



1. In modern terms, Francesca Giordano suffers from post-traumatic shock related to an event early in her life. Is she helped or harmed by the discovery of what really happened to her? Is the uncovering of hidden truths always beneficial or are there times when secrets should remain unspoken?
2. Do you consider Francesca to be insane? Is her willingness to kill a result of her troubled mental state or a rational response to circumstances in her world?
3. Francesca has a complex relationship with her employer, Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia. Why do you think he withheld information about her past from her? What role may he have played in the murder of her father?
4. Francesca lives at a time when both secular and religious powers are clashing for control of a rapidly changing world. How does that struggle shape this story and the challenges that she faces?
5. While she yearns for the glassmaker, Rocco, and the life she could have had with him, Francesca does not hesitate to pursue a relationship with Cesare Borgia that is sexual and more. Is she hypocritical in having feelings for both men or is she drawn to each for different reasons?
6. The Cathars believed that the material world is ruled by evil that can be escaped only by rebirth into a realm of light. Numerous followers from all classes of society were drawn to this spiritual view. What do you think influenced people to so completely reject this world and seek to escape it forever?
7. Why did the Roman Catholic Church act so brutally toward the Cathars and others considered to be heretics? Would a spirit of religious tolerance have helped conditions in Europe or would it have weakened institutions

Discussion Questions



that were forces for stability, education, and overall social advancement?

8. Lucrezia Borgia is depicted very differently in this story from much of what has been written about her. Why do you think she has been portrayed in such dark terms historically? Did being a woman make her more vulnerable to exploitation by her family's enemies?
9. As Rodrigo's son, Cesare Borgia has access to great power yet he cannot use it to claim the life he truly wants. What acts might his frustration give rise to?
10. Throughout this story, poison appears as a metaphor for the stain of corruption running through the highest levels of society. Is a similar metaphor appropriate in our own time and if so, where?
11. What role do you think the corruption of the popes and other high-ranking prelates of this time played in triggering the rebellion against Catholicism that we know as the Reformation? Were there internal reforms the Catholic leadership could have taken that might have prevented the Reformation from happening?
12. If Rodrigo Borgia's dream of a papal dynasty controlled by his family had succeeded, what would have been the implications for his time? For ours?