

Readers Guide

1. Dorothea Dix had great talent, which was demonstrated through her success as a writer, teacher, and reformer. What social norms of the time prevented her from using these talents in a more public way to bring about the changes she sought? Do any of these restrictions exist today?
2. The author suggests that Dorothea's mother was "unavailable" and that her father was abusive and unreliable. How did these parental responses to life's challenges affect Dorothea? Were there options she could have chosen to improve her life and the life of her brothers that she didn't choose?
3. Dorothea and her colleagues had a conversation about whether asylums kept society safe from the mentally ill or whether the mentally ill needed protection from society. What are your thoughts about this? Is treatment part of the social contract? Do we have to look after those less fortunate? How well are we addressing the needs of the mentally ill today?
4. The great novelist Willa Cather wrote that the "most basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen." I think as readers we're attracted to stories that derive from that period of our own lives. Perhaps that's why

children and young adult novels can be as compelling as adult works. Cather, a Pulitzer Prize winner, also suggested that the two great emotions that drive such stories are “passion and betrayal.” I would add “acceptance and forgiveness,” that those are the emotions we connect with inside stories. What betrayals did Dorothea experience? How did she respond to these betrayals? Were her responses healthy? What were her passions? What was her greatest ambition? Did she seek acceptance? forgiveness? How were those journeys portrayed?

5. What role did children play in the life of Dorothea Dix? How might Dorothea’s life have been different if she had been able to adopt Marianna Cutter or live with her or have her brothers at Orange Court? Would you say Dorothea was a good steward of her pain? Why or why not?
6. Dorothea initially did not support the abolition of slavery and believed that women’s suffrage was a waste of time. Does a social reformer need to be so focused on one avenue only? What other true believers come to mind in bringing about social change? How would their personalities differ or be similar to Dorothea’s?
7. The Rathbones were Quakers. Dorothea had friends that were pastors and Harvard Divinity School students. What role did faith play in Dorothea’s life as an activist? Would

you agree with Elizabeth Rathbone's view that Dorothea was much like the older brother in the story of the prodigal son who struggled with how to receive the love of the father? Why or why not?

8. Dorothea's land bill failed at a time of debate over the role of the federal government and states' rights. President Franklin Pierce vetoed the bill on the basis that the federal government only had a role in the states if the law enhanced economic development within the states. Did such an argument change after the Civil War? Does this argument resonate today? Could Dorothea get her national charity bill passed today? Why or why not?
9. Where was Dorothea most at home? Who was her family? Why do you think Dorothea resisted the social requirements related to marriage? What choices did a woman of the 1830s have to be independent? Could she have married and still been an activist?
10. Were you ever called as Dorothea was to act courageously to make a difference in the lives of others? How did you respond? Is that door still open? What would it take for you to walk through it?