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J. Zimmerman, MA

Sexuality in Cinema

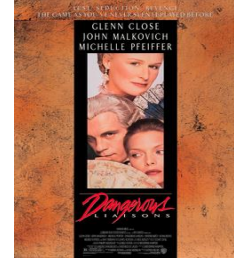
Dangerous Liaisons (1988)

Stephen Frears (b. 1941)

Director Born in Leicester, England, during the height of the Second World War, Frears lived a fairly typical upper-middle-class lifestyle, attending a boarding school in his teens and earning a degree in law from Cambridge. It wasn't until this point in his life that he learned that his mother was Jewish. In 2001, he told *The Jewish Journal* about how his curiosity about his heritage led him to direct the film *Liam* based on Jimmy McGovern's autobiographical screenplay: "I was sticking a toe into the water." Through the 1960s, Frears worked as a stage manager and assistant director. His first feature would be 1971's *Gumshoe*, and he would continue on to many accolades, beginning with helping to launch Daniel Day Lewis' acting career in the gay romantic comedy *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Among his best known films are *Dangerous Liaisons*, *High Fidelity*, and *The Queen*.



Film A rewrite of the 1985 stage play by Christopher Hampton based on the 1782 novel of the same name by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, *Dangerous Liaisons* was the first English-language film adaptation of the novel. It was nominated for seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture, winning instead Best Costume Design, Best Production Design, and Best Adapted Screenplay.



Background Shot on location in Northern France, *Dangerous Liaisons* features such notable landmarks as the Château de Vincennes, the Château de Champs-sur-Marne, and the Château du Saussay. Of some interest given that this is a film about sexual intrigue and adultery, leading man John Malkovich had an affair with Michelle Pfeiffer (who plays Tourvel) during the production, and his marriage to Glenn Headly ended soon after this was uncovered. The film grossed more than \$34 million in the box office and is considered a modest success in that aspect with an initial budget of \$14 million. Viewers and critics, however, agree that the film is well worth watching. At the time of writing, *Dangerous Liaisons* holds a 91% rating on the film review aggregation site Rotten Tomatoes.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Marquise de Merteuil – A French noblewoman who takes great pleasure in seductions

Vicomte de Valmont – A French nobleman infamous for his lack of principles

Madame de Tourvel – An honorable woman targeted by Valmont

Madame de Volanges – Cécile's mother and Merteuil's cousin

Chevalier Danceny – Cécile's music instructor and suitor

Cécile de Volanges – Volanges' daughter, lover of Valmont and Danceny

SYNOPSIS

Set in and around Paris sometime in the latter half of the 18th century, though before the Revolution, we are introduced to the Marquise de Merteuil, who seeks revenge against a former lover with the aid of another former lover, the Vicomte de Valmont. He is noted for his frequent womanizing, making him the perfect pawn in her plan of sexual intrigue and deception. It will be easy for him to steal the virtue of young Cécile de Volanges. Valmont declines, already on a quest to seduce a notably religious noblewoman, Madame de Tourvel. Seeing a chance to manipulate him into working for her, Merteuil promises to sleep with Valmont if he can provide her written proof he's slept with Tourvel. In his fruitless

attempts to seduce Tourvel, Valmont and his page stumble across correspondence between Cécile's mother and Tourvel warning her about Valmont.

Meanwhile, Cécile meets Chevalier Danceny and requests that the attractive young man become his music teacher. During their lessons, they fall in love, though Cécile is promised to another. Using the pretext of smuggling letters between the two young lovers, Valmont gains access to Cécile's bedroom and assaults her. The young girl locks herself in her room and refuses all visitors afterward. This prompts her mother to call on the aid of Merteuil, who is all too happy to manipulate the young girl into seeing Valmont regularly. Believing Merteuil is helping her, Cécile agrees to a sort of "student-teacher" relationship with Valmont, using the things he teaches her to enthrall Danceny during their nightly meetings. At the same time, Merteuil begins a similar arrangement with Danceny.

After several weeks, Cécile suffers a miscarriage of what Valmont assumes was his child. He turns his attention to Tourvel, but the game isn't going as expected: the lifelong playboy has actually fallen in love. After they finally unite in private, Merteuil forces Valmont to abandon Tourvel, breaking the woman's heart in the process and causing her health to deteriorate. In spite of this sacrifice, Merteuil still refuses to sleep with Valmont. She informs Danceny that Valmont has been sleeping with Cécile, and the young man calls for a duel. Valmont and Danceny fight with rapiers in the snow, each striking the other several times before Danceny makes the killing blow. In an act of both remediation and revenge, Valmont's dying wish is for Danceny to take his correspondence with Merteuil and to let Paris know of her deceit. Later, we see Merteuil attend an opera, and all conversation halts when she enters her private box. The crowd looks up at her, hissing and booing, having learned the truth from the circulated letters. The film ends as Merteuil tearfully removes her makeup in a mirror, completely alone.

PLOT

Dressing – The Marquise de Merteuil looks at her face in a mirror. A smile slowly spreads across her face as she starts brushing her hair. Elsewhere, an army of servants enters a room, filling a bath and gathering fine garments. One servant moves to the bedside as another opens the curtains. Another follows, stirring sugar into a cup of tea as a hand emerges from beneath the covers, taking a kerchief from the first servant's dish and pulling it underneath. The Marquise is tended to by an army of maids who apply salve to her skin and makeup to her face while tying and fastening the many parts of her fine garments into place. The man with the handkerchief lies in bed, the servants meticulously grooming his fingernails and plucking nose hairs. The montage jumps back and forth between the Marquise and the Vicomte de Valmont as their servants dress and preen them, preparing them for the day. Both look into mirrors somewhere behind the camera, admiring their appearances. Neither says a word to their servants. The title sequence ends with Valmont stepping out of a carriage outside an opulent manor. A young woman looks down at him from a window.



Cards – The young woman moves into the room, and the camera follows her. A group of servants meticulously tend to the candles in an ornate chandelier. In the corner of the room, Merteuil plays cards with another woman. "Well, my dear," she says to the girl. "So, how are you adapting to the outside world?" The girl responds politely before her mother (the other woman playing cards) pipes up, "I've advised her to watch and learn and be quiet except when spoken to." A servant approaches with a note on a platter. Merteuil lifts it to look, putting it down without a change in her expression, and the servant walks away. "Valmont is here," she says. "You receive him, do you?" the other woman asks. "Yes," Merteuil replies with a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. "So do you." The mother warns her daughter that Valmont "never opens his mouth without first calculating what damage he can do." The three women take positions near a couch and receive Valmont with the typical introductions: The mother is Madame de Volanges, and the young woman is her daughter, Cécile. As he discusses the reason for his visit with Merteuil, he stares conspicuously at Cécile's breasts. The Volanges excuse themselves, leaving the room to Valmont and Merteuil.



Private conversation – Merteuil laughs after the Volanges leave, amused by Valmont's behavior. She asks if he knows why she called on him. "I'd hoped it might be for the pleasure of my company," Valmont says pridefully. "I need you to carry out an heroic enterprise," she replies before explaining that she wishes to get revenge on her former lover for running out on her with another woman. She goes on to say her former lover has been seeking the perfect bride and has now found one.



"Cécile Volanges," says Valmont, having deduced why she was present when he arrived. "Bastide's priority, you see, is a guaranteed virtue." "I wonder," coos Valmont, "if I'm beginning to guess what it is you're intending to propose." Merteuil tells him Bastide is away tending to his troops, concluding, "That should give you plenty of time." In veiled language, they discuss the deflowering and impregnation of Cécile. "Love and revenge," Merteuil says to Valmont as he grins devilishly. "Two of your favorites." He quickly changes his mind, however, saying it's too easy: "Any one of a dozen men could manage it... I have my reputation to think of." He also admits to pursuing one Madame de Tourvel, a notably religious woman he wishes to conquer.

"True to my profession" – "How is Belleruche?" Valmont asks as a servant opens a door into a mirrored hallway for him and Merteuil. "I'm very pleased with him," she says. Valmont asks if he's her only lover, and she says he is. Valmont says she should have more: "I think it most unhealthy, this exclusivity." Merteuil says Valmont is just jealous, and he admits this. "I think you should organize an infidelity," he says as they walk toward the main staircase. "With me, for example." Merteuil grins at him, saying, "You refuse me a simple favor, then you expect to be indulged?" Again, he says it would be too easy to seduce Cécile, concluding, "I have to follow my destiny. I have to be true to my profession." Merteuil seems to relent, telling him to return with written proof that he has bedded Tourvel, promising to sleep with him as a reward. After bidding Valmont farewell, Merteuil enters a secret room hidden behind a mirrored wall where her lover Belleruche waits for her.



Sacrament – Valmont watches his aunt and her guest, Madame de Tourvel, accept the sacrament from a priest, pacing conspicuously in the rear of the chamber. Outside, the nobles and their children walk and play on well-manicured grass. Valmont's aunt says they'll walk home as it's such a beautiful day, handing her bible to a servant. As they walk, Tourvel notes that Valmont didn't take the sacrament. "I have this appalling reputation, as you may know," Valmont says. Tourvel says she's received a warning about him from a friend she will not name, stirring Valmont's curiosity. "The fact is," Valmont continues, "I've spent my life surrounded by immoral people... and even taken pride in outshining them. Now, what I most often feel is unworthiness." "But," Tourvel replies, "it is precisely at such moments that you start to become worthy." Valmont agrees.



Opera – A soprano's voice touches our ears before we even see the theater. When the camera cuts away, we see a stage filled with actors and props, performing as hundreds of nobles watch from the audience, among them Merteuil, who sits in a private box, more interested with the others in the audience in the play. She looks up with her opera glasses to see a young man weeping in the balcony. "Chevalier," she says, greeting him after the performance. "I don't believe you know my cousin, Madame de Volanges, and Madame's daughter, Cécile." Cécile seems smitten by the young man immediately. "Tell us what we should think of the opera," she asks, and the young man gives a flustered reply that it is "sublime," himself smitten by Cécile. Merteuil politely teases him as a "rare eccentric" who appreciates the opera for the music. After he's left, Merteuil mentions that he's a music teacher, recommending that her cousin employ him.



Hunting – A cuckoo calls as Valmont and his valet, Azolan, make their way into the woods near the chateau. A maid watches them from a balcony as a rotund man scampers after them, comically attempting to remain unseen. The maid enters Tourvel's bedchamber and rouses her, whispering in her ear. Amid the trees, Valmont asks Azolan how he's getting on with Tourvel's maid. "It's been a bit boring," Azolan replies. "If I wasn't so anxious to keep Your Lordship abreast, I'd have only bothered the once." "It wasn't so much the details of your intimacy I was after,"



Valmont replies in a bored tone; "it's whether or not she's agreed to bring me Madame de Tourvel's letters." Azolan says she won't. Azolan mentions the man following them, and Valmont notes that he's been aware of the ruckus the man is making before taking the shotgun from Azolan and pointing it in the direction of the man. "I don't think we should make it too easy for him," says Valmont only a moment before pulling the trigger and walking away through a gate.

Show of generosity – Near the chateau lies a hovel hunched and disheveled like a very old person. A group of men haul away what little of value lies inside as women and children watch in despair. Valmont appears, scolding the men, telling them the owner of the house is unwell. He pushes a bag of coin into the tax collector's hand before entering the hovel. The loud pursuer watches from a nearby window as Valmont addresses the homeowner, a man who looks as old as the house. The members of the household stoop to kiss Valmont's hands, following him outside, where he distributes stacks of coin to each person. A bit later, as Azolan checks a post box, Valmont comments on the situation: "Fifty-six livres to save an entire family from ruin. That seems a genuine bargain." Azolan comments that it's all too common a situation. Valmont thanks Azolan for picking a perfect family to help for appearance's sake: none of the girls were "too pretty" or other such issues that might raise suspicion. Valmont looks at the letters, trying to discern their authors by the handwriting of the address. As they approach the Chateau, they make a plan for Valmont to 'catch' Azolan in bed with the maid and blackmail her into giving over Tourvel's letters.



Servant's gossip – In a parlor at the chateau, Valmont reads a book. Behind him, his wife and Madame de Tourvel approach, asking if it's true that he paid off the poor family's debts. He tries to play dumb, but Tourvel mentions that her servant saw it. "I don't think you should pay too much attention to servants' gossip," Valmont warns, though he quickly admits to it being the truth. His aunt asks to give him a hug, and Tourvel is shocked when he shares similar affection with her. Soon thereafter, we see



Tourvel take the pair of letters from a servant. Later, as she reads them, Valmont sits across the parlor. Tourvel looks at him from over the letter, saying she can't believe he lives such a "dissolute life." Valmont says she has "an exaggerated idea" of his generosity and depravity. He then says it's her influence that has swayed him, telling Tourvel that he loves and adores her and throwing himself at her feet, begging for her to help him. When Tourvel breaks away from him and moves to her room upstairs, he follows, stalking like a predator. He bends to peek through the keyhole, seeing Tourvel in a tizzy, and he walks away with a prideful smile.

Planned discovery – Chamber music plays as Valmont, by candlelight, walks into Azolan's chambers, finding him in bed with Tourvel's maid. He scolds his servant, saying he rang a number of times before ordering him to fetch him hot water. After he's gone, Valmont sits next to the girl, saying he'll keep quiet if she agrees to his "price." Thinking he means a sexual favor, the girl lays back and spreads her legs, but Valmont waves his hand in disapproval. "No, no. Nothing like that. All I want is to get to see every letter that Madame de Tourvel has received... and every letter she writes from now on." The maid tries to argue, but Valmont won't hear it, giving her some coin for good measure before leaving. Azolan meets him wordlessly outside before they depart for their respective chambers.



Music lesson – In a parlor somewhere, Danceny and Cécile sing while playing instruments, working on arpeggios. Cécile's mother listens, watching behind them. Hearing a sour note, Danceny stands to help Cécile adjust her grip on her harp strings, passing her a note at the same time. She opens it to see it reads, "I love you." Quickly, she hides it and begins plucking the strings again as Danceny begins playing and singing. Merteuil enters the room, smiling viciously as she watches the young people make eyes at one another. A bit later, we hear the same arpeggio sung by a tenor on stage at the opera. Cécile sits in Merteuil's booth, staring out at Danceny. She asks Merteuil if she should respond to Danceny's letters, and Merteuil says it would be wrong given the circumstance. Merteuil then tells Cécile that she's to be married to Bastide, someone she knows only "slightly." When she tells Cécile Bastide's age, Cécile practically throws a fit, catching herself after the outburst. Merteuil promises to get her messages to Danceny so long as she is allowed to read both ends of the conversation. Cécile agrees.



Offense – Madame de Tourvel walks through one of the chateau's gardens. Nearby, Valmont walks as well, whistling out a bird call. "I trust you slept well, madame," he says, approaching her. She scolds him, saying, "I thought the least I could hope for is that you would respect me." "But I do," Valmont replies, "of course!" She says this confirms everything she's been told about him, accusing him of planning everything and trotting away. Valmont jumps to keep pace with her, attempting to defend himself even when she tries to ignore him. He claims to be fascinated by her goodness and says this is what led him to feeling true love for the first time. "It's not that I want to have you, all I want is to deserve you," he concludes. "Tell me what to do." She orders Valmont to leave his aunt's chateau. He agrees, asking one favor: to know who besmirched his good name to Tourvel. She refuses.



Correspondence – Late that night, Tourvel's maid delivers the letters to Azolan. Later still, we see Valmont reading the letters to Azolan. "He knows exactly how far he may venture without risk and guarantees his own security by tormenting only the safest kind of victim: women. Madame de Volanges." The next morning, Valmont wishes his aunt a fond farewell at the chateau steps. Tourvel is there too, and Valmont promises to write soon before forcing a kiss onto her. Sometime later, we see Valmont penning this letter, using the back of a lover as a writing desk. She is unable to put up with the tickling, so he puts away his pen and ink and turns his attention back to her.



Remade plans – Merteuil stirs sugar into her tea in a parlor. "Your damned cousin," says Valmont, "the Volanges bitch, wanted me away from Madame de Tourvel. Well, now I am, and I intend to make her suffer for it. Your plan—to ruin her daughter—are you making any progress?" Merteuil has already enlisted him without his knowledge: "I told Danceny you would act as his confidant and adviser. I need you to stiffen his resolve, if that is the phrase." They sit on the couch next to each other to drink their tea, and Valmont asks how she became the woman she is. "Women are obliged to be far more skillful than men," Merteuil replies. "You can ruin our reputation and our life with a few well-chosen words. So, of course, I had to invent not only myself, but ways of escape no one has ever thought of before." She says she knew the meaning behind her life was to dominate men and avenge her sex through social deceit at a young age. She tells Valmont about meeting him and how their affair was the one time she allowed herself to be "controlled by... desire." She quiets as she hears the door open. A servant enters and whispers in her ear. "Ah!" she says, grinning, "Madame de Volanges!"



News of a dangerous liaison – Madame de Volanges rushes into the parlor, saying she's responding to an urgent note. With much drama and bluster, Merteuil tells Volanges that a "dangerous liaison" has "sprung up" between Cécile and Danceny. Volanges deflects, saying Cécile is but a child and Danceny is respectable. We catch a glimpse of Valmont hiding in a corner. "Does Cécile have a great many correspondents?" Merteuil asks. "Why do you ask?" Volanges responds. Merteuil says she went into Cécile's chambers and saw the girl stuffing letters into her topmost desk drawer. Valmont struggles to remain hidden as Merteuil says her goodbyes to her cousin. He emerges from his hiding spot after she's left, calling Merteuil a "genuinely wicked woman." They make plans for Valmont to return to his aunt's chateau, where he can pursue both their revenge on Volanges and his conquest of Tourvel. Valmont leans in, trying to steal a kiss, but Merteuil denies him, demanding proof of his affair with Tourvel in writing.



Letters – The Madame de Volanges storms into her daughter's room and looks in the drawer Merteuil told her. Cécile stands in shocked horror, dropping her sewing. When her mother holds up the letters, the girl collapses. Sometime later, Valmont paces around a parlor toward a couch where Cécile sits, doing embroidery. He twiddles a sealed letter behind his back, trying to get her attention as he passes. Her mother eyes him with distrust, though she doesn't see the letter. Frustrated, Valmont sits next to Tourvel, who shoots him an equally frustrated look before going back to her sewing. Valmont's aunt speaks up to tell him that the poor family he helped is on the mend, but Valmont interrupts her, saying that Tourvel looks ill. The women dote on her, insisting they go get fresh air. He throws the letter into Cécile's sewing kit while the others are distracted and steals her shawl as she exits, instructing her to leave and come back. When she does, he tells her about his plan to act as a go-between for Cécile and Danceny, but he needs to make a copy of her bedchamber key. He tells her where it is and gives her a fake to replace it until the copy can be made.



Changing keys – Cécile races upstairs to do as Valmont has asked. She finds the key with the blue ribbon on the mantelpiece beneath the clock and begins to affix the blue ribbon to the fake, but in her haste she knocks the real key into a large vase. Outside, Valmont strikes up a conversation with Tourvel, who scolds him for returning, but he cuts things off when Volanges walks back inside and up the stairs. He rushes down the halls to beat her, trying to warn Cécile that her mother is coming. Seeing the girl struggle with the vase, Valmont upends it, and the key tumbles out. He quickly finds a hiding spot in the other room, and Cécile makes up a story about coming upstairs to retrieve her mother's shawl. Unable to pass the key to Valmont, she leaves it on the post of the staircase for him to find.



Anger – Valmont once again finds Tourvel in the chateau garden. "Why are you so angry with me?" Valmont asks her, standing close. "All I can offer you is my friendship," Tourvel says, shaking with emotion. "Can't you accept it?" "I could pretend to," he responds, "but that would be dishonest." He says that he's changed and that what he feels for her goes far beyond friendship. When she walks away, he accuses her of being unfriendly, and she asks what he means. She spits back that he sabotages her piece of mind. "You were wrong to feel threatened by me, madame," he says, walking toward her. "Your happiness is far more important to me than my own. That is what I mean when I say I love you." She says they shouldn't be talking like this, and he moves to leave, but he turns and says that they shouldn't avoid each other. She says this is amenable, so long as he follows her simple rules.



Secret passage – Late that night, Valmont opens a secret door and makes his way into Cécile's bedchamber. He frightens her awake after touching her body but tells her not to be scared, and she quiets. When he says he has no letter, she looks at him, confused before Valmont leans forward and kisses Cécile. The kiss quickly turns into groping and fingering, causing her to yelp and reach for the bell cord near her bed, but Valmont pulls her back and covers her mouth, all while continuing the assault. He's able to blackmail her into submission, threatening to spin a deceitful story about how she gave him the key to her bedchamber. She's still unwilling to put up with the groping, but he says he'll go if she'll give him a kiss. He pushes her back down, saying that he kissed her, but she didn't kiss him, and he's not leaving without his kiss.



"Something going on" – The next day, Valmont's aunt's guests all gather for lunch at a grand table. Cécile stares daggers at Valmont from across the table, and he responds by making a rude gesture with his tongue. Cécile jumps up and runs to her room, her mother excusing herself to see what upset her. Late that night, Valmont tries to get into Cécile's bedchamber, finding the secret passage barred closed. Cécile writes a letter to Merteuil, begging for her assistance, so Merteuil takes the opportunity to meet with the young woman. "There's something going on," Cécile's mother tells her as she's led up to the girl's room. "Cécile won't tell me. You must speak to her at once." Next comes a shot of Merteuil's face as she listens to the girl talk about what Valmont did. "I'm so ashamed," Cécile says, looking up at Merteuil. "You'll find the shame is like the pain," the Marquise says with a cold smile, "you only feel it once." She begins advising Cécile on how to use her womanly powers of seduction to get what she wants, calling Valmont's visits "instruction."



Congratulations – Merteuil enters a party with Valmont at her side. Cécile rises to greet them. "I don't think I've congratulated you on your revenge," Merteuil coos after Cécile walks away. "I believe from now on, you'll find her door unbolted." They walk away together, Merteuil wondering where Tourvel is. Vaguely, Valmont blames the game he's playing with her, saying he loves "watching the battle between love and virtue." Merteuil expresses concern that he loves watching more than winning. He jokes that it's a shame their 'agreement' rides on him completing the task he set himself. She echoes his earlier sentiments that it would have been too easy: "One does not applaud the tenor for clearing his throat." Valmont stifles his laughter at this joke. A chamber performance of a song from an opera begins, and Tourvel enters from the side to watch. Making her way to a seat, she smiles at Valmont. He stares, slackjawed, and she deigns him another smile. Merteuil takes notice.



Education – By candlelight, Valmont and Cécile make their way into a chamber. "As with every other science," Valmont says as they take each other's clothes off, "the first thing you must learn is to call everything by its proper name... Without the correct polite vocabulary, how can you indicate what you would like me to do or make an offer of something I might find agreeable?" Cécile wonders why lovers need talk at all. To illustrate, Valmont tells a story from before Cécile's birth about her mother, who was, by his assessment, "more noted for her enthusiasm than her ability," making Cécile laugh when he reveals the 'third party' in the story was himself. "You asked me if Monsieur de Bastide would be pleased with your abilities, and the answer is education is never a waste." They move closer together in the bed, kissing as Valmont begins to instruct Cécile on how to use Latin for pillow talk.



"Inches from surrender" – A priest stands before the altar in the chapel near the chateau, chanting a prayer in Latin. Valmont enters and sits, surprising Tourvel, who has never seen him here. He looks at her, ignoring the service. Soon, we see them walking side by side in the garden as Valmont's voice narrates: "We go for a walk together almost every day. A little further down the path that has no turning." Merteuil sips tea while reading the letter as Valmont's voiceover continues his report. The camera goes back to the garden where Valmont tells Tourvel he wishes she knew him better so she could know how much he's changed, illustrating this idea with how his friends talk of him these days. Tourvel laughs when he mentions that they say he's celibate. "I feel she is inches from surrender," the voiceover continues. "Her eyes are closing." Late that stormy night, Valmont stages a chance encounter in order to gain a private moment with Tourvel. He torments her again with admissions of love and a demand for her to love him back. Eventually, she cracks, telling him she loves him back, and he kisses her neck. She begins to panic



Taken ill – Tourvel begins to hyperventilate, and Valmont lays her on the bed, loosening the front of her corset. She begins to breathe easier, and Valmont leans close, their lips almost touching before he suddenly pulls back, leaving Tourvel sobbing in her chambers as he goes to fetch a servant who rushes downstairs to find more help. Soon, the servant and his aunt appear, caring for Tourvel, who Valmont says has suddenly taken ill. She asks for them to not call for a doctor as Valmont leaves. Outside, he encounters Volanges, hissing at her rudely and making her walk away from the bedchamber. Tourvel tells Valmont's aunt that she must leave, as she's in love with her nephew. The older woman commiserates before delivering some wisdom: "Do you still think men love the way we do? No. Men enjoy the happiness they feel. We can only enjoy the happiness we give." Tourvel says that he let her go, and Valmont's aunt says she should escape while she can.



Late night escape – Azolan rushes across Valmont's bedchamber to rouse him. Outside, a carriage clatters away in the night. Valmont begins barking orders, telling Azolan to follow Tourvel and report back everything he sees and hears about her. He then throws the servant a bag of coins, saying it's payment for bribes and that his payment for the task will come later.



Pleasant surprise – Tourvel sits at a desk penning a letter to a priest, saying that while she doesn't think the interview is necessary, she will meet with a third party on Thursday. She passes the letter to a waiting servant with instructions. Azolan returns to Valmont with his report, which is that nothing has happened, she's not eating much, and she's reading the book Christian Thoughts: Vol. II. Valmont gives Azolan his payment as Merteuil enters the room with Danceny in tow. "What a pleasant surprise," Valmont says, crossing the room to greet him. Danceny thanks him for keeping the relationship between himself and Cécile alive with his advice and letter-carrying. He mentions that Cécile's last letter was unique, and the camera finds her writing the letter on Valmont's back as he relays the proper verbiage. Another shot sees Merteuil reading the letter beforehand, grinning. Danceny gives the other two some privacy, and Valmont reveals to Merteuil that Cécile may be pregnant with his child. She politely celebrates his successful revenge before taunting him about Tourvel. Valmont swears to have Tourvel this coming Thursday, but Merteuil doesn't stop teasing.



Thursday – Servants lead Valmont deep into an opulent house as a clock chimes six. In a parlor, Tourvel sits with her back to the door. She slowly rises to greet Valmont. He circles the room around her before asking if she knows why he is visiting. She says she doesn't see the



need for reconciliation, but he begins spitting venom, saying she treats him with contempt. She tells him to stay away, and he says she's made him terribly unhappy. "I've only ever wanted your happiness," she says. "How can I be happy without you?" he asks. "I must have you or die." He lunges at Tourvel, begging on his knees, and she scampers away. "Death it is," he quips. He makes a dramatic speech about the smallness of this sacrifice, and she begs him not to go, tugging on Valmont's arm, who turns, and they kiss. They sink down to a nearby couch, where Tourvel promises, "No more refusals. No more regrets." Valmont begins to pull off her clothes and lie her back on the couch as he kisses her body.

"Success!" – "Success!" Valmont shouts as he scampers up a staircase. "Success!" Merteuil listens happily as he recounts his night with Tourvel. "It had a kind of charm that I don't think I've ever experienced before," he explains. "Once she'd surrendered, she behaved with perfect candor. Total mutual delirium. Which, for the first time ever with me, outlasted the pleasure itself." As she listens, Merteuil's smile fades: She realizes that Valmont has fallen in love. He ends his story by teasing her, saying he's in a position to claim his reward. Before he can become physically flirtatious, Merteuil stands and walks away, insisting on having the written proof before they do anything, much to Valmont's chagrin. She scolds him for falling in love—a fact Valmont denies—as she leads him toward the exit. Valmont swears to her that they can love again as they used to, but his "current infatuation" with Tourvel is "beyond my control." These words seem to trigger some anger in Merteuil, who walks away quickly. In the hidden doorway, Merteuil takes a moment to collect herself before rushing in to happily meet her lover.



Life like a hermit – A carriage rolls away as Merteuil's voice reads a letter aloud, telling Valmont that she will be going away and returning in a few weeks. Then, they shall spend a single night together so long as he can furnish the written proof she requires. Valmont states in his reply that he is "living like a medieval hermit." After he says this, we see him kissing a woman in a yellow dress on a couch. Azolan appears and whispers something in his ear, and he collects himself, telling the woman a lady is coming, and she won't like her presence. Tourvel enters the room to see Valmont paying the woman, and she feels more jealousy and embarrassment when the woman laughs on her way out. Tourvel says she knows the woman is a sex worker, and she confronts Valmont, but he asks for her to hear him out before she judges. Valmont spins a story, saying the money is for the woman's charitable giving. "I want to believe you," Tourvel says eventually. "I knew you were coming up!" Valmont chuckles. "You were announced. Hearing this, Tourvel apologizes and hugs his head to her chest. "It is I who must apologize," Valmont says with an uncharacteristic candor. "It was most insensitive of me."



Love and jealousy – Lying sweaty in a bed, Valmont whispers to Tourvel, "I didn't think it was possible for me to love you more, but your jealousy..." Tourvel whispers back, "I love you so much," and they kiss passionately. Valmont wonders aloud when she'll start writing to him again. Merteuil's voiceover begins where the last letter left off: "My dear Vicomte, I don't believe this self-denial can be good for you. I hope it doesn't mean you're neglecting your little pupil." Valmont crosses a rainy courtyard before we see him and Cécile lying in bed together.



"Where can Danceny be?" the girl asks. "I have all my people out looking for him," Valmont replies, catching his breath. "There's no trace of him." Something clatters, startling them. Jumping up to see what it is, Valmont carelessly elbows Cécile in the chin, causing her to cry out and roll to the floor. He pulls her back into the bed, where they can see she is bleeding: she's had a miscarriage. Outside her chateau, Merteuil exits a carriage with a dark-haired young man in tow. Azolan takes notice.

The Chevalier found – Valmont makes his way up the mirrored corridor in Merteuil's chateau by candlelight, rattling the edges of the mirrors until he finds the secret door. Valmont finds Merteuil lying with her lover within, the young man hiding his face in her neck. He's quickly recognized, however, and turns to face Valmont: it's Danceny. "It's you that I'm looking for," says Valmont. "Mademoiselle Cécile returns to Paris after an absence of over two months. Now, what do you suppose is uppermost in her mind? Answer, of course: The longed-for reunion with her beloved Chevalier." Merteuil accuses Valmont of making mischief, but he tells them that she's ill. Valmont assures the young man that Cécile will be alright before showing Merteuil a letter. When she sees whose handwriting it is, she smirks and tries to take it, but Valmont playfully pulls it away.



Obligation fulfilled – A bit later, Merteuil reads the letter in a parlor of her chateau. "I see she writes as badly as she dresses," she quips. "Is it really true the little one has been ill?" Valmont confirms that Cécile has had a miscarriage. "Isn't there something else that we should be discussing?" Valmont asks, pressing his body to Merteuil's back. She tries to ignore him, making an insult about how Danceny is better equipped to serve her. "If I thought you would be your old charming self," she says, "I might invite you to visit me one evening next week. I still love you, you see... in spite of all your faults and my complaints." As she leads him toward the staircase, Valmont wonders if there will be some new condition thrown at him. She gives him instructions by telling a story told to her by a friend: Valmont is to separate from Tourvel, replying to her every objection with the words "It's beyond my control."



"Beyond my control" – The next day, Valmont makes his way to Tourvel's home, where they meet in a parlor. Tourvel rushes to him, throws her arms around him, and kisses him deeply. She says she gets so worried when he's late that she'll never get to see him again. Valmont agrees, saying he feels like that at this moment. "What?" she says after realizing this is no joke. "I'm so bored, you see," he replies. "It's beyond my control." Just as in Merteuil's story, Tourvel is heartbroken and makes objection after objection, Valmont simply repeating the phrase, "It's beyond my control." As he repeats himself, we see pain on his face: he doesn't want to do this, but he feels he must to prove himself in Merteuil's eyes. She starts hammering her fists against his chest in anger, and he pushes her away, knocking her to the floor. Again, he repeats the phrase as she sobs. He leaves her, hesitating in the doorway for a moment before stomping away.



A greater glory – A carriage pulls up to Merteuil's chateau. Valmont exits, barking the order, "Tomorrow morning, early." Inside he enters a large parlor and confronts Merteuil. "This is not your appointed night," she says, but he ignores her, instead telling her he's done as she asked. "How wonderful of you," she grins. He says this betrayal may be his greatest achievement, though it could be outclassed by a "greater glory." Merteuil asks what this is, and Valmont replies, "To win her back." Merteuil says the wound he struck was designed to be "fatal" before revealing that her plan all along was to dominate Valmont, to make him happy, and then to break his heart. She mocks his inability to see what was going on and the fact that he is still in love with Tourvel. Valmont begins shouting, even slapping her, but Merteuil remains calm, asking, "Haven't you had enough of bullying women for the time being?" Valmont says that he's ruined her relationship with Danceny, and he demands that he come with her upstairs, saying a refusal would be a declaration of war. "Alright," says Merteuil. "War."



Duel – Reading a letter to Danceny, Merteuil reveals the relationship between Valmont and Cécile as Valmont and Danceny circle each other beneath a bridge, rapiers drawn. Steel clangs as they fight. Eventually, Valmont throws Danceny to the ground, but he doesn't make a killing strike. Somewhere in the city, the Volanges visit Tourvel, who is lying in a hospital bed. "I'm dying because I wouldn't believe you," she says. Steel clashes again, and this time Valmont is thrown to the ground. We see Tourvel undergo a painful-looking medical treatment as nuns pray over her. As Valmont takes his position again, he thinks of Tourvel before throwing Danceny against a wall. Both are beginning to tire, both bleeding. Valmont decides something, dropping his sword and flinging himself at Danceny, who stabs him. "Fetch the surgeon!" Danceny cries out as Valmont lies in shock in the snow. "No," pleads Valmont.



Advice and a request – Azolan lowers himself to the ground, cradling the dying Valmont on his lap. Weakly, Valmont asks Danceny for a moment of his time, saying, "Two things: a word of advice, which of course you may ignore, but... it is honestly intended... and a request." Danceny asks him to continue. "The advice is: Be careful of the Marquise de Merteuil. You must permit me to treat with skepticism... anything you have to say about her. Nevertheless, I must tell you, in this affair, we are both her creatures, as I believe her letters to me will prove." He pulls a bloodstained stack of letters from his pocket, asking Danceny to circulate them. His request is to get a message to Tourvel: "I want you to tell her that I cannot explain why I broke with her as I did. But that since then, my life has been worth nothing." A tear trickles down his face as he delivers the last words, "Tell her her love was the only real happiness that I have ever known." Danceny pledges to get the message to her. The camera pulls up, showing the pool of blood beneath Valmont in the snow as Azolan covers his body.



Breakdown – True to his word, Danceny relays the message to Tourvel on her deathbed. "Enough," she says. "Draw the curtains." Danceny does as she asks, allowing her to die in peace. A bit later, the nuns pray over her body as they close her eyes and cover her in a shroud. A scream is heard outside of Merteuil's bedchamber. She barges into her room, sobbing at the top of her lungs and knocking everything from the tables nearby. Servants rush in to attend to her, but she tells them to leave, curling up in a ball on the floor and sobbing loudly.



Booing – The orchestra tunes up at the opera as the audience murmurs. All falls silent as Merteuil enters her private box, however. She smiles at the crowd, but one by one, everyone in the audience begins to hiss and boo. Realizing she isn't welcome, she turns and leaves. We see her in her bedchamber as she slowly removes her jewelry. Slowly, Merteuil begins to remove her makeup. Wipe after wipe, the confident look on her face fades, becoming sadder, more afraid. Tears form in the corners of her eyes as she continues to wipe, and the screen fades to black.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Marquise de Merteuil

Merteuil seems to know everyone. She is a powerful socialite and noble in Paris, and she uses that power to enact her petty social games like ruining marriages and foiling the plans of her former lovers. Her love and jealousy of Valmont leads to her downfall as each finds their equal in the other.

Scornful The Marquise has a mass of spite wound up inside of her. Some of this is entirely understandable: she is a woman in a man's world, and even with her wealth and power, all it would take is a word from a man to destroy her. Other scorn is more reactionary, such as her jealousy around Valmont falling for Tourvel. She takes advantage of this scorn, initiating a plan to dominate Valmont, but it leads to her downfall, as Valmont is a man and he gives many a word to Danceny to circulate.

Planner Merteuil is always acting on a plan. She loves playing games without others' knowledge, manipulating them into embarrassing or scandalous situations. Most of her time is spent maintaining these schemes either through letter writing, manipulation, or information gathering. She shows herself to be more skilled than even Valmont at this, leaving everyone in the dark to her social games and promiscuity until Danceny circulates Valmont's letters after his death.

Dominant Domination is a major character trait of Merteuil's. Her *raison d'être* from a young age was to dominate and humiliate men as revenge for the way they hold women down. She shows this trait subtly through most of the film, showing it in a refusal to react and through manipulation. Toward the end of the film, she reveals that she was working with Valmont specifically to dominate him, achieving this through making him abandon the love of his life before denying him a sexual rendezvous.

Vicomte de Valmont

Valmont is a Parisian aristocrat who torments women for fun. He joins forces with his former lover, Merteuil, in order to help her get some warped revenge against another former lover of hers. Things get complicated when he starts to fall in love with another woman he's targeted for torment.

Prideful Valmont's pride is legendary and frequently mentioned before we actually see it in practice. He thinks himself above everyone: faster, stronger, smarter, and wittier. This helps him act in ways that dupe Tourvel and others who have already been warned about his behavior. It's also the main justification behind his torment of women: if they were just adequate like Merteuil, they'd never fall for his deceit. He begins to struggle with his pride for the first time when he realizes he has fallen in love with Tourvel specifically because his pride is wrapped up in his cruelty and promiscuity.

Cruel This is one of Valmont's core traits. He has a very sociopathic worldview in which he sees others as lesser, as things to be toyed with. This comes out most clearly in his initial treatment of Cécile when he torments the teenager and rapes her for the sake of a misguided revenge plot in the hopes of having sex with a former lover. Most would take much more persuasion and pressure to commit such acts, but not Valmont. He rejoices in making other people upset, frequently pushing the boundaries of polite behavior to see if he can get people to remove their social masks. In the end, he makes one last cruel act in an attempt at seeing justice done when he gives his correspondence with Merteuil to Danceny and asks him to circulate it. In this way, he ruins Merteuil's reputation, sapping the joy from her life in much the same way her games have taken his love and his life.

Playful There is an odd playfulness about Valmont. He's often seen jumping and running, such as when he sprints up Merteuil's steps screaming, "Success!" Even while he's doing very cruel things to others, he smiles as if he's winning a game of cards. He also sits in a goofy way, trying to get a rise out of others by propping his feet up on couches and tables. Valmont also plays explicitly sexual games with his lovers, writing letters on their backs and other similar moments.

Madame de Tourvel

Tourvel is the wife of a member of parliament. She is shown to be very pious and traditional, setting her at odds with many of the Paris elite. It is these characteristics that make her first a target of Valmont, then the only woman he's ever loved.

Pious We don't see a lot of this, but it is stated repeatedly by multiple characters. Valmont and Merteuil express how Tourvel's piety will make her a difficult conquest. When Azolan returns from following her for

a handful of days, he reports to Valmont that Tourvel is reading "Christian Thoughts: Vol. II." This shows that in her times of crisis, she turns toward her faith. The clearest show of her faith happens twice when we see her in church. She seems joyous to take the sacrament, and even when others are distracted by Valmont, she keeps her attention on the priest.

Emotional Madame de Tourvel is incredibly emotional. Most of the other women in her position are keen to keep their emotions hidden or muted, but not her. She wears her mood on her sleeve. This is such an issue, she is often taken for being ill because of her disposition. Valmont takes joy in his harassment specifically because he is able to get such a rise out of Tourvel. This emotional behavior, however, becomes one of the things he finds so attractive about her. It's through her honest emotional conversation that Valmont is brought in, becoming devoted instead of simply playing his cruel games. Her emotions kill her in the end, Valmont's final heartbreak making her fatally ill.

Traditional Tourvel is targeted by Valmont because she is very traditional. Unflappably so. She adheres to strict religious practice, often reading books about Christianity and proper behavior. Tourvel is also extremely disturbed by Valmont's attention, especially at first. As she begins to fall in love, she vocally asks for God's help and says he must have abandoned her for some sort of pride. It's an appeal to her traditional role as a woman, as a carer for men, by Valmont's aunt that makes her decide to give in to Valmont's advances. Less about the character herself and more the writing, but her death of a broken heart is incredibly traditional for women in dramatic literature.

THEMES

Society

Class This is a story that could only happen in an aristocratic setting. The only time we see people who aren't rich are when there are moments of servants interacting with their masters and when Valmont uses the poor family as a prop in his game to conquer Tourvel. There is not a singular moment that shows this theme better than any other: the absolute wealth and power of the main characters are made clear from the first seconds of the film until the very end. These are the games of the rich and powerful. Lower-class people wouldn't ever have the time or means to enact some of these complex plans, and most wouldn't be interested in such cruelty. Haunting the narrative is the impending revolution, which was triggered by the behavior of Parisian nobility similar to what we see in the film: instead of using their wealth and influence to make the world a better place, we see all of the nobles simply live richly, waste their time, and give extra effort to petty pastimes all while flocks of servants dress, feed, wash, and preen them. In many ways, *Dangerous Liaisons* is a condemnation of such disparity and the depravity of those with endless power and wealth but no responsibility.

Work/Leisure This theme connects deeply to class. We're not shown a lot of lower-class people, and even many of the servants we see are lesser nobility, such as Azolan. The only work we watch being done is that which prepares and sustains the nobles who make up the main cast. We see armies of butlers and maids preparing and serving meals, dressing the main characters, and even taking care of their personal hygiene. The nobles, on the other hand, are never seen doing anything resembling work. They seem to have perpetual free time, visiting others, walking in gardens, sipping tea and gossiping, and viewing the opera. *Dangerous Liaisons* is a film about the cruel games of the leisure class, how people with no problems will seek to create problems as a form of entertainment. While Valmont and Merteuil cloak their strange desires in philosophical reasoning to "unmask the phonies" as it were, they both simply take a cruel pleasure in hurting others. We see this most in Valmont, who exclusively targets women who have the hardest time being taken seriously by a sexist society and risk the most revealing their indiscretions to the public.

Gender While it falls to the wayside for the sake of drama, we're given many glimpses into the gender norms of pre-revolution Parisian nobility. In a lot of ways, there isn't much difference in form, but there is a strict segregation: Men have male servants and women have female servants. We see more similarities than differences in some ways. Both men and women among the nobility have armies of servants who dress them, do their makeup, take care of their grooming, run their messages, and prepare their meals.

Both men and women are concerned with appearances and fashion, changing many times per day to impress the others in their class. The typical historic norms are in place as well. Women are expected to be submissive and receptive to men, and men wield great social and political power. This is shown most clearly in how Valmont takes down Merteuil at the film's end, echoing something she said earlier in the film about how women must outperform men because they can "ruin our reputation and our life with a few well-chosen words." There is some show of freedom in sexuality. While he does it for cruel reasons, Valmont is teaching Cécile not just to please other men but how to get pleasure for herself as well. Merteuil and Valmont celebrate their promiscuity with each other in private, often sharing details of their recent liaisons. In all, we're shown a complicated if incomplete view of gender and gender roles among Parisian nobility.

Illustrative Moment One of the clearest moments of this theme in the film happens at the very beginning. We see Valmont and Merteuil go through a typical morning, dressing in a back-and-forth montage. Here they do very similar things, though different. Merteuil's maids lotion and powder her body, while Valmont's servants powder his wig and pluck his nose hairs. This moment showcases both the wealth and the superficiality of these people in spite of their differences of gender. For people of their class and time, there is more similarity in gender than difference.



Justice

Revenge Revenge comes up many times throughout the film. It's Merteuil's main interest in Valmont's help: she wants him to help her get revenge on a former lover of hers. They take this very far, victimizing other people like Cécile and Danceny in order to enact their plan. They end up tearing each other apart, Merteuil turning Danceny on Valmont, and Valmont giving Danceny his correspondence with Merteuil.

Illustrative moment We see Valmont's final revenge in full swing at the end of the film. Danceny spreads his correspondence with Merteuil, telling Parisian society about all the skeletons in her closet. We see Merteuil throwing a tantrum when she hears this. She screams and sobs, knocking all of her makeup equipment to the floor and throwing something at a nearby mirror, breaking it. As she mentioned earlier, all it takes is a few "well-chosen words" for a man to bring down a woman. This is exactly what Valmont has done after death.



Sexuality

Attraction A subtle yet important theme, attraction arises at several key points in the film. We see it first in a comedic sense. In an early scene, Valmont stares at Cécile's bust, trying to get her mother to react. There is an obvious attraction between Merteuil and Valmont made clear by the fact that they were once lovers but cemented by their love of tormenting other nobles. We see it again in a more serious light when the relationship between Tourvel and Valmont grows deeper. They are frequently seen staring at each other. Valmont's attraction is so clear to Merteuil, she becomes jealous. He recognizes his own genuine attraction to Tourvel too late, only after breaking her heart.

Illustrative moment The clearest moment of attraction happens at the film's midpoint. Tourvel has been avoiding Valmont, but she appears at a party to hear a tenor sing. Valmont's eyes find her as soon as she enters the room, and she passes behind him with a smile, his head swiveling to follow her. Valmont stares obviously, a bit slack-jawed. His attraction in this moment is so clear that Merteuil is affected by it, growing jealous.



Love Portrayals of love are extremely brief in *Dangerous Liaisons*. Infidelity dwarfs these moments, but their rarity makes these moments all the stronger. We see Valmont begin to fall for Tourvel, but he doesn't see it at first. Merteuil has to point it out first. We also hear her admit to having loved Valmont, describing it as her one lapse of control in her entire life. Tourvel falls hard for Valmont, and the frankly bad advice of Valmont's aunt leads her to give in to Valmont's sexual desires in order to fulfill her "purpose as a woman" to spread happiness to men. She does love Valmont enough to betray her values, and he finds himself completely devoted to her and her happiness. In order to reclaim his former life and gain Merteuil's approval once more, Valmont betrays Tourvel and breaks both of their hearts. Realizing how he's killed his love and his chance at true happiness in life, Valmont drops his sword during his duel with Danceny, ending his life and revealing the clandestine affairs of Merteuil to Paris' aristocrats.

Illustrative moment One of the most obvious moments of love in the entire film happens during the second sexual encounter between Tourvel and Valmont. Lying together after having sex, they whisper to one another about how much they love each other and how good they feel. We quickly see this moment contrasted with one of Cécile's lessons where Valmont betrays little feeling and seems not to notice or care when he elbows the girl in the head while rolling out of the bed.



Infidelity We're shown countless examples of infidelity throughout *Dangerous Liaisons*. It is one of the most repeated ideas shown on screen. All things lead toward infidelity, both Merteuil and Valmont seeking to corrupt the incorruptible and embarrass the social leaders of Paris society. Through their practices of infidelity, they get a thrill. In the end, however, their desire for others drives a wedge between them, and jealousy leads to both of their downfalls as their unfaithful lives are broadcast to Paris society as per Valmont's dying wish.

Illustrative moment While there are too many moments of this theme to count, one of the more important is when Cécile begins her "lessons" under Valmont in her bedchamber. In spite of their first clandestine encounter being a sexual assault, Merteuil's intervention leads Cécile to accept his "instruction" on how to excite her future lovers. It's during these "lessons" that Valmont impregnates her as well as when she suffers a miscarriage.



Multiple partners Just like infidelity, the idea of multiple sexual partners is too many to count in this film. The idea of being able to conceal this infidelity comes up often as well. We see an odd relationship between Valmont and Merteuil, who share their sexual conquests with one another freely, reveling in their shared love of infidelity and sexual intrigue. From others, however, they seek to conceal their relationship. Valmont is so skilled at this that he is able to convince Tourvel that he has no sexual relations with the known courtesan.

Illustrative moment One of the clearer moments of this theme comes fully into view toward the film's end. Here, Valmont finds Merteuil's secret bedroom where she meets with her other lovers and discovers her in bed with one such man. Valmont has had his suspicions, but it's only when the young man turns to face him that we see Danceny lying with Merteuil. In this moment, we see how little reaction there is between Valmont and Merteuil at seeing Danceny in bed with her, but we see jealousy rise in Merteuil when Valmont informs Danceny that Cécile is ill, and he jumps from her bed to see his primary lover.



Sexual assault A minor yet important theme, we see an outright rape about halfway through the film when Valmont enters Cécile's bedchamber for the first time. The girl is obviously distraught after the experience, acting strangely, especially when Valmont covertly taunts her with rude gestures at the dinner table. Her mother is unable to get a word out of her and calls on Merteuil, who normalizes what happened to Cécile and tells her to subject herself to further encounters for the sake of her future pleasure. Valmont

continues to see the girl, giving her “instruction” on how to please men during their sexual encounters. In this moment, we can see elements of rape culture that still exist in our society today.

Illustrative moment About halfway through the film, we watch Valmont sexually assault Cécile. She tries to push him away, screams, and demands that he leave, but he blackmails her, saying her mother will believe him when he says he was there on Cécile’s invitation. How else would he get a key? This sickening scene continues with Valmont feeling her up and fingering her before forcing Cécile onto the bed and demanding that she kiss her. Thinking she’s done this by bearing his groping and letting him kiss her, she expects him to leave, but he says he’s not leaving without her actually kissing him and tells her to get comfortable.



Seduction Both Merteuil and Valmont are skilled in the art of seduction and but they do not intend to pursue further in love or marriage. They are “con man” pretenders who practice the sport of hunting lovers to have sexual pleasure and put people into scandalous situations for their own. Their behavior mirrors that of a big game hunter: once they have conquered one target, they begin seeking another. Valmont targets Tourvel specifically because he believes it will be terribly difficult to convince her to start an affair. Merteuil and Valmont use every tool at their disposal, from letters filled with charming words to emotionally distressing behavior, from fashion to paying servants to stalk their prey for them. Their combination of intense sexual desire and confidence game makes them particularly dangerous among the Parisian nobility. Not only do they wish to have sex with many others, they want to dominate their “preys” mentally, thinking this cruelty proves their superiority.

Illustrative Moment One of the best examples of how seduction appears in *Dangerous Liaisons* happens just after the halfway point of the film when Danceny calls on Valmont to thank him for his guidance and carrying his letters to and from Cécile. Here, Merteuil and Valmont share in a shared knowledge of not only the letters between the young lovers but also the reality of their situation: Valmont dictated the letter, which Danceny found so titillating after one of his “lessons” with Cécile. The two older nobles try to hide their amusement as Danceny vaguely talks about what was said and how much he’s fallen for Cécile. In this film, seduction is just a cruel tool for Valmont’s and Merteuil’s amusement.



The art / skills of lovemaking People think lovemaking is an expression of desire, love, and intimacy, but *Dangerous Liaisons* shows us a much more clinical view of sexuality. Valmont and Merteuil see themselves as masters of a great art, not just having the ability to seduce anyone they want, but being teachers as well as practitioners of lovemaking. Both take a pupil under their wing as a part of their strange revenge scheme: Danceny and Cécile. These young people are inexperienced in love and lovemaking, and they’re impressionable. Merteuil and Valmont use this to their advantage, giving them not just experience but private lessons about what to do and say to please a lover and oneself based on decades’ worth of sexual conquest.

Illustrative Moment One of the most interesting instances of this theme happens during the second time we see Valmont visit Cécile’s bedchamber. In sharp contrast to his first visit, the young woman seems excited and asks many questions. Valmont explains that he’s going to teach her how to speak about sexual activities so that she can express exciting ideas to her future husband and lovers but also so that she can express her own desires. He also tells her a story of her mother, calling her unskilled but enthusiastic, causing Cécile to giggle. This moment shows us how Valmont and Merteuil view lovemaking as a skill or art used to gain self-pleasure, and they pass this view on to Cécile through their meddling in her love life.



CHANGE

Transience The idea of transience of emotions comes up at several points through the film. Falling in love and falling out of love, different partners to follow each other, are a common occurrence for Valmont and Merteuil and Cecile. Both Merteuil and Valmont have desires and goals they refuse to walk away from, but their feelings around them change several times. At first, they are simply playing a game they've played together for years, trying to gain some entertainment from tormenting the emotions of some of their fellow nobility. Is it curiosity or desire or temporary whim or just a sport of hunting? People change and their emotions just like anything else in this world. As the film goes on, however, Valmont goes through a change he doesn't notice: he begins to genuinely fall in love with Tourvel. Merteuil notices this change first, growing jealous and vengeful. While she still wants to get her revenge on her most recent former lover, she also starts getting her revenge on Valmont, manipulating him into breaking things off with Tourvel in an especially cruel way. Valmont does this, though he has to repress his true feelings to do so.

Illustrative moment We see this theme on full display when Valmont ends his affair with Tourvel. At the beginning of their meeting, he clutches her close to him, kneeling and calling her his angel. It's clear in this moment that his love is true, but he fights off this feeling and begins doing as Merteuil ordered him, cruelly berating and even physically assaulting Tourvel, repeating, "It's beyond my control." When he leaves the room, he hesitates, unsure if he can just walk away after hurting someone he actually loved, but, again, he swallows the feeling and returns to Merteuil. Here we see how feelings can be repressed when someone desires something else enough, and this moment becomes a betrayal leading to the deaths of Tourvel and Valmont.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What feminist ideas arise in this film?
2. How is humiliation tied to sexuality in the games of Valmont and Merteuil?
3. Would you be able to tell this story without the extreme wealth of the French aristocracy? Why or why not?
4. Discuss the examples of rape culture portrayed in the film: In what ways does this historical drama examine the existence of this culture in the modern day?