

A Lost Lady
Book Club Discussion Questions



1. Describe Niel's feelings toward Mrs. Forrester. Why does he feel as he does about her? How do his feelings change as the novel progresses? What Causes these changes?
2. During one of Mrs. Forrester's discussions with Niel, she tells him not to forget how important money was. What does she mean by this?
3. Compare and contrast the personalities of Captain Forrester and Frank Ellinger.
4. Discuss the significance of Mrs. Forrester's rings and jewelry in the novel.
5. Discuss the theme of pioneers as it is presented in the novel.
6. In your opinion, is there a change in Mrs. Forrester from the first part of the novel to the second? If yes, what is this change? Do you believe she has lost all of her morals and high-bred quality as Niel does or has he just had his eyes opened to her true nature?
7. What is the narrative point of view of *A Lost Lady*? Try to describe it as accurately and completely as you can.
8. What is the setting of the book? How does it seem significant?
9. Briefly list some incidents in the book that give us insight into the characters of Niel Herbert, Marian Forrester, Captain Forrester, Ivy Peters, and Frank Ellinger.
10. What is the purpose of the woodpecker scene at the beginning? How does it affect the tone of the rest of the book?
11. What do you infer the author's attitude to be toward Marian? Is it congruent with Niel's? Where do you see indications of the author's attitude toward her and her actions?
12. What characters are static, and which are dynamic? Why?

For further reading:

Correspondence from F. Scott Fitzgerald to Willa Cather about *A Lost Lady* in Spring 1925

My Dear Miss Cather:

As one of your greatest admirers—an admirer particularly of *My Antonia*, *A Lost Lady*, *Paul's Case* and *Scandal* I want to write to explain an instance of apparent plagiarism which some suspicious person may presently bring to your attention.

To begin with, my new book *The Great Gatsby* will appear about the time you receive this letter (I am sending you the book besides). When I was in the middle of the first draft *A Lost Lady* was published and I read it with the greatest delight. One of the finest passages is the often quoted one toward the end which included the phrases “she seemed to promise a wild delight that he has not found in life... “I could show you” ...etc (all misquoted here as I have no copy by me).

Well, a month or two before I had written into my own book a parallel and almost similar idea in the description of a woman's charm—an idea that I'd had for several years. Now my expression of this was neither so clear nor so beautiful, nor so moving as yours but the essential similarity was undoubtedly there. I was worried because I hated the devil to cut mine out so I went to Ring Lardner and several other people and showed them mine and yours and finally decided to retain it. Also Ive kept the pages from my first draft to show you and am enclosing them here. The passage as finally worked out is in my Chapter One. Hoping you will understand my motive in communicating this to you. I am

With Best Wishes and Most Sincere Admiration

F. Scott Fitzgerald

“ANOTHER GLIMPSE OF WILLA CATHER” by Burton Rascoe

Friday, February 22, 1924

Hazel joined me at the office, and we went to Miss Willa Cather's for tea. Over her fireplace I observed with interest a large framed engraving of George Sand, with a small cutting, portraying Sand in a top hat, sliced from a periodical and stuck in the corner, and this I found significant. Miss Cather talked mostly of Suzanne Lenglen, the tennis champion, whom she greatly admires, and said that, though she is not, in the American sense, a good sport and does not take even the promise of defeat easily, she is a magnetic and enchanting figure, playing not at all on beef and muscle, but on nerves.

I asked her if it was permissible to talk about her books, when I found that she and Hazel had been discussing “The Song of the Lark,” and when she said there was no objection, I asked her if I was right, so far as her own artistic intention was concerned, in saying that the story of “The Lost Lady”* had to do entirely with Mrs. Forrester and not with the disillusion of the young chap who fell in love with her. She said, of course, it was; that in order to portray Mrs. Forrester it was necessary to show her as she was reflected in the minds of a number of men; the young man who was disillusioned was no more necessary than the butcher boy who brought the flowers at the time of Forrester's death, but he was more directly connected with Mrs. Forrester's career than the butcher boy, and therefore he figured more importantly in the story.

*As appears in text, should be “A Lost Lady.”
New York Herald-Tribune, 22 February, 1924.

The novel, "A Lost Lady," by Willa Cather sketches the changing relationship between a young boy in the western town of Sweet Water and a worldly but beautiful lady from California. The boy, Neil Herbert, was a little boy when he first saw Mrs. Forrester and believed her to be something "not of this world." By the time he is 19, Niel's opinion of Mrs. Forrester has changed to chagrin as he watches her flirt with boys that Niel believes are below her social class.

One of the themes that recurs in Cather's novels is the celebration of the pioneer. In this particular novel, Niel realizes that he is seeing the end of the glorious age of the pioneer. The men who claimed land in the west and tamed that land grow old during Niel's youth and early adulthood. He watches as their pioneer dreams are dashed by dwindling incomes and failing health. One example of these pioneers is Captain Daniel Forrester. His high moral standards will not allow him to remain rich while those who depended on him to protect their money lose most of what they have. As a result, Mr. Forrester and his wife are forced to rent part of their property to a crude man who destroys its beauty and encourages Mrs. Forrester to invest money in illegal ventures.

By the conclusion of the novel, Niel finally determines that he is angry with Mrs. Forrester for her determination to live and go on with her life despite the death of her husband. While the people of the town are talking about Mrs. Forrester because of her habit of inviting young men to her house for dinner, she believes that she is doing what is best for them by sharing with them the ways of life she knew. Niel, who had taken off a year from school to care for the Forresters during Mr. Forrester's last days, feels the time he sacrificed for Mrs. Forrester was wasted.

One of the challenges of the novel is for the reader to determine what type of relationship Niel hoped to have with Mrs. Forrester. He sees her as a friend, a mother figure, and as a woman he loves deeply. When Niel sneaks over to the Forrester home one morning when Mr. Forrester is away on business, he is upset to find her alone with another man. Similarly, after the death of Mr. Forrester, Niel believes that with the right man, Mrs. Forrester could be saved. It should be considered as one reads the book that Niel believes he is this man capable of "saving" Mrs. Forrester.