LECTURE NOTES
"THE TELEGRAPH GIRL"

Englishman Anthony Trollope (1815-1882) was one of the most prolific and popular Victorian (nineteenth-century) prose writers. Reportedly, he wrote from c. 5:00 - 8:00 AM daily, then went to his day job as a senior British Post Office official; ultimately, he became Surveyor General of that organization. Trollope invented the freestanding mailbox. The Post Office was a key apparatus of the British Empire, and relatively early in his career Trollope advanced that service in Ireland, which had been politically joined to Britain (to form the United Kingdom) in 1800. While he produced Irish short stories and novels (including his first novel, *The Macdermots of Ballycloran*), his greatest successes came once he returned to—and wrote about—England. Prior to their publication as books, his novels often appeared in serial form in magazines, which supplied much domestic entertainment prior to the invention of radio and television. Trollope traveled widely on Post Office business—for example, to Egypt, the West Indies, and Central America. Among the most famous of Trollope's novels are the six known as the Barsetshire Chronicles, which concern a fictitious English shire or county. Another set of novels by Trollope is the "parliamentary" or politically charged Palliser Novels, which center around a wealthy aristocrat and law-maker, Plantagenet Palliser and his wife Lady Glencora. The English poet W.H. Auden opined, "Of all novelists in any country, Trollope best understands the role of money"; and we see detailed awareness of money in his short story "The Telegraph Girl." In fact, the tale constitutes an important critique of gender-based wage inequity, even as more and more women entered the labor force. Lucy earns "eighteen shillings a week" (1), but Abraham Hall ends up making "four pounds a week" (15)—that is, eighty shillings!!! Hall appears to participate in something like trade-union activism; certainly, he de-greases and dresses smartly to attend "some [evening-time] political meeting" (7). "The Telegraph Girl" highlights the dilemma between work and family, still experienced by many professional women. More generally, it interrogates the institution of marriage, suggesting perhaps that Hall's first wife left their relationship prior to her death (or perhaps died in childbirth): "She left me before we had been a year married...She died" (8). "The Telegraph Girl" first appear in the 1877 Christmas ("Good Cheer") Number of the magazine Good Words, and it was reprinted in a short story collection entitled Why Frau Frohmann Raised Her Prices and Other Stories (1882). Lucy Graham and Sophie Wilson: London-based telegraph "girls," working as crown (i.e. state or government) employees alongside "eight hundred female companions" (page 1) with electric telegraphs: a cutting-edge communications technology of the day. Samuel Morse first successfully tested his telegraph in 1838. Exhibiting "pervading brownness" (2), Lucy—whose name mean light—shares lodgings in the London suburb of Clerkenwell with Sophie, a younger woman "wedded to bright colors" (3). On 13 Dec 1867, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (or Fenians) exploded a bomb at Clerkenwell prison, regarded as the worst terrorist atrocity in 19th-century London. The independent-minded, pragmatic, and frugal Lucy finds Sophie's consumerism—her love of glittering gewgaws (5)—almost as distressing as her flirty nature. Rather as the Fenians were regarded as over-violent "Celts," the Scottish-sounding Alec Murray may be interpreted as an over-amorous "Celt," given to the libidinal space of the "Music Hall" (4). Sophie sets her sights on a male resident of their building: the widower Abraham Hall, a printing-house engineer with an out-of-town son. Hall's place of employment is significant: male printing-house workers were among the fiercest opponents of introducing women onto the production floor. They feared female dexterity (smaller, more nimble, faster fingers): women's hands could handle type blocks more efficiently than men's. Trollope is using several Biblical stories: in Genesis, Abraham is the great patriarch, the man God chooses to found the Hebrew nation, and (as Trollope's tale ends) the "tall and broad and powerful" (5) Abraham Hall essentially creates a new dynasty with his son and Lucy in a kind of promised land: the iron-rich Forest of Dean, which saw
massive industrial growth in the 19th century ■ Lucy's faithfulness to Sophie evokes the character Ruth's faithfulness to her mother-in-law Naomi: "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God" ■ Lucy's "cut[ting] herself a bit of bread" (page 16) in her upper room echoes Jesus's breaking of bread during the Last Supper ■ Due to workplace conditions, Sophie becomes ill with "[g]eneral debility" (10), a commentary on unhealthy workplace conditions associated with the technologically driven Industrial Revolution ■ With welfare support—a kind of "socialized medicine"—from her employer, the government-run Post Office (which operated the telegraph service), she attempts to recuperate in a seaside town called Hastings: like the Music Hall, a type of libidinal or erotic space ■ The Battle of Hastings in 1066 was the last time that England was successfully invaded (by the Normans, under William the Conqueror or Bastard), but Trollope may fear that industrial modernity has "conquered" England, destroying its essence ■ Altruistic support of Sophie burdens Lucy financially, an expense that Hall offers to help defray; however, Lucy fears that her accepting money from Hall for Sophie's care might be misconstrued—"For a young woman to accept money from a man seemed to imply that some return of favors [i.e. sex] would be due" (12) ■ Slowly, Lucy and Hall develop a relationship, but what will become of sickly Sophie? ■ Sophie's eventual marriage to Mr. Brown, a Hastings-based "hairdresser" (page 13), highlights the growth of the leisure industry in the seaside resort towns that burgeoned as railways connected the salubrious (healthful) south coast of England to the capital city, London ■ Literary device or technique of foreshadowing ■ Example (a): in second paragraph, unidentified narrator remarks, "Of music, [Lucy Graham] did not know a note"; this foreshadows how the music-based advance in telegraphic technology ("system of little tinkling sounds" [7]) impedes the hardworking Lucy's professional advancement, even as it advances the lazy, feckless, but aurally gifted Sophie ■ Example (b): seeking "real, downright, hearty love" (page 2), Lucy rejects marriage request from widowed bookseller; she doesn't want to become "second mother for his children" (page 2); this foreshadows Lucy's anxiety that Abraham Hall desires her not as a wife-lover for her own sake but just as a mother for his son ■ Development of leisure industry: Sophie contends, "life...was too hard [and] some kind of amusement was necessary" (page 4); the story's first sentence twice invokes the term "recreation" (1) ■ Lucy okay with "decently attended" visits to "Music Hall" (page 4), but (unlike Sophy) she's serious in her commitment to Telegraph Office, a bureaucracy

END