

Sparrow's Song Discussion Questions



These questions are designed to spark conversation about the themes, relationships, and choices in Sparrow's Song. Use them in any order that feels right for you or your group.

1. Kathryn sees assimilation as a practical tool for survival and advancement. Her family sees it as a loss. How does the novel invite readers to think about the difference between adapting to a new country and feeling forced to erase parts of oneself?
2. When Kathryn's mother delivers the porch decorations to Mrs. Abbott for the Yellow Party, Mrs. Abbott speaks to her directly, admires her skill, and accepts her gift of handmade Pysanky eggs with genuine appreciation. Kathryn has spent years watching townspeople overlook her mother. What does it mean for Kathryn to see her mother acknowledged like this, and what does it say about the value of being seen?
3. Kathryn's sister adapts to American life differently than she does. What does their relationship reveal about the varied ways immigrant families adjust to a new country, and how do their differences push Kathryn to understand herself more clearly?
4. Kathryn's father is frustrated by being passed over for advancement at work and by having no voice in the laws that shape his life. Yet when Kathryn offers help with reading, English practice, or naturalization preparation, he resists. What does this reluctance reveal about the shame he feels around his own limitations?
5. On the cigar-making floor, the work is demanding and the conditions are harsh. Kathryn notices the camaraderie among the young women. She observes that they are wise to enjoy the work—or at least to pretend to. What does this observation suggest about the role of community in helping the women endure difficult labor, and how does community support resilience?
6. During the grueling beet-field season, Kathryn remembers a Sunday afternoon when her family was walking home after a rare day of rest. Their peace was broken when Kathryn's young sister Anna accidentally spooked the horse of one of two local riders they happened upon, causing the horse to step in a hole and stumble. No one was injured, yet the riders threatened and bullied Kathryn's father. What might have driven these local men to react with such unnecessary hostility in a moment where no real harm was done?

7. In Gleason, Ohio, while she's teaching nursing, Kathryn forms a friendship with Arthur, the first mechanic she's known with soft hands and clean, well-shaped nails. She comes to think of him as the finest friend a woman could have. What was your impression of Kathryn and Arthur's relationship, and what qualities in Arthur make him such an ideal friend for Kathryn?
8. Mrs. Abbott's gift of the Cutex home manicure set is a small gesture loaded with meaning, hinting at the life she believes Kathryn can achieve. Why does Kathryn first hide the manicure set and the fact that Mrs. Abbott has offered to be her patron from her family? How does the reappearance of that symbol in the boardroom scene deepen your sense of Kathryn's growth and the fulfillment of Mrs. Abbott's early confidence in her?
9. Miss Roberts, Mrs. Abbott, Miss Durham, and Dean Goodrich each step forward for Kathryn in different ways. What does their willingness to help her reveal about the qualities they see in her, and how does their support shape your understanding of Kathryn's place in the world she's trying to enter?
10. Kathryn and Clara's friendship shifts from childhood closeness to painful distance as their adult choices pull them apart. What struck you most about the loss of this relationship, and how do you think each of them understands what happened between them?
11. Kathryn leaves for the Army School of Nursing shortly after her father's stroke, even though her help at home would clearly be needed. How did you interpret her decision to go, and what does this moment reveal about the tension between duty to family and duty to one's own future?
12. Their mother calls Kathryn and Anna "Meine Kleine Spatzen," or my little sparrows, because of the way they looked out for one another when they were children. When the story begins, the sisters are no longer close. By the end, they are beginning to reconcile. What do you see as the catalyst for this change?
13. At the Abbotts' party, Mary Arnold humiliates Kathryn by intentionally dropping her purse and then blaming her for it. When John responds, "I'm sure she didn't mean anything by it," what does his reaction reveal about privilege, cowardice, or the limits of his empathy—and how might this moment shift Kathryn's view of him?
14. A defining feature of Kathryn's character is her fear of being alone in the dark, a fear she attributes to the stories Großmutter told about wolf packs, robber bands, and marauding Mongols in Russia. Do you think fears that are rooted in a family's past dangers and upheaval can be passed down through generations?

15. How does meeting Arthur's Uncle Janko affect Kathryn's feelings about her own heritage?
16. When Pearl and Mabel tell Kathryn they've been placed at the Beasley Hotel for Working Women instead of the nurses' home, Kathryn is irate but chooses not to confront Gloria at the welcome party. Instead, she says, "Aren't you girls lucky. You know, the Beasley Hotel for Working Women was the home of Mr. Monroe, the man who built this hospital. His wife's family name was Beasley. That house has some of the most impressive features in all of Gleason." Do you agree with Kathryn's decision to respond in this manner? Why or why not?
17. On her walk to the depot, while she's home for Arthur's funeral, Kathryn sees how much Gorham has changed in the 25 years since she's lived there, and how many families from her community have built successful businesses. Pride and regret rise up in her at the same time. What do you think this moment reveals about Kathryn's relationship to her past, and how does it shape the way she understands the choices she made when she left home?
18. Kathryn's mother often defers to the heads of the household, her husband and her mother-in-law, yet she quietly supports Kathryn in ways that are both tender and at times bold. How did you interpret her mother's influence on Kathryn, and what did you make of the moments when she steps forward on Kathryn's behalf?
19. By the end of the story, Kathryn is confronted with the idea of reclaiming parts of herself she once abandoned. What do you, as the reader, believe about the possibility and the limits of starting over?
20. The story raises the idea that sometimes a person must choose the path that restores them rather than the one that resolves a conflict. Do you agree with Kathryn's final decision? Why or why not?