

Examine the ways in which the epistolary structure of *les liaisons dangereuses* cr...



The epistolary structure achieves a sense of individual characterisation through writing style and tone that a conventional unilateral narrative form cannot. It allows the authors to reveal or conceal knowledge from other characters, while only the reader is privy to all sides and perspectives of events. Laclos reveals the characters through their literary voice, as an epistolary structure does not allow long character description. The voices of La Marquise de Merteuil and le Vicomte de Valmont are characterised by wit, irony and stylistic adaptability. In Valmont's first letter to Merteuil, already we are shown the irony and humour that pervades much of their correspondence, 'Vos ordres sont charmants; votre façon de les donner est plus aimable encore; vous feriez plaisir le despotisme.' The sharp correspondence between Merteuil and Valmont is the driving force of the novel and by positioning Cécile's letters between theirs her naivety and linguistic ineptitude are highlighted. Her letters create a pause in real plot development thereby creating suspense; they are almost inconsequential to the reader, becoming a distraction from the substance of the surrounding letters, just as the seduction of Cécile is a distraction for Valmont. This ordering of letters crafts a sense of psychological entrapment between Merteuil and Valmont which is compounded by her limited information 'je ne sais encore rien,' and 'c'est peut-être celui-là qui doit m'imposer' she writes. The reader, however, is already told by Merteuil in the previous letter who she is to marry and is therefore better informed than Cécile. This layering of knowledge and dramatic irony is prevalent and integral in the development of drama and suspense. As a result of her linguistic ineptitude, although she is the innocent victim, we find it difficult to relate to Cécile and pity her. The well-crafted letters of Merteuil not only convince the

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addressee of their truth, but also the reader. We too are entrapped by Merteuil and Valmont's sharp and insightful exchanges. The correspondence between them serves as a script for the development of the plot and the surrounding letters show the enactment of this script thereby offering the reader, but not the other characters, insight. Valmont describes society as 'le grand théâtre' but they are each others only audience and as actors they are required to play multiple roles and take on different guises. Both are able to do this with linguistic flair and ease and the epistolary form compliments their changing roles perfectly; each new epistle presents an opportunity for character change. Comparatively, Danceny considers a letter to be 'le portrait de l'homme' designed to reveal everything and conceal nothing. In a time when letter-writing was considered an art form, both Valmont and Merteuil are experts. Merteuil often picks out phrases from Valmont's letters with a view to undermining his self-esteem, often relating to Tourvel, 'une femme étonnante, une femme délicate et sensible.' The significance of this is to highlight the centrality of language as a force influencing and creating the atmosphere of the novel. They are well capable of both revealing and concealing through their letters in order to manipulate the addressee. Tourvel's simplicity and piety is revered, but even her virtue is vulnerable to Valmont's powerful manipulation through language. In letter 145 Merteuil tells Valmont that she does not know when she will arrive in Paris, but in the next letter she informs Danceny that she is to arrive the following day, this technique of concealing information thereby forming yet another level of understanding skilfully increases drama and tension between characters from the reader's perspective, whilst the characters remain unaware. In the same way, Laclos employs a cause and effect

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technique with the juxtaposition of letters; Valmont's letters to Tourvel are often preceded or followed by one to Mertueil. This not only highlights his ability to craft an appropriate tone, but illustrates the theory and execution of his tasks. Laclos is able to portray one single event from many different perspectives through the epistolary form. Very different accounts are written about Cécile's seduction are written by Cécile (letter 97) and Valmont (letter 96), we also read Madame de Volange's total misunderstanding of the same event. When Valmont discovers that it is Mme de Volanges, the 'infernale machine' who has been reinforcing Tourvel's resistance Cécile's downfall is virtually assured. It is significant and ironic that, when her affair with Danceny is discovered, she should be taken to the chateau where Valmont seduces her. These multiple layers of perspective add to the web of deceit being spun by Mertueil and Valmont, increasing the depth of intrigue. Another perfect example is a letter written by Valmont, read by Emilie and Mertueil, and then forwarded to Tourvel. This letter is a masterpiece of double meanings with only Tourvel left unable to understand them. She is led to mistake sexual arousal for emotional despair. He again is playing on her emotions to gain sympathy for his sexual indulgences. In each case the reader is in the privileged position of possessing all interpretations or misinterpretations of the same event. The nature of the epistolary form is that there is no omniscient narrator; Valmont and Mertueil are not well-informed enough to take on this roll. It is therefore the reader's responsibility to tie together the threads of intrigue and be aware of these ambiguities in meaning. The use of different ways in which a letter can be interpreted becomes increasingly complex and tense towards the end of the text. Letter 128 describes how nothing can now affect Tourvel's happiness as long as she

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has Valmont's love, and when compared with Madame de Rosemonde's warnings in letter 126, 'que j'aime bien mieux que vous ne soyez pas réduite à cette ressource' it becomes ever more striking. Thus is the power of the epistolary structure; by juxtaposing conflicting letters the sense of drama and tension is increased. The letters themselves are important within the plot and development of the plot. Danceny's letters are confiscated from Cécile, Tourvel refuses to open letters from Valmont, and they are even intercepted and dictated by Mertueil and Valmont. This indicates the way in which letters, as a form of communication regardless of the author, can be manipulated to create drama. With this exchange of letters the characters act and react before the reader's eyes, rather than the action already being completed. This enhances the drama and immediacy of the novel. The inclusion of a recounted event in a letter gives it extra importance, for example Cécile's seduction, or Valmont's gesture of 'bienveillance' in the village. The epistolary form in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is manipulated to create multiple layers of awareness and irony. Laclos has organised a complex series of interrelationships into an organic whole mapping the parallel developments of Cécile and Tourvel. He has intertwined letters of the plot and sub-plot, and keeps the reader one step ahead of some characters, whilst still speculating about the next response thus charging the development with suspense, drama and intrigue.