

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE BRICKWORKS

In 1879, the Tay Bridge disaster in Scotland was a shocking event of international significance. At nearly two miles long, it was at the time, among the longest structures of its kind. The bridge's failure represented a major blow to Victorian engineering. **The Brickworks** starts with the collapse of the Tay Bridge and the repercussions of the catastrophe. The manuscript demonstrates the contemporaneous sense of globalization and possibility that took place at the turn of the twentieth century. Central to the work is a cautionary tale about the effects of industrialization on both the landscape and the lives of those for whom it initially held such potential. The manuscript explores transition in terms of dislocation, promise and cost.

1. Brodie is entrepreneurial and resilient and has a number of adventures before he settles in Braemor. He evolves a great deal as the story unfolds. How does his character development affect your feelings for him? Does his evolution make sense to you in terms of the age in which he lives?
2. Alistair is determined and ambitious. His friendship with Brodie is central to the novel. How does Alistair's nature affect the relationship between the two men and the major events in the novel? How do you respond to Alistair? Is he someone you would want as a friend?
3. Charlotte is a hard-working, good-natured widow who has had a difficult life. What is her role in the novel? Can you identify with any aspect of her life? Do her responses to grief feel real and convincing?
4. If you were asked to state the central theme of the novel to someone who had not read the book, what would you say?
5. There is a contrast between the lives of the steel barons in Buffalo to those who live and work in Braemor and surround. In previous periods, a *Novel of Manners* was a term that was often used for books that drew the reader's attention to the conversations, social customs, and ideologies of various classes or groups in society. Does the novel capture the essence of such distinctions?
6. There are several catastrophic events in the novel. How realistic did these seem to you? Did any of them resonate with you? Did they make you reflect upon larger themes or issues? Explain.
7. The Tay Bridge disaster is central to the novel. How do the events at Tay Bridge inform the narrative?
8. Brickmaking, bridge-building, and building a life in general, are key components in the novel. Comment upon the aspect of building and some of the inherent risks involved.
9. Rather than remain in the comfort of Buffalo society, Violet actively encourages and pursues Alistair. Did this surprise you? What do you think of Violet?
10. Brodie takes Charlie to Scotland and plans, potentially, to remain there for some time. Did this decision surprise you?
11. A great deal of research forms the underpinning of this novel. Can you identify the ways in which the history has contributed to the novel?
12. Can you choose a character that spoke to you or stayed with you after you closed the book? Who was it and why did they linger?