

# Trollope's and wilde's depictions of victorian society



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Through the scope of a satirical lens, both Anthony Trollope's novel *Barchester Towers* and Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* take turns examining the carefully structured norms of courtship and marriage in Victorian England. Marital pursuits abound between many of their major characters, and the relations between men and women essentially evolve into a type of business enterprise, where both parties are interested in what the other can bring to the table. The importance of courtship during this period emphasizes the class structure of Victorian England, because marriage evolves into a useful, sometimes even necessary tool that both men and women can utilize in order to maintain a respectable social status. Marriage in the Victorian era is intimately linked with social class in these works of literature. In the first act of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the character Algernon makes comments to his servant, Lane, that lead to a short discussion of marriage. Algernon, having no experience with marriage himself, remarks, "Is marriage so demoralizing as that?" after being told that married households only drink low-rate champagne, something he finds appalling (p. 1699). Lane offers his own advice on marriage, but Algernon dismisses it. "I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane," he explains (p. 1700). As an upper class bachelor, Algernon could never take marriage advice from a servant, since the norms in a lower class marriage could never apply to him. Wilde satirizes this, having Lane openly admit that, as a manservant, his own experiences with marriage do not really 'count.' "It is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself," Lane quickly offers in response to Algernon's dismissal (p. 1700), understanding that his own married life is of little consequence. It is clear that in the Victorian period, middle to upper class marriages are very

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different kinds of social institutions than lower class unions. If a woman fails to procure a good marriage in life, then she cannot procure a respectable class status for herself. Similarly, a woman's class standing can even prevent her from procuring a good marriage, and thus a woman is unwillingly trapped in her social position. Miss Prism, Cecily's governess in Wilde's play, is a respectable woman in the eyes of Jack Worthing because he recognizes that she is valuable to his ward, but Lady Bracknell's higher class status renders her unable to acknowledge Miss Prism as such. Upon hearing that there is a Miss Prism in their midst in the Hertfordshire estate, Lady Bracknell wonders if this is the same Miss Prism that had formerly been employed in her household many years before, asking sharply, "Is this Miss Prism a female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education?" (p. 1737). Lady Bracknell immediately associates Miss Prism with a certain foulness and repulsiveness, branding her as someone she considers to be completely beneath her notice. Miss Prism's choice of employment in education also is an indicator of her social class status. Since she has remained unmarried, working as a governess has become her only reliable option of supporting herself. Even though Jack interrupts Lady Bracknell's interrogation by explaining that Miss Prism has actually been young Cecily's "esteemed governess and valued companion" for the past three years, the lady cannot view her in that manner. Her impression of Miss Prism is that of an unmarried, lower class woman, and Lady Bracknell even mistakes her to be freely and inappropriately associating with Dr. Chasuble. Miss Prism's social situation in life continues on a downward spiral from Lady Bracknell's perspective, and she cannot see Miss Prism in any positive light. Similarly, women who do not marry well at all also find themselves subjected to ill

opinion and gossip. In *Barchester Towers*, Madeline Stanhope returns to her family in England from the continent after having “ married the worst of those who sought her hand,” according to Trollope (p. 74). Her husband, Paulo Neroni, was “ a man of no birth and no property,” and eventually the marriage had dissolved into disaster. Madeline’s poor choice in marriage results in her “ fallen” social standing, a status that is physically manifested when it is revealed that she had become crippled after literally falling in an accident: “ She had fallen, she said, in ascending a ruin and had fatally injured the sinews of her knee” (p. 75). The ruin Madeline was ascending metaphorically represents the ascending ruin of her marriage to the bad Paulo Neroni. Her disability is a consequence of marrying beneath her social class, and when it causes a ruckus at the reception thrown in honor of the Proudies’ arrival in Barchester, Signora Neroni’s reputation in the town worsens. In addition, the social class standings of men also rely upon the acquisition of a successful marriage. It naturally follows then that both men and women find themselves on a constant search for particular qualities in their future spouses in order that they may obtain an advantageous union. The question of income and property comes into play often when a pairing is considered, because more money can translate into a better social class in the Victorian period. The bishop’s chaplain in *Barchester Towers*, Mr. Slope, is looking to essentially lift himself to the top of society in Barchester, and one of the ways of doing so are through marriage. Through his relationship with the new bishop, an opportunity eventually arises for Mr. Slope: “ Having been thus familiarly thrown among the Misses Proudie, it was no more than natural that some softer feeling than friendship should be engendered” (p. 26). But Mr. Slope is hesitant on securing Olivia Proudie, the eldest, in

marriage because “ the doctor had no immediate worldly funds with which to endow his child” (p. 26). The union would not help Mr. Slope's plans on rising through the ranks in Barchester. Slope soon believes he can actually catapult himself into a more respectable status upon discovering that one of the women in town is the recipient of a rather desirable income. Though Mr. Slope is physically attracted to the flirtatious charms of Signora Madeline Neroni, he believes that a union with the widowed Eleanor Bold would bring him more success, because she has twelve hundred pounds a year to her name, something that greatly pleases Slope (p. 134). Because a woman's income and property can legally turn over to her husband after marrying, men naturally desire a wife with a great deal of money of her own so that he may add it to his own fortunes and elevate his social standing. Thus Slope abandons his easier pursuits for the Proudie daughters and Madame Neroni in favor of the rich, sweet Eleanor Bold, believing that the widow would be the best path to obtaining a higher, more respectable social class. Likewise, Algernon's desire to marry Cecily Cardew in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is met with derision by his aunt, the Lady Bracknell, because she believes Cecily would benefit too much from Algernon's social class and eventually want to demand money for herself. She at first gives her refusal to the engagement, but when Jack explains that Cecily has “ about a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in the Funds” (p. 1734), Lady Bracknell changes her mind and is suddenly happy to have this young rich woman join the family. “ There are distinct social possibilities in Miss Cardew's profile,” she declares to her nephew (p. 1734). Lady Bracknell acknowledges that Cecily has “ distinct social possibilities” because of her fortune, and though her class is considered slightly lower because of the mystery of her parentage, there is

still hope for a rise in society. The union between Algernon Moncrieff and Cecily Cardew becomes an example of how money and class come together in a marriage arrangement in order to raise the social and economic status of both parties. If a woman's income and property become her husband's after marrying, then a woman in Victorian times must find a worthy husband to share that wealth with in order that she may maintain the respectability that comes with a large fortune. For example, before Jack can marry the lady Gwendolen Fairfax, her mother wants to know that Jack is a reputable bachelor who will not bring Gwendolen's social class status down in the same manner that Signora Neroni's did in *Barchester Towers*. The fact that Jack has "lost" both his parents worries Lady Bracknell because "to lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune – to lose both seems like carelessness" (p. 1709). If Jack comes from a family that regularly "loses" their children and are imprudent with their own fortunes, then Gwendolen cannot marry into such a lineage otherwise she herself might become "lost" in the carelessness or worse, "lose" her inherited position in upper class society. Maintaining one's position in society is important, and this careful preservation is the reason why there are numerous rules and norms when it comes to courtship and marriage in the Victorian period. The events that transpire between the genders in both *Barchester Towers* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* are because certain things must be considered before a marriage can be "approved" between a man and a woman. Marriage has become a type of business opportunity for men and women to increase their wealth and social standing, and each party must have some type of asset to benefit whomever they are marrying in order that a proper social class is preserved. If the "requirements" for a successful marriage are

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met - decent family background, adequate fortune, social respectability -  
then upper class men and women are free to marry as they please.