with a dollop of sardonic humor thrown in, with the mention of a very impious breach of promise case. Apparently, the handsome Mr. Latimer has much in common with thinly veneered furniture when it comes to self-honesty and insight.

Most intriguing is how Pym strangely describes characters in the novel as actually being like pieces of furniture. Miss Morrow is variously described as a chair, a bed and a harp. Of course this is in part due to the nature of Miss Morrow's position which is simply to be present and unobtrusive, like a piece of furniture. But it also reflects Pym's intention for us to see Miss Morrow as someone who can be a witness and observe without drawing attention to herself. Mr. Latimer observes:

but there was no personal quality in his feeling for her. He regarded her simply as a man might regard a comfortable chair by the fire, where he can sit with his slippers on and a pipe in his mouth. Miss Morrow felt this, but it did not worry her. Inanimate objects were often so much nicer than people, she thought. What person, for example, could possibly be so comforting as one's bed?

At another point in *Crampton Hodnet*, Lady Beddoes' late husband is likened to a sideboard. He has served a purpose and is now forgotten. Lady Beddoes seems hardly to remember anything of her husband but instead refers to a love affair that preceded her dry unhappy marriage.

When you've been married to somebody for nearly twenty years, you get so used to seeing them about the house. When they've gone it's as if you'd moved a piece of furniture and left only a blank wall to look at, if you see what I mean,' she added.

Of course Miss Doggett agreed that she did see, but she could not help being surprised that Lady Beddoes should compare the death of her husband to the removal of a piece of furniture. It was not, somehow, what one expected.

‘Funnily enough,’ Lady Beddoes went on, ‘we had a large mahogany sideboard in Warsaw that Lyall was very fond of, but we didn’t bring it to England with us, and Lyall only lived in Chester Square for eighteen months. Perhaps It was an omen, though Lyall wasn’t a large man. He was quite small, not really as tall as I am in high heels.’

‘I am sure you were devoted to him,’ said Miss Doggett, doing the best she could, for she hardly knew what to make of this talk about sideboards. It was not the usual way in which widows spoke of their late husbands.

Pym uses settings in another unusual way that seems very influenced by movies, a large part of culture in which she lived. Settings in *Crampton Hodnet* at several points become highly cinematic in their description and dramatic development of the plot. The setting of the University Parks for Miss Morrow’s walk with Miss Doggett is described with a great sense of drama and movement. In the hands of such a skilled writer, a prosaic setting becomes a filmed ballet charged with vitality and kinetic energy. Pym even suggests as she does several times in the book, appropriate music for her movie’s soundtrack.

They moved slowly away, Miss Morrow adjusting her usually brisk step to suit Miss Doggett’s more majestic one. They walked in silence, enjoying the sunshine and their surroundings.

Miss Morrow loved the Parks, especially in the fine weather when they were full of people. In the spring there was a faintly ridiculous air about them, like Mendelssohn’s *Spring Song*, but, as in the song, there was also a prim and proper Victorian element which chastened the fantasy and made it into something quaint and formal, like a ballet. Dons striding along with walking sticks, wives in Fair Isle jumpers coming low over their hips, nurses with prams, and governesses with intelligent children asking ceaseless questions in their clear, fluty voices.

Then suddenly other characters literally dance into the setting, Michael and Gabriel leaping appropriately on this beautiful spring day, to Stravinsky’s *Sacre du Printemps*.

‘Why, Michael and Gabriel,’ she said, ‘what are you doing here? You quite startled me, leaping about like that.’

‘We feel must express ourselves in movement,’ said one of them. ‘We’ve been playing Stravinsky’s *Sacre du Printemps* all day, and we’re simply shattered by it.’

‘Michael wants to leap into that pool with one glorious leap,’ said Gabriel.

‘Wouldn’t you frighten the ducks?’ said Miss Morrow prosaically.

‘Oh, no, we are quite at one with all the wild creatures today,’ said Michael.

Pym then heightens the drama by Michael’s revelation that they had witnessed Francis and Barbara hiding guiltily in the shrubbery thus instigating a series of confrontations that will become the focus of the plot.

Elsewhere in the book Pym is not just attuned to the cinematic element of settings, but introduces a meditation or description of place that seems almost surreal; surrealism being a very influential movement in the 1930s. Pym incorporates a surrealist imagination in what should be a rather mundane setting. Perhaps the best example of this is at the end of *Crampton Hodnet* when Barbara and Francis approach a crisis during their naughty escape to Paris. Stuck overnight in a seaside hotel in Dover, it is a moment filled with anxiety for Barbara as confronts her romantic notions of love with its more imminent carnal expression. Sitting in the hotel lobby she views her fellow elderly guests as fossils:

She stood in the lounge, nervously twisting her hands and looking around her with some agitation....

They looked as if they had been left there many years ago and abandoned. Or perhaps they were people who at some time long past had intended to go abroad and had then either not wanted to or forgotten all about it, so that they had stayed here ever since, like fossils petrified in stone.

This insight initially calms Barbara Bird, as her fellow guests seem lifeless and unreal. But then Barbara, drowning in her own naïveté, seems to panic, as Pym illustrates her state of mind by the surreal description of the hotel lobby emanating from her imagination. Under water emotionally, the surrounding lobby seems to fill suddenly with seawater.

...she sat down on the edge of a green-plush-covered chair. It was still raining outside, and she was sure that if she were to touch the greenish wallpaper it would be damp or even mouldy. She had the idea that she

was in a tank under the water or in a vault, and that if she spoke to one of the reading figures it would not answer her...

It gave her quite a shock when Francis came in. The occupants of the lounge looked up in surprise, as might corpses in a vault on hearing a live human voice.

With a brilliant economy, in a few lines we are treated to a surreal exposition of an ordinary seaside hotel lobby as a fossil bed, aquarium and ultimately a crypt. Salvador Dalli could not have done better.

I would like to conclude by observing that we have seen people as furniture, houses as reflections of their inhabitants, both physically and morally, and settings that amplify or juxtapose the emotional lives and action of the novel's characters. But to what end?

Ultimately, we must turn to Miss Morrow for meaning. By the close of the novel she is the one character who maintains an integrity and authenticity. She alone has not been blinded by ambition, egoism or an overdeveloped romantic sensibility. She stands as a touchstone for the novel; illustrating the theme that freedom is not necessarily escape, but is rather rooted in acceptance and self-knowledge. No one could seem more constrained than Miss Morrow by setting, but in perception she is the freest of all the characters of *Crampton Hodnet*.

The novel ends as it began, with a setting in North Oxford at Leamington Lodge on a cold, wet autumnal Sunday afternoon. But through the course of *Crampton Hodnet* we have come to see Miss Morrow as possessing redemptive qualities of observation, humor and acceptance. These qualities give Miss Morrow a serenity that transcends the seeming constrictions of her situation in life. Here she resides in the depth and therefore the freedom of her imagination, much like the novelist herself.

Crampton Hodnet might not be a real place, christened as it is in a hasty lie by Mr. Latimer, but it is a place which we have been invited to enjoy and cherish, if only for an afternoon of a delightful read.

Mrs. Wardell was asking in an interested tone the name of the place where he had been.

'Crampton Hodnet,' said Mr. Latimer glibly.

Was there such a place? Miss Morrow wondered. She was sure that there was not.

Luckily for us, thanks to Miss Pym, there is.