

Fremont Great Books Book Club

Discussion Questions for "The Betrothed" by Alessandro Manzoni

May 30, 2026

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Manzoni introduces the novel as an adaptation of a "discovered" manuscript, which he claims is "terribly written" and "full of mistakes". Why do you think Manzoni chose this framing device? Is it effective in allowing Manzoni to maintain an ironical tone and offer social commentary?
2. Philosophers like Umberto Galimberti have argued that the novel's message is one of "cosmic passivity," where individuals do not matter because a "higher plan" solves everything. Does the novel depict characters as passive victims of fate, or is Providence shown to require active spiritual and moral turmoil from the characters? Does the novel present Divine justice as miraculous punishment or as the leveling effect of historical catastrophe?
3. Despite its tragic backdrop of famine, war, and plague, the novel is frequently described as a "human comedy". Analyze the role of Don Abbondio as a source of comic relief. How does his "cowardice and incompetence" serve as a mirror for the "hidden, less noble selves" of the readers?
4. Joel J. Miller suggests that Manzoni dramatizes the "mystery of divine providence" through a "rowdy circus of flawed humans." Discuss how the converging actions of flawed characters—such as the meddlesome Donna Prassede, the cowardly Don Abbondio, or the resourceful Agnese—ultimately serve redemptive ends.
5. The sources describe the novel as a "pro-Catholic" work that nonetheless acknowledges the Church's "failings and limitations". Compare and contrast the idealized clergy members, like Fra Cristoforo and Archbishop Federigo Borromeo, with fallible figures like the Nun of Monza and Don Abbondio. What does this spectrum of characters suggest about Manzoni's views on institutional versus personal faith?
6. Using the chapters on the Milanese Great Plague of 1630, analyze the Church's role as a crucial heartbeat of a just, functioning society. How does the heroic leadership of the Capuchins and Archbishop Borromeo provide a critique of secular power's retreat into a place of shielded self-interest?
7. The novel centers on the plight of two young lovers who have to overcome local obstacles and world events. How does the struggle of Renzo and Lucia against the Spanish aristocracy and Don Rodrigo reflect the broader political instability of 17th-century Lombardy and Manzoni's heartfelt affection for the Italian poor?

8. Analyze the conversion of The Nameless One. Is his transformation from a "monstrous villain" to a protector of Lucia depicted as a "flat, phony" religious device, or is it a "fully realized" and "believable" exploration of conscience?
9. Contrast Renzo's early desire for revenge against Don Rodrigo with his eventual choice to forgive the dying baron in the *lazaretto*. How does Fra Cristoforo's argument—that "there's no room for retribution when repentance is still possible"—serve as the moral centerpiece of the novel?
10. Many readers find Manzoni's account of the 1630 plague "frighteningly reminiscent" of the COVID-19 pandemic. Discuss the recurring patterns of human behavior Manzoni identifies during an epidemic, such as "door knob hysteria," the scapegoating of foreigners, and the "incredulous deadly power of common prejudice".

Rabbit Holes:

Language and National Identity: Manzoni spent years revising *The Betrothed* to shift its language from his native Lombard dialect to Florentine Italian. Explain the political significance of this "language revolution" in the context of the *Risorgimento* (Italian unification) and why the novel is considered a "founding and unifying" monument of modern Italy.

The Nameless One is generally understood to have been inspired by a real historical figure, Francesco Bernardino Visconti. Visconti had a reputation for violence, feuds, and lawlessness, and he controlled fortified estates in the region around Milan, but was not quite the legendary outlaw presented in the novel. Historical sources indicate Visconti underwent a dramatic religious conversion after contact with church leaders, however, his conversion appears to have been a more gradual process than the intense spiritual crisis depicted in Chapters 20–23. Manzoni deliberately transformed him into a universal literary character rather than a direct portrait.

Federico Borromeo. Unlike the Nameless One, Borromeo appears in the novel under his real name and is portrayed quite closely to the historical cardinal. Historical records do indicate that Borromeo met with Visconti and influenced his religious transformation.

- [The Betrothed – All Things Lawful And Honest](#)
- [The Human Comedy of 'The Betrothed' - by Joel J Miller](#)
- [More Literary Runaway Lovers: Alessandro Manzoni's The Betrothed and the Birth of the Modern Italian Novel – Sarah Holz](#)
- <https://www.trishtalksbooks.com/2023/06/the-betrothed-by-alessandro-manzoni.html>
- [Removing "The Betrothed" from schools : r/italy](#)
- [Project MUSE - A Classic for All Times: Manzoni's The Betrothed](#)