



THE TROLLOPE SOCIETY TRIP TO BRUSSELS AND BRUGES

Friday 29th August – Tuesday 2nd September

Can You Forgive Her?

Reading Guide

Publication Details

Written: 1863–1864

Published: Serialised in *Saint Paul's Magazine* from July 1864 to February 1865; published in two volumes by Chapman & Hall, London in 1864–65

Format: Serial and two-volume novel

Illustrations: First published with 40 original illustrations by Phiz (Hablot Knight-Browne) and others

Earnings: Trollope received £3,525 for this novel

Summary

The first novel in the *Palliser* series, *Can You Forgive Her?* explores the consequences of choice, independence, and societal pressure in the lives of three women. Alice Vavasor, the central character, finds herself torn between two suitors, her honourable fiancé John Grey, and her dangerous cousin George Vavasor. Around her, Lady Glencora struggles with life inside a political marriage, and the widow Mrs Greenow must choose between two contrasting suitors. Through these parallel stories, Trollope examines Victorian expectations of women, the limits of forgiveness, and the tension between passion, duty, and self-respect.

Key Characters

Spoiler Alert: the character listings linked to below may reveal some plot details.

- **Alice Vavasor** – A wealthy young woman facing pressure from family and society over her conflicting romantic commitments.
- **John Grey** – Alice's principled and patient suitor, representing steadiness and moral strength.
- **George Vavasor** – Alice's cousin, charismatic but reckless and self-serving.
- **Kate Vavasor** – George's sister and Alice's confidante, who manipulates events in favour of her brother.

- **Lady Glencora Palliser (née MacCluskie)** – Alice’s cousin, a spirited woman trapped in a political marriage.
- **Mrs Arabella Greenow** – A wealthy widow torn between two suitors, offering comic contrast to Alice’s dilemma.

Themes

Choice, Autonomy, and Responsibility

At the heart of the novel is the question of how much freedom individuals, particularly women, have to make meaningful choices. Alice Vavasor’s indecision about marriage reflects a struggle between emotional desire, personal independence, and social pressure. Trollope examines how such choices are shaped by family influence, financial dependence, and moral expectation.

Gender and Social Convention

Through Alice, Glencora, and Mrs Greenow, Trollope explores how Victorian women navigated the expectations of marriage, widowhood, and propriety. The novel highlights both constraint and resistance, Glencora’s political match, Alice’s uncertainty, and Arabella Greenow’s ironic enjoyment of widowhood all point to the varied ways women responded to convention.

Power, Influence, and Ambition

Power dynamics in the novel are subtle and varied: between men and women, parents and children, cousins and suitors. Characters like George and Kate Vavasor manipulate for personal or political gain, while others, such as John Grey, exert quieter, steadier influence. Trollope contrasts integrity with ambition, and questions how authority should be earned or used.

Money, Politics, and Marriage

The novel links romantic decisions with political and financial motives. Inheritance, status, and ambition play central roles in who marries whom, and why. Trollope critiques a world where personal feeling often collides with practical or public concerns, especially for women whose lives are shaped by the choices of men and the structures of property.

Humour and Satire

The comic subplot involving Mrs Greenow gently mocks romantic and mourning conventions. Still in full mourning dress while choosing between two suitors, she parodies Victorian expectations around grief, respectability, and feminine behaviour. Trollope uses her story to expose the performative nature of such customs, even as he treats her with warmth.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Alice struggle so much with the question of marriage, and how is her indecision portrayed?
2. How do the three main women in the novel, Alice, Glencora, and Mrs Greenow, illustrate different responses to Victorian expectations?
3. What does the novel suggest about the link between power and morality, especially in George Vavasor's character?
4. In what ways is the novel political, and how does it connect domestic life to public affairs?
5. How does Trollope use humour in the novel, particularly in Mrs Greenow's scenes?

BIG READ

Can You Forgive Her? was featured in the Trollope Society's BIG READ in 2023. The programme included six fortnightly Zoom meetings covering the novel in sections, culminating in a concluding lecture.

- [Complete recordings of Can You Forgive Her? BIG READ](#)
- [Watch the concluding lecture](#) – Professor Dinah Birch reflected on the novel's emotional intensity, its focus on female autonomy, and its place at the start of the Palliser series.

Resources

- [Plot summary and character listing for *Can You Forgive Her?*](#)
- [Download from Project Gutenberg](#)
- [40 original illustrations by Phiz \(Hablot Knight-Browne\) and others](#)