

# [Philosophies, pretenses, and styles of satire in barchester towers and the way of...](https://assignbuster.com/philosophies-pretenses-and-styles-of-satire-in-barchester-towers-and-the-way-of-all-flesh/)

As Walter Wagoner wrote, “ Satire is humor on an errand. It is wit used with a vengeance, rejecting the facades of the godly, insisting on reminding those within the Holy of Holies that their pretense is showing”. It is this “ pretense” that is satirized and lampooned in both the novels Barchester Towers by Anthony Trollope and The Way of All Flesh by Samuel Butler. The two books can be said to have superficial similarities, the use of a narrator and similar subject matter, ridiculing the hypocrisy of the Church of England as well as those who claim to adhere to, but fail to practice, Christian values, but it is the differences between the novels which are pointedly notable; they both not only employ very different styles of humor and overall tone, but the subtexts on which they are based are contrary to one another. The humor and ridicule of Barchester Towers gently yet clearly promotes the Victorian ideal of patriarchy and the maintenance of traditions above the chaos that is brought by change, and The Way of All Flesh uses pointed irony and shocking cruelty to expose, and break free from, the tyranny of the past, the traditional, the presumed duties and obligations of society in favor of the pursuit of pleasure and the practice of free will.

The first noticeable difference between Barchester Towers and The Way of All Flesh is the style of humor used. Paul Lyons writes that “ the narrator understands human weakness and transforms the worst to humor through tender irony” (p. 41). Barchester Towers is a light-hearted romp about the power struggles of the overly ambitious as they try to fill the vacuums that have been created by the three deaths in their society. Openings in the financially lucrative positions of Bishop, Dean, and husband to Eleanor, bring new characters into Barchester who create quite a commotion. It is the ways in which the characters interact with, and react to, one another which builds the comedic effect, more so than the plot itself. Trollope uses primarily irony, role reversals, and misunderstandings, to satirize the faults and foibles of the Church leaders of Barchester. One of the main ironies of the novel is that the two characters who are not ambitious at all, Mister Harding, along with his double Mister Arabin, end up winning all the power positions without even trying, whilst the overly ambitious Mister Slope falls flat on his face, losing everything. It is in this way that Trollope preaches his “ sermon” denouncing the Church’s focus on power and money rather than on Christian values, without coming across as preaching at all. The same cannot be said for Butler’s novel. Richard Hoggart points out in the introduction that Butler writes “ primarily as a philosopher” and further he describes the novel as an “ extremely sharp portrait of a Victorian clerical family [which reads] as an illustration, in narrative, of a scientific theory” (pp. 8-9). This gives the book an overall tone of being intellectual rather than farcical.

Whereas The Way of All Flesh is sharp, Barchester Towers is light, and uses the humor of exaggeration and the absurd to maintain its playful tone. Each of the characters is ridiculous and highly dramatic in his own way. As Paul Lyons writes “ Trollope tells a story dramatizing the necessity of full-hearted sympathy and forgiveness in a world where everyone’s behavior merits laughter” (p. 44). That being said, some characters “ merit” more laughter than others. The three characters who stir up the most trouble are: the unlikeable and ridiculously ambitious Mr. Slopes, the henpecking bishop’s wife Mrs. Proudie who “ rules supreme over her titular lord…with a rod of iron”, and the irreverent and highly sexually charged Signora Madeline Neroni (Trollope p. 20). Mr. Slopes is described by the arch deacon Dr. Grantly as one of those “ canting, low-bred, hypocrites who are wriggling their way in among us; men who have no fixed principle, no standard ideas of religion or doctrine, but who take up some popular cry, as this fellow has done” (ibid. p. 37). However, undauntedly, Slopes goes about his work “ zealously, flattering such as would listen to his flattery, whispering religious twaddle into the ears of foolish women, [and] …prying into everything” (ibid. p. 49). He becomes a caricature of the New Low Church who wants to bring reform into every aspect of Church life. The humor by exaggeration extends to details in the novel such as Mr. Quiverful having his fourteen children, and Bertie Stanhope’s conversion from Anglican to Catholic to Jew to Muslim. The climax of the silliness comes when the delicate and overly sensitive Eleanor boxes Mr. Slope in the ear during his proposal of marriage, and afterwards when speaking of the incident, Eleanor “ whose mind as regarded Mr. Slope was almost bloodthirsty… says ‘ Had I stabbed him with a dagger, he would have deserved it’ ” (ibid. p. 363). Underneath all the humor and caricatures the subtext of Barchester Towers is that the traditional ways should be respected and that peace and order comes by maintaining the status quo. The Victorians were living in a time of great social and political upheaval. Their culture was undergoing rapid change due to the influences of the New World, changing technologies, industrialization and urbanization, increasingly rapid travel and communications, the rise of feminism and social reform, as well as the impact of Darwinism. Change and reform was everywhere.

Much of Trollope’s humor is a reaction against these rapid changes. Mister Slope and the Proudies are cast as the reform movement that is divided even amongst its own ranks. The traditional is held up as something to be valued for its stabilizing effect, much like the old Bishop Grantly who “ died as he had lived, peaceably, slowly, without pain and without excitement”(ibid. p. 5). The new Bishop’s chaplain Mr. Slope during his first sermon causes much “ pain and excitement” to the diocese of Barchester as he shows “ no slight tact in his ambiguous manner of hinting that… he stood there as the mouthpiece of the illustrious divine…the particular points insisted upon were exactly those which were most distasteful to the clergy of the diocese, and most averse to their practices and opinions” (ibid. pp. 40-1). As he stirs the hornet’s nest “ angry eyes which glared round from one enraged parson to another, with wide-spread nostrils from which already burst forth fumes of indignation…minds disturbed, and hearts not at peace with all the world” (ibid. p. 44). In the same way that Mr. Slope is the caricature of reform within the Church, Mrs. Proudie is a caricature of what happens when women get a taste for, and are allowed to wield, the political power of men. The subtext of this humor being that if a man is not the head of the house that chaos will ensue. The married couples in this novel serve as a prime example for the status quo being emphasized through humor and ridicule. Mr. Slope even foolishly fantasizes that in order to increase his own power he could “ join the bishop against his wife, inspire courage into the unhappy man, lay an axe to the root of the woman’s power and emancipate the husband” (ibid. p. 24). The message of how a wife should behave is made clear when Trollope writes that “ Susan Crantly knows how to assume the full privileges of her rank, and express her own mind in becoming tone and place … She never shames her husband; before the world she is a pattern of obedience; her voice is never loud, nor her looks sharp… she knows what should be the limits of a woman’s rule.” (Heddendorf p. 414). Susan not only serves as a comic foil for both Mrs. Proudie as well has her own “ ambitious, worldly husband” but she also maintains the Victorian status quo for women by being “ content to nourish his career and live in his ample shadow” (ibid. p. 414) The two novels both use the method of satire but in very different ways.

Barchester Towers uses irony and the ridiculous to make the reader laugh, to make him relate to, and sympathize with, the human condition, and in the end, to uphold tradition over change. The Way of All Flesh also uses irony and caricature but the characters are not light hearted. They physically abusive and horribly manipulative. As readers we cannot help but to sympathize with poor innocent Ernest as he navigates the harsh realities of the world around him. Butler is able to make this harshness humorous by the way in which he describes the characters and his use of extended metaphors, for example, the hypocrisy of Ernest’s mother as she pulls confessions from him: “ for he still believed that she loved him…she had played the domestic confidence trick upon him times without number…so moved by the siren’s voice as to yearn to sail towards her…the mangled bones of too many murdered confessions were lying whitening round the skirts of his mother’s dress” (pp. 199-200). As well there is the silly imagery of Christ smoking a cigarette in the scene when Ernest has decided that the “ turning point in his life had come. He would give up all for Christ—even his tobacco…Tobacco had nowhere been forbidden in the Bible…we can conceive of St. Paul or even our Lord Himself as drinking a cup of tea, but we cannot imagine either of them as smoking a cigarette …there should be moderation, he felt, in all things, even in virtue (pp. 249-51). The more one understands the issues of the times the more a novel such as this one can be appreciated.

Barchester Towers can be valued as a satisfying and light comedic read, but The Way of All Flesh needs to be understood within its social context for one to fully appreciate its humor and understand its message. Hoggart reveals that Butler’s novel is not just a satire of the “ power of cultural controls such as the church and the paterfamilias when the novel confronts Britain’s hegemonic class, gender, and religious systems” (Neilson p. 88), but its satire, and overall structure, is based upon an earlier novel, Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus (1833-1834). This earlier book appeared in England at the dawn of the age and helped inaugurate the Great Victorian movement with its spirit of reform and moral earnestness (Hoggart p. 29). Butler’s satire is not only responding to the “ late-Victorian angst about the place of religion in one’s life and reveals an increasing desire to determine one’s identity outside of the church and family” (Neilsen p. 79) but as Shuttleworth writes, he is also reacting to “ the public scandals and debates provoked by The Priest in Absolution, a privately printed text at the center of a heated controversy that threatened at one stage to destabilize the Church of England… raising questions about the precise relationship between the soul and the mind (p. 625). The novel The Way of All Flesh differs dramatically from Barchester Towers not only in the style of humor used, the overall tone and the subtext, but most importantly it tailors the narrative to fit Butler’s philosophy and focuses primarily on the character development of one individual. Barchester Towers is particularly character driven, the plot being a pretense to introduce the fighting factions into a power struggle, and, the characters do not change significantly during the course of the narrative. Butler’s protagonist, Ernest Pontifix, is not only the main focus of the book but also his personal development forms the foundation of the author’s philosophical beliefs represented in narrative form.

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