

BARCHESTER TOWERS

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Seminar: Victorians

[Assignment: How does Trollope express his ideas about change, reform, and progress in Barchester Towers? You will need a clear thesis statement that sums up the point of your paper. Everything in your paper should contribute to the support of your main point. Clear paragraph structure--one major topic per paragraph--will help you construct an organized answer to the topic. Again, the way to make your point effectively is to base your discussion on evidence from the text.]

(1) In Barchester Towers, Anthony Trollope presents a group of characters each of whom represents a particular set of values. He defines each attitude and point of view by the position of the character relative to the ongoing power struggle in Barchester. He exaggerates these characters using illustrative names and physical descriptions, then makes them seem quite comical both in their own actions and in his narrative interjections. Trollope weaves humor through the novel, flavoring the story in a manner resembling the satire of our contemporary social and political cartoonists. As the events in Barchester unfold, Trollope indicates his own attitudes concerning change, reform, and progress.

(2) Obadiah Slope is the obvious villain in the story. His name points to the downward direction of one who slides without a firm footing on principles. As chaplain to the new bishop and his wife, he intends to impose new practices of sabbath observance, to establish Sunday schools, and to radically change services at the cathedral. The author does not describe such change as necessary or beneficial, but rather focuses on the turmoil it causes within the group. Slope plans to enact his questionable improvements by influencing the bishop, or more correctly, by influencing the bishop's domineering wife. Trollope's physical description of Slope is most uncomplimentary, highlighting his greasy hair, his complexion which is the color of beef of a bad quality, and the "cold, clammy perspiration (that) always exudes from him" (29).

(3) The history of Slope's unsuccessful schemes proves him to be a man of little conviction, who makes himself ridiculous by changing camps every time he spots a new opportunity for more power or wealth. By the time the story ends, Slope falls in and out of love with Olivia Proudie, allies himself with Mrs. Proudie against the bishop, and then with Dr. Proudie against Mrs. Proudie. He promotes first Mr. Quiverful as Warden, then switches his support to Mr. Harding. He convinces himself to love Eleanor because she has a sizeable inheritance, in spite of his attraction to the charming Signora Neroni. He comes precariously close to deception in his letters and

in conversations with the people of Barchester. Trollope wants his readers to despise this man, not just as an ambitious hypocrite, but because of some instinctive revulsion that well-bred persons should feel toward such a man.

(4) Dr. and Mrs. Proudie are the other two newcomers from London, and as such, are likely to represent more change for Barchester. Dr. Proudie is ambitious but spineless, while Mrs. Proudie has no quality more outstanding than her amazingly strong will. Although they are the new ecclesiastical authority at Barchester, Trollope shows us that they are both foolish, because their shallow convictions are based on a fanatic devotion to low-church reform that is really a disguised form of self-promotion.

(5) Archdeacon Grantly represents the high-church principles challenged in Barchester and elsewhere in England during the nineteenth century. He is quite determined to retain power for himself and his allies, but he underestimates the unscrupulousness of his adversary. Instead he pompously presumes to vanquish Mr. Slope by aligning other conservative forces with his own. His is the complacency of many an incumbent who fails to consider the momentum characteristic of social change once it has begun.

(6) Mr. Harding represents morality in its sincerest and humblest form. He resigns his wardenship because he recognizes the merit in the charges of proponents of reform. He is steadfastly loyal to his friends at the hospital, in the clergy, and in the town itself. Above all, he has an unconditional love for Eleanor, feeling that "even as Mrs. Slope she must be dearer to him than any other creature on God's earth" (2). He has no ambition greater than his desire to serve God and his fellow man, and so, like most men of humility and grace, he easily becomes a pawn in a game of political maneuvers. Eleanor is also caught at the strategic center of Barchester's power game, but she is there more as a result of naive innocence and a tendency to wallow in baby worship.

(7) In the Stanhope family, Trollope shows us the result of inactivity and indifference to responsibility. Mr. and Mrs. Stanhope have spent years in idle and unproductive ways, and as a result, they have raised three peculiar children. Charlotte encourages everyone in the family to continue with idle pursuits, Bertie drifts from one kind of living to another, and Madeline spends all her time and energy playing the temptress to the men she meets. Trollope treats the Stanhopes with a hint of disdain for their manners of dress and lack of value for tradition. Bertie's "costume . . . was always totally opposed in every principle of colour and construction to the dress of those with whom he for the time consorted" (81). Madeline's visiting card alludes to some kind of nobility, and the pretense of the name

she concocted for herself the author is at a loss to explain (77). Trollope seems to have a low opinion of foreign influences and modern values, and to hold the more traditional English practices in higher esteem.

(8) The Thornes of Ullathorne are the bastions of traditionalism in Trollope's novel. He creates a somewhat whimsical portrait of their devotion to old ways of life, but praises the virtue of these old ways.

Such, we believe, are the inhabitants of many an English country home. May it be long before their number diminishes. (225)

(9) The contest for ecclesiastical appointments and for Eleanor's hand in marriage are vehicles for the author to indicate which of these characters are good people and which are not. Slope loses on all counts because he is a schemer. Even though he convinces himself that his intentions are good, the author and the folks of Barchester are not so easily fooled, and Slope has to move on at the end of the story. The Grantlyites are partially victorious, since they have rid themselves of the presumptuous man who came to town on the coattails of the new bishop. Eleanor and Mr. Harding end up with exactly what they want, which is not very much, and the wardenship and the deanery are both filled by men who never actively sought the positions, a strong indication that Trollope does not approve of self-serving ambition.

(10) The author never treats the changes taking place in Barchester as though they might be improvements. Trollope seems to feel that the old ways of doing things are the best. The hero and heroine, Mr. Harding and his daughter Eleanor, are graciously willing to question their own ways and to yield to the reformers as long as the resulting situation is fairly beneficial to everyone. Change, then, is an inevitable circumstance to which one must yield every now and again. Nowhere in the novel does Trollope present change as though it is to be equated with progress. Arbitrary change is a weapon of self-serving parasites like the odious Slope, and it causes a great deal of disruption to the harmony between good people like those of Barchester. Change and reform are forces with which to reckon, but they are not necessarily progress, especially in the hands of the incompetent and ambitious.