

Discussion Questions for *Kristin Lavransdatter*

1. The novel is set in 13th and 14th century Norway and Sweden. Does the novel read like a 13th or 14th century work, or does it read like a more modern work? Please cite some examples for your position.
2. A number of 13th and 14th century works deal with the exploits of men and knights errant. Examples include *El Cid*, *The Song of Roland*, the *Eddas* and *Don Quixote* (although this was written at a later date and parodied the convention of the knight errant). *Kristin Lavransdatter* is primarily concerned with a young lady and her family. How does this novel compare with the heroes of the epic poems mentioned above?
3. Can we term this novel an epic? Epic poems generally deal with a hero who faces adversity, is skilled in warfare and overcomes obstacles. Is Kristin heroic? If so, is her heroism different than the heroism associated with the traditional epic?
4. Is *Kristin Lavransdatter* similar to the *Decameron* in that it deals with the story of a common person? Is Undset's narrative technique similar to Boccaccio's? Is the tone of the novel similar to that of Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales*, which were inspired by the *Decameron*?
5. Is Kristin's rejection of her chosen husband believable, given that many marriages were arranged in the 13th and 14th centuries? Why does her father, Lavrand, go along with the proposed marriage between Kristin and Erlend?
6. Do you think that anyone suspected that Kristin was pregnant at the time of her marriage? If so, do you think that they covered up this fact?
7. In the early portions of the novel, Undset gives hints that the marriage between Lavrand and Ragnfrid is somewhat troubled. Just before the marriage, we learn that Ragnfrid was not a maiden when she married Lavrand. Yet, Lavrand appears to be somewhat reluctant to become intimate with Ragnfrid. Clearly, Undset is leaving something unsaid about their relationship. What do you think remains unsaid?
8. There is a religious theme that runs through the work, and is often expressed as a tension between the spiritual and the physical. How does Undset weave this theme throughout the work? How does the character of Brother Edvin attempt to reconcile these two sides of man's nature?
9. The work contains elements of pre-Christian religious practices and ritual in it. The character of Fru Aashild seems to embody elements of the pre-Christian in her practices. She and her husband are shunned, presumably because of an affair they carried on, but also because Aashild represents a number of pagan elements that still existed in Norway and Sweden in the 13th and 14th centuries. Fru Aashild's integration back into the community owes a great deal to the efforts of Lavrand, who is a deeply religious man. How can we reconcile Lavrand's Christian religious practices with his acceptance of Aashild?
10. Why does Kristin reject Simon Andresson as a suitor? Why does she choose Erlend Nikulausson as her husband instead? Were Kristin and Erlend's promises to each other naïve? Did they constitute a true marriage compact as Erlend led Kristin to believe?