The Lily of the Valley (Le Lys dans la vallée)

Honoré de Balzac · *1835* · *Katharine Prescott Wormeley translation (1891)*

Félix de Vandenesse writes a long letter to the woman he hopes to marry, Natalie de Manerville, telling her the story of his earlier love. Unloved by his mother and shy, he meets Henriette de Mortsauf, the wife of a tormented nobleman, and she becomes his guide and his idol. The novel is a love story in which the great passion is never consummated, and its cost is felt to the end.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does it mean to love someone who cannot be yours, and what does that love do to the lover and the beloved?

Balzac sets Henriette's virtue against Félix's hunger for her, and he makes neither one simple. She teaches him how to live in the world, and she is also bound to a husband and children by duty. Félix's later affair with Lady Dudley breaks her heart. The ending is a deathbed scene and a letter, and Natalie's dry reply turns the whole confession into a question about whether a man can be a fair judge of the past.

KEY CHARACTERS

Félix de Vandenesse
The narrator, a shy young man who writes the letter.

Henriette de Mortsauf
The woman he loves, the lily of the valley.

the Comte de Mortsauf
Her husband, an elderly and tormented nobleman.

Lady Arabella Dudley
The worldly woman who becomes Félix's lover.

Natalie de Manerville
The woman to whom Félix writes.

Jacques and Madeleine
Henriette's children.

Grades 11–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The Envoi

DEDICATION AND ENVOI

Félix agrees to tell Natalie the story of his past, knowing it may cost him her love.

- The letter form makes the whole book a confession.
- Natalie has pressed him for the story.
- He warns her that it will pain them both.

02

Two Childhoods

CHAPTER I

Félix recalls a cold mother and a lonely school at Tours. At nineteen he goes to a ball for the Duc d'Angoulême and kisses the bare shoulders of an unknown woman.

- His mother's coldness is the root of his shyness.
- The ball is his first dazzling experience.
- The woman is Madame de Mortsauf.

03

Clochegourde

CHAPTER II

Félix is sent to the country and comes to know the family at Clochegourde, the count, and the sick children. Henriette receives him as a friend and teaches him conduct.

- The valley of the Indre is a lyrical setting.
- The count is moody and difficult.
- Henriette's gentle rule is the first love and the first school.

04

Paris and Lady Dudley

CHAPTER III, FIRST PART

Henriette sends Félix to Paris to serve the king. He succeeds in the world and falls into an affair with Lady Dudley.

- Henriette's advice follows him.
- Lady Dudley is the opposite of the Lily.
- He betrays his idol in fact if not in thought.

05

The Last Letter

CHAPTER III, ENDING

Broken by grief and illness, Henriette sends Félix a last letter and dies.

- Her death is a scene of deep suffering.
- The last letter reveals what she felt.
- Félix is left with remorse.

06

Natalie's Answer

ANSWER TO THE ENVOI

Natalie replies to Félix with a dry and practical letter, and declines to be compared with a saint.

- The reply undoes the long confession.
- She refuses to be a second Henriette.
- The book ends on an ironic note.

Idealized Love | Duty | Desire | The Valley

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The novel is a long letter. Ask who is the real audience of Félix's story.
2. Henriette and Lady Dudley are opposites. Notice what each stands for.
3. Pay attention to the flowers and landscapes. They carry feeling.
4. Read Natalie's answer carefully. Does it change how you see Félix?

Summaries are original to Classics Library. Read the Katharine Prescott Wormeley translation (1891) (Project Gutenberg #1569 (Balzac, The Lily of the Valley, tr. Katharine Prescott Wormeley, Roberts Brothers, 1891); Internet Archive scan lilyofvalley00balzrich), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/balzac-the-lily-of-the-valley/.