

***DANGEROUS LIAISONS'* TEACHER'S GUIDE**

CONTEXT

Les Liaisons Dangereuses was first published in 1782 in French as an epistolary novel written by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos. It is a story crafted around The Marquise de Merteuil and The Vicomte de Valmont; two bored aristocrats/former lovers who decide to construct a little intrigue for themselves by seducing and debauching chosen targets surrounding them.

The story is set in a pre-French Revolution (1789) and is meant to expose the corrupt ways of the *Ancien Régime*.

CHRISTOPHER HAMPTON

Christopher Hampton is a playwright, screenwriter, director and producer. Born in 1946 in Portugal, he spent his childhood in Aden, Egypt and Zanzibar, then studied French and German at Oxford University. He was the youngest writer ever to have a play staged in the West End, and in the late 1960s, was resident dramatist at the Royal Court Theatre.

In 1985 Christopher Hampton wrote the play *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, adapted and translated from the novel by Choderlos de Laclos.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Vicomte de Valmont is determined to seduce the virtuous (and married) Madame de Tourvel, who is living with Valmont's aunt while Monsieur de Tourvel is away for a court case. At the same time, the Marquise de Merteuil is determined to corrupt the young Cécile de Volanges, whose mother has only recently brought her out of a convent to be married to a former lover of Merteuil. Cécile falls in love with the Chevalier Danceny (her music tutor) and Merteuil and Valmont pretend to want to help the secret lovers in order to gain their trust, so that they can use them later in their own schemes.

Merteuil suggests that the Vicomte seduce Cécile in order to exact her revenge on Cécile's future husband. Valmont refuses as he wants to devote himself to seducing Madame de Tourvel. Merteuil promises Valmont that if he seduces Madame de Tourvel and provides her with written proof, she will spend the night with him. He expects rapid success, but does not find it as easy as his many other conquests. During the course of his pursuit, he discovers that Cécile's mother has written to Madame de Tourvel about his bad reputation. He avenges himself in seducing Cécile as Merteuil had suggested. In the meantime, Merteuil takes Danceny as a lover.

By the time Valmont has succeeded in seducing Madame de Tourvel, it is clear he has fallen in love with her. Jealous, Merteuil tricks him into breaking up with Madame de Tourvel — and reneges on her promise of spending the night with him. In response Valmont reveals that he prompted Danceny to reunite with Cécile, thus abandoning Merteuil. Merteuil declares war on

Valmont, as such she reveals to Danceny that Valmont seduced Cécile. Danceny and Valmont duel. Valmont is fatally wounded, but before he dies he is reconciled with Danceny, giving him the letters proving Merteuil's own involvement. Two of these are sufficient to ruin her health and her reputation, and she flees the country. Furthermore, her face is left permanently scarred by her illness, and so she loses her greatest asset: her beauty. But the innocent still suffer: hearing of Valmont's death, Madame de Tourvel succumbs to a fever, while Cécile returns to the convent.

(source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Liaisons_Dangereuses)

CHARACTERS

The Marquise de Merteuil

The toast of all Paris, considered wise and chaste, though she has had more lovers than most professionals, until she enters into an unsavory deal with her former lover the Vicomte de Valmont. He must provide her with written proof that he has seduced the religious Présidente de Tourvel before she will sleep with him again. By the end of the novel, the Marquise's tendency to enjoy intrigue before love gets her into trouble, and she is revealed as the schemer she is.

The Marquise de Merteuil is a self-described, self-made woman. She writes that she is her own creator. As a young girl Merteuil refused to let fate or society describe her, and began to compose herself. After her husband died, she set about educating herself and creating a reputation. Since then, she has remained at the top of the heap through careful manipulation, never once letting her guard down.

The Marquise is not particularly interested in love, nor does she seem to believe that love exists except as that capacity men and women have to enslave each other. Though she admits that it is possible that she and the Vicomte de Valmont once loved each other, she seems to have no interest in renewing that affair even when the opportunity presents itself.

As a letter writer, she is shrewd, with a particular gift for lifting phrases out of other people's letters and using their words as if they were her own. This nasty side of her self-protective instinct is reflected in her downfall. The disease that disfigures her has an interesting result: other people's true opinions of her are, metaphorically, written on her face.

The Vicomte de Valmont

Like the Marquise de Merteuil, the Vicomte de Valmont is in it for the game. Or at least, he professes to be, and he styles himself as a player, without any belief or trust in love.

As he seduces her, the Présidente de Tourvel's religious tones begin to appear in his letters. The Vicomte adopts the Présidente's language in order to convince her, but this also tends to alter what he says. Therefore, he must subvert Tourvel's religious motifs to his own purpose with parody, just as he must subvert her religious convictions.

But Valmont's pride is also his downfall. So impressed by his former immunity to love, he cannot admit to himself that he has found a source of happiness in the Présidente de Tourvel. He is unable to allow himself to see that the game is over, and so he sacrifices the Présidente to the dictates of intrigue, and ruins himself as he has ruined so many women before.

STUDY QUESTION:

Discuss the different roles played by women and men in *Dangerous Liaisons*. Is one sex portrayed as more powerful or more skillful than the other? Do women use different techniques to get what they want than men, and vice versa? Compare and contrast the Marquise and Vicomte and their strategies.

THEMES

Desire:

In a society where people live in such luxury that they can want for nothing, the very act of wanting something makes that commodity become valuable.

War:

War, or at least a minor altercation in Corsica, is in the background of *Dangerous Liaisons*. War is also in the foreground, since battle is the metaphor constantly used by Merteuil and Valmont to describe their amorous exploits.

Religion:

Religion is another metaphor used to describe love, employed in particular by Valmont. To gain some ground on the Présidente de Tourvel, he writes to her in terms to which she will be forced by her convictions to respond. These are religious terms: for example, Valmont accuses his Présidente of refusing to listen to his prayers, of punishing him unfairly for his misdeeds, and of averting her eyes from him like some unfortunate person one has no intention of assisting. This could be called parody, but Valmont is not mocking, or even imitating, Tourvel's writing style. Rather, he is anticipating her reading style, and how much what she reads will reflect on her. Thus, he invents situations in which she could be responsible for his unhappiness, even though he was the one who started the whole affair. She can only believe what he says if she is sure that it pertains to her. What better way to convince a devout woman, Valmont reasons, than to convince her that she is the one who has done wrong. As the novel progresses, "faith," for the Présidente de Tourvel, has progressively more to do with the duty she owes Valmont than the duty she owes her god.

Education:

Education comes in many colors, but in *Dangerous Liaisons*, "receiving an education" usually refers to a loss of innocence, as opposed to learning the periodic table. It is unclear whether the Marquise de Merteuil's frequent referral to the seduction of Cécile as the girl's education is entirely an unkind joke. The Vicomte de Valmont participates in this unusual view of education as well. In Letter One Hundred and Ten, he describes Cécile's recent anatomy lessons in bed

with him, in which he has taught her "a sort of debauchee's catechism" to help her remember the names of all the important parts.

(<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/dangerous/themes.html>)

STUDY QUESTIONS:

- 1) "Revenge is a dish best served cold" is a phrase thought to originate from *Dangerous Liaisons* even though the line itself doesn't actually appear in the play. What is your interpretation of this phrase and how does it relate to the play? What other clichés can you think of and where do you think they originate from?
- 2) Describe the role of servants in *Dangerous Liaisons* and examine how they move the plot forward.
- 3) Love is confused with war, with religion, and with illness in the course of *Dangerous Liaisons*. Which characters use them? Why do you think a certain character is or is not prone to the use of this particular metaphor? Which of these metaphors seems more appropriate to describe love to you?
- 5) How are letters and letter writing significant in *Dangerous Liaisons*?
- 6) How is class and class differences addressed in *Dangerous Liaisons*? How are they apparent in the costumes?