



Fanny: A Fiction

By Edmund White
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Reading Group Guide Introduction

While in her fifties, Mrs. Frances Trollope garnered overnight fame for writing a book that attacked the domestic manners of Americans. Twenty-five years later, she sharpens her pen for her most controversial work yet -- a biography of her old friend, the ardent radical and feminist Fanny Wright. Mrs. Trollope recalls the 1820s, when the young Fanny erupted into the Trollopes' sleepy English cottage like a volcano, her red hair flying and her talk aflame with the utopian ideals of socialism, abolition, free education, birth control, and women's rights. She recounts how Fanny Wright persuaded her to follow her to America, where she endured a journey of extreme penury, frontier hardships, and -- rather unexpectedly -- the most satisfying sensual romance of her life.

As she wades deeper into her biography, Mrs. Trollope turns away from her account of Fanny and embarks on an extended digression on the misadventures of the Trollope clan. By turns noble and petty, comic and tragic, Trollope's work introduces us to literary lions like Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Robert Browning, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning; battling political theorists; gamblers; escaped slaves; and even the aging General Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson. With hallucinatory realism, Mrs. Trollope paints French châteaux, Belgian fogs, Mississippi mud, and the gaudy splendors and cruelties of Haiti. And throughout this charming, vivacious narrative, Mrs. Trollope uncovers love in its myriad guises: familial, homosexual, and interracial.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does Trollope's editor mean when he writes of Frances Trollope and Fanny Wright as "ill-suited but devoted friends"? Are these qualities reconcilable? How would you characterize the relationship between Trollope and Wright? How does Fanny describe her feelings about her counterpart?
2. "Oh, I know this is not my biography but Fanny Wright's, yet I hope merely to explain what was transpiring in my life at the time she was gallivanting around America." How reliable of a narrator is Frances Trollope? On what elements of her own life does she tend to dwell?
3. How does the Marquis de Lafayette feature in Trollope's biography of Wright? What is his significance to Americans? How is he received by them on his American tour? How does Fanny Wright interact with him?
4. What is Nashoba? How does Fanny Wright convince Mrs. Trollope to accompany her there? What is involved in the journey? How does the actual Nashoba compare to Fanny's representation of it to the Trollopes?
5. Frances Trollope writes: "Without Hervieu we would never have survived in the New World." Who is Monsieur Auguste Hervieu? What role does he play in the Trollope family? How does he help them survive poverty in America? How does he feel about Henry Trollope? What is Frances Trollope's understanding of their relationship?
6. How did you interpret the parenthetical asides Frances Trollope makes throughout her biography? Did you find these glimpses into her thinking amusing, frustrating, or humorous? Were you surprised by any details revealed in this manner?
7. "Later I discovered that Americans are -- what? -- afraid of laughing at others." To what extent is this observation borne out in Mrs. Trollope's biography of Fanny Wright? How do Americans treat Mrs. Trollope and Fanny Wright? Do you think that her statement is true of contemporary American society?
8. What is New Harmony? Why does Henry Trollope go there to live? How do the Trollopes manage to retrieve him? How is Fanny Wright associated with New Harmony, its founder, Robert Owen, and his son?
9. What did you think of the Trollopes' schemes to make money at the Western Museum of Cincinnati and the Bazaar? Were you surprised by the outcomes of these enterprises?
10. Who is Jupiter Higgins/Cudjo? How does Frances Trollope get to know him? What incidents reveal the growing importance of their relationship? How does she propose to help him escape Ohio? What ultimately prevents her from coming to his aid?

About the Author

Edmund White's novels include *A Boy's Own Story*, *The Beautiful Room is Empty*, *Farewell Symphony*, and *A Married Man*. He is also the author of a biography of Jean Genet, a study of Proust, and *The Flâneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris*. Having lived in Paris for many years, he is now settled in New York and teaches at Princeton University.