

21F.010, Introduction to European and Latin American Fiction

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First Essay Topics

1. How does Valmont change his understanding of "winning" in the course of his attempted conquest of Mme. Tourvel. Is there more to her "prudery" than meets the eye initially? Is there a similar function that her code of prudery serves, as the code of the libertine does Valmont? Is one of them freer to discover more about life and truth than the other? Explore what the novel teaches you about the role of power vs. love as the characters explore control over others, vulnerability to another, primacy of oneself, and "winning" vs. "losing."
2. If it's true that Laclos as a soldier has a real admiration for the strategy and tactics of V and M, he also presents them as "upper class bullies who prey on the weak and gullible, squandering their intellectual gifts on mean acts of petty destruction." In what ways can the two of them be seen then as tragic heroes in the Shakespearean sense? They attempt to lay bare an emptiness and hypocrisy in conventional morality, but what is their grandeur, if any, and what tragic flaw(s) overtake them to bring their own destruction and prevent them from winning the war between the sexes? Be sure to be specific, cite brief passages, and use action and reaction from characters to support your claims.
3. Track the film characters of *Cruel Intentions* or the film version of *Les Liaisons* vs. the novel. Be sure to give an overview of core character and story arcs, telling about the similarities and differences in the film and the novel. Refer to characters in the film, plot points in the film, character actions and apparent revelations (with other detail) that show differences/similarities you noticed. Talk about the differences related to film/print. As you compare the unfolding actions, observations and character in the film vs. the novel you must relate them to an argument about the two versions—not simply compare the two works.
4. How close do Valmont and Merteuil get to understanding differences between Love vs. Conquest in the course of the novel? Define "real" love for yourself as shown by one character in the novel. What is the usefulness of Reason vis-a-vis love in this novel? What do you think Laclos wants the reader to discover about human relationships here? Why is their Code of Conquest so rigid? How does their code serve each of them? Does maintaining power prevent either/both from knowing "real" love? Does Merteuil demonstrate that it's possible to lose the war between the sexes in the longterm, despite winning every battle to control another? What do they show us about the role of Reason and Emotion in the world of 18th century enlightenment?
5. Considering the fact that a central theme of *Liaisons Dangereuses* is sexual conflict between Merteuil and Valmont, there are surprisingly few overtly sexual scenes. Yet there is a lot of sexual tension. How is this tension created? Discuss why the book is not a more sensual one. How does the form contribute to the creation of this atmosphere. Is it pornographic?