Alexander's Bridge
Book Club Discussion Questions

1. Both Alexander's wife, Winnifred, and his mistress, Hilda are musicians but the way their music is described is quite different. What does this difference represent in the context of their relationship with Alexander? How does the characterization of their music reflect the way the narrator characterizes each woman?

2. How does the bridge represent Bartley Alexander's relationship with both Winifred and Hilda?

3. What does Wilson offer as a narrator that Alexander would not be capable of?

4. In her essay "My First Novels [There Were Two]", published in 1931, Cather writes, "My first novel, *Alexander's Bridge,* was very like what painters call a studio picture" and "The impressions I tried to communicate on paper were genuine, but they were very shallow."

   Is this an accurate representation of her first novel? Why would she prefer *O Pioneers!* to *Alexander's Bridge* and prefer the former to be remembered as her first long fiction work?

5. Conversely, Cather's partner and executor of her estate, Edith Lewis wrote in her biography, *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record*:
   "For many years I accepted her estimate of *Alexander's Bridge*. But in reading it over again, after her death, I felt that she had never altogether done it justice. It is true that it is a contrived novel, and one feels a slightness and an artificiality of structure in the earlier parts. But when it at last moves into its true theme, the mortal division in a man's nature, it gathers an intensity and power which come from some deeper level of feeling, and which overflood whatever is "shallow" or artificial in the story. It is as if her true voice, submerged before in conventional speech, had broken through, and were speaking in irrepressible accents of passion and authority." (78).
   Is this a more accurate depiction of the novel? Is Lewis correct in claiming that Willa's true voice emerges as the book progresses?

6. *Alexander's Bridge* is a story filled with doubles, a literary device that was especially common at the time of its publication. Alexander's double life in Boston and London, the two bridges, Hilda and Winifred are a few examples. What do these doubles reveal about Alexander's life and how he views the world?

7. Why does Hilda refuse to sing "The Harp that Once" for Alexander?

8. Why does Cather set the novel in both Boston and London? How does Alexander change from one place to the other?

9. Many critics argue that this novel was largely disliked because it has a eurocentric tone. If this is true, how does that overarching theme contrast her later novels?

10. How are gender roles developed, supported or defied in *Alexander's Bridge*?

11. A common theme throughout *Alexander's Bridge* is youth and youth lost. In Chapter Three Alexander reflects on his life:

> "This feeling was the only happiness that was real to him, and such hours were the only ones in which he could feel his own continuous identity—feel the boy he had been in the rough days of the old West, feel the youth who had worked his way across the ocean on a cattle-ship and gone to study in Paris without a dollar in his pocket. The man who sat in his offices in Boston was only a powerful machine." (38).

Later, in Chapter Five, Cather writes:

> "On that instance he [Alexander] felt that marvelous return of the impetuousness, the intense excitement, the increasing expectancy of youth." (72).

Though a successful bridge builder, does Alexander feel he has lived a full and successful life? What regrets does he have and how do they influence his choices in the present?

12. Another theme is indecision and its psychological effects. Where does Cather insert moments of tension expressed through indecision?

13. What is the significance of the letter found in Alexander's pocket after he has drowned? What could have been written inside?

14. Was this novel necessary for Cather to write in order to develop her strong writing aesthetic? Though she dismisses it, where can hints of the later Cather be found in *Alexander's Bridge*?