



## An Academic Question

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The protagonist and narrator of this brief, ironic, and highly amusing tale is Caroline (Caro) Grimstone, the twenty-eight-year-old wife of an intensely ambitious anthropology professor at a provincial British university. The role of “professor’s wife” is dreary indeed. Caro--with a young daughter but a weak maternal instinct--has no career of her own, and while she does not really yearn for one, she feels that she should be accomplishing something.

What she actually wants is a modicum of romance. When she goes to bed at night, her husband, Alan--like many of Pym’s men, good-looking, vain, insufferably self-absorbed--stays up working on a paper for a scholarly journal. Yet, deflected from his everyday routines, he is capable of indulging in a casual, extra-marital bit of sex, which he expects Caro to accept with minimal fuss.

The real subject of the novel is Caro’s dissatisfaction with her marriage--and, by extension, with the unromantic realities of life--and the process by which she comes to a tentative acceptance of things as they are. The mechanics of the plot largely concern a wryly and delightfully presented academic intrigue, in the course of which a valuable manuscript is filched from the trunk of a dying old man who once did anthropological fieldwork in Africa.

Pym veterans will relish the references to or appearances of such recurring characters as Esther Clovis, Digby Fox, and Sister Dew, and the novel is rich with the small comic touches that have won such a following, but there is an underlying bleakness to this book which connects it with *THE SWEET DOVE DIED* and *QUARTET IN AUTUMN* rather than with Pym’s earlier, sunnier novels.

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