

Entwined Lives: Love, Marriage, And Autonomy In Anthony Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?*

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Abstract:

Love is portrayed as a profound connection of souls, while marriage represents both a romantic ideal and a societal institution shaped by rigid expectations. Autonomy, particularly for women, challenges these norms, highlighting the struggle for self-determination within the confines of duty, gender roles, and economic dependence. These intertwined themes expose the tension between individual agency and societal constraints, providing a complex perspective on personal and relational dynamics within a structured social framework. This study explores the intricate depiction of love, marriage and autonomy through the female characters in Anthony Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* The novel provides a varied composition of social and political interactions that reflect the societal expectations and limitations placed upon women during the Victorian era. The article focuses on key characters such as Alice Vavasor, Lady Glencora Palliser, and Mrs. Greenow, the analysis examines how Trollope portrays their struggles for autonomy, their roles within the confines of marriage, and their indirect engagement with political power. Alice Vavasor's vacillation between personal freedom and societal conformity highlights the internal conflicts faced by women who sought independence in a patriarchal society. Lady Glencora Palliser's story, set against the backdrop of her husband's political career, illustrates the intersection of marriage and politics, revealing the subtle yet significant influence women could wield in the political sphere, despite their exclusion from formal participation. Meanwhile, Mrs. Greenow's financial independence as a widow offers a contrasting narrative of female autonomy, challenging traditional gender roles through economic empowerment. This study argues that Trollope's portrayal of these female characters not only critiques the restrictive gender norms of his time but also recognizes the complexities of women's roles in Victorian society. Through these narratives, Trollope provides insight into how women navigated the constraints of their era, subtly influencing the political and social spheres from within the confines of their prescribed roles. The novel serves as a valuable literary lens for understanding the interplay between gender and politics in Victorian England, offering a multifaceted exploration of the female experience in the society.

Keywords: Victorian Societal Norms, Victorian Politics, Power Dynamics, Women's Identity, Victorian Literature.

Introduction

The Victorian era was indeed a period of significant transformation, characterized by rapid industrialization, social reforms, and changing cultural norms. These shifts had a profound impact on the literary landscape, with authors such as Anthony Trollope and his contemporaries using their works to explore and comment on the society. Trollope existed within a constellation of distinguished contemporaries, each contributing a unique hue to the vibrant tapestry of Victorian literature. While their thematic inclinations varied, these writers collectively captured the essence of an era marked by societal flux, moral inquiries, and an exploration of the human condition. Trollope's legacy endures alongside these luminaries, as his realistic portrayal of Victorian society and astute observations on human nature continue to captivate readers and scholars alike, enriching the legacy of 19th-century English literature.

Anthony Trollope, a stalwart of Victorian literature, stood amidst a cohort of distinguished contemporaries, contributing significantly to the literary landscape of his time. In the vibrant tapestry of 19th-century English literature, Trollope's works intermingled with those of eminent writers, fostering a milieu of creativity, innovation, and diverse literary expressions. Trollope's contemporaries comprised a constellation of literary luminaries, including Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Wilkie Collins, among others. Each luminary possessed a distinct narrative style, thematic preoccupations, and a unique contribution to the Victorian literary canon. Amidst this constellation, Trollope held his own, renowned for his realistic portrayal of society, intricate character delineation, and astute observations of human nature. Charles Dickens, a towering figure in Victorian literature, shared the literary landscape with Trollope. While Dickens's narratives often ventured into the realm of social reform and the plight of the marginalized, Trollope's works delved into the nuances of daily life, social mores, and the intricacies of human relationships. Despite their differences in thematic focus, both authors were lauded for their vivid characterizations and profound insights into the human condition. Another luminary of Trollope's era was George Eliot, renowned for her psychological depth and moral inquiry. Eliot's exploration of complex human emotions and moral dilemmas found resonance in Trollope's nuanced portrayal of characters navigating societal expectations, personal aspirations, and ethical quandaries. Both authors demonstrated a keen interest in dissecting the intricacies of human behaviour against the backdrop of Victorian society. Thomas Hardy, celebrated for his evocative depiction of rural life and the inexorable forces of fate, offered a contrasting narrative to

Trollope's social realism. While Hardy's works often grappled with the harsh realities of rural existence and the capriciousness of destiny, Trollope's novels centred on the intricacies of urban life, societal hierarchies, and the ramifications of personal choices within a structured society. Wilkie Collins, a pioneer of the sensation novel, explored themes of mystery, intrigue, and psychological suspense. In contrast, Trollope's narratives unfolded with a measured pace, focusing on the everyday lives of individuals navigating the complexities of Victorian society. However, both authors displayed a knack for compelling storytelling and a keen understanding of human motivations. Despite their thematic disparities, these writers shared an era characterized by social and cultural transformations.

Trollope left an indelible mark through his extensive and captivating Palliser Novels. Comprising a series of six political novels, collectively known as the Palliser or Parliamentary Novels, this corpus stands as a testament to Trollope's literary prowess, adeptness in portraying political intricacies, and profound insights into the human condition. With a keen eye for societal dynamics and political manoeuvrings, He intricately weaves together narratives that depict the multifaceted dimensions of power, ambition, love, and morality. The Palliser Novels, composed between 1864 and 1880, serve as a literary panorama of the Victorian era, delving into the labyrinthine world of British politics. At its heart lies the saga of Plantagenet Palliser, later Duke of Omnium, and his wife, Lady Glencora. The series commences with *Can You Forgive Her?* and culminates with *The Duke's Children*, delineating the compelling evolution of characters across a considerable period.

Trollope's meticulous portrayal of characters within these novels is a testament to his intricate understanding of human nature. The protagonists, including the steadfast Plantagenet Palliser and the spirited Lady Glencora, are meticulously crafted with their virtues, flaws, ambitions, and internal conflicts. Their complexities serve as a mirror to the societal constraints and personal dilemmas prevalent in Victorian England. Central to the Palliser Novels is the interplay between politics and personal lives. Trollope deftly navigates the corridors of power, revealing the intricacies of parliamentary procedures and the nuances of political machinations. Through characters like Plantagenet Palliser, who ascends to the highest political echelons, Trollope provides a penetrating commentary on the challenges and compromises inherent in political life. Moreover, the portrayal of Lady Glencora's struggles within the confines of societal expectations adds a poignant layer to the narrative, reflecting the constraints faced by women in that era. Moreover, Trollope's narrative style, characterized by its lucidity and realism, captivates readers by immersing them in the intricacies of Victorian society and its political landscape. His penchant for intricate plots, multifaceted characters, and a balanced blend of wit, drama, and social commentary renders the Palliser Novels a tour de force in Victorian literature.

The enduring legacy of the Palliser Novels lies not only in their literary merit but also in their enduring relevance. Trollope's astute observations on power dynamics, societal norms, and human nature resonate with contemporary readers, offering a timeless insight into the complexities of human existence. One of the salient features of Trollope's Palliser Novels is his vivid depiction of society. The author meticulously delineates the social strata, illuminating the stark disparities between classes and the complexities of interpersonal relationships. Trollope's astute observations on societal mores, traditions, and values provide a panoramic view of Victorian England, rendering his works not just entertaining novels but also invaluable historical documents. Victorian aristocratic society was deeply invested in maintaining its hierarchical structure, and marriage was a key mechanism for preserving social order. Aristocratic women, much like Alice, were often seen as pawns in this system, their marriages arranged to consolidate wealth, power, and status rather than for love or personal choice. In this context, Alice's struggle for autonomy can be seen as a microcosm of the larger tensions within the aristocracy, where individual desires were frequently sacrificed for the sake of familial or social expectations.

Can You Forgive Her? by Anthony Trollope stands as a compelling portrayal of gender roles within the intricate tapestry of Victorian society. Through its narrative, Trollope delicately crafts a world where societal expectations, gender norms, and individual agency intersect, especially concerning the portrayal of women in relation to their roles in politics and society. At the heart of Trollope's exploration are the female protagonists, notably Alice Vavasor, whose character serves as a focal point for dissecting the complexities of Victorian gender roles. Alice embodies the tensions between personal desires and societal obligations, grappling with the expectations imposed on her as a woman within a conservative society. Her internal conflict reflects the societal pressure for women to conform to traditional roles, juxtaposed against their yearnings for autonomy and self-determination.

Trollope presents a spectrum of female characters, each navigating the constraints and opportunities within their socio-political milieu. Whether conforming to societal expectations or challenging them, these characters offer nuanced insights into the varied strategies adopted by women to navigate their roles in a male-dominated society. The novel also explores the realm of politics, traditionally perceived as male-dominated, and the challenges women face when engaging in political discourse. Through the female characters' interactions within political spheres, Trollope scrutinizes the limitations imposed on women seeking agency and influence, showcasing the barriers they encounter in asserting themselves within these arenas. Moreover, the male characters in the novel serve as contrasting figures, often embodying societal expectations and reinforcing gender norms. Their attitudes and behaviours toward the female characters provide a lens through which Trollope critiques and examines the prevailing gender dynamics of the Victorian era.

Critics like Nancy Armstrong and Mary Poovey have argued that the Victorian novel often exposes the limitations placed on women by a society that outwardly celebrates their moral influence but internally constrains their autonomy. Critics of

Victorian aristocratic society have often pointed out the inherent contradictions in its treatment of women. While the aristocracy espoused ideals of refinement, morality, and virtue, it simultaneously denied women the agency and education necessary to fully realize these ideals. Alice's vacillation between independence and conformity mirrors these contradictions, as she attempts to assert her own will within a system that systematically undermines it. Alice's character thus serves as a critique of how Victorian aristocratic society used gender roles to maintain its social order. Her ultimate reconciliation with John Grey can be read as a surrender to these societal pressures, yet it also highlights the personal cost of such surrender. By drawing parallels between Alice's struggles and the broader dynamics of Victorian aristocracy, Trollope underscores the pervasive influence of social structures on individual lives, particularly the lives of women. Critics have long recognized the complex interplay between gender and class in the Victorian aristocracy. In their analyses, scholars have highlighted how the aristocracy's emphasis on propriety, social order, and tradition often resulted in the subjugation of women's desires and freedoms. Elaine Showalter, for instance, has discussed how Victorian literature frequently portrays women as trapped within a "domestic ideology" that limits their roles to the private sphere, despite the aristocracy's reliance on women to uphold social and moral standards.

The Romantic Struggles of Alice Vavasor

Critics have noted that Trollope, while often sympathetic to his female characters, nonetheless portrays the difficulties they face in achieving true autonomy within the confines of Victorian society. This paradox is evident in Alice's story, where her personal struggles are inextricably linked to the societal expectations that dictate her choices. Alice's eventual submission to John Grey's moral authority reflects the broader societal expectation that women, even those with independent minds and strong wills, should ultimately conform to the roles assigned to them by a patriarchal system. Furthermore, feminist critics have explored how Trollope's work, while critical of the restrictions placed on women, still operates within the ideological framework of his time. This framework often portrays female autonomy as inherently dangerous or destabilizing, a view that is mirrored in Alice's brief engagement to George Vavasor—a relationship that threatens to lead her into moral and social ruin. Critics like Deborah Epstein Nord have argued that Trollope's novels reveal the anxieties of a society grappling with the changing roles of women, even as they reinforce the traditional gender norms that sought to contain these changes.

Alice Vavasor, the central female protagonist in Anthony Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* embodies the conflict between personal autonomy and societal expectations that defined the lives of Victorian women. Throughout the novel, Alice's journey is marked by her intense internal struggle to assert her independence in a society that offers limited opportunities for female agency. Her vacillation between two suitors—John Grey and her cousin, George Vavasor—serves as a metaphor for her broader dilemma: the tension between the desire for self-determination and the pressure to conform to the traditional role of a dutiful wife. The character of Alice Vavasor highlights moral strength and complexity. Despite her limited means, she is generous, and independent, and strives to live by Christian values. She endures suffering quietly and maintains hope for a better future. Her deep, unwavering love for her cousin, even after being hurt by her, portrays Alice as compassionate and forgiving, showcasing her as a morally upright yet emotionally complex character. Yet she was a good woman. Out of her small means she gave much away. She owed no man anything. She strove to love her neighbours. She bore much pain with calm unspeaking endurance, and she lived in trust of a better world. Alice Vavasor, who was after all only her cousin, she loved with an exceeding love, and yet Alice had done very much to extinguish such love. (43) Alice Vavasor is portrayed as a morally upright and resilient woman, marked by generosity, endurance, and deep, unconditional love, even when tested by betrayal. Her character reflects both strength and compassion, embodying Victorian ideals of virtue and emotional fortitude.

John Grey, whom Alice initially accepts as her fiancé, represents the epitome of Victorian respectability. He is patient, and kind and offers Alice a life of security and stability. However, Alice perceives his unwavering calmness and moral certainty as oppressive, fearing that marriage to Grey would require her to surrender her own identity and desires. This fear reflects the broader Victorian expectation that women should subjugate their will to that of their husbands, sacrificing personal autonomy for the sake of marital harmony. Alice Vavasor's confusion over her love for John Grey and George Vavasor reflects her internal struggle between two very different paths in life. John Grey represents stability, respectability, and the promise of a secure future, aligning with traditional Victorian ideals of marriage and domesticity. However, his calm and predictable nature makes Alice question whether her affection for him is genuine or simply driven by societal expectations, Alice – ! sometimes you drive me too hard; you do, indeed. You make me doubt whether I hate or love you most Knowing what my feelings are about George, I cannot understand how you can bring yourself to speak of him to me with such contempt! (66)

In contrast, George Vavasor, with his fiery ambition and unpredictable nature, appeals to Alice's desire for excitement and independence. Yet, George is also deeply flawed—impulsive, reckless, and ultimately untrustworthy. Alice's brief engagement with George represents her rebellion against societal norms and her attempt to assert control over her own life. However, this decision also exposes the risks that come with stepping outside the boundaries of acceptable female behaviour, as George's influence threatens to lead Alice into a destructive path. Alice's eventual return to John Grey, after breaking off her engagement with George, symbolizes a reluctant acceptance of the constraints imposed by Victorian society. While Trollope presents Alice as intellectually capable and strong-willed, her ultimate decision suggests a resignation to the societal norms that dictate a woman's role as supportive and submissive to her husband. Yet, this return

is not without nuance; it is a complex act of reconciliation, where Alice attempts to balance her desire for autonomy with the realities of her social environment.

Trollope's portrayal of Alice Vavasor highlights the limited options available to Victorian women and the psychological toll of navigating these restrictions. Her struggle is emblematic of the broader plight of women in a patriarchal society—caught between the longing for independence and the societal expectations that confine them. Alice's story underscores the novel's exploration of gender dynamics, revealing the challenges of asserting female autonomy in a world that demands conformity to rigid gender roles. Through Alice, Trollope critiques the societal structures that limit women's freedom; while also acknowledging the complex and often painful choices they must make within these constraints.

Alice Vavasor's character is not only a reflection of individual struggles but also a critique of the broader Victorian aristocratic society, where the lives of women were often circumscribed by rigid social hierarchies and expectations. Unlike the aristocratic women in Trollope's world—exemplified by characters such as Lady Glencora Palliser—Alice is not bound by the same level of societal expectations related to wealth and status. However, she still faces similar pressures to conform to the ideals of womanhood, which prioritize duty, obedience, and marital allegiance over personal fulfilment.

Glencora Palliser's Journey Through Love and Duty

In *Can You Forgive Her?* Glencora Palliser's character is often seen as a commentary on the limited avenues available to aristocratic women for exercising power and autonomy. Critics like Shirley Robin Letwin have argued that Trollope's depiction of Glencora reflects the reality that, while Victorian women were often sidelined in formal political structures, they played crucial roles in shaping the political landscape through their influence within the home and social sphere. Moreover, feminist critics have highlighted how Trollope uses Glencora's character to critique the patriarchal structures that confined women to supporting roles in both marriage and politics. Elaine Showalter, for instance, has pointed out that Trollope's portrayal of Glencora suggests a recognition of women's potential to contribute meaningfully to political life, even as they are constrained by societal expectations.

Lady Glencora Palliser, one of the most vivid and complex characters in Anthony Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* embodies the intersection of marriage and politics within the Victorian aristocracy. As a young woman of high social standing, Glencora's life is initially shaped by the expectations of her class, where marriage is not just a personal union but a political and social contract. Her experiences highlight the tensions between personal desires and the demands of an aristocratic society that views marriage as a tool for political and economic consolidation. Her marriage to Plantagenet Palliser, a rising political figure, is arranged by her family to secure social and financial stability. Her initial resistance to this marriage, due to her lingering love for Burgo Fitzgerald—a man deemed unsuitable by her family—illustrates the coercive nature of marriage within the aristocracy. For Glencora, marriage is a sacrifice of personal happiness for the sake of duty, reflecting the broader societal expectation that women, particularly those of the upper class, should prioritize their family's interests over their desires.

Lady Glencora Palliser emerges as a quintessential example of the political role that an aristocratic wife could play in Victorian society. Although women of this era were largely excluded from formal political power, their influence within the private sphere—and by extension, the public sphere—was significant. Trollope uses Lady Glencora's character to illustrate how aristocratic wives could exert political influence through their roles as supporters, advisors, and social facilitators, despite the constraints placed upon them by societal expectations. Lady Glencora Palliser enters her marriage to Plantagenet Palliser under the shadow of compulsion, having been pressured by her family to marry for social and political stability rather than love. Initially, her role is that of a reluctant wife, disconnected from her husband's political ambitions. However, as the narrative progresses, Glencora evolves into a politically savvy partner who plays a crucial role in Plantagenet's career.

Plantagenet Palliser, Glencora's husband, is deeply committed to his political career and the responsibilities that come with it. His marriage to Glencora, while socially advantageous, is initially marked by emotional distance and a lack of mutual understanding. Trollope portrays Plantagenet as a man consumed by his political ambitions, often to the detriment of his relationship with Glencora. This dynamic underscores how Victorian society often viewed aristocratic women as mere adjuncts to their husbands' public lives, expected to support their husbands' careers while suppressing their own emotional and intellectual needs. Despite the constraints of her marriage, Glencora gradually evolves into a politically astute and influential figure within her husband's world. Trollope presents her as a woman of intelligence and strong will, qualities that enable her to navigate the complex social and political landscape of Victorian England. As she grows more confident in her role, Glencora begins to exert subtle but significant influence over Plantagenet's political career. She becomes an essential partner in his political life, offering advice, managing social interactions, and even helping to secure alliances that benefit his ambitions. Glencora's transformation highlights the often-unacknowledged political power of aristocratic wives in Victorian society. While women were formally excluded from the political sphere, they wielded considerable influence through their roles as hostesses, confidantes, and advisors. Glencora's involvement in politics, though indirect, demonstrates how women like her could shape political outcomes by leveraging their social connections and understanding of the political climate. Throughout *Can You Forgive Her?* Trollope explores the tension between Glencora's desires and her public duties as a politician's wife. Her earlier love for Burgo Fitzgerald represents the life she might have led had she been free to follow her inclinations—a life of passion, spontaneity, and perhaps social ostracism.

The memory of Burgo lingers as a symbol of what she has sacrificed, creating a poignant contrast to her life with Plantagenet, which, while more stable and socially respectable, lacks the emotional fulfilment she once craved.

Trollope portrays Glencora as more than just a passive observer of her husband's political life. She becomes deeply involved in the social aspects of politics, understanding that her position as a hostess and socialite can be leveraged to advance her husband's career. Glencora's ability to navigate the complex social landscape of Victorian aristocracy allows her to build connections, influence key figures, and subtly steer political conversations—all of which benefit Plantagenet's ambitions. One of the primary ways in which Lady Glencora wields political influence is through her role as a social hostess. In Victorian society, social gatherings were not merely opportunities for leisure; they were venues where political alliances were forged, and social capital was accrued. Glencora's charm, wit, and social acumen make her an invaluable asset to Plantagenet, as she uses her social gatherings to foster relationships with influential figures, create favourable impressions, and subtly advocate for her husband's political interests. Trollope highlights how Glencora's influence is rooted in her understanding of the social dynamics that underpin political power. Her ability to manage these dynamics—whether through organizing dinners, engaging in strategic conversations, or facilitating introductions—demonstrates the critical, though often unacknowledged, role that aristocratic wives played in the political sphere. Through her social prowess, Glencora helps to secure Plantagenet's position within the political elite, illustrating how the private actions of a wife could have significant public consequences. Beyond her role as a social facilitator, Lady Glencora also emerges as a key advisor to her husband. Despite Plantagenet's initial reluctance to involve her in political matters, Glencora gradually becomes someone he relies on for emotional and practical support. Her insight into human nature, coupled with her understanding of the political environment, allows her to offer valuable advice that Plantagenet comes to respect and consider. Glencora's influence is most evident in moments of political and personal crisis, where her counsel helps Plantagenet navigate the complexities of his career. For instance, her support during his tenure as Chancellor of the Exchequer is crucial, as she provides both moral support and practical advice. Through these interactions, Trollope demonstrates how the role of the aristocratic wife extended beyond mere companionship; she was often a critical partner in her husband's political endeavours, shaping decisions and strategies from behind the scenes. While Glencora's political role is significant, Trollope also explores the personal cost of this involvement. Glencora's transformation into a political partner requires her to suppress her desires and emotions, particularly her longing for the passionate but unsuitable Burgo Fitzgerald. Her marriage to Plantagenet, while politically and socially advantageous, is marked by a lack of personal fulfilment—a tension that underscores the sacrifices aristocratic women were expected to make in the service of their husbands' careers.

Another key political figure in Glencora's life is the Duke of Omnium, Plantagenet's uncle and a powerful figure in the British aristocracy. The duke, known for his immense wealth and influence, plays a crucial role in Glencora's marriage, having initially supported the union between Glencora and Plantagenet as a way to secure the family's political legacy. The duke's approval is vital to Plantagenet's career, and Glencora's ability to maintain a good relationship with him is an important part of her role as Plantagenet's wife.

Glencora's interactions with the duke are marked by a blend of respect and subtle manipulation. She understands that the duke's support is instrumental to her husband's success, and she uses her charm and wit to maintain his favour. Trollope presents Glencora as adept at managing these relationships, recognizing that her influence on figures like the duke can have significant implications for Plantagenet's political future. In *Can You Forgive Her?* Glencora also forms a significant friendship with Mrs. Max Goesler, a wealthy widow with her own social and political connections. Mrs. Goesler is portrayed as an independent and intelligent woman who, like Glencora, understands the power dynamics of the aristocracy. Their friendship is based on mutual respect and shared experiences as women navigating the male-dominated world of politics. Mrs. Goesler serves as both a confidante and a potential political ally for Glencora. Through their relationship, Trollope explores the ways in which women of the aristocracy could support each other in their political endeavours, creating networks of influence that operated parallel to those of their male counterparts. This friendship underscores the importance of social alliances in Victorian politics, where personal relationships often intersected with political interests. In many things Lady Glencora was much quicker, much more clever, than her husband, though he was to be Chancellor of the Exchequer, and though she did know nothing of the Constitution. She knew, too, that he was easily to be deceived, – that though his intelligence was keen, his instincts were dull, – that he was gifted with no fineness of touch, with no subtleappreciation of the characters of men and women; and, to a certain extent, she looked down upon him for his obtusity. (504)

Glencora's interactions with other political characters reveal her as a skilled political operator in her own right. She understands the importance of social influence in politics and uses her position to support her husband's ambitions. Through these connections, Trollope illustrates the often-overlooked but vital role that aristocratic wives played in the political life of Victorian England. Trollope uses Glencora's character to critique the limited roles available to women within the aristocracy, where their value was often tied to their ability to support and enhance their husbands' public lives. The personal sacrifices that Glencora makes highlight the gendered nature of these expectations, as her own ambitions and desires are subsumed by the demands of her role as a political wife. Lady Glencora Palliser's character in *Can You Forgive Her?* provides a compelling exploration of the political role of the aristocratic wife in Victorian society. Through her social influence, advisory role, and personal sacrifices, Glencora exemplifies how women, though formally excluded from the public political sphere, could still wield significant power and influence. Trollope's portrayal of Glencora

challenges the notion that Victorian women were merely passive figures in the political landscape, instead highlighting their active participation and essential contributions. Lady Glencora's story not only reflects the complexities of gender and power in Victorian England but also serves as a critique of the societal structures that confined women to roles that often required them to navigate the delicate balance between public duty and private desire.

Mrs. Greenow's Assertion of Autonomy

Mrs. Greenow is another prominent character in Anthony Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* presents a unique perspective on the themes of widowhood and economic independence in Victorian society. Unlike many of the novel's other female characters, who are bound by the expectations of marriage and social propriety, Mrs. Greenow embodies a form of autonomy that is rare for women of her time. Through her character, Trollope explores the opportunities and challenges that widowhood presents to women, particularly in terms of financial independence and social mobility. In the Victorian era, widowhood often conferred a level of social and financial freedom that was not available to unmarried or married women. As a widow, Mrs. Greenow possesses a degree of independence that allows her to navigate the social world with greater ease and autonomy. She inherits a considerable fortune from her late husband, which grants her economic security and the ability to make decisions about her life without the immediate oversight of a male guardian or husband, "Then Mr Greenow died; and the widow, having proved the will, came up to London and claimed the commiseration of her nieces." (104) Trollope portrays Mrs. Greenow as a woman who understands the power that her widowhood affords her. She is fully aware of the social advantages that come with her status, and she uses this to her benefit in her interactions with other characters. Unlike younger, unmarried women in the novel, Mrs. Greenow is not under the same pressure to marry quickly or make decisions based solely on financial necessity. Her financial independence allows her to engage in relationships and social activities on her own terms. Despite her independence, Mrs. Greenow skilfully manipulates the expectations of Victorian society to maintain her social standing and influence. She often presents herself as the grieving widow, adhering to the societal norms that dictate a period of mourning and decorum. However, Trollope makes it clear that Mrs. Greenow's mourning is more performative than sincere; she is pragmatic about her circumstances and uses her status as a widow to her advantage.

This performative aspect of Mrs. Greenow's widowhood allows her to navigate the marriage market with a level of control that younger, less experienced women do not possess. She attracts the attention of multiple suitors, including the earnest farmer Mr. Cheesacre and the more adventurous Captain Bellfield, and she plays them against each other with remarkable skill. Trollope uses these interactions to highlight Mrs. Greenow's shrewdness and her ability to manipulate social norms to secure her own interests. Mrs. Greenow's financial independence is central to her ability to make choices that reflect her desires rather than societal pressures. Unlike many women in Victorian novels, whose marriages are often driven by financial necessity, Mrs. Greenow is in a position to marry for companionship or even amusement rather than economic security.

The coast is low and straight, and the east wind blows full upon it. But the place is healthy; and Mrs Greenow was probably right in thinking that she might there revive some portion of the health which she had lost in watching beside the couch of her departing lord. (105)

Her wealth allows her to consider suitors on her terms, evaluating them for qualities other than their ability to provide for her. Trollope presents Mrs. Greenow's independence as both empowering and somewhat subversive. In a society where women were often economically dependent on men, Mrs. Greenow's ability to manage her own finances and make decisions about her future represents a challenge to traditional gender roles. She is a character who defies the notion that women must be dependent on men for their livelihoods, instead asserting her agency in the economic and social spheres. Through Mrs. Greenow, Trollope also offers a subtle critique of Victorian society's treatment of women, particularly in the context of widowhood. While Mrs. Greenow is able to use her status to her advantage, the novel also highlights the limitations and expectations placed on widows. Even with her financial independence, Mrs. Greenow is still subject to societal scrutiny and must navigate a complex set of social rules to maintain her respectability. Trollope's depiction of Mrs. Greenow suggests that while widowhood can offer women a form of liberation, it also comes with its own set of challenges. Mrs. Greenow's calculated approach to her relationships and her awareness of social expectations reflect the precarious position of women who, even when economically independent, must still operate within the confines of a patriarchal society.

Conclusion

In Anthony Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* the characters of Alice Vavasor, Lady Glencora Palliser, and Mrs. Greenow each represent different facets of the struggle for female autonomy within the constraints of Victorian society. Through their distinct narratives, Trollope explores the complex interplay between gender, power, and societal expectations, offering a nuanced critique of the limited roles available to women during this period. The exploration of these characters in *Can You Forgive Her?* offers valuable insights into the ongoing discourse on gender, power, and autonomy. Although set in the Victorian era, the struggles faced by Alice, Glencora, and Mrs. Greenow resonate with contemporary issues surrounding women's rights, agency, and the balance between personal desires and societal expectations.

Alice Vavasor's internal conflict and her ultimate submission to societal norms reflect the enduring challenges women face in defining their identities amidst external pressures. In today's world, where the fight for gender equality continues,

Alice's story serves as a reminder of the importance of supporting individual autonomy and resisting societal pressures that seek to limit personal freedom. Lady Glencora Palliser's ability to influence political outcomes from within the domestic sphere speaks to the ongoing relevance of women's contributions to public life, even when they are not formally recognized. In contemporary society, where discussions about women's roles in politics and leadership are more prominent than ever, Glencora's story highlights the need to acknowledge and value the diverse ways in which women contribute to societal progress. Mrs. Greenow's economic independence through widowhood challenges traditional gender roles and underscores the importance of financial autonomy for women. In a modern context, her story emphasizes the significance of economic empowerment as a foundation for achieving broader social and personal freedoms. As contemporary women continue to seek financial independence, Mrs. Greenow's narrative offers both inspiration and a cautionary tale about the complexities of navigating autonomy within the society. Trollope's novel reveals a rich tapestry of female experience, each narrative contributing to a broader understanding of the challenges and possibilities of autonomy for women in a male-dominated society. The struggles of Alice Vavasor, Lady Glencora Palliser, and Mrs. Greenow are not merely relics of a bygone era but continue to resonate in contemporary discussions of gender equality.

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