

LOVE, THEODOSIA

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The novel opens with Theodosia Burr attending a salon in the home of a prominent member of New York City society in 1800, feeling very much above what she calls "banal repartee, off-key singing, and the occasional dull reading." What impression do you have of Theodosia in this scene? How does this make you think of the role of women at that time?
2. Aaron Burr and his wife Theodosia Bartow Prevost Burr raise their daughter according to the principles of Mary Wollstonecraft, an English writer and far-ahead-of-her-times advocate for educational and social equality for women. In her 1792 book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft denounced common thinking at the time that women were intellectually incapable of being educated at the same level as men. Some reports call the younger Theodosia an "experiment" of her father's to prove this true. Whether it was an experiment or his true beliefs, Theodosia Burr Alston was concerned a prodigy and called one of the first truly educated women in America. Does Theodosia's education play a role in the decisions she makes regarding her father? Alston? Philip? What does Theodosia gain and what does she lose with an upbringing so different from many women at the time?
3. At several points in the novel, Theodosia is concerned about fueling gossip, partially because of what her mother experienced when rumors swirled about her involvement with Aaron Burr while still married to another man. She also understands how public opinion and gossip among influential members of society can hurt her father politically. Do you think Theodosia is right to be concerned about appearances, as her father has raised her to be?
4. Theodosia herself becomes involved romantically with Philip Hamilton, the son of her father's greatest rival. In a time when so much is at stake for her father and the fledging nation, does Theodosia have a right to follow her heart? What would you have done in her situation?

5. Theodosia says, like her mother before her, she is a “scholar with the skills of a socialite”? How do both sides exhibit themselves in the novel? Do you think Theodosia is comfortable with that description?

6. It is clear that in these early days after the American Revolution, the men who were instrumental in forming what this country would become were very aware of their roles and their inclusion in the history books. Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr were no exception. How do you think this knowledge might have guided their behavior as politicians, men, and fathers? How do you think this knowledge might have guided their children’s decisions and actions? Should it have played any role in the choices their sons and daughters made?

7. History shows that many prominent families, including those of the men referred to as the country’s founding fathers, owned slaves, including Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr. While each publicly claimed to support abolition, their personal lives saw them contributing to the institution. How does this make you view these historical figures? What role do we have in being true to all sides of the history of America’s founding?

8. Her father has a contradictory and complicated relationship with slavery, of which Theodosia becomes more fully aware as the novel proceeds. She says, “Her naivety as a child and perhaps willful ignorance as an adult had left her accustomed to seeing the servants in her own home and those of others in the city.” At the start of the novel, she, like those of many Northern families who owned slaves, seems to make a mental distinction between the slaves who were “servants” in her home versus those slaves working on plantations in the South. By the end of a novel, she confronts her father saying, “a slave is a slave.” What contributes to Theodosia’s realization of her own complicity?

9. Theodosia believes Natalie to be a sister, and yet she refrains from telling Natalie her deepest secret: that she married Alston for her father’s political gain and becomes stuck in this farce of a marriage due to her father’s financial debts. Why do you think Theodosia kept the truth from Natalie? Should she have shared what she calls this “burden” with her?

10. When Theodosia's plans to free herself of Alston are thwarted, she says: "She'd never felt so impotent. Her father had never before allowed it, raising her to believe she wasn't in the same position as those of her gender. But she was. A woman with no home or wealth of her own, dependent on the whims of a husband. A father." What role does this play in her ultimate decision with Philip? Did she have other options?

11. In their final meeting, Theodosia and Philip are resigned to the impossibility of their circumstances. History shows they were not wrong on the difficulty of a woman freeing herself from a marriage she does not want to be in. What options did Theodosia and Philip have? Were they correct to make the choice they did to have just one night together?

12. In the epilogue, when Theodosia learns that Philip was actually still trying to find a way for them to be together, she is devastated and rethinks the decision she made. What role does she play in his death? What role does Philip's father play? Earlier Theodosia says, "fate would have never dealt kindly with a Hamilton and Burr." Do you agree?

13. One of the themes of the novel is that of sacrifice. Alexander Hamilton says, "It is a strong and brave thing to do, to put others before ourselves. But we cannot live with the people we become if we do not." Do you agree? What sacrifices do the characters make in the novel? Are there some sacrifices too great to make?

14. Theodosia is in constant conflict throughout her secret romance with Philip. On one side, there is family, duty, and legacy. On the other is love. Do you believe "love conquers all?" Should it?