

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Delphine 1802 Mme Germaine de Stael

OVERVIEW

Author We know that the 'real life' Madame de Stael grew up sitting in close proximity to the voices of tumultuous events of her day. Sitting at her parents' knees, in their comfortable Parisian sitting room, she grew up among the voices of men who were at the highest level in the day's French culture. (Her father, for example, was Minister of the Treasury for the government of France.) Dependent on the moment, these invitees could easily include scientists of distinction, like Cuvier and Buffon, intellectual political eminences like Jefferson or Washington.) The young Germaine was thus, of course, preparing herself for that bold 'presence to the world' which was of course to mark the daring career in which she proved herself at home with human beings from every point on the globe. At the same time, Germaine was preparing herself for another kind of world exploration. She was taking a clear view, as a woman, of the new social contours of her world. She was making herself into an avid social critic.

Mme de Stael, of course, was far more than a passively involved observer of, and analyst of, the tumultuous events which were establishing a new post-revolutionary world around her. Since the Renaissance European society had begun its march toward a dynamic class system, a diversification of the arts which would give expression to ever finer nuances of developing societies, and to the evolution of a pre sociological consciousness. Mme. de Stael picked up on this emerging analytical perspective, and gave birth to pioneering new responses to it in fiction. Her two novels, *Delphine* and *Corinne*, put her in the front rank, as an analyst of new social issues, among which those pertaining to women's matters—divorce, abortion, inheritance rites. As we know from the *Concordat of 1801*, signed between Napoleon and the Roman Catholic Church, these issues, affecting women's roles within the church, absorbed great attention within the French believing community.

Text It suited Mm De Stael's perspective, that she christened her first novel in the waters of the epistolary novel, which had already established itself as a dominant 18th century European fiction form—f *Pamela* (1740), *Clarissa* (1748), or Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782). Mme. de Stael's purpose, in the present novel, is to indicate the entanglements and blockages which inhibit human development within society.—especially as it pertains to women. The epistolary back and forth proved the perfect vehicle for De Stael's points.

SYNOPSIS

Delphine d'Albemar, a rich and recently divorced widow, sets out to help arrange a marriage between her distant relative, Matilde, and Leonce de Mondoville, a French noble man. It is here, at the outset of her novel, that Mme. De Stael introduces the fatal complexity into her tale. Delphine falls head over heels in love with Leonce, while she is in the course of arranging the marriage of Matilde and Leonce. The new lovers cannot breathe a word of their love for one another, because the whole social world is thinking in terms of the engagement between Matilde and Leonce. Here starts the social complexity. In society's eyes, Leonce and Matilde are already engaged, so the couple cannot breathe a word of their relationship. Plans for the marriage advance, thanks to the intervention of Matilde's cunning mother, who employs all the resources of gossip and innuendo to assure the general public that her daughter will be marrying Leonce. Delphine will be victimized by this gossip campaign, which goes far to defame her free spirited activism, and to degrade her reputation. Being of free spirit though, Delphine declares to Leonce that she loves him, whereupon he confides to her that he is now widowed, and that he is furiously in love with her. Their dilemma is virtually complete. Delphine realizes that, with her tarnished reputation, she could never marry Leonce. Her final decision is for suicide.

CHARACTERS

Delphine 'Albemar Is a rich Parisian widow--husband recently deceased—who finds herself adrift on the ocean of social norms and expectations, her own strong passions, and her innate love of humankind. Delphine is intelligent and practical, aware of the way the world works. As we first see her she is busy figuring out how to arrange a marriage between her best friend Matilde de Vernon and Leonce de Mondeville, a Spanish nobleman. She is not a meddler, but in fact a distant relative trying to do a good turn. We accept her as a person of genuine good will, for whom the loss of her husband is a spur to remember the good in the world. The irony, surrounding Delphine's rich benevolence, is that she continually runs up against her aristocratic society's prejudices, which fly in the face of female independence. Despite that state of affairs she believes that it is more important to do the right, as one sees it, than to do what others think you should do.

Matilda de Vernon, kinswoman of Delphine, who damages Delphine's reputation.; and daughter of the stealthy Mme Vernon, who has no scruples about tarnishing Delphine's reputation.

Leonce: fiancé of Matilde Loved by Delphine, but inhibited by society from marrying her, thanks to his widely familiar engagement to Matilde. He is as trapped as Delphine by social conundrums, but does not involve himself fatally, like Delphine, who is shamed into destroying her life.

Mme. de Vernon, mother of Matilde. , source of malign gossip about Delphine. She surrounds herself with malicious voices, of aristocrats who scorn Delphine's free spirit.

THEMES

Independence Delphine is a model of the new woman of post-Revolutionary France. She has recently lost her distinguished husband, to whose memory she remains faithful. He gives her the courage to pursue her own liberal values, those of a free spirited citizen of the world. Meanwhile, while Delphine is immersing herself in the social ties of arranging Matilde's marriage with Leonce, she finds herself falling in love with Leonce, and thereby losing the freedom that had marked her personality. Independence can come at a cost, as is proven by Delphine's suicide.

Status quo Aristocracy appears to thrive on the stability of inheritance, a system in which inherited wealth and inherited ideas flourish. This status quo arrangement makes little allowance for independence. Someone like Delphine can attempt to move Leonce around the social chessboard, but his situation will not release him, for he is already incorporated.

Social malignity. Matilde's mother is determined to confirm the engagement of her daughter to Leonce, just the right pre-arranged spouse for her. However, news gets out to Mme. Vernon that an affair is cooking between Delphine and Leonce. (Some of the most striking letters in the present book are those written, at just this time, between Delphine and Leonce, as each of them expresses their love for the other.) Mme. Vernon is quick to generate the rumor that Delphine is attempting to break up Matilde's marriage—which in fact is by this time partially true. Delphine is already on the dark side of destiny.)

Social analysis *Delphine* is an epistolary novel, which was in vogue in eighteenth century fiction, and which provides a springboard for analysis of whatever theme is in question. Mme. de Stael characteristically resorts to the capacity of the epistolary form, for juxtaposing and sorting out the opposing perspectives proper to each of two different viewpoints, persons, or arguments. Mme de Stael works to establish a wide range of nuanced attitudes toward her society, by the use of the epistolary strategy. Basic tenets of that analysis demand attention: intimacy of language communication is quite possible; ambiguous language points allow for unusual nuance and shading, in the stashing of attitudes; aristocratic societies leave much room for the oral, as an opinion establisher.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Does Madame de Stael want to celebrate -- —celebrate the independence and resilience of women—or does she intend to bemoan women's susceptibility to roadblocks in society, and to men's trivializing of them? In one sense, certainly, she is ready to to adopt a feminist style, and to insist on the strong abilities of Delphine—her courageous fidelity to her husband's memory, her exuberant vitality, in

supporting the marital hopes of other women, or in her equal to equal conversations with Leonce, about women's independence. Does Madame de Stael make her own heroine out of herself, in creating Delphine?

What advantages do you see in using the epistolary style for social analysis? Can we say that this style enables an author—like Mme de Stael—to expound two sides of an issue, providing parity to each side? Is that, for instance, what happens when the author dramatizes a letter exchange between Leonce and Delphine, in which each of them lays out their case for declaring their love publicly? What does the epistolary form enable an author to do with the intersecting attitudes of two interlocutors?