

Analyzing The Protagonist In Trollope's *The Warden*: Anti Tragic Traits

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Abstract: *This study analyses Trollope's The Warden through the lens of pragmatic constructivism and the theory of anti-tragedy with particular focus to the character of Reverend Septimus Harding, the protagonist. The study demonstrates that Harding's quiet withdrawal from his office is to be understood as an anti-tragic ethical response grounded in self-examination, humility, and an acknowledgment of moral uncertainty and limited personal agency, rather than as evidence of tragic defeat or moral triumph. From this perspective, Trollope's narrative anticipates Richard Rorty's post-philosophical ethics, which privilege social cohesion over objectivity, narrative understanding over abstract theory, and gradual reform over radical transformation. By foregrounding these concerns, The Warden emerges as a novel deeply engaged with questions of moral conduct in a social world where justice, value, and meaning remain provisional and subject to continual reassessment. Through this lens, The Warden emerges as a novel concerned with ethical life in a social environment where values and judgments are contingent, negotiable, and continually revised. By proposing this interpretive approach, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions on tragedy, anti-tragedy, and ethical representation in literature. It also critically reflects on the limitations of anti-tragic pragmatism, particularly its challenges in addressing individual moral conflicts within intricate and imperfect social structures.*

Keywords: anti-tragedy, pragmatism, moral uncertainty, social cohesion

Introduction

Literature has historically functioned as a reflective medium through which societies examine their values, tensions, and contradictions. By means of fictional narratives, authors enable readers to observe human behaviour and the social frameworks that govern collective life. Classical literary traditions often foreground tragic heroes whose personal flaws or ethical failures precipitate not only their own downfall but also widespread social or national catastrophe. In contrast, a number of literary works present protagonists who are not burdened with the symbolic responsibility of an entire nation. Such figures experience neither catastrophic endings nor heroic annihilation; instead, their narratives culminate in resolution, compromise, and adaptation shaped by multiple perspectives. This study investigates the anti-tragic dimensions of heroism in Anthony Trollope's *The Warden* (1855) through the lens of pragmatist philosophy. Pragmatism, as a philosophical movement, originated with Charles Sanders Peirce and was later expanded by William James. The tradition privileges action over abstract doctrine,

lived experience over immutable principles, and evaluates ideas according to their practical consequences. From a pragmatist standpoint, meaning and truth are not fixed entities but emerge through verification in real-world circumstances. Pragmatism thus emphasizes functionality, adaptability, and usefulness rather than adherence to universal or metaphysical absolutes. Peirce articulates this position succinctly when he observes that “there is absolutely no difference between a hard and a soft thing so long as they are not brought to the test” (Peirce, 1992–94, vol. II, p. 131). This assertion underscores the pragmatist belief that distinctions—such as those between tragic and anti-tragic heroes—only acquire significance when individuals are tested by concrete circumstances and their responses become visible.

Richard Rorty further develops this notion in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, where he reconceptualizes heroism in non-metaphysical terms. According to Rorty, a pragmatist culture may still admire exemplary individuals, but such admiration is not rooted in divine origin or access to transcendent truth. Instead, heroes are valued for their exceptional ability to live well within human limitations. As Rorty explains, these figures are not revered for possessing secret knowledge or ultimate truths, but for their capacity to engage meaningfully and ethically with ordinary human life (Rorty, 1972–80, p. 39). Within this framework, the anti-tragic hero emerges as an ordinary individual whose moral worth lies in compassion, responsibility, and adaptability rather than in extraordinary power or monumental sacrifice.

An anti-tragic hero, therefore, is characterized not by supernatural abilities or grand victories but by humane qualities that foster trust and affection. Such a figure does not triumph through warfare or dramatic confrontation, nor does he meet a spectacular downfall. Instead, his narrative arc is defined by moral negotiation, emotional resilience, and survival. The absence of a fatal conclusion distinguishes the anti-tragic hero from the classical tragic protagonist and aligns this figure with pragmatist ideals of continuity, adjustment, and lived ethics.

The Victorian period offered fertile ground for literary examinations of moral consciousness and social responsibility. Anthony Trollope’s *The Warden* stands as a significant text of this era, presenting a nuanced portrayal of anti-tragic heroism. Set in the seemingly placid clerical community of Barchester, the novel exposes the underlying tensions between institutional authority, social expectation, and personal conscience. Through the character of Septimus Harding, Trollope constructs a protagonist whose quiet moral strength challenges conventional definitions of heroism. Harding’s ethical struggle does not result in catastrophe but in a reflective withdrawal that preserves his integrity. By analyzing Harding’s character, this study seeks to illuminate how Trollope redefines heroism as a form of moral perseverance rooted in everyday experience rather than public acclaim. The novel thus reveals heroism as an ethical practice shaped by humility, compromise, and inner resolve.

Existing scholarship has demonstrated the relevance of pragmatist philosophy to literary analysis. Woodard Jr.’s (1969) thesis, *Pragmatism and Pragmatism in James and Howells*, examines how American pragmatism influenced both William James’s philosophical writings and William Dean Howells’s realist fiction. Woodard argues that James conceived pragmatism as a method for resolving metaphysical disputes through practical consequences, a perspective that permeated both his intellectual work and personal outlook. Similarly, Howells integrated pragmatist values into his literary representations of ordinary life and moral uncertainty. Woodard establishes a clear connection between James’s theoretical formulations and Howells’s narrative strategies, demonstrating how both figures rejected fixed ideals in favor of experiential, flexible notions of truth and morality. He concludes that James and Howells embody complementary expressions of the pragmatist ethos: James as philosopher and psychological inquirer, and Howells as novelist and social critic.

More recent scholarship by Murphy (2019) further extends the application of pragmatism to literary studies. In *Meaning through Action: William James’s Pragmatism in Novels by Larsen, Musil, and Hemingway*, Murphy analyzes *Passing*, *The Man Without Qualities*, and *The Sun Also Rises* to show

how characters seek certainty through action despite profound uncertainty and limited knowledge. Murphy argues that these novels dramatize James's pragmatic theory of truth by portraying thought as an experimental process oriented toward action. Decisions are made not on the basis of absolute certainty but through deliberate engagement with uncertainty. Drawing on James's essays, including "The Will to Believe," Murphy demonstrates how pragmatic philosophy offers ethical guidance even when outcomes remain unpredictable. The study emphasizes that both James and the novels he examines value ignorance as a productive condition, suggesting that intentional openness to uncertainty can generate new forms of understanding through action and, at times, through language.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for interpreting *The Warden* as a pragmatist narrative that foregrounds anti-tragic heroism. Trollope's portrayal of Septimus Harding resonates with pragmatist ideals by emphasizing moral action, experiential judgment, and adaptive integrity, thereby challenging traditional tragic paradigms and offering an alternative vision of heroism grounded in everyday human experience.

Reflection on Anti-tragedy

Curran's (2012) thesis, "*Anthony Soprano: Aristotelian Tragic Hero, Anti-Hero or Thug; and Why We Watch*," critically evaluates the status of Anthony Soprano, the protagonist of HBO's *The Sopranos*, in relation to classical and modern conceptions of heroism. Curran investigates whether Tony Soprano can be classified as an Aristotelian tragic hero, an anti-hero, or merely a criminal figure, while also examining the reasons behind the audience's sustained engagement with the series. The study begins with a detailed overview of traditional definitions of tragedy and the tragic hero, particularly Aristotle's moral and structural criteria. Through a systematic analysis of Tony Soprano's actions across the episodes of the series, Curran demonstrates that the character fails to satisfy both the ethical and formal requirements of classical tragedy. Rather than exhibiting moral nobility or a redemptive downfall, Tony is portrayed as violent, self-serving, and largely devoid of conscience, aligning him more closely with the figure of a thug or psychopath than with a tragic hero. Despite this, Curran argues that Tony's appeal lies in the sophistication of the narrative, the strength of the performances, and the psychological complexity that attracts viewers to themes of power, control, and transgressive behavior. Ultimately, the thesis concludes that Tony Soprano represents a contemporary anti-hero or villain whose moral ambiguity reflects shifting cultural values and audience fascinations.

The emergence of the anti-hero as a dominant literary figure is explored by Adams (1976) in "*The Anti-Hero of Eighteenth-Century Fiction*." Adams examines how eighteenth-century literature increasingly moved away from idealized representations of virtue toward protagonists who embody moral ambiguity, cynicism, and self-interest. Unlike the traditional hero, characterized by honor, courage, and ethical clarity, the anti-hero reflects the complexities and contradictions of real human behavior. Adams argues that this transformation mirrors broader cultural shifts toward realism and satire, as writers began to question rigid moral frameworks and celebrate psychological depth. Characters such as Tristram Shandy in Laurence Sterne's work and Tom Jones in Henry Fielding's novel function as vehicles for social critique and comic exploration, exposing hypocrisy, vanity, and social absurdities. Although often humorous or seemingly unserious, these figures reveal profound philosophical and psychological truths. Adams concludes that the anti-hero played a crucial role in reshaping literary morality and aesthetics, paving the way for the more psychologically complex protagonists of Romanticism and modern literature.

Rosenfield's (2005) article, "*Irony in Machado de Assis's Dom Casmurro: Reflections on Anti-Tragic Cordiality*," examines how Machado de Assis subverts traditional tragic conventions through irony and unreliable narration. Rather than presenting a straightforward narrative of betrayal, *Dom Casmurro* unfolds as an ambiguous account shaped by the protagonist Bentinho's jealousy, insecurity, and emotional passivity. Rosenfield argues that Bentinho's suspicions are less a response to objective reality

than a projection of his own psychological weaknesses, including cowardice and moral stagnation. In contrast, Capitu—frequently accused of infidelity—is depicted as intelligent, active, and self-possessed. By refusing to cast Bentinho as a tragic hero in the tradition of Othello, Machado critiques patriarchal assumptions and moral absolutism within Brazilian society. Rosenfield contends that irony serves both to dismantle tragic expectations and to reveal deeper truths about self-deception, human frailty, and the limitations of moral perception. As such, *Dom Casmurro* functions as an exemplary anti-tragedy in which the central failure lies not in an external act of betrayal but in the protagonist's inability to act decisively or perceive reality clearly.

In *Tragedy and After*, Faas (1984) outlines the fundamental distinctions and intersections between tragedy and anti-tragedy, providing a critical framework through which texts such as the Elizabethan play *Arden of Faversham* (1592) may be examined. Faas defines tragedy as a structured progression toward suffering that, however painful, is ultimately grounded in causality and purpose. Tragic suffering is often tied to providence, moral necessity, or fate and is embedded within a broader framework of meaning—whether to achieve redemption, affirm love, or fulfill a cosmic order. The tragic hero's downfall typically arises from identifiable causes, such as divine wrath, moral error, or a decisive turning point that confers significance upon the suffering endured.

Anti-tragedy, by contrast, denies the audience such moral or metaphysical consolation. According to Faas, anti-tragic narratives present suffering as arbitrary, devoid of redemptive purpose or moral justification. Pain occurs not because it must, but because human cruelty, desire, or chance allows it to occur. There is no meaningful atonement, and causality is stripped of ethical coherence. This absence of justification renders anti-tragedy particularly bleak, as suffering is neither instructive nor ennobling. *Arden of Faversham* exemplifies this mode through its depiction of the brutal murder of Arden by conspirators hired by his wife, Alice, motivated solely by illicit desire. The play offers no higher moral rationale for the violence, instead emphasizing deception, lust, and betrayal.

The play's lamentation underscores a sense of grim inevitability, compelling the audience to confront violence as a senseless act rather than a tragic necessity. Alice Arden's character embodies the moral emptiness of anti-tragedy: she professes love while engaging in calculated hypocrisy, manipulating language and promises to conceal her intentions. Throughout the play, she is portrayed as cruel and deceitful, while Arden remains a passive victim, repeatedly deceived and ultimately destroyed. In this manner, *Arden of Faversham* resists tragic transcendence and instead exposes the stark realities of human malice, aligning it firmly within the tradition of anti-tragedy.

Research Method

The present study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design, drawing upon methodological perspectives from both the social sciences and the humanities. Owing to the subjective nature of the literary corpus, the reliance on interpretive analysis, the absence of a fixed temporal framework, and the lack of rigid procedural rules, the research is situated firmly within the qualitative paradigm (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, pp. 106–107). Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to this study as it allows for an in-depth examination of meanings, patterns, and conceptual frameworks embedded within literary texts.

For textual analysis, the study employs Catherine Belsey's methodological framework, *Textual Analysis as a Research Method*, as outlined by Griffin (2005). This approach facilitates a close and systematic engagement with literary texts, enabling the researcher to examine how meaning is constructed through language, structure, and context. The primary data consist of selected novels that exemplify or support the concept of anti-tragedy, which form the central focus of the analysis.

Data collection and analysis were conducted through a multi-stage reading process. In the first stage, the researcher undertook an initial reading of the novels to gain general familiarity with the texts. The second stage involved critical reading, during which passages relevant to the research objectives were

carefully identified and annotated. The third stage, referred to as interpretive reading, required a detailed examination of the selected passages from a pragmatist perspective, focusing on how meaning emerges through action, consequence, and contextual engagement. In the final stage, corresponding to the analysis presented in Chapter Four, each selected passage was subjected to critical evaluation, and interpretations were systematically developed and articulated. Through this layered reading process, the study aims to produce nuanced and well-supported interpretations that contribute to a deeper understanding of anti-tragic narrative structures.

Discussion

Exploration of Anti-Tragic Pragmatism through the Complex Narrative of *The Warden*

Through its complex narrative, Anthony Trollope's *The Warden* (1855) explores the gradual formation of Septimus Harding as an anti-tragic and anti-heroic figure. As the novel progresses, Harding does not evolve toward heroic suffering or cathartic resolution; rather, Trollope resists the pursuit of absolute moral principles, definitive solutions, or monumental tragedy. Instead, the narrative privileges compromise, social harmony, and the gradual reconfiguration of personal conviction. This narrative trajectory closely aligns with Richard Rorty's pragmatist philosophy, particularly as articulated in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, where truth and morality are understood as contingent, negotiated, and socially embedded rather than grounded in universal foundations. This section examines how Trollope critiques foundationalist thinking, constructs Harding as an anti-hero, and transforms what might conventionally be a tragic conflict into an anti-tragic resolution.

At its core, *The Warden* marks a conceptual shift from foundationalism—the belief in stable, objective, and rational grounds for moral judgment—to contingency, wherein values and truths emerge from historical, social, and emotional contexts. This shift resonates strongly with Rorty's rejection of fixed epistemological foundations and his emphasis on the contingency of language, selfhood, and moral reasoning. Trollope's narrative demonstrates how institutional authority and moral certainty, initially perceived as stable, are gradually exposed as socially constructed and ethically unstable.

At the beginning of the novel, several characters assume that their moral and institutional positions rest on unquestionable foundations. Septimus Harding, for instance, firmly believes in the moral legitimacy of his role as warden of Hiram's Hospital. The generous income he receives is perceived not only as legally sanctioned but also as divinely justified: "The comfortable income which he received from the hospital had been thought to be his legal due, and was looked upon as a gift from God" (p. 45). Harding's acceptance of this belief reflects his reliance on tradition and ecclesiastical authority as sources of moral certainty. He never anticipates that his position or income might be ethically questionable, nor does he imagine that an external agent would challenge the hospital's financial arrangements.

Harding's moral confidence is further emphasized by his conviction that his personal kindness and dedication absolve him of any wrongdoing. He believes that his conscientious efforts on behalf of the hospital justify his financial benefits and is therefore unprepared for John Bold's challenge. Archdeacon Grantly, by contrast, represents a more aggressive form of foundationalism rooted in legal precedent, religious authority, and institutional tradition. His defense of the hospital's financial structure relies heavily on historical documentation and ecclesiastical law. Trollope describes Grantly as being "thoroughly convinced of the justness of his father's claim" and determined to protect what he believes to be both legally and morally sanctioned (p. 69). Grantly's extensive review of wills, royal awards, and financial records exemplifies his faith in institutional continuity as a guarantor of justice. Canon law, church tradition, and governmental approval form the basis of his argument, reinforcing the assumption that long-standing practices are inherently legitimate.

However, Trollope gradually dismantles these foundational beliefs by revealing their emotional, historical, and political contingency. The novel demonstrates that legal validity does not necessarily equate to moral righteousness. Harding comes to recognize this distinction explicitly, asserting, "If there

be such a thing as wrong, this is wrong; and if the law supports it, the law is a lie” (p. 69). This declaration marks a pivotal moment in Harding’s ethical transformation, as he acknowledges that tradition and authority may perpetuate injustice rather than prevent it. His realization exposes the vulnerability of institutional morality and highlights the disproportionate suffering of the poor under systems designed to protect privilege.

Harding’s eventual resignation as warden constitutes a decisive pragmatist turn. His choice is not guided by legal obligation or doctrinal certainty but by emotional distress, moral unease, and compassion for others. In Rortyan terms, Harding’s action reflects a rejection of externally imposed moral vocabularies in the favor of lived experience and ethical sensitivity. Truth and rightness, in this context, are not discovered in statutes or traditions but negotiated through interpersonal relationships and personal conscience. John Bold, often positioned as a reformer, initially appears to challenge institutional injustice on utilitarian grounds. Yet Trollope complicates Bold’s role by revealing that his motivations are equally contingent. Bold himself admits feeling compelled by external pressures rather than pure principle: “He felt himself to be driven on by a fixed law, the Hiram’s will, and could not stop himself, even though he saw the abyss before him” (p. 98). Over time, Bold recognizes that his reformist zeal is shaped by public opinion, media influence, and personal attachments. His decision to withdraw the case—motivated by friendship with Harding and love for Eleanor—demonstrates that even reformist action is governed by relational and emotional considerations rather than immutable moral laws. Trollope thus presents both reformers and traditionalists as operating within contingent moral narratives rather than timeless truths.

The narrator further destabilizes any claim to moral finality by emphasizing ambiguity and interpretive humility. Trollope repeatedly resists authoritative judgment, suggesting that moral understanding is provisional and situational. The assertion that “there is no royal road to learning, and the best of us must be content to stumble through it” (p. 134) reflects Rorty’s critique of “final vocabularies”—the idea that no single moral, legal, or theological framework can definitively resolve ethical conflict. Moral insight, Trollope suggests, emerges through struggle, uncertainty, and reflection rather than certainty.

This rejection of moral absolutism extends to the portrayal of religious institutions and their followers. The church, initially assumed to embody justice and integrity, is shown to be vulnerable to corruption, rumor, and self-interest. The bedesmen, once loyal to the warden and the cathedral, quickly abandon their allegiance upon hearing reports of financial reform. Abel Handy’s behavior illustrates this shift: “Abel Handy limped hither and thither through the rooms, repeating all that he understood to have been printed, with some additions of his own” (p. 101). This moment underscores the fragility of institutional loyalty and the influence of economic desire and public discourse. Ultimately, *The Warden* transforms a potentially tragic narrative into an anti-tragedy by denying heroic suffering, moral absolutes, and redemptive catastrophe. Harding survives not through triumph or martyrdom but through withdrawal, humility, and ethical self-awareness. Trollope’s novel thus exemplifies anti-tragic pragmatism, presenting moral life as an ongoing negotiation shaped by contingency, empathy, and social connection rather than by immutable principles or tragic inevitability.

Transformation from Tragedy into Anti-Tragedy

Anthony Trollope’s *The Warden* initially presents many of the conventional elements of tragedy: a morally conscientious protagonist confronted with ethical conflict, public scandal amplified by the press, institutional hypocrisy, and the looming threat of personal and social ruin. However, Trollope deliberately resists tragic closure and instead transforms the narrative into an anti-tragedy through the sustained use of irony, satire, restraint, and gentle comedy. While the novel adopts the structural tensions of tragedy, it ultimately redirects them toward a more humane and ethically nuanced resolution. In doing so, Trollope replaces heroic downfall with moral withdrawal, emphasizing reconciliation over catastrophe and dignity over destruction.

At the centre of the narrative is Septimus Harding, a mild, compassionate, and morally principled clergyman who serves as the Warden of Hiram's Hospital. Trollope establishes Harding's character through narrative commentary, interpersonal relationships, and the perceptions of other characters. At the outset of the novel, Harding is depicted as contented and emotionally fulfilled, deriving pleasure from simple pursuits such as reading and music: "It is not everyone that can sit down contentedly to a book or a piece of music" (p. 46). This description underscores the tranquility of Harding's life and frames him as a figure of quiet happiness rather than ambition or self-interest.

Harding's benevolence is further demonstrated through his affectionate relationships with his daughters, Eleanor and Susan, and his genuine concern for the bedesmen under his care. Despite his authoritative position, he remains humble and unostentatious, taking little pride in the financial privileges associated with his office. Trollope consistently portrays Harding as a moral victim rather than a perpetrator, emphasizing his kindness, social courtesy, and reluctance to assert power over others. His sociability and gentleness are reflected in moments of everyday civility, which reinforce his ordinariness and ethical decency (p. 58).

The narrative conflict is initiated when John Bold, a young reformer, confronts Harding with accusations regarding the legality and morality of his annual income, which far exceeds the stipends allocated to the bedesmen. This confrontation establishes a classical tragic dilemma: an essentially virtuous individual is torn between institutional duty and personal conscience. Harding neither wishes to undermine the Church nor betray his moral integrity, yet the allegations provoke intense internal anguish. His psychological turmoil mirrors the introspective suffering of tragic protagonists such as Hamlet, where ethical uncertainty generates emotional paralysis and social consequence.

As the novel progresses, the potential for tragedy intensifies. Public scrutiny escalates through Bold's legal challenge and the intervention of *The Jupiter*, whose editorials subject Harding to harsh public judgment. The situation worsens when some of the bedesmen, motivated by the prospect of financial gain, begin to support the lawsuit and withdraw their loyalty. Their reaction is marked by a sense of triumph rather than empathy, as they anticipate increased income following Harding's departure: "The one hundred a year to each of them was actually becoming a reality" (p. 149). This betrayal compounds Harding's isolation and deepens the moral crisis, as those he once cared for abandon him at his moment of greatest vulnerability.

In classical tragedy, such circumstances often precipitate violent resistance or moral collapse. Trollope, however, charts a different course. Harding responds not with defiance but with withdrawal and sorrow. His encounter with Sir Abraham Haphazard highlights this contrast, juxtaposing Harding's emotional sensitivity with bureaucratic detachment (p. 124). Rather than asserting himself, Harding retreats inward, embodying the vulnerability of a tragic hero without adopting the destructive responses traditionally associated with tragedy.

The narrative appears to approach a tragic climax when Harding secretly leaves Barchester to travel to London—a symbolic gesture often associated with downfall in tragic literature. His departure is marked by fear, secrecy, and emotional strain, as he avoids those who might dissuade him from his decision: "No schoolboy ever ran away from school with more precaution and more dread of detection" (p. 182). His reluctance to encounter Archdeacon Grantly reflects his determination to act independently of institutional pressure, despite the personal relationships that bind him.

It is at this moment, however, that Trollope decisively redirects the narrative. Harding meets with Sir Abraham Haphazard and voluntarily resigns from his position as warden. This act does not represent defeat or public disgrace but a conscious moral choice. Harding relinquishes his office because he can no longer reconcile its privileges with his conscience. By choosing resignation over confrontation, Trollope transforms what could have been a tragic downfall into an anti-tragic resolution grounded in ethical self-respect.

This decision prevents the narrative from descending into catastrophic loss. There is no violence, no dramatic exposure, and no irreversible destruction. While Harding experiences loss, it is accompanied by dignity, emotional restraint, and moral clarity. Trollope thus replaces the spectacle of tragedy with quiet endurance, presenting a resolution that affirms humanity over heroism and compassion over ideological struggle. *The Warden* ultimately redefines moral victory not as triumph or martyrdom, but as the capacity to withdraw honorably from an ethically compromised position.

Components of Anti-Tragedy in *The Warden*

Anthony Trollope's *The Warden* opens with narrative conditions traditionally associated with classical tragedy: a morally upright protagonist, Septimus Harding, is subjected to ethical scrutiny and public controversy when the legitimacy of his clerical income is questioned. Rather than allowing this conflict to culminate in tragic inevitability, however, Trollope deliberately subverts the tragic form. Through humor, irony, resignation, and narrative restraint, the novel transforms potential catastrophe into an anti-tragic resolution. The techniques by which Trollope effects this transformation demonstrate a sustained rejection of fatalism and heroic downfall in favor of moral pragmatism and humane realism.

Harding's awareness that his income from Hiram's Hospital may be ethically questionable initiates a profound internal conflict. Although his distress is genuine and emotionally compelling, Trollope prevents this crisis from resulting in personal destruction. Instead of enduring a tragic downfall, Harding chooses voluntary resignation, asserting moral autonomy over institutional allegiance. His decision represents a conscious prioritization of conscience over tradition and signifies withdrawal from power rather than capitulation to it. Harding explicitly articulates this resolve when he declares, "Whatever may be the truth of the matter... I will go up to London... and if no better excuse can be made for me than that, I and the hospital will part" (p. 156). This moment constitutes the novel's decisive anti-tragic turning point. By allowing Harding to act pragmatically and ethically, Trollope averts the conventional tragic trajectory. Harding's choice reflects moral agency rather than helplessness, demonstrating that ethical clarity can arise through action rather than suffering. Unlike the tragic hero, whose fate is often sealed by flaw or misfortune, Harding views resignation not as defeat but as moral growth. His simple assertion, "I can resign" (p. 199) redefines renunciation as ethical victory. In Trollope's framework, resignation signifies self-knowledge and moral refinement rather than loss. Harding's struggle is internal, and its resolution restores equilibrium rather than precipitating ruin. From a pragmatic perspective, the novel thus resists the tragic convention in which guilt culminates in annihilation, instead affirming the possibility of peaceful ethical withdrawal.

The novel's tonal balance further undermines tragic intensity. Trollope consistently employs satire and comedy to deflate institutional solemnity, particularly through the portrayal of ecclesiastical politics. Characters such as Archdeacon Grantly embody inflated self-importance, rendering institutional conflict absurd rather than ominous. Trollope satirically observes that Grantly "did not believe in the Gospel with more assurance than he did in the sacred justice of all ecclesiastical revenues" (p. 75), exposing the conflation of religious devotion with material privilege. This exaggerated reverence for financial entitlement destabilizes the moral authority of the Church and diminishes the gravity of the conflict.

Trollope extends this satire through vivid figurative language, notably when he likens Grantly to a combative rooster preparing for battle: "As the indomitable cock preparing for the combat sharpens his spurs..." (p. 78). This simile caricatures Grantly's zeal, transforming what might have been a morally charged defense into theatrical posturing. Such moments drain the narrative of tragic solemnity and reinforce its comic and ironic orientation. Even institutions typically central to tragic resolution—the legal system and the press, are rendered objects of ironic detachment. Sir Abraham Haphazard and Tom Towers of *The Jupiter* are portrayed as bureaucratic and impersonal, incapable of delivering moral clarity. Trollope's observation that "what is any public question but a conglomeration of private interests?" (p. 179) encapsulates the novel's skepticism toward ideological purity. Public disputes are

shown to be shaped by overlapping personal motives rather than by transcendent moral principles, reinforcing the novel's pragmatic outlook.

The romantic subplot between John Bold and Eleanor Harding further subverts tragic expectation. Rather than culminating in estrangement or loss, their relationship concludes in reconciliation and marriage: "And so, it was settled that Eleanor should be the wife of John Bold" (p. 210). This resolution affirms emotional harmony and symbolically reconciles reform and tradition. Love, rather than ideology, restores balance, suggesting that personal relationships can endure despite institutional conflict. By the novel's conclusion, ecclesiastical structures remain intact, but Trollope emphasizes that moral integrity resides in individual conscience rather than systemic reform. Harding's resignation ultimately aligns with the Church's deeper ethical interests, as indicated by the narrator's assertion that "the real interests of the Church coincide with the powerful dictates of Mr. Harding's conscience" (p. 180). Harding's withdrawal thus functions as a moral defence of the institution, preserving its integrity through personal sacrifice rather than public confrontation.

The novel's closing imagery reinforces its anti-tragic sensibility. The neglected garden at Hiram's Hospital, once lovingly maintained by Harding, symbolizes quiet loss rather than catastrophic collapse: "The drive and paths are covered with weeds..." (p. 232). This image conveys melancholy and unintended consequence, suggesting that reform motivated by abstract justice may result in decay rather than renewal. The ending resists catharsis, offering instead a subdued elegy that acknowledges loss without despair. Ultimately, *The Warden* avoids tragedy by rejecting moral absolutism, heroic annihilation, and apocalyptic closure. Trollope constructs an anti-tragedy that values ethical restraint, satirizes institutional arrogance, and affirms the dignity of moral resignation. Through irony, comedy, reconciliation, and open-ended realism, the novel demonstrates that moral resolution need not be achieved through destruction, but may instead emerge through humility, compassion, and pragmatic self-awareness.

Conclusion

The Warden emerges as a sustained critique of tragic inevitability, moral absolutism, and foundationalist ethics. Through the gradual ethical transformation of Septimus Harding, Trollope replaces the classical tragic arc defined by heroic suffering, irreversible downfall, and cathartic destruction—with an anti-tragic narrative grounded in contingency, humility, and pragmatic moral judgment. Harding's journey does not culminate in martyrdom or disgrace but in voluntary withdrawal, ethical self-clarity, and emotional reconciliation. In this respect, Trollope anticipates the pragmatist insights later articulated by Richard Rorty, particularly the rejection of fixed moral foundations and the affirmation of socially embedded, context-sensitive ethical reasoning. The novel consistently dismantles claims to moral finality, whether advanced by institutional authority, legal frameworks, reformist zeal, or public discourse. Characters such as Archdeacon Grantly and John Bold initially appear to occupy opposing ethical positions, yet both are revealed to operate within contingent moral vocabularies shaped by tradition, ambition, emotion, and social pressure. Trollope refuses to privilege any single perspective as morally absolute, instead exposing the instability and partiality of all ethical claims. This narrative strategy aligns closely with Rorty's assertion that moral truth is not discovered through universal principles but negotiated through lived experience and communal discourse.

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