



1. At the start of the novel, Natalya experiences anxiety in relation to the pressure put on her to marry. How does this pressure affect her view of herself and of her role in society? How will it come to impact her relationship with men?
2. Natalya is keenly aware that she lacks a formal education, yet is eager to discuss literature and history when she is able. Do you think Natalya considers herself well-educated? In what ways is she able to utilize the education she does have to her advantage?
3. Other than her beauty, what do you think draws Alexander to Natalya? Why is she attracted to him? What qualities do each of them share and in what ways do their differences complement one another? As the story progresses, how do both Natalya and Alexander change to fit in better with St. Petersburg society? In what ways do these changes affect their marriage?
4. At several points, Alexander references his African heritage, sometimes in relation to those who have wielded it as a racist insult. How does this impact his worldview and his opinion of the tsar's court?
5. Do you think Natalya and Alexander were happier when they were living apart from the court of the tsar? Would their marriage have been more stable if they had resided in the country on a semi-permanent basis?
6. What do you think the tsar wanted from Natalya? What could she have done differently to deflect his attention? Given his power, do you think the tsar's attention to Natalya constitutes sexual harassment as we would understand it today?
7. What is your opinion of Georges d'Anthès? Why was he so drawn to Natalya and why did he insist on pursuing her even after it led to a challenge to a duel? Is it possible Georges suffered from a mental illness, as Natalya comes to suspect? Is it also possible Natalya has ulterior motives for assuming this is the case?

### *Discussion Questions*



8. Likewise, how do you view Natalya's sister, Ekaterina, and her relationship with Georges? Ekaterina seems to turn a willfully blind eye to Georges's continuing attraction to Natalya even after Georges marries Ekaterina. Do you think Ekaterina was truly in love with Georges? Did Ekaterina have other options? If not, does her lack of options make her a more sympathetic figure?
9. At times, Alexander seems to rely on divine inspiration to create and at others he commits to his "stupid fits" of writing. What are your thoughts on these two methods? Is creativity something the individual creator can control? If so, in what ways? Do you think stress over Natalya and his debts impacted his writing?
10. After Alexander's death, Natalya refers to herself as the villain of St. Petersburg. As mentioned in the author's note, Natalya's historical reputation was often shaped by her alleged role in the duel, and she was depicted as frivolous, callous, and unappreciative of her husband. Is it appropriate to characterize her as a villain? Which of Natalya's qualities made her susceptible to these accusations? Which pieces of her life were not known or explored by historians until recently? In what ways does a society's expectations of gender roles determine a woman's reputation? Do any of these expectations continue to influence media depictions of prominent contemporary women?