



Discussion Questions

A Gentleman in Moscow by Amor Towles

1) In the transcript at the opening of *A Gentleman in Moscow*, the head of the tribunal and Count Rostov have the following exchange:

“Secretary Ignatov: I have no doubt, Count Rostov, that some in the galley are surprised to find you charming; but I am not surprised to find you so. History has shown charm to be the last ambition of the leisure class. What I do find surprising is that the author of the poem in question could have become a man so obviously without purpose.”

Rostov: I have lived under the impression that a man’s purpose is known only to God.

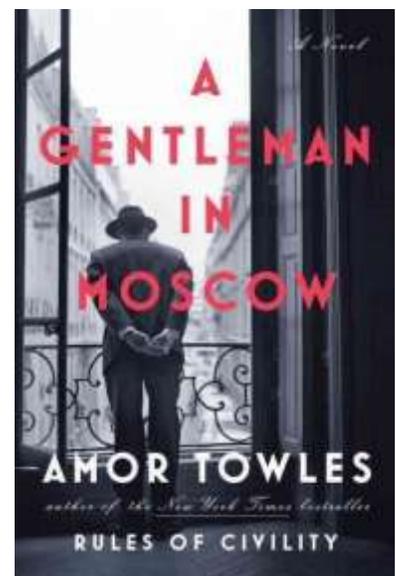
Secretary Ignatov: Indeed. How convenient that must have been for you.”

To what extent is *A Gentleman in Moscow* a novel of purpose? How does the Count’s sense of purpose manifest itself initially, and how does it evolve as the story unfolds?

2) Over the course of Book Two, why does the Count decide to throw himself from the roof of the Metropol? On the verge of doing so, why does the encounter with the old handyman lead him to change his plans?

3) The Count’s life under house arrest is greatly influenced by his relationship with four women: Nina, Marina, Anna, and Sofia. What is the nature of the Count’s relationship with each of these women? How do those relationships differ from his relationship with the members of the Triumvirate—Andrey and Emile?

4) The majority of *A Gentleman in Moscow* is told in the third person from the Count’s point of view. There is, however, an overarching narrator with a perspective different from the Count’s. Initially, this narrator appears in footnotes, then in the “Addendums,” then in the historical introductions of “1930,” “1938,” and “1946.” How would you characterize this narrator? How does he differ from the Count in terms of his point of view and tone of voice? What is his role in the narrative?



5) In the “1946” chapter, Mishka, Osip, and Richard each share with the Count his perspective on the meaning of the revolutionary era. What are these three perspectives? Are you inclined to agree with one of them; or do you find there is some merit to each?

Mishka: *Russians are adept at destroying what they created – we believe in the power of the picture, poem, prayer, person.*

Osip: *Brush aside the past before bowing to it – we do it for the common good.*

Richard: *Grand things persist – still with us. When fate hands something down to posterity, it does so behind its back.*

6) One of the pleasures of writing fiction is discovering upon completion of a project that some thread of imagery has run through the work without your complete awareness—forming, in essence, an unintentional motif. While I was very conscious of the recurrence of tolling bells, keys, and concentric circles in the book, here are a few motifs that I only recognized after the fact: **Packages wrapped in brown paper**, such as the Maltese Falcon, Mishka’s book of quotations, the Russian nesting dolls discovered in the Italians’ closet, and the Count’s copy of Montaigne (in Paris). **The likeness of stars**, such as the freckles on Anna’s back and the beacon on the top of the Shukhov radio tower. **Sailors (often in peril)**, such as Robinson Crusoe, Odysseus, Admiral Makarov, and Arion in the myth of Delphinus. What role do any of these motifs play in the thematic composition of the book? And if you see me in an airport, can you explain them to me?

7) The Hotel Metropol serves literally and symbolically as a window on the world. What picture does Amor Towles paint of the Soviet Union – the brutality, its Kafka-esque bureaucracy, and the feat it inspires among its citizens? What are the pressures, for instance, faced by those who both line in and visit the Metropol? Does Towles’ dark portrait overwhelm the story’s narrative?

8) How does the narrative incorporate the passage of time, and does it do so effectively? Thematically speaking, how does the Count’s experience of Time change over the course of the novel and how does it relate to his father’s views as embodied by the twice-tolling clock? What does the novel suggest about the influence of individuals on history and vice versa?

9) At the opening of Book Five, the Count has already decided to get Sofia out of Russia. What occurs over the course of Book Four to lead him to this decision? Why does he choose to remain behind?

10) Near the novel’s conclusion, what is the significance of the toppled cocktail glass in *Casablanca*?

11) *A Gentleman in Moscow* is a novel with a somewhat fantastical premise set half a century ago in a country very different from our own. Nonetheless, do you think the book is relevant today? If so, in what way?

12) Think of the Count. How would you describe him? Do you find him an appealing, even memorable character?

13) On page 14, the Count reflects on how humans value possessions:

“’Tis a funny thing...From the earliest age, we must learn to say good-bye to friends and family...taking comfort from the notion that we will hear word of him soon enough...But experience is less likely to teach us how to bid our dearest possessions adieu...we come to hold our dearest possessions more closely than we hold our friends. We carry them from place to place, often at considerable expense and inconvenience...Until we imagine that these carefully preserved possessions might give us genuine solace in the face of a lost companion.”

Do you have a possession that represents so much of your past that you cannot bear the thought of parting with it? Have you ever had to actually part with such a possession?

12) How and why did the bees save the Count’s life?

15) Who was “the Chief Administrator” whose only instruction in the disappearance of Count Rostov was to “round up the usual suspects”? Does the frequent appearance of the movie *Casablanca* play into your opinion of the story’s end?

16) What did you think of the way the author used footnotes throughout the book? Did it distract you from the story or add to it?

17) At various points in the book, there is reference to “purpose” or “intent” (a man of intent, a man of purpose, etc.), and to “mastering one’s circumstances.” Often it is only in hindsight that we can identify our “purpose”, especially if we do not see our life as particularly exciting. What did Count Rostov consider to have been his primary purpose in life?

18) Did you notice the way the window in the Count’s new attic quarters became smaller and smaller? What feeling did this prompt in you, or what sense of foreshadowing do you think it was meant to provide to the reader?

- “window the size of a chessboard” (page 11)
- “window was only the size of a dinner invitation” (page 16)
- “it was only the size of a postage stamp” (page 18)

19) How do you think the story ended (not the book, but the story)?

20) The Count was imprisoned for writing the poem “Where Is It Now?”, which questioned the purpose of the new Soviet Union. Can comparisons be made now with Russia under Putin, 70-some years later?

21) Describe this book in one word.

22) **Bonus Question:** Who in the novel also appears in *Rules of Civility*?