

Les Liaisons Dangereuses Study Guide

Les Liaisons Dangereuses by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos

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Plot Summary

Les Liaisons Dangereuses, by Choderlos De Laclos is an erotic tale of deceit, betrayal, and seduction that has existed through time as one of the most controversial novels in European history. The Vicomte de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil are two wealthy individuals in high society who take great pleasure in showing their power over their lovers, and who choose cruelty and deceit over the passion of true love. Valmont, a suave and charming man, takes aims to seduce the virtuous Madame de Tourvel, the wife of a prominent judge. His goal is not to shake her foundations of religious faith, but to use that faith, and her own virtues, to ensure her complete demise. Merteuil, on the other hand, seeks revenge against the Comte de Gercourt, and devises a plan to corrupt his soon-to-be young wife, Cecile Volanges. She uses a young music teacher, Chevalier Danceny, to occupy Cecile's time, and employs Valmont to seduce the young woman, thereby corrupting her appropriately.

Merteuil herself plays confidant to both Cecile and Danceny, thereby ensuring her plan is a success. But when Valmont begins to earnestly fall in love with Tourvel, Merteuil begins to become jealous, and she and Valmont begin a battle of the sexes that ensures their demise. Valmont falls prey to Merteuil's plan to trick him into breaking his affair with Tourvel. As Tourvel becomes deathly ill as a result, Valmont begins to destroy Merteuil by removing her lover, Danceny. Merteuil, for revenge, sends letters to Danceny, showing Valmont's seduction of Cecile. When Danceny hears of this, he duels Valmont, and succeeds in killing him. However, Valmont, in his last act of cruelty, gives Merteuil's letters to Danceny, which show everyone of her treachery. When Danceny passes these letters, Merteuil is driven from society. Tourvel dies soon after Valmont, Danceny leaves Paris, and Cecile joins a convent. Merteuil is stricken with smallpox and disfigured, as well as made poor through the loss of her reputation.

The novel shows clearly the dangers of illicit behaviors, and the harm that can come both from love under false circumstances and from love that exists only to harm another. Laclos, while writing in a libertine manner, appears throughout the novel to show that promiscuity and immoral behaviors are, while accepted in general society, the downfall of man, and are punished by the outcome that always rises from such behaviors. Thought in different periods to be a knock against religion, politics, high society, libertine morality, and even thought by some to be based on true events, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is, regardless of message, a wonderful novel about the danger of love, and the true nature of humanity.

Introduction through Editor' Preface

Introduction through Editor' Preface Summary

This story is about morality, the fight against one's self, and the power of persuasion in the face of innocence. Merteuil and Valmont are wealthy socialites whose lives are corrupt and immoral. When they turn their tools on others, however, they find their own immorality leads to their demise.

In the Introduction by Douglas Parmee, several aspects of the novel are discussed. Parmee discusses reactions to the novel by society, ranging from the positive to very negative ideas about both the novel as well as the author. Parmee then notes the military upbringing and lifestyle of the author, and the often feminist, morally righteous other works Laclos penned during his short career. Laclos, however, on death was little mourned, as he was often seen as a detriment to society because of his erotic tale of deception. Over time, however, Parmee notes there has been defense of Laclos. He argues several possible underlying themes in the novel, such as religion, a defense of morality, a defense of libertarianism, and political motivations, all of which he then proceeds to discount. In the end, Parmee believes the novel to be a comment against the philosophic age, and a lend of support for the cause of emotional capacity. Parmee finishes by noting that any novel discussed so often and with so many possible underlying messages is a worthy novel.

The Note of French Texts simple discusses the references used by translator Douglas Parmee. The Selected Biography section lists several choices to learn more about the author. The Chronology of Laclos discusses the life of the author in chronological order. The Publisher's Forward, written by Laclos himself, notes a lack of proof in the authenticity of the letters in the novel, as well as a general view that the actions of those in the novel could not happen in society. In the Editor's Preface, also written by Laclos, the author reasserts the truth of the letters presented in the novel. He points out that the letters represent the thoughts of an entire social class, and as such, can serve to show that morality is often falsified by those whose methods corrupt morals. He also notes two points: that women who consort with immoral men are bound to victims, and that a mother should be the only confidant trusted for a young woman.

Introduction through Editor' Preface Analysis

The Introduction by Parmee sets the stage for the reader in terms of the underlying motives behind the novel. Parmee's discussion of the life of Laclos helps the reader to understand he is indeed not an immoral man, but actually one of high society and a military background. His other works, while unsuccessful, show him also to be sympathetic towards the plight of women, and high in virtue himself. This discussion leads well into an analysis of the novel its self, and of arguments presented about the true context in which it was written. Parmee goes through the arguments one by one,

and firmly discounts any belief that the novel is from a libertine view, although it is clearly written as such. His arguments also persuade that it is not a novel about the evils of high society or of religion, but do persuade that the novel is, more generally, about the humanity of individuals, and the downfall of man at the hands of those unwilling to feel emotion, and those who choose philosophy over the heart. The Notes and Biography are useful for those wanting more information, as well, as the short chronology of Laclos' life.

The Publisher's Forward seems to be Laclos' first attack on the morality of his own society. By taking a tone of high authority and by his strongly adamant arguments against the morality of the novel, and the disbelief that such actions could occur in the late 1700's in France, Laclos actually seems to be indicating to readers his true feelings; that such actions occur anywhere, and that to deny them is to hide them, which is a detriment to society. Instead of arguing the points, he seems to be mocking them and actually arguing against them. He continues this in the Editor's Preface, where he this time argues what appear to be his own points. He clearly believes that the philosophical age has led to the downfall of both religion and human emotion through the encouragement of thought instead of feeling. His points about the virtues of females again take readers back to the idea that, to some extent, women are the cause of their own problems. He seems not to be arguing for a feminist position, but instead, for humanity to take note of immoral behaviors, regardless of the origin. His refusal to lend either explanation or defense of the novel serves to intrigue the reader, and to show his own apparent distance from the topics presented.

Part I: Letters 1 through 15

Part I: Letters 1 through 15 Summary

In Letter 1, Cecile Volanges writes to her friend, Sophie Carnay, and discusses her somewhat carefree life. She also informs her friend she believes she is to marry. She admits to being apprehensive. In letter 2, the Marquise de Merteuil writes to the Vicomte de Valmont, begging him to come back to Paris, as she has an idea for his enjoyment. She explains that she seeks revenge against the Comte de Gercourt, and as he is the chosen husband of Madame de Volanges for Cecile, Merteuil wishes Valmont to return to Paris so he can seduce the young girl, thereby spoiling her for her husband. In letter 3, Cecile again writes to Sophie, complaining that the evening before, she had been subjected to a large dinner party, at which people continuously stared at her. She feels embarrassed, but notes that Merteuil was particularly polite.

In letter 4, Valmont writes to Merteuil, noting he adores her ways, and that he regrets no longer being her lover. However, he also notes he will be unable to fulfill her wishes, as he is seeking to seduce Madame de Tourvel, a young religious woman who is married to a judge. He intends to stay at his aunt's, where the three of them are currently residing. He believes his conquest is much more boast worthy than seducing a young girl. In letter 5, Merteuil responds that she is angry, and that she disbelieves Valmont can achieve his goal. Even if he does, she points out, his victory is against a husband, which is not boast worthy. She also notes a young man, Danceny, is attracted to the young woman already. Merteuil herself admits to a wrath, which she intends to take out on her lover, since she finds cruel one of the finest compliments a woman can receive. In letter 6, Valmont responds to Merteuil, mentioning his anger at her low opinions of Tourvel. He continues to praise the woman, and explains that he attempted to carry her over a ditch. She was very bashful, which Valmont takes to show her love for him. He plans to take her from her husband and her God, and to become her God. He mentions that between himself and Merteuil, there is no love but only passion, whereas his affair with Tourvel has renewed his senses. In letter 7, Cecile tells Sophie she and Danceny practice music together daily, and that she adores him.

In letter 8, Tourvel tells Madame Volanges she admits she believes Valmont's reputation as a womanizer and a cad is undeserving. Volanges replies in letter 9 by noting Vicomte is indeed a man to watch out for. In letter 10, Merteuil writes angrily to Valmont, noting he is acting like an uneducated boy, chasing a dream, and that she believes he is in love. She also notes her own affairs with her knight, whom she treats badly but still attends to. In letter 11, Tourvel again defends Valmont to Madame Volanges, believing he has changed his ways. In letter 12, Cecile apologizes to Merteuil for not being able to attend the opera, and in letter 13, Merteuil responds that she too regrets not being able to attend the opera with Cecile. She also notes she will be happy to deliver messages to Danceny, at Cecile's request. In letter 14, Cecile explains to Sophie the Danceny thinks she is attractive, that she is becoming vain, and that Merteuil and Danceny are arriving later. Valmont responds to Merteuil in letter 15, admitting he is jealous of her knight, and

asking for her to take him for a lover, as well. He also admits he is in love with Tourvel, and that she is paying someone to follow him in the mornings, to discover his activities.

Part I: Letters 1 through 15 Analysis

Letters 1 through 15 introduce readers to many of the primary characters of the novel, as well as to the major themes in the book. Cecile Volanges is shown to be a young, inexperienced young woman who, finding herself thrust into society, is reeling with emotions and fears, and who finds solace in the Marquise den Merteuil. However, Merteuil shows herself to be a dangerous woman who shows adoration to Cecile in an effort to win her trust, so she can manipulate her, thereby gaining revenge against the Comte de Gercourt. She admits several times throughout her letters that she enjoys cruelty and revenge, and proves herself through her writings to both Valmont and her writings to Cecile that she is a woman not to be crossed. Her arguments with Valmont, already building, foreshadow a war between these characters. This is further indicated by Valmont's character. Like Merteuil, he is a vicious man who seeks only to corrupt others for his own pleasure and reputation. He too pretends to be what he is not in order to gain the trust of Tourvel, whose innocence and care is shown through her letters to Madame Volanges. In addition, he makes no claims not to wish Tourvel to denounce her God in favor of Valmont himself.

So, already it is clear that Merteuil and Valmont are selfish, self-centered individuals who aim to harm others for their own gain. It is also clear Cecile and Tourvel are innocents, who trust others without questioning their value of character. Madame de Volanges is clearly a good friend of Tourvel, in that she attempts to warn her of Valmont's evil ways. Further, Merteuil's willingness to assist Cecile in delivering messages to Danceny, her young music teacher who is clearly interested in her, foreshadows the development of this relationship later in the novel.

The letters between Valmont and Merteuil are particularly strenuous, as Merteuil, clearly jealous of what she sees as Valmont's growing love for Tourvel, torments him with tales of her own adventures with her lover. In addition, she uses his own words against him, and is generally cruel, but shows a certain level of care at the same time. This duality continues for many of the characters in the novel. It is clear from Valmont's replies that he feels for Merteuil, and was once her lover, but this too has duality, in that he also is beginning to have feelings, whether real or imagined, for Tourvel.

Letters 16 - 50

Letters 16 - 50 Summary

Cecile again writes Sophie in letter 16, and explains to her that Danceny has begun writing her letters. She knows she should not respond, but plans to ask Merteuil, her "only friend", for advice. Danceny's letter is revealed next (letter 17), and speaks volumes of his love for Cecile. Cecile's response to Sophie is next (letter 18), and in it she notes she and Danceny looked into one another's eyes, and when he began to cry, she promised to write to him. Cecile's letter to Danceny, letter 19, follows and while she does not admit to love so freely as Danceny, she does explain her positive feelings for him, but asks that he no longer write. In letter 20, Merteuil promises herself to Valmont, but only if he succeeds in winning Tourvel, and only if he provides proof of that in writing. She also admits she is pondering taking Cecile as a lover. Valmont responds in letter 21, and reveals he has tricked Tourvel.

Early one morning, he went out, knowing he was being followed, and purposefully arrived in time to rescue a family from losing their home due to unpaid taxes. Tourvel, in letter 22, tells Madame Volanges of Valmont's good deed. Valmont writes to Merteuil in letter 23, continuing his story from letter 21. Tourvel, on Valmont's return to the home, looks at him gently, and he realizes she already knows of his good deed. He hugs her, from which she pulls away. Later, after visiting the family again, he is left alone with Tourvel and proclaims his love for her, and tells her it is because of her and God that he is saved. She pushed him away, and went to her room. The following night, she claimed to be ill, and never came for supper. In letter 24, Valmont writes to Tourvel, exclaiming his sorrow at her treatment of him. In letter 25, Valmont tells Merteuil that he delivered his letter to Tourvel, and she responded. He believes Tourvel shows love for him, and sends it to Merteuil for her judgment. Tourvel's letter (26) rebukes Valmont, and reminds him that she is not one of his normal women. She expresses her disappointment in him, and asks that he never speak of his feelings again.

Cecile, in letter 27, writes to Merteuil and asks if she can continue to write Danceny, as well as asks why it is wrong to love someone. In letter 28, Danceny rebukes Cecile for not writing, and again states his love. Cecile writes to Sophie in letter 29, revealing that Merteuil has agreed she can write Danceny if she shows all letters to Merteuil first. She also reveals Merteuil is giving her books on love and on how to write properly. In letter 30, Cecile writes to Danceny, expressing her love. Danceny, in return, expresses his love and happiness in letter 31.

In letter 32, Volanges reminds Tourvel that Valmont is a dishonorable man, and that he should be avoided. In letter 33, Merteuil tells Valmont he is harming his own cause through letter writing, since it is difficult to lie about emotions in a letter. Valmont responds to Merteuil in letter 34 and agrees with her, but also notes his only choice is writing to wear down her defenses. She is now refusing his letters, however, and thus he has resorted to sending letters through the post with various postmarks to disguise

his letters. She opened one at breakfast, and was forced to read it, as others believed it to be a letter from her husband. He encloses two letters.

Letter 35, to Tourvel, again claims his love for her, and asks that she provide him with the names of those who have warned her against him. In letter 36, he tells her she is becoming crueler. In letter 37, Tourvel admits to Volanges that she was right, and that she will find a way to send him from the house. Merteuil writes to Valmont in letter 38 of her actions with Cecile. She has been exciting her with ideas. She admits Cecile is a natural, and wishes Valmont were available to help in the seduction. In letter 39, Cecile writes to Sophie, upset as Merteuil has told her of her soon to be husband. Valmont writes to Merteuil in letter 40 angrily, noting Tourvel's wish that he go away. After his last letter, she first refused to see him, but then lured him into the garden to give him a letter, which Valmont encloses. In this letter (41), Tourvel asks him to leave, if his love for her is true. In his reply (letter 42), Valmont agrees, on the conditions that she will give him the names of those who spoke against him, and that he is allowed to write to her. He also asks for a face-to-face interview. Valmont continues letter 40 by telling Merteuil he is trying to find a way to gather all letters Tourvel receives to find the name of the friend who betrayed him. In letter 43, Tourvel writes to Valmont, condemning him for asking favors, but she agrees to accept his letters if he leaves.

In letter 44, Valmont tells Merteuil he is convinced he has won Tourvel. He explains he paid his valet, who is sleeping with Tourvel's maid, to allow him to surprise the two during lovemaking. He then blackmailed the maid to steal Tourvel's letters. When he receives them, he realizes it is Madame Volanges who is sabotaging him. As a result, he agrees to come to Paris to assist Merteuil. He also, on announcing his departure, manages to evoke what he assumes is passionate refusal from Tourvel out of her fear of her feelings.

Valmont promises to see Merteuil the following day. In letter 45, Tourvel tells Volanges Valmont is leaving, and reveals Rosemonde wishes for Volanges and her daughter to come stay. In letter 46, Danceny accuses Cecile of changing her mind, and again reiterates his love for her. Valmont writes to Merteuil in letter 47, and admits he will not see her, as he has stopped for an affair with Emilie, one of his women. He also admits he has written a letter to Tourvel using Emilie as a writing desk. In the letter, number 48, Valmont writes of his love for Tourvel, but also adds his regrets that she does not feel the same. In letter 49, Cecile writes Danceny and explains she has promised God to only show love for her husband, and asks his forgiveness. In Letter 50, Tourvel writes to Valmont, and again is cross with him for expressing his emotions. She claims to not have the power to hold him in the first place, and asks she forget her.

Letters 16 - 50 Analysis

In this section, more is revealed about the characters in question, and about the major themes of the novel. Cecile is, through her letter writing, shown as an extremely naive little girl. However, with Merteuil's "help", she appears to be changing her ways to show a smoother, silkier writing style. It is also clear from her letters that she trusts Merteuil



with all her secrets, which Merteuil's letters to Valmont ridicule. Merteuil is concerned only with spoiling Cecile, or in having her for herself. Valmont too in this section is shown to be highly calculating as he tricks Tourvel into believing he is a kind soul. When he pushes her, however, she rejects him wholeheartedly. Valmont continues to betray others in his quest as he blackmails the maid, and forces Tourvel into uncomfortable positions simply so he can torture her with his letters. When Valmont discovers it is Volanges who is poisoning his love against him, he is set on revenge, foreshadowing his own seduction of Cecile later in the novel, and his betrayal of Danceny.

Tourvel, on her part, does seem to be showing a breaking of barriers by the end of this series of letters. In the beginning, Tourvel fought against Valmont with considerable indignation and disbelief. By the end of this series of letters, however, her arguments seem to be more centered on her inabilities as a woman, instead of Valmont's own faults. Her fear of his presence does, as Valmont says, betray her feelings. Merteuil enjoys belittling Valmont as well as in tormenting him with her promises, but also appears to become highly jealous as Valmont falls more in love with Tourvel. Merteuil's own statements that lies of emotions are difficult symbolize Valmont's own situation, in that as he pretends more and more not to love Tourvel, he does, in fact.

Danceny, in this series, also shows himself to be a naive young man whose heart is being broken by Cecile. As Merteuil works with Cecile, Danceny finds her letters less sincere, until the point Cecile informs him she has changed her mind. Since Danceny has previously threatened death over the loss of her, this foreshadows problems later in the novel. Madame Volanges, for her part, has accepted the role of Merteuil in her daughter's life, and has been grateful to her for her advice. From Laclos' note in the opening, this relationship is clearly wrong to him. A mother who trusts her daughter to another is one who is bound to be hurt.

Letters 51 - 80

Letters 51 - 80 Summary

In letter 51, Merteuil explains to Valmont that she is angry for not keeping his date with her, and explains that he is to seek out Danceny and gain his trust. She reveals Cecile has gone to confession and now wishes to break it off with Danceny. Merteuil has arranged a meeting between Cecile and Danceny, and Valmont is to guide Danceny. Valmont responds to Tourvel in letter 52, and again expresses anguish about his love for her, and reminds her that love is only sorrowful if it is unmatched. In letter 53, Valmont reports he has met with Danceny, and is convinced all will go well. Merteuil responds (letter 54), and tells Valmont that the meeting went well. She also admits she herself took liberties with Cecile.

In letter 55, Cecile writes Sophie and angrily notes she would like to see Sophie refuse real love. Tourvel writes Valmont in letter 56, and again reiterates that his love for her is useless. Valmont responds to Merteuil in letter 57, and notes his pleasure at her frustrations. He admits he now knows all Danceny's secrets, and adds that he believes Danceny needs more challenges for him to prove his love. He also asks for an advance on his reward. In letter 58, Valmont writes Tourvel, and again shows hurt at her refusals of him. He begs her not to stop his letter writing. In letter 59, Valmont writes to Merteuil to ask of events with Danceny. Danceny writes to Valmont in letter 60, asking advice as he has not heard from Cecile.

In letter 61, we are made aware of why, since Cecile writes to Sophie that her mother has discovered her letters from Danceny. Letter 62 is from Madame Volanges to Danceny, where she scolds his betrayal of her trust and asks he not return to the home. Merteuil explains the situation to Valmont in letter 63, and reveals that she, in fact, told Madame Volanges about the letters from Danceny. She wakes to find two letters, one from the mother and one from the daughter, exclaiming their trust in Merteuil, to which she laughs about to Valmont, comparing herself to the Divinity. She attends to both equally, and even seduces Cecile in her distraught state. Merteuil also tells Valmont Cecile and Volanges are headed to the country, and that she wants him to join them, to become the go between for Cecile and Danceny.

Danceny answers Madame Volanges in letter 64, and implores her to forgive him. He refuses to return Cecile's letters, as he does not wish to betray her. In letter 65, Danceny writes to Cecile, lamenting about their situation, and notes Valmont has become his go between. Valmont answers Merteuil in letter 66, and tells her of his success in becoming the confidant of Valmont and of Cecile.

Tourvel writes to Valmont in letter 67, and offers him her friendship in return for a limiting of love from him. He replies in letter 68, informing her that to say he could be her friend would be to lie, and that he still loves her. Cecile responds to Danceny in letter 69, and informs him she loves him, and is missing him, as well. She agrees she will try to like

Valmont, as he is now their messenger. In letter 70, Valmont warns Merteuil of Prevan, a man who bets he can soften the heart of Merteuil, and is willing to then brag about it. He asks that, in light of Prevan's status in society as a rival of Valmont, that Merteuil make him look silly. He then explains Tourvel must pay his price for love, and must be willing to sacrifice virtue.

In letter 71, Valmont recounts a story of sex with the Vicomtesse, and asks that Merteuil spread it around. Danceny writes Cecile in letter 72, telling her she is wrong to doubt Valmont. In letter 73, Valmont himself writes Cecile, telling her where he has hidden writing supplies for her to use, and that she should trust him. Letter 74 finds Merteuil writing Valmont, admitting she is attracted to Prevan, and asks about a sexual story involving him as of late. She also admits she has maneuvered a way to meet him at a dinner party. In letter 75, Cecile writes Sophie, exclaiming her appreciation for Valmont and Merteuil.

In letter 76, Valmont writes Merteuil, and explains Prevan's love life, and again reiterates his dangerous charm, noting he believes Merteuil must be joking. Valmont also admits he is now in the country with everyone, is near to bedding Cecile, but that he is losing the battle with Tourvel, although he admits he knows she loves him. In letter 77, Valmont is cross with Tourvel, claiming she is rude and unfair to him as she has, but that he still loves her. Tourvel answers in letter 78 by noting he has betrayed her by returning, and that she refuses to allow him to treat her badly, or without respect. In letter 79, Valmont tells Merteuil of a sexual adventure of Prevan's, where he seduced three women who were to be married.

Letters 51 - 80 Analysis

In this batch of letters, more is revealed about the depths to which Merteuil and Valmont will go to achieve their goals. Merteuil reveals herself as not only vengeful, as she teases Valmont with her pleasures, but also deceitful as she gives away the secrets with which Cecile has entrusted her. Merteuil enjoys arousing Cecile, and it is suggested that she has at least some sexual contact with the young girl herself, further showing her ability to corrupt and her desire to ruin Cecile. Merteuil even rejects Valmont's sincere concern over Prevan, foreshadowing her own demise at his hands later in the novel. Jealous of Valmont's growing love for Tourvel, Merteuil begins her own downfall. In all aspects, Merteuil's need for power, whether over Cecile, Danceny, Valmont, or even Prevan, foreshadow her eventual loss of all power.

Valmont, too, shows himself to be even more cunning and deceitful in this batch of letters. By interjecting himself between Danceny and Cecile, he ensures his place later in the novel both near Tourvel and in a position to sexually seduce Cecile. In addition, he seems to enjoy the displeasure and guilty feelings he invokes in Tourvel, and expresses several times his desire to see her fall from grace. Valmont's treatment of Tourvel, whether by letter or through his actions, show an increasing need, which foreshadows his own loss later. However, his driving passion also appears to betray his love for Tourvel, thereby angering Merteuil. His sexual exploits with Vicomtesse, as he

seduces her between her husband and her lover, show his own need for power. His concerned letters to Merteuil show this further, in that he admits Prevan is a rival, and it is questionable whether his letters are truly concerned, or aimed at dissuading Merteuil from having an affair with a rival.

Cecile and Danceny both show their naivety and youthfulness in this selection of letters, but also sincerity, as they both express love for one another with the despair of one who truly understands the emotion. Unlike the feelings of Merteuil or Valmont, which are jaded by age and experience, the emotions of these young children are pure and deep. Although they are young, and continue to place trust in those who have betrayed them, their honesty is refreshing, as is their capacity for love and affection. It is clear, however, by the amount of trust these individuals place in Merteuil and Danceny, that their own downfall will soon arise.

Tourvel, for her part in this section, does appear to be falling in love with Valmont, although her words reject this notion. Her tone has become softer, and her offers to continue friendship, along with her mannerisms and movements, as explained by Valmont in his letters to Merteuil, show an increasing passion for Valmont. Based on Valmont's own admission that he desires to see her falter, and based on her actions, the author foreshadows the breakdown of Tourvel's defenses. On the other hand, knowing Valmont's past, one also knows such a breakdown will lead to disaster for Tourvel.

Letters 81 - 100

Letters 81 - 100 Summary

In letter 81, Merteuil explains to Valmont that he need not worry about her involvement, and belittles his own achievements. She tells of her history as a young woman who learned of sex and pleasure and pain and humiliation. Her husband passed away, and she was determined to overtake the world of men, which she has succeeded, she claims, in doing without harm to her reputation. She admits she will have Prevan, and will cause him harm. Cecile, in letter 82 to Danceny, accuses him of making his misery seem more harmful than her own, and reminds him he is not alone in his suffering.

In letter 83, Valmont writes to Tourvel, asking for a meeting, and reminding her his love is pure. Valmont writes to Cecile in letter 84, and asks that she steal the key to her room from her mother, allowing him to have it for hours to make a copy. That way, he can have access to her room to deliver Danceny's letters.

Merteuil writes to Valmont in letter 85 to inform him she has finished with Prevan. The two, along with a friend, decide to attend a play, and arrive at Merteuil's for supper. At the end of the evening, the two talk and agree on a plan to meet. Merteuil will hold a dinner party, and, on leaving, Prevan will enter the home again unnoticed through the side door. When he does so, however, Merteuil calls for her maids, accusing Prevan of breaking into the home. She allowed him to leave, embarrassed, and Merteuil tells her servants to gossip the following day. Prevan is asked to turn himself over to police. The Marechale writes to Merteuil in letter 86, expressing regret at Prevan's actions, and Merteuil writes Madame Volanges in letter 87, telling her story of Prevan, and noting he is in prison, and her regret at the situation.

In letter 88, Cecile writes to Valmont, refusing to steal the key as asked. Valmont immediately writes Danceny in letter 89, reporting that Cecile is not cooperating. In letter 90, Tourvel writes Valmont, asking again for him to leave, and again reiterates her desire only for friendship, and her fear of his love. However, she also repeatedly refers to her misery at making him unhappy, and admits she now knows how difficult feelings are to refuse.

Valmont responds in letter 91, forcing Tourvel to recognize her own true feelings by explaining his own love, and by asking her to tell him to leave in person. Danceny writes to Valmont in letter 92, exclaiming he believes Cecile may no longer love him, as a result of Valmont's own letter to him. He then writes Cecile, accusing her of turning her heart as she refuses to trust Valmont. Cecile answers in letter 94 quite crossly, pointing out again her own misery, her fears, and her sorrow at his lack of faith in her. In letter 95, she writes to Valmont, promising to do as he asks, but chiding him for telling Danceny of her original refusal.



In letter 96, Valmont tells Merteuil of his own affairs with Tourvel as he congratulates her on her win over Prevan. He also informs her he has taken advantage of Cecile fully. Sneaking into her room one evening, he begins to take advantage of her. When she attempts to cry for help, he reminds her she gave him the key. With this, he traps Cecile into doing as he wishes, and makes love to her. They agree to meet again. Cecile, in letter 97, laments to Merteuil about Valmont, but admits she didn't refuse as much as she should have. She asks for advice, and admits she fears her mother knows something. In letter 98, this fear is shown as Madame Volanges writes Merteuil, asking for her advice, as she fears for her daughter. She sees she is depressed, and worries it is her loss of Danceny that is causing the sorrow. She asks if she should consider allowing Cecile to marry Danceny.

In letter 99, Valmont writes Merteuil, boasting of his dual role as lover and slave. He admits Cecile has vexed him by keeping him away, but that Tourvel's love is coming along nicely. In her room one evening, Valmont nearly succeeded in kissing her, but she turned to violent prayers and convulsions. Valmont left, only to hold her hand again the following evening. He is confident in his impending success. He closes by reminding Merteuil she has promised herself to him as a reward.

However, in letter 100, Valmont laments to Merteuil that he has been tricked, in that Tourvel has left for Paris. He is angry and vengeful, and admits his happiness now depends on controlling Tourvel's fate. His valet in Paris is spying on Tourvel, and Valmont plans to continue to seduce Cecile, and eventually to return to Tourvel in Paris to gain his revenge.

Letters 81 - 100 Analysis

In this section, Merteuil and Valmont begin their spiral downward. Merteuil spends her time jealousy belittling Valmont without admitting her own feelings for him. She accuses him of falling in love, and yet her actions imply it is she who is, or has, fallen for Valmont. Learning of her history as a young woman certainly helps to explain her actions in her current life, as she was unprepared to deal with the seduction of the social world. As her husband died, she sought to wreck havoc on men, as her belief in women as the stronger sex is key to her personality. Her planning and treatment of Prevan shows clearly her lack of care for others as well as her deep need for control and power. She humiliates Prevan, and attempts to ruin his life, simply for her pleasure. Her treatment of Valmont and his responses foreshadow a war between these strong, power hungry characters.

Valmont, in this section, proves himself more than just deceitful. He uses his friendship with Danceny to gain access to young Cecile, and uses Cecile's own innocence to trick her into giving him access to her room. Once there, he blackmails her, lies to her, and eventually forces her, in a sense, to have sex. He ignores her pleas and continues to abuse her. Additionally, his growing anger at Tourvel, as well as his growing obsession with her, forces his actions to attempt to push her into submission. As he belittles her, accuses her of being entertained by his misery, and continuously ignores her pleas, she

eventually tires of the treatment, and leaves. The resulting emotional rage of Valmont shows clearly, although not to him, that he does in fact love Tourvel. However, as he is incapable of honest and pure love, his rage foreshadows his fall later in the novel.

Cecile in this section is beginning to show signs of becoming Merteuil. She is beginning to seek pleasure, and beginning to learn how to belittle those who love her in an effort to gain the upper hand. She claims to have refused Valmont, but also admits to not resisting hard enough. These events foreshadow her continued affair with Valmont. In addition, her harsh treatment of Danceny shows a growing restlessness within the girl. However, at the same time, her letters to Merteuil show her still as a trusting young woman. Danceny, too, is showing an increase in restlessness as he accuses his beloved of changing her heart and of not cooperating. These small arguments between the young lovers, much due to the influence of Merteuil and Valmont, foreshadow the downfall of Merteuil's plan.

Tourvel shows a serious change of heart in this section. Readers could see in the last set of letters a softening of Tourvel's heart, but in this set, she nearly admits to her love. Her outburst and convulsions in her bedroom with Valmont show a deep seeded fear, which can only be attributed to deep feelings of guilt over her growing love for him. However, her own belief in God as a savior to those emotions appears to continue a theme Laclos gives throughout the book, that God does not save humans from themselves.

Letters 101 - 124

Letters 101 - 124 Summary

Valmont petitions his valet, Azolan, in letter 101, to follow Tourvel wherever she goes, and to gain Tourvel's maid's assistance, as well. Tourvel, in letter 102, explains her disappearance from the chateau to Rosemonde, and admits she is in love with Valmont. She feels tremendous guilt and wishes for death to stop the pain she feels in hurting him. In letter 103, Rosemonde replies that she was aware of the feelings Tourvel had and is not surprised, but urges her to remain steadfast and firm in her faith. Merteuil responds to Volanges in letter 104. She expresses her opinion that Volanges keep the marriage to Gercourt, and continue to provide her daughter with strength and wisdom. She notes that Cecile either does not love Danceny or does not know him fully, hence her strong love for him.

Merteuil then writes to Cecile in letter 105, and is rude and vicious in her reactions as she makes fun of Cecile for her concerns about Valmont. She is cruel, and points out that Cecile is being childish and that she should be grateful for Valmont's lessons. She also notes Cecile should pretend not to love Danceny, so that Volanges will marry her off, and she will have more freedom for lovers. Finally, she tells her to learn how to write better letters. In letter 106, Merteuil praises Valmont, but falsely as she makes fun of him for not seeing that Tourvel was about to leave. She chides him for his stupidity, and for taking Cecile, but admits between the two of them they can destroy the young woman. In letter 107, Azolan reports on Tourvel's life, in that she eats little, wants to go to confession, sees no one, and writes letters, which he encloses to Valmont.

In letter 108, Tourvel writes to Rosemonde that she is wrought with sorrow over not seeing Valmont. Cecile writes to Merteuil in letter 109, thanking her for her advice and admitting she now enjoys Valmont very much, and that she sneaks into his room now at night. In letter 110, Valmont writes to Merteuil that he is losing the war with Tourvel, as she is refusing his letters, but gaining ground with Cecile. He admits he has told stories to Cecile about her mother that cause her to feel contempt, and has tricked her into coming to his room at night, so she can feel more free, sexually. He also admits he has not used protection. In letter 111, Gercourt writes to Volanges to tell her he will be delayed by several weeks, and that the wedding must wait. Rosemonde responds to Tourvel in letter 112, and wishes her strength.

In letter 113, Merteuil tells Valmont people in Paris are beginning to notice his absence. She also defends older women, since Valmont often shows disregard for them, and reminds him Cecile only gives him her body, and not her mind or her heart, or even her head. She adds that she is going to her country home, where she will sort out a large legal battle she has in the near future. She plans to seduce Danceny next, as she feels Cecile no longer deserves him.



Tourvel tells Rosemonde in letter 114 of her concern for Valmont, as he has not written, and is reported ill. In letter 115, Valmont tells Merteuil he can see they do not see eye to eye, and he explains that he plans to tell society of his affair with Cecile and with Tourvel, since he is sure that will occur. He makes fun of her for taking Danceny as a lover, and keeps his affairs with Tourvel from her as punishment. However, he does tell Merteuil he believes he has successfully impregnated Cecile, and will have free time for Merteuil when she returns from the country. Danceny tells Cecile in letter 116 that Merteuil has left, and that his misery is complete. She writes back in letter 117, with the help of Valmont, and reminds him she too is miserable, but resents him for assuming she would make love to him even if they were together, since she knows it is wrong.

Danceny then writes Merteuil in letter 118, and expresses love for her, and a deep desire within him, although he also talks of Cecile. In letter 119, Rosemonde writes Tourvel of her increasing concern for Valmont's health. In letter 120, Valmont writes to Father Anselme, asking for him to set up a meeting between Valmont and Tourvel, so he can give her the letters he has kept, confess, and walk a path of Godliness. Merteuil responds to Danceny in letter 121, telling him he should refrain from writing letters of trifling concepts, but instead write of thoughts and feelings. She reproaches him for his feelings, reminds him of his love for Cecile. Rosemonde writes Tourvel in letter 122 and discusses Valmont, noting he has seemed to undergo an inner change, and talks often of God forgiveness, and "the most important business of his life", which Rosemonde admits not understanding, but also admits frightens her.

In letter 123, Father Anselme responds to Valmont, assuring him he has arranged a meeting with Tourvel for him to ask forgiveness, and promises his support. Tourvel writes to Rosemonde in letter 124, informing her of Valmont's new choice for forgiveness and virtue, and exclaiming her happiness at being able to assist him in his journey. However, she expresses sorrow that she is no longer miserable without him, and yet means nothing to him. She asks permission to, after meeting with Valmont, travel to the country to stay.

Letters 101 - 124 Analysis

This section of letters begins the serious dual between Merteuil and Valmont, as well as shows a decaying relationship between Cecile and Danceny, at the hands of these two merciless individuals. In addition, this section shows Valmont gearing up for his final deceitful attack on Tourvel, and Tourvel's weakening defenses. Merteuil, at her happiest, plays both confidants to Madame Volanges as well as to her daughter. On one hand, she seeks to keep the impending marriage on track as a means to revenge, and on the other hand, she seeks to keep Cecile involved with Valmont to further her revenge. One can see her attitude towards the young woman changing as she begins to become jealous of Valmont and Cecile. Her treatment of Valmont is becoming increasingly hostile and cruel, as is shown through her ridicule. Further, Merteuil seeks more revenge on Cecile, now Valmont's lover, by seducing Danceny. Again, readers see Merteuil's need to control overpower her need for logic. By angering Valmont, who knows her secrets, she can only serve to fail, and by taking Danceny as her lover, after



already sending Valmont to Cecile, she again places herself in a position to be harmed, simply out of jealousy. While her frequent commentaries about her abilities show a precise, cruel individual, her jealousy of everyone around her shows a woman who is vulnerable.

Valmont, on the other hand, is showing increasing signs of obsession with Tourvel. His employment of his valet, his increasingly stealthy behavior, his letter writing to Father Anselme, and finally, his claims of retribution and his willingness to play on the emotions of his aunt all point to a plan emerging, foreshadowing his confrontation with Tourvel. Additionally, his increasingly angry letters to Merteuil, in response to her jealousy and in response to his own jealousy over Danceny foreshadow an upcoming war between these characters. He seems to treat Merteuil in these sections of letters almost as a second thought, as he uses his relationships with Tourvel and Cecile to enrage her. Further, his purposeful impregnation of Cecile shows his complete disrespect for the young woman. His plans to give her husband a child of his own loins can only lead not only to Cecile's demise, but also to his own.

Cecile, too, in this selection shows an increase in cruelty as her letters to Danceny become more harsh and less consoling. As she spends more time with Valmont, and on advice from Merteuil, she seems to allow herself to forget Danceny, her "love", and replace him with the pleasures of Valmont. This changing behavior shows Merteuil's influences. On the other hand, Cecile still shows a high level of naivety as she asks Merteuil for clarification of love and a lack of understanding about protection. Laclos seems to be again pointing out the failures of Madame Volanges in keeping her daughter safe, and the dangers of allowing virtuous individuals access to those who simply pretend to be of high virtue. Madame Volanges knows the reputation of Valmont, and knows of her daughter's already dangerous behavior in her letter writing to Danceny, but still allows her to remain in the home with Valmont near. Danceny too is beginning to show the influence of Valmont. His letters to Merteuil are increasingly accusatory, as are his letters to Cecile. While it is clear he still loves Cecile, it is also clear Merteuil is taking him in. He continues to show a lack of care for Cecile's own anguish, and instead projects his own. This too foreshadows a battle to come.

Finally, Tourvel herself begins to crumble in this selection as she finally comes to term with her feelings for Valmont. Tourvel knows what Valmont is, and knows she has to sacrifice her own happiness for her virtue, which is why she left Rosemonde's. However, each day brings her new anguish as she fights the feelings inside. She confides in Rosemonde, and this alone seems to symbolize a desire to keep Valmont near, since Rosemonde is Valmont's nephew. In addition, her increasing inner turmoil seems to symbolize the struggle between pleasure and virtue in human kind. Her willingness to see Valmont, albeit under false pretenses, foreshadows her fall from grace. In addition, her own failing health shows the depths of her misery, and foreshadows her end.

For the first time in the novel, the character of Rosemonde, Valmont's aunt, is being brought to light. While she is old, she knows all about the things occurring under her nose, and chooses only to become involved when asked. This character is torn between her love and adoration for her nephew, and her knowledge of his scheming ways. Even

as she attempts to strengthen Tourvel's resolve, she still informs her of Valmont's supposed state of illness. One can only assume Rosemonde understands not only Tourvel's love, but also that Valmont himself is falling in love, albeit unwittingly. Her insertion into the novel at this point as moderator serves to facilitate the ending sequences as she fights for the dignity of all parties. She is, essentially, the only voice of reason in the novel, and the voice of logic and love tempered with reality and virtue. She appears to symbolize an older generation of individuals, much unlike the young, corrupt characters who have thus played vital roles in the novel. This perhaps speaks of Laclos' view of a loss of morality in the young people of his own time.



Letters 125 - 150

Letters 125 - 150 Summary

In letter 125, Valmont writes to Merteuil, proclaiming his victory. He explains that he arrived at Tourvel's under the false pretense of forgiveness. He complained of her behavior toward him, and her cruelty, to which she objected. After an argument, Valmont threatens suicide if he cannot have her. He continues the ruse by giving back her letters, claiming they were his last hope to life. Tourvel, faced with his death or her loss of virtue, gives in. Valmont admits that at first, Tourvel was nearly catatonic. When he mentioned his happiness, however, she responded that was all she wished for, and relaxed. Valmont admits that, after making love, he swore eternal love to her, and had to fight later to get her from his mind. Valmont closes by asking Merteuil for his reward, and promises her he can find the time.

In letter 126, Rosemonde writes to Tourvel, reminding her that her role as God's servant may be mysterious, but that she should not question it. In letter 127, Merteuil responds to Valmont violently, upset that he places her below Tourvel, and angered that he thinks she will have any time for him. She reminds him she is not his slave, and is above him. Tourvel, in letter 128, responds, telling Rosemonde of her affair and of her eternal love to Valmont. In letter 129, Valmont questions Merteuil's anger, and reminds her of their friendship. In letter 130, Rosemonde expresses love and acceptance of Tourvel's decisions. She warns that men seek only their pleasure, whereas women seek to please.

Merteuil answers Valmont in letter 131, and at first seems more calm and willing to bargain. Merteuil promises one night of bliss to Valmont, but reminds him they can never be lovers, since they are both deceivers and because she would demand things of him, and she would eventually face losing him. In letter 132, Tourvel writes Rosemonde and thanks her for her kindness, but feels unworthy of it. In letter 133, Valmont asks Merteuil to clarify what she would ask that he would ever refuse. He also makes excuses for continuing to see Tourvel, and admits he is still enjoying Cecile, but that he is handing her back to Danceny in three days.

Merteuil responds in letter 134, again angry, and noting that Valmont ignored her refusal to make him a lover. She points out he loves Tourvel, and asks that they just remain friends. On the other hand, she admits that if he drops Tourvel, and keeps Cecile, she would still consider his reward.

In letter 135, Tourvel writes Rosemonde, stating that Valmont has betrayed her. She saw him one evening with a prostitute, and wrote him, asking to stop their affair. That letter, 136, asks for her letters back, and accuses him of betrayal. Valmont writes to Tourvel in letter 137, and explains that the prostitute, Emilie, is simply a friend to whom he gave a ride home after the opera. In letter 138, Valmont responds to Merteuil, and informs her he sought out Emile to prove he did not love Tourvel. He admits he made

sure Tourvel saw Emilie. He claims his attempts to gain Tourvel's forgiveness are simply due to his refusal to allow someone to leave him.

In letter 139, Tourvel explains to Rosemonde that she was wrong about Valmont, and that he has not betrayed her. Valmont, angry, writes Merteuil in letter 140, and demands an answer. He also informs her that he has been seeing Cecile more. The evening prior, the couple were nearly caught, and in the chaos, Cecile fell from the bed and miscarried her child. Valmont secretly informs the family doctor of her previous condition while Cecile calls for her maid. In letter 141, Merteuil chastises Valmont for his cross letter, and warns him not to push her into making choices. She reiterates that he loves Tourvel, and tells him a story of another young man who becomes infatuated with a woman. In the story, the man loves a woman, despite his reputation. A woman friend of his gives one last chance before she reveals his secret to society. She tells him a story, to which each fight for love by his lover can be battled, and combated with an excuse of "it's not my fault".

Valmont, in letter 142, tells Merteuil he has copied the story, and sent it to Tourvel. In letter 143, Tourvel writes Rosemonde, informs her of Valmont's betrayal, and asks to be forgotten. Valmont writes Merteuil in letter 144, and informs her Tourvel has gone to a convent. He is bothered that she could tolerate his rejection so quickly, and questions whether she would reconcile with him. In letter 145, Merteuil informs Valmont she has tricked him into breaking it off with the woman he clearly loved, and reminds him his vanity is his downfall, as he was more ashamed of being teased than of hurting the woman he madly loved. She also notes should could further destroy him, but instead will choose to reward him.

In letter 146, Merteuil writes to Danceny, chastising him for being too busy with Cecile to write her, but forgiving him and asking for his company the following evening in Paris. Volanges writes to Rosemonde in letter 147, and informs her Tourvel has fallen gravely ill with a high fever, convulsions, delirium, and thirst. In letter 148, Danceny writes to Merteuil, proclaiming his love for her. Volanges, in letter 149, reiterates to Rosemonde that Tourvel is violently ill. She has told Volanges of Valmont's betrayal. She seemed to improve, but when a letter from Valmont arrived, she reverted. In letter 150, Danceny writes to Merteuil, again pronouncing his love, and asking why Merteuil would prefer not to write.

Letters 125 - 150 Analysis

In this section, readers see Tourvel finally giving in to her desires, and see the true cruelty of Merteuil. Valmont begins by bragging of his success, and yet, between the lines, it is clear he has true feelings for Tourvel. He may attribute his happiness to hard won success, but one can see his happiness comes from his love for the woman. However, his threats of self-destruction as a means to achieve success only show his obsession, and his complete lack of emotional capacity. In Valmont, we see duality again as his love for Tourvel is equaled by his drive to show Merteuil his devotion. He is willing, in the end, to give up his love to prove she doesn't exist to him, and yet in the

end, he finds himself regretting the decision, made only at the prodding by Merteuil. It is now unavoidable that war will ensue. Additionally, this section shows Valmont's cruelty, as his unborn child dies and he makes light of the situation.

Merteuil proves herself in this section to be crueler than even Valmont. Jealous by the way Valmont speaks of Tourvel, and furious at his seemingly secondary treatment of her, Merteuil proceeds to tease and taunt and torment Valmont into leaving his beloved. She stoops to pretending reconciliation between herself and Valmont is possible, but in the same breath tells him to forget such a possibility. Her threats to further destroy Valmont betray her eventual intention, and foreshadow the downfall of these two characters. Additionally, Merteuil succeeds in seducing Danceny, again showing her desire for power over others.

Cecile, once a primary character in the story, plays a smaller role in this section as her story fades in light of her elders'. There are no letters between Cecile and Danceny in this section, displaying clearly their obsessions in other areas. If nothing else, Merteuil and Valmont have succeeded in breaking apart two individuals who cared for one another. Danceny, too, betrays his love for Cecile, and allows himself to be seduced by Merteuil, even though he is now back in Cecile's life.

Tourvel, the once prim and proper woman of Valmont's dreams, in this section becomes a slave to Valmont's desires. When threatened with his death, Tourvel has no choice but to succumb to his desires, and to her own. In spite of her religious beliefs and her feelings of duty, Tourvel relinquishes herself to Valmont in an effort to make him happy. Her convulsions at the beginning of this section show her internal torment and foreshadow her demise at the loss of Valmont, which, as she predicted earlier, is imminent. She gives herself completely, but is given a chance to pull herself from the edge when she catches Valmont with a prostitute. Her giving nature, as well as her trust in Valmont, betray her, and she is swayed to believe his lies. Shortly after, she is crushed as Valmont cruelly ends their relations without care. Her letters to Rosemonde throughout this section show she still has a clear faith in God, but this is not enough to stop her from her own demise. This could be Laclos' attempts to show religion as a false sense of security. Even after Valmont's crushing blow, Tourvel falls back on religion, but does not appear to be saved.

Rosemonde, in this section, again shows herself to be a pillar of strength and knowledge and faith in a world full of deceit and cruelty. Her giving nature allows her to forgive both her nephew and her friend for their transgressions. Her faith in God allows her to support Tourvel, but her sense of reality also allows her to feel for Tourvel and to commiserate with her heartache. These traits, so foreign to these characters, again show Rosemonde as the opposite of the immoral youth of Laclos' time.

For her small part, Volanges proves to be a loving and concerned friend. She has figured out far before being told why Tourvel has fallen ill, and, once told, is clearly upset. However, she reserves her comments and seeks only to assist Tourvel in whatever matters necessary. Again, this woman has allowed Valmont to harm someone she loves, simply because she placed faith in those around her, and refused to take a

firm part in removing him from society. Willing to accommodate this vile man in order to fit into her world, Volanges proves the idea that being proper and well raised does not equal intelligence or logical behaviors.

Letters 151 - 175

Letters 151 - 175 Summary

In letter 151, Valmont reveals he found Merteuil in her home with Danceny. He is angry, and warns her that betrayal would devastate them both. He demands that she see him this evening, and that she stop seeing Danceny. Merteuil replies in letter 152, and is clearly furious as she cruelly makes fun of Valmont's threats. She reminds him she never remarried because she did not want anyone to control her actions, and continues to note that he is not in a position to demand. She states he is not the man he was. Valmont responds in letter 153, and explains that Merteuil must choose between having Valmont as a lover or as an enemy. She has tricked him once, and he admits he will not allow it again. He closes by noting that any prevarication will be seen to him as an act of war. In a small note, Merteuil declares war.

In letter 154, Volanges writes to Rosemonde, telling her Valmont has sent a letter, along with a request that Volanges become his go between. She claims he is expressing despair, but admits that even if it is true, his demise is of his own doing. In letter 155, Valmont writes to Danceny, explaining that he knows he has a date with Merteuil, but that he has arranged a meeting between him and Cecile. He includes Cecile's letter, number 156, which proclaims her love for Danceny and asks that he meet her. In letter 157, Danceny replies to Valmont that he need not worry, as he deeply loves Cecile, and realizes now he does not love Merteuil.

In letter 158, Valmont writes Merteuil, asking sarcastically about her adventurous night with Danceny, and then reveals his cruelty by explaining Danceny's withdrawal of affection for Merteuil. She responds in letter 159 by stating that such bad behavior is beneath her, and that he should not yet celebrate his victory. Volanges writes to Rosemonde in letter 160, enclosing a delirious letter written by Tourvel. In that letter, number 161, Tourvel first speaks of Valmont as a vile creature, then seems to speak of her husband as she wishes for his return, then speaks against God for his vengeance, then speaks of Valmont again. The letter is jumbled and without any addressing of names. In letter 162, Danceny writes to Valmont, informing him that he has been made aware of his seduction of Cecile and his betrayal of their friendship, and demands a dual.

In letter 163, Bertrand, the valet of Valmont, writes to Rosemonde to inform her that Valmont has perished in the dual. He states that Danceny was in tears as they brought the dying man to his home, but when Bertrand attempted to speak out against him, Valmont stopped him and demanded that he forgive Danceny. He then gave Danceny a bundle of letters, spoke with him alone, and then perished. In letter 164, Rosemonde writes to Bertrand, demanding he take legal action against Danceny. In letter 165, Volanges writes to Rosemonde, expressing her sympathy, and informing her that Tourvel, too, has perished. When she overheard others speaking of Valmont's death, she began to fail. She gave a bundle of letters to Volanges to give to Rosemonde, and



perished. In letter 166, Bertrand informs Rosemonde that the judge advised him not to charge Danceny, as such action would certainly ruin his reputation.

In letter 167, an unsigned individual informs Danceny that it would be in his best interest to leave Paris. Volanges informs Rosemonde in letter 168 that rumors are spreading that Merteuil was the cause of the dual. She explains Danceny released letters given to him by Valmont that incriminate Merteuil both in their dual and in lies surrounding Prevan. In letter 169, Danceny gives all letters to Rosemonde, and explains that he is sorry for her loss, but wants her to understand the entire truth. In letter 170, Volanges writes to Rosemonde, revealing that her daughter has fled to the convent, convinced she is being called to take the veil. She asks for advice. In letter 171, Rosemonde, after reading the letters, forgives Danceny, but asks that he send her the two remaining letters from Cecile.

Rosemonde then writes Volanges in letter 172, and reveals to her that Merteuil betrayed her severely, and that she has information, but will not discuss it. She advises, with this knowledge, that Cecile be allowed to stay at the convent and become a nun. Volanges writes to Rosemonde in letter 173, expressing her fears that Cecile's decision is based on her love for Danceny. She also reveals Merteuil was recently shunned at the Opera, and, at a party, left to sit alone while others gathered around the recently freed Prevan. They eventually hissed her from the room. The following evening, she became ill with smallpox.

In letter 174, Danceny writes to Rosemonde, expressing that his love is dead. He gives her all letters, points out that Cecile is innocent, as it was society who lured her from virtue, and notes he is leaving for Malta. In letter 175, Volanges reveals that Merteuil is now horribly scarred, disfigured, and has lost an eye to smallpox. In addition, she has lost her lawsuit, and is now penniless. She has fled to Holland. Volanges also reveals her daughter is set to become a postulate the following day. She laments that one dangerous acquaintance can ruin several lives, and that people should be more careful.

In the Publisher's Note, it is revealed that the lives of Cecile and Merteuil continue, and that Merteuil's retribution is at some point made final, but that such information will not be revealed. In the Appendix, a letter from Valmont to Madame Volanges is revealed, in which he asks her to become his go between to Tourvel as she is dying. Another letter, this one from Tourvel to Valmont, is given, in which Tourvel happily chatters about her love for him. At the end of the novel, "Epistle to Margot" is presented, in which a young man is praising his young lover, although she does not have money, education, or wit. Additionally, "The Procession" is given, which is a tale about a young woman seduced by her cousin. The young woman is virtually raped, and asks him, in the end, only to give back what he has taken.

Letters 151 - 175 Analysis

In this final section, readers see the complete downfall of many of the characters as a result of their immorality. Merteuil, after seducing Danceny, uses him as a torture point

for Valmont. When this works, and Valmont is angry, Merteuil uses that against him as well. When forced to make a choice, the jealous, cruel woman chooses war, thereby ensuring her own demise. When tricked by Danceny, Merteuil chooses to not only strike, but to mortally wound Valmont by telling Danceny of his actions with Cecile. This leads, however, to her own downfall as Valmont, dying, gives Danceny all letters which show not only Merteuil's involvement but also her deceit and lies through the course of history. This leads to her loss of favor in the eyes of society, her bankruptcy, and in a way, even her disfigurement as she contracted smallpox while in the country, to which she would not have had to flee had it not been for her own actions. This shows clearly Laclos' point that mankind creates his or her own destiny, and that our moral actions, or immoral ones, come back in the end to ensure our end.

Valmont, too, comes to an end as Danceny kills him for his treachery. His own jealousy and want for power over Merteuil causes him to push her into a decision, which leads to their war. His attempts to gain access to Tourvel, in his regret at leaving her, only serve to make him more miserable as his actions fail. His actions against Merteuil, while certainly more noble at first than hers towards him, only serve to further anger her, and push her to dealing her own injustice for Valmont, which leads to his death. In this death, Valmont is able to deal the final crushing blow to Merteuil, thereby saving himself and leaving her to perish. However, thanks to those who love him, and to those he did remain faithful to in life, his reputation is somewhat spared. This too, seems to show Laclos' point about morality. Valmont, while definitely a vile character, begins to find himself and his love by the end of the novel. His death is most surely a blessing, since his life would mean persecution and possibly prison. There is no question Valmont suffers for his deed, but his changing path by the end of the novel appears to have won favor, as his death saves his reputation.

Cecile and Danceny suffer their own losses due to their indiscretions, although certainly less severe than those of Valmont and Merteuil. Cecile becomes a prostrate, thereby ending her relationship with all men, following the death of Valmont and the betrayal by Merteuil. Cecile has perhaps chosen the only path left for her, in that the scandal will likely at least be somewhat revealed, and is bound to affect her. By becoming a nun, she can avoid such harshness. This is a deserved punishment, Laclos appears to say, since her actions, while naive, were still partially to blame for the outcome of the story. Danceny, too, is forced to leave as a result of his involvement in the scandal. He did, in fact, try to seduce young Cecile, and as a result, opened her eyes to possibilities otherwise unknown. Tourvel suffers, as well, and eventually dies as a result of her own immorality. She gave into temptation by the end of the novel, and suffers not only heartache and despair, but also with her life. Her delusional state by the end of the novel shows the duality within her as she struggles to find peace within herself. It is only after Valmont is dead that she can free herself by forgiving him, and die herself.

Rosemonde and Volanges are the only two characters to survive the events virtually unscathed, although one loses a loved one, another a daughter, and both someone they believed a friend. Rosemonde, the woman shown to have virtue and wisdom, becomes the keeper of the story as the letters are given to her. She helps Volanges make decisions for her daughter that are best, and helps Danceny to forgive himself. In this,



the character with virtue and strength becomes, even at her age, the pillar of salvation, showing that morality wins over immorality. Volanges, for her part, sums up the moral when she points out that many lives can be destroyed by a single event, or a single meeting.

The final section appears to be more on the moral insight of Laclos. The addition of two letters show Valmont's own deceit at attempting to gain access to the dying Tourvel, and show Tourvel's own happiness in her love for Valmont. Both seem to simply further the idea that love can make one happy, but can also destroy. The final small stories show that love is blind, and that virtue cannot be attained once it is lost.

Characters

Marquise de Merteuil

As the primary female character in the novel, the Marquise de Merteuil is a powerful, strong minded, cruel, and merciless woman who spends her life attempting to cause the downfall of other men and woman. Thrown into society at a young age, Merteuil picks up on the idea that woman are expected to be pure and wholesome, and thereby sets upon a course of life to overcome such ideas, and to show the world that woman can be as merciless as men. Married early, she spends much of her married life having illicit affairs. When her husband dies, Merteuil elects not to remarry, but instead sets off on a life full of pleasure without emotion.

When a chance for revenge against a man who wronged her arrives, Merteuil wastes no time in planning to corrupt his young and beautiful bride to be. She elicits the help of her friend and once lover, Valmont, and the two embark on a heroic effort to destroy the girl, and her future husband. However, Merteuil's need for power is combated by Valmont's own, and the two struggle to maintain the upper hand. To further anger Merteuil, Valmont, the only man she has loved, falls in love with another woman. When pushed into making a choice between him and her new lover, Merteuil, always one to choose the path less traveled, rejects him, and declares war. Valmont, however, knows all of her secrets, and betrays her. In her anger, she reveals Valmont's role in the seduction of the young girl, which results in his death. Her need for power, however, backfires, and she is left penniless, shunned from society, and disfigured for life.

Vicomte de Valmont

The Vicomte de Valmont is the primary male character of the novel. A rich, flattering, charming man, Valmont is a womanizer of the greatest proportions. His need for pleasure and power far outweigh any emotional attachments he may ever feel. His desire for bragging rights leads him to betray women and to ruin their reputations simply for fun. His relationship with Merteuil, though rocky, is perhaps the only relationship in which he has felt anything, as is shown through his remaining friendship with the woman.

Valmont has his sights set on a woman of virtue. Married to a judge and committed to God, Valmont first seeks to corrupt Tourvel simply for the challenge. Over time, however, he begins to fall in love with the woman, although his version of love is quite different from most. He becomes obsessed, and cannot stand to lose her, although whether out of fear of failure or true emotional commitment, one cannot be sure. As a side task to this battle, Valmont takes on Merteuil's chore, and seduces young Cecile. He becomes her sexual mentor after nearly raping her. His lack of precaution and his pointed desire to impregnate her show his lack of care or concern for others. However, when faced with the loss of his power of Merteuil and his own feelings of love, he leaves



Tourvel cruelly. This weighs on him, and causes him to be even angrier with Merteuil, who has tricked him into leaving his only love. Their war, then, leads to his death in a duel with Danceny. While his death is certainly a punishment, he does win against Merteuil, in that he is saved from public ridicule.

Madame de Tourvel

Madame de Tourvel is the wife of a judge, and is highly religious and virtuous. She believes strongly in morality, in her duties as a wife and a child of God, and in her faith. She is kind, considerate, and often looks for the good in others. It is precisely these qualities that betray her as Valmont, a charming but dangerous man, enters her life and begins to slowly seduce her. While she presumes protection from these events through her religion, it is exactly these pretenses that Valmont uses against her. His ability to twist and turn her words and actions is only possible through her own lack of identity outside of her marriage and her faith.

Tourvel fights through much of the novel with her own duality, in that she seeks pleasure and happiness from Valmont, but feels obligated to maintain her faith and her morals. When she is faced with his death or her own sacrifice of morality, however, Tourvel caves, and becomes slave to Valmont's desires. She is wrought with guilt, and her peace and tranquility is destroyed, although her love for Valmont is strong. When he betrays her, however, Tourvel's duality becomes her life as she becomes delirious and very ill. It is clear Valmont has broken more than just her spirit and has, in fact, broken her soul. It is only when Valmont dies that Tourvel is able to forgive him, and herself, and as a result, perishes.

Cecile Volanges

Cecile Volanges is the fifteen-year-old daughter of Madame de Volanges. Educated in a convent, Cecile knows little of the real world, and is still very naive about love, relationships, sex, and society. Freed by her mother in preparation of her wedding, Cecile finds herself surrounded by new temptations and new thoughts that she is unsure how to control. Her mother, however, does not feel she should teach such concepts to Cecile, and instead allows her to confide in an older woman, Merteuil, who secretly wishes to betray her.

Cecile falls in love with her music teacher, Danceny, and through her relationship with Merteuil is allowed to write him and express her love for him. When Merteuil enlists the help of Valmont, Cecile finds herself not only the object of one man's desire, but also of one man's power. Valmont teaches her much of sexual relations, but impregnates her as well, without her knowledge. It is only when she loses the baby that she learns of the event. Cecile's life is destroyed, as her love, Danceny, kills her lover, Valmont, and Merteuil, now revealed to be the cause of the issues, flees. In the end, Cecile chooses life in a convent over life in society.

Chevalier Danceny

Chevalier Danceny is a young music teacher in Paris. Madame de Volanges hires him to assist her daughter with the harp and with her singing. He soon falls in love with the young girl, and begins to write her letters. Spurred on by her responses, Danceny continues to write increasingly passionate letters until Madame Volanges, tipped off by Merteuil, discovers the letters. After Cecile is then taken away, Danceny confides in Merteuil and Valmont, and reveals himself to be a tender, kind, loving individual who trusts easily. These qualities allow Merteuil not only to guide him to betray Cecile, but to fall in love with her, as well. However, when Danceny discovers Valmont has taken liberties with Cecile, he duels to the death, killing Valmont. Now knowledgeable about the betrayal, Danceny finds it difficult to love anyone, and escapes to Malta.

Madame de Volanges

Madame de Volanges is the mother of young Cecile. As a mother, Volanges believes children should be seen and not heard. She seems to care deeply for her daughter, but also wishes to see her daughter well married and well off in life. This dual desire leads to many problems, as she first forbids her from seeing Danceny. After she is raped and seduced by Valmont, Volanges knows of her daughter's unhappiness, but believes it to be a side effect of losing Danceny. As she does not talk emotionally or deeply with her daughter, she has no idea what is going on in her life. She is a good friend with strong morals and good values, but forgets to impart such wisdom in a close relationship with her daughter. This proves to be her downfall as she loses her daughter to corruption.

Madame de Rosemonde

Madame de Rosemonde is the aunt of Valmont. As one of the only innocents in the novel, Rosemonde is strong in her faith, and does not allow it to waiver. She loves her nephew, but also knows what he is. Her character is not developed until later in the novel, as she becomes the keeper of the secrets, the confessor of Tourvel, the adviser of Volanges, and the forgiver of Danceny. Her strong faith in God along with a good sense of reason and a stronger sense of kindness allows her to play all of these roles despite her age. In this character, Laclos seems to create a symbol of the old values of Paris, and of the proof that morality will always prevail over immorality.

Monsieur de Prevan

Monsieur de Prevan is a gentlemen with a strong reputation as a womanizer, and a rival of Valmont's. His exploits with women are legendary, and he sets his eyes on attaining Merteuil. She allows him to believe he is winning the game, but eventually tricks him into coming to her room at night. When he does, Merteuil pretends to not have asked, and accuses him of breaking in. He is shun from society and loses his military post. He

is even thrown in prison. However, on evidence of Merteuil's deceit, Prevan is freed and helps cause the social downfall of Merteuil.

Monsieur Bertrand

Monsieur Bertrand is the butler of Valmont, and a dear friend. When Valmont is killed, it is Bertrand who writes Rosemonde, informing her of the tragedy. It is also Bertrand who seeks to spread the truth of Merteuil, and also to preserve his master's good name. When asked to bring judgment against Danceny, Bertrand refuses for fear of putting his master's name in jeopardy, showing that regardless of Valmont's behaviors, his servants supported and cared for him.

Comte de Gercourt

The Comte de Gercourt is the husband to be of Cecile. Having once left Merteuil for the wife of a judge, Gercourt is one of her prime enemies, and she sees his impending marriage to Cecile as a chance to gain revenge. Gercourt, while boisterous and somewhat self-serving, is also very gracious and a sincere individual. He clearly wants to marry Cecile and is excited to become a part of the family, but his military duties and a family issue prevent him from returning fast enough to save Cecile from her own demise.



Objects/Places

Paris

Paris, France, is where some of the story takes place, and where much of the primary action in the novel occurs.

Francs

Mentioned often, francs are the primary form of money in Paris at the time of the story, and roughly equal the English shilling of the same period.

Ursuline Convent

Ursulines are teaching orders in this time period. Thus, a convent of such would be a place of religious teachings.

Intendant

An intendant is a provincial governor or another senior administrator of the crown.

Little House

A little house, as the explanatory notes mentions, was an important component of the high society of Paris at the time. These areas were often luxurious small estates in the country, designed for leisure and behavior that could cause scandal. This is the type of place Merteuil purchases for her lover.

Le Sopha

Mentioned several times in the novel, La or Le Sopha is an erotic fantasy story by Crebillon about the soul of a man trapped in couches until young lovers mate on them.

Knight

This phrase is used throughout the novel to indicate lovers.

Gallimaufry

This game, mentioned often in the book, is a combination of several different card games.

Clarisse

Another novel mentioned often in the book, the story of Richardson's Clarissa is similar to *Les Liaisons*. Clarissa finds herself writing to a man, and then runs away to avoid his pursuit.

Dry Season

Mentioned often, the dry season in Paris at the time was considered the time of year when nobles and others in high society are still in the country for the season, and the plays, operas, and balls of the year have not yet begun.

Themes

Immorality vs. Morality

Throughout the entire novel, Laclos pits morality against immorality in almost every interaction, attempting to show that any level of immoral thought or behavior will always lead to destruction whereas morality will lead to grace, if not to happiness. Merteuil is, without doubt, an immoral character. Her entire life is built on deceit and lies, and her behaviors are for pleasure rather than love or a greater good. She betrays everyone, including those she holds dear. In a search for vengeance, her immoral behaviors lead her to corrupt a young, innocent girl, seduce an innocent young man, betray a true friend, and to play a part in the death of a young man she once claimed to love. Further, her immoral behaviors lead to her bankruptcy, her social seclusion, and her disfigurement. Clearly, in the case of Merteuil, her immoral behaviors led to a swift and decisive end. Valmont's immorality, too, leads to his own death.

Laclos' seduction of Cecile, regardless of the cause, leads Danceny to wield a sword that takes his life. His seduction of Tourvel leads to a struggle between his vanity and his love, and in the end, his immoral character is unwilling to deal with the pains of love, thereby deciding his fate. Regardless of his regrets, he has lost the one person he truly loved. He is not, as was originally intended, able to become a father, because his immorality prevents him from protecting Cecile in her pregnancy. In the end, his immoral behaviors are the cause of his own death. Tourvel, too, is guilty of immorality, despite her internal fight against it, and is therefore punished with death, as well. Although she gives a valiant fight to protect herself against immoral thoughts and behaviors, she finds her own morality tested consistently by Valmont. Unable to resist, she eventually gives in, and for this is initially rewarded with pleasure. Over time, however, the inevitable happens and she is left without love, knowing she has sacrificed her morality for nothing. She becomes ill, and dies.

While these three characters choose to partake of immorality, Cecile's character is a bit different. Her morals are learned from repetition and from familial values, rather than from inner searching and personal decisions. As a result, her morals are easily corruptible. Her nativity and her lack of worldly knowledge lead to a loss of these learned morals, and an increase in immorality, showing clearly that morals are only actually believed if they are the result of one's own values and beliefs. Danceny, too, is a representative of this class of morality. While he certainly does not seek to corrupt Cecile, his initial advances are known to be against society and against God, and yet he partakes of them anyway.

The only characters in the story to remain true to their morals are Rosemonde and Volanges, and these characters are the ones least directly affected by the sad events at the end of the novel. Volanges struggles through the novel to retain her values and morals, and succeeds. Although she loses a daughter and a friend, her morals are intact and therefore her life is not ruined. While she may not be happy, she is also not



defeated. The same can be true for Rosemonde. She too has lost, in that her nephew has perished. However, her life is still stable and her faith, like Volanges, is still in tact. These two characters' morals and beliefs are bred not from society but from within, and in the end, they are able to come through their journey whole, showing that morality wins over immorality.

Religion vs. Man

Laclos also seems to have something to say revolving around whether God is responsible for the fate of man, or if that fate lies in the hands of each individual. In the novel, there are several who believe strongly in God and in their faith. Tourvel, for example, is strong in her faith and calls out to God to save her several times. She is strong in her religion and believes that God will help her to survive her inner turmoil. However, when God, or if God, does answer her by continuously giving her strength and support, such as with the warnings of Volanges and with the friendship of Rosemonde, Tourvel still rejects it in preference to her own happiness. This eventually leads to her death. One could say this is Laclos' way of pointing out that even with religious faith, one still has to take responsibility for one's own life.

The same can be said for Cecile. Cecile has been raised in a convent. She is knowledgeable in faith, and believes in God and morality. And yet, when faced in the real world with choices, Cecile chooses her own pleasure. In the end, this leads to her demise, as well. Although she was certainly guided by evil hands during her journey, it was still the choice of Cecile to stay firm in her faith or to be persuaded to relinquish herself to her pleasures. The fact that she is able to make this choice shows that in the end, it is always our choices that lead to either our religious lives or another fate.

Rosemonde is still another example of this choice. Rosemonde has lived her life according to her beliefs. She has compassion, empathy, the power of forgiveness, the capacity for love, and many other fine qualities. Without question, she has faltered from time to time in her faith, but it is her faith that has continued on in her life. As a result, she is, in the end, one of the few who remains in the favor of God by the end of the novel. However, Laclos seems to point out this is still her choice as a human being. Her choice to remain with God leads to her salvation. In the end, Laclos shows that mankind always has a choice, and that while a choice to remain with God may not lead to pleasure, it will lead to peace.

Man vs. Woman

Another theme throughout the book is the eternal war between men and women, particularly in the age during which this novel was written. Valmont represents the typical male in society. He is a womanizer of the most dangerous kind, whose charm and wit often trick women. He makes no claims to a pure life, and revels in his objectification of women. He takes delight in ruining the reputations of women. On the other hand, Madame Tourvel is the typical female. She is virtuous and kind, with morals

and a strict sense of duty. In a sense, she is prude. Her values and morals dictate her life, as does her dedication to her husband.

These definitions, however, are challenged with the introduction of Merteuil and Danceny. Merteuil is much like the typical male of society, only perhaps more vicious because she is a woman, and thus such behaviors are unexpected. She notes several times in the novel that women are believed to be a lesser race, and that she seeks to rise above this belief. In this quest, she takes on many of the behaviors of the men she often complains about. Danceny, on the other hand, is overcome by love for Cecile. His letters are an outpouring of love and affection, and his behavior is as innocent as that of a woman. His behaviors are also driven by values and emotion, and not simply by emotion.

However defined, the battle between men and women is defined in the battle between Merteuil and Valmont. Valmont, although cruel, devises a plan to remove Danceny from the life of Merteuil. While this is certainly cruel behavior, it is done to teach Merteuil a lesson. On the other hand, Merteuil, in a cunning, conniving rage, seeks to outshine Valmont, and to permanently remove him from the world. She knows the revelation that Valmont was involved with Cecile can lead to her demise, but her drive to win over men is so strong, she risks this simply to win against Valmont. In the end, both are destroyed. This ending seems to convey that Laclos attributed both wrongful and moral behaviors to both men and women, and believed that together, men and women could succeed. When against one another, however, men and women would destroy one another.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of the novel is third person. This point of view is vital to the story, in that it allows the author to present the novel as a series of letters, which serves to make the text more plausible, and to allow characters to tell their own deeds, actions, and emotions, without interpretation. This method also proves reliable, in that one senses differences in tone and voice throughout the novel, making character changes more easily recognized. Only the author, or the presenter of the letters, knows the full story. This point of view is also important in that one of the primary themes of the novel is the power of mankind to make or break their own lives, and this third person presentation of ideas allows each character to explain their own reasons for behaviors. The dramatic betrayal of characters would not be as entertaining if not being done behind the backs of other letter writers.

The story is told entirely as a collection of letters from a host of people from all social statuses, including servants, young men and woman, religious individuals, immoral individuals, and those in between. This method is likely used as a way of showing the reader the thoughts, emotions, and actions of all walks of life in the society of Paris, and to show a variety of inner methods and workings of mankind. This allows the reader to gain insight into the causes of issues in such societies, and the roles each person plays in the lives of the characters. Additionally, without the letter writing, the reader would be lost as to why many of the issues in the novel were occurring, since many of the characters are not even in the same city. Further, the addition of location and date on each letter allows the reader to focus on important time frames and places, to better understand characters' motives and emotions.

Setting

The novel is set primarily in and around Paris, France in the late 1700's. The location for the novel focuses on high society, and often includes luxurious homes, vacation homes in the country, ballrooms, opera houses, dinner theaters, and other areas of interest. Many of the characters in the novel are privileged, and know nothing of poverty or of heartache. They travel to and from homes in horse drawn chariots, and most have servants surrounding them.

During much of the novel, Tourvel, Rosemonde, Cecile, Volanges, and Valmont spend their days in the country home of Rosemonde, which appears to be a vast estate with gardens, large dining rooms, and many bedrooms. The weather varies from rain to sun, but both serve purposes in the novel, as rainy days make life in the country gloomier. In other areas, many of the women are either in, or speak of, convents, where they are religiously educated and taught virtue and morality. Merteuil's little house, on the other hand, is a place in Paris designed to escape detection and for dangerous sexual

encounters. Other areas of the novel include Malta, where Danceny flees, and Holland, to where Merteuil flees.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel ranges greatly between writers. The letters of Merteuil are well written, often with a sarcastic or cruel tone, and are often written in anger. Valmont's, on the other hand, appeared to grow more violent as his frustration grows. Cecile's begin written as a young woman, with much emotion and childish scolding, but mature as the girl matures. Danceny writes consistently through the novel, never wavering from an innocent, although somewhat selfish, mindset. Others, such as the servants, write with a more toned down sense of style. These changes in style allow the characters to develop their own personalities through their writing skills, and make the change of characters easier for the reader to tolerate on such a rapid and consistent basis.

The language of the novel tends to be still and formal, in part due to the letter writing style, and in part due to the class of the characters. Sentences are constructed formally in some areas, indicating a more polite correspondence, and in some areas, appears much more friendly, indicating a closer relationship. Although even those letters appear somewhat stiff due to the dated material, the reader does adapt to it, and thus it does not harm comprehension, and actually seems to increase it over time. Many words and phrases are explained in the Explanatory Notes section to assist the reader with concepts and words no longer used.

Structure

The novel is made up of several different components. The Introduction serves to explain the life of the writer and to offer several explanations for the novel its self. The Notes of French Texts allows the translator to explain several aspects of the novel to make it more comprehensible. The Bibliography presents options for further reading, and the Chronology presents the life of the writer in order of events. For the main novel, there are four parts, each of unequal length, and each containing an unequal amount of letters. Each part of the novel is unnamed, but represents a turning point in the progression of the characters. The Appendix includes a few miscellaneous letters, and two short stories by the author. The Explanatory Notes section includes small pieces of additional information to enhance certain areas of the novel.

The plot of the novel is fairly complex, with several themes and sub-themes running throughout the text. The novel is primarily about the consequences of immorality, and the damage mankind can do to themselves. The novel's pace ranges from slow and tedious to areas of high excitement and deceit. The story does contain stories from previous events, so following a timeline can be difficult, but becomes easier as the novel moves forward.

Quotes

"He'd call me false and faithless and I've always had a weakness for those two words; next to cruel, they're the nicest words for a woman to hear, and not so hard to earn." - Letter 5, page 18.

"As far as I'm concerned, I shan't try to justify myself more than anybody else. Certainly, Monsieur de Valmont comes to my house and he is accepted everywhere. This is one more absurdity to add to the thousand and one others condoned by society. You know as well as I do that we spend our lives noticing them, complaining about them, and committing them. Monsieur de Valmont has an honored name, great wealth, and many likable qualities and he recognized early on that to acquire social prestige two things only were required: to be equally adept at flattery and ridicule." - Letter 32, page 62.

"I had to be cautious to avoid compromising myself. I allowed her to write and say I love you and that very same day, without her realizing it, I arranged for her to be alone with Danceny. But can you credit it? He's still so wet behind the ears that he didn't even manage to obtain a kiss!" - Letter 38, page 75.

"To what are you sacrificing me? Preposterous fears! and who is causing these fears? A man who worships you, a man whom you will never cease to have at your mercy. What is there, what can there be to fear from a feeling which you will always have the power to control absolutely as you think fit? But your imagination is conjuring up monsters and you blame the terror they are causing you on love. Show a little more trust and these spectres will vanish." - Letter 58, page 112.

"So here I am like the Divinity, with blind mortals vying in their prayers to me while I never change my immutable decrees. However, I abandoned this august role in favor of that of consoling angel and in accordance with that mandate, went to call on my friends in their tribulation." - Letter 63, page 119.

"Aren't those marriages based on calculation rather than on compatibility, so-called arranged marriages where everything is accommodated except personal tastes and temperament, the most fertile cause of these scandals which are becoming commoner every day?" - Letter 98, page 210.

"To see myself once again reduced to pleading with a defiant woman who has broken away from my authority! Did I have to be humiliated in this way? And who's done it? A timid little woman whose never been trained to fight. What benefit have I gained from winning a place in her heart, firing her with love, exciting in her a frenzy of desire when she's now sitting calmly in her safe retreat feeling prouder at having run away than I am of all my victories?" - Letter 100, page 217.

"Once she's more satisfied with your conduct, your mother will finally marry you off and then, with your greater feeling, you'll have your choice, to leave Valmont, to take Danceny, or even to keep both of them." - Letter 105, pg. 233.



"I wasn't doing this just for fun, not only did it arouse my coy young pupil more than anything else but at the same time I was filling her with the deepest contempt for her mother. I've long known that if this method may not always be necessary to seduce a girl, it's indispensable and often most effective way of depraving her, for a girl without any respect for her mother won't have any self-respect either: a moral truth which I consider so useful that I was delighted to offer practical proof of the principle." - Letter 110, pg. 246.

"Our prettiest women, the ones said to be the most deserving of being loved, are still so vastly inferior to you that they could never provide more than a very pale image of you. I even think that for a practiced eye, the greater the similarity might appear at first glance, the greater the discrepancy afterward. Try as they may and using every means at their disposal, they are still not you and that's where the charm positively lies." - Letter 118, pg. 264.

"Did I say your portrait? But a letter is the portrait of the soul. Unlike a cold image, it hasn't the stagnancy so far removed from love; it lends itself to all our emotions; it can move from excitement to ecstasy and then to calm." - Letter 150, page 330

"The Marquis de _____, who never misses a chance to say something unkind, when talking of her yesterday said that her illness had turned her inside out and that now her soul was showing in her face." - Letter 175, pg. 370.

"Who can fail to shudder at the thought of all the disasters which can result from one single dangerous acquaintance! And what trials and tribulations would we not avoid by being more careful! What woman wouldn't take flight the very first time a seducer approached her! But all these reflections come too late, always after the event; and one of the most important truths, perhaps even the most universally recognized, is stifled and ignored in the frantic turmoil and folly of our morals." - Letter 175, page 371.

Topics for Discussion

Throughout the novel, Merteuil reiterates her opinions that men are allowed to be deceitful, but that women are supposed to be prim, proper, and above all, moral. She has rejected this view of women for some time, and chooses instead to pursue her own path. Based on her stories of her youth and her life in the story, why do you think Merteuil chooses this lifestyle? Does she have a choice? Why or why not? Be sure to include areas of the novel in your argument.

Valmont, throughout the novel, is attempting to win the heart of Tourvel, and it is clear that by the end of the novel, he has fallen in love with her. Why then, do you believe he gives her up so quickly in an effort to please Merteuil? Do you think his reasoning is sound? Why or why not?

Rosemonde chastises Danceny for his involvement in the seduction of Cecile, and at least partially blames him for the corruption of the young woman. Do you believe this is a fair judgment? Why or why not? Do you believe Danceny, without any interference from Merteuil or Valmont, would have succeeded in winning Cecile? Why?

At the end of the novel, it is said that Merteuil now wears her soul on her face, since she is severely disfigured after smallpox. What does this statement mean? Do you agree? Why or why not? Be sure to back your argument using ideas from the novel.

Laclos, the author, appears to be making a point throughout the novel that immorality will always cause destruction, whether internal or external, and that morality will, when maintained in the face of any obstacle, win over evil. Do you think this is a true statement? Why or why not? Do you believe the cause of the downfall of Merteuil and Valmont was immorality? If so, why? If not, what was the cause?

Madame Volanges has clear reservations about Valmont, and even warns her friend that she should ask him to leave. However, later in the novel, she allows her easily influenced young daughter to be in his presence, and to be in the presence of other older individuals in society. These influences eventually lead her astray. What do you think the author is trying to say about the responsibilities of Volanges? Why? Do you believe Cecile would have suffered the same fate without Valmont or Merteuil? Why?

Throughout the novel, the characters struggle against one another and even within themselves for power. Why is power so important in this society? Why power do the characters fight for, or with? Does power and control equal happiness? Why or why not?