

# Wolfe vs Trollope

The Urth list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 29 Apr 2015

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6754>

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Andrew Bollen — 29 Apr 2015, 16:32

Last week saw the 200th anniversary of the birth of Anthony Trollope, probably not a big anniversary for most Wolfe readers, given that on most measures the two are about as different as novelists can be.

It wouldn't surprise me much to learn that I am the only read-everything fan of one who is also a read-everything fan of the other. But from this perspective I've come to the conclusion that Wolfe would be a better writer if he were sometimes more like Trollope.

Trollope is pretty much an anti-Wolfe. Plots are entirely secondary to character. Most of his characters are intentionally unremarkable, drawn from a narrow spectrum of upper-middle-class to upper-class mid-Victorian English life. Their stories are about money, wills, marriage and honor, affecting nobody outside a narrow circle. His characters are not required to save or destroy any universes beyond their own domesticity. He is a master of the dull and uneventful setting, as a background against which the small events driving his characters and their small reactions stand out.

Trollope writes as his own reliable & omniscient narrator with full insight into his characters' thoughts, emotions & motivations, which he shares with the reader in detail. The reader is his customer and Trollope thinks it's kind of dishonest to hold back anything he knows about the character or the plot, after the reader has paid for the book. Sometimes he will make an attempt to start a story in media res without first describing his characters, their family situations, their incomes and an outline of what is going to happen to them in the rest of the book - but after a while he'll confess that he finds this too difficult and perhaps a bit of a trick, and will then revert to a totally linear narrative style, assuring the reader that nothing much unexpected will happen from now on. The concept of "spoiler" doesn't really apply to a Trollope novel.

What makes all this work is Trollope's extraordinary ability with character. He's like a puppeteer who shows his audience how he has put his puppets together, how he makes them move, where the wires go - and then magically brings them to life, all in full view. The characters are just "ordinary" people confronting "ordinary" situations, but as mirrors and illustrators of human nature they have no equal in anything else I've read, when Trollope is writing at his best.

In this respect he makes Dickens seem very shallow - there's always a Dickens-surrogate on a pedestal with a bunch of grotesques capering around it. In Trollope, there's (usually) no Trollope-surrogate, no grotesques, just people. And versus Wolfe, Trollope would seldom hobble a character's living individuality by making him or her an exemplar of some idea or philosophy, which I think Wolfe does, too often.

Perhaps one explanation of Trollope is that he really loves his (best written) characters, just as they are, in a very selfless way, and so in a fashion he partakes a little of some modest essence of divinity with respect to his modest worlds.

My paradigmatic Trollope is one of his lesser-read works, "Miss Mackenzie". She's a dowdy mid-30's spinster who has spent most of her life looking after an invalid brother - no social life, one brief tiny flicker of romance years before, thought of by the few people who know her as an old maid worthy of little notice or respect. The brother dies; she inherits a modest fortune. Determined to see some life while still possessing a fragment of youth, she moves to a fictional version of Bath (made smaller and duller than the real Victorian Bath). She navigates the rocks and shoals of which church group to join, grasping relatives and proposals from needy bachelors attracted by her modest charms and bank balance. Eventually it's discovered that she wasn't actually entitled to the inheritance, and destitution looms. But it all works out OK because the actual inheritor is one of the needy bachelors whom she has in fact come to love, in a modest kind of way, despite the contempt of his family and his own rather dull & limited character and circumstances. So they marry.

I'm sure this will sound entirely unpromising to most readers of Wolfe but in Trollope's hands this dowdy spinster is more real and as heroic as any figure of fantasy struggling to pursue an ethical course through a world of demons and angels - while remaining a dowdy spinster living in a world if anything duller than reality. Quite remarkable.

Anyway, tying back to Wolfe: I think one overlap between Trollope and Wolfe, besides both being male English-language novelists and my liking, is that both at the end of the day are very (or perhaps mainly) concerned with personal ethics. Wolfe approaches this from an "idea" perspective and within a genre which tends to demand a lot of action and sensation. Versus Trollope's "character" perspective and down-playing of action and sensation to allow smaller, more real effects to manifest themselves.

In my view, Wolfe has a notable ability to do character well, quite often, despite what seems sometimes to be an overload of formalism, demands on readers to think the story for themselves for & gaudy genre trappings. I could wish that he had tried his hand at a more character-driven approach - which IMO is what makes for the greatest literature.

(As a side note, I get the impression that Wolfe has probably read little if any Trollope. As far I can recall, he mentions Trollope just once, in PEACE: Eleanor Bold says that Mr Macafee sometimes comes to their house for dinner and discusses Dickens and Trollope with her father.)

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DAVID STOCKHOFF — 29 Apr 2015, 17:10 · in reply to Andrew Bollen

Thanks for the superb descriptions. Trollope is one of those many Victorian authors you think will bore you to death until you read him, and then he winds up sticking around. I should read more of him myself.

A.S. Byatt's Frederica Potter novels are similar, but far more grim.

On Wednesday, April 29, 2015 12:32 PM, Andrew Bollen <jurisper at gmail.com> wrote:

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Marc Aramini — 29 Apr 2015, 18:53 · in reply to Andrew Bollen

Well, he named Eleanor Bold from the Barchester books, no?

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Andrew Bollen — 29 Apr 2015, 23:28 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On Thu, Apr 30, 2015 at 4:23 AM, Marc Aramini <marcaramini at gmail.com> wrote:  
Well, he named Eleanor Bold from the Barchester books, no?

Doh!

Now I'm going to spend far too much time wondering if there are any other Trollope references in PEACE that I've missed.

I think some of Wolfe's shorts are very much low mimesis near future SF and character driven in the basic manner of Trollope with extra eccentricity and more prostitution ... but these are his least memorable in terms of anything actually happening (Going to the Beach, It's Very Clean, Sweet Forest Maid, Beautyland, or Sonya, Crane Wessleman, and Kitty kind of spring to mind)

I've never really gotten into short stories, even Wolfe's - can't recall reading any of these.

- let's be honest, Wolfe often has more memorable high mimesis or mythic characters like Latro or Severian ... no one would probably say Mr. Green is one of his better characters. I think Wolfe needs the hint of grand, histrionic, or narcissistic characters to really show his best dramatic force. Silk would be pretty flat at times without the drama of a polar opposite love interest ..

I suppose that's my point, more or less.

One of my favorite Wolfe characters is Horn in OBW - before he becomes touched by any particular specialness. I think Wolfe can do this stuff. On the other hand, the thought of Trollope trying to do Wolfe ...